

COLLISION

Vol. 1, No. 3 (2012)
Art and the City

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



Ho, Louis and Mayee Wong. "The Sticker Bomber and the Nanny State: Notes from Singapore." *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 3 (2012): 10-22.

ABSTRACT

In the Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore, street artist SKLO has come into conflict with the authorities for her sticker bombing and stenciling. Her arrest foregrounds issues about the socio-cultural resonances and broader value of street art in local public discourse. This article explores SKLO's praxis vis-à-vis the phenomenon of official graffiti, and its structuring of the tightly regulated public realm. Dubbed the "Sticker Lady," SKLO has been also referred to as "Singapore's Banksy" by local and international media. Besides prompting questions regarding the value of street art as expressions of local culture, these references shed light on how the figure of Banksy has become a figure of neoliberal urban aesthetics, especially pertaining to urban entrepreneurialism – a globally circulated signifier of a particular image of street art that sees the attachment of monetary value, celebrity and cool to such artistic works of subversion. These references to Banksy also raise a deeper question: can the Singaporean authorities accept the subversive and political aspects of art as the city-state embarks on a neoliberal agenda to present itself as a considerable player in the global art market?

KEYWORDS

SKLO, street art in Singapore, neoliberal urban aesthetics, aesthetics of resistance, street art vs. vandalism

The Sticker Bomber and the Nanny State: Notes from Singapore

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They appeared overnight.

“Mystery stickers press on at pedestrian crossings,” a headline read.¹

In a country renowned for its public cleanliness, these mystery stickers presented themselves as anomalies within an immaculate streetscape. One would look down to push the button on a traffic light, and there it would be: a round black sticker bearing a message, and a pictorial tag comprised of two triangles and a tiny dot, the calling card of local graffiti artist, SKLO.² The repertoire of *bon mots* featured several in the local hybrid vernacular, Singlish. There was *Press some more*, and *Press once can*

already, i.e. pressing the button just once is enough. Others included *No need to press so hard*; *Press until shiok*, or press till you get a kick out of it; *Press for Nirvana* and ironically enough, as it turned out, *Anyhow press police catch*, a dictum against pressing the button at will, the result of which might prove to be a run-in with the boys in blue. Less frequently, one would encounter *My Grandfather Road* stenciled on a stretch of street, or inscribed on the wall of a building, the phrase being one used against careless drivers and irresponsible pedestrians, two classes of people who tend to ignore the rules – people, in other words, who behave as if their grandfathers owned the streets.

The authorities were less than amused. Sticker Lady, as the media and the general public now dubbed her, was arrested, though released the following day on bail. An online petition and several dedicated Facebook pages materialized in response, as did calls by various individuals for leniency toward Singapore's very own Banksy.³



SKLO. *Anyhow press police catch*. Used by permission.

• Subversions •

Contrary to popular belief, there is graffiti aplenty on the streets of Singapore – albeit of the so-called official variety:

Regulation is an inescapable part of everyday life...epitomized by the ubiquitous...signs displayed on buildings of public access, Entry and Exit (or In and Out), and...the prohibition circle with its diagonal red slash across the circle warning, for example, No Smoking. It is these signs that we designate official graffiti..."Official" is a status which not only marks formal legitimacy, but also asserts legitimacy; the same No Smoking sign adorns law courts, restaurants, and stores, has found its way onto the front door of private homes. It is the appearance of official status that is the key.⁴

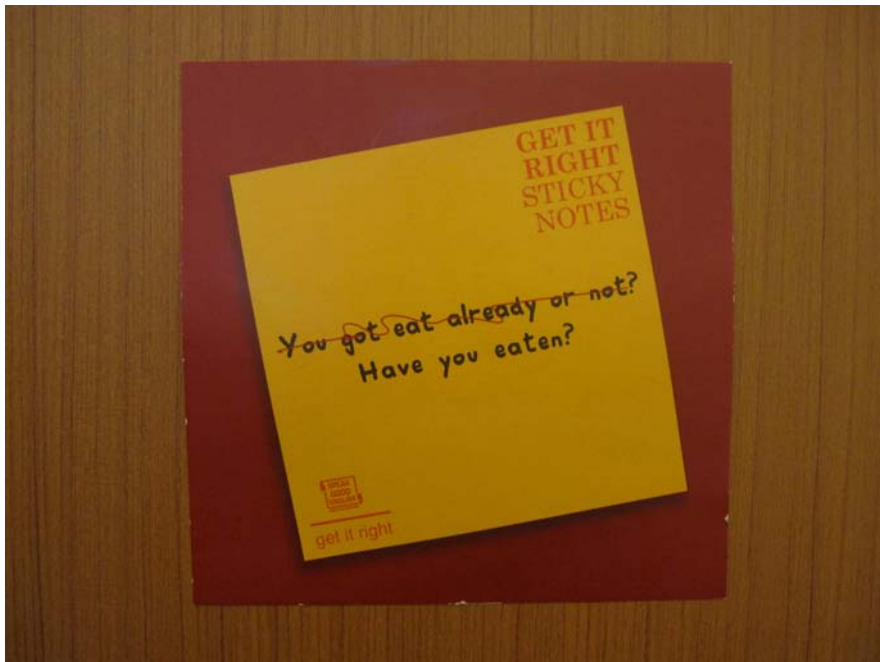
Official graffiti, then, is simply the most direct manifestation of bureaucratic will; individual agency is negotiated around the parameters it enacts. Singapore's famously spotless urban fabric, its glitzy architecture and pristine streets, is the most immediate expression of the ruling administration's⁵ zero-tolerance attitude towards the disruption of public cleanliness and, by extension, civic order.⁶ This disciplinary dystopia is maintained through various means: policing, surveillance technology, and a diverse array of signage deployed to exhort, to warn, to prescribe and proscribe. *No Littering; No eating or drinking; No Smoking; CCTV in operation* – the examples are numerous.



Louis Ho. No Smoking sign. Used by permission.

It is against this milieu of relentless regulation that the formal characteristics of SKLO's stickers articulate an aesthetics of resistance in crucial, critical ways. The chief strategy here turns on the twin axes of appropriation and subversion: contra the visual language of those symbols that seek to determine so much of the lived everyday, her stickers insinuate themselves into the landscape of the familiar as simply another form of regulatory display, at once borrowing and destabilizing the appearance of such official signage. They assume the guise of an official notice, both their size (perfectly obscuring the round portion of the black button boxes) and their palette (blandly blending in with the surrounding surface) seeming to suggest that they are site-specific entities, just one more sign put out by the authorities to govern public behavior. And while the imperative voice of these pseudo-signs likewise adopts the tone of bureaucratic decree, what they proffer instead is an instant of light-hearted hilarity, all the more affecting because completely unanticipated. At the moment when one, reaching down to push the button at a pedestrian crossing, may reasonably expect to see a sign bearing directions of some kind, there it is instead, a memorandum of comic import: *Press until shiok*.

The linguistic implications of SKLO's stickers also foreground the fissure between state-sanctioned cultural forms and their reception at a grassroots level. In a setting where the imbalance of power between state and citizen is particularly stark, the artist's embrace of Singlish, inserted into public sites as the ersatz language of bureaucratic proclamation, represents an open contest of the government's perennial drive to improve the standards of English in Singapore. The previous theme of the Speak Good English Movement, in 2010, had as its tagline "Get It Right."⁷ To that end, it promoted the "guerilla tactic" of sticking remedial Post-it Notes over public signs rendered in Singlish, or ungrammatical English – with little distinction made between the two.⁸ Posters featuring these yellow Post-its began appearing everywhere, from cafés to libraries: an offending phrase (e.g. "You got eat already or not?") shown crossed out and replaced by its officially acceptable translation ("Have you eaten?"). These posters constitute yet another form of official graffiti, one that seemed ubiquitous during the life of the campaign.



Louis Ho. Public Post-it Note from the *Get It Right* campaign. Used by permission.

SKLO's unauthorized inscriptions run directly counter to the spirit and the visual contours of the push to "Get It Right." Her deliberate use of Singlish, of course, asserts the prerogatives of colloquial language against a linguistic mold cast by the authorities, a top-down imposition on so fundamental a fact of life as everyday speech. The camouflaged aesthetic of her stickers likewise presents a contradictory visuality that resists the conspicuous palette of the Post-it Notes and posters, which were intended to arrest the glance. Most salient, perhaps, is the artist's encounter with the law, which belie the spurious "guerilla tactics" of the official campaign – tactics propagated by an administration which endorses such maneuvers as a function of broader socio-cultural control, but which, as symptoms of individual expression and autonomy, are prohibited.

SKLO's stickers challenge the prevalence and regulatory character of such official signs within the sphere of the everyday. As an intervention in a public realm subject to varied forms of supervision, her work defies the hegemony of a bureaucracy obsessed with order – a subversion of official priorities, a declaration of agency in the face of a monolithic state apparatus.

• Discourses •

SKLO's arrest prompted the opening of a public discursive space centered on the question of whether her work counts as vandalism or street art, with many Singaporeans petitioning for the vandalism charge against SKLO to be considered under the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act. This debate raises further questions: What is the value of street art? Should street art be recuperated from the law under a special rubric? These questions resound in the context of a city-state that is still struggling to develop its cultural identity, while pursuing global ambitions that are dependent on normative notions of cultural vibrancy and aesthetic clout. One of the reasons for widespread support of SKLO is that her work speaks to the local population. Previously, the most highly profiled cases of graffiti in Singapore had been committed by foreigners; the infamous Michael Fay incident in 1994 put Singapore on the map as a draconian regime with the caning of the American teenager. SKLO, however, is a Singaporean artist, and her messages may be considered as "act[s] of reclamation."⁹



SKLO. *My grandfather road*. Used by permission.

But the rallying cries of Singaporeans to defend their very own Banksy call for an examination of contexts beyond patriotic claims to subversive creativity. The discourses surrounding this incident shed light on how the figure of Banksy has become a figure of neoliberal urban

aesthetics – a globally circulated signifier of a particular image of street art that sees the attachment of monetary value, celebrity and cool to artistic works of subversion. In an age of urban entrepreneurialism, culture and the arts have become an indicator of the economic competitiveness of a city; and works by famous street artists, such as Banksy, now contribute to the notion of the cultural vibrancy of a given city or place as a reflection of the work of productive creative industries.¹⁰ Street art's accessible, critical, and aesthetic appeal encourages institutions and companies to appropriate it for their agendas, which include promoting the city and its creative culture. As a local Nominated Member of Parliament noted, the street art of Melbourne has been marketed as a tourist attraction, even though the State Department imposes strict anti-graffiti laws.¹¹

Banksy's success is attributed to the wit and sheer audacity of his various undertakings, like his 2005 stunt: placing his artworks in New York museums without their permission.¹² His work has moved from the streets to more official art spaces thanks to his notoriety; his show *Banksy v Bristol Museum* was displayed in the Bristol City Museum in 2009. Banksy has now become even more famous for breaking into the art market without going through the traditional channels, and for fetching extremely high prices for his work – two of his works have garnered sales prices of over one million dollars in 2008.¹³

SKLO's work comes nowhere near Banksy's in terms of monetary value or international publicity, but one cannot help but wonder if comparing them might reveal an unconscious economic motivation behind Singapore's bid to become a competitive art capital. The proliferation of Banksy references in the media imbues value to SKLO's work by emphasizing its cheeky subversion; but Banksy is also mobilized as a brand, which vindicates the professional legitimacy of the artist's work. These references highlight a paradox underlying neoliberal urban aesthetic production: the value of such art lies in its resistance to the commodification of everyday urban life, and is created by its own commodification and internationalization in the art market.

However, street art never gets institutional respect from the mainstream art world, and it will always be caught up in discourses of commercialism, cleanliness and social order.¹⁴ The secret of Banksy's art-market success lies in his maintenance of street art's outsider status, by playing up the aesthetics of resistance that provide the basis of its artistic and monetary value. To this day, he insists on being known as a "quality vandal."¹⁵ In Singapore, the aesthetics of resistance in graffiti/street art

have been domesticated by governmental authorities, to the point where aesthetic resistance is translated into creative decoration. Graffiti artists spray their works on sanctioned public spaces; some Singaporean artists believe that “graffiti doesn’t have to be subversive to be considered art.”¹⁶ Resistance and subversion are notions associated with criminality, which is always severely punished – a Singaporean graffiti artist says, “I know there is a law to obey, and there’s no running away from it.”¹⁷ Given this social climate, it is not surprising that SKLO’s work has generated such debate in Singapore. The defense of SKLO as Singapore’s Banksy raises the deeper question of whether the Singaporean authorities can accept the subversive and political aspects of art, aspects that are often promoted as its selling points, while the city-state presents itself as a considerable player in the global art market.

Fundamentally, the work of SKLO is tied to the context of the street. The effectiveness of her work has to do with its direct response to the issues on the freedom of public space. In recent years, the street has served as the backdrop for various protests and revolutions around the world, and the emergence of the Occupy movements has confronted the public with the problems of privatized space and culture. However, the streets are clean, business- and ad-friendly, and Occupy-free in Singapore, thanks to a strongly policed, self-regulating social culture.¹⁸ In this sense, the stakes are unusually high for SKLO, but as her friend relayed during a meeting, “the streets were the only place to convey her message.”¹⁹ SKLO was recently invited by the local independent arts centre The Substation to produce an artwork. A large sticker now resides on the walkway wall just outside the centre. Emblazoned on it is the word “Opportunity.”

• Notes •

¹ Goh Shi Ting, “Mystery stickers press on at pedestrian crossing,” *The Straits Times*, June 2, 2012, Home, B19.

² Believed to be one Samantha Lo.

³ See also Peter Beaumont, “Strict Singapore divided by the arrest of its own Banksy,” *The Guardian*, June 10, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/10/sticker-lady-strict-singapore-divided>.

⁴ Joe Hermer and Alan Hunt, “Official Graffiti of the Everyday,” *Law & Society Review*, vol. 30, no. 3 (1996), p.456.

⁵ The PAP, or People’s Action Party, has uninterruptedly governed Singapore since the country’s independence in 1965. Its political hegemony is often adduced as an example of one-party rule.

⁶ NYC Mayor Ed Koch, for one, who led the so-called ‘war on graffiti’ in the early 1980s, believed that its prevalence was not merely a symbol of the city’s decay, but fostered an atmosphere of unlawfulness in general: “Koch’s war on graffiti characterized writing as a major contributing factor to New York’s elevated crime rate and general lack of civic order. The official argument against graffiti rested on the notion that citizens were frightened by it because it represented an unlawful disruption of the urban environment, which encouraged other, more severe crimes.” See Anna Waclawek, *Graffiti and Street Art* (London & New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011), p. 54.

⁷ The Speak Good English Movement was officially inaugurated in 2000 – to, in its own words, “encourage Singaporeans to speak grammatically correct English that is universally understood.” See <http://www.goodenglish.org.sg/category/movement/about-us>.

⁸ Lim Wei Chean, “Don’t ignore poor English, fix it – with a sticky note,” *The Straits Times*, September 8, 2012.

⁹ Ng Yi-sheng, “Samantha Lo vs. the Vandalism Act,” *The Online Citizen*, June 9, 2012, <http://theonlinecitizen.com/2012/06/samantha-lo-vs-the-vandalism-act/>.

¹⁰ Tim Hall and Phil Hubbard, eds. *The Entrepreneurial City: Geographies of Politics, Regime and Representation* (London & New York: Wiley, 1998).

¹¹ Janice Koh 许优美, “Sticker Lady’s Arrest: Is There Space for street art in Singapore?” June 4, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/janice-koh-许优美/sticker-ladys-arrest-is-there-space-for-street-art-in-singapore/414236755288024>.

¹² Randy Kennedy, “Need Talent to Exhibit in Museums? Not This Prankster.” *The New York Times*, March 24, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/24/arts/design/24arti.html>.

¹³ Ulf Wuggenig, “The Tattooings of Cities. Notes on the Artistic Field and Popular Art in the City,” in *Participate: Art and Urban Space*, eds. Timon Beyes, Sophie Thérèse Krempf, Amelie Deuflhard (Zürich: Niggli, 2009), Section 198.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lauren Collins, "Banksy Was Here: The Invisible Man of Graffiti Art," *The New Yorker*, May 14, 2007, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/05/14/070514fa_fact_collins.

¹⁶ Adeline Chia, "Spray Paint Art: Is graffiti art? And does sanctioned graffiti deserve the tag? The verdict is divided," *The Straits Times*, June 21, 2007. The pdf form of the article is available at: <http://kamaldollah.wordpress.com/2007/06/21/is-graffiti-art-and-does-sanctioned-graffiti-deserve-the-tag/>.

¹⁷ Adeline Chia, "Spray Paint Art: Is graffiti art? And does sanctioned graffiti deserve the tag? The verdict is divided."

¹⁸ Shibani Mahtani, "Protesters Fail to Occupy Singapore," *The Wall Street Journal: WSJ Blogs Dispatch*, October 15, 2011, <http://blogs.wsj.com/dispatch/2011/10/15/protesters-fail-to-occupy-singapore/>.

¹⁹ Mayo Martin, "Sticker Lady! Town hall meeting! The Lowdown!" *TODAYonline: For Art's Sake!*, June 13, 2012, <http://blogs.todayonline.com/forartssake/2012/06/13/sticker-lady-town-hall-meeting-the-lowdown/#more-5401>.

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