

Stickers as a Literature- Distribution Platform

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Abstract

Contemporary experimental writing often directs its attention to its writing space, its medium, the material on which it is presented. Very often this medium is meaningful and becomes part of the work – the printed text transferred to another media context (for instance, into a traditional book) would become incomprehensible. Literature distributed on stickers is a form of writing that is divided into small fragments of texts (a type of constrained writing), physically scattered in different locations. One of the newest challenges in literature are books with augmented reality, AR, which examine the relation between the physical (the medium) and the virtual interaction. Sticker literature is a rather simple analog form of augmented reality literature. The stickers have QR codes or web addresses printed on them, so the viewer who reads/sees a random sticker in the public space can further explore the text online. The viewer can read other parts of the text on photographs (the photograph being another medium) of other stickers placed in different locations. The author will discuss the use of stickers throughout literary history, beginning with 20th century French Situationists, through different textual strategies applied by visual artists and ending with literary forms such as the sticker novel *Implementation* (2004) by Nick Montfort and Scott Rettberg or *Stoberskiade* (2013). The author shall try to explain why writers decide to use this form, how the text is distributed and received and how the city space is used in such projects.

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The twenty-first century techniques of experimental writing teach that the book is no longer considered the only or the main – to use Jay David Bolter’s term – writing space. According to contemporary scholars, material platform of the text is now seen as a significant aspect of a literary work. Describing the content and the text itself, one should also focus on technical and material conditions of the medium. Therefore, N. Katherine Hayles proposed the term *technotexts* to distinguish literary works with significant material qualities, which can be read with a medium-specific analysis in mind. Current spatial approaches to literature (e.g. textual caves), conceptual and uncreative writing, as well as experiments in the field of electronic literature are only a few examples of such a writing machines. Contemporary writing platforms include walls, websites, and floppy discs, to point out only a few ways of expanding the writing spaces. Additionally, established in 2013, the comparative textual media method focuses on print and digital-based writing spaces with emphasis on the medium characteristics.

Using stickers means above all an intervention in the public space. According to the definition, a sticker is a small piece of printed paper, self-adhesive on one side. It is also a kind of label usually used to create object identification through word, idea or image. However, in capitalism, stickers can also have an ambiguous meaning; on the one hand it is a sign to promote and identify a product; on the other hand it may be a subversive and effective way to fight a system (such as capitalism). Predominantly, stickers are attached in public spaces, generally without permission, thus they are treated as vandalism. They are placed in heavily populated areas as well as in and on buses, trains (mainly near their doors to be better seen), cars and other vehicles, bikes, tunnels, road signs, dumpsters, suitcases, and public toilets.

Artists started viewing stickers as a platform for their work at the beginning of the 20th century. The Dada movement, considered the first avantgarde formation, distributed its works on stickers, which was part of how it explored new forms of expanding writing techniques. It is worth emphasizing that Dadaist attitude – based on absurd, pure nonsense, and randomly generated text – was a method of fighting the system’s oppression (World War One). Therefore, the history of stickers in the 20th and 21st centuries can be seen as a history of subversive and oppositional strategies. When used in this way, stickers speak against totalitarisms (e.g. nazism and communism in Poland), the society of the spectacle (Western Europe), or American imperialism. Wherever one can find oppression or abuse in society, a public intervention such as stickers can be used to express independence, struggle, and everyday revolution.

The Situationists, Fluxus, Folklore, Distributed Narrative

There are a significant number of critical approaches which can help to read and understand the sticker literature projects. A few of them are based on the history of visual art and numerous subversive strategies (e.g. Fluxus, the Situationists). Sticker literature can also be read as a folklore literature, which can circumvent the professional institutions (e.g. publishing houses, bookstores – usually part of free-market logic). There are also some digital techniques and terms which could be useful when describing this kind of work (e.g. distributed narrative).

Recontextualizing all the aforementioned approaches goes beyond the frame of this

paper. Situated between media, stickers are considered intermedia projects which contain almost all Fluxus ideas discussed by Ken Friedman in “Forty Years of Fluxus”(1): globalism, the unity of art and life, experimentalism, chance, playfulness, simplicity, implicativeness, exemplativism, specificity, and presence in time. Moreover, putting up stickers can be a psychogeographical strategy to transform and react to the common space in a poetic way. To attach stickers in the public space also means to create a situation and to work collaboratively. According to the Situationist International, psychogeography is considered “the study of the exact laws and specific effects of geographical environments, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals...”.(2) Since public space is a maintained area taken and organized by businesses and local government, the Situationists proposed to make the public space the people’s.

According to the Situationists such a psychogeographical action can be considered a rebellious strategy opposed to the ubiquitous Spectacle. Debord criticizes spectacle’s domination effects. He argues that people, controlled by mass-media, became observers, non participants. Consumers don’t experience life nor do they act in life, but replace reality by contemplation as they lead a superficial and inauthentic existence. Also the Society of the Spectacle is characterized by a lack of human perception, and a complete degradation of knowledge and critical thinking. Debord argues that society has experienced “the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing.”(3) Creating situations and psychogeographical strategies can be the kind of stimulus from the environment which may wake up senses and experiences. Situationists believed that such strategies can be a tool for individual everyday revolution: “Every situation, as consciously constructed as can be, contains its own negation and moves inevitably toward its own reversal. In the conduct of an individual life, a situationist action is not based on the abstract idea of rationalist progress (which, according to Descartes, ‘makes us masters and possessors of nature’), but on the practice of arranging the environment that conditions us.”(4) As Joseph Hart argues, we need “a whole toy box full of playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities ... just about anything that takes pedestrians off their predictable paths and jolts them into a new awareness of the urban landscape.”(5) Putting up stickers means creating a situation, a poetic response: not a serious revolution which can change the system but a start to perceive the environment in a different way than the usual. Scott Rettberg, the co-author of a novel-length sticker project, mentioned that putting stickers up in his normal traffic environment helped him to find his city a canvas and a kind of playground. He discovered a bunch of signals which he had never noticed before: “I am seeing the city in a new way. I am noticing the signs of graffitists and street artists. I am observing and thinking more intensely about what is at my eye level and what lies beneath my feet, the manhole covers and the details of streetlights, hidden conversations between the official languages of civic life in the city and its subcultures.”(6) He reinvented his own city and public space for his use. As Situationists fought for freedom from the society of the spectacle and criticized middle-class bourgeois society, Rettberg and Montfort printing and attaching a couple hundred stickers can be treated as a revolutionary transformation, glorifying freedom from oppressive ideas and discussing in an open way unpopular approaches to life in an imperialistic country such as the United States.

Another tool one can find useful to describe stickers in public space is given by the anthropology of everyday life. Today's ethnological approach focuses on contemporary aspects, like cultural margins and digital activities. Since one of the most important qualities of folk literature is its oppositional and non-official nature, stickers can be considered a flagship genre of that kind of writing. In a sense, attaching stickers to public surfaces has an ethical and practical function: the goal is to provide meaning. Stickers can be treated as a form of communication, visual written dialog in public space (that's why they often contain e-mail addresses or URLs).

Just as with graffiti, ethnology considered stickers a tool to help shape the world. That is the reason behind placing stickers in places which are unfamiliar, unknown, ugly, and belonging to anybody. Attaching stickers in those areas could be an expression of a will to change those places, to make them safer and better described. Moreover, stickers interact with other signs in the public space. Especially big cities are considered areas where the number of signs is overwhelming, usually containing restrictions or manipulations designed to keep us consuming. In addition, stickers play with their strategies, giving the feeling of safety that contradicts the macro-aesthetics (large size, noisy, manipulative). Paradoxically, small stickers can be more visible than large-size means of communication. Small size is significant, gives an opportunity to react immediately, to move quickly, plus a sticker can be carried all the time in the pocket. To sum up, a sticker is compact sign and a new kind of text, usually appropriated from well-known slogans which don't need a description. Stickers can be characterized as folklore literature because their audience is accidental: the reader is someone who does not plan to go for a reading series or to the bookstore. Apart from the accidental audience, sticker artists address their works to other sticker artists and in this way create a kind of community(7).

Jill Walker sees sticker projects (along with e-mail novels and new websites) as flagship examples of distributed narrative. According to her research, artists in the postprint era tend to invent new genres, which do not achieve unity. Experiments in the digital era go further in opening the formal and physical aspects of literary works than postmodernist text chunk, fragmented plot or style. Notably, contemporary works are spread across time, space, and the network(8).

Walker points out that literary works based on distributed narratives don't have clear boundaries (like book covers or the linear narrative). In her view distributed narratives become ambiguous because readers and critics must describe and locate things that are not things but connections. Walker argues that because of the word alteration, one's understanding of it must be revisited. Distributed narrative can help to realize the novelty and "sometimes invisible way of seeing and communicating who we are." Refusing Aristotle's unity of work, Walker distinguishes a new kind of text distribution which appreciates fragmented and networked structure. Instead of homogeneity one can notice three kinds of distribution: "in Time", "in Space", and "of Authorship."

One of the most radical projects shaped as distributed narrative is Shelley Jackson's "Skin" – a short story that is literally tattooed into the skin of its readers, one word at a time. That means the whole narrative can not be read. The platform for a literature's work is the volunteer's body, which distributes part of the text around the world. The

project will also be disintegrated, as people (words) pass away.

There is no single place in which the whole narrative can be experienced. Also, there is no single author and group of authors who is in control of the narrative and there is no unity of time. Distributed narratives also upended the established definition of the narrative, which (for scholars) consists of events ordered in time with some kind of causal connection between them.

Implementation & Stoberskiade

Today's literary sticker projects are works based on the medium of print and digital media. Moreover, they are at the same time analog and digital: they use some digital solutions (e.g. distributive narration), they are published on websites to download, but they are also printed out and put up in the physical world – where they have an e-mail address or URL to refer to online parts of the projects. Thus, sticker projects are shaped as augmented reality and as a conversation between old and new media. One can imagine that the reader reads only one sticker in the physical world, but can remember a phrase or a sentence, put it in a browser and find the whole project online. Sticker project authors send out stickers via e-mail to the readers, encourage them to print them out, and then put them up in their environment, take photos and send them back to publish as online documentation. Furthermore, documentation of stickers in a physical environment can be considered the goal of the whole project.

It is worth comparing two different literary sticker projects from two cultural contexts to present why this platform is appropriate for distributing content, and what differentiates it from the medium of codex book. Both are full length (one can say book length) projects, they took the form of stickers, were put up in public spaces around the world, and then published as a photo documentation online. Although these two projects have a lot in common, they are markedly different.

Nick Montfort and Scott Rettberg's *Implementation* is an American fiction project written in English in 2004–2005 as a serial novel. According to the description it is “a novel about psychological warfare, American imperialism, sex, terror, identity, and the idea of place, a project that borrows from the traditions of net art, mail art, sticker art, conceptual art, Situationism, serial fiction, and guerrilla viral marketing.”(9) Readers easily recognize the common historical background (9/11, Operation Iraqi Freedom, the United States' global war on terrorism), which affects gestures, expressions, or the way the main characters (Kilroy, Frank, Samantha, Roxanne) live. Focusing on some material aspects, it is worth pointing out that the novel contains 240 stickers, which were distributed in 8 installments of 30 stickers each. Five years later the project was “re-implemented” – the authors send out the installments to a new audience to put up in new locations. The goal was to publish a coffee table book, categorize and archive the documentation.

Stoberskiade, in comparison, is a collaborative Polish nonfiction project, a bilingual experimental biography of a naive Cracow writer Jaś Stoberski (1906-1997). In fact, the text was distributed not only in Polish and English, but also later in French and Spanish. Chronically dependent on the people he visited and to whom he gave money, Jaś Stoberski would walk a daily route through Cracow. He is also considered a secular saint, a master of detail, “Krowodrza's answer to Proust.” As the online description put

it: “The point of departure for this experimental biography was the thesis that Stoberski was a mystery figure, a symbol of ambiguity, Citizen Kane in reverse (unlike the American magnate, he never possessed anything). He was the very image of the happy simpleton, but unraveling his story would give Lacan or Derrida ample room to expound on the substitution of desire or the theory of ‘lack.’”(10)

Tracing material differences between *Implementation* and *Stoberskiade*, the American fiction was formatted in a very minimalistic way; it contained only text on business-size shipping labels so that people could easily print them out (one sticker contains circa 350 characters), distribute and install them in public space. The authors had the intention to create a novel as a whole, but they were conscious that their audience could be someone who read only one piece. As they pointed out: “We abdicate control over the way that the chronology of events in the story is experienced by the reader, and we accept that the most common form of reading will be partial, fragmentary, and incomplete.” Such a distracted and distributed way of reading means that *Implementation* does not have the first or last sticker, also one can imagine a reader who can read only one random piece in isolation, which he or she came across in the physical world (e.g. on a dumpster or at a bus stop). *Implementation* can be compared to online hypertext novels and conceptualized as atomistic.

Because *Stoberskiade* is shaped as a bilingual biography, it consists of more than 248 stickers. In contrast to *Implementation*, stickers look like intermedia project, and contain not only of text but also visual elements, URL and QR code. *Stoberskiade* is shaped as a kind of ‘untourist’ trip, also without a beginning and without end. The departure for this project was the idea to retrace Stoberski’s daily route (hence the title) and to recount the stories of Cracovians whom the writer obsessively visited (the route around the city’s apartments was found by placing ads in the local papers). Multiple perspectives presented on these stickers prove how difficult it is to speak of a figure who appeared regularly and seldom spoke a single word about himself. The idea to use stickers was to express Stoberski’s phenomenon based on a kaleidoscope of perspectives.

Whereas Rettberg and Montfort’s sticker novel is a kind of political and critical intervention, an answer to political issues after 9/11, *Stoberskiade* can be considered a project which has nothing in common with politics. Paradoxically, Montfort and Rettberg wrote and published their novel only in English and asked people in other countries to put up stickers in their geographical spaces. They aimed to scatter their anti-imperialistic message around the world in one language only. In contrast, Stoberski, the smallest among the smallest writers, comes from a peripheral country. *Implementation* is as a metaphor of the US, which portrays the whole range of US citizens who live in a small city called *Implementation*, which stands for a superpower. *Stoberskiade* shows one writer who is completely forgotten even in Poland, even in Cracow, the city where he spent all his life. The Polish project is also a portrait of people whom Stoberski visited and the way they remember him. In this sense these two projects are like David and Goliath, still using the same platform to distribute the text.

In addition, one can point out the different legacy of *Implementation* and *Stoberskiade*. Scott Rettberg and Nick Montfort admit that the well-known a public critical intervention OBEY campaign was the most important impulse to kick off the

project(11). Montfort also mentions text artist's Jenny Holzer's Truisms (trite phrases – truisms – written down on stickers posted around Manhattan) as an inspiration.

In that sense the completely different and very minimalistic campaign You Are Beautiful could be considered the inspiration for *Stoberskiade*. The departure for that project was, in 2002, to spread throughout the world the slogan “You Are Beautiful” – a subversive response to consumerism and positive self-realization. Stickers with that slogan can be found for instance on the buses but they can be sent to a given address, too (a kind of gift economy). The idea of the *Stoberskiade* is to spread Stoberski's very positive attitude (e.g. to “prove” that snatching happiness out of thin air is possible).

Rettberg and Montfort's idea was to scatter stickers around the world and attach them in very important places and cities to express their message. That's why their stickers are put up in a tourist traps. In comparison, *Stoberskiade* stickers are often located in non-recognizable places such as mountains, small cities, small villages. The idea behind it is to better see that Jaś Stoberski was a writer drifting through places that are, by their very nature, unattractive and untouristy.

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- (4) *The Meaning of Decay in Art. Internationale Situationniste #3* (December 1959), Translated by John Shepley [access: 5/21/2014].
- (5) Hart, Joseph. *A New Way of Walking, Utne Reader* July/August 2004. [access: 5/21/2014].
- (6) Rettberg, Scott. *Implementation in Contexts..* Copenhagen: Ubiquity Network, 2010.
- (7) See Kwiatkowska, Olga. *Podwójne życie wlepek, czyli komunikat w przestrzeni miejskiej i wirtualnej*. [in] *Genologia literatury ludowej. Studia folklorystyczne*, Mianeki, Adrian, Wróblewska Wioletta (eds.), Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2002.
- (8) See Walker Rettberg, Jill. *Distributed Narrative: Telling Stories Across Networks*. <http://jilltxt.net/txt/Walker-AoIR-3500words.pdf>, 2004. [access: 5/21/2014].
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