

# cover story



# Alive and Stickin'

This sly form of urban street art is on the rise and under the radar

On a recent Saturday afternoon near the U Street Metro station, a 30-something guy in an olive-green jacket walked past a police officer, slapped a homemade sticker on the back of a street sign and strode away, unnoticed. Over the last five years, this street artist has blanketed greater D.C. with his trademark sticker, a sketch of his left hand bearing the enigmatic phrase "I Will Not," which has become his pseudonym.

"I want to put my hand on everything, pardon the pun," iwillnot says.

A married father of two who asked to keep his identity a secret, iwillnot is among a legion of sticker artists who are decorating — or vandalizing, depending on your perspective — electric boxes, newspaper boxes and other flat, metal surfaces around the region with miniature works of art.

Some of these stickers are individually hand-painted, while others are block or screen printed, or simply made on a home printer. They can be as sleek as commercial logos, but what distinguishes sticker artists from common advertisers is that real artists leave their images up for interpretation,



## ABOUT THE PHOTOS:

Sticker artists love to hit Express boxes. "They are brightly colored and tend to be in high traffic areas," local artist iwillnot says. We at Express would prefer that our street boxes stay pristine, but we did ask iwillnot to go to town on one out-of-service box to illustrate this story.

iwillnot says. That's certainly been the case with his hand.

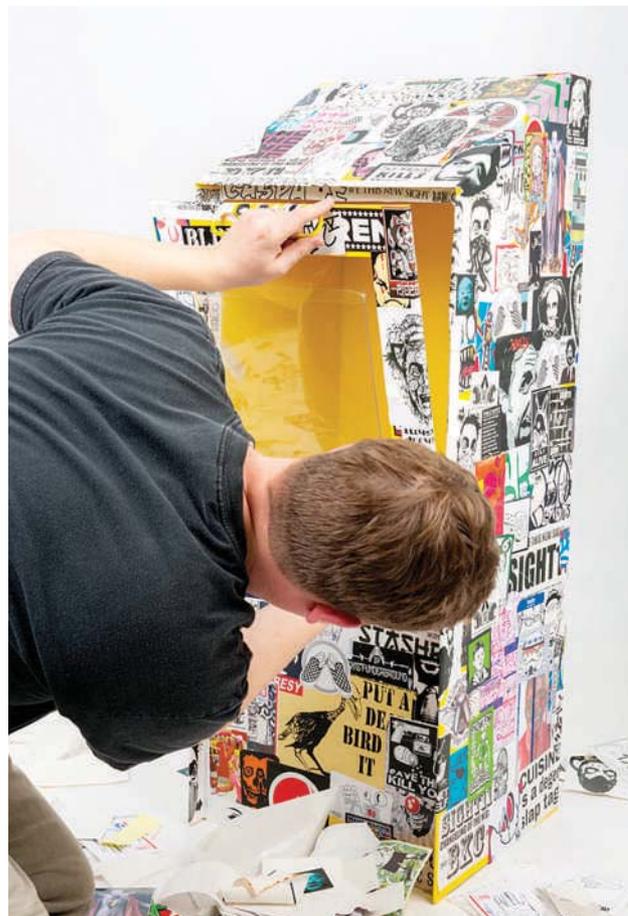
"Some people think I'm swearing allegiance to something, some people think it's about detaching yourself from the current sense of urgency or whatever other trendy nonsense has infected the culture," he says.

Sticker art is increasingly ubiquitous in the D.C. area, in part due to the rapid rise of surveillance cameras in the city, says street art expert Alex Goldstein, owner of The Fridge DC art gallery in Capitol Hill. These cameras can easily capture spray-painters, who might spend hours working on a single installation. Sticker artists, on the other hand, can slap up their works in seconds.

"They're a lot less likely to get caught," Goldstein says.

As a result, stickers are popping up in suburban parking lots and train tunnels as well as the city's center. But somehow, they've largely escaped official notice.

"I just have never seen them,"



JASON HORNIK (FOR EXPRESS)

**“I’d much rather see a bunch of stickers that someone put a little thought or creativity into than just the plain, boring, gray base of a street-light.”**

— IWILLNOT, D.C.-AREA STICKER ARTIST

says Cassandra Ball, the director of D.C.’s graffiti abatement program. “I can’t remember ever sending a crew out to take stickers off.”

D.C. Department of Public Works spokeswoman Nancee Lyons agrees. “I’ve seen band flyers and posters, but little stickers? I haven’t seen that.”

Lyons’ office, at 14th and U streets NW, happens to sit at the epicenter of D.C.’s sticker art explosion. Stickers have been stuck on the bus stop, electrical box and roadwork sign directly in front of the Department of Public Works headquarters. Across the street, a blue sign pointing pedestrians to Meridian Hill Park is plastered with more than 40 stickers, including one depicting a coffee mug that looks like a duck and another showing an astronaut with a television head.

Like spray-paint graffiti, sticker graffiti is destruction of property, punishable with fines of up to \$1,000, community service or jail time. But the people behind it see



## Put a 'Bot on It

Look sharp and you’re likely to spot a “Robot Griffin III” sticker somewhere in D.C. RGIII is a creation of artist BZA, who calls his works “Memebots” — “visual shells that can encapsulate any personality.” His illustrations start with a basic robot design that he alters to depict a character or celebrity. “I try to keep them really happy, fun, positive,” he says. Other D.C.-ish Memebots: “Bobby Lee Bot,” inspired by Bobby Lee of the Arlington-based reggae band SOJA, and “Robama.” Who’s next? “I haven’t done a sticker of Chuck Brown,” BZA notes.

MARISSA PAYNE (EXPRESS)

themselves as artists, not vandals.

“Stickers have so much value, even though they’re cheap and small,” explains a local artist who goes by “Moral,” who plasters the city with stickers featuring intricately drawn monster faces.

For his part, iwillnot sees stickering as sort of a neighborhood beautification project.

“I’d much rather see a bunch of stickers that someone put a little thought or creativity into than just the plain, boring, gray base of a streetlight,” he says. “D.C. is already such a gray city. I’m in a battle against the gray.”

As other forms of street art are finding their way into galleries, sticker art has largely stayed on the street. “The problem is, you can’t make any money off of it,” iwillnot says. It took him years to convince The Fridge’s Goldstein to put on a sticker art show.

That show finally happened last fall, after iwillnot posted notices on online street art forums, asking artists around the world to mail their work to him. More than 10,000 stickers flooded his P.O. box, and iwillnot spent some 60 hours affixing them to wooden panels for the show. Today you can find the installation near the gallery gift shop, but it’s not for sale.

“There is no way I could track down 10,000 mostly anonymous

artists and pay them maybe \$1 each,” says iwillnot, who volunteered his time to create the show.

Small, cheap and abundant, sticker art may be particularly resistant to the commercial forces that threaten to appropriate other facets of street art.

“We don’t get a lot of cred, since what we do is so low-risk,” iwillnot says. “But we are as street as it gets.” SADIE DINGFELDER (EXPRESS)

## STUCK ONLINE

See all five surfaces of our sticker-coated Express box, plus detailed shots of the stickers that adorn it, at [readexpress.com](http://readexpress.com).



**His Top Sticks:** Local artist iwillnot told us about some of his favorite stickers and sticker-makers.



### Poor Kid

This Chicago-based artist hand-draws all of his stickers, which often juxtapose Dr. Seuss-like characters with punk iconography. “Each one of his stickers is a self-contained little story.”



### Skam

The chip-toothed avatar of this Portland, Ore.-based artist suggests a person celebrating ignorance. “If you look at the arrow, it seems like he is shooting himself in the head with his own words.”



### Arrex

Arrex, also from Portland, Ore., makes precision die-cut stickers. The sticker above features a matte orange layer on a glossy white base. “He produces professional-quality stickers, all at home.”



### Garth Fry

A professional mixed-media artist in Pennsylvania, Fry hails from the D.C. area and has only produced a single sticker design: these spiffy checkered shoes. “I love the balance and the simplicity of the design.”