

This essay was originally written for inclusion in **Stencil Pirates**. It wasn't published in the book, but quoted extensively instead. This is the entire unpublished text.

Stencil Art: A Revolutionary Meme

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"We need to learn how to spread the vision of liberation and life everywhere in humble, small, invisible ways. Like grass slowly growing up through the cracks in the concrete, perhaps our counter-information can eventually sneak up on the mighty machine and topple it." -PB Floyd, *Slingshot*, Summer 2003.

"Street stencils are beautiful little booby-traps of information lying in wait, aesthetic gifts left behind as urban folk art, simultaneously revealing and concealing their purposes."
-Peter Walsh, *Mapping Social and Cultural Space: the Ramifications of the Street Stencil*¹

Stencil art is a unique art form. Its humble beginnings as ancient art helped humans discover higher forms of communication. Once humans developed new expressive tools, stenciling continued to endure. Like a fractal, its form maintains continuity while its path in time drops into infinity. We have benefited from stencil art, and there is evidence that it maintains a strong power to create change. In a modern world where humans communicate via complex technological tools, where nothing seems to be that simple anymore, stencil art speaks clearly amongst the digital white noise.

In 1976, Oxford zoologist Richard Dawkins wrote about the concept of a meme (pronounced *meem*) in his book *The Selfish Gene*. His original definition of a "mind-virus" stated "the meme is simply a unit of intellectual or cultural information that survives long enough to be recognized as such, and which can pass from mind to mind."² Examples of memes exist throughout history while new ones are created daily. From an early human's handheld ax to the changing of English grammar due to text messaging, memes infect our minds, alter our behavior, and cause us to propagate certain patterns.^{2,3}

The stencil art meme, viewed as a piece of contagious information, predates most means of repetitive object representation. At least 5,000 years ago, the Aboriginal peoples of Australia stenciled hands, boomerangs, and tomahawks onto rock faces by blowing colored ochre with their mouths.⁴ Speculation as to why they created these images ranges from their use in ritual rites to being "a way [for the artist to say] 'we are here, we are part of this place.'"⁵

Stencils were used in Asia, "sliced from dried banana leaf to decorate bark cloth; cut from leather to spread the Buddha's image." Greek and Roman artisans created decorative art patterns such as spirals and swastikas with simple stencils. "Theodoric, the illiterate king of the Ostrogoths (454 CE to 526 CE) used a stencil of gold ingot to sign his name."⁶ In the modern, industrial era stencils were used as decorations, reusable type, and for high quality printed images.

In the late 20th century, the stencil meme left its recent utilitarian and high art past to become a revolutionary communication tool. Reaching a tipping point in its evolution, the art form redefined itself. Around the late 1970s, in the midst of the punk and DIY (do it yourself) sensibilities, stencils became an easy tool for public expression. The focal point of street stenciling originated in Baltimore, Maryland, where artists spoke to one another via stenciled words and images. The New York City area, and Paris, France also became a vibrant source of street stencils. It is not a

coincidence that artists from different geographical locations caught the infectious idea at the same time.

The stencil meme reached this point for obvious reasons. As other types of contemporary street art developed, the stencil proved to be a resilient medium. Even compared to nonpublic art, the stencil holds significant power for the common viewer. Looking at the apparent weaknesses of other artistic communication methods, power and resilience aren't the only characteristics of the revolutionary stencil meme.

Traditional art is usually a static experience. One cannot find the same sculpture throughout a city or somewhere else in the world unless it is a replica. Most traditional art is found in galleries, chosen by someone and viewed by a select group of people. These pieces of art can be moved, but usually get placed in other galleries with their own limited viewership. Even when thousands of people see larger exhibits, traditional art's exposure is still limited by the price of admission at the door.

Mural and graffiti pieces are static examples of street art. Like traditional art, they have limited expressive capabilities for the artist. Murals have been repainted in different cities, but it is a labor-intensive art form, usually directed and/or produced by people with strong art skills. Skilled artists do graffiti pieces, designing the piece before painting it. Quicker graffiti tags can be repetitive, but lack intense details and colors of the more complex pieces.

Sticker and poster art are cousins to the stencil meme. Screen printing actually evolved from the use of stencils,⁷ but soon became a technically advanced art form. Today, emulsions, dark rooms, screens, and printing presses are used to squeegee and print images onto paper and vinyl. Posters must be wheat-pasted onto walls while stickers have to be cut to size and peeled to stick. These forms may be repetitive means of street art, but their advanced reproduction needs inhibit some people from using these methods of expression.

Due to its small size, a sticker can be easily concealed. Unlike a stencil, sticker art usually remains small and therefore doesn't work for larger pieces. A Sharpie or marker tag may also work for repeating an idea or image, but its voice is limited by where the artist writes the tag. The marker tag cannot be mailed to a different location and painted. Markers can be more difficult to use for detailed tags and its size is usually small.

Public corporate advertising should be mentioned with regards to its differences from stencil art. Ad agencies use the public commons to sell products via billboards, wheat-pasted one sheets, magnets, and sidewalk stickers. Artists and activists cannot use these public means of communication because of its high usage price. Even when artists and activists can afford to use these tools, corporate media companies usually turn them down or censor their art. Public advertising creates revenue for ad agencies and isn't free for public usage.

It must be mentioned that corporations and small businesses use stencils as advertising tools as well. Termed guerilla marketing, crews go out with machine-cut stencils and promote everything from clothing lines and TV shows to consumer goods. Smaller, local DIY campaigns promote nightclubs, bands, and performers. City governments have scrutinized the larger stencil ad campaigns. The ill-fated IBM Linux campaign in San Francisco and Chicago ended in threats of fines and sandblasted stencils.⁸

Looking at these examples of public art, one easily sees that the stencil meme's power rests in its simplicity, mobility and adaptability. Being able to repeat text and images, sometimes in different cities, improves the stencils effectiveness in conveying messages to more people. Though there may be problems concealing or transporting larger stencils, they do not have size constraints like stickers and marker tags do. Stencil art belongs to the artist that doesn't have a big budget of a larger organization or the advanced skills that screen printers, graffiti artists, and muralists

need. Unlike fine art, stencils live indoors or out, easily making the transition from canvas, paper, or metal to a factory wall or concrete sidewalk. It is art for the people, accessible by anybody with a thick piece of paper, a pencil, a sharp knife, an idea, some spray paint, and time for practice.

Webster's defines revolution as "a sudden, radical, or complete change." The stencil meme, a concept carried from person to person for millennia, has evolved into the 21st century. Taking cues from its recent vibrant past, and using its strengths, artists and activists continue to use stencils in new and creative ways to radically change the landscapes that we live in. They subvert billboard ads, protest gentrification, celebrate heroes, and dot the urban environment with portraits, phrases, and images.

The advent of the Internet in the late 1990s has added fuel to the revolution by connecting the international stencil community. Online communications allows artists to share techniques, documentation, and even actual stencils. Simple e-mail campaigns urge artists to submit their stencil art to a show on a different continent. Activists create exchange projects where stencils are mailed to other cities for organized public actions.

Now that the stencil meme has dropped into the virtual landscape, its development continues to grow and change. It has always been an uncontained art form and now it is spreading across the real and the virtual at an unprecedented rate. While the messages fade in one city, they go up somewhere else or get photographed and put on a Web site. Stencil art heads into an exciting future, steeped in advanced ideas yet simplistic in its methods.

And if the modern urban society ever disappears, there will most likely be a human, in a cave, recording his presence by making a stencil with a mouth full of pigment.

1. This article is has been republished on the stencilpirates.org
2. <http://maxwell.lucifer.com/virus/alt.memetics/what.is.html>).
3. <http://www.lucifer.com/virus/memlex.html#MEME>
4. <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/2996/carnarv.html>
5. http://www.wimmera.com.au/wimmera/2_aboriginal_rock_art.htm
6. <http://www.cooper.edu/art/lubalin/stencil.html>
7. <http://www.mruthvenart.com/html/serigraph.html>
8. http://www.marketleap.com/report/ml_report_06.htm