Young People (De)politicizing Youth Cultures: Agency, Well-Being, and Claims for Change

This paper investigates unauthorized practices of sticker art that are usually understood by scholars as political acts and yet narrated as apolitical by the sticker artists themselves. In order to analytically explore this contradiction, the article examines how and why representatives of youth culture (de)politicize their practices and present themselves as (non)political subject. The concept of (de)politicization is utilized as a tool enabling researchers to analyze what actions and intentions actors wish to present as claims for social change and what not, and the rationale for this. Using ethnographic data on the sticker artists' community in St. Petersburg, Russia collected in 2016-2021, I scrutinized the nexus of the ethics, esthetics, and politics of youth culture in order to reveal how certain combinations of ethics and its visual manifestations are connected to the young people's (de)politicization of practices in a given socio-political environment. Through the example of sticker artists, the paper discusses the alternative types of claims that do not follow the logic of resistance and shows young people's complex work of politicization and depoliticization, which contributes to their liberation from subordination and provides them with an opportunity to live a meaningful life in their own manner.

Keywords: youth culture, sticker art, depoliticization, Russia, well-being

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Ethical Approval

This research followed the ethical principles of research involving human participants and ethical review in the human sciences in Finland. Participation in the research was voluntary; participants were informed of the nature of the study and their right decline to participate. The collection of data involved no risk to the subjects. The anonymity of research subjects and data protection issues were duly considered when collecting, processing and reporting data.

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Introduction

This article originated from my contemplation of the sticker artists who took part in my research in 2016-2021 and their dominant position of being unequivocally opposed to the display of any political expression through their stickers. My pre-fieldwork assumptions were the opposite; I thought that they must intend to demonstrate some kind of resistance because of the illicit nature of the practices they engage in. I considered gluing stickers as a tool for expressing one's position and thought that if an artist uses this media, they are protesting against a certain rule. Indeed, some researchers also noted the dissemination of protest stickers in certain contexts as pervasive (Awcock, 2021; Bloch, 2000).

A sticker is a small item made from plain or vinyl paper with an adhesive back so that it can be put on different urban surfaces. The front of the sticker may be a picture, sign, slogan, logo, nickname, or anything that can fit the size (see Figure 1). The sticker artists who participated in the research mainly claimed that they were driven by curiosity, a desire for self-expression, and friendship, and that many of them imply no additional political meaning in their art practices. Why is that?

Figure 1. Stickers. Photo by Nadezhda Vasileva.

Figure 2. Sticker combo. Photo by Nadezhda Vasileva.

The streets of a city like St. Petersburg, to a certain extent, represent a space of various confrontations and negotiations taking place in symbolic and esthetic forms. This antagonism can cover a range of issues from the urban planning and housing developments to the micro details that compose the urban fabric and reflect the everyday needs, sentiments, requests, and messages of various actors - outdoor signs, posters, billboards, ads, graffiti, stickers, etc. In particular, the urban walls and other surfaces are a very sensitive radar that often in a direct sense depicts the changes ongoing in the city (Feiten, 2017). Street art in Russia and St. Petersburg in particular is usually considered one of the most notable and available forms of visual grassroots protest and also a form of young people's political resistance. Those artists who have gained media and/or art institutions recognition in recent years often create politically charged artworks and in that way set the tone for this kind of art and fashion the audience's expectations. In turn, local authorities follow a zero-tolerance policy towards any unauthorized urban intervention (Government of St. Petersburg, 2017) and tend to remove every image or inscription regardless of the meaning of the expression and its location. In that manner, the urban illicit drawing may acquire a political meaning, at least at the level of semantics and the symbolic level. Semantically, it is mainly traced only to those artworks that carry the political message intentionally expressed and depicted by street artists (e.g. Arranz Otaegui & Moore, 2022). Symbolically, every unauthorized urban intervention can be defined as political because it suggests alternative esthetics, claiming the right to the city and the field of the visible (Brighenti, 2007; Campos, 2015).

Noteworthy, the strengthening of the authoritarian regime in Russia (Lemon & Antonov, 2020), accompanied by the growth of hostility in the urban environment - the reduction of the number of sites available for civic expression, and the imposition of censorship - led to an enhanced interest among residents in stickers (e.g. Silina, 2022). Stickers are an easily made, readily available and small-sizes tool, enabling diverse urban inhabitants to make anonymous statements in public spaces across the city. Meanwhile, sticker artists as representatives of youth culture "sticker art" are rather interested in drawing non-anonymous[1] politically neutral bright characters that refer to their alter egos or nicknames and put their stickers on locations where, in their opinion, these would not destroy or harm the general city esthetics (e.g. Vasileva, 2021).

There is a certain contradiction between sticker artists' actual involvement and the influence of urban power relations through unauthorized practices that change and diversify the physical environment of public space, turning it into a space of informal urban communication (Samutina & Zaporozhets, 2021), and artists' own conscious representation of their activity as non-political. The same discourse of denial of political was noted, for example, by Wai-man (2004), who

described the civic initiatives in Hong Kong in the second half of the 20th century, which made obvious attempts at political participation, but were publicly proclaimed by the participants as being free of politics. Wai-man explained this intention as a consequence of the historical development and specific socio-political positioning of Hong Kong, characterized by the promotion of a culture of depoliticization and the presentation of politics as undesirable. This paper examines how sticker artists reflect on the meanings of their practices and why they are eager to remove these meanings from the field of the political. Therefore, I wonder what kind of benefits young people derive or what kind of intended effects they produce if they frame their activity as non-political.

Pondering on this topic, I encounter a certain methodological and epistemological contradiction – as a researcher, I always try to politicize sticker artists' (or indeed all young people's) experiences and practices in order to represent them as political subjects and to defend them against accusations of passivity, whereas they are themselves rather involved in the conscious work of depoliticization. Scrutiny and reflection on this contradiction seem to me a substantial methodological and theoretical challenge that aims to enhance the understanding of the politics of youth cultures.

The Entanglement of Esthetics and Politics: A Youth Research Perspective

In order to facilitate thinking about young people and politics, this section discusses three different analytical conceptualizations of relationships between the esthetic expressions and political cultures of youth scenes. The two of them were summarized and described by the sociologist and youth researcher Ferreira (2016) as the *politics of existence* and the *politics of resistance*. The third has been introduced by the anthropologist of Soviet and post-Soviet cultures, Yurchak (2008) as the *politics of indistinction* employed by informal communities of Soviet artists and intellectuals during the later years of the Soviet Union.

Reviewing the body of research conducted predominately in the Global North and shaping the dominant theoretical comprehension of young people's spectacular practices, Ferreira (2016) distinguished two analytical approaches describing two different types of political participation, which he refers to as different historical and socio-economic periods. The *politics of resistance*, in this conceptualization, rather describes the spectacular youth cultures of the past and emphasizes young people's collective symbolic confrontation with the dominant norms of working-class parental culture and bourgeois cultural hegemony and their pursuit of social change, whereas the *politics of existence* implies the development of individual subjectivity through lifestyle

experimentations of modern youth, mainly by means of consumption and the creative appropriation of cultural artifacts and objects.

Yurchak's concept of the *politics of indistinction* tries to capture and describe absurdist and provocative attitudes and esthetics intentionally designed and presented by individuals as apolitical. Through the example of the Necrorealists – an artistic group that practiced "an aesthetic strategy of suspending the political from most spheres of their existence, often so thoroughly that their lives literally changed on the existential level" (Yurchak, 2008, p. 201), Yurchak scrutinized the emergence of non-Soviet subjects in the late Soviet period. In a regime requiring the mandatory performing of declared forms of political participation and which had an exclusive right to define and control these forms of participation, ignorance of political issues and refusal to define a self in political terms may be considered a certain kind of political subjectivity that challenged the existing order. The famous Foucauldian formula "where there is power, there is resistance" also specifies that "this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 2019, p. 95). Therefore, the subject of resistance is consciously or unconsciously engaged with the power structure and their behavior is shaped as a reaction to power. Necrorealists refused to accept and act as if placed into power relationships, they positioned themselves as subjects in the state's zone of indistinction, living as if unaware of the rules of conduct dictated by power. Yurchak called this strategy of suspending political a politics of indistinction – a paradoxical way of acting politically.

These three concepts – *politics of resistance, politics of existence,* and *politics of indistinction* – provide different analytical perspectives which situate young people in relation to others and explain how they exercise agency (Nichanian & Ploof, 2020). The concepts are grounded in different theoretical underpinnings, which fashion a researcher's gaze and determine the logic of interpretation of youth culture. The *politics of resistance* is mainly rooted within the subcultural theory, which relies on the structuralist and Marxist explanations of social relations and the determination of class division (Hall & Jefferson, 1976), whereas the *politics of existence* is derived from the post-subcultural and postmodern theories that emphasize young people's agency and coins a term lifestyles to describe how individual identities are constructed and lived out (Bennett, 2013; Miles, 2000). The *politics of indistinction* is a concept resulting from an analysis of non-democratic and non-consumer society, whose structure is not centered around class division, and an attempt to examine alternative forms of subversive politics.

The clear conceptual demarcation between the politics of *resistance* and *existence* turned out to be possible due to the original difference between subcultural and post-subcultural theories, guided respectively by structural and interpretive analysis and both criticized for excessive commitment to only one of these. For example, the subcultural approach was accused of overuse of a semiotic glance that retrieved the agency of young people "from subcultural assemblages rather than explored in practice" (Sweetman, 2013, p. 228). Researchers read spectacular manifestations of subcultures as a text, deployed in a specific social environment, and drew conclusions about the antagonistic nature of traditional subcultures not always taking into account the young people's own understanding of their practices and intentions, and analytically attributed to them participation in resistance (Sweetman, 2013). The interpretive stance of post-subcultural theory has been criticized for hollow empiricism (Hall & Jefferson, 2006) and this compelled researchers to contextualize more minutely the lived experience and ideas of young people within social structures. The ongoing theoretical discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches has resulted in some rapprochement in the definitions of resistance and the politics of existence. Postmodern theory associates resistance with pleasure, hedonism, and expression of the self (Blackman, 2010), and conceptualizes it, in particular, as young people's "inappropriate" consumption that "undermines the neo-liberal model of dutiful citizenship" (Riley et al., 2010, p. 37). In this respect, despite detachment from the youth research debate, Yurchak's analysis employed both structural and interpretive perspectives, deploying the agency of young people by making sense of their own conceptualization of their activities in a particular social environment.

Taken together, the politics of *resistance*, *existence*, and *indistinction* reflect and emphasize the relative and constructed nature of understanding politics, which relies heavily on interpretation, contextualization, and the theoretical position of the subjects of interpretation. Therefore, this paper endeavors to complement the structuralist and interpretative analysis of the politics of youth cultures with a constructionist gaze that will assist in tracing the process of the construction of meanings attributed to certain activities in certain societal environments. In order to do this, I utilize the concept of (de)politicization, enabling me to distinguish the subject of (de)politicization – adults, researchers, politicians, or as in the case of this article participants of youth culture - and focus on their reasoning and the consequences of their producing the certain meanings of practices. I use brackets in the spelling of this concept to emphasize that both processes of politicization and depoliticization may be present in the youth culture and to theoretically bind them as equal and entangled manifestations of young people's will. *Politicizing* their actions, young people present them as claims to change what "has previously appeared or been presented as self-evident or necessary" (Meriluoto, 2021, p. 4) and show how and why things could be otherwise. Doing the

work of *depoliticization*, they frame their cultural activities as non-claims and thereby present themselves and their community as nonpolitical subjects.

The concepts discussed above – *politics of existence, politics of resistance, and politics of indistinction* – provide a vocabulary to differentiate the types of young people's claims and the way young people formulate them. I approach (de)politicization as an unfolding process caused by particular reasons and implemented for particular purposes even if these are not entirely clear to young people themselves. Thus, the paper attempts to approach the politics of youth cultures as constructions created by young people themselves in reaction to the specific social environment.

Data and Methodology

The article is based on ethnographic data collected in several steps between 2016 and 2021 in St. Petersburg. The initial fieldwork took place in the summer of 2016 in the framework of the project "Digital Youth in the Media City". At this stage, the interviews with sticker artists were collected jointly with the researchers of the Center for Youth Studies (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia). The subsequent active fieldwork stages were implemented in fall-winter 2018, summer 2019, summer 2020, and spring-summer 2021. Throughout the period from 2016 to 2021, I also attended and observed sticker artists' events and jams, and monitored social media, mainly Instagram[2] accounts, representing both sticker art as a community and the personal accounts of sticker artists. The data include altogether 37 semi-structured interviews conducted with 25 sticker artists (8 female, 17 male), aged from 13 to 40 (most participants were in their twenties). Some of the research participants were interviewed twice in the logic of a longitudinal study. The duration of the interviews varied from 60 to 150 minutes. The participants of the research are a heterogeneous group that includes students, early career professionals (white-collar), and blue-collar individuals, even though most of them are connected to the creative industries in one way or another. Approximately half of the sticker artists who participated in the research had moved to St. Petersburg from other regions of Russia to study and work. The participants represent a rather ethnically homogenous group.

The research participants were recruited mainly through social media (Instagram and Facebook analog "Vkontakte"), sometimes I just searched for the particular nicknames that I had seen on the stickers on different streets of the city. This recruitment strategy in many ways determined the sample, which turned out to include artists who create authors' stickers because they do not mind being found out. As I have never practiced or participated in the sticker art community, I neither

possess or have insider subcultural knowledge, albeit I inhabited the same broader socio-political environment in which sticker artists operated, being of the same age and living in St. Petersburg. I believe this allowed me to occupy the position of a reflexive outsider, who could relate to the participants' experiences and ideas without adapting them to my own thoughts.

It can be claimed that the evolution of the conceptual toolkit of youth research employed to analyze and describe spectacular youth cultures approached progressively as subcultures, tribes, neo-tribes, scenes, etc, emphasizes the dynamic relationship between the form of organization of youth culture, its esthetics, values, and politics. In that manner, I approached the political, esthetic, and ethical dimensions of young people's engagements and utilized them in order to understand how these dimensions are entangled in the process of (de)politicization of youth culture. I distinguished from the general data set narratives and observations that reflect at least one of the themes:

- conceptualization of political action and political participation, explanation of experiences of participation; reflections on the relationship of sticker art and political action, and meanings of stickering activities
- sticker art esthetics and manifestations of style
- expressions of individual and communal ethics (ideas about (in)appropriate behavior, ideas about good and bad, rules of conduct).

By political dimension I understand young people's own definitions of political participation and reflections on the relationship between their practices and political action. By esthetic I understand their ideas about beauty, creativity and mastery that are manifested through the visual stylization of objects, activities, and outlooks, which produce a common group identity and a way of "being-in-the-world" (Clarke et al., 1976). I approach the ethical dimension as a set of ideas about the norms and rules that regulate artists' relationships with each other, with the environment and other people.

I will start the analytical section with a descriptive introduction to the ethics and esthetics of the sticker art community in St. Petersburg and of the wider cultural context. Then I will analyze sticker artists' political imagination and how they make sense of their practices. Finally, I will reflect on the relationship between ethics, esthetics, politics, and sticker artists' political subjectivities.

The ethics and Esthetics of the Sticker Art Community Against the Background of Russian Cultural and Youth Policies

Cultural and Youth Policies: A Brief Introduction

Inherently youth-led and voluntary cultural practices (youth culture) are usually positioned by researchers if not as a protest, then at least as a project that suggests an alternative cultural imaginary. In Russia, culture as a complex of norms, discourses, and practices still seems to be mobilized by the state to achieve targeted political goals, even though the government no longer maintains a monopoly on cultural production as it was during the Soviet period (Turoma et al., 2018). The official cultural representations are dominated by images of high culture designed to demonstrate a great cultural heritage and to emphasize the position of the country in the world as a civilization superior to other nations (Forsberg & Mäkinen, 2022).

During the 2010s, cultural policy intensified the reconceptualization of the national and state identity in an Orthodox religious framework and intensified the conservative value-orientation (Kivinen et al., 2020; Turoma et al., 2018). Since 2016, the Ministry of Culture has annually proclaimed among the goals and agendas the "transmission from generation to generation of traditional Russian civilization values and norms, traditions, customs and patterns of behavior" (Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2021, p. 2), which are symbolically represented as a bulwark against the hegemony of Western culture (Forsberg & Mäkinen, 2022; President of Russia, 2021). Kukulin (2021) noted the consistent convergence of cultural and youth policies under the auspices of a state security agenda.

Youth policy in Russia has inherited the Soviet style of governing, characterized by paternalism and an instrumentalized approach to young people as a manageable resource (Silvan, 2021). The strong emphasis on patriotic education has led to the flourishing of masculine military esthetics and ideas of militarizing citizenship (Elshtain, 1985) enhanced by images of glory and the victories of the past, approached as an ultimate display of patriotism. A vivid example is the Young Army Cadets National Movement (Yunarmiya), launched in 2016 and supported by the Government of the Russian Federation, which has proclaimed as its mission to cultivate citizens and patriots who serve the state and society. According to its website, over a million children and young people had taken part in the Movement's activities by 2022.

Consequently, the Russian context provides a fairly coherent and vivid image of the dominant cultural and political paradigm to which young people can position themselves. Basically, scholars have observed that oppositional power in Russia protests not only against political ideas and the prevailing moral order but also subverts the symbolic system of representations (Kalinin, 2018). In fact, stylistic creativity and emphasis on stylistic divergences from the state-promoted esthetics is "not only a means for the articulation of political protest, but its very content" (Kalinin, 2018, p. 51). Thus, sticker art may be approached as a culture of resistance since it implements Western ideas of esthetics, democratic and amateur DIY cultural production, and illicit practices. However, sticker artists themselves rarely conceptualize their practices in terms of resistance and define them as a minor infringement of formal norms.

Ethics and Esthetics of the Sticker Art Community

Stickers are very accessible media used for various purposes by various actors in the city, therefore sticker art as a phenomenon has a vague definition and an eclectic nature. Several groups of stickers can be distinguished according to their purposes and esthetics. Football fans' stickers visualize supporting one football team and/or discrediting others; advertising stickers are made to promote a product or service; political stickers are created by political activists for agitation or as protests. This article focuses on the so-called authors' stickers (*avtorskie nakleyki*), which are represented by artists as an art form crafted by a community of people who like to create, exchange, collect, and "slap on" stickers in the city. The division into these types is nominal and the belonging of a sticker to a certain group is not always obvious. The author's stickers usually deploy a character – an artist's alter-egos and/or fictional protagonists, or a nickname that looks like a tag or graffiti piece.

Sticker art assembles and attracts vastly different people in their attempts to exercise creativity and find peers. Young people tend to drift between various activities and groups, collecting experiences and polishing identities. Thus, a community of sticker art practitioners is characterized by weak ties, accidental encounters, and often fairly superficial engagement, which may, however, at times become more intense, enhanced by personal interest or collective dynamics. Sticker art forms a part of a wider graffiti and street-art culture, it is to a certain extent inspired by hip-hop esthetics. This influence can be traced to the style of the stickers themselves, the way artists dress, what kind of music they listen to, what other activities they are involved in, etc. Even though there is no stylistic homogeneity in the community and some participants may practice and be interested

only in sticker art without relating to any other street culture activities, some artists place sticker art and its esthetics in a more developed and famous cultural tradition:

> *I think it's somehow not quite right to work only in one direction because it's still part of some larger subculture and you need to be involved in it comprehensively, I mean, it's a break [dancing], graffiti…*

However, the ethics of stickering activity is very different from graffiti despite some stylistic kinship. Sticker art, like graffiti, is a communication game for telling about one's movements (Macdonald, 2001), but not in the same manner as the "fame game" that scholars usually attribute to graffiti (Macdonald, 2001; Snyder, 2011). Fame game is a specific street etiquette according to which the positioning of a tag relative to others, its size, and style embody and visualize the social relations and power within the subculture: the status of each writer, respect, or disrespect. Neither do the sticker artists presented in this article participate in the "sticker wars" of football fans or protestors, who, as Ritchie (2019) described, scrawl or superimpose their stickers on top of those of an opponent. In general, as has been shown in the documentary *Stick to It* (Deforges, 2017), the global sticker art community is characterized by the fact that sticker artists rather cherish and admire each other stickers than compete against them.

Stickers in most cases are not specifically tailored to appear in a specific place and are often printed in large numbers of copies. Sticker art culture usually manifests itself as a "combo" – a collage of stickers, placed in urban settings, for example, on a transformer box. Often spontaneous, combos are co-created by various actors just by adding a new sticker to those that were put up earlier (see Figure 2). Combo as an art form reflects both individuality and collectivity, both supported and encouraged by a community. Even though some personal conflicts are possible, the sticker culture is driven not by competition but by co-creation and the celebration of creativity. Artists tend to avoid judging someone else's art:

> *Interviewer: Do you think, is it possible to evaluate the quality of the sticker? This sticker is cool, and this one is not.*
> *Sticker artist: Oh, well, it's a matter of taste, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I may like it, but you may not like it, and vice versa. It's a matter of taste.*
> *Interviewer: So, there is no such thing that it is obvious that one is a poorly made sticker ...*
> *Sticker artist: You can't do that because it may offend the artist. Well, everyone will always find an admirer.*

Networked collectivity is nourished by different joint events and through practices of sticker exchange and co-creation carried out with the help of social media. In contrast to graffiti, where a graffiti piece in most cases cannot be "cut" from the wall and a writer needs to be in the place themselves to draw their tag, the format of stickers is mobile and to a certain extent detached from the author. Sticker artists may send their stickers by post to other artists living in different cities and countries to "slap on" a sticker in a city where this sender has never been. Moreover, since most sticker artists use digital drawing tools, people located in different parts of the globe can create stickers together. They usually try to come up with a story that would unite their characters and portray it.

> *There is a lot of communication in this community, it is not necessarily face-to-face communication, it is not necessary to be interested in someone's life. You can just write to a stranger from another city, it may be, I don't know, a 30-year-old Muscovite who works in an office, it is absolutely not important. I write "cool character, I like the cat you're drawing, let's do something together". Let's say: "Have you watched Full Metal Jacket[3]? Let's come up with something on this topic"… and in the process, this can turn into some kind of closer communication, up to the point that a person comes to the city, we meet face to face.*

This quotation also emphasized the paramount importance of creative expression that overrides any social characteristics and statuses of a person that reproduce inequalities and which are traditionally cherished in mainstream society. Due to this subversion of prescribed norms, young people experience a certain type of transgression. In that manner, sticker art activity shapes an alternative space that is nevertheless integrated into the life of practitioners – as the quotation says, communication can be initiated to encounter a person solely for creative (quite anonymous) collaboration that later may be transformed into a friendship that supposes exchange of personal information and disclosure of identity.

The idea of sticker art practices is to leave as many stickers in the city as possible to be noticed by others, therefore the most advantageous tactic is to create a digital sticker layout and then print in a professional print office or at home. Repeatability and reproducibility of stickers is also reminiscent of pop art aesthetics. Artists do not claim authenticity, uniqueness, or even artistic mastery. They also exploit popular images, slogans, and logos, ironically transforming or redefining them, and often imbuing them with subversive meaning. Known as culture jamming (Carducci, 2006; Dery, 1993), these globally widespread practices, according to sticker artists,

have lost some critical potential and social acuity in a Russian context because of obvious borrowing and emulation of Western examples.

The strategies for the placement of stickers in the city space also follow certain common rules. Sticker artists do not aim to destroy the overall esthetic of the place, therefore they try to find spots in which their stickers will be visible, but not spoil the environment. Artists choose different surfaces of urban infrastructures as the most suitable sites with a smooth texture and low esthetic value for fellow citizens.

Thus, to a certain extent, motley and amateurish sticker combos visualize an attempt to generate a community of support, in which young people experience solidarity and recognition, in contrast to the competitive and alienated social environment.

Political Imagination and Sticker Art Esthetics

Remarkably, scholars simultaneously identify two contradictory tendencies – the growth of young people's political participation in Russia (Kukulin, 2021) and their apathy toward collective political issues (Zhelnina, 2020). Perhaps this contradiction illustrates the formation of two opposite and confronting regimes of citizenship – democratic and authoritarian. A declared transition to democratic values contributed to the emergence of ideas of a democratic regime of citizenship that requires mobilized and active citizens, who participate in formal politics and engage actively with the various ongoing societal processes. However, in practice, an authoritarian regime allows only managed youth participation (Silvan, 2021) and purposefully implements a policy that generates passive and de-mobilized citizens, who leave the solution of all political issues to the superior discretion (Østbø, 2017; Zhelnina, 2020). In that manner, political participation in the depoliticized environment may assume a paradoxical form (Erpyleva & Magun, 2015) and differ from customary "acts of citizenship" in Western and democratic interpretation (Jakimów, 2022).

Young people involved in sticker art to a certain extent evinced the same discrepancy and inconsistency. Sticker artists are not those who are indifferent to various political issues; as citizens, they may have different political preferences and exercise political participation in different ways. However, the artists do not aim to engage sticker art in political activism, or in what Ferreira (2016) named the politics of resistance. This section will consider the rationale of artists who (de)politicize their stickering practices.

Resistance as a Loss of Creative Freedom and Subjectivity

The sticker artists expressed the feeling that life, in general, is becoming more politicized. The various events, statements, decisions, and announcements attributed to the national and international political agenda infiltrate everyday life at least at the discursive level. Due to the popularity of social media among young people, everyone has a platform for speaking out and the artists noted that more and more people express their positions and opinions and so become involved in public discussions and confrontations, i.e., they politicize their everyday lives in the logic of the politics of resistance. On the one hand, the expansion of the area of public debates and the growing social tensions foster and promote the images of good and concerned citizens cognisant of the socio-political context and having opinions related to it. On the other hand, the apathy-producing policy of the state and the prevention of protest activities nourish de-mobilizing emotions, such as sadness and mourning, or fear, as well as social mistrust and disbelief in collective action (Østbø, 2017; Zhelnina, 2020), thereby demotivating young people to be active political subjects and making them suspicious of those who are active. For example, one of the artists explained his attitude towards political action and public expression of political opinion in the following way:

> *Maybe the point is the intelligibility of this position. This again, if we are talking about social media. Let's say, now there is a big scandal about the previous elections. And from every direction there is the news that someone was not allowed [to take part in elections as a candidate] here, something is forbidden here. And as I already said, yes, I support that it is necessary to disseminate information. But when I see reposts from people who post their torso three times a day, then they will post: guys, you need to go on the barricades. Then again...*
>
> And later he also added:
>
> *I would really not like to use stickers to make any statements because I would not want to associate myself with some political or social group. I feel that I am rather closer to being against every [group], but I think they should exist. I just don't like to be associated with them.*

These extracts illustrate how elements of democratic and authoritarian regimes of citizenship are mixed. Recognizing the importance of public discussions and making inquiries, the sticker artist is in any case doubts the sincerity of those expressions, suspecting that they may be a gesture motivated by pragmatic purposes of gaining symbolic capital. The intention not to be associated with any political group also reflects the disappointment in the politics of resistance. In that

manner, the skepticism, irony, and cynicism inherent in these quotes are the instruments that young people employ to maintain a sense of control and subjectivity (Bennett et al., 2013; Zhelnina, 2020).

Sticker artists questioned if the exploitation of acute social and political ongoing processes in artworks is a true civic position or a desire to promote an individual or group artistic brand. This is a clearly negative evaluation of intermittently joining a popular discussion for the sake of gain. According to the narratives of the artists, authentic political expression rather requires serious engagement in political activism, which means that the artistic component of activity becomes secondary and subordinate to the political one. In this manner, artists need to be devoted to their political programs and be ready to take a risk.

> *Now there is still such a moment in my life I want to do my favorite things. And I understand that I don't want to take the path of a person who is involved in politics and who lives a corresponding life. Well, like Pavlensky. It's kind of tough, and it's not how I see my life, or how I would like to live. These things are not compatible. Like, you can't be a little Pavlensky and still kind of (laughs) <...> I am kind of not ready to take the blows.*

The quotation refers to the figure of Petr Pavlensky, famous for his controversial political art performances that eventually led to his defection from Russia. This notable example also shows that a political activist is seen as the one who loses a part of the control over their life path. Sticker artists consider resistance an activity that suppresses and slows down the development of other areas of life. I cannot say that they fear taking part in the politics of resistance in general, but sticker artists wish to disassociate sticker art from the politics of resistance to provide themselves with more creative freedom.

Summing up these reflections on the politicization in the form of resistance, it seems that sticker artists admit that the logic of resistance puts a rigid framework on creative activities and the community itself, so artists prefer to avoid it in order to retain their subjectivities. Sticker artists' criticism of the pursuit of symbolic capital and power, which may take the form of a fame game or of “insincere” resistance, is a key prerequisite for creating an inclusive community and generating trust between participants.

Alternative Ways of Politicization

Sticker artists do not mind articulating that stickers are engaged with the politics of *existence*. This extensive perspective on politics was voiced, in particular, by female sticker artists reflecting on their practices as pro-active and constructive individuals or collective expressions. While discussing the need for socio-political messages in street art according to the examples of Banksy's and Pasha's 183 art, the artist said to me:

> *Well, it needs to be done, it's just that everyone has their own methods. I think that all these people basically say the same thing. The same Banksy, he is just, how to say. For example, from my side, I send some kind, positive feelings with my drawings to people. ... Banksy does the opposite. Shows people's imperfections in the world. And it already causes a little [feelings] from the other side. But, in essence, it's all the same. This is all aimed at somehow changing the world for the better. Well, so that people around them notice other people, they respect them more, a lot of things can be said. It all seems to be vague, but it seems to be about the same thing. It's just that the people there ... the main thing is that people become, probably, kinder. The basic idea.*

The artist emphasized that she politicized her activity in the logic of the politics of existence. Her claim is to make people kinder by using her style - not by exposing and criticizing the imperfections of the state of affairs, but by creating good intentions and positive meanings for herself and others. This approach nourishes the ethics of care and horizontality. Curiously, she does not juxtapose the politics of existence to the politics of resistance, according to her, they use different toolkits to achieve the same goal – a better and fairer world.

Thus, this extract challenges the understanding of the pair of existence-resistance as a dichotomy. Moreover, to a certain extent, it enhances and expands the notion of a politics of existence. Ferreira (2016) introduced the politics *of existence* as the *art of good living* and the *art of making living*, describing them respectively as individual consumption and production. However, the case of sticker artists shows that the good life for young people is not limited to the frames of production and consumption, but rather embodied in the concept of well-being as a holistic phenomenon (Allardt, 1993; Vasileva & Honkatukia, 2023) which includes overcoming social alienation through the experiences that youth cultures create. In this manner, sticker artists attempt to generate trust through communal creative activities and establish ethics that encourage mutual respect and recognition for everyone, thereby leveling some social inequalities. Thus, this article argues that politics of existence refers to the *art of well-being* that includes both participation in production and consumption, but also emphasizes the importance of relationships, emotions,

personal and collective meanings of self and the world that youth cultures generate. Hence, it turns out that the politics of existence are aimed not only at improving individual life, but also the collective experience of society.

Reflecting on the meaning of stickers, artists usually mention that like other manifestations of graffiti culture they serve as personal marks of presence in the city and as a calling card that demonstrates their artistic skills. However, because of the small size and availability of stickers, artists do not consider leaving those personal signs in the urban landscape as a political claim for the right to the city. In general, many artists emphasized that there are no special meanings in their stickers and no additional messages that they wish to disseminate. These narrations are also sometimes accompanied by confessions that they do not really know the reason for their stickering activities, they just love doing it. There is a story of an artist who was caught off guard by a person when he was putting a sticker on a traffic light. Artists have been asked about the meaning of a sticker and his response got the following reaction:

> *She said to me: "are you serious? Damn, man, come up with something better, it's not interesting". I was laughing. Damn, I should have something more interesting. Oh my goodness. Well, it's so funny, actually. I tell different stories all the time. <...> Yes, it's just crazy that they want something. Like this: no, your story, is like bullshit. They've already come up with something so super.*

It seems that this passer-by, like me, was eager to hear a certain story of resistance and was disappointed on discovering something else. This particular sticker depicts image that can have multiple meanings from very mundane to highly politicized. The artist surprisingly discovered that he provoked the audience with this sticker and there are even discussions on social media in which viewers propose various interpretations of it and some of the assumptions are reminiscent of conspiracy theory. Utilizing these reactions, the artist ironically observes how people seek resistance or any hidden meaning in an action, which he prefers not to analyze, conceptualize, or define, leaving himself the opportunity to juggle different interpretations and not to be committed to any of them. Yurchak also noted similar intentions among Necrorealists, who "often avoided articulating an argument that would seem coherent and self-reflexive, especially in response to questions about the meaning of their actions" (Yurchak, 2008, p. 210). Different strategies of refusing to clearly formulate the purpose of their artworks can be interpreted as an element of politics of indistinction – resistance to attempts to reduce the meaning of cultural activities or artifacts to a certain normative framework and represent them as claims. The semantic non-designation or indistinction of the practices emancipates young people at the discursive level, since

by maneuvering between definitions they avoid positioning themselves in power relations and so legitimate them.

Conclusion

This paper, following the tradition of subcultural and post-subcultural studies, examines the ways in which young people are engaged in a critique of the relations of dominance and subordination in society through participation in voluntarily led youth cultures (e.g. A. Bennett, 2013; Blackman, 2005; Ferreira, 2016; Johansson & Lalander, 2012). In particular, it investigates the role of the intentional discursive depoliticization of practices in the formation of the political subjectivities of young people in the context of a non-democratic society. In democracy theory, depoliticization is considered to be the major anti-democratic concern (Meriluoto, 2021) and an antithesis to resistance. However, depoliticization can also have subversive effects as the intentional depoliticization of practices in some cases may be a manifestation of an inner need to disassociate themselves from the dominant power (Yurchak, 2008) or, in the context of an external pressure of demobilizing policy (Zhelnina, 2020), be a way to carry out activities that young people consider vital. Moreover, in some socio-political environments, open politicized actions may be brutally suppressed, so any kind of disobedience is possible only in outwardly depoliticized form. In that manner, conscious "resistance to resist" is not equivalent to political indifference and passivity, and can be interpreted as a manifestation of young people's political subjectivity that contributes to their emancipation and provides them with an opportunity to live a meaningful life in their own manner (Yurchak, 1999).

This paper suggests utilizing the concept of (de)politicization to describe more minutely young people's own positioning at the discursive level that shapes their practices as claims or non-claims, especially in the context of the socio-political environment, which is an alternative to the Western democratic tradition. The political culture of the youth scene is a conglomerate of different types of politics, entangled with ethics and esthetic expressions. As has been shown in the example of sticker artists in St. Petersburg, young people may accept an engagement with certain kinds of politics and deny others in any possible combinations, thereby simultaneously politicizing and depoliticizing their activities. Revealing the reasoning and consequences of such positioning, scholars nuance youth epistemology and their life worlds, and expand the understanding of liberation with which cultural activities can provide young people.

Note

1. Artists sometimes add their nicknames or Instagram usernames to the stickers (which are usually identical) to be found online by the audience; they also try to make their characters recognizable. Protest stickers usually carry just a message, for example, “Go vegan” without any signature.
2. In 2022, a Russian court banned the use of Instagram and Facebook, and labeled its parent company Meta an extremist organization. All activities of Meta are prohibited on Russian territory.
3. The film was directed and produced by Stanley Kubrick.

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