

Passing along the secrets of the city

At first glance, I think it's just another bit of graffiti. Another tag shouting to be heard above the din of the urban jungle's spray-painted tapestry.

But I look closer. It's a yellow sticker. An arrow. It has an ID number on it, something like gg916. Just one word -- "Counts" -- is printed at the head of the arrow. Apparently, what the arrow is pointing to matters to someone.

And it does. The offshoot of an art project that started a few months ago in New York City, this Bay Area yellow arrow is part of a new, organized fad called YellowArrow.

I don't normally embrace pop culture fads like YellowArrow. To my jaded sensibilities, taking art out of the gallery and into the real world only amounts to more clutter. More litter.

Besides, stickers are trouble. I won't even attach the FasTrak thing to my car window because I don't want to eventually have to scrape off the sticker goo.

Of course YellowArrow (at yellowarrow.org) is more than just a bunch of stickers. See, after someone tags a spot with a sticker, that person uses a cell phone to text message their thoughts about the spot -- whether it's an urban monument, a great taqueria, an abandoned building that attracts too many pigeons, the irony of a city sign -- to point@yellowarrow.org using the arrow's ID.

That's not the end of it, though. Now the information is shared. I can walk by that arrow, text message point@yellowarrow.org with the arrow's ID, and in a few seconds, the meaning of it all will be lighting up my cell phone's display screen. Boom. An individual's own, quirky observation is now available to the masses. Masses with text messaging cell phones, that is.

Anyway, it turns out gg916 was pointing to where someone had recently parked a particularly fuzzy, cheetah-print, faux-fur-covered pickup truck.

So, despite the clutter, the litter, the sticker goo, there's something to this YellowArrow project that intrigues me. Especially after speaking with one of the founders, Christopher Allen, a 2002 Columbia University graduate. Talking to him on the phone the other day as everyday life in New York screamed behind him in the form of sirens, honking horns and sighing buses, I started to see his point. That is, when his cell phone wasn't cutting out.

"It's all about the secrets of the city," says Allen, 24. "And the yellow arrow is how those secrets get passed. Part of the mission of this is to point out things that are often overlooked in a city, yet matter to an individual. It creates a map of the city that is more personalized. It creates a community of people that know about it."

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Oakland Tribune

There's been a lot of this community-creating over the Internet through the years. No longer an individual sport, the Web is all about bringing together individuals and assembling them into a virtual village. Bookcrossing.com -- a global book club where members discuss and share books -- was one that got a lot of hype. Swappingtons.com was another, in which members swapped stuff they didn't want any more using a point system. And of course, chat rooms, ad nauseum.

But YellowArrow is different. It's not about tangible goods, it's not a place where teenagers gather to practice the tapping out of misspelled vulgarities. Instead, it's about an appreciation of your surroundings. Or, at least, an acknowledgement of them. It's spreading, too. Aside from here and New York, arrows are available in L.A. and Chicago. The organization has also had requests for arrows from Hong Kong, Israel, Uruguay and all over Western Europe.

To get in on the action, I know what I'd tag if I had some of those arrows. Which, by the way, are available free at 10 bars in San Francisco (Kilowatt, the Triangle Lounge, Bottom of the Hill, Cassidy's Bar, An Bodhran, Washington Square Bar and Grill, The Cafe, Trax, Martuni's and the Hi-Fi Lounge), or through yellowarrow.org.

I'd point one in the direction of where the setting sun turns the leaves of the trees behind my house that particular golden-red hue every evening. I'd point one at the grassy green field I pass daily, where kids barely bigger than the soccer balls they're kicking are all wide-eyed and intent on learning a new game. I'd point one at the Altamont Pass, where you can be treated to a spectacular sunrise if you're up early enough and happen to be heading east.

I'd do all that, of course, if it weren't for all that sticker goo.

Where would you point your arrow? Let us know. Write to Living Letters, living@angnewspapers.com. Our address is 4770 Willow Road, Pleasanton, CA 94588.

--Candace Murphy

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