

## Laughing All the Way to the Banksy: October 2013



Known to most of the world as Banksy, the renegade street artist has been enjoying a thirty day “residency” as he uses the city streets as his canvas. From controversial tags like “Ghetto 4 Life” in SoBro, which cheekily play upon motifs of inequalities, to humorous stunts like the “Sirens of the Lambs,” a slaughterhouse truck packed with stuffed animals that noisily tours the meatpacking district, it is clear that Banksy enjoys flexing his artistic muscles for the media. The street artist has appropriately titled his current guerilla art project *Better Out Than In*, and one can track images of his latest artwork on his website <http://www.banksy.co.uk>



The “hat trick” of Banksy’s project rests on the heads of the general public; mainly how to determine the target of his next location. This extended performance piece has sparked a firestorm within the local media and as a result, Gotham City has become divided on their opinions of the street artist. Many private property holders are weary against Banksy’s next calling card, not wanting their walls and doors spaces to be vandalized with street art. In response, Bloomberg has attempted to crack down on the artist, stating “...*running up to somebody’s property or public property and defacing it is not my definition of art...it may be art, but it should not be permitted.*” Conversely, other property owners whose spaces have already been tagged by Banksy are going to great lengths to *protect* the artwork from being defaced by other graffiti artists. The bottom line is, whether you view Banksy as a hero or an antihero, the art world is certainly a more interesting place with him in it.

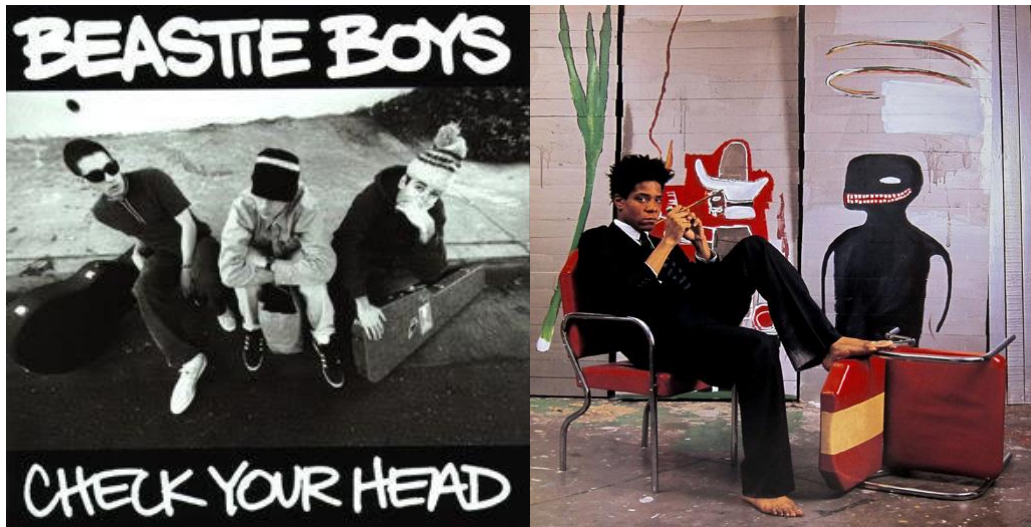


Up until 2003, Banksy was better known in the UK for his controversial graffiti. By fall of that year, the mystery provocateur made worldwide headlines with an outrageous prank that involved gluing one of his own paintings to a gallery wall in the Tate Britain...and not until the

painting fell off of the museum wall did anyone notice that the work had been installed! Over the years, Banksy has used his art as a vehicle to send subversive messages—anti-war, anti-capitalist or anti-establishment—to the public. Whether it’s a stenciled image of paradise on the Gaza Strip barrier wall in Palestine, a rendering of gay cops kissing, or a Guantanamo Bay-inspired dummy installation in a Disney Theme Park—he consistently captures the attention of the media. Banksy’s art is a form of “brandalism” that continually picks at the scab of social consciousness. And despite his notoriety, his works sell for millions at galleries and auction houses. So how did this all come to be?



Historically, the term “street art” originated out of graffiti. In the 1960s and 70s, graffiti was interpreted as a form of unsanctioned visual art often executed outside the context of traditional art venues. Not only was graffiti considered to be “low brow” art; it was (and still is) a form of vandalism. By the 1980s, particularly in New York City, graffiti became ubiquitous, appearing on streets, on subway cars and in public murals. Graffiti also started to gain traction within various circles such as the art world (paintings of Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat) and the music industry (album art for Beastie Boys, Public Enemy) and mainstream culture began to take notice.

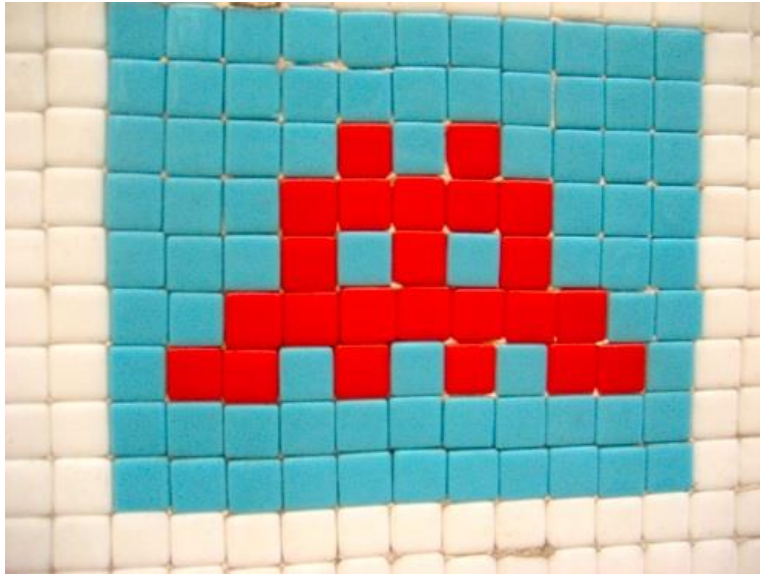


As graffiti continued to develop, our collective society swiftly ushered it from the margins of culture into a center of power. What was once a singular art form had become multidimensional discipline, and as a result “graffiti” became repackaged as “street art.” Thanks to this shift, landmark buildings like 5Pointz, an outdoor art exhibition space and graffiti mecca in Long Island City came to support this new movement.

Quite tragically, the future of 5Pointz is rather bleak and is currently facing demolition. Ironically, it is the only place in New York City where artists can legally paint graffiti.



This “new graffiti” was driven by a new generation who used stencils, stickers, posters, sculptures and even video projections to make their marks. Given that the nature of this art pushes the boundaries of legality (technically street art is a form of vandalism) most street artists work at night. Many aerosol artists found this “graveyard shift lifestyle” alluring, and the practice quickly elevated within creative circles. Not since punk had a movement become so influential within countercultural society. However, it’s important to note that these artists were not looking to change the innate meaning of art, but rather to question the existing environment within the context of its own language.



As street art gained momentum in the 1990s in America, the underground movement quickly spread worldwide. In France, a group of street artists known as Monsieur Andre, Space Invader, and Zeus were tirelessly tagging the streets of Paris by any means necessary. Not only did these artists lay the groundwork for future generations, they also pioneered the concept of an outdoor gallery (which is essentially what Banksy is doing now with his month long artists residency). Coinciding with the arrival of the Internet, these once temporary artworks could now be permanently archived and shared online with an audience of millions. Additionally, these technological advances fostered a digital community for artists, which allowed them to create a digital gallery as well.



By 2000, street art had become viral. Leading the new wave of artists was Shepard Fairey, who was known for his *Andre the Giant Has A Posse* (OBEY) sticker campaign series but became a household name after designing Obama's campaign poster, HOPE, for the 2008 presidential election. In addition to Banksy, other street artists such as D\*Face, KAWS, Swoon, Neck Face and Faile, began to redesign the outdoor landscapes of NYC and LA through their individual tags, stencils and sculptures. Like most underground movements, there was an unspoken code amongst its members to protect one another. Despite the renegade nature of their work, it was imperative to retain a certain level of discretion around project and collaborations. Like a secret artists society, it is not surprising that many of these paint-wielding players deliberately fly below the radar i.e. working at night or protecting one's identity like Banksy and Neck Face.

The beautiful irony of Banksy is that the general public does not know his true identity. All we know is the persona of Banksy. Similar to Warhol, half of Banksy's art is about the art of being Banksy. Subsequently this anonymity has allowed him to inhabit the role of the "other"—such as gender, race, or class—and make art from underneath a protective cloak of neutrality. Banksy's superpower is invisibility and he has taken the very visible profession of "artist" and has cleverly inverted the role, to the point where he is immaterial yet omnipresent