TOPSY-TURVY-TRICKSY...BANKSY!

Marco Valesi  
University of California. Merced  
mvalesi@ucmerced.edu


Abstract:
My article centers the discussion on Banksy’s street interventions. It analyzes the world’s most famous street artist, underlining the impact of his artworks on the city and its citizens. Banksy’s street art calls attention to the hypocrisy of political and corporate ownership and to authority over public spaces. Banksy’s stencils and museum interventions encourage interactions, often using timeless symbols and icons, inciting to question existing structures of authority and hegemony, fighting for a redistribution of power. My analysis demonstrates that Banksy’s cultural production is a way of linking street art to beautification and enhancement of the urban environment. In conclusion this study promotes Banksy's imaginative use of locations and public spaces as a way to bring out the wonders of the urban landscape fostering a new urban mindscape.

Key Words: Banksy, Urban Art

Resumo
Il mio articolo e’ basato sull’analisi di alcuni degli interventi urbani di Banksy. Lo stesso analizza il piu’ importante street artist del mondo sottolineando l’impatto dei suoi lavori sulla citta’ ed i suoi cittadini. Le sue performances richiamano l’attenzione sull’ipocrisia del mondo politico ed economico e sul controllo degli spazi pubblici. I
suoi stencils e i suoi interventi nei musei favoriscono l’interazione, spesso usando simboli ed icone senza tempo, incitando a interrogarsi sulle strutture di autorità egemoniche esistenti, e a lottare per una redistribuzione del potere. La mia analisi dimostra che la produzione culturale di Banksy collega la street art con l’abbellimento ed il miglioramento dei contesti urbani. In conclusione questo studio evidenzia l’uso creativo di luoghi e spazi pubblici promosso da Banksy da interpretare come strumento utile alla ri-scoperta del nostro scenario urbano e capace di creare un nuovo scenario urbano della mente.

Paraules clau: Bansky, Arte Urbana

Resumen
Este artículo analiza algunas de las intervenciones urbanas de Bansky, el artista callejero más importante del mundo, subrayando el impacto que su trabajo tiene sobre la ciudad y sobre los ciudadanos. Sus performances ponen en evidencia la hipocresía de un mundo político y económico que controla el espacio público. Usando símbolos e iconos sin tiempo, sus stencils y sus intervenciones en los museos favorecen la interacción, incitan a preguntarse sobre las estructuras hegemónicas vigentes y a luchar por una redistribución del poder. Este estudio demuestra que la producción cultural de Banksy une el street art con el embellecimiento y la mejora de los contextos urbanos. En conclusión este análisis pone en evidencia como el uso creativo de lugares y espacios públicos, promovido por Bansky, se tiene que interpretar como un instrumento útil para el re-descubrimiento de nuestro escenario urbano y para la creación de un nuevo escenario urbano mental.

Palabras clave: Bansky, Arte Urbano
“I’m writing my thesis on graffiti and wondered if you could answer the following question?

Do you think graffiti is a form of urban expression born out of the socio-economic policies of the latter 20th Century in the neo-classical style of a post Modern Thatcherist era?

...Err, no” (Banksy)

The British artist Banksy is the world’s most famous culture **artivist**\(^1\). Although he is also known for some art galleries exhibitions (especially the one organized in 2009 at the Bristol City Museum and “Barely Legal” proposed in 2006 at a vandalized warehouse in Los Angeles), it is due to his street art production that he has reached worldwide popularity. Banksy’s jamming interventions have a strong commentary and political influence behind them. Because of the illegality of some of his performances, Banksy’s identity remains anonymous, even if his real name probably is Robin Banks. Through his artworks, the British master has become, without any doubts, the most paradigmatic street-urban artist. He is able to jump from underground to mainstream; from merry prankster, vandal, and nuisance to an art world showman and post-Warholian career manager. At the same time, he is still refusing to lend his works to corporate agencies for profit, as he views this as “selling out,” or contradictory to the message of his artwork. While he originally dealt with the classic graffiti style, Banksy turned to stencils that allow him to best express his

\(^1\) Artivism is a portmanteau word combining "art" and "activism". Artivism developed in recent years while the antiwar and anti-globalization protests emerged and proliferated. In most of the cases artists attempt to push political agendas by the means of art, but the focus on raising social, environmental and technical awareness, has increased exponentially as people has started to lose faith in politics and the current socioeconomic system. Besides using traditional mediums like film and music to raise awareness or push for change, an artist can also be involved in culture jamming, subvertising, street art, spoken word, protesting and activism.
always critical, sometime derisive and humorous commentary into a powerful means of communication. The work of Banksy incorporates satire and subversive ways of playing on words to communicate an impertinent, dark humor that is executed through a stenciling technique. Such works of political and social commentary have appeared on signs, walls, streets, and bridges around the world and Banksy has even gone as far as to build physical props (Baker).

Banksy’s art features images of various types of animals such as rats and apes, policemen, children, soldiers, and a range of pop-culture icons. His stencils are both humorous and noteworthy (fig.1). They are often combined with slogans to convey a message that is generally anti-war, anti-establishment or anti-capitalist in nature.

![Banksy's Graffiti](image-url)
The artist has stated that through his work, he wants to show that money has not crushed the humanity out of everything. Banksy has gained an international reputation by pushing the limits through his countless pieces of street art as well as highly illegal pranks, such as works on the Israeli separation wall (fig. 2) that echo the political situation surrounding the area.

Fig. 2 Banksy—“Girl and Soldier”
Another trick through which he gained significant press coverage was the mounting of a stuffed rat (fig. 3) with wrap-around sunglasses on a wall in the Natural History Museum in London.

Fig. 3. Banksy- “Pest Control”

Other stunts have included falsifying copies of Paris Hilton’s debut album in numerous record stores across the UK, and even placing a life-size replica of a Guantanamo Bay prisoner in Disneyland (fig. 4).
More recently, he managed to “carry his own humorous artworks into four New York institutions (fig. 5): the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum and the American Museum of Natural History. He attached them with adhesive to the walls, alongside other paintings and exhibits” (Kennedy). It is undeniable that his “sense of placement” is always both “highly considered and highly effective, and while many street artists present their messages in a take it or leave it fashion without any discourse for their work, Banksy offers some form of critical opinion time and time again” (Lewisohn).
In this way Banksy became now a cult hero around the world, known for his provocative, amusing, and politically charged stencil graffiti, as well as his highly publicized museum “interventions.” Often labelled in newspapers as a “guerrilla artist,” or even as an “art terrorist,” his artwork gained fanatical popularity not only for its ingenuity and wittiness, but also because of its illegal nature. While Banksy has held several gallery shows, generally he seems to prefer city streets, buildings, cars, national monuments, uninvited museum spaces, zoos, to display his work.

I would like to center my discussion on his street activity because of its relation to the city and its citizens. Banksy’s illegal street art calls attention to the hypocrisy of political and corporate ownership and to authority over public space. Often using timeless symbols of societal outcasts, Banksy’s stencils and museum interventions
encourage anarchy: they incite the “powerless” (assumedly the poor, minorities, members of subcultures, and revolutionaries) to question existing structures of authority and hegemony (dominant political parties and corporations) and fight for a redistribution of power (fig. 6).

Fig. 6 Banksy—“R.McDonald&Mickey Mouse”

In his book Existencilism, Banksy states: “I have a fantasy that all the little powerless losers will gang up together. That all the vermin will get some good equipment and then the underground will go overground and tear this city apart” (Banksy). Thus his pieces portraying rats in such a manner stand as a societal critique and call for a reversal of power. In addition to his rats, Banksy likewise utilizes irony and humor in other iconographic images to confront societal power structures. His works range from military helicopters, wrapped in a pink bow, wishing viewers to “have a nice day” to chimpanzees with signs tied around their necks stating “Laugh now, but one day we’ll be in charge”; from smiling children gleefully embracing nuclear weapons to surveillance cameras. Another branch of his stencil graffiti that exemplifies this anarchical, defiant quality is his work depicting British police officers. By portraying law officers in compromising situations, Banksy endeavors to undermine their roles as figurative symbols of official or “legitimate” authority or enforcers of that authority. In a stencil from 2002, Banksy executed the life-size, tri-colored image of a
palace guard urinating on the wall with his machine gun resting at his side. Not only did he chose to portray a symbol of hegemonic power and authority in an embarrassing situation, but he also chose to highlight illegality (public urination or public indecency), thereby effectively stripping the guard of his power through the use of irony. In his anarchical rejection of social power structures, we can see a reaction to the hegemonic structures of authority.

This artistic reaction to social control links his artworks to Foucault’s ideas. Foucault detailed how the structuring of discursive spaces of specialized institutions, such as military camps and monasteries, has infiltrated not only the structure of prisons, but the rest of society as well. Banksy maintains his anonymity because of the illegality of his art and his desire to avoid incarceration. The British artist alters a vertical guided social way of life, promoting instead an artistic reaction to the established power. In one of his few declarations, he complains: “If you want to say something and have people listen then you have to wear a mask” (Banksy). This statement is evocative of Subcomandante Marcos’s ideas of public face and of unknown icon. By addressing his anonymous persona, Banksy directly critiques the cult of genius that has dominated the art world since the Renaissance. Yet these statements are contradictory: while denying the importance of the creator, he likewise expresses a desire to disseminate his personal opinions and ideas not only in this quotation, but also in the fact that he “signs” many of his works (fig. 7).
By invading the public domain and the museum system with his graffiti art and installation pieces, Banksy is, indeed, making his voice known and becoming a celebrity in the process. Therefore, while he may not have begun creating illegal art as a ploy to become famous, attaining an international reputation has certainly been one of the results. I believe that Banksy views graffiti as a way of linking illegality to beautification and enhancement of the urban environment. The British artist sees street art in general as a means of expression for those who are the victims of poverty and oppression. Banksy offers a romantic, mockingly wistful vision of the possibilities of street art on his website:
“Imagine a city where graffiti wasn’t illegal, a city where everybody could draw wherever they liked. Where every street was awash with a million colors and little phrases. Where standing at a bus stop was never boring. A city that felt like a living breathing thing which belonged to everybody, not just the estate agents and barons of big business. Imagine a city like that and stop leaning against the wall-it’s wet” (Banksy).

Banksy also interprets graffiti art as a direct assault on corporate advertising tactics (see for example -fig.6- in which is critically re-interpreting famous Walt Disney and McDonald’s icons). He turns vandalism laws upside down with his own theory of “Brandalism,” a concept that identifies “The Advertisers” as the real villains and criminals. Following this construction, public advertising is a more vindictive, manipulative form of vandalism, as it invades public space and infiltrates public opinion without the permission of the general public. Indeed, he and other street artists like Blu, Os Gêmeos, JR, among others, are in agreement as to the inequitable distribution of public space. For example, corporations are allowed by law to advertise on buses, billboards, benches, etc., because they have the money to pay for such an intrusion. Thanks to trademarks, intellectual property rights and copyright laws, advertisers can say what they like and wherever they like, with total impunity. Banksy effectively negates their authority and legality. It is apparent that he attempts to justify his illegal graffiti art by villainizing hegemonic cultural signifiers, such as those used by corporate advertisers, and the manner in which they wield their influence. In his book Wall and Piece, he comments on the public’s perception of graffiti artists as criminals:

“Crime against property is not real crime. Graffiti writers are not real villains. I’m always reminded of this by real villains who consider the idea of breaking into someplace, not stealing anything, and then leaving behind a painting of your name in four foot high letters the most retarded thing they ever heard of” (Banksy).

Thus Banksy is denying the malicious, destructive intent that hegemonic authority posits as the motivating factors fueling the production of graffiti, while simultaneously, and perhaps more subtly, pointing out how figures of authority have the power to shape public perception. “When Banksy negates the veracity of crime..."
against property as a real crime, and downplays the image of graffiti writers/artists as true villains, he is negating the ideological constructs established by hegemonic authority” (Stephens).

“Thus Banksy uses illegality in his street art and museum interventions as a counter-cultural intervention that works against the hegemonic control of the ideology of criminality, and the utilization of public space. After all, the city is more vivid when you speak to it” (Stephens).

Being impossible to analyze all his innumerable performances around the world, I conclude this brief excursus, on the provocative British artist, briefly commenting on one of his last public appearances: Better Out Than In, a New York residency undertaken during October 2013. With his exploits spread through every form of mass and social media, he dominated the news, even during a busy election season, becoming a topic of discussion, an object of fascination and a cause for celebration. Certainly Banksy's residency was a brilliant guerrilla art campaign authenticated through his own website (http://banksy.co.uk/) and Instagram account (http://instagram.com/banksy#), which announced their general locations, his creations turned into an urban scavenger hunt.

Following the humor of Piero Manzoni and using the cleverness of Marcel Duchamp, he transcended his medium, elevating the genre of street art. Unlike those taggers who derive their significance from repetition, Banksy's work was minimally invasive. Rather than cover the city in paint, Banksy's imaginative use of locations and public

---

2 Guerrilla art is a street art movement that first emerged in the UK, but has since spread across the world and is now established in most countries that already had developed graffiti scenes. Guerrilla art differs from other art forms in the fact that it has no external boundary between the image and the environment. While a traditional painting can be moved from one gallery to another without the meaning or the artistic credibility of the piece being affected, street art is environmental, the surface to which it is applied to being as fundamental to the piece’s meaning as that which is applied. Without the dynamics of modern life, guerrilla art is reduced to ‘art for arts sake’ and would accordingly be defined by what it is as opposed to what it does. The production of guerrilla art is focused on cause and effect, not the material piece itself. It aims to produce an effect within the minds of those people that live within the environment being altered. It does not necessarily aim to produce art that is meaningful in itself.
spaces brought out the wonders of the urban landscape\textsuperscript{3} creating a new urban mindscape\textsuperscript{4}.

On the Upper West Side, the silhouette of a boy with a mallet converted a red standpipe and fire bell into a carnival amusement (\textbf{fig. 8}).

\textsuperscript{3} The concept of urban open space is traditionally used to embraces public spaces, parks, squares, streets, boulevards, natural parks, surplus areas, left over areas, abandoned industrial or urban sites, etc. The later introduced concept of urban landscape can be viewed as a synonym. It stresses, though, a more comprehensive and holistic view on the open spaces and points to the structuring of the city. Intrinsically the urban landscape contains urban open spaces. In both cases the landscape is planned, designed or shaped to convey human intention and it is affected by the social, physical and natural context in which it is embedded.

\textsuperscript{4} The urban mindscape to be understood as an evolution of the idea of mindscapes created originally by Maruyama Magoroh, are inner reality constituted by consciousness or states of mind achieved through social art. Urban mindscape is the landscape as people experience through visual stimuli and can be very personal and social in meanings. Urban mindscape is a system of essentially individual, but unquestionably also collective, values, judgments, feelings, and meanings that are related to the urban landscapes. The urban mindscaping approach is a structure of thinking about a place. An urban mindscape, for example, indicates something that exists between the physical landscape of a city and people’s visual and cultural perceptions of it. Mindscape can also mean landscape of the mind. Urban mindscape is, finally, my key word to underline the importance of an interdisciplinary and creative approach to understanding places as complex and multifaceted cultural entities. Our cities’ mindscapes, for example, have to become complex and multi-faceted entities.
Fig. 8 Banksy- “Hammer Boy”

In Williamsburg, two stenciled figures re-envisioned a bricked-over archway as the moon bridge of a Japanese tea garden (fig. 9).

Fig. 9 Banksy- “Japanese Silhouettes”
“The Street is in Play” (fig. 10) is located on Allen Street, between Hester and Canal, featuring his signature stencil style and the sign “Graffiti is a crime.”

Banksy headed to the South Bronx with some sharp social commentary in his stencil work. A butler-like man serves spray cans on a platter to a little boy writing “GHETTO 4 LIFE” on a gray wall (fig. 11).
"Outside is where art should live, amongst us" Banksy asserted in the final day’s audio guide. "Don’t we want to live in a world made of art, not just decorated by it?"

With his topsy-turvy-tricky...Banksy art, that doesn’t ignore boundaries but crosses them to prove their irrelevance, it is impossible for me to answer NO!

Bibliography:


