

BANKSY

IN NEW YORK





PREFACE

By Steven P. Harrington and Jaime Rojo

New York has a vibrant and badass street art and graffiti scene, and has had one for years. Standing somewhere between vandalism and artistic free speech, its origins in aerosol writing half a century ago have expanded and have been infused with every manner of art-making possible. Illegal by nature, street art and graffiti are organic and always evolving, gritty and polished, fresh and weathered, underwhelming and sublime: at any moment it is a multi-headed hydra that taunts its critics and cavorts with its fans. This ongoing conversation appears wherever it likes: on abandoned buildings, in empty lots or dimly-lit tunnels, under bridges, along railroad tracks, on chain link fences or electrical boxes, in bus shelters and the most random places imaginable. For those who participate in or follow it, street art and graffiti have a history of development that is claimed, qualified, owned, fought over and prophesied.

The international street art scene that has grown and flourished during the last 15 years is unprecedented from a variety of perspectives; principal among them is that the ease of sharing its

explosion via digital technology has fostered a *de facto* first global grassroots people's art movement, with nary a gatekeeper and open to almost all. Magnificently chaotic and unmanageable with an ocean of participants including artists, fans, photographers, writers, academics, critics, historians, anthropologists, ethnographers, collectors, galleries, museums, advertisers and designers all eager to capture and characterize its essence, the contemporary street art scene now spans hundreds of cities and towns and has even made appearances in rural areas.

Cast upon the digital ocean of our new post-Gutenberg era of deliberately and discursively relaying news, images, and opinion digitally from a magnitude of contributors in ways never before possible, it is notable that only a certain handful of street artists have risen to international notoriety to become household names. Perched atop this global pile for the last decade or so has been the Bristol, England native who goes by the name of Banksy.

Famously anonymous, and a reliably wisecracking saccharine, salty, and sarcastic observer of our hypocrisies



OCTOBER 1: CHINATOWN



"The street is in play."

When I arrived in Chinatown, on Allen and Grand, there was already a flock of onlookers armed with all types of cameras gathered around the image of the two working-class boys reaching for the can of spray paint on an anti-graffiti sign. Word about the piece and its location was apparently spreading much faster than it ever had before for a new Banksy piece in the city.

When Banksy was last active in New York he did a stencil of a bloke putting up smiley posters a block down the street. It lasted for a few days before it got ragged (more about that later) and no one seemed to pay much attention to it when I stopped by to shoot it. Since then, Banksy had been nominated for an Oscar for *Exit Through the Gift Shop* and, thanks to social media, FOMO was spreading like wildfire among the young and the restless. A steady stream of fans arrived in ones and twos, mostly boys and girls in their 20s and 30s, the prime advertising demographic. They had swallowed the bait whole and were now busy calling the 1-800 number stenciled next to the piece to listen to a brief audio commentary recording that accompanied it. I would not have been surprised if the double-decker tourist buses that travel up and down the street started to make unscheduled stops at 411 Allen.

The audio commentary (which would refer to the artist variably as "Banksy" or call him by other, butchered renditions of his moniker) established another theme for the month: Any deep-diving attempts to explain this piece or to identify its underlying meaning in an art-historical context would be potentially futile and possibly self-serving. In any case, you were on your own — the artist appeared to want us to experience each work as a temporary phenomenon, highly specific to and potentially meaningless without its immediate local environment. But of course, no one expects the Spanish Inquisition — sorry — escapes art criticism. Not even Banksy.



OCTOBER 9: Lower East Side

It is said that when Banksy and his team were scouting locations for this installation – an interpretation of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* consisting of a painting spanning the sides of a truck and a passenger vehicle, the obligatory traffic cone coated in paint and a few barrels – they were faced with a real challenge. In a city as densely populated as New York, where would they find a location that was highly accessible by foot and subway, that offered an open, but protected view of the art, and where onlookers – ideally from out-of-state – would be so inebriated, distracted and indifferent at any time of the night that they wouldn't pay attention to a truck, car, cone and barrels being towed into and arranged in a lot surrounded by nightlife?

Banksy and his lieutenants hovered over maps of New York City, moving around push pins. Gowanus? Too remote. Astoria? Too many old ladies screening every movement on their blocks with a finger on their rotary phone dials. Williamsburg? Eww.



Then, a *Eureka!* moment. Of course! It had to be Hell Square!

I recognized the lot immediately when the photo was posted on @banksyny. Its walls were covered in fill-ins by Rambo, Syc5, Paste, Ski, Fuor, Mist and a few others that had been running for years. This neighborhood, like much of downtown Manhattan, used to have many regular street art and graffiti spots not long ago, and now had very few. This one was secured by a ten-foot fence topped with barbed wire, ensuring that Banksy's installation would be stolen piecemeal rather than all at once.

I lingered for a while, by turns taking photos of the installation and the crowd, and started to recognize the regulars: The skinny dude who took photos for Gothamist. The Dark-skinned guy with long hair, his girlfriend and their little dog. The dude with the silver single speed bike who was about to turn into a minor Instagram celebrity for correctly identifying the locations of several pieces before anyone else. The blonde who took selfies in front of each piece with her stuffed ferret, or whatever that was (what was up with that, girl?). For the rest of the month, these folks became part of the daily experience. We might have had absolutely nothing else in common, but we shared the thrill of discovery and, whenever I could get my head out of my ass, a smile and a greeting.



OCTOBER 11: MEATPACKING DISTRICT



The Sirens of the Lambos truck, a terrifying contraption created to induce screaming fits and nightmares in small children, was first documented on Instagram a day or two prior to its official launch. Its most endearing feature was the driver. What a nice man! While I noticed that he had a British accent and in height and stature resembled the man shown in what is purported to be the only photo of Banksy, I will not engage in any speculation as to who he really was. After all, at any given time, there are thousands of British lads in the city, preying on NYU students with their outlandish accents. (Yeah, that's right — we refer to what you call "English" as an "accent," and don't even get us started on your teeth, Colonizers.)

Anyway, this guy was a prack. He patiently answered questions and posed for photos on his coffee break. He even waited to pull out into traffic until Ferret Girl had finished taking photos of her critter wedged in between the other animals on the back of the truck. As a roving installation, the truck itself was perhaps the most "finished" piece of the month. Even art critic Jerry Saltz reluctantly admitted that it conveyed "surprise, pathos, and humor," which was probably the nicest thing he said about any piece of art in 2013, and the only nice thing he said about Banksy. And he probably didn't even meet the driver.

According to the audio commentary, "in order to bring [the cuddly, soft toys] to life, four professional puppeteers are required, strapped into bucket seats, dressed entirely in black lycra, pulling on an array of levers with each limb and given only one toilet break a day, proving that the only sentient beings held in lower esteem than farm livestock are mine artists." I couldn't find any evidence for the presence of sentient beings in the back of the truck, so I can only assume that this statement is a metaphor meant to illustrate the rise and fall of the American automobile industry as well as the inability of our leaders to do anything about the monopoly a certain coffee chain has on public restrooms.

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