

BANKSY

Guerilla Tactics in the Art Museum Rebecca Arkenberg

Banksy, a largely unidentified graffiti artist from the United Kingdom, is fond of the word “vandal,” but he prefers to be identified as an “art terrorist.” Banksy is notorious for adding his own touches to old oil paintings, smuggling them into museums, and displaying them on the walls. Some of these “fakes” include peaceful landscapes modified with crime scene billboards, hovering helicopters, and portraits of people with gas masks over their faces or spray cans in their hands.

Banksy has managed to hit four New York City museums, including the Metropolitan, MoMA, Brooklyn, and Natural History Museum. In each case, the museums simply removed the artwork and placed it in lost and found or storage. Museum comments to the press are necessarily terse and the events are downplayed to discourage imitation.

Personal Confession

Is this art or practical joke? I have to admit that years ago, in the Denver Arboretum, I was with a group of friends and noticed tall concrete pillars that were designed to evoke tree shapes with flaring roots and spreading branches. We decided that they needed signage, so using a folded-over index card, we wrote “Concretus Pilarus” in block letters and placed the card at the foot of one of the organic structures.

We then found a vantage point from which to watch our victims as they stooped to read the card. We were very amused at our own cleverness, and I have always been careful not to reveal this practical joke to any impressionable young person who might attempt an even more daring stunt.

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Web Site Documentation

Banksy’s museum adventures are documented on his Web site through photos evidently taken during the “installations.” His graffiti art is also featured on the site, including phrases (“It’s not a race”) and spray-painted stenciled images that have appeared

on rooftops, walls, and buildings in England, and even the Israeli West Bank Barrier. His images—soldiers with yellow smiley faces, police-

man pursuing a cartoon character, a tiger escaping from a cage that is a giant bar code—are witty, political, surprising, and well, illegal.

Other Street Artists

Banksy’s commentary and distinctive style recalls the work of street art pioneers Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. These two artists are now discussed in art history texts and their works are displayed in galleries and museums, commanding high prices at sales. Like Haring and Basquiat, Banksy has been criticized for “selling out” when he works in the more acceptable and legal venues of record album covers and paintings on canvas.

Aesthetic Discussions

Banksy’s artwork raises some interesting issues that provide a great base for classroom discussion:

- Can an artist move to the mainstream after being a street or graffiti artist?
- Are graffiti or graffiti-related stunts legitimate means of calling attention to one’s art? Are they ethical?

- Can Banksy’s work be considered a prank, a publicity stunt, a crime, or art?
- Can students define what it is about graffiti that makes it art?
- Who is the audience?
- Should a graffiti artist be anonymous?
- What role does the artist’s Web site play in generating publicity?
- How do personal characteristics like ego, a sense of humor, and risk-taking manifest themselves in Banksy’s statements?
- Do you agree or disagree with Banksy’s methods?
- What are the financial and legal ramifications of producing this kind of art? ☹

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students identify intentions of those creating artworks, explore the implications of various purposes, and justify their analyses of purposes in particular works.

