



Introduction

Banksy: Painter, Prankster, Polemicist

Paul Gough

Everyone asks the same two questions: 'Have you actually met Banksy?' and 'Does he know you are writing this book?' Answer to the first: 'Possibly; but how would I know?'; answer to the second: 'Probably, but why do you think it's important?' These and other frequently asked questions - and my cryptic responses - reveal several things about us and Banksy: first, our continuing fascination with this most secretive of public artists; secondly, a begrudging respect at times bordering on genuine affection for his role as a spokesman on contemporary matters; and thirdly, the British fascination with the 'whodunnit', who exactly is this person about whom so much is apparently known but who chooses anonymity and absence over visibility and instant recognition. Banksy's absence throws down a blatant challenge to our cult of instant celebrity. His is the missing face from the weekly glossy gossip mags; a global 'name' who simply refuses to reveal himself; the empty seat on the ubiquitous chat show.¹

By choosing to be notoriously reclusive, Banksy has become a celebrity figure inside both the DIY activist communities and in mainstream popular culture.² Far from alienating him from the British public, his closely guarded identity appears to have endeared him to many who have become tired of the self-regarding, hi-visibility of many 'celebrities' whether they be TV cooks, overpaid footballers, or peripheral royals. However, despite the many who revere the humorous and subversive nature of his artwork, there are as many others who regard it as simply criminal; those law enforcement figures view any illegal painting in public spaces as little more than wilful vandalism; other street painters who see his work as little more than a sequence of stunts (and who believe street art should stay in the street not in neat frames on the gallery wall), and others who regard Banksy as a clownish one-liner, a prankster with attitude and a spray can. In his public statements Banksy cleverly toys with these disparate views, threatening on the one hand that 'A wall is a very big weapon. It's one of the nastiest things you can hit someone with'³ while raising Calvino-esque poetic aspirations on the other:

Imagine a city where graffiti wasn't illegal, a city where everybody could draw whatever they liked. Where every street was awash with a million colours and little phrases. Where standing at a bus stop was never boring. A city that felt like a party where everyone was invited, not just the estate agents and barons of big business. Imagine a city like that and stop leaning against the wall - it's wet.⁴

This book offers a platform to a variety of views, to voices of dissent questioning some of the aesthetics and ethics behind his work, to those who revere his contribution to the culture of our over-furnished cities. Above all, this book sets out to locate the Banksy phenomenon within a wider socio-economic-cultural context in the aftermath of the 2009 exhibition in Bristol, aptly named 'Banksy versus Bristol Museum'. It was not difficult to garner strong views. Everyone, it seems, has a Banksy story: a recollection, an anecdote, an opinion about one of his artworks, or more than likely a 'queue' story.



Seeing Banksy or anonymous street art is a daily occurrence in Bristol. This 'Rose' stencil, by an unknown artist, is in the Hotwell Road, Bristol. [photograph: Harry Gough October 2011]



I love you: another example of a random stencil in central Bristol, Gaol Ferry Bridge, Bristol [photograph: Harry Gough October 2011]

During the making of this book I heard a great many such stories, freely and generously re-told, often richly embellished, and resonating in ways that one would never expect to hear about 'conventional' pieces of art in a gallery. Many of these personal narratives (indeed some of the contributions in this book) were offered by people who had heard of the project and wanted, in some way, to be part of it. One woman volunteered this tale:

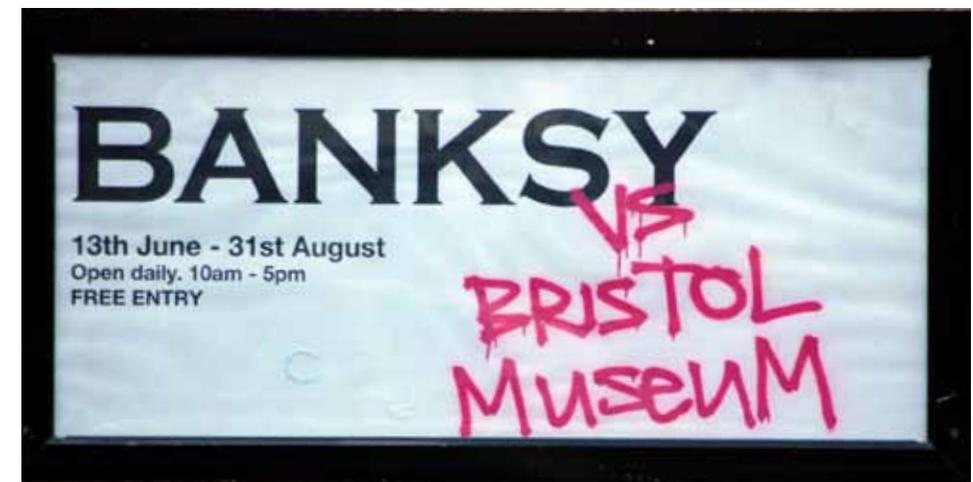
The Banksy work at the bottom of Park Street is a source of fascination for my five year old son and we pass it on the way to school and on the way back. He has multiple questions mainly starting with the word 'why.....?' and relating to each of the characters painted. It has really tested me to continue to find age-appropriate answers to the questions of fidelity. We've been through a few stages that have covered.... 'he's hiding'.... 'he's angry'.... and our latest (and so far satisfactory) interpretation is 'whether it is okay to be naked in someone else's house?' My little one has so far agreed that it isn't necessarily a good idea. It has made me think ahead about how we deal with questions of relationships and answer honestly but in an appropriate way and how the questions I'll need to answer in the next 4-5 years will be much more testing. My observation is that public art has the

*opportunity to provoke a reaction in all of us, regardless of age and force us to question the question!*⁵

Others who offered their thoughts had queued in the interminable lines outside the gallery; others had failed in their attempt to see the show, thinking there would be plenty of time but eventually realizing there wasn't. Instead they had to resort to the hundreds of newspaper reviews, the thousands of pictures taken by visitors and shared on *Flickr* or other social networking sites, and of course there is the rather brilliant 'official trailer' on *YouTube*, which concludes with a PG Certificate and the warning 'Contains scenes of a childish nature some adults may find disappointing'.⁶

As both a teaser for the show and the nearest we may have to an artist-sanctioned synopsis of the event it seems wholly authentic, except perhaps for one very short sequence (two seconds long, 54 seconds in) which captures at close quarters the figure of Sir Nicholas Serota, Director of the Tate, striding up the steep hill of Park Street ostensibly *en route* to the Banksy show. Sandwiched between footage of a hooded figure spray-painting through a stencil, Serota seems to be answering the question 'What d'you think of Banksy', to which an overdubbed voice answers 'he's frighteningly amazing'. Shot within inches of the Director's face the words might actually be 'frightening and amazing'. Whatever the words, they're patently not Serota's.

By contrast every word in this book is authentic; the authors happy to reveal themselves and to share their reflections of the show and its aftermath. The aim of this book was not to reveal the identity of the artist, nor to uncover how the show was created, although some of the contributors hint at both. Its aim was to try to evaluate the legacy of the show, to ask if there was an estimable impact, a lingering influence on Bristol, on its culture, on the



The Queen's Road poster for the ground-breaking Banksy exhibition. [photograph: Dr John Manley]

museums, and whether this could be evaluated in economic terms. Clearly, the first port of call had to be the museum itself. Not the most settled of workplaces on the eve of the show, it had been blighted by a 'staff-management dispute' for some time that year as the then Director was leading a programme of re-structuring and staff 'downsizing' to meet wider budget constraints and realignment of the service.⁷ As others relate elsewhere in this book, the show caught its own staff by surprise, many were delighted, a few though were actually unpleasantly surprised, feeling that their integrity as curators had been compromised by 'intruders' having the freedom of their collections. I recall walking past the museum on the Thursday evening before the unveiling and peering into the rather scruffily masked plate windows, taped over with sheets of paper, the doors labelled with A4 notices 'Closed For Essential Maintenance Work'.

We now know that the weeks leading up to those frantic few days of installation had been fraught indeed. Significantly, it started with a cold call from the artist himself. The curators who picked it up and ran with the idea were running quite a risk; after all in mid-2009 Banksy was still an outlaw to many in the council. The waste and cleaning department had been irritated by the popular vote to preserve the Banksy painting of the naked man opposite the Council House.⁸ After all, although Banksy clearly had a deep affection for the museum recollected from his many childhood visits, his last public utterance about such places had been rather salacious:

As far as I can tell the only thing worth looking at in most museums of art is all the schoolgirls on daytrips with the art departments.⁹

The curators had to conduct clandestine mobile phone conversations in quiet corners of normally crowded museum offices, a relationship of trust had to be established, and negotiations conducted using code-words and pseudonyms. Surprise was paramount. Anonymity had to be assured at all times. Fewer than six staff across the whole of the city council knew about the Banksy project and they agonised over whether it was some horrible hoax that would ricochet badly.

It might surprise many to learn that a contractual agreement was actually drawn up between Banksy, his crew and the City Council. Graffiti artists don't normally 'do' contracts. Civil servants don't do much without them. However, without some form of contract Banksy couldn't dictate his own terms and the museum would run the risk of being badly exposed should something go wrong. It can still be viewed online - all 14 pages of it - redacted (blacked out) in many places, and accompanied by numerous emails one of which begs the artist to 'stay schtum' as the museum and their lawyers clamber up the 'mountain of work' that faced them.¹⁰

Given the eventual success of the show it's now hard to remember the actualities of the time. The stakes were high on both sides. Not only had the cultural chiefs closed their flagship building for over 48 hours without being able to tell their own staff why, but they had allowed what some might regard as a motley crew of hooded youth and 'urban guerillas' the freedom to roam at will amongst galleries of rather expensive paintings, rooms full of historic artefacts, and the largest collection of Chinese ceramicware in Europe. And, of course, they had no idea what to expect when the doors were opened to the public. In the end the top team at the museum - Paul Barnett, Kate Brindley, Tim Corum and Phil Walker - pulled it off and their story is told in this book.



The sight that greeted unsuspecting museum staff arriving for work on the opening day. The choice of ice-cream van was not random or a mere whim. In a BBC Radio 4 documentary on ice-cream vans (30 July 2011) Banksy, his voice heavily disguised, recalled with affection 'the classic Bedford, gloopy tiny little row of headlights shining out from a droopy bonnet; yeah, it was made for selling ice-cream right? Because it looked like one.' Adding, with characteristic edge, 'it was a childhood thing gone wrong, really; slight loss of innocence, the broken shards of a burnt-out husk of Britain - but still with a soft centre.'

Damien Hirst and Local Artist: , 2009. Children on a school visit are introduced to Banksy's work at Bristol Art Gallery. [photograph: Nadia Nasser]

They don't, however, tell the full detail of the story and neither should we expect to have it revealed. Anonymity is essential to the Banksy myth. Still, it would have been fascinating to know how he and his crew managed to drag and assemble an ice-cream van into the lobby of the museum, or how they actually placed the orange-suited Guantanamo Bay figure in the middle of the flimsy balsa-wood box aeroplane that hovers over the main entrance. The 'How Did He Do That?' questions were never answered, nor did I really expect them to be. The curators had entered into a pact with Banksy and his crew which they did not want to compromise, not least because they might want to work with him and his team again, but primarily because they respected him and his team of fabricators, decorators, animatronic-ists, and installation professionals. A 'reveal' was not going

to happen: that was the deal. That deal, however, didn't stop national newspapers (allegedly initiated by *The Daily Mail*) from filing repeated Freedom of Information requests asking to see copies of any written correspondence, data, or transcripts of phone calls between the artist and the museum. Under pressure as a publicly funded body to release something, the museum eventually reproduced a heavily redacted copy of the contracts and an extensive sequence of email exchanges. Fascinating as these are they don't reveal much, but they made a striking headline for the national press and pacified those in authority who feared that the council, the museum and the collection had been violated by the hoody and his crew.¹¹

Although some contributors suggest in this book that they know the 'true' identity of Banksy (indeed that 'fact' can be found within a few seconds on *Wikipedia*) the general public seems to have actually lost interest. By comparison, there is an increasing interest in how a large city like Bristol relates to Banksy, how he and his breed of artists *speak* for the city, and somehow represent a dimension of the city that is often difficult to quantify - its 'spirit of innovation, creativity and unorthodoxy'¹² or what the UK *Rough Guide* describes as an unusual blend of 'new technologies, the arts and a vibrant youth culture [that] have helped to make this one of Britain's most cutting edge cities.'¹³

Cities however can easily forget. And as several contributors to this book loudly argue, Bristol has done its fair share of strategic forgetting. So, this book attempts to recall, remember and remonstrate with the easy amnesia that characterizes urban memory. It does so by asking several questions: what was the impact of the Banksy show in 2009 on the city of Bristol, on its earnings at the time and afterwards, on the businesses that benefited directly and indirectly from such a blockbuster show; what have been the mid- to long-term effects on the cultural sector in the city-region; what, if any, the impact on museum policies, direction-of-travel and its relationship to the community of artists that produce street art; what opportunities were missed (or taken) in re-positioning the city authorities and their relationship to its cultural players. The book suggests that there have been both some predictable and some unforeseen consequences to the show: in the more predictable column we might include the major street art show of 2011 - 'See No Evil' - and the annual UPFest (Urban Paint Festival) which have now become part of the Bristol *zeitgeist*, less predictable is the interest in issues of heritage and preservation, the move to recognise Banksy and his ilk as the creators of venerable *objets d'art* that must be looked after and valued as cultural markers. That could not have happened without the show in 2009, nor would the gathering of feisty street artists in Bristol museum during 2010 as part of a Research Council-funded project called 'Design Against Crime', which brought together a couple of dozen artists, gallery curators, Council community liaison officers, and academics like me squirrelled away in a corner taking notes and trying to understand the peculiar vernacular of tagging, buffing, and 'green walls'.¹⁴

The gathering suggested how amenable (at least on the surface) the city of Bristol has become in the past five years to hosting street art, regarding it not as a curse on its architecture but an aesthetic gift to the public.¹⁵ It now takes the form of a 'street dialogue' in which the urban scene had become the subject and background of 'an infinite flow of coded messages and interferences'.¹⁶ Artists such as Stic and Motorboy gave convincing and committed presentations, arguing that local authorities would actually save considerable sums of money if they courted urban painters, collaborating with them and with property owners to create dedicated spaces for their graffiti. Across the UK most councils had a reputation for being negative and hostile to street art, harassing and arresting perpetrators, painting over their work. The uniform grey of municipal censorship was described by one artist as 'the greatest act of minimalist painting in the world.' Each of the contributors to this book has addressed the question of

A fellow street artist's commentary on Banksy's notorious decoration of an elephant for his 2006 exhibition in Los Angeles; the animal, called Tai, was covered in pink and gold paint and placed in a mocked-up house to represent how world poverty is widely ignored. This comment was painted at the Bristol UPFest, June 2011. [photograph: Harry Gough]



Visitor enjoying the UPFest at Bedminster, 2011.



Pic 8 Street artist at work during the UPFest.



Pic 9 Spray cans ready for action.



legacy and impact. The first section of the book sets the scene, starting with a potted biography of the world's most elusive artist by veteran correspondent John Hudson. This is followed by several essays that locate Bristol as a city with a rich history of radical dissent and division. Historian Dr Steve Poole discusses the hastily-scribbled or scratched calligraphic mark as the signature of urban protest, and in an essay on 'the versus habit' I trace the tensions that linger, and occasionally erupt, under the carapace of the city. The Banksy show, argues curator Kath Cockshaw, was preceded by an equally seismic event in an equally hallowed gallery. Her essay on 'Crime of Passion' concludes this initial series of essays that set the context for the show and identify its wider origins.

The middle section of the book looks at the show itself. As principal architects of the exhibition Kate Brindley, Tim Corum and Phil Walker throw some light - though not the full beam - on their front-line role in staging the exhibition. One person who spent possibly more time 'working the queues' than anyone else that summer was the curator Katy Bauer whose innovative book *The Banksy Q* captured the raw enthusiasm and sticking power of the tens of thousands who travelled from far and wide to see the work. Her reflective essay locates the Banksy phenomenon in the widest political context and examines its roots in the Stokes Croft social scene. Eugene Byrne, a writer who few can match for his granular reading of the city, examines the immediate impact of the show and the artist's ambivalent relationship with 'official' Bristol. Cultural impresario and historian Andrew Kelly offers a panoramic view of not only how the show immediately reverberated, but how it was also played out through a network of educational projects and associated events, which were deeply attuned to the many communities touched by Banksy's work. Aware that many consider the artist to be little more than a witty one-line 'quality vandal', Kelly celebrates his more generous attributes and, as someone who also stages exhibitions, events and arts festivals concludes, 'I long for the day when I can see those queues again.'

Which brings us to the third section of the book, where we attempt a judgment of the show from a number of vantage points. As someone deeply committed to bringing museum collections to life for the widest array of people, Dr Anna Farthing asks the knock-out question: who won? Her thoughtful and rhetorical answer is followed by a cool economic assessment by two business historians Anthony Plumridge and Andrew Mearman, who bring to bear evaluation and costing tool-kits to ask a number of questions about official statistics, hyperbole and civic sentiment. John Sansom explores one of the most visible manifestations of the Banksy legacy: the urban paint festival held in August 2011 under the rubric 'See No Evil' which took place in an inner-city front-line urban trench sandwiched between new shopping arcades and rather threadbare office

blocks. He discerns an official anxiety to appear inclusive and cutting edge, and also reminds us that in these excitable times the question should be not 'is it art?' but 'is it good art?' Another sceptical voice concludes this evaluative section of the book: with characteristic wit and an inimitable approach, art critic David Lee offers a sobering assessment of Banksy's iconography. Drawing provocative comparisons with other 'amateur' art exhibitions held in the city more recently Lee draws some interesting broad conclusions suggesting that the 2009 Banksy exhibition may yet be seen to have marked a watershed in the State's reaction to popular art.

Drawing up the rear is an essay by lawyer John Webster who suggests that, given their cultural and financial value to a city, Banksy street paintings could benefit from the protection of listing through the British planning system. This is followed by a short essay on the art of stencilling, the urban calligraphy which has become Banksy's trademark. A bibliography of further reading and viewing drawn up by Dr Alice Barnaby concludes the book.

In truth, I could have included many other essays. Once word was out that I was embarking on this project I was inundated with stories, anecdotes, photographs and illustrations. The wave of generosity and interest was impressive and touching, although there were also those who wanted to express a personal note and room has been found for these voices too. The Banksy story shows no sign of abating - it is lively, current and dynamic. The 2009 exhibition was just a staging post in a longer narrative about the city, its streets and its mutating identity, or as Banksy puts it:

Graffiti ultimately wins out over proper art because it becomes part of your city, it's a tool; 'I'll meet you in that pub, you know, the one opposite that wall with a picture of a monkey holding a chainsaw'. I mean, how much more useful can a painting be than that?

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Notes

1. I am making the popular (but unjustified) assumption that Banksy is male. Sam Downie, a digital noisemaker based in Bristol, has told me that 'Banksy' is not so much a single individual, rather it is a network of Bristol characters, a 'family tree' that would include Massive Attack, Tricky, many artists, writers and performers. However, every encounter I have had with those who have worked with the artist describe him as male.

2. Emily Truman (2010) 'The (In)Visible Artist: Stencil Graffiti, Activist Art, and the Value of Visual Public Space'. *SHIFT: Queen's Journal of Visual & Material Culture*. Issue 3, 2010, pp.1-15.
3. Banksy, *Banging your Head against a Brick Wall*, Weapons of Mass Distraction: London, 2001.
4. Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, Century: London, 2005, p.85.
5. Janet Wilkinson, correspondence with the author, June 2011. I am also grateful to Nicola Donovan for her observations about the exhibition which have been incorporated into this section of the Introduction.
6. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRaigx8aD3A&feature=player_embedded/ accessed 7 October 2011, by which dates there were 949,122 hits, of which 2,061 were 'likes', 44 'dislikes'.
7. Agenda item 2 at the Bristol City Council Museums and Archives Select Committee held on 23 March 2009 (a few months before the Banksy show opened) contained a letter signed by over seventy museum staff which posed six penetrating questions regarding the future staffing of the service. The first stated:
Was the Select Committee aware that in December 2008, the three unions which represent the staff of the service lodged an official letter of 'dispute' with the senior management, on behalf of their collective membership, over the proposed new staffing structure?
In addition to letters of protest from eminent organisations and individuals, the last page of the official record carried an angry letter from Professor Bernard E Leake, FRSE, which read:
'I am appalled at proposals to reduce the dedicated Geology curatorial staff in the City Museum. I lived in Cotham for 17 years & I know, as former Keeper of the Geological Collections in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow, that you cannot look after the very valuable collections that have been donated to you over nearly 200 years without expert Geologically-trained staff. At a time when there is unprecedented interest among the public & young people in environmental matters, to reduce the City support for geological material, which is the main source of information about past Earth environments, & leave the displays to 'fossilise' in neglect, due to diverting the resources into 'visual arts' or other matters, will not receive the support of most Bristolians or scientists in general. It will result in an outcry nationally as well.' (p.14)
8. Not many months earlier the telephone number of the City Council's Chief Executive had been daubed on a wall which once sported some impressive graffiti but which had been cleaned, despite local protest, by the municipal authorities. Even during the course of the Banksy show the Council had to apologise after a piece of street art in Bristol was painted over for a second time. (see BBC Bristol, 22 July 2009)
9. Banksy, quoted in numerous websites. Most of the material attributed to Banksy is pithy and rather memorable: 'The artist Paul Klee said "drawing is like taking a line for a walk", but for me it's always been more like drowning a photocopier in a canal' and in *Time Out*, 'I plead not guilty to selling out. But I plead it from a bigger house than I used to live in.'
10. Kate Brindley, heavily redacted email headed 'Fwd: Freedom of Information Request' to Banksy (?) sent 22 June 2009, available as four PDF attachments on-line from <http://www.culture24.org.uk/art/art71021/> accessed 8 October 2011. Page seven of the May 2009 version of the Contractual Agreement includes the detail of the costs (£1) paid by the Museum to the artist to stage the show, although paragraphs 5.2, 5.3, and 5.4 are all excised in what is the most heavily redacted portion of the paperwork that was released.
11. In the email exchanges certain names and highly-sensitive information such as the value and insurance costs of individual works were obscured with blank ink. There are no direct references to the artist, but passages carry the initials of the Pest Control Office (PCO) responsible for verifying Banksy works. There is also a letter from Bristol City Council's legal team which describe the artist's anonymity as 'crucial to his commercial interests'. The papers released under the Freedom of Information Act were made available from 14 August 2009. The handling of the Banksy team, the press and the public was made the basis of a case study by the MLA (Museums, Library and Archives), and is available on: <http://research.mla.gov.uk/case-studies/display-case-study.php?prnt=1&prjid=558/> accessed 10 October 2011.
12. This phrase is taken from the *Yellow Railroad* report created for 'Destination Bristol' in 2010. The sentiment is endorsed in a number of other sources amongst them the 2010 McKinsey/World Economic Forum Innovation Map, which states: 'Bristol is a hot spring of innovation in the global innovation 'heat map'.'
13. Bristol, *The Rough Guide to the UK* 2010. Opening the Bristol and Bath Science Park (SPark) in April 2008, Lord Sainsbury said: 'Bristol is unique in combining excellence in new technologies and creative content. It is this cross over which marks it out.'
14. 'Design Against Crime' is a socially responsive, practice-led research centre located at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, London. 'Buffing' is the street-art term for a piece of graffiti removed by the authorities; a 'green wall' is a public space grown with plants or trees to prevent it being painted or tagged. See 'A Graffiti Glossary', <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html/> accessed 12 October 2011.
15. Jennifer Harris (2011) 'Guerilla art, social value and absent heritage fabric', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol.17, No.3, May 2011, 214-229, p.219.
16. Christine Dew (2007) *Uncommissioned Art: an A-Z of Australian Graffiti*, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, p.13.
17. Banksy, *Banging your Head against a Brick Wall*, Weapons of Mass Distraction: London, 2001.