

Study of Banksy Graffiti Art

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Received: 19 April 2022; Accepted: 4 May 2022; Published: 28 May 2022

Abstract:

Banksy once said: “Some people become police officers because they want to make the world a better place, and others become vandals because they want to make the world a better place to look at.” Banksy, a nickname, is a graffiti artist or perhaps an art group. No one knows what he really looks like. From his graffiti works, we can see the rich content and metaphor, such as irony, absurdity and anti-war theme. At the same time, Banksy’s special graffiti works and artistic behaviors have induced the “Banksy” phenomenon in Europe and even the world.

Keywords:

Banksy, Graffiti, Contemporary Art

1. Overview of Banksy

Banksy, a legendary figure among young Westerners, “sees the world as just a joke”. He is regarded as a terrorist in the art world for stimulating the whole society in his own way.

With works spreading all over the street, he uses walls as weapons. His drawing board be street corners, car bodies, park benches, or animal bodies. It seems to be a social commentary expressed in an artistic way. Most of his works present the anti-war theme, and he tries his best to ridicule it. As pointed by Black [1], his eclectic panels have appeared on streets, walls and Bridges in cities around the world, and even become the fascinating cityscapes.

He has created lots of works with the real-life and anti-war theme for more than ten years, and is regarded as one of the world's most talented street artists. “Banksy” is just his alias. No one knows who he really is, because he has not shown up in public and remains anonymous in the 21 years since 1999. Even when he appeared on the cover of Time Magazine, he did not show his true face.

Of course, Banksy’s remarkable achievements have also raised some questions about whether he is a real artist at all. In the face of this question, the art world has a different view. As the influence of Banksy’s graffiti art continues to expand, he has become more of a vandal, political activist and social activist than an artist. Moreover, he uses his own way to convey his inner thoughts to the world, which is full of anti-war, satire, absurd malignant fun.

2. Banksy's Graffiti Art Formation Environment

2.1. Political Environment

Since the 20th century, great changes have taken place in the art world. It is no longer possible to define art simply by a certain doctrine. The development of modern and contemporary art presents a kaleidoscope trend, which is closely related to politics. Events such as World War I, World War II, and socialist revolution have not only spawned a lot of modern art movements but also promoted the development and transformation of artistic concepts.

Banksy, as a British graffiti artist, is also influenced by the Western political situation in his artistic creation. The world is changing, and the stability of Western politics is gradually being broken. The British political system is centered on the parliamentary cabinet, and the country is a unitary democracy with constitutional monarchy. The system consists of four institutions: government, congress, political parties, and parliament. However, in some cases, the incomplete realization of citizens' rights, the unsatisfactory government system for all citizens, and the complexity of the international environment in which Britain is located have accumulated materials for creation of Banksy.

Political environment is the main reason for the emergence of Banksy's art and phenomenon. Specifically, politics is the soil for the birth of art, which not only provides Banksy with creative materials, but also stimulates his creative initiative. Through understanding Banksy's works, we can also clearly see the metaphor of politics: dissatisfaction with the Western society, emphasis on human rights, resistance to war sentiment, etc.

2.2. Cultural Environment

Graffiti culture is developed based on Pop art, which originated in Britain in the 1950s. Although the pop art has flourished in the United States since then, this unique ideology and cultural concept has profoundly influenced the British artists.

The rise of "pop art" promoted the popularity of graffiti art in big cities in Europe and the United States in the 1970s. They were consistent in spirit and tended to focus on mass culture. Starting as the memorial messages on bottles, it later became a way for blacks to express their discontent. However, this not only caused administrative problems for the city, but also led to official intervention. Thus, this "art" form was questioned, and the British government classified graffiti as "vandalism". In the 1970s, many people with lofty ideals and artists from all over the world created graffiti on the wall of more than 20 kilometers long in Berlin, expressed their views on life and politics, and made it a public art with political, cultural and artistic influence. At that time, it was recognized and protected by the government, and the artistic identity of graffiti was greatly enhanced. The graffiti movement, which came to life in Europe around 1980, has been focusing on communication with the public since its birth. Graffiti artists also draw on the concepts and ideas of "pop art" and use images of popular culture and daily objects as themes of expression.

Bristol, where Banksy was born, is an area heavily influenced by graffiti culture. Banksy was influenced by graffiti culture when he was young, and graffiti art became public in the 1970s, which provided a strong support for Banksy's artistic creation. It was also reflected in his later works.

2.3. Living Environment

Banksy's work was influenced by underground graffiti in Bristol, England, where graffiti artists collaborated with musicians. According to the writer and graphic designer Staustan Vingo, Banksy was born in 1974 and grew up in Bristol, Southwest England. It was also revealed that he was the son of a photocopier technician and was caught up in the graffiti craze that began in the city in the late 1980s.

Who Banksy really is remains up in the air. However, through the scope of his activities, newspaper reports and friends' reports, it can be found that he was born in Bristol, UK. From 1990 to 1994, he started his graffiti career as a graffiti lover in Dry BreadZ working group in Bristol, together with two other artists Kato and Tes. During this period, Banksy was inspired by other local artists and his own work became an important part of Bristol's underground scene. After moving to London in 2000, Banksy decided to make art entirely using templates because he realized he could cut production time significantly. [2] Since then, he has fully adopted the stencil technology, and soon gained a wider attention in the surrounding Bristol and London art circles, beginning the peak of his art.

The special growth environment provided Banksy with incomparable creative ideas and skills, which had not only positively affected his graffiti art, but also indirectly improved his artistic achievements.

3. Banksy's Graffiti Art Features

In the view of Banksy, art can be used as a weapon. As pointed by Black [3]: "A wall is a big weapon. It's something you can hit or touch someone with." The streets, walls and bridges of cities around the world are Banksy's canvas, creating often amusing and arresting images with anti-war, anti-capitalist and anti-idolatry tenets. It is noteworthy that "Banksy never explains his intentions to the public. He believes that what people perceive is valuable."

As pointed by Black [4]: "In fact, the work of the celebrated street artist can be read as a mirror and reaction to the rapid economic, social and cultural changes in London at the start of the new millennium, and as a landmark in the history of recent street art."

The classic wall paintings include a man who is about to throw something (a bouquet of flowers, rather than a bomb), a mouse announcing the birth of a race, a dreamy scene of a girl releasing balloons, and an accidental kiss between two police officers. In his works, we can see various kinds of phenomena in the Western modern society, which also reflects a kind of documentary with irony.

3.1. Anti-War Sex

Banksy's graffiti is strongly anti-war. [5] The Walled Off Hotel was built in Bethlehem, the disputed territory between Israel and The Palestinians. Hotel has 8 theme rooms and 1 presidential suite. Banksy "embellishes" the entire room with his own work (Figure 1). This picture shows the two people who are having the "pillow fight, but it really reflects Banksy's distaste for the war, and shows discontent with some developed countries interfering with the internal affairs of Central Asia, Europe and other places.

Banksy once said: "The wall is a disgrace to mankind." "On the Israeli side of the wall, you have manicured lawns and sport utility vehicles. On the Palestinian side,

you have dirt and poor people looking for work.” This sentiment is reflected in many of his graffiti, apart from the Israeli-Palestinian wall. [6] A little crying girl walks forward holding hands with “smiling” Mickey Mouse and Ronald McDonald, in which the crying is in a stark contrast to the bright smile. This warm scene is from a refugee picture of the Vietnam War. Obviously, this work (Figure 1) is against the intrusion of hegemonism on the world. In 2012, a work about London Olympic Games used the Olympics to satirize the invasion of Iraq war. Although the British government put the prevention of Banksy on the priority agenda during this period, but it was impossible to prevent. Banksy even painted Mona Lisa with a bazooka on her back to express his war pangs.



Figure 1. “Napalm girl”.

3.2. Ironic

Banksy also satirizes politics, including politicians, civil servants and street cops. The most famous satire is *The Kissing Police*. On the wall of a gay block in Brighton, England, two figures in police costumes kiss each other, which ironically describes the British police.

Combining with the events during the epidemic, Banksy also painted a graffiti work for *Black Floyd* (Figure 2). In this work, there is an American flag hanging behind the portrait of Floyd. The flag is large, while the portrait is small. Except for the eyes, all parts of the body are black, which fully implies that the victim is a black man, a human being of flesh and blood, and the huge national flag on the back is full of irony. There are unlit candles in front of the portrait, but a large candle lit under a huge national flag, as if it were honoring not Freud but a nation.



Figure 2. The Death of Freud.

Banksy also appended a political statement to the piece: “At first, I thought I’d shut up and listen to what black people have to say on this issue. However, on second thought, it seems to be unnecessary. This is because it's not their fault, but my fault. It’s our system and the white man’s system making people of color feel bad. It’s like living in the same house, the pipes break, and the people who live in the basement all get submerged. It’s the broken system that makes their lives miserable, but it’s not

their responsibility to fix it. They could not solve it, for no one had given them permission to come upstairs. It's a white man's problem. If the white man doesn't do something about it, somebody's going to come rushing up the stairs and kick down the door!"

The satire of Banksy's art is not only the satire of politics, but also the satire of the whole art system. He tries to get his work displayed "in" museums and galleries, rather than just through the proper channels. More than once, he has hung his work in museums and art exhibitions to satirize modern art exhibitions and prove that "everyone is an artist and everyone can have his/her work displayed in museums for eternity".

3.3. Absurdity

From an aesthetic perspective, "absurdity" is anti-tradition, anti-aesthetics and anti-form, which is similar to the meaning reflected in Banksy's art works. Watching Banksy's works, we can feel the inversion of the theme of his works to real life. Meanwhile, his works as a whole present a sense of humor, absurdity and irony. Banksy's works do not complete the events, but leave more space for the audiences to think, which is caused by the characteristics of visual art. This is also the charm of visual art.

In his works, we can often see many "mice". As pointed by Black [7], they exist without permission. They are hated, hunted, and persecuted. They live in filth in quiet despair. However, they have the power to bring entire civilizations to their knees. If you're dirty, unimportant and unlikeable, mice are the ultimate role model. In Banksy's works, mice are cute and innocent elves and pets (Figure 3), and even have their own "occupation", such as cameraman, welder, and maintenance worker. On the one hand, these mice represent the lower class and the vulnerable groups. On the other hand, it also reflects the absurdity in Banksy's works. Namely, the classic image of the mouse is used to humorously symbolize the absurdity of the world.



Figure 3. "Mouse".

3.4. Anti-institutional

As pointed by Black [7]: "Imagining a city where graffiti is not illegal, where anyone can do what they want. Every street is filled with countless colors and short words. Standing at a bus stop is never boring. The city is like a party where everyone is invited, rather than just real estate agents and big business tycoons." "It takes two people to make a work of art," he once quipped, "One makes it, and the other, from parliament, arrives later to sandblast it away."

A major feature of the Western system is the parliamentary system, in which members of parliament vote democratically to decide certain bills. However, according to Banksy, the MPS (politicians) do not seem to be so serious and professional. [8] In a large room of the House of Commons, it seems that a bunch of “apes” are having a meeting (see his work *The Decentralization of Parliament* in Figure 4). The graffiti itself has the colour of “liberty” and “democracy”, which conveys the voice of “civilian” fighting against “elite”. In this work, the Banksy depicts the meeting in the House of Commons. Meanwhile, Banksy purposely describes each member with orangutan’s appearance, so as to taunt some defects of Western system. After exhibition of this work, Banksy even tweets: Laugh now, but one day no-one will be in charge.



Figure 4. The Monkey Parliament.

4. Banksy’s Graffiti Art Influence

4.1. Impact on the Contemporary Art Environment

Banksy’s graffiti art works embody rich metaphors in content and form. [9] Even when his art works have a high commercial value, he sells his works at ordinary booths in the park to protest against art criticism and art auction, and show the cheapness and hypocrisy of modern art.

He believes that works of art have material value under the operation of capital, but he values more the spiritual value and eternity of works of art. In one of his works depicting the auction act, he even wrote: “I Can’t Believe You Morons Actually Buy This Shit”, with a sharp irony.

With the art behavior and form, Banksy strikes the art system since the development of Western capital. This art system has been gradually formed in the last century, which is a kind of “art” alienation and “art” for the sake of material. Although the strength of the Banksy may be weak, he does provide a possibility to break through the barrier of traditional art system.

4.2. Generation of “Banksy” Phenomenon

Banksy’s influence is reflected not only in the art world, but also in the business world and the fashion world. The influence of his graffiti art has formed a phenomenon called “Banksy” phenomenon. He has provided an inspiration for many designers, which can be reflected in their products.

Banksy’s artistic behavior has gradually formed a spirit and an effect, which is enveloped in the hearts of Western young people and spread to the whole world. While affecting the whole world, it creates a chain effect and stimulates the world’s young people and artists to continue carrying out this radical behavior.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, Banksy's graffiti art leaves people much imagination space. Through the analysis of Banksy's graffiti art, it can be seen that on the one hand, Banksy's work reveals the "rebellion" and "darkness" of the politics, and is full of anti-war, irony, absurdity and anti-institutional theme. [10] This is also the core content of Banksy's graffiti art. On the other hand, political tolerance also gives Banksy the space for graffiti art creation. Banksy used to make jokes on police, soldiers and famous political figures in his graffiti. It is the tolerance of Western society that creates such a free artist.

With distinct political style and huge social effect, Banksy's graffiti works have also aroused the public's attention and reflection on social and political issues. As society develops, art continues, and Banksy will continue to provide more surprises for the contemporary art. In addition, we will also be able to see the craziness of society and contemporary art in Banksy's future works.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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