BANKSY AS TRICKSTER: THE RHETORIC OF STREET ART, PUBLIC
IDENTITY, AND CELEBRITY BRANDS

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: BANKSY AND THE RHETORIC OF STREET ART

Imagine that you are enjoying a leisurely visit to a local museum of human history and culture. You are making your way through the galleries, carefully studying the pieces on display, when the somewhat odd behavior of a nearby man diverts your focus. You watch as the bespectacled man, whose hat and ordinary clothing indicate that he is not a museum official, strokes his abundant facial hair before pulling an item from his bag and mounting it on the gallery wall. He then carefully positions a placard alongside the object and exits the gallery as if nothing is amiss. You are seemingly the only observer of this strange event, since no one else appears to have noticed.

Obviously intrigued, you walk over to see just what the stranger has done. On the wall is a small rock (10 inches by 6 inches, to be exact) with the painted outline of a man wielding a spear and pushing a shopping cart in pursuit of a bison. The sign accompanying the piece bears the title *Early Man Goes to Market* and the following caption:

This finely preserved example of primitive art dates from the Post-Catatonic era and is thought to depict early man venturing towards the out-of-town hunting grounds. The artist responsible is known to have created a substantial body of work across the South East of England under the moniker Banksymus Maximus but little else is known about him. Most art of this type has unfortunately not survived. The majority is destroyed by zealous municipal officials who fail to recognise the artistic merit and historical value of daubing on walls.¹

No one seems alarmed by the new addition to the gallery. Others enter the room and view the piece as if it belongs amid the ancient relics and noted artworks. A few days

later you learn that this installation was in fact unauthorized … but is now part of the museum’s permanent collection.

Now imagine that the scene you just envisioned is more than a hypothetical situation – that this uninvited museum installation actually occurred. Indeed, it did. In May 2005, infamous British street artist Banksy (cleverly alluded to as “Banksymus Maximus” in the piece’s inscription) visited London’s British Museum and placed the mock cave painting and caption on the wall of the Roman Britain Gallery 49 (figure 1.1). *Early Man Goes to Market* went unnoticed by museum personnel for several days (eight, according to Banksy, but only two or three if you ask museum representatives). The publicity generated from a link on the artist’s website to a “Treasure Hunt” that challenged readers to post a picture of themselves with the piece in exchange for an original Banksy artwork seems to have clued museum officials in on the new acquisition, which, by the way, remains in its original position in the gallery today.

![FIGURE 1.1 Close-up of Early Man Goes to Market, a “cave painting” created by decorating a rock with a marker. SOURCE: Banksy, *Wall and Piece* (London: Century, 2005), [155].](image)

In reality, few individuals besides Banksy could accomplish such a feat.

Instead of condemning Banksy’s transgression, museum representatives took “a very

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light-hearted view of it as an isolated incident” and applauded the wily artist’s ability to mimic the gallery signage and exhibit style.³ The British Museum was careful not to be grouped among the “zealous municipal officials who fail to recognise the artistic merit and historical value of daubing on walls” mentioned in the piece’s caption. In an unusual turn of events, the satirical rock drawing was made part of the institution’s permanent collection. Museum officials even agreed to loan the work to Banksy for his exhibition opening later that same week. Consider the following remarkable aspects of the situation: Not only did this man make an uninvited intervention into a revered social space, but also the museum essentially sanctified his stunt by adding the piece to the permanent collection. The details of this successful interference with the elite framework of institutionalized art manifest the strength of Banksy’s rebellious rhetorical arsenal.

Worldwide many are familiar with Banksy’s street art – characterized by iconoclastic imagery and biting socio-political humor – but few know his true identity. This mysterious individual fascinates the public and the media, who seem determined to unmask his identity or to create one for him if nothing else. Reaching audiences through a marginalized aesthetic form of self-expression, this pseudonymous street artist has prodded the collective conscious by making a spectacle of both current unpleasant socio-political subjects and of himself. Of particular interest to me as a student of communication is the phenomenon of the Banksy spectacle. As the public has navigated and actualized his persona, the street artist has been fashioned into a

celebrity and, by extension, into a brand. In this thesis, I interpret the rhetoric of several major works by Banksy and demonstrate how the public’s readings of his persona and of his communication artifacts produce a brand identity for the artist that hearkens back to the trickster figure from ancient religious mythology and cultural folklore across the globe. My study explains Banksy’s brand from a communication perspective, concentrating first on public interpretations of the artist’s performative artifacts and the rhetorical situation of street art in general; second on a rhetorical criticism of select pieces of his artwork; and finally on giving an overview of his brand communications, his public identity, and the rise of his celebrity.

Stencil graffiti on the steps of a platform in Trafalgar Square, a mangled red phone box melting into a London city street, a sticker on the doors of a subway car—nearly any surface or public structure provides a canvas for Banksy to reach an audience. As a street artist, he faces distinct artistic and communicative challenges, namely avoiding arrest while creating illegal artifacts that intrigue passersby. Yet, acknowledged by the press and fellow practitioners as one of the most prolific street artists, Banksy has proven time and time again that he can meet the challenges of the field. Even an art specialist from one of the art market’s most prestigious institutions, Sotheby’s, recognized Banksy as “the quickest-growing artist anyone has ever seen of all time.”4 Read by some as trite or trivial and by others as profound, Banksy’s ability to galvanize the public is undeniable. Try entering “Banksy” as a search term into LexisNexis, and you will access nearly 1,000 hits from major U.S. and world

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newspaper publications between October 1, 1999 and October 1, 2009. While a larger portion of these articles focuses more on uncovering the artist’s identity, whereabouts, or estimating his financial worth than on his actual artwork, as artist and curator Cedar Lewisohn remarks, “It has to be said that Banksy is the best-known street artist working today.”

Fashioning artifacts that break free from modernity’s flood of visual clutter, Banksy has mastered the rhetorical constraints facing all rhetors today. He has secured a growing international audience and become a relevant creative voice that stands outside of the artistic institution. What follows is an overview of Banksy’s work and its relation to the general rhetoric of street art. Building on this survey, I detail how viewers actually experience his illicit spectacles.

Banksy’s chosen communication platform, street art, is an art genre that resists categorization and is not widely understood by the public. A descendent of graffiti writing, street art follows its relative’s tradition of making uninvited alterations of

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public and private property. In fact, much of the populace often treats *street art* as the reciprocal of *graffiti* or *graffiti writing*. This casual use of language can be debilitating for an artist like Banksy given *graffiti* and *graffiti writing*’s bad reputation. In reality, *graffiti* is a dated term used as a default for any kind of unauthorized surface marking, especially those done with aerosol paint. In the midst of the urban graffiti writing movement that exploded in New York City and Philadelphia during the 1970s and 1980s and gave birth to highly stylized spray-painted letterforms, *graffiti* began to connote vandalism and defacement. As Lewisohn explains, *graffiti* is now a default term used by the general public to describe “any form of unofficial, unsanctioned application of a medium onto a surface.” However, whether it is paired with the word *art* or *stencil* (both distinct from the graffiti writing movement just mentioned), that eight-letter g-word still retains its negative connotations for many. Thus, since most of Banksy’s artworks take the form of “unofficial, unsanctioned application[s] of a medium onto a surface,” and because he is largely known for his *stencil graffiti*, the stigma attached to *graffiti* directly influences viewers’ interpretations of Banksy’s works. Therefore, it is worth reviewing why and how *graffiti* came to evoke such discomfort.

The origins of the word *graffiti* far predate the invention of aerosol paint and the abstract human signatures perfected by the graffiti writing subculture of the 1970s

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6 Lewisohn, *Street Art*, 15. Throughout my research and the writing of this essay, I have sought to identify where authors of the sources I include use the word *graffiti* in the way that Lewisohn indicates when *street art, stencil graffiti, or graffiti art* may have been their intended reference. Following this logic, I occasionally apply writings about *graffiti* to my discussion of *street art*. 
and ‘80s. Regularly used as a verb or a singular noun, graffiti is actually the plural of graffito, which derives from the Italian verb graffiare—to scratch. The first graffiti were simple images or textual phrases and verses scratched into walls or trees. James Walmsley traces the heritage of graffiti back to ancient Pompeii, the pyramids of Cheops, and even to biblical writings about King Belshazzar. He emphasizes that, contrary to popular belief, graffiti is not a recent by-product of urban decay; rather, “throughout history people have obeyed the urge to make their mark on buildings and the like,” paving the way for today’s graffiti writers and street artists like Banksy with their “crimes of style.” Walmsley and others well versed in contemporary graffiti culture, especially its participants, argue that graffiti is an umbrella term that is outmoded for discussions about the modern graffiti movement. The more accurate descriptor for the present-day spray-painted tag (i.e., stylized signature or an individual’s nom de plume) is graffiti writing, and those who engage in this activity are self-proclaimed writers. A thorough treatment of the arguments related to graffiti writing’s artistic merits is beyond the scope of my argument. However, given the confusing relationship between graffiti writing and its progeny street art, at the very least I must introduce some of the attitudes held by those both inside and outside of the graffiti writing community toward these markings as well as detail how regard for this kind of graffiti influences readings of Banksy’s street art.

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8 Walmsley, “In the Beginning,” 193-195; Lewisohn, Street Art, 15. For a detailed account of international street art, see Nicholas Ganz, Graffiti World: Street Art from Five Continents (New York: Abrams, 2004).
The graffiti writing movement was a cultural phenomenon led by poor, displaced youths and minorities in the city slums. Like the gang graffiti that preceded it, graffiti writing became a way to mark one’s territory. Spray-painted tags became the voice for a subculture muted by the hegemony. Frustrated black youths from the inner city took to the streets wielding aerosol cans to siege a creative battle on the hegemonic order. Soon others who felt ignored by the parent culture joined the aesthetic offensive. However, as in any war or within any subculture, participants must follow the rules of the game and respect the internal structure.9 For graffiti writers, this protocol means honoring the hierarchical grammar of the street and learning the language of the tag. A tag simply declares the writer’s chosen nickname and does so in a cryptic style legible only to those within the closed community of graffiti writers.10 Accordingly, these signatures are not meant for everyone. “The problem for the external viewer is that this aesthetic code exists in such an internalized language that the main group of people who can fully appreciate it are other graffiti writers,” explains Lewisohn.11 Such exclusivity is completely intentional. The tag is a sign of power, a challenge to the aesthetics of authority that Walmesely likens to the communicative artifacts of all subcultures that cry out for attention but refuse to adhere to the demands of any audience willing to listen.12 This analysis brings us to the crucial distinction between the genres: the intended audience. Street art and graffiti writing are both illegal, and they share a sense of expressive appropriation, but graffiti

9 Walmesley, “In the Beginning,” 197-198.
10 Lewisohn, Street Art, 19-23.
11 Ibid., 19.
12 Walmesely, “In the Beginning,” 198.
writers are communicating among each other and have little concern for viewers outside of their closed community, whereas street art is meant to communicate with the public. Though the two genres are overwhelmingly conflated as one, they have important differences—especially if one is to appreciate the rhetorical value of Banksy’s alterations of public space.

Stencil graffiti, spray-painted freehand images, three-dimensional installations (the modification of public sculptures, architecture, or museum collections), and collage—all techniques that Banksy adopts—are different genres of street art. Street artists move beyond the ornate tagged signatures of graffiti writing to create an art form amenable to a wide range of media and to content largely based on pictures rather than typography. These artists often prepare their work before going out into public space so as to install or execute it quickly and efficiently. They operate with anything from stencils, stickers, oil or acrylic paints, and flypostings to video projectors or LED lights. Given the many divergent approaches to creating such artistic interventions, demarcating the genre is difficult. Additionally, some creative practitioners consider street art to be an arbitrarily broad category that trivializes the specific techniques and functions of the many art forms to which it refers.\(^\text{13}\) Nevertheless, I support Lewisohn’s recognition of street art as the operative term to describe the illicit art that integrates the physicality of a public site into its expression.\(^\text{14}\) Although Banksy first laid claim to the streets of Bristol as a graffiti writer inscribing his tag across the cityscape and occasionally spray-painting freehand

\(^{13}\) Lewisohn, Street Art, 15.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 15.
images, not until he abandoned the tag and adopted the street art tradition of stencil graffiti did he achieve widespread notoriety.

Banksy was drawn to the aggressiveness of graffiti writing and envisioned its offspring, stencil graffiti and freehand spray-painted graphics, as democratic means of artistic communication. In his own words, “Graffiti has been used to start revolutions, stop wars and generally is the voice of people who aren’t listened to. Graffiti is one of the few tools you have if you have almost nothing. . . . Graffiti ultimately wins out over proper art because it becomes part of your city, it’s a tool.”15 Banksy’s concern for creating something that “becomes part of your city” is precisely why he fits within the street art model. Street art seeks to consciously interact with its environment without addressing a specific audience. It is meant for everyone. Art as a whole is an aesthetic expression of how we see ourselves in relation to the world.16 Banksy seems to appreciate the unique power of graffiti of the street art genre to respond to and interact with the world, reviving a space and a voice. What Banksy and all street artists produce are embodied, material mediations of the sensory world. In his detailed account of street art, Lewisohn draws from Jacques Rancière’s discussion of persons in terms of the “the body of our condition” to introduce the dialectic of street art. Regarding street artists’ preoccupation with incorporating the architectural landscape into their artifacts, Lewisohn remarks, “Making art becomes a way to alter the body of

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15 Banksy, Banging Your Head against a Brick Wall (N.p.: Weapons of Mass Disruption, 2001).
16 Ibid., 100.
Accordingly, Banksy stages alternative negotiations of public space. Discussing the initial impact of Banksy’s street art, Charlotte Higgins notes how an encounter with his street art “would occasion, for many, a moment of intrigued amusement, the monotony of the city suddenly enlivened by a stencil of two policemen kissing [fig. 1.2], for example, or a rat carrying a sign saying Welcome to Hell [fig. 1.3]. Spotting a Banksy became a low-level sport.”

17 Lewisohn, Street Art, 100.
Higgins’ description of viewer’s involvement with Banksy’s street art as a “low-level sport” indicates street art’s performative qualities. Performativity is a significant and powerful rhetorical quality. As the acclaimed street-artist-turned-gallery-professional Shepard Fairey indicates, “When something is illegally placed in the public right-of-way, the very act itself makes it political.”19 Apart from its content, the act alone of making unauthorized modifications of public space performs a speech act. By incorporating the cityscape into expressions of his own doctrine of dissent, Banksy directly contests the ownership and use of space that is allegedly for public use and enjoyment. Banksy’s artifacts—and all pieces of street art—are performative in the sense that they do something through their very presence. They are imbued with a political disposition and a provocative sense of agency.

This notion of agency is fundamental to a performative interpretation of street art communication and is best explained in Alfred Gell’s theory of the art nexus, posthumously published in his *Art and Agency: Towards an Anthropological Theory*. Gell discussed art in terms of the relations between persons and things. He considered artworks to be indexes of social *agency* – a term that refers to something’s socio-culturally derived propensity for action. Gell suggested that an agent, be it a person or an object, initiates “causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention.”20 For Gell, social agency is not exclusive to humans. Objects can be rendered secondary agents if humans (primary agents) invest them with

active agency. Human agents consciously initiate causal chains with respect to social others, or “patients.” Be that as it may, Gell stipulated: “unless there is some kind of physical mediation, which always does exploit the manifold causal properties of the ambient physical world (the environment, the human body, etc.), agent and patient will not interact.”

In the context of art, physical mediation takes the form of art objects, which Gell also described as indexes due to their function as indicators of agency. This does not mean that any indexical object qualifies as art. Gell specified that art objects are manufactured artifacts that are noticeably difficult, “difficult to make, difficult to ‘think’, difficult to transact. They fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator.” These objects index their manufactured origins and have an efficacy that inspires consideration for the artistic agent and motivates responses. Gell asserted that an index centers each recipient’s focus on the process and agent of its creation, thereby inciting conjectural inferences about the disposition and intentions of the primary and secondary agents. Gell emphasized this inferential process, which he termed “abduction” in his justification for labeling indexes as performative. Banksy’s artifacts, the product of carefully planned, furtive activities, typify the enigmatic virtuosity to which Gell alluded in addition to the performativity he highlighted.

Just what do Banksy’s illicit artifacts accomplish? These street art communications are unexpected breaks in the everyday rhythms of society, regardless

21 Ibid., 20.
22 Ibid., 23.
23 Ibid., 13-14.
of whether one chooses to interpret them as artworks or as pieces of vandalism. Viewers can feel physically and cognitively involved in a performance as they attempt to make sense of these unfamiliar, uninvited indexes of communication. Separated from their authors and connected to connotations of rebelliousness, street art artifacts are part of an ambiguous rhetorical situation that does not readily supply interactants with information to navigate the communicative event. This ambiguity can easily make participants uncomfortable, for humans actively seek information that may facilitate social interaction within our shared social environment. Such a claim relates to the dialectic that Erving Goffman considered fundamental to social experiences: “When one individual enters the presence of others, he will want to discover the facts of the situation.”

Our social lives take shape from this innate desire to uncover all aspects of a social encounter, even those that are mediated by artifacts, as with viewers’ encounters with Banksy.

Gell expanded on Goffman’s discussion by applying similar concepts to art artifacts. Gell asserted that artifacts are capable of mediating social interaction and that the human hunger for information actually increases in the presence of artifacts. As Gell suggested, “Any object that one encounters in the world invites the question ‘how did this thing get to be here?’”—yet artifacts, as indexes of agency, acutely compel us to imagine their inception. Artifacts are entities that prompt cognitive interpretations and semiotic inferences. Since they are marks of human presence, viewers naturally

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consider the human agent(s) responsible for the artifacts. With Banksy’s street art, one almost cannot help but wonder who this person is who dared to break the law, to go against societal norms, to defy authority. Better yet, how did he create these inscriptions?

Banksy’s choice of location for a piece is always strategic—or, to put it in communication studies terms, rhetorical. Stumbling upon one of his pieces compels a person to imagine the artist’s struggle to access the prominent site and to quickly and artfully produce the prohibited artifact undetected. One individual recalls having this very reaction during his first encounter with a Banksy artwork: “I remember seeing his rats on Park Street and being hugely intrigued, both by the art and the guerrilla tactics of whoever was doing it.”26 This statement testifies to the ability of Banksy’s street art to engage viewers by transmitting the tension integral to its execution. Cultural theorist Rafael Schacter attributes this performative component of street art artifacts to a pronounced efficacy that conveys the intensity of their production and the illicitness of their existence.27 As I see it, Banksy’s street art reclaims inaccessible territory within organized society and defies conventions of artistic expression.

Banksy’s unexpected, aberrational artifices invite attention and reflection about the nature of their transgressions against the social hierarchy and mainstream conventions. Journalist Simon Hattenstone, like the artist also a native of Bristol, describes the experience of encountering a Banksy piece:

26 Steve Wright, Banksy’s Bristol: Home Sweet Home (Bristol: Tangent, 2007), 39.
When I do come across them, surreptitiously peeping out of an alley or boldly emblazoned on a wall, I find it hard to contain myself. They feel personal, as if they are just for me, and they feel public as if they are a gift for everyone. They make me smile and feel optimistic about the possibilities of shared dreams and common ownership.  

Within the vitality of the public stage, these artistic productions achieve a compelling sense of immediacy and aggressively affront the dominant institutions. Spontaneously staging his artistic speech acts in the public realm through the anonymous art form of street art allows Banksy to disembody himself from his artwork while inviting any incidental audience member to seize control of the rhetorical situation. Tristan Manco points out that the criminality associated with spray-painted artwork in some ways “gives it an edge: the audience feels part of something which is both personal and subversive.” It is an expression of difference and defiance that inspires readers to personally relieve the tension between art and social process.

Banksy creates opportunities to revive the democratic use of public space along with open public discourse. In *Cut it Out* he coined his own term for the subversion of commercialism and the dissolution of extensive social control: *brandalism*. The short essay explaining the word is a sort of credo for his street art, which by itself seeks to encourage the reclamation of shared space for the public voice rather than for the voices of commerce or authority. The iconoclastic artist often works in a visual style that mimics what is culturally revered and accepted only to subvert the subject matter in favor of his own message. This parodic style of communication is

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30 Banksy, *Cut It Out*. (N.p.: Paranoid Pictures, 2005), [31].
common in street art, where creative rhetors perform ironic reversals of commercial or instructional messaging by mimicking their style and form. Banksy in particular has co-opted widely recognized cultural symbols and icons, such as Mona Lisa’s portrait, Mickey Mouse, or McDonald’s golden arches, only to destabilize their accepted meanings through satirical modifications. As Pat Rafferty observes of such political and social lampooning, “Exercising options which encourage difference and consequently conditions where the street artist/ graffitist appears to be simultaneously inside the cultural mainstream and yet outside of it offers an alternative way of understanding art while expressing how change can take place.”

Banksy’s performances model deviance for us, showing us the way to modify the world we have constructed. Neither Banksy nor his medium fits within traditional conceptions of the elite art world. Nonetheless, by and large, the public considers him to be an artist of some sort. His work is a creative assault on the segmentation of social communities and on the delimiting nature of cultural institutions. He creates a tense rhetorical situation with obscure constraints, intermittently intervening to modify the rhetorical urgency.

By concealing his identity and creating his productions away from the public gaze, Banksy reduces the power of authorship to distract viewers from interactions with the artifacts themselves. At the beginning of his book Existencilism, Banksy muses, “you find that people who know you rarely listen to a word you say, even though they’ll happily take as gospel the word of a man they’ve never even met if it’s

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on a record or in a book. If you want to say something and have people listen then you have to wear a mask.”

He highlights the human tendency to incorporate our perceptions of others into our interpretations of their utterances. Furthermore, operating anonymously through street art enables Banksy to directly interact with the city and with the populous while simultaneously mocking the hierarchical and materialistic axioms of modernity. This seemingly unknowable source fascinates and frustrates audiences with his expressions of difference and defiance that sharply focus attention on the social scripts that they defy. As you will see throughout this essay, Banksy’s exaggerated interjections can and often do engender insightful critical reflection once viewers overcome street art’s criminal stigma.

Banksy’s street art is antithetical to the art institution, which celebrates privileged tastes and proffers a selective rubric of legitimization. This street artist eradicates his artworks from the traditional contextual trappings of the museum and occasionally attacks the art institution from within. He utilizes the landscape of the city to bring his artistic expressions and individual presence directly to the populace without the mediation of the art intelligentsia. Banksy explains his interpretation of what history suggests is Art in the following tirade from *Wall and Piece*:

> Art is not like other culture because its success is not made by its audience. . . .

> We the people, [*sic*] affect the making and the quality of most of our culture,

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but not our art. The Art we look at is made by only a select few. A small group create, promote, purchase, exhibit and decide the success of Art. His attack against the institution that could potentially validate his artistic endeavors according to cultural doctrines suggests the artificiality of the elite framework enshrining Art. In addition to circumventing critical curatorial receptions by presenting his performances as artistic artifacts outside of the sacred framing of the museum, Banksy infiltrates and tampers with museums from the inside. He has executed several covert installations (similar to the one mentioned at the outset of this chapter) in revered museums in Europe as well as the United States, inserting his own parodic modifications of canonical pieces or of celebrated styles into the prestigious sites.

The inherent transgressiveness of the stencil graffiti and of the other unauthorized spectacles that Banksy creates makes a viewing of his performances an interactive experience. Denied a direct exchange with the communicative source, audience members are inclined to formulate a narrative that accounts for the communication and its meaning. While Banksy repeatedly attempts to reclaim his voice in the discourse surrounding him through his books, content on his website, or comments relayed by his public relations representative, the public is the actual purveyor of meaning in his narrative.

Banksy’s brand story begins with his unsanctioned art in its pure, unmediated form. Before his commissioned cover art for alternative rock band Blur’s 2003 album

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33 Banksy, Wall and Piece, 144.
Think Tank, his makeshift gallery shows, or his uninvited museum additions, his street art first won him an audience. Some charge him with being a reckless vandal while others see him as a talented artist. Ultimately, I see Banksy as a rhetor seeking an audience. Indeed, his communications are predicated upon other social agents’ experiences of them. By mediating his communications through artifacts, Banksy makes Gell’s concept of abduction a fundamental component of the discourse.\textsuperscript{34} When a social actor recedes leaving an artifact to substantiate his or her statement, as Banksy does, a marked separation opens between the agent and the addressee. Such spatio-temporal distance within the rhetorical situation yields a degree of uncomfortable ambiguity for the addressee. In the presence of artistic artifacts specifically, the hunger for information increases and absorbs attention. Gell suggested that artifacts, as indexes of human agency, acutely compel us to imagine their inception. “This means playing out their origin-stories mentally, reconstructing their histories as a sequence of actions performed by another agent [the artist],” he clarified.\textsuperscript{35} Since Banksy’s street art is created illegally, away from the public gaze, it can pique viewers’ curiosity in a very pronounced way as they engage in this process of origin-story musings that Gell described.

The craft of street art is by no means easy to master. It involves physically strenuous exercise (shinnying up and down drain pipes, leaping across window or building ledges, running from the police, and so on) and a great deal of vigilance and resourcefulness. Yet the press and the public seem to have some understanding of

\textsuperscript{34} Refer back to p. 13 for the initial explanation of abduction.
\textsuperscript{35} Gell, Art and Agency, 67.
these challenges. In the unofficial guide to Banksy and his Bristol roots, author Steve Wright notes, “Some of Banksy’s stunts have amazed and impressed because of the sheer bravery of the event.” Indeed, a three-story tall stencil graffito that reads “One Nation Under CCTV” (fig. 1.4) on the side of a Post Office building “right under the nose of one of those ubiquitous closed-circuit security cameras,” as one journalist put it, implores viewers to ask just how it got there—and just how the source of the mural escaped undetected by authorities. Intuitively, audience members begin authoring their own accounts of the artifact’s origination, focusing specifically on the human agent responsible for the artwork. Artifacts such as Banksy’s, inserted into public space with no evident communicative source and no apparent code or caption, prompt cognitive interpretations that invite viewers to make semiotic inferences.

FIGURE 1.4 One of the largest street artworks in central London, Banksy’s mural shows a dog and a security guard watching in earnest as a young boy paints a message for those monitoring the footage of the actual CCTV camera nearby. SOURCE: “One Nation under CCTV,” photograph by Steffen M. Boelaars, Flickr, http://www.flickr.com/photos/boelaars/2434895992/.

Banksy’s work exhibits a keen awareness of audience and context. Regard for these elements marks a good communication artifact as well as a successful street

36 Wright, Banksy’s Bristol, 59.
artist. His aesthetic is clean and instantly readable and the content of his work strategically marries humor and socio-political commentary. As a street artist, Banksy practices an ambiguous and misunderstood outlet for creative personal expression. However, this rhetoric serves the rebelliousness permeating the form and content of his artworks. He applies his satirical art to weighty, polemical subjects such as cultural elitism, social injustice, poverty, commercialism, as well as governmental control and surveillance. Moreover, street art forges a very mindful negotiation of space and is intimately linked to the gestural rhetoric of its creator. Banksy’s artifacts manifest socially taboo content through a highly affective, agential form of expression. Operating under the cloak of anonymity in direct opposition to government policy and social norms, Banksy retreats from the scene of his artistic crime and leaves only his stimuli to mediate chance interactions with audience members. The medium is not simply the vehicle for his message; it is the message. His communications are complex utterances with several layers of meaning. In the following section, I will elucidate some of the tools in Banksy’s rhetorical arsenal that demonstrate his profound communicative abilities.
CHAPTER 2
THE TRICKSTER IN ACTION: BANKSY’S RHETORICAL PERFORMANCES

The myriad jungles of modern cities are playgrounds for street artists. Amidst the canopy of skyscrapers and the dense undergrowth of steel, concrete, or brick, these creative practitioners initiate a game of hide-and-seek between a city and its inhabitants by artistically cultivating the surroundings. Suddenly parts of the cityscape once obscured by the chaos of the daily milieu are recognized, even sought out, by those caught up in the tangle of city life. Banksy, of course, knows how to navigate the region and dominate the game. He has familiarized himself with the tools and techniques of communicating through street art, learning which media or subjects are appropriate for certain locations and which artifacts are likely to resonate with an audience. Moreover, his works model street art’s integration of place into a message. The genre’s emphasis on the site or surface’s incorporation into the communication artifact honors Marshall McLuhan’s assertion that the medium is the message.1 According to McLuhan’s equation, the character of the medium enables its effect: the message. Banksy capitalizes on street art’s ability to forge connections with the physical and cultural landscape to fashion communication artifacts that offer novel expressions of stock criticisms. In this chapter, I give a detailed rhetorical analysis of three artistic interventions by Banksy that demonstrate the range and style of his rhetorical arsenal: 1) a series of stencil graffiti and flyposting pieces he painted in Bethlehem on the West Bank separation wall between Palestine and Israel, 2) a stencil

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graffito on the side of a sexual health clinic in Bristol that the city council continues to preserve, and 3) the placement of a blow-up doll dressed as a Guantanamo Bay prisoner inside Disneyland’s Big Thunder Mountain Railroad ride and the theatrical video Banksy made of the stunt. These rhetorical performances by the artist demonstrate how the man behind Brand Banksy uses politically irreverent artwork as a means of poignantly interjecting in the social dialogue.

Banksy in the Middle East: The West Bank Separation Wall Murals

Banksy journeyed to the Palestinian territories in August 2005 to make his mark on the controversial barrier that separates the West Bank, formerly part of Jordan, from the state of Israel. Catalyzed by a series of violent uprisings in the Palestinian territories, Israel began building a security structure in 2002 to protect its population from militant attacks from the territories. The wall penetrates the landscape along parts of the former border between Israel and Jordan, enveloping Israeli settlements in the West Bank while weaving in and out of Palestinian lands without regard for the 1967 Green Line that marks the internationally accepted border between the two territories. The barrier, which is predicted to span over 450 miles upon completion (tentatively scheduled for 2010), mostly combines chain-link or barbed wire fences, mounds of earth, trenches, and several checkpoints with metal gates staffed by Israeli soldiers. In some areas the separation barrier is made up of concrete slabs over twenty feet high – an ideal medium for someone like Banksy, who has
parlayed the activity of altering industrial surfaces into a career. While Israel claims that the barrier is necessary for protection against terrorist attacks, in 2004 the International Court of Justice declared that the wall violates international law and called for it to be dismantled. However, only slight modifications to the planned barrier route have been made, and construction continues. Additionally, the United Nations has condemned the wall as an illegal annexation of portions of the West Bank and as an assault on the basic human rights of Palestinians. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs countered this condemnation with data that reflect a substantial decrease in terrorist activity aimed at Israelis since the inception of the West Bank wall project. Although the barrier may protect Israeli citizens, it does so at the expense of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees in the disrupted area. One journalist observes, “For the Israelis, the wall represents increased security from terrorist attacks, as well as a way to consolidate the legitimacy of settlements. For the Palestinians, the wall symbolizes apartheid and economic oppression, separating thousands of West Bank residents from their workplaces, their schools, and their

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The long-standing tension between the two populations is almost palpable. Regardless of one’s attitude toward the wall, its physical presence commands attention. Accordingly, in 2005 Banksy imposed his own presence on the polemical wall.

Banksy’s artistic pilgrimage to the separation wall disrupted a literal and figurative social boundary. The artist painted nine large, playful scenes on unadorned areas of the cement barrier. While Banksy was not the first to alter the wall, the metaphoric strength of his visual representations, his documentation of the project, and his international fame gave the controversial wall renewed attention in the media following his visit. The rhetorical effectiveness of his West Bank murals can largely be attributed to the way that the antic representations sharply contrast with the forbidding wall, a context that reframes the images as ironic. Banksy utilizes graffiti’s affective quality and sense of immediacy to communicate on the once mute surface.

His frivolous imagery does not pleasantly veil the divisive structure, nor symbolize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nor represent the inhabitants’ lived experience in the presence of the wall. Rather, these incongruous images deliberately contrast with the immediate surroundings and renew the visibility of the object, prompting a comparative reading of its significance to the social and political collective.

Before detailing the images that appeared on the wall, we must first consider the rhetorical readings of the barrier and the concrete portions of the wall. The obtrusive structure physically expresses the region’s volatile political reality. It

impedes Palestinian access to agriculture, water, employment, education, and proper healthcare. As it fragments the land, the economy deteriorates while the communal threads of families, social groups, and religious orders unravel. The steely concrete, the razor wire, and the cold steel chains loudly interrupt the landscape. In addition to the physical obstacles, a complex system of permits greatly restricts the movement of goods and people between the regions. The barrier not only apportions the land but also controls and contains human lives.

The land between the West Bank and Israel proper is known as the seam zone. As the economy and communities within these territories continue to atrophy, the seam zone settlements have been reduced to gated ghettos. One man living within the ravaged terrain expressed a lost sense of belonging. He reflects, "I don't consider myself in a seam zone; I don't consider myself in Israel. I consider myself hanging in the air, floating. They neither want to give us a divorce nor do they want to get married to us. We are just ... hanging." Much like this man, the disjointed flypostings of a horse that Banksy pasted on a portion of the wall in Bethlehem seem to float on the barrier (fig. 2.1). The unusual piece consisting of two apparently wheat-pasted squares in a trompe l’œil style is made to look like openings in the wall—one framing a horse’s head, the other its hooves. The spacing of the illustrated openings does not correspond with the physical proportions of a horse’s body. These disconnected frames, out of place but contained by the wall, allude to the alienating reality of many residents in the seam zone.

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This playful mural also exemplifies the dialectics of landscape and vision that structure the viewing process and, by extension, our experiences. In an article describing the language of vision with respect to landscape, W. J. T. Mitchell explains how walls and gates dramatize the paradox of visual experience. He notes:

The wall and gate (or the window, or course) are what give the fort-da game of now you see it, now you don’t, or peekaboo, a physical field of play. They are the architectural manifestations of the scopic drive as a push-and-pull between what geographer Jay Appleton calls refuge and prospect, the impulse to see and show, on the one hand, and to conceal and hide on the other.\(^8\)

These objects reflect the interplay between revealing and concealing in the built environment. Placed on an object that conjures this playful vacillation between showing and hiding, Banksy’s mural of the horse evokes the game of peekaboo. This dialectic of concealment and exposure also functions in another of Banksy’s collage

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murala in Bethlehem, where thick, black graffiti lines make it appear as if the cement surface is peeling back to reveal a woodland stream (fig. 2.2). The clear water canopied by lush vegetation would be a coveted site in this geographic area. The greenery almost mocks the farmers who have lost much of their farmable land as a result of the barrier’s disruption of the land. Additionally, this painting refers to an important symbolic element repeated in Banksy’s West Bank murals: water.


Given that Banksy generally avoids detailing a piece’s specific implications or limiting its meaning to select interpretations, I do not claim that the artist intended to emphasize the explosive conflict over water in the West Bank territory in his murals. However, references to water appear repeatedly in the murals, and one need not know the bureaucratic details of water distribution in the region to understand how precious water is in this dry, hot landscape.

In Bethlehem, Banksy painted two boys prepared for the beach, pail and shovel in hand, standing in front of a trompe l’oeil scene depicting a hole in the wall that discloses an idyllic tropical beach (fig. 2.3). Another trompe l’oeil suggesting beach
imagery also appeared at the Ramallah checkpoint (fig. 2.4). In this piece, a boy created from the same stencil used for the young boys featured in fig. 2.3 has paused to stand with his bucket and shovel atop a large rock with a pleasant blue sky behind him. The whimsical references to water underscore the impermeability of the wall and the restricted access to the Dead Sea, which is the closest recreation beach to these two sites. These children with beach toys, wearing expressions of excitement or innocent curiosity seem divorced from the harsh surroundings beyond the wall.

FIGURE 2.3 Two boys enjoy beach toys and life shirtless by an imaginary entrance to a tropical shoreline. SOURCE: Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, 112.
Banksy employed the technique of inversion in another one of his trompe l’oeil visuals in Bethlehem with allusions to water. This satirical mural showed a comfortable sitting area in front of a window revealing a lake flanked by a picturesque snow-capped mountain landscape (fig. 2.5). Obviously, lakes situated along valley edges of snow-capped mountains do not exist in the hot, arid landscape of the Middle East. This irony is underscored by the comic contrast between the realistically picturesque landscape and the abstracted, artificial sitting area. The boldly outlined furniture compared to the detailed linear perspective of the mountain scene implicitly asserts that this background view is real. However, the objects in each plane of the mural are nothing more than two-dimensional representations, impossible given the context. The ironic images underscore the way in which the wall has restricted Palestinian lives. The satirical visuals interact with the site to convey a unique and
forceful communication about the disputes over land, natural resources, and human rights that have developed in response to the erection of the barrier.

FIGURE 2.5. The young man standing in front to examine Banksy’s addition to the wall surface gives a sense of scale of this impressively large piece. SOURCE: Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, 116.

Escape was another theme repeated within Banksy’s West Bank works. In Bethlehem was a silhouette of a girl being lifted above the wall by balloons (fig. 2.6). A rendering of a boy with a paintbrush, smiling proudly and kneeling beneath his painted rope ladder adorned the barrier’s surface in Abu Dis (fig. 2.7). In Ramallah the artist spray-painted a pair of scissors cutting along the dashed outline of a large rectangular portion of the wall (fig. 2.8). The visual texts reflect a desire to go beyond the impassable surface. Still, the simplicity of these suggested escape routes is tauntingly optimistic. The deliberate impossibility of the playful subject matter on this imperious surface makes use of the wall as a metaphorical representation of the volatile political environment.
FIGURE 2.6. The girl pictured here must walk by or around the wall rather than be lifted over it by balloons like the girl in Banksy’s stencil graffito shown behind her does. SOURCE: Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, 113.

Each of these far-fetched illustrations is satirically incompatible with the separation barrier. The cushioned armchairs, the tranquil scenes of nature, the whimsical horse—these are hardly images one would associate with a partition that some refer to as “the apartheid wall.” The bold outlines of imagined openings in the structure depict the edge between the weathered, opaque wall surface and the colorful scenes made “transparent.” It is tempting to read these outlines as boundaries for things that actually exist. However, Banksy avoids a romantic modeling of the terrain by depicting landscapes that are geographically impossible in the Middle East.

Banksy’s images maintain resonance in part because they are clearly framed from an outsider’s perspective. Banksy incorporates picturesque views of landscapes beyond the Middle East, and the children he depicts have features that are obliquely Western. He does not attempt to be the voice of those experiencing the barrier every day. His visual representations on the West Bank barrier are not overtly didactic. He does not use text or political iconography to instruct viewers’ interpretations of the images. Rather, the unlikely pairing of the simple, light-hearted visual subject matter with a structure that is a symbol of separation and division offers sufficient implications for viewers to understand the artist’s message without alienating them.
terms of aesthetics, the realism of trompe l’oeil combined with the reductive iconography of stencil graffiti unites disparate styles and makes for a compelling visual. The subversive, satirical images direct one’s focus to the structure’s function as an obstacle. The images of an imaginary glimpse of the other side or the motifs of escape emphasize separation, repression, restriction, and exclusion. Banksy offered a statement through his publicist Jo Brooks about his decision to “decorate” the wall: “The segregation wall is a disgrace. On the Israeli side it’s all manicured lawns and SUVs, on the other side it’s just dust and men looking for work. The possibility I find exciting is you could turn the world’s most invasive and degrading structure into the world’s longest gallery of free speech and bad art. And I like to think I can help with that bit.”9 Making his opinion about the wall clear, Banksy minimizes the significance of his “bad art” and the danger of tampering with the separation barrier.

Reaching the wall can be a perilous task. One must navigate trenches and sharp wires in order to reach it in certain areas, under the watchful eyes of Israeli soldiers armed with automatic rifles, rubber bullets, and tear gas all the while.10 Soldiers at some points along the wall permit some graffiti or artwork on the Palestinian side of the wall, conceding that it is less troublesome to allow it than to repress it. Be that as it may, in general it is very difficult for individuals, locals in particular, to alter the

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While Banksy was able to complete his artistic contributions to the wall, doing so was not simple. He had to enlist the help of both Palestinians and Israelis to act as lookouts or to steady his ladder and still endured warning shots from Israeli security forces and several guns pointed in his direction in some instances. However, Banksy, always a rhetor quick to identify social injustice and the contradictions of modernity, evidently knew that he must express his criticisms of the barrier on site rather than from abroad.

The location’s importance is essential for the overall metaphor of these images. As vibrant, prohibited additions to plain areas of a wall that looms for miles, Banksy’s rhetorical performances induced a heightened awareness of the specific physical and cultural landscape that contained them. One journalist observed that Banksy’s work on the West Bank wall “drew the world’s attention to the barrier in ways that protest and op-ed pieces could not.” The self-referential quality of street art helps to achieve this effect. Ella Chmielewska offers insight on unauthorized daubings, explaining, “graffiti is an act of pointing to itself, an act of calling attention to self while designating specific place as well as indexing its environ and authority of the writer.”

Chmielewska’s observation about the expositional quality of graffiti also applies to street art; thereby, one can appreciate the performative strength of Banksy’s collages

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of stencil graffiti and wheat-paste posters on the wall itself. These deceptively light-hearted artifacts on the West Bank wall show how the medium (the wall combined with Banksy’s alterations to it) is absolutely part of Banksy’s message, which did not go unnoticed.

The images did not remain in their original form for long and have since been covered or altered by other visitors to the wall. However, the murals’ evolution into palimpsests demonstrates the effectiveness of the alternative interfaces that Banksy inscribed on the wall. His rhetorical act inspired others to interact with the wall and with his texts. Additionally, Banksy’s murals revived international media interest in the conflict over the West Bank separation barrier. Others have flocked to the site to make images that copy the biting humor and the mixture of cartoon imagery and realism of Banksy’s pieces.  

Also, one can now pay to have a personal graffiti message written on the wall as Palestinian graffiti artists at www.sendamessage.nl turn spray-paint into profit in their struggling economy. That being said, one can see how Banksy’s artistic communications on the barrier effectively renewed the visibility of the object and prompted readings and re-readings of its cultural significance.

The Frogmore Street Mural

While Bristol, Banksy’s alleged hometown, boasts a rich street art culture, authorities have long had an antagonistic attitude toward any such illegal markings.

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found in the public domain. Banksy, however, prompted them to change the rules. In June 2006, when the unexplained scaffolding on the side of the Brook Young People’s Sexual Health Clinic on Frogmore Street was disassembled, the once blank exterior had a new addition: Banksy’s latest work. The surface now displayed a graffiti painting of a naked man clutching a window ledge while an angry man looks intently out the window searching for someone or something and a woman in her undergarments waits nervously in the background (figs. 2.9 and 2.10). In a drastic departure from the city policy on graffiti, Bristol City Council sought public input on the fate of the mural. The Council launched an online forum where residents could express their reactions to the Banksy piece, and an overwhelming 93% of the nearly 500 survey participants voted in favor of preserving the mural.\(^\text{16}\) It seems almost paradoxical that a criminal activity was accepted and lauded by authorities. This public endorsement of Banksy’s trangressive speech act helps to elevate him from the level of unremarkable nuisance to catalyst for meaningful social dialogue.

FIGURE 2.9. Cropped image of the Frogmore Street mural. SOURCE: Wright, Banksy’s Bristol, 92.

FIGURE 2.10. From this photo, taken from atop the bridge where Park Street crosses over Frogmore Street, one can appreciate the difficulty of placing the mural on location above the street. SOURCE: “Banksy Window Lovers, Park Street, Bristol,” Art of the State, http://www.artofthestate.co.uk/Banksy/banksy_park_street_window_lovers.htm.
The mural contains two levels of narrative: one is the placement of the image, and the other is the image itself. With street art it is essential to understand how the artwork and its physical location maintain a reciprocal relationship in which they extend and enhance each other. Banksy’s risqué depiction of this encounter amongst lovers is a thematically relevant illustration for the side of a sexual health clinic. Additionally, the piece is in clear view of the nearby Council House, making it a bold display of contempt for authority. The fact that Banksy could mount such an artistically advanced graffiti mural on a busy street under the nose of the Bristol City Council without being detected is testament to his skills as a guerilla artist. The artist created a piece that resonated with the public, prompting their fight to preserve it.

The mural displays Banksy’s advanced technical capacity for stencil graffiti work. The figures are skillfully executed, with good anatomical proportion and the illusion of three-dimensionality. He demonstrates dexterous control of the spray-paint can through his illustration of line, color, and shape to create an accurate display. There is limited use of color, but the opposition of light and dark gives the impression of three-dimensionality. Additionally, Banksy utilized contrasting shades and imagined vectors following the body language and gaze of the figures to move our eyes through the scene. The image’s professional, well-balanced composition invites us to recognize it as art. The large man in the window frame establishes weight on the left side of the mural while the psychic line following the dangling lover’s nervous look upward toward him distributes weight to the opposite side. The man suspended in the air adds tension that complements the instability of the decisive moment Banksy
depicts. The dynamism of the representation combined with its unexpected presence in the urban landscape can incite viewer engagement.

The Frogmore mural encapsulates a decisive moment from a story that passersby are likely to elucidate. The unstable position of the man clinging to the window ledge as well as the rigid body language of the man scouring the landscape stimulate what design experts and art historians call kinetic empathy. These two figures exhibit cues with a potential for movement, which, as Alan Pipes explains, prompt viewers to engage a process “where we re-create in our minds an inevitable course of action.”17 We refer to our own lived experiences to read the image and to anticipate the course of movement. The scene Banksy creates is left for the public to interpret and complete according to social and experiential knowledge.

The mural is a simple, accessible image that makes use of formula story. John Cawelti details how the formula story employs cultural patterns of convention in the treatment of a specific person or thing, making it an engaging rhetorical device.18 Such formulas incorporate cultural themes and stereotypes that become embodied in more universal story archetypes. The artist incorporates the fabled love triangle into this particular visual. We are likely to conclude that this woman is sexually or romantically involved with two men at the same time, one of whom was unaware of the woman’s ties with the other man and is very displeased upon learning about the concealed

relation. This entertaining scene is highly relevant to its location outside a sexual health clinic.

Indeed, the artifact has the potential to be an excellent marketing piece for the Brook Young People’s Sexual Health Clinic. The visual is a ridiculous dramatization of a sexual taboo. This comical parody of the sexual exploits of one group of people can reduce the stigma associated with sexual health clinics. Annie Evans, medical director of the clinic on which Banksy painted, was excited about the mural and emailed Banksy to express her thanks: “Brook is one of the biggest providers of sexual health advice for young people in the UK … and your stunning artwork is exactly what we needed to promote our service.”

Evans recognized the playful scene’s potential to increase awareness of the organization within the cityscape while providing comic relief. As a satire of an embarrassing and problematic sexual situation, the painting can counter the anxiety and ambivalence typically associated with discussions about one’s sexual affairs.

While the audience is invited to provide a personal interpretation of the humorous scene, the choices Banksy makes within the image composition reflect the gender politics of British culture and structure the narrative we infer from it. The woman in dishabille is physically dominated and sexually subordinated. She lingers in the background, her fate dependent on the men in the foreground of the mural who do not seem concerned about her at the moment. It is noteworthy that aside from the neutral skin tones of each figure, the only color used is the vibrant red of the curtains.

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and the woman’s lips. Our eyes are naturally drawn to patches of bright color surrounded by less saturated hues or monochromatic values. The cultural and psychological meanings of colors induce us to associate this shade of red with passion, aggression, or stimulation. The warm red used for the woman’s lips links her to the bright red curtains that frame the background of darkness where she stands. Although she is separated from the men in the foreground and disregarded by both figures, she still invites viewers’ attentions. Framed by the red curtains and painted with crimson lips, the woman in her undergarments is the source we might link to red’s symbolism for sex, sin, and excitement.

Gender stereotypes are also apparent in the positioning of the figures along with their facial expressions. The notion of the male ego comes into play in a reading of both male figures. The man, dressed in business attire, scans the horizon from the window, and assumes an authoritative stance by squaring his shoulders and widening his body frame. One hand clenches the windowsill and the other shields his eyes from the sun (and from viewers) as he focuses intently, presumably to identify the perpetrator. Although we cannot see his eyes, the down-turned corners of his mouth offer us a clue about his facial expression. One can sense his determination to take control of the scene and to respond to this personal affront, though, lamentably (or comically—you decide), he is looking in the wrong direction for the nearby offender. He asserts ownership and control over the woman, blocking her from the frame without regard for her visual entreaty to him or for her attempt to interact with him by resting her hand on his shoulder. The naked man clutching the window is also
separated from the woman, and seems more concerned with his own well being as he clutches the ledge and shields his genitals. Notably, this man is not as artistically developed as the other figures. While it is possible that Banksy was hurrying to finish the piece for fear of being caught, the weak aesthetic quality of the figure matches the discernible weakness in his character. Rather than remain on site to deal with the consequences of this entanglement, or to defend or support the woman, the painted figure apparently chose to flee. He does not use the strength of both arms to grasp the windowsill as he hangs naked in the air. Instead, the unclothed, vulnerable, and likely embarrassed man makes an effort to conceal his genitals from any possible observers. Whether consciously or subconsciously, Banksy’s framing of the visual narrative affirms and contributes to the gender hierarchy. However, such cultural themes and stereotypes are part of what makes formula stories appealing and successful. The Frogmore piece provides the public with immediate gratification as they can easily recognize the basic plot structure and implied story. So engaging was the piece that after it appeared the citizens of Bristol petitioned to the Council to preserve the illegal artwork. A lively social discourse ensued about the distinction between graffiti and street art, the merits of such work, and the control of space.

While the imagery in the Frogmore Street mural is not expressly political, the change in public policy it inspired exemplifies the political strength of Banksy’s art and, concurrently, of street art itself. The illegal piece subverts the system of order and ownership embedded in the cityscape. It is more than a mere personal expression of Banksy’s creativity. The mural successfully called people’s attention to their
surroundings and revived the urban landscape. Banksy conveys a social message by creating a piece that helps redefine public space. As Halsey and Young explain, “graffiti—both in the presence of its images and the absence of its authors—forces (for whatever duration) a reflexive relationship to self/selves.” Unauthorized surface images actively question the ownership of public space by provoking viewers’ awareness of their relationships to their surroundings at specific moments. However, the public does not always respond positively to such disruptions. Banksy’s work demonstrates control of the medium of graffiti in a way that is socially recognized and valued. Graffiti, as we learned in the previous chapter, is often perceived as hostile and chaotic—nothing more than a vestige of someone’s ego. However, the Frogmore Street mural is far from the amateur riot of colors and abstract letters naming a group or an individual that we regularly associate with graffiti. This is a refined, limited imposition on the space. Banksy’s professional approach to using spray-paint demonstrates a sense of awareness and restraint that the public can tolerate, and, in some cases, enjoy.

With this piece, the artist set a new precedent, elevating a subculture phenomenon into a form of expression legitimized and praised by the dominant culture. The public spoke out in support of an artifact traditionally treated as a piece of vandalism. The public policy resulting from the Council’s final decision to preserve the mural further obfuscates the parameters of what is considered art. This veneration of Banksy’s work recognizes its artistic merits and transcends the cultural conventions

20 Mark Halsey and Alison Young, “‘Our Desires are Ungovernable’: Writing Graffiti in Urban Space,” Theoretical Criminology 10, no. 3 (2006): 298.
of acceptance and rejection. Here, the transgressive act of marking an area with graffiti produced a public affirmation of the subculture activity and acknowledged the relationship between graffiti artist and community.

Banksy’s Disneyland Artifacts

For his large-scale foray into the American consciousness, Banksy targeted the magical world of Disney. In September 2006 during the week prior to his first major United States exhibition *Barely Legal* in Los Angeles, California, the artist traveled to nearby Anaheim to place an inflatable doll dressed as a hooded prisoner in an orange jumpsuit within the landscape surrounding Disneyland’s Big Thunder Mountain Railroad ride (figs. 2.11 and 2.12). The handcuffed and shackled figure reportedly remained in its location for approximately ninety minutes before the amusement park security team removed it and closed the ride.\(^{21}\) The artist complemented the stunt by documenting his infiltration with a video, which he included in his Los Angeles exhibition the following week and briefly posted on his website. A spokesperson for Banksy confirmed, “the stunt was intended to highlight the plight of terror suspects at the controversial detention centre [Guantánamo Bay Naval Base] in Cuba.”\(^{22}\) These two rhetorical acts, in Disneyland and on the Internet, prompt public scrutiny of commercial spaces and oppressive social and political systems. Through the live performance and the video that followed, Banksy emphasized the paradoxical nature


\(^{22}\) Ibid.
of our society, where thousands can remove themselves from the normal day-to-day in exchange for the whimsical environment of an amusement park while others are confined to an oppressive reality that can easily suffocate the human spirit.


The manacled figure was quite incompatible with the theme park’s environment of fun and fantasy and was likely a jarring spectacle for visitors immersed in this arcade of recreation. The stunt was a direct threat to the regulated world of fun that Disney seeks to create in this “cathedral of consumption.” This term comes from George Ritzer’s investigation of contemporary backdrops for
consumption. As Ritzer explains, cathedrals of consumption are created “to have an enchanted, sometimes even sacred, religious character . . . [and] need to offer, or at least appear to offer, increasingly magical, fantastic, and enchanted settings in which to consume.”

Such a context aims to lure us into an affected state of consciousness through which consumption relieves the stress of reality. Disney revolutionized one form of these cathedrals of consumption with its theme parks. With the creation of Disneyland in Anaheim, California in 1955, the Disney company marketed the commercialization of fun and a controlled environment with controlled entertainment. Walt Disney distinguished Disneyland and his subsequent theme parks from what he saw as the tired model of amusement parks by offering a regulated, sanitized environment where visitors could escape the traditional order of society and release their energies. Ritzer notes that while “visitors arriving at earlier amusement parks felt a sense of looseness, even danger, tourists arriving at Disney World [and Disneyland] know and take comfort in the fact that inside the gates lies a tightly regulated world . . . Disney World created a new morality emphasizing conformity to external demands.”

An uninvited guest in the likeness of prisoners of the U.S.’s internationally controversial detention center symbolized a clear threat to this regulated world. To fully understand the discourse that the static installation and the video performance offer, one must understand what the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base symbolizes to many citizens around the world.

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24 Ibid., 7.
The U.S. acquired control over the Guantánamo Bay area once the 1903 Cuban-American Treaty was signed, which gave the U.S. a lease on the territory and permission to create a coaling station as well as naval bases. The treaty, codified in 1934 by the Permanent Treaty, stipulated that Cuba was to hold ultimate sovereignty over the area, although the U.S. was granted “complete jurisdiction and control” of the protectorate for the purposes of operating the fueling station and the naval bases. This ambiguous division of power has obscured the implications of the term sovereignty and was later confounded by the Castro regime’s refusal to acknowledge the treaty. Since the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the Cuban government has maintained that the U.S. coerced Cuba into complying with the treaty and now practices illegal jurisprudence within the bay. Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. and our subsequent invasion of Iraq, the base became the U.S.’s chief prison for captives suspected to be involved in terrorist activities. Over 600 detainees have been held on the premises without charges, counsel, or access to the American legal system. Alfred de Zayas notes that those who contest the U.S.’s exercise of power over the region and the detainees cite the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which requires a state to grant individuals in the physical bounds of a territory under its control (which arguably applies to the U.S. protectorate at the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base) the rights specified in the Covenant, “in particular the rights to habeas corpus, to access to a lawyer, to due process of law, to recognition as a person

26 Ibid., 394.
before the law, to humane treatment during detention, and above all, the right not to be subjected to torture.”

In response to numerous accounts of serious acts of torture and disregard for the Covenant, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and several non-governmental organizations have criticized the U.S. for acting in violation of international law, and they have condemned the nation’s neglect of human rights at the Guantánamo site. The spectacle Banksy installed in Disneyland made clear his gross opposition to the U.S.’s activities at Guantánamo Bay.

The effigy of a prisoner situated within Disney’s theme park constituted a darkly ironic agitprop. Placing a figure of a prisoner from a site associated with the controversial War on Terror as well as the unlawful treatment of human beings amidst Disney’s fantasyland backdrop is a powerful paradox. Disneyland offers a structured escape from reality, but, into this cathedral of consumption, Banksy inserted a harsh reminder of the actual social situation beyond the theme park gates. Thus, the artist inverts the discursive space of the magical amusement park, subverting the expected as a way of potentially revitalizing viewers’ perceptions and awareness of their surroundings.

For his encore performance, Banksy edited footage of the intrusion to include in the *Barely Legal* exhibit and on his website. The dramatic structure of the two-minute video can logically be divided into four acts. Act I opens with a shot of the text

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28 Ibid., 280-283.

29 The video is no longer accessible through Banksy’s website but has been copied to *YouTube*. See “Banksy at Disneyland 2006,” *YouTube*, posted Nov. 27, 2006, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkZoC6dwRqE.
“Disneyland 2006” fading out as a slow motion clip of a guard leading a procession of actual Guantánamo Bay prisoners, wearing prison jumpsuits, handcuffs, and black hoods, and a guide-ropes hooked around their arms linking them together through the prison grounds plays along with ambient music. This grotesque parody of a parade—a polar opposite of Disneyland’s famous Electrical Parade of Snow White, Cinderella, and other childhood characters—is followed by a segment of an unidentifiable man (assumed to be Banksy but whose face we never actually see) dressing an inflatable doll in the likeness of the prisoners before stuffing the deflated doll into a backpack. Then, the man is shown arriving at Disneyland and successfully making it through the security checkpoint at the entrance with the backpack containing the blowup figure. This easy admittance reveals how insecure this purportedly protected fantasyland really is.

Upon Banksy’s entrance into the theme park, we transition into Act II. The cheerful, repetitive Disney song “It’s a Small World” begins playing. Its lyrics are famous:

It’s a world of laugh-ter, a world of tears; it’s a world of hopes and a world of fears. There’s so much that we share that it’s time we’re a-ware. It’s a small world af-ter all. just one moon and one gold-en sun and a smile means friend-ship to ev- ry one. Though the moun-tains di-vide and the o ceans are wide It’s a small world af-ter all. It’s a small world

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The inclusion of this cheerful, melodic tune with idealistic lyrics alongside visuals of an internationally contentious detainment center makes a mockery of foreign relations and diplomacy. The camera follows Banksy as he travels through the park, emphatically zooming in on the stylized exterior of Disneyland’s “It’s a Small World” ride where an assembly of merry audio-animatronic dolls styled like children from around the world surround visitors and sing the ride’s title song. The camera shoots a close-up of the iconic smiling clock façade rhythmically bobbing from side to side in sync with the tune. The mechanical swaying and hypnotic tune are almost irritating to the average audience member. Clearly, this harmonious land of merriment is a crude contrast to a site such as Guantánamo Bay that exists as a global metaphor for hegemonic oppression and international conflict.

Act III commences when we see the artist surveying the grounds of the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad ride. After casually inflating the Guantánamo Bay blowup figure, he nonchalantly slips through the ride’s enclosure and places the figure beside a fence within the desert-like landscape. The posts of the fence frame the shackled prisoner in much the same manner as would the bars of a cell. We then see shots of the doll from various angles as the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad rollercoaster rumbles past and visitors amble through the park, unmindful of the new addition to the ride.

A black change-frame, reminiscent of the displays from the early models of loud, shaky film-reels, projects, “Some time later…” onto the screen to mark the transition into the final act of the mediated artwork. The camera then returns to a view of Banksy’s installation alongside the ride as we hear a man speaking calmly and
pleasantly to issue an announcement through a loudspeaker and see a caption of his update: “Sorry folks, due to some security reasons we have to stop our ride.” The figure remains untouched in its location alongside the ride while several people linger for a moment to make sense of the hooded figure in shackles and an orange prison jumpsuit. Banksy is then shown coolly strolling out of the park with his backpack, unnoticed. The video finishes with the camera zooming in on the plaque affixed to the Disneyland exit gate that bears the inscription, “Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow and fantasy,” as “It’s a Small World” plays.

This mediated rhetorical act frames a representation of Disneyland and seeks to reframe visitor experiences of the Disney spectacle. The sense of mockery and humor is made explicit through the incorporation of Disney’s jolly music and the visuals that focus on frivolous elements within the park. Juxtaposing these light-hearted elements with the haunting figure of the prisoner and the confused observers at the theme park might suggest the hypocrisy of patronizing such cathedrals of consumption while the problems at Guantánamo Bay continue. The pairing of this contradictory imagery can cause discomfort in the viewer and pique his or her emotions. Banksy’s theatrical video prompts public scrutiny of social power structures and commercial spaces. The artist uses emotive appeals alongside humor and irony in both the static installation and the dramatic artifact to prompt reflection and to bolster his critique of power regimes and commodity fetishism.

Curiously, Disneyland offered no commentary on the security breach, and responses from witnesses of the event were not documented in the press or by Banksy.
Additionally, only the artist’s word and the video he produced during the week following the performance made the installation identifiable as a Banksy prank. The Wooster Collective, a well-established online organization devoted to the documentation of street art, seems to have received information from someone in Banksy’s camp about the stunt soon after its execution, as it was the sole official source to offer photographs and information about it as early as September 8, 2006. The mainstream British media did not note the event until three days later on September eleventh—a date that, fittingly, marked the fifth anniversary of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks that galvanized the U.S. offensive against terrorism, of which the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base is an integral part. The video of the stunt debuted at the September fourteenth opening of Banksy’s Barely Legal exhibit and was posted on his website that same day. Only then did the U.S. media discuss the Disneyland stunt.

Banksy acted as his own public relations agent for this prank and for his upcoming exhibition. His limited release of information related to the prank seems precise and strategic. By documenting the live stunt himself and by later pairing it with edited clips and poignant music, Banksy denied the media a degree of control over his image and his artwork. In translating his street art into a video form, he also removed the ephemeral quality of this type of art and surrendered some ownership of the mediated piece of rhetoric to viral dissemination on the Internet—but this open-source communication is all part of the Banksy trickster brand that people embrace.
The three artifacts I focused on in this section deal with topics and imagery familiar to a wide audience, allowing Banksy to combine thoughtful socio-political commentary with contemporary expressionism in an accessible form. Banksy’s modus operandi of uninvited, temporary works possesses a vibrant ephemeral quality that makes it a powerful medium for political and social commentary. His work in the West Bank exemplifies how his communications respond to the dialectics of their surroundings. The representations interact with an unsightly, polemical structure that restricts human lives. Whimsical and humorous given their context, these artifacts call attention to the site they reference. The rhetorical strength of Banksy’s use of humor and place is visible in the public recognition his Frogmore Street mural as a relevant piece of artwork. This light-hearted visual became a political tool to return the power of democracy back to the people as the public rallied in support of an illegal communication. Finally, Banksy’s Disneyland stunt and video translation of it demonstrate how the artist buttresses his street art communications with additional messages, providing additional commentary and framework to interpret and memorialize these once ephemeral performances. As these three artifacts demonstrate, Banksy is an interventionist with an acute awareness of situation and place—a master rhetorician with a captive audience, as we will see in the next chapter.
I love the way capitalism finds a place—even for its enemies.
– Banksy, in an e-mail correspondence with The New Yorker’s Lauren Collins

Capitalism certainly has found a place for Banksy: as a brand. Branding is no longer limited to products and retailers. What began as a symbolic way to distinguish services, packaged goods, or businesses has evolved into a tool for individuals to transmit and maintain an image and a persona. As Banksy has become a recognizable entity in the media market with an undeniable celebrity status he has cultivated his own brand. The pseudonymous artist advances an image of mystery that viewers in the public piece together through the shreds of information filtered to them through the media or through Banksy’s own cryptic ciphers. In the service of an irony that surpasses the kind found in his art, the characteristically anti-capitalist street artist employs an agent, a publicist and a public relations team as well as a handling service that authenticates his artworks. This network surrounding him signals a persistent trend in the art world: the rise of an artist’s public image in tandem with his or her art. While Banksy is certainly not the first artist to remake himself into a recognizable product (ever heard of Andy Warhol, Salvador Dali, or Pablo Picasso?), he is the first to do so through an illegal art form AND the first to do so while concealing his identity.

We know Banksy only through the conspicuous block-letter tag he stencils on his works or through the carefully formulated content on his website and in his books. However, these are strategic messages—rhetoric in the service of the brand he tries to
perpetuate and protect. The public is left to fill in the blanks, which, as indicated by the wealth of published and broadcast features on the artist in addition to the burgeoning online communities and blogrolls devoted to all things Banksy, they actively do. Whether they extol or villanize him, audiences in Britain and abroad actively construct the myth of Banksy and, in effect, complete his brand image.

This rogue street artist is a marketable commodity formed and exploited by the media and the masses. However, Banksy in turn cunningly exploits his fame and his image, frustrating and intriguing the audience through his performative street art and symbiotic performance of identity. Not content to leave his street art artifacts as his sole brand communications, he uses his books, content on his website, and strategic public relations maneuvers to modify the image of Brand Banksy. He encourages the misconstrual of his persona and the public fascination with his presence in the cultural discourse. Through deception, inversion, and humorous mockery he effectively prompts critical reflection and remains in the collective conscious. Banksy has parlayed his public image and growing fame into a trickster myth. In fact, I argue that Banksy’s brand identity is the trickster. The trickster, an ancient cultural character with a number of forms, appears in social narratives along social thresholds to challenge and reform the accepted order—just like Bristol’s celebrated outlaw. Banksy’s brand story parallels the basic typology for trickster tales, complete with a fundamentally ambiguous figure capable of humorously profaning sacred social institutions from a liminal position. In this chapter, I investigate how the public
interprets Banksy’s brand communications so as to illuminate how his brand identity embodies the trickster archetype.

The phenomenon of the trickster is marked by typological complexity. In reality, this archetypal figure has no fixed definition, as he forms and behaves according to the cultural needs of each generation. However, it is only fitting that a character well versed in duality, confusion, and amorality should elude any conclusive definition. The trickster figure has appeared in the folklore and mythology of a number of different cultural and religious belief systems for centuries. In Native American mythology he assumes the form of Coyote or Fox; he appears in the West as Hermes or as Saint Peter; in Greek myths as Prometheus; in African-American stories as Brer Rabbit; in Norse mythology as Loki; in African folklore as Ananse, Eshu, and Legba; and in Asian culture as Horangi or as Susa-nō-o. While the particularities of a trickster are narrowed by the belief system he serves, there is a discernible pattern in his generic features. Lewis Hyde concludes, “Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox.”

The character is a master of duality who confuses our attempts to clarify distinctions. Such complexity certainly applies to Banksy, whose street art performances and

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1 I use he to refer to the trickster because the overwhelming majority of these characters are male. Lewis Hyde observes that the role of the trickster is generally “assigned to the sex that does not give birth.” Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 8. The majority of the writings I surveyed on the topic confirm this observation and, like Hyde, most writers use the masculine voice to discuss the archetype.

2 Hyde, Trickster, 7.
ambiguous persona coalesce to form a brand that fulfills the trickster’s mission to prompt confusion and engagement in the name of critical reflection.

My designation of Banksy as a brand deserves some explanation, for the word *brand* has greatly evolved from its original meaning. Moreover, human brands are a special breed. Gone are the days when *brand* stood for symbolic logos, concise slogans, or catchy jingles that designated a product or a service. Douglas Holt observes that the modern branding paradigm has transformed brands into strategic expressions of social and psychological ideals as well as intangible values.\(^3\) Branding now requires the production of a symbolic entity with projected near-human attributes that consumers can have an emotional experience or connection with. Holt’s commentary on the cultural, ideological, and emotional properties of brands correlates with Judith Yaross Lee’s insight that today’s global information economy operates with a currency of ideas, attitudes, and audiences rather than goods.\(^4\) With regard to today’s societies, undergirded by capitalist marketing prerogatives, Lee synthesizes, “When durable goods take a back seat to the less tangible post-industrial commodities of media (information) and services (know-how), brands become crucial to denote, differentiate, and symbolize commodities. Rhetoric itself becomes the product of the information economy as brands supply literal and metaphorical meaning for economic

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transactions.” The term brand is no longer synonymous with a product or a business. In the global information economy, where the ebb and flow of the market is dictated by more abstract, intangible commodities of culture and intellect, brands become value articulations; as Lee concludes, the whole concept of brand becomes rhetoric. I put forward in Ch. 1 that Banksy is essentially a rhetor seeking an audience. However, the artist’s rhetorical performances are only one part of his brand narrative. Banksy’s brand is cultivated and maintained through the public discourse, where the press are the chief mediators of informational transactions between Banksy and his audience.

Banksy exists in the public mind in much the same way as a traditional product or service brand. Banksy’s brand is Banksy. It is a combination of associations and expectations based on the man’s image and persona. However, consistent with the doctrine of the trickster, Banksy never makes it an easy task to uncover the structure and motives of his speech acts and carefully conceals any details about himself. In all of his various performances—on the street, on the Internet, in his books, or through messages relayed to media correspondents—the rhetor waggishly obscures his identity and riddles his persona with complexities. Therefore, it becomes increasingly difficult for the public to navigate the origins and the intentions of Banksy’s unconventional expressions. Furthermore, as I discussed in the first chapter, the use of an ephemeral, subversive rhetorical medium such as street art adds to the confusion of the rhetorical situation. Street art artifacts are uninvited reclamations of “public” territory that defy the standards of acceptable personal expression. Viewers often struggle to translate

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5 Ibid., 166.
these aggressive expressions that toy with traditional communicative elements. With Banksy, the important factor is that viewers across continents and cultures *choose* to struggle. They choose to give life to Banksy’s brand. In order to interact with rather than alienate an audience and to function as a true trickster, Banksy had to acquire a hint of credibility and legitimacy, which the media conferred upon him by introducing him as an artist.

Banksy’s status as an artist remains central to his brand. The acquisition of this status personality arguably began in 2000. Although his freehand and stencil graffiti began swathing his hometown of Bristol as early as 1992-1994 and he quickly acquired a following in the underground street art scene, Banksy did not become a notable fixture in the public discourse until 2000.⁶ Taking a break from the streets and the city walls, he transferred his work to canvas and ran a conventional exhibition in Severnshed restaurant in Bristol from February through April of 2000. Apparently, this concession to traditional artistic practices increased Banksy’s credibility in the eyes of the public and legitimized him as an artist worthy of its attentions. Journalists in the mainstream media introduced Banksy not as a spray-can-wielding vandal, but as a street or graffiti artist. Also important to note about his emergence on the public stage is the limited discussion of his obscure identity. While anonymity is now a primary component of Banksy’s brand, it did not dominate the rhetorical situation initially.

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Days before the opening of the Severnshed show, Banksy did something he pledges he will never do again: a face-to-face interview. Free-lance journalist Fergus Colville met Banksy for an audio-recorded interview (which later aired on BBC Radio Bristol) to discuss the difficulty of transferring the artist’s illegal street art into gallery pieces. Colville referred to Banksy as “the original street outlaw” and alluded to the fact that lay people and the authorities had begun to recognize Banksy’s creations in cities across Britain but did not mention any speculation about the street artist’s true identity. Although in recent years Banksy has relied on voice modification technology to distort his natural way of speaking for any audio recordings, I found no indication that the Colville interview had been altered. Curiously, this early interview with the artist has not surfaced in any of the public campaigns to uncover Banksy’s actual identity. In fact, BBC News did not even mention the interview until nearly seven years later when reporter Fiona Pryor included it in an article about Banksy’s cult of anonymity (and incorrectly listed the interview date as 2002). While Colville did give some details about the artist—“He was very ordinary, about 5’9’ and quite skinny. I’ve seen a photo of him since and he’s filled out”—this lead on Banksy’s identity has evidently not been pursued, nor has it resurfaced in any other news publications, despite the current feverish speculation about this faceless, enigmatic trickster.

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Bristol Evening Post was the first mainstream news source to devote a written article to Banksy. The short item appeared in the newspaper on March 23, 2000 and contained information about the success of the Severnshed show, where Banksy’s works sold out on opening night. The words anonymity and identity did not even appear in the article, although Banksy was described as “very security conscious” and constantly wary of the police.9 Another article about the artist in the popular press did not appear until May of the same year, this time in London newspaper The Independent as an introductory profile of Banksy and an alert about his upcoming retrospective in the city. By comparison, the tone of this second article is noticeably more dramatic, and journalist McClymont focuses intently on creating an intriguing story with evocative language in the first few sentences:

It all started in Bristol six years ago. Strange and slightly sinister images began appearing on city-centre walls. They’ve now spread, via New York and various British cities, to London. Take a walk around Soho and you can't miss them. It's all the work of one 26-year-old graffiti artist known only by his tag, ‘Banksy’.10

McClymont describes the “strange and slightly sinister images” that have spread across city walls and cannot be missed, using language that gives the visuals a mysterious and aggressive quality. She then identifies one man as the sole source for, as she foreshadows with importance, what “all started in Bristol six years ago.” Who is this powerful figure? Omar Majeed describes the appeal of this popular creation:

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10 Fiona McClymont, “Cheeky Monkey; Coming Soon to a Wall Near Your: Cult Graffiti Artist ‘Banksy,’” The Independent (London), May 27, 2000, p. 16.
“[Banksy] could be anyone, or everyone, and that’s part of the allure.”

The public is drawn to his accessibility and universality. Alas, he is an invisible figure, or, as McClymont teases, “a graffiti artist known only by his tag.” Nonetheless, as these early articles indicate, the trickster, now seen as an artist of some sort and thus a more credible rhetor, gained an audience willing to listen to him.

Societies have long conceived of the artist as someone to be both admired and feared. Art historians Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz dissect the historic deification of the artist and the myths associated with artistic persons in their book *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, tracing the pattern back through ancient Eastern and Asian literature. The authors assert that the desire to name an artifact’s creator signifies the artifact’s elevated social valuation. For Kris and Kurz, this urge to identify the artist indicates that the artwork “no longer serves a single purpose, [that] its valuation has at least to some extent become independent of such connections.” Furthermore, the recognition of art “as an independent area of creative achievement … declares itself in the articulation of the growing wish to attach the name of a master to his work.” The feverish concern to identify Banksy’s works and to identify Banksy himself suggests an overwhelming validation of his creations as works of art rather than superficial pranks or products of mere vandalism. Although he is now widely considered a famous artist, his main art form is still illegal. Yet even governmental

13 Ibid., 4.
bodies cannot deny Banksy’s unique cultural significance. Simon Cook, Bristol City Council deputy leader and cabinet member for culture, concedes, “Twenty years ago, we might have looked on him as a vandal . . . but the more we looked the more we thought that what he was doing was not just mindless [sic] but a very creative kind of street art.”\textsuperscript{14} Social validation, however, is not Banksy’s goal, nor is the raised pedestal of the artist his destination.

Modeling trickster’s refusal to be defined by socially derived standards or classifications, neither Banksy nor his medium fits within traditional conceptions of the elite art world. However, exclusion is of no concern to Banksy, who shamelessly expresses his contempt for high art and refers to the art world as “the biggest joke going . . . a rest home for the overprivileged, the pretentious, and the weak.”\textsuperscript{15} His work is a creative assault on the segmentation of social communities and on the delimiting nature of cultural institutions. Additionally, he instigates the criticism while straddling the line between acceptance and rejection by the majority. This is precisely how any trickster operates: by prodding the social consciousness from the periphery. Hyde affirms, “The best way to describe the trickster is to say simply that the boundary is where he will be found—sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing it or moving it.”\textsuperscript{16} Although some within mainstream culture embrace him as a heroic artist and a romantic figure of rebellion, Banksy fights complete absorption within popular culture. His anonymity and asocial actions have

\textsuperscript{15} Banksy, interview by Shepard Fairey and Roger Gastman, \textit{Swindle} 8, 2006, 88.
\textsuperscript{16} Hyde, \textit{Trickster}, 7-8.
allowed him to continue venturing betwixt and between thresholds, thereby retaining elements of his trickster status. However, since Banksy presents his works in the public sphere, he makes them available for public interpretation and evaluation while also submitting himself as a target for public scrutiny. Despite Banksy’s criticism of popular notions of art, he ranked sixty-third on *ArtReview*’s 2008 list of the most powerful living figures in the art world.\(^\text{17}\) Clearly, the public overwhelmingly embraces him as an artist.

The public regard for Banksy as an artist promotes a specific image of the man himself. Historically, artists are characterized as special individuals distinct from the average citizen. Kris and Kurz describe this public image of the artist as the “riddle of the artist,” which refers to the mystery of the artist and the specific expectations for his or her personal characteristics and abilities.\(^\text{18}\) Art objects are noticeably complex and profound. Gell described the public treatment of art artifacts as “difficult to make, difficult to ‘think’, difficult to transact. They fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator.”\(^\text{19}\) Why should their creators be any different? Banksy’s street art and anonymity provide space for subjective interpretation and for mythical insertions. Kris and Kurz explain how we interpret the complex art objects we encounter through narrative mechanisms and cite episodes in which we employ stereotyped biographical artist anecdotes. They explain our rationalization: “by collecting stories about this or that leading artist, [the audience expects] to illuminate his life and gain insights into

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\(^\text{18}\) Kris and Kurz, *The Image of the Artist*, 1.
his character not supplied elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{20} So we learn that Banksy is from Yate—no wait, Bristol. He was age fourteen when he began making street art. He looks a bit edgy according to some, but his appearance is unremarkable for others. His name is Robin Banks … hold on … robbin’ banks—scratch that; his real name is actually Robin Gunningham. Dozens of blogs and online communities have sprung up devoted to documenting Banksy’s works and discussing their value.\textsuperscript{21} The media is constantly creating spectacles to reveal the acclaimed artist. In response to Banksy’s playful ambiguity and manipulation of the public conscience, audiences have recreated the anti-hero in their own imagination.

The Banksy the public has made into a popular cultural commodity is a seemingly unknowable figure capable of fascinating and frustrating audience members with his expressions of difference and defiance. Bristol graphic designer Azlan, an acquaintance of Banksy’s, offers an insightful assessment of the public image of the

\textsuperscript{20} Kris and Kurz, \textit{The Image of the Artist}, 11.
\textsuperscript{21} Banksy is from Yate according to the following article: “Guerrilla Artist’s Mural for Sale – with House Thrown in,” \textit{Daily Post} (Liverpool), Feb. 10, 2007, Northwest edition, p. 11.


For an article in which Banksy is identified as Robin Banks, see Sawyer, “Unmasked at Last,” sec. A, p. 7. For articles naming the artist Robin Gunningham, see Lewis Carter, “Unveiling Banksy, the Artist Formerly Known as Robin Gunningham,” \textit{The Daily Telegraph} (London), July 14, 2008, p. 7; Joseph, “The Artist Formerly Known as Banksy,” p. 2.

artist: “The whole thing about his anonymity was really created by the media for the media. They seemed to latch onto a shred of information they thought unusual and slowly re-invented Banksy as a mythical artist, not a person. Now it seems the more mythical his identity, the more notorious his artwork/stunts have become.”

Headlines such as “Banksy, the Man behind the Mask,” “How the Art World’s Mystery Man Came Unstuck at the Tate,” “Breaking the Banksy: The First Interview with the World’s Most Elusive Artist,” seem to validate Azlan’s observation. While anonymity is a prerequisite for avoiding the legal repercussions of creating illegal artworks such as his, Banksy’s anonymity has become integral to his artwork.

Writings about Banksy in the media remain highly speculative, and he has been—to borrow from the language of so many journalists—unmasked at least three times (first in 2004, then in 2007, and again in 2008). However, these reveals have been widely discredited or conveniently discarded and forgotten as the myth continues. Discussion surrounding Banksy now centers on his anonymity while his art is typically given secondary attention. The public continues to enjoy the myth of the “shadowy art terrorist”; the “rebellious Robin Hood of the spray can”; the “Scarlet Pimpernel of

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22 Wright, Banksy’s Bristol, 71.
modern art”; or the “Zorro of the Art World.”25 The fact that the byline on the back cover of Wright’s book profiling Banksy reads “a rounded picture of an artist who is *most famous for being anonymous,*” rather than simply “a famous, anonymous artist” confirms that Banksy’s anonymity is central to his celebrity status.26

Rather than a self-made hero of the people, this street artist is now a celebrity made by the media. In the 1960s Daniel Boorstin saw the rising tide of the media’s influence and emphasis on dramatization as movie stars and average individuals rode the wave of publicity and fame into the Information Age and into the minds of widespread audiences. For Boorstin, “The celebrity is a person who is well known for his well-knownness . . . . He has been fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness.”27 An interesting twist on Boorstin’s widely used definition of celebrity, Banksy is a person who is well known largely for being unknown. Still, Banksy experiences all of the advantages and disadvantages that come with celebrity status. Celebrities are personalities that the public elevates to positions of social prestige. During his separation of the hero from the celebrity, Boorstin adds, “The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media.”28

28 Ibid., 61.
Worshipped and scrutinized in popular culture, celebrities offer distractions for our own daily lives. Boorstin interprets them as human *pseudo-events*—staged, scripted, fantastical events that provide calculated accounts of reality. They are made and remade according to the demands of the audience, transformed into an “image or a trademark” within the media marketplace. They become, as Boorstin says, “a ‘nationally advertised’ brand.”29 The celebrity obsession that Boorstin observed when *The Image* was first published in 1962 has since exploded, and the potential for celebrity brands he alluded to has become the norm for popular public figures.

What does it mean to call a person such as Banksy a brand, though? In a thorough exploration of internationally famous soccer player David Beckham’s transformation into a branded commodity, Andy Milligan explains:

> People aren’t brands, but – and it is a fine distinction – brands can be people. By that I mean that it is possible to manage the public side of your personality and, particularly in the case of celebrities, the commercialisation of your personal appeal in the same manner and with the same discipline as a successful brand.30

A celebrity can reduce the multiple aspects of his or her identity and personal persona into one basic image. This is what the public has done by imagining Banksy as a brand: he has been distilled into a cultural commodity of defiance and humorous irreverence.

As a celebrity and an artist situated in the modern parade of pretence, Banksy has been forced to harmonize with the rhythms of the information economy. Since he

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29 Ibid., 49.
is first and foremost an artist, Banksy has much in common with brand managers. All artists utilize communicative objects to engage audience members in a process of meaning making. Artworks merge aesthetic principles with social interaction as viewers are inspired to look beyond the materiality of the objects to interpret them as semiotic indexes. In the gallery or on the street—where Banksy usually operates—artists do not have control of their communicative artifacts. Ultimately, the audience negotiates a reading of the image. Therefore, artists must strategically manifest their expressions if the artifacts are to mediate interactions with recipients according to the artist’s desire. In reality, this communicative paradigm is the driving force behind branding. Brands present the public with communications that promote specific symbols and experiences aligned with a brand identity.

The modern marketing paradigm and the information economy mentioned earlier help to explain why it is no longer enough for Banksy to simply produce artworks. Robert Deutsch, a cultural anthropologist and consultant for a New York branding agency remarks, “In a world of too fast, too complex, too competitive and too unstable, people are looking for anchor points.”31 Citizens today constitute an audience with many choices. To reduce the effort during the proverbial purchasing process, we seek identifiable symbols that communicate value and experience, which is precisely what brands offer. Therefore, in order to retain his valuable position in the

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31 As quoted in Becky Ebenkamp, “We’re All Brands around Here,” *Brandweek* 40, no. 25, June 21, 1999: par. 6, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0BDW/is_25_40/ai_55090010/.
social discourse and in the minds of his audience members, Banksy has been forced to
manage his public presence and the brand identity the public has formed of him.

Examining his artworks, his position in the public consciousness, and the
evolution of his brand identity substantiates the label of Banksy as a contemporary
trickster. This man thrives on his ability to frustrate and enchant the populous. While
anonymity is a prerequisite for avoiding the legal repercussions of creating illegal
artworks such as his, Banksy’s is integral to his mission as an artist as well as his
connection to the trickster figure. Granted, his anonymity frees him from some
authorial obligations and standards of accountability, his publications and rare
commentary in the news media may emit a hint of smugness, and some of his actions
have a tinge of selfish individualism to them. Nonetheless, Banksy’s ability to alter the
cultural system and to stimulate public dialogue transcends egoistic deviance and
elevates him to the realm of the trickster. Every human being has a desire to express
and develop himself or herself; the trickster, on the other hand, has the unique ability
to subvert his selfish desires in favor of improving the collective environment.32 Put
more simply, this archetypal character’s disruption of the social order serves a purpose
beyond himself.

Banksy clarifies that his transgressions are not exclusively designed to service
his egoism. He sardonically professes, “I like to think I have the guts to stand up
anonymously in a western democracy and call for things no-one else believes in – like

32 Hyde, Trickster, 13.
peace and justice and freedom." While he masks his statement with humor, Banksy evidently recognizes that he can be a voice for those too frightened to speak for themselves or to reject social norms. The man’s guerrilla tactics openly resist social rules and interfere with the rhythm of social order. His anonymity lends these rebellious messages and his deviant persona a degree of universality. Once a communication artifact can be separated from the rhetor’s identity and biography, the utterance itself, as well as the receiver’s personal experience with it, can enjoy more significance. Additionally, as Banksy jokes, “it’s a pretty safe bet that the reality of me would be a crushing disappointment to a couple of 15-year-old kids out there.” The eradication of his identity provides a space where the public can insert their romantic conceptualizations of this rebellious anti-hero. By hiding his identity, Banksy distances himself from the majority and preserves the clandestine spirit of the trickster. Furthermore, by disidentifying himself, Banksy becomes an irregular rhetor in the public discourse. As I mentioned in Ch. 1, humans are guided by a dialectical motivation to uncover the details of interactions; we consciously fixate on the person responsible for artistic artifacts. Banksy, however, frustrates our attempts to process his communications in the manner to which we are accustomed. This contemporary trickster employs anonymity to lend his disjointed performances an involving, urgent presence in the minds of audience members.

Past written and oral trickster tales demonstrate the archetype’s enduring social function. As Hyde explains, a trickster’s thievery and deception are likely to “disturb

33 Banksy, Wall and Piece, 25.
34 Banksy, interview by Fairey and Gastman, 84.
the established categories of truth and property and, by so doing, open the road to possible new worlds.”  

This statement is reconcilable with Banksy’s antics, which directly challenge social norms and the conventional use and control of property. He mocks the governmental control of public space through his own unauthorized designation of areas reserved for graffiti. The text of the stenciled piece follows the precise, utilitarian style of official notices and even includes a crest that resembles a governmental insignia (fig. 3.1).

![Stenciled piece](image.png)

FIGURE 3.1 Banksy has repeated this piece on locations throughout Britain, confusing police officials and graffiti writers alike. SOURCE: Banksy, Wall and Piece, [49].

In his satiric reframing of well-known symbols or communication artifacts, we see how Banksy’s performance through street art serves his liminality and facilitates his engagement in the trickster activity of garnering the attention of the parent culture from the margins. These complex performances supplant cultural language to strain its conventional assigned relationships between signifiers and signifieds. Banksy co-opts the style and language of hegemonic institutions to parody social norms and cultural expectations. This trickster’s productions therefore become semiotic sites where

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35 Hyde, Trickster, 13.
meanings are made and exchanged rather than forced upon interactants.  
Such cultural revisionism corresponds with the trickster archetype’s function as a shape-shifter. Hyde clarifies that the trickster’s shape-shifting is not limited to corporal transformations; the activity also refers to how, “given the materials of this world, he [the trickster] demonstrates the degree to which the way we have shaped them may be altered.” A trickster coopts the language and materials of a culture in order to profane them. As I made evident in rhetorical criticisms of the three artifacts from the previous chapter, Banksy achieves subversion by exploiting the physicality of social centers while creatively insinuating the hypocrisy of social doctrines and demonstrating how they can be challenged.

For example, let us return to the West Bank separation wall where Banksy’s creative modification of the symbolic barrier parodied the natural order of the site and showed a penetrable reality. Articulating the demarcation of the physical and cultural landscape, the artist resuscitated a public voice that had been muted by the dominant powers. His disruption actualizes the trickster’s ability to, as Hyde details, “create lively talk where there has been silence, or where speech has been prohibited. Trickster speaks freshly where language has been blocked, gone dead, or lost its charm.” The artist called attention to the unjust facets of the wall and its crippling effects on Palestinian life. While critics may question the effectiveness of rebelling

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37 Hyde, Trickster, 91.
38 Ibid., 76.
against the barrier by adding artworks to it rather than leaving it in its unsightly, unmodified state, Banksy’s interactions with the wall inspired new possibility and invited media attention.\(^{39}\) Following the storm of media that erupted after Banksy’s trip to the wall, some areas of the censored surface have evolved into living texts of democratic personal expression.\(^{40}\) Banksy effectively created an alternate interface on the wall that served as palimpsest for future revisions of the surface. By expressing the Palestinian situation through his caustic art, he translated the problem into the powerful, imaginative language of visual messages. His additions to the concrete surface serve the trickster’s function of restoring the cultural interchange—a campaign Banksy continues in his efforts to democratize art and to discredit institutionalized art. His presence parallels the mythic trickster’s proclivity for exploiting cultural deficiencies. Like any mythic trickster, Banksy’s performances are calculated attempts to create discord that evolves into critical public deliberation.

Through carnivalesque performances Banksy lampoons social institutions and reframes public discourse. Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin introduced the term *carnivalesque* to describe the ritual carnival spectacles. Bakhtin surmised that in the chaotic scenes of a carnival, social hierarchies are inverted, ideas and truths are scrutinized, and suppressed energies are released through a comedic performative

\(^{39}\) One such critic, a Palestinian political cartoonist, voiced his disapproval of embellishing the wall: “I am against that. Leave it to show that it is very ugly. I don’t like it to be nice. I like it to be in a [*sic*] very ugly, dirty, not acceptable for any normal person.” Kalman, “Israeli Barrier Draws Artists to a Cause,” p. A18.

\(^{40}\) For example, beginning in 2007 an organization of Dutch and Palestinian artists began to offer a service through which individuals around the globe could pay to have their message inscribed on the wall. See [http://www.sendamessage.nl](http://www.sendamessage.nl) for details about the organization.
Does this description not sound like the anarchic, playful spirit surrounding the Banksy spectacle? His performances unveil carnivalesque spaces that emphasize laughter. This element of laughter is an important characteristic of any trickster narrative. Humor serves the trickster’s credibility and makes him a more convincing change-agent. Hyde points out, “It isn’t that there can’t be contradiction, but that contradiction cannot nourish without the waters of laughter.”

Humor conserves the spirit of the carnival and preserves the balance that the trickster must maintain between creative defiance and aggressive destruction.

In Banksy’s carnival, the wily artist baits viewers through the provocative practice of street art, hooking them with his strategic interruptions of the urban landscape. Finally, Banksy then reels his catches in with humor. Upon being returned to the currents of modernity, the viewer is left wondering what was wrong or significant about this unexpected experience. Miranda Sawyer surmises, “Either you’re offended by his cheek, which is the point, or you love the mischief, which is also the point.”

Either way, Banksy’s irreverent communications connect with audiences. The average viewer can easily digest the straightforward, simple humor and cynicism of the artifacts. For instance, one hardly needs a caption to interpret the underlying message of Banksy’s stenciled text marking “Fat Lane” on the boardwalk of Venice Beach, California, a popular site in a nation known for its obesity crisis.

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Moreover, the caustic artist avoids alienating or extensively offending viewers (and consequently curtailing the reflection process) by making artifacts that are not expressly didactic—and by remaining ill defined himself.

For audience members, such mystery and uncertainty can make his satirical performances more authentic and less offensive or aggressive. Jonathon Jones of The Guardian made a critical inquiry into Banksy’s popularity and concluded that the populace enjoys the way in which the anonymous artist’s jokes convert “underground culture to something rationalist and mild, with a cosy, chatty familiarity.”44 By lingering between humor and political commentary, Banksy engenders a spirit of play and creative thinking while rendering himself credible. Kris and Kurz identify the use of humor and jokes as important components of the riddle of the artist. The two theorists infer that humor indicates an ability to “place ordinary things in an unexpected light,” and therefore exhibits the artist’s “mastery of the environment [and] superiority over the public.”45 This conclusion from Kris and Kurz reflects the awesomeness of a creative spirit. Viewers can appreciate and enjoy the artist’s humor, but a level of separation between artist and public remains. The public may understand the joke or the witty remark, but the artist retains a level of the “superiority over the public,” for he has displayed a “mastery of the environment.” In this way, Banksy retains the ambiguity and ambivalence of the trickster, creating more gaps in the myth of this artist. However, humor alone is not enough to retain public attentions. A

45 Kris and Kurz, The Image of the Artist, 100.
trickster must apply his satirical performances to significant cultural components if he
is to truly challenge the social order.

Trickster myths overwhelmingly record a cultural marauder upsetting a
community’s most guarded institutional elements. Banksy’s rhetorical performances
embody the trickster aesthetic—the profaning of the sacred. Collectively, Banksy’s
lampooning of the government, capitalism, religion, social norms, and high art is
consistent with Hynes’s characterization of the trickster as “the official ritual profaner
of beliefs.” He adds, “Profaning or inverting social beliefs brings into sharp relief just
how much a society values these beliefs.” Banksy refashions archetypal symbols of
culture to interrupt the cultural consciousness. This archetypal figure has the potential
to break taboos within human culture, but only if we are able to accept the value of his
antics. This speaks to the necessary association of any trickster with revered cultural
institutions—which Banksy overwhelmingly achieves.

The public endorsement of Bansky’s Frogmore Street mural in 2006 and the
change in the city’s graffiti policy that it prompted marks the gradual canonization of
an asocial figure and affirms Banksy’s position as a trickster. The sanctification of
Banksy’s work represents a distinguishing quality of tricksters: their connection to the
sacred realm. Trickster tales have functions specific to their culture of origin, but the
mischievous mythmaker they present always functions within a sacred context.

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46 Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 186-187; William J. Hynes, “Mapping the
Characteristics of Mythic Trickster Figures: A Heuristic Guide,” in *Mythical Trickster
Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, ed. William J. Hynes and William G.
According to Hyde, a trickster “needs at least a relationship to other powers, to people or institutions and traditions.”48 Beginning with the Frogmore Street mural, the vandal was publicly reframed as a cultural benefactor. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the Bristol City Council sought and honored the public’s position on the preservation of Banksy’s illegal mural on the side of a sexual health clinic. In addition, in 2007 the Bristol City Council instituted an informal policy that called for the preservation of any street art created by Banksy.49 These events signal the public valorization of a street artist who consciously attempts to separate himself from the mainstream and a partial restoration of the public voice. In an ironic twist of fate, the institutions that were once preoccupied with silencing Banksy began to publicly endorse him, though the public had already begun to do so.

Banksy’s popularity as a trickster figure directly relates to his popularity as a brand. His anonymity and liminality do not render him unimportant or irrelevant; rather, they generate efficacy and escalate his significance. By nature, the trickster is an agent of the people, and Banksy is no exception. The artist denounces cultural semiotics and the social hierarchy by negating authorship and positioning himself as a faceless, nameless bard of the people. He can be everyone and no one; ultimately, his meaning resides with the public, who has developed a myth and a fluid identity for the artist.

48 Hyde, Trickster, 13.
Other than his political views or social grievances, Banksy’s art reveals very little about the man himself. By themselves, they are sourceless street art communications enigmatically reflective of their creator’s identity. What of his life, his biography, his background? We cannot trust the information in published resources, such as Tristan Manco’s book, *Stencil Graffiti*, where Banksy manufactured his own biography. Banksy mocks our attempts to excavate the details of his personhood. He quickly tired of the excessive public interest and the news media’s invasive attempts to extract information from him. He began to send different people to interviews pretending to be him and later refused to be interviewed altogether (although on rare occasions he will grant interviews or relay information to certain allegiant individuals in his inner-circle). He confessed to Shepard Fairey, “I have no interest in ever coming out. I figure there are enough self-opinionated assholes trying to get their ugly little faces in front of you as is.” He offers ambivalent, incoherent personas to the public rather than expressions of his true self-identity. The problem of obtaining any illuminating details about the artist’s biography or personality is compounded by the loyal respect for his anonymity that he commands from those close to him in any capacity. Concealing Banksy’s identity requires careful orchestration and the collusion of many parties. At any cost, preserving his anonymity

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50 In response to an email requesting verification on Banksy’s biographical information contained in *Stencil Graffiti*, Tristan Manco revealed to Sarah Stephens that “The biog of Banksy in the Stencil Graffiti book is slightly tongue-in-cheek; he wrote it for me but I don’t know if anything in it is true at all.” As cited in Sarah Stephens, “Fun with Vandalism: The Illegal Street Art of Shepard Fairey and Banksy,” MA Thesis, University of Cincinnati, 2006, 39-41.

51 Banksy, interview by Fairey and Gastman, 84.
enables him to operate as a trickster who breaks taboos of modern culture, scrutinizing the very celebrity brand image the public has of him while carefully balancing creativity with disorder.

The social valuation of Banksy as intellectual and aesthetic capital to be traded is symptomatic of the cultural fermentation of capitalism. The phenomenon of the Banksy Brand demonstrates the fusion between, rhetoric, art, and commerce. Banksy’s brand story exemplifies how through rhetoric, brands become vessels of intangible value and of emotional connection. The public takes Banksy’s rhetorical performances and makes them its own, completing the discourse as it wishes and mythicizing Banksy all the while. In order to retain his audience, Banksy has been forced to juggle his game of carnival with the game of the marketplace. Through rhetoric Banksy maintains his public persona and artist identity that the public and the media consume like any other symbolic commodity. However, this celebrity trickster must be careful that his trick does not turn against him to jeopardize his credibility and anonymity.
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