



INTERVIEW WITH NICK PEARSON, FOUNDATION ART & DESIGN ASSOCIATE LECTURER

'Art is in the Bin': Banksy's Protest

By Luna Campos, Guest Writer

Banksy's latest stunt may be his most audacious one yet. On 5 October 2018, Sotheby's auction house in London sold one of Banksy's most iconic artworks, "Girl with Balloon", for just over £1m.



The resulting artwork following Banksy's shredding stunt.

The twist was that as the auctioneer's gavel went down, a shredder hidden in the picture frame was remotely activated, partly destroying the canvas.

The stunt quickly went viral and ever since it happened, the art world has been overflowing with praise, critiques and analysis dissecting it. However, Banksy has revealed very little about the piece, which has since been renamed "Love is in the Bin" and his true motivation behind it.

We do know that, according to Banksy's Instagram account, he fitted the shredder into the picture's frame years ago in case it was ever put up for auction. It was also revealed that the canvas was supposed to be fully shredded.

Everything else is speculation. The whole stunt is a mystery, but we can safely assume that there's much more to it than meets the eye. In fact, "Love is in the Bin" turned out to be a perfect example of why Banksy matters and an excellent case study of the art market's relationship with artists. We talked to Nick Pearson, Associate Lecturer at LCCA, to take a look at what makes Banksy so relevant.

Art in the digital age

Love is in the Bin is making history and this is partly because it caused a huge media sensation. Some estimate that it's worth even more after the shredding and that all of Banksy's works have since increased in value.

That probably wasn't his intention, but it goes to show



Banksy never shied away from criticising the most prevalent elements of modern life.

the extent to which the media dictates the value of artists. "Social media has become the vector through which the world knows Banksy's work," says Nick. "How many of us have seen a Banksy 'in the flesh' anyway?

"So many photos have been taken of his known works and they have been posted, shared and consumed countless times."

Banksy and his work are products of the globalised, social media-driven 21st-century world. "Banksy exists in a world of sound bites, hyperreality, advertising and smartphones,"

Nick notes

"Our world is almost infinitely interconnected and instantly viewable, with the 24-hour news cycle, wars we don't understand, political walls we don't want and rampant capitalism. All this and the ability to know, 'like' and share makes social media an effective way of getting his work known."

These elements of chaotic modern life are clear in the anti-establishment message that permeates Banksy's art and he's managed to cleverly use the media as an instrument to spread the original message of his art beyond his hype in the art world.

The impermanence of Banksy

The internet is the perfect medium to return his art to the public view, allowing it to live on after its removal from the streets. "His pieces are short-lived, being painted over or carefully removed (or, as he might put it, stolen) and taken to a museum, exhibition or private collection," says Nick.

The transient nature of street art is part of the deal. Graffiti is illegal and seldom stays in place for long, unless a conscious decision is made to preserve it. However, Banksy also has to contend with the removal of his graffiti from public walls for sale in the secondary art market without his consent. His work is characterised by its anti-establishment message, yet at the same time, he's become a favourite of the art market elite. As art critic Jonathan Jones puts it, "the market turns imagination into an investment and protest into decor for some oligarch's house."

One example is Banksy's mural "Slave Labour", which was painted in London in 2012. The mural was made as a protest against the use of sweatshops in the making of products for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the London Olympics.

However, the piece was removed straight from the wall and twice sold at auction for huge amounts. This prompted Banksy to comment, quoting Henri Matisse, "I was very embarrassed when my canvases began to fetch high prices, I saw myself condemned to a future of painting nothing but masterpieces."

So, considering Banksy's views, the creation of "Love is in the Bin" might have been a way of criticising the art market's exploitation of his art for profit. According to Jones, Banksy did this because "art is being choked to death by money. The only rebellion left is for artists to bite the hands that feed them."

Selling graffiti

There's an inevitable contradiction about selling street art in the secondary art market. According to urban art specialist Mary McCarthy, the growing popularity of street art led to its rising commercialisation, which exposes the paradox between the very nature of street art and its increasing mainstream success, "thereby robbing the medium of the 'outsider' stance with which it is identified".

Banksy wasn't the first street artist to be trapped in this paradox; the art world first caught an interest for street art in the 1980s when "New York galleries first saw the appeal of graffiti to an audience who felt that this new underground art had a very interesting 'urban cool'. This launched the careers of artists like Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat," says Nick.

As for Banksy, he started getting attention from the mainstream art world in the early to mid-2000s and it wasn't long before his art was selling for big sums.

Enter "Love is in the Bin". Banksy always intended for the piece to be sold – and shredded – at the auction, so the prank may well be a protest against the mass commercialisation of street art, which may turn it into a by-product of consumerist society and rob the art of its very meaning.

It wasn't the first time that he critiqued art market economics. Another creative way he's done this was by setting up a stall in Central Park in 2013 and selling some of his paintings for $60 apiece. At the time, no one knew the paintings were authentic and not many were sold, but the next day Banksy confirmed on social media that the canvases were authentic, causing their value to skyrocket.



Banksy's works sold in Central Park only acquired value in the art market after the pieces were identified as his.]



Some of those who bought the paintings reportedly resold them for well over $100k, exposing the irony of art market dynamics and its perception of artistic worth.
"If Banksy hadn't been 'made' by the great wave of media hype he has cleverly managed to surf, if those art world 'wall-breakers' were not encouraging their clients to throw around so much money, the media wouldn't have been interested in him in the first place," says Nick. "In a capitalist society, this is what we've come to call value".

The fact that Banksy has managed to hold a mirror up to the art market showing its own shortcomings demonstrates why he is one of the most relevant artists today. "Banksy's impermanence, the commercialisation of his art and the self-destructive nature of his latest prank are nothing new," says Nick, "but we shouldn't damn him for that.
"Each artist reinvents art for their own time. Each artist has the opportunity to change art and the possibility of finding their own audience. That is the real value of art."



The mural, made as a protest piece, depicted an impoverished boy sewing Union Jacks into a piece of string