ESSAYS

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Existencillism: Banksy and the stencil as radical graphic form

Keywords

Abstract

Contemporary graffiti artists, or 'writers' as they are known, observe a strict hierarchy that self-ranks ambition, daring and calligraphic innovation. At the apex are those writers who create the imposing wildstyle exhibition pieces, large-scale vivid inscriptions that require a high degree of graphic invention and daring. At the other extreme are the stencil-cutters, who by comparison are regarded within the peer community of the subculture, as lesser writers, relying on craft skills that are held to be quaint, even fraudulent. This article explores the persistence and ubiquitous spread of the stencil as a vehicle for mass-produced street art, made especially popular through the iconic work of British street-artist Banksy. Exploring the origins of his work in stencil the article examines how he has both radicalized the genre, while still retaining its essential value

as an industrial, utilitarian and iconic graphic. The article compares the deadpan, but hugely popular, drawn language of the stencil with the freehand calligraphy of the taggers, 'kings' and other exhibition 'writers', and closes with a set of questions, in particular: what is the future of drawing in countercultural expression?

Urban calligraphy

> Graffiti have to be seen as an assertion of something, a criticism of public reality […] [a] tide of indecipherable signatures of mutinous adolescents which has washed over and bitten into the facades of monuments and the surfaces of public vehicles in the city where I live: graffiti as an assertion of disrespect, yes, but most of all simply an assertion […] the powerless saying: I'm here too.
>
> <div align="right">(Sontag 1987: 122)</div>

Street art movements and fashions present us with a rich evolving tale of street rivalry and creative bravado (Visconti et al. 2010). This is fuelled by political and aesthetic ideologies that are in constant cross-cultural hybridization (Gastman, Rowland and Sattler 2006). Few other forms of public expression arouse such ire and anxiety, but also begrudging pleasure. 'Like other unwelcome, staining deposits', asserts Emily Gowers, it has 'always polarized people into defenders and aggressors, neighbourhood watchers and anarchists' (Gowers 2014).

Invariably described as 'graffiti' or more recently 'street art', Borghini et al. (2010), and other commentators (Gastman, Rowland and Sattler 2006) generally identify seven distinct (but also fluid) categories of street-drawing practice and the mark each makes on our urban sphere:

1. Originating in New York, the *tag*, is the autographic trace of an individual's name (or moniker or personal logo), marking the marginal spaces of the city with an incessant, often unintelligible, repetition (Figure 1).
2. The *throw up* consists of two letters of a name, in no more than two colours, one being the outline, the other the in-fill. Regarded as more demanding of the scribe, the throw up is one step up the ability scale from the often-perfunctory *tag*.
3. Highly stylized calligraphy, exercised on a large, ambitious scale is used for self-affirmation and promoting personal prowess within a peer group. At its most ambitious these large-scale inscriptions are known as a *piece* or a *masterpiece*. Here, the artist's name is drawn with near-rococo elaboration against a field of colour, or situated against a background that can be equally elaborate.
4. Unlike simplified, stylized letters (or *burners*) a sophisticated variation of this highly stylized calligraphy is described as *wildstyle*, which is best described as a form of competitive calligraphy incorporating interwoven and overlapping forms (intricately drawn as arrows, curves, flares or

letters) which have a volumetric appearance, as opposed to a lineal signature (Ahearn 1983). So radically transformed is the visual language that – to the eye of non-graffiti practitioners – the 'piece' is rendered arcane and impenetrable (Gastman, Rowland and Sattler 2006).

5. Larger set-piece wall drawings and paintings are known as a *production* and are invariably drawn by a 'crew' (a gang of accomplices).

6. *Sticking*, or *wheatpasting*, is a transgressive form of bill-posting, whereby drawings, prints, logos or symbols are liberally pasted in public places. This is a clandestine means of transmitting short messages and images to a broader audience.

7. The *stencil* is a form of mimicry, borrowing the shorthand iconic graphic stencil forms used to replicate identical forms or symbols. Stencilling allows multiple repeated, and sometimes unlimited, use of the same image (Rose and Strike 2004).

While such a typology is prone to being quickly outdated, this list presents an instructive hierarchy of form, format and performance. The freehand-drawn *wildstyle* production is regarded as the peak of the genre, requiring formidable confidence, manual dexterity and calligraphic ingenuity. Its visual language, as Petherbridge (2010: 365) notes, lies between script and figuration. To watch a group of practised street artists at work on a large *exhibition* piece, is to witness draughtsmen (the scene is highly gendered [Milnor 2005]), their notebooks and preparatory sketches in hand, undaunted by a large wall, prepared for a lengthy (invariably illegal) engagement, armed with little more than plastic carrier bags crammed with aerosol paint-cans.

> On the other side of [Leake] street is a lone artist with about a dozen cans of paint at his feet. He is wearing goggles and full breathing apparatus to protect himself from the paint fumes, so he looks more like a welder than an artist […] he has been here since ten this morning, painting a piece which suits his name, planes exploding like darts out of everywhere. He is not using stencils, but it is not traditional graffiti, rather it is freehand graffiti without a letter in sight; he is using the spray can to paint what he wants without following any of the rules.
>
> (Ellsworth-Jones 2013a: 44–45)

Commenting on this 'piece' as Ellsworth-Jones watched, the artist said there was still much more drawing to be done, a further two to three hours at least. Nonetheless he acknowledged that, like so much graffiti, it could be destroyed within days, perhaps hours, and the wall redrawn by other hands. 'Kids', concludes the artist, 'will only aspire to what they can see. And that's why you do your best work, so that kids can look and aspire to master the craft' (Ellsworth-Jones 2013a: 45).

By contrast to many in the street art community there is little, if any, craft in stencilling. If ever an artist were to use masking tape to help create a straight line he would promptly be dismissed as a *toy*, a 'neophyte writer', 'with no skills and little clue of the history of the culture' (Snyder 2009: 37).

Figure 1: Anon., Tagger *(2015), North Street, Southville, Bristol. Courtesy of photographer: Harry Gough.*

Figure 2: Blek le Rat (2012), street stencil, Paris. Courtesy of photographer: Paul Gough.

Figure 3: Banksy, Mona Lisa touting a Milan Missile Launcher, *photographed 2008* © *Pest Control Office.*

The stencil in a post-graffiti context

Expressed in its most basic form, the act of stencilling requires first a thin sheet of material out of which letters, numbers or a pattern have been pre-cut to create a predetermined design. A single colour, or pigment, is then applied with a broad brush or sprayed through an aerosol to create the stencilled image. The *stencil* is therefore both the resulting image and the piece of material from which the image has been made; the material is, in other words, the 'positive' to the image's 'negative'. This clumsy description of a rather basic technique can occlude the simplicity and imme-diacy of the stencil as a graphic form, one of the reasons, perhaps, why it has been embraced so readily by graphic designers and typographers – such as R. S. Hutchings, who identified no less than 41 stencil typefaces in the 1950s (Kindel 2013).

Its origins are humble: the stencil has a significant, but understated, history of being favoured by large organizations to clearly and consistently label objects, vehicles and locations. Requiring mini-mal artistry, stencils can be hand-carved, machine-cut, customized or purchased as individual letters, numbers, symbols or signs. In the hands of even a moderately skilled worker letters, words, phrases and other icons from a single set of templates can be arranged uniquely to the item being labelled. When drawn from a standard format (or an easily sourced template) the consistent use of a singular font, letter size or specific layout, can help identify connected groups of objects or groups of connected signs, thus making their affiliation or source easier to identify, understand and follow.

Essentially urban, stencils are historically an industrial graphic – economic, spare and instructive. They have their aesthetic roots in the utilitarian styles of signage used by the military, utility compa-nies and packaging services. Stencilled lettering and logos are found in warehouses, on industrial goods and on temporary signs (such as for roadworks) (Dickens 2008). Well-designed and well-cut stencils spell out a simple, bold message in two-tone, with no grey scale, 'in-between' or mid-tone. They smack of the military, the language of authority, and shun ambiguity. Stencils are the official calligraphy of mass production. Their adoption by street- and graffiti-artists is a canny ironic twist of their customary use, 'mocking it by subverting its meaning through the artful juxtaposition of image and text', or through the witty, often trenchant, remixing of familiar icons, symbols, phrases (Morrison 2007: 232).

An existencil act: The origins of stencilling as street art

The 'godfather of stencil graffiti' Blek le Rat (born in Paris in 1951 as Xavier Prou) is widely held to be the originator of this urban art form (Philby 2008). Trained in etching, lithography and painting at L'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, before taking a further degree, in architecture, Prou tells of being inspired by Italian propaganda posters drawn in a simple semi-silhouetted form for the dictator Benito Mussolini from the 1930s. Prou also recalls that he became aware of the early
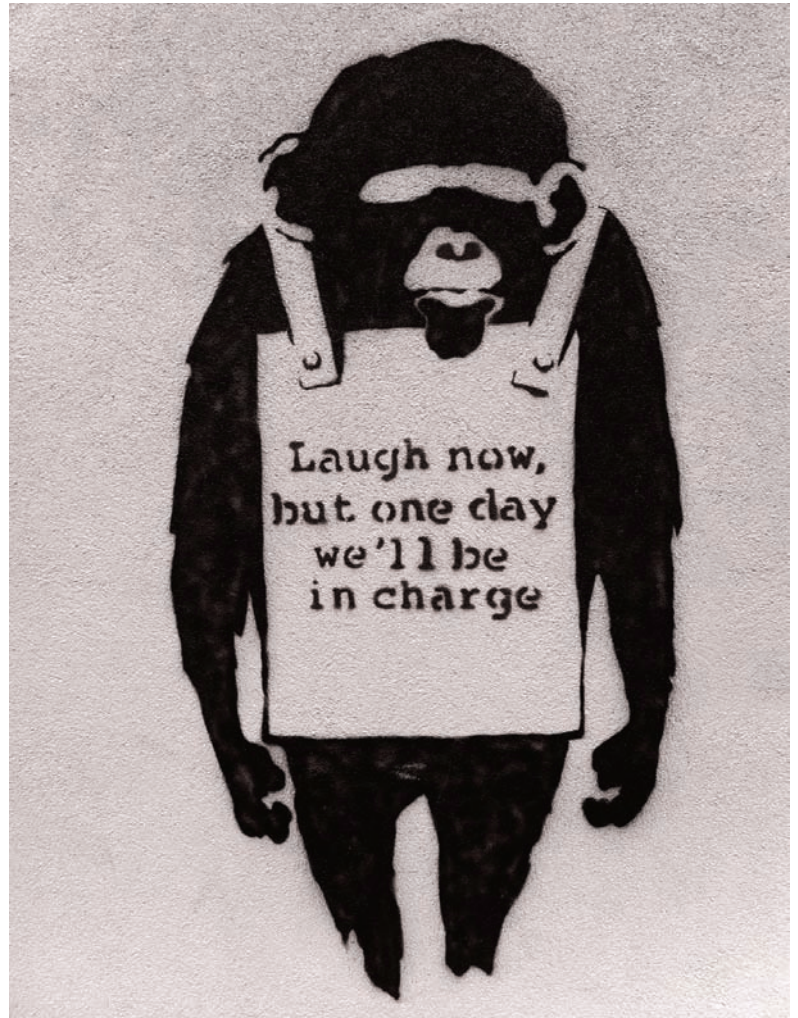
Figure 4: Banksy, Ape stencil, *Bristol, photographed 2009. Courtesy of photographer: Harry Gough.*

graffiti art of New York after a visit in the early 1970s. From 1981 he adopted the silhouetted form of the rat as his personal leitmotif, stencilling it on walls across Paris, describing it as 'the only free animal in the city […] which spreads the plague everywhere, just like street art' (Prou and Adz 2008).

Prou's rats, and their attendant leaping cats, perhaps owe more to the flamboyant arabesque of *la belle époque* than to the nihilistic grunge of post-punk urbanism or the utilitarian language of the stencil, but his large-scale, life-sized silhouettes of running, walking and dancing figures set a new standard of street-side visual intervention in the French capital (Figure 4). In the 1980s Prou's work became markedly more political, increasingly irreverent and discomforting, though he chose not to hide his identity. After a decade of graffiti, in 1991 he was threatened with prison if he was arrested one more time. He then adopted a less clandestine approach and took to pasting up pre-stencilled posters citing the 'speedier application of the medium to walls, as well as lessened punishment should he be caught in the act' (Januszczak 2008). This expedience was received with mixed reactions from the street art community. In the simple (but sharply monitored) hierarchy of urban artists, where freehand 'production' is considered the zenith of large-scale street writing, many view the 'wheatpaster' as a poor compromise, a weak imitation of authenticity, even beneath the work of the stenciller. To the street art community, mastery can only be achieved by prowess with the felt-tip or spray can, the status of 'king' bestowed only on those who are the 'best with the most' – king of throw ups, king of a certain line, and so forth.

Nevertheless, Prou's impact on younger British street artists is now widely recognized. He offered a visual shorthand that many seized. Its combination of political commentary, witty imagery and graphic immediacy appealed instantly to the now notorious urban artist, Bristol-born Banksy, who was quick to credit the French master. He paid ready homage to his mentor and is much-quoted as saying 'Every time I think I've painted something slightly original, I find out that Blek le Rat has done it, too. Only Blek did it twenty years earlier' (Banksy 2005: 203). For his part Prou was equally gracious:

> People say he copies me, but I don't think so. I'm the old man, he's the new kid, and if I'm an inspiration to an artist that good, I love it. I feel what he is doing in London is similar to the rock movement in the Sixties.
>
> (Coan 2008)

But in this adversarial subculture, such equanimity could not last and by 2011 Prou was less gracious about Banksy's adoption of 'his' technique. Rivalry is habitual in the closely contested world of street artists, but perhaps Prou has become increasingly resentful of Banksy's global impact and his unas-sailable popularity. He may also have baulked at the British artist's offhand comments about the stencilling technique, which the Frenchman felt that he had mastered and introduced to the public

Figure 5: Banksy, Grim Reaper, *Thekla boat, Bristol Harbour, photographed 2009. Courtesy of photographer: Paul Gough.*

Figure 6: Stenciller, Urban Paint Fest *(UPFest), Bristol, May 2014. Courtesy of photographer: Harry Gough.*

realm (Januszczak 2009). In particular Prou may have taken a craftsman's umbrage at Banksy's characteristically idiosyncratic advice on how to make the perfect stencil:

- First off, stencil anything. If you wait for the perfect idea you will be waiting forever. Cleverness is never as entertaining as blatant stupidity, failure and public humiliation.
- Obtain a fucking sharp knife. Blunt knives result in fluffy pictures and make the whole process long and boring. Snap-off blades of British steel are best.
- Draw your artwork on paper, glue onto some card then cut straight through them both. Acetate is apparently quite good but any sort of free cardboard is okay. Stiff 1mm to 1.5mm board is ideal.
- Get a small roll of gaffa [*sic*] tape, pre-tear small strips and stick them on your shirt inside your coat.
- Find a suitable piece of card to act as a folder. For instance when using red paint cut the stencil into the bottom of a pizza box so when you get paint all over your fingers it's not so suspicious.
- Leave the house before you find something worth staying in for.
- Spray the paint sparingly onto the stencil from a distance of 8 inches.
- If you're in a place with lots of security cameras wear a hood, move around the city quickly and act like a sad old drunk if you attract attention.
- A regular 400ml can of paint will produce up to 50 A4 sized stencils. This means you can become incredibly famous/unpopular in a small town overnight for approximately ten pounds.
- Mindless vandalism can take a bit of thought.
- The easiest way to become invisible is to wear a day-glo vest and carry a tiny transistor radio playing Heart FM very loudly. If questioned about the legitimacy of your painting simply complain about the hourly rate.
- Try to avoid painting in places where they still point at aeroplanes.

(Banksy 2005: 204)

Characteristically, the origins of Banksy's interest in stencilling have multiple layers of narrative. In a tract of autobiographical writing he relates how at the age of 18 while trying to paint 'LATE AGAIN' in silver bubble lettering on the side of a passenger train in Bristol, he was chased by British Transport Police. Deserted by his fellow taggers (who had made it to their getaway car), Banksy spent over an hour hidden under a dumper truck with oil leaking over him:

As I lay there listening to the cops on the tracks I realised I had to cut my painting time in half or give up altogether. I was staring straight up at the stenciled plate on the bottom of a fuel tank when I realized I could just copy that style and make each letter three feet high.

(Banksy 2005: 7)

According to this self-mythologizing narrative, it was a creative breakthrough. Creeping home undetected, he later told his girlfriend he had had 'an epiphany', to which she allegedly replied that he ought to stop taking that drug as it was bad for his heart (Banksy 2005: 13). So much for post-hoc rationalization. In interviews and authorized accounts Banksy has admitted that he had never been especially talented at freehand graffiti, lacking the necessary draughtsmanship. He told Simon Hattenstone of *The Guardian* in (allegedly) the only face-to-face interview with a journalist ever given: 'Because I was quite crap with a spray can. I started cutting out stencils instead' (Hattenstone 2003). Unlike the subjective hand-drawn mark, stencils were quick, clean, crisp and efficient:

> I started off painting in the classic New York style you use when you listen to too much hip hop as a kid, but I was never very good at it. As soon as I cut my first stencil I could feel the power there. The ruthlessness and efficiency of it is perfect.
>
> (Ellsworth-Jones 2013)

Elsewhere Banksy has related how he was drawn to stencilling because if its 'political edge' (Banksy and Bull 2006). As he is reported to have said: 'All graffiti is low-level dissent, but stencils have an extra history. They've been used to start revolutions and to stop wars. Even a picture of a rabbit playing a piano looks hard as a stencil' (Ellsworth-Jones 2013: 58). Ruthless, efficient, unambiguous: the stencil has a powerful history as a clandestine graphic form which originates in its speed of execution, crisp use of line and singular tonality.

'Stencils are no coincidence', comments a fellow writer from Banksy's Bristol past, 'He knows his history. He looked at Paris in the sixties and how quickly they got their message up' (Ellsworth-Jones 2013a: 58). He may also have been aware of the many other Parisian street artists who had embraced the medium. Clet Abraham, Jef Aerosol, Miss Tic, Speedy Graphito and Jerome Mesnager had, in numerous ways, shown how stencil-work can become innovative by incorporating hand-drawn, autographic images, marks and textures, as well as prepared stickers and collage. Concerned less with anonymity than with calligraphic innovation, many of these French stencillers had experimented richly with the medium. Clet Abraham attaches pre-cut stickers to street signs, adding halos, lips and crucified figures to subvert their conventional meaning. Speed of execution has fuelled graphic experimentation, generating a highly altered urban iconography, provocative and memorable. In such cases the pre-cut drawn stencil or sticker responds to a known iconography of public signage: drawing is used to radicalize meaning. For other stencil artists it is the twin elements of chance and context that have extended the possibilities in this field of work. Jerome Mesnager created the 'white body' stencil so that it might be reproduced on walls on every continent, and indeed it now marks surfaces as diverse as the Giants of Menilmontant and the Red Palace of Moscow.

Figure 7: Banksy, Well Hung Lover, *Park Street, Bristol, photographed 2010. Courtesy of photographer: Harry Gough.*

Figure 8: Banksy, Slave Labour, *Poundland Store, Wood Green, London, photographed 2012. Courtesy of photographer: Paul Gough.*

To pursue the lesser street craft of stencilling was not easy in Bristol, widely regarded as a hard-core graffiti city. Nor should it be assumed that stencilling is technically simple. Despite its ease of production (Raychaudhuri 2010), and the step-by-step guidance proffered by numerous craft books, it cannot be reduced to a simple set of instructions. It is a precise art form that requires methodical processes and an eye for simplified two-dimension design. That much is clear from a photograph of Banksy's studio, its floor strewn with A1 stencils assembled into life-size figures (Gough 2012). At a glance you can see the precision needed to conjure up a facial expression or the folds in clothing. Cutting out a single letter or a 'Nike tick' logo is relatively straightforward for those modestly competent with a sharp knife. But 'drawing' the bling on the silhouette of a street rat takes a creative eye and a steady hand. Typically a stencil constitutes a thin sheet of material, card, paper, plastic or metal with letters, numbers or a design taken out of it. If not machine- or laser-cut, fashioning the stencil by hand requires forethought and some dexterity with scissors or a blade. Working from a sketch or a drawing, sections of the material are cut away to create the positive forms of the design; at intervals interior sections – 'islands', as they are called – have to be connected by narrow 'bridges' of material that must be left intact. It is these 'bridges' that lend traditional stencils their particular graphic character and their taut economy of shape. The 'bridges' also help keep the stencil robust enough to be reused. Without them the template would lose its form, wilting under the intensity of an aerosol jet, rendered flaccid and difficult to hold in place – quite a liability for a clandestine street artist working at night, in fear of being spotted and arrested. In addition to its graphic simplicity, the real advantage of the stencil is that it can be reused to rapidly produce the same motif over and over again, a particular boon to the early graffiti artists who preferred the relative speed and ease of the stencil to an encounter with the law.

From his early (2002), rather crude, stencils of chimpanzees adorned with slogan-stencilled tabards ('You're no safer in first class', District line, London Underground), Banksy's stencils have become increasingly more sophisticated and unrelentingly ironic (Brassett 2009). He has progressed from the simple silhouette – *Mona Lisa touting a Milan Missile Launcher*, or the Banksy 'ape' stencilled onto a yellow wheel clamp – to stencils that called for multiple templates (Figures 5 and 6). His striking image of a goggle-eyed dustbin on legs (Brick Lane, East London, 2005), for example, clearly required an initial stencil of black body tone (for the trousers and the deep shade of the bin), a mid-grey for the shoes and the cylindrical surface of the metalwork, and a final addition of white paint to add an ironic punchline – the myopic eye peering with alarm from the lid. A final fourth stencil would have been necessary to provide the solid black question mark hovering over this very strange assemblage. In these more sophisticated multilayered stencils the drawing is taut and precise; additionally there is evidence of freehand interventions to further animate the surface and enliven the edges of the drawing. The stencil provides the drawing's infrastructure; freehand drawing augments the structural foundation. Arguably, it is this confluence of stencil, freehand overdrawing, speed of

execution and an opportune context that marks Banksy as creator of a radical graphic language, one perhaps more closely aligned to the site-specific graphic work of Raymond Pettibon and David Tremlett.

Although highly disciplined by the core method of stencilling, Banksy selects the drawing language best suited to the motif: the message is strongly allied to the medium. He uses stencilled lettering where an icon will not do, or where the context is too inviting – writing 'FAT LANE' on a sidewalk in Venice Beach, the United States (2003), for example – and where he wants to mimic (and of course, mock) the conventional street lexicon, such as 'Cycle Lane' and 'Mind the Step'. Unlike stencillers such as Jerome Mesnager, who insistently repeat the same motif via the same drawn language, for Banksy chance opportunity determines the drawing medium. On occasion (and like Mesnager) he will reverse the silhouette, painting white on black – such as the pale vertical ladder crawling up the face of the Peace Wall at Abu Dis, or the Grim Reaper figure rowing along-side Thekla in Bristol Harbour (Figure 5).

Compared to the economic simplicity of the small black silhouetted rats (which had for a period become the painter's trademark) the larger ghostly white stencils are more painterly; Banksy's approach is less mechanistic, less rushed. There is an unevenness in the distribution of the white spray, a reliance on the autographic mark, which gives the figures a rather more haunted, elusive look. None more so than the stencilled white image of an angelic down-and-out in West London (2002) armed with wine bottle, cigarette and broken halo.

Reflecting on Banksy's (not especially relevant) tips for the stenciller one may ask if they are useful. At street art displays or urban paint festivals it is possible to watch graffitists at work. Whereas the freehand writers are rather relaxed about displaying their skills, happily showing off their dexter-ity with the spray can, with marker pens such as the grog cutter and with the large-nibbed X-wide Markwell marker (Bombing Science 2015) the stencillers are a little more reluctant to impart their secrets (Figure 6). Perhaps it is the industrial nature of the process, the methodical arrangement of one shape over another, the rather monotonous way they 'label' the wall rather than loosely draw their images. Closely observed, stencillers are even a little furtive, taking their precious card templates from their folios one at a time, making sure not to share them with their rivals, swiftly sliding them back into their folio the moment they are finished with them.

Apart from the flick of a wrist as a stenciller directs the nozzle of a spray can or applies a loaded brush, there is little apparent 'craft' involved. They do not cut the stencil there and then: everything is prefabricated. So can we see the perpetrators as technical draughtsmen or as the printmakers of the fine art world? Are they actually a sub-band of technophiles capable of producing dazzling results but somewhat embarrassed that their work is reprographic, not autographic; machined rather than hand wrought, industrial rather than crafted? Commenting on a perceived lesser status of the stencil-cutter one graffiti artist, Inkie, recalls:

> To us stencils were taboo. I would have just been laughed at, it was all about face. Even if you used a piece of paper or some sellotape or masking tape to do the sharp edges it was frowned on […] But Banksy had a punk attitude. He didn't care what people thought, he had a strong personality.
>
> (Ellsworth-Jones 2013a: 62)

Petherbridge (2010: 365) has commented on these issues of status, observing that many contemporary street artists actually lay claim to 'an uncensored and marginal space' by deliberately subverting their drawing skills. These strategies are adopted to celebrate their lack of official status, a position reinforced by their chosen drawing domains, the liminal public spaces 'associated with the fleeting and the transitory, along railway lines, public toilets or road underpasses' (Petherbridge 2010: 365–66).

Post-stencil: A diminution in quality?

There are three criteria that help ascertain if a new piece is an authentic work by Banksy. First, it will be featured on his official website (*banksy.co.uk*). Second, the context for each Banksy piece of street art is usually deliberate. As the Art Placement Group extolled in 1970 as part of *Between 6* at the Kunsthalle in Dusseldorf, 'context is half the work' (Tate Gallery 2005). Banksy illustrates this with, for instance, his renowned multicoloured stencil of the adulterous couple provocatively titled *Well Hung Lover* (Figure 7). This work appeared in a site strategically chosen for its context; placed provocatively opposite Bristol Council House – later the City Hall – whose street cleaning department had for many years been called upon to clean the streets and walls of tagging and graffiti. That much would be typical of any street artist – provocative, disrespectful, physically confronting. But, perhaps more significantly and typical of Banksy's deeper sense of location and context, the artwork adorns a gable wall of a terraced street that once housed a sexual health clinic. It is an insiders' 'street' knowledge, carried like a private joke shared with a few in the *cognoscenti*.

In 2012, when this author was asked by the BBC to 'authenticate' a new artwork in north London, he drew attention not just to the customary indicators but to the adjacent buildings which provided the crucial context for the new drawing. The stencil, a finely drawn piece in black and white depicting a young child labourer at a sewing machine diligently producing Union Jack bunting, had been painted on the wall of the British supermarket chain store Poundland, which two years earlier had been in the press for exploiting Indian child labour. Banksy brought the rumbling controversy up to date by painting the stencil on the eve of the celebrations for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee (Figure 8).

The third 'test' of authenticity is perhaps more subjective but it tells us much about Banksy's evolution as a creative practitioner; namely, how well is it drawn and then painted? Despite a steady

evolution in his practice, there is a notable diminution in the quality of the stencil-work. *Mobile Lovers* and *Spy Booth* (both created in 2014) aroused much public interest and the customary clamour of controversy but few bothered to note that the drawing of the figures and the rendering of the clothing lacked precision, that the underlying anatomy was ungainly and the chosen colours were bland. There were even suggestions that the *Mobile Lovers* piece had its origins in a Ken Pyne cartoon published in *Private Eye* years earlier in March 2010.[1]

Looking critically across Banksy's *oeuvre,* stencilling may have had its moment. Others must take up the mantle. Under pressure to produce a new piece of art every day for his October 2013 New York 'residency' *Better Out Than In*, Banksy's work – and that of his many facilitators, fabricators and performers – was variable in quality. Possibly the least successful of the 31 daily interventions were the smaller stencils – the young boy with the fairground mallet (NY Upper West Side, Day 20 piece), the two Japanese women on the arched 'bridge' (Day 17 piece), and the Twin Towers stencil painted on Day 15. Compared to the larger 'exhibition' pieces (of which there was one considerable piece in the 'residency', Day 9 *Night Vision Horses*, painted on a car and truck in the Lower East Side) these are under-nourished, one-dimensional stencils of limited invention. They lack the graphic wit and the painterly dexterity that has marked Banky's work over the past two decades. In creating a seemingly authentic market stall flogging off reduced-price stencils on canvas, Banksy may be indicating that there is little more to say through 'stencil art' (as the street trader describes it).

If, as Banksy states, 'existencilism' is the underlying thread of his interventions, arguably it is not the physical and aesthetic quality of the works that matter as much as the message. Indeed, looking at the evolution of his stencilling through another lens, in New York Banksy may have been able to return the stencil to its true democratic origins, as a process owned and enacted by anyone: the day after *You Complete Me* (2013) was tagged a member of the public with card in one hand, spray can in the other, 'restored' this black Banksy stencil of a dog urinating on a fire hydrant. However, most of the pieces were overpainted, destroyed or clumsily removed within days, usually hours, of being spotted.

Drawing and its future in counterculture expression

Street art connects with contemporary and urgent themes through activism, reclamation and subversion. Pitted against the combined weight of civic authority, communities and public property, its multiple formats allow artists and street writers a transgressive platform to reach a broader audience than traditional art forms (Chung 2009). As a vernacular cultural form, street art has branched out from the clandestine self-naming celebration of 'I am here' and 'here I draw' to a didactic and highly polemicized display achieved largely through pasting and stencils. Drawing on the breakthrough achieved by Blek le Rat, Banksy took the polemic potency of the stencil to a new level. However, as the literature reveals the arena of graffiti is a highly contested and fragmented one.

1. See http://www.private-eye.co.uk/pictures/lookalikes/big/pyne_banksy.jpg. Accessed 5 May 2015.

Like many other street 'writers' who have gained a commercial and reputational standing, Banksy's position is regarded by current practitioners as heavily, and irreversibly, compromised. Diminished respect from his peers is, of course, balanced by his ability to create city-wide spectacle and engagement, such as his October 2013 'residency' in New York and more recent interventions in Gaza. Rivalry, and even envy, aside, much of the irritation expressed by his peers focuses not so much on Banksy's unassailable esteem and recognition, but rather on the ubiquitous rise, and adoption, of the stencil. In an article that might be considered typical of the mood of the peer group, Luke Muyskens asserts that 'Banksy is ruining graffiti', alleging that an overwhelming flood of uninitiated neophytes are turning to the stencil-form to flood the public realm with weak imitations:

> Not only is their work generally shoddy and uninspired, but their etiquette is practically blasphemous in most graffiti circles. These Banksy emulators are doing nothing more than mimicking the work and stylings of another artist – which, in a culture built on originality, is missing the point entirely.
>
> (Muyskens 2012)

Bemoaning the 'Banksy cult', Muyskens vents his frustration with the 'wannabes' who lack respect for the established graffiti scene, interviewing and quoting fellow writer Eros AKB: 'Some seem to not have any respect for those that obtained the space prior to them. I think that in the future there will be a fight for the space between the wheatpaste/stencil artists and the graffiti artists' (Muyskens 2012). Neither writer seems to appreciate the profound irony that the stencil is essentially an egalitarian format, an artistic practice that is firmly rooted in the notion of community (Howze 2008: 8). Furthermore as a practice that can be readily, if not expertly, 'mastered' by all, it can constitute what commentators such as Emily Truman (2010) have described as an 'informal document of citizenship' which links the originator with the wider community through the act of 'think[ing] up an idea, put[ting] it on a piece of paper or plastic, cut[ting] it out and paint[ing] it somewhere' (Howze 2008: 8).

Thus, while maintaining his reputation to shock, engage or amuse, Banksy (and his precursors) have radically validated the conventions and graphic language of the stencil. In so doing they have been able to maintain a reputation as artists who can mimic an 'official' and utilitarian iconography but 'cleverly mock it by subverting meaning through the artful juxtaposition of image and text' (Morrison 2007; Truman 2010) but also by irreverently remixing its codes, icons and graphic integrity.

It is tempting to mourn the passing of an era of innovative and engaging graffiti or street art that has been dominated by the graphic line and irreverent insignia. Perhaps we should also be welcoming the twenty-first century opportunities for counterculture commentary, an art that

remains energetic and didactic but adopts filmic or performative conventions to convey its mixed ideologies. As Banksy's team demonstrated in New York, a third of the 'residency' output took non-graphic forms – advertising iconography was extrapolated to an actor cleaning the shoes of a fibre-glass po-faced Ronald McDonald; installations travelled the city in trucks; cinderblock debris was recycled in a poignant sphinx head tribute to the Middle East; and messages and images were conveyed by Instagram, Twitter and a faux audio guide. Stencilling, once a staple of his message, was relegated to quick 'hit and run' cameos. Graphic language of the street was neither enriched nor extended through the residency, and more broadly Banksy's recent work eschews innovations in the drawn mark, though as has been pointed out in this article many other street artists, and those part of the 'post-graffiti' subculture (Merrill 2015: 373), have harnessed the graphic immediacy of the stencil to catalyse and reactivate their aesthetic.

Banksy's shift to film and installation, and the ready absorption of his contemporaries into the gallery system, offer compelling evidence of the counterculture becoming a further part of the main-stream, 'street art' now mutating into (and shaping) the expanded field of contemporary fine art practice. Banksy's work has shifted into film, towards a temporal aesthetic (rather than temporary), preferring non-graphic art forms that cannot be easily ripped off, copied or repeated ad nauseam. Is he (and his accomplices) throwing down a challenge to the mainstream in its new 'public streets' with a generation of 'weaponry' – cheap video, demotic photography, social media – that assures an instant global reach? Yet, having re-established the stencil as a valid form of unauthorized inscrip-tion, Banksy will observe that inscribing the streets through stencilling is a very current practice internationally, embraced and extended by a diverse body of artists, blending the distinctions between street and gallery. Further work needs to be done on the diverse graphic language of graffiti and its many subcategories, its inventive and mutating use of script, stencil and signature; but it is clear that drawing will continue to have a central place in counterculture expression.

Acknowledgements

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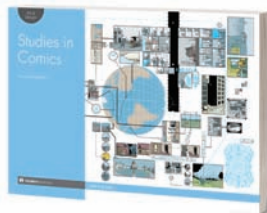
Studies in Comics

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