



**“Pervasive Pseudonyms: Banksy’s Faceless Art in
Contemporary Landscapes”**

By Sarah Williams

The Undergraduate Research Writing Conference

• 2020 •

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey



RUTGERS
THE STATE UNIVERSITY
OF NEW JERSEY

Sarah Williams

Professor Dawn Lilley

Auto & Mem - Research Paper Final Draft

5/6/19

Pervasive Pseudonyms: Banksy's Faceless Art in Contemporary Landscapes

I. Introduction

The Contemporary Art scene is a hotbed of political unrest, socioeconomic commentary, and ideations of collectivity. All of these facets perpetuate myths about the identity of artists, confining them to four distinct categories: the starving artist, the Cinderella artist, the sellout, and the loner. These personas are emblematic, and they dominate our concept of what art is, how it is evaluated, and who can become successful within the industry. These stringent personality constructs have forced artists to evolve and become entrepreneurs of self; their new objective is to define the experience of people in their immediate communities as opposed to just demonstrating their interpretations of it. What many critics fail to consider is that there is a fifth identity in art, one which bleeds into all of the others due to its innate multidimensionality, that being the anonymous artist. I use Banksy, a prolific English graffiti artist, as a case study because his stencil work and installations are wrought with satirical underpinnings of class structure, social modes that have now come to benefit him due to his infamy. His identity is directly tied to his anonymity in art and life, for the two cannot exist as separate entities. Anonymity has allowed him to critique without becoming himself part of the criticism. The subjectivity of art and lack of universality in criteria for taste and value make his influence more substantial. Banksy's works serve to emphasize the power of the unknown frontier in art.

This hidden dimension of anonymity is now akin to performance; as such it has altered the world's understanding of different types of fine art.

In this paper, I will be synthesizing postmodernism and class theory to evaluate the inextricable links between anonymity, agency, and identity, taking into account the development of qualitative judgment in modern art. Being that there is an entirely new order for artists today, I contend that the viewership of non-artists is heavily impacted by the sociological contexts of what is presented to the public. For my argument, I refer to my composite of theories as contemporary classicism. This new theory can be understood as a juxtaposition of the six social classes in the United States including upper class, new money, middle class, working class, working poor, and those at the poverty level, with technological advancements, increased representation, and a heightened global outlook, all of which are common tenants of postmodernism. I first establish the intricacies of these theoretical frameworks, observing how they pertain to macro-political phenomenons like consumerism. I then utilize Geisbrecht and Levin's Theory of Psychoanalysis to illustrate how artists are successful in a highly commodified environment. I address how newer art forms like graffiti function, how artists attain agency, and why performativity has replaced the need for originality. To provide some background, I introduce two terms that are prevalent throughout this paper. Mimesis can be defined as "an emerging movement of critics, theorists, writers, and artists arguing that techniques of appropriation and quotation are inherent to the creative process" (Reynolds and Reynolds 2012). Tagging can be defined as a personalized signature in its most basic form. However, it has been expanded to include imagery. When I reference the hierarchy in the modern art market, I am referring to the high barriers to entry that galleries and dealers face at the top levels of buying and selling fine art due to the market share of auction giants, Sotheby's and Christie's.

II. Postmodernism: Consumerism and Mass-Production Era Art

Principles of capitalism have permanently altered people's perceptions of which objects are visually acceptable for artistic consumption. This has established a model by which artists can take financial advantage. An apple, a sundress, and a painting are all visually acceptable as an advent of consumerism. Everything is socially viable because artists bear the responsibility of defining what makes art. Even so, expansion of what is portrayed in artistic media has led to more inclusion in representation, spanning race, socioeconomics, gender, and sexuality. Artists have more power over channeling their perspectives into their mediums. As such the call to action is a series of events that are both initiated and supported by the artist to contextualize spaces that already exist in this economic climate; it is important to recognize this as a departure from the modernist abstraction popularized by theorists. Nancy Hanrahan's take on postmodernism's role is that "autonomy can and did coexist with the very concerted attack against it by artists themselves. Autonomy also coexists with commercialization, cooptation and capitalist production relations" (Hanrahan 403). Autonomy is not lost in art simply because representation grows to include commercialized images. The opposite is true. *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) is an excellent example of this. For the first time, an everyday item is a subject of fine art. This inclusion would not have been possible in a timeframe with a different philosophical framework. The above painting by Andy Warhol represents his drive as a pop artist. Mass imagery is art meant for the masses which was revolutionary. The painting has 32 slightly different



cans which extend to the points of differentiation amongst people contained in a larger group. Popular culture icons are also commodified and shown in art as Warhol demonstrates with his silkscreen *Marilyn Monroe* (1962) above.

Culture is also manufactured although it is not a product in a conventional sense. Consumers are categorized and labeled according to their ultimate buying power, so it only fits that they are depicted in art like Duane Hanson's *Supermarket lady* (1969). The photorealistic sculpture above illustrates how the average consumer would have looked. Hanson criticizes excess in this piece by making her overweight and filling her cart to the brim with processed foods. He leaves it open to the viewer although he does imply



that if her cart were larger, she would purchase more. "There is a kind of idealizing energy that draws people to art. It might even be argued that there is a *need for identity* and that art in the Western world, and in many cultures, has been expected to answer this need" (Geisbrecht and Levin 1). This communal spirit is exemplified by artworks that deal with the concept of ownership because they usually refer to ideas of status and classification of self. Opposite to the intentions of Warhol, Hanson sought to attack mass consumption by showing his negative impression of a real woman shopping. Regardless of motive, both artists render people and things that would have previously had no place in the art world. Contemporary classicism allows artists to explore how the post-war economic boom was affected by consumers and how those consumers had an influence over the dominant advertising imagery. The technological revolution is inspiring newer artists like Banksy to tackle these issues all over again. The first departure

here is that anonymity is a fixture in works of art created under these conditions. Contemporary classicism opposes the idea that “postmodern art is neither autonomous nor critical, but a facet of corporate capitalism regardless of the ways in which it borrows from the earlier avant-garde period” (Hanrahan 403). Autonomy can function because it is not reliant on a specific set of parameters for presentation. Newer art forms like tagging have demonstrated this.

III. Tagging: ‘Tactful Laziness’ as a Substantive Art Form

Tagging is the most common form of anonymous mimesis in existence. It also happens to be the most accessible art form for the majority of people spanning all class backgrounds. Tagging is an act of performance in public space that is necessary to the advancement of social equity for one reason: it breaks up the clutter of advertisements and other commercial imagery that civilians are otherwise bombarded with in urban areas. Graffiti art such as tagging is “fundamentally about unsanctioned public messages geared toward challenging the existing visual order and subverting corporate dominance by introducing new names into the cityscape” (Dar and Hunnicutt 5). Before one can delve into the nuances of graffiti in city environments, it is important to make certain distinctions. “Graffiti art is a social practice with aesthetic aspirations. In contrast, graffiti does not possess the same skilled, aesthetic intentions” (Dar and Hunnicutt 2). I have included an example of what is universally accepted as graffiti art (see Appendix A) and what is mere graffiti (see Appendix B). Since this act of creating graffiti is mostly completed in secrecy, graffiti artists must establish an anonymous identity second to their real life to create. “Anonymity is at the crux of a graffiti writer’s identity, as graffiti writers are known for being unknown. Oddly enough, anonymity is the key to fame. Banksy remarked: “Nobody ever listened to me until they didn’t know who I was” ”(Dar and Hunnicutt 13). Very public imagery is thus introduced to the visual spectacle of a city by extremely private artists. Not only is this a

truly unique aspect of a subculture today, but it is also a testament to the power of anonymity in contextualizing the motivations of artists and defining the experience of non-artists. Secondly, the graffiti artist, unlike a regular artist, must communicate with other graffiti artists operating in their space which often translates to the same few walls within a couple of city blocks. Tags are a channel of collaborative output amongst these secret artists. This means graffiti is a group activity that exists at the intersection of public interaction and social steering.

Francis Russell suggests that through the nameless authorship of graffiti, street artists are able to reclaim autonomy and that “it is worth considering what forms of artistic resistance to the ideology of work can be found in contemporary practice and...whether or not a certain legacy, rhetorically marked by the name “Duchamp,” can be seen as critically active today” (Russell 3). Dar and Hunnicut would agree with Russell’s theory that tactful laziness in art results in creations that can be just as effective as thoughtful episodic-like works. In this case, tactful laziness is best exemplified by tagging because it is often perceived as being a shorter process than sculpting or painting. Being that the function of the tags is to provide a sense of community in the public sphere, I contend that the inclusivity of the activity itself also establishes its place as real art. The tags in this sense are an evolving performance that represents the real people who have to see them daily. Each new component on an existing wall or billboard accentuates this process of development and is the act of art itself. When considering how someone like Banksy factors into this, it is important to remember that his start unfolded on the streets of Bristol, England, but also that his anonymous career is one of the longest recorded. According to some participants of the study done by Dar and Hunnicut “the longer a [graffiti] writer is able to remain anonymous, the more others become curious about the [graffiti] writer’s true identity” (Dar and Hunnicut 6). Although his stencil work is mostly premeditated and

elaborate, tagging at its core, still defines how we see him as an artist 25 years later. Society assigns meaning based on his persona to all of his works long before he physically produces them. This social meaning is extended solely because of his brand, a brand which was birthed out of tags. However, Banksy is much more than a graffiti artist. He creates aesthetically pleasing forms of public upheaval in many different shapes and sizes. He tags walls, but he also paints on canvas.

IV. Creating Valuation Metrics for New Art

Non-artists often confuse the criteria for value in the art world as being wholly subjective and based on the personal whim of those who view it. While shifting social discourses have impacted the art community, catapulting those like Banksy to fame, there has always been a consistency in the value of classical art. To a certain extent, the works of old masters will still be heralded as the level that new artists should strive to meet. Although the value of canonical works by the greats are established to be priceless, we as a society accept whatever sticker price is ultimately agreed upon at private auction. In considering modern, postmodern, and now contemporary art, there has been a mental shift to encompass the novelty of new artworks. So it is of the utmost importance for me to determine how value is perceived when the length of time and popularity is not as much of a factor if it is at all. The first thing to reconcile is if there is any continuity of the great works and these pieces that are created today. Esplund answered this very question when he implied that a painting should be likened to a human being's biological makeup. "An artwork is a living organism. If you visually break down a work of art into its various components and systems, you will begin to understand how each of the functions of its elements and how those elements work together in harmony, just as you would if you were learning gross anatomy or dissecting a body. In this way, you can begin to see not just what an artwork looks like, but how

it's structured, what its elements and systems do, how they interrelate, and how they contribute to the life of the artwork as a whole” (Esplund 2019). Art is given an established value based on this life that the work exudes, that life should be representative of the community in which it is exhibited. Anonymity in this regard is thus a means of producing the unconventional, and more importantly, that which is controversial. Again, this is an extension of actual life which is incredibly complex, giving new meaning to the art imitating life debate.

A street artist’s capacity to impact the local and national art scene is completely dependent on a few distinct factors. I narrow the scope to a specific area like St. Louis, Missouri based on a study conducted by McCall. “Because the St. Louis art world is not recognized nationally, St. Louis is not important nationally in the creation of artistic value.” (McCall 37). The reason that New York City, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles do not have this problem is that they have no shortage of places where visitors can experience local art. Now layering anonymity into this, it should be noted, that art without a face can easily go unnoticed in an area like this if not properly curated. Banksy's fame is in large part due to the marketing of supreme art powers, and I elaborate on this in my section titled *Virality of Performance*. “Without an art world of any kind, artistic value is created under different circumstances. But if alternative means are available, artistic value can be created, even without the support of a strong art market” (McCall 41). These circumstances are that there must be an art identity attached and extended to the works produced in a certain area, individual artists must establish their motivations for production, and unfortunately, artists in areas like these usually require some academic verification of ability, most notably holding the post of professor at the university level. "The St. Louis case suggests ways of studying art and artists in other provincial cities: by looking for the alternative means of creating artistic value, especially art schools, and faculties, and alternative means of achieving

artistic status, especially direct participation in the national art market” (McCall 42). Schools, Libraries, Municipal Courts, etc.. can be the locations in which the community is informed of art. The thought that art can only be made on a wall and shown in a gallery is reductive considering “the behavior of the art world, and our attitude toward the articles, actions, and discourses within it, are governed by a powerful social force, and that there is a particular way in which that force has been shaped and inflected by the cultural evolution of the art world” (Geisbrecht and Levin 7). However, the thought that only an artist can create art is the standard by which artists like Banksy are separated from artisans or individuals who paint pictures. There is no art, and fundamentally, there is no value, without intention. This is more important in environments like St. Louis where the art world is still small and new.

V. Establishing Agency in 21st Century Art

Art in the present day has been redefined by some to include ‘shortcut’ methods and reproduction. The consequences of this re-creativity, otherwise known as mimesis, are twofold: (1) artistic theft disenfranchises other artists, contradicting the thought that this form of expression can be and ought to be conducive to community, and (2) this idea champions the thought that re-creativity is a sufficient replacement for just plain creativity. “Not only are the concepts of originality and innovation obsolete, they’ve *always* been myths” (Reynolds and Reynolds 2012). Remixes and mashups as many non-artists know them are not new concepts. What is new is the idea that artists can do the job of a curator and retain the title of a creator. If this new wave of art is simply about making connections establishing if art is "good" or "bad" becomes an impossible feat, and there will be no need for the label of genius. Every single work will be a derivative of one that preceded it, and with this the requirements for mastery or innovation in all art are abandoned. A lot of art that is reproduced and targeted towards this kind

of conceptualism exhibits the same "banality in their points: Consumerism is bad. Sexism is bad. Censorship is bad. Corporations do not have your interests in mind. Art collectors are rich, mean, corrupt people who commodify art and use it for their own ends" ("Hans Haacke: Art or Punditry?" 2000). Anonymity is the vehicle which enables artists to criticize these institutions and cling to ideals of mimesis. This movement is replacing originality in art because anonymity has rendered accountability irrelevant. These artists establish agency for themselves when they incite social revolts via their re-creations because conventional authorship in art is endangered. The competitiveness of the market only serves to exacerbate this. "The art market can be viewed as a pyramid. At the broad base, the market is relatively competitive, since supply is abundant, entry is free, the product is homogeneous, and sellers seek to differentiate similar goods; competition hinges on variety rather than on price" (Zorlini 61). Banksy has always recycled symbolism from popular culture in his art to challenge social norms. His cultural resonance is in great part due to the use of specific imagery that is not an original and unique design. He has reaped the monetary benefits of contrarianism through remixing that which already exists in the public space. Therefore, inconsistencies in valuation methods in art are taken advantage of by creators like Banksy. Throughout history, the profile of artists has been rooted in this glorification of misfits and outsiders who champion a David-and-Goliath-like battle of righteousness over profitability in art. The art world is established as the big bad villain in Banksy's narrative as it is a contingent extension of the exclusive, capitalist arm of society. Unlike my analysis of the relationship between anonymity and intention, agency in art is not about altruism at all. Much of Banksy's allure is contained within the six letters of his name. His pseudonym is a powerful statement about the art world today in itself. Everything is about money, and he is not exempt from that just because of his reputation. By remaining unknown, he

can control his narrative in the media discourse, but also avoid responsibility for possible hypocrisy.

VI. Virality of Performance

The marketability of art matters more than the actual produced content due to a rise of event culture. Performativity has transcended conventional restraints and made works of art more valuable. Banksy demonstrates this to be true in two ways. He recently won a copyright lawsuit



over merchandise that was being sold using his imagery and name in an Italian museum. Critics have questioned his legal action due to the circumstantial irony at play. One of his seminal wall pieces, which I have included above, criticizes copyright because of its infringement on the accessibility of art to the public. This begs the question of whether or not the stances he took as an unknown artist were only important because he was, in fact, unrecognizable to the public and the art world. In keeping with this argument, his early political agenda may be in name only at this point in his career. Since the “characteristics of modern artists are autonomy and subjectivity and, at the same time, a dependence on an anonymous art market,” Banksy is fully equipped to parade himself as an art anarchist regardless of what his truth is (Muller-Jentsch 157). In an attempt to disavow the hierarchal modern art market mentioned earlier, Banksy destructed his 2006 painting of *Girl with Balloon* after it was officially sold at Sotheby’s London in 2018. Now considered to be a live art intervention, it has since been renamed *Love is in the Bin*. The name change represents the work becoming an entirely new piece in a matter of seconds. Banksy claims to have installed the shredder when he created the painting if it was ever

sold at auction. This is yet another element of performativity.

"The suitability of the object in question is already present in the object as it is, the artist need do no more than select the object. Despite this, the object must also be "made" into an artwork through this process of selection and does not become an artwork until the selection has occurred " (Russell 6). The painting is 'made,' and the shredder is 'ready.' This is an alternative spin on what Marcell Duchamp, the creator of



'ready-mades,' would have considered to be pure. However, it is one object that becomes another once Banksy selects and disrupts it. To the right is a photograph of Duchamp with his sculpture *The Wheel* at an exhibition. Banksy understood that his destruction would cause intrigue that would drive up the price to a record \$1.4 million while bringing him more attention.

Love is in the Bin is being questioned by Art critics due to inconsistencies with the shredding of the piece. It would have been virtually impossible for no one at Sotheby's to know this would



occur as indicated by the employee's amusement, and the positioning of the piece as the auction's closer. It has been suggested that the premier auction house came up with this idea themselves and paid Banksy to take the credit in an

attempt to shock spectators. This instantaneous performance art benefitted all parties involved, as the work sold for a record amount of money, Banksy was praised for his act of rebellion, and the crowd experienced a once in a lifetime art intervention. For this to classify as a work of

performance art according to how they are understood, Banksy required some segment of the public so that this could occur in real time. Since I have established that art is about intent in contemporary classicism and Banksy remarked on Instagram that he planned for this moment, it is evident that he defined audience parameters to be anyone who attended this sale. He also met the prerequisite of performance by instigating a defiant action, that being the shredding. Banksy authored a statement about the value of art which speaks to performance's unique capability of altering expectation in art communities. If it is the case that Banksy, Sotheby's, and the unnamed collector were all aware of this spectacle beforehand, then their collaboration is directly responsible for yielding the high exit value. It seems that "the aesthetic norms and standards for art objects themselves are dictated by the seemingly arbitrary speech acts of agents and agencies" and in this case, Sotheby's did not have to say anything at all (Geisbrecht and Levin 5). This is an indication that curated marketing can be built around live demonstrations and incite performativity. Ten years before this sale, the notion of making live art transactional was beyond imagination. Utilizing a brand to poise art would have been observed as tacky. Not only is Sotheby's an established brand, but Banksy also has an abundance of brand equity. *Love is in the Bin* has demonstrated performance art's ability to undermine the traditional and limited system of how art is sold. Marketing, more so than art expertise and knowledge, indicates the value of art to the public now. If promotional power outweighs artistic motivation when creating a new work, then services that dealers are meant to provide to art consumers are upturned. This is especially true due to the role that anticipation and response of the masses plays. The consensus of the people guides how art is shown in museums, galleries, and of course, the auction houses. Art presentation and sanctity will evolve further due to the emergence of event culture. Society seems to prefer art through a social exchange as Nancy Weiss Hanrahan mentioned. If so,

exhibits could become irrelevant and even extinct, raising new questions about who ultimately determines the value of performance art like Banksy's piece.

VII. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I reference the public sphere because the bulk of viewership (by non-artists) of anonymous art occurs in urban spaces. The visual spectacle for human consumption has implications more significant than aesthetic ones. Private artists prove that social spaces affect art just as art has an imposed effect on those same places. In an attempt to start addressing some of the new questions that will inevitably arise from this paper, I include some additional works by Banksy which he completed on the Israeli Wall, a public barrier, for more reference (see Appendix C-E).

Contemporary classicism and psychoanalysis illuminate how and why artists like Banksy operate. For him, anonymity is an instigator of interest but also a justifier of ingenuity. He challenges problematic conventions as opposed to just regurgitating imagery from popular culture. However, he has shown himself to be capable of empowering that imagery. Banksy is actively deconstructing the paradigms of traditional art, trying to move physical spectacles that encompass his work and less about his secret identity. However, the opposite tends to play out in the art world. Instead of honing in on the intricacies of art pieces and debating their meaning, those who can afford to clamor to own works they feel have a fantastic value. "There seems now to be a different kind of demand for art, which is mediated less by cultivated taste than by shrewd business sense" (Geisbrecht and Levin 1). The thought of owning something remnant of the most renowned vandal in the world is far more appealing than supporting more conventional forms of activism or bidding on a piece that one enjoys looking at. This allows artists who reach a particular status to contradict themselves and their original belief systems with no one to

publicly call them into account which makes this systematically easier. Anonymity has replaced individual requirements for real innovation in art, putting the sanctity of art for art's sake at stake. However, it is not all negative as anonymity will always be a pivotal double-edged sword in art. Anonymous art is not a new trend. It is quite old. For centuries creatives have created without necessarily taking credit or being allowed to do so. This has not diminished the contribution that such works have made to the aesthetic affinity that art has been defined by throughout different periods. Non-artists do not need to know an artist's personality traits or appearance to resonate with the humanity embodied in their work. These pieces have the power to transcend time and space because the lesser characteristics of individuals do not tether them. In 2019, tags take the place of prehistoric cave paintings, but one thing is sure: artists produce every variant of 'vision' and vandalism in an attempt to leave their mark.

Works Cited

- Russell, F. (2018). Tagging as lazy technique: On the politics of art as work. *Space and Culture*, 21(2), 120-128. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1206331217733423>
- Parry, N. (2006). British graffiti artist, Banksy, hacks the wall. *Thresholds*, (32), 90-93. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1429206240?accountid=13626>
- Hanrahan, N. W. (2000). The institution of art in postmodernity: Autonomy and critique. *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 14(2), 401-409. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/60403100?accountid=13626>
- Giesbrecht, H., & Levin, C. (2012). *Art in the Offertorium: Narcissism, Psychoanalysis, and Cultural Metaphysics* (p. xi, 268 pp.). Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi.
- Muller-Jentsch, W. (2005). Artists and artist groups. sociological perspectives on precarious profession. *Berliner Journal Fur Soziologie*, 15(2), 159-177. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/60019782?accountid=13626>
- McCall, M. M. (1977). Art without A market: Creating artistic value in A provincial art world. *Symbolic Interaction*, 1(1), 32-43. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/si.1977.1.1.32>
- Dar, A., & Hunnicutt, G. (2017). Famously anonymous artistic outlaws: The negotiation of dual identities among former graffiti writers. *Identity*, 17(4), 207-223. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2017.1379903>
- Zorloni, A. (2005). Structure of the Contemporary Art Market and the Profile of Italian Artists. *International Journal of Arts Management*, 8(1), 61-71. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41064863>
- Reynolds, S., & Reynolds, S. (2012, October 06). Why Doesn't Anyone Believe in Genius Anymore? Retrieved from <https://slate.com/culture/2012/10/against-recreativity-critics-and-artists-are-obsessed-with-remix-culture.html>
- Hsu, H. (2010, May 17). When Street Art is Neither. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/05/when-street-art-is-neither/56246/>
- Esplund, L. (2019, January 16). To Understand Art, Think Biology. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/01/art-looking-living-organism/580177/>
- Hans Haacke: Art or Punditry? (2000, March 17). Retrieved from <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2000/03/hans-haacke-art-or-punditry.html>
- 129 Amazing Banksy Graffiti Artworks With Locations. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://us.canvasartrocks.com/blogs/posts/70529347-121-amazing-banksy-graffiti-artworks-with-locations>
- MoMa Learning. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/andy-warhol-campbells-soup-cans-1962

Appendix A – Graffiti Art: The Beatles



Appendix B – Regular Graffiti



**Appendix C – Unnamed Israeli
Wall Print 1 (two boys at play), 2005**



Appendix D – Rage, Flower Thrower



**Appendix E – Unnamed Israeli
Wall Print 2 (perforated cutout), 2005**

