

Interest v. Principal

A brief review of a book about Banksy

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2019

a review of

This Is Not a Photo Opportunity: The Street Art of Banksy

Artist: Banksy, Photographs by Martin Bull. PM Press, 2014 pmpress.org

Anonymous England-based vandal Banksy, most known for graffiti-like works across the planet recently made news with his latest prank, by destroying it, or rather by it destroying itself. Upon selling at Sotheby's, an art auction in London, *Girl with Red Balloon*, autonomously shredded itself before bidders. This was a departure from previous works, which are displayed in Martin Bull's 2014 book, *This Is Not a Photo Opportunity*. There is a problem with Bull's book. You discover the issue when you approach the text more critically than you would a coffee table book, which might be all that this is.

This isn't a wholesale dismissal. Coffee table books are not always uninteresting and can be challenging, even if they cry out for action and print manifestos. Coffee table books do not make unique claims or proposals, and this book doesn't either.

I'm not discounting some of Bull's specific insight on Banksy's process, but it seems little more than supplemental text for the salient photos and documentation that make up the bulk of this volume.

Also, coffee table books are enhanced by a coffee table, at arm's length within a room for entertainment and transitory dialogue. Is this the ideal location and occasion for viewing works by Banksy, our generation's Duchamp? Entertainment and transitory dialogue?

The 20th century art critic, John Berger, would be the first to tell you that paintings no longer require pilgrimage.

Paintings have a secular mobility due to reproduction, their original location has been struck and cropped out and their new frame is one that is the backdrop of wherever that reproduction happens to be when your eye finds it.

If the artist's studio, cathedral, monastery, or museum all recede into a transparent landscape behind the image over time, then what happens when we cannot separate the image from the precise surface and specific architecture that frame Banksy's images? His frames of brick and mortar and space and light attempt this same recession as Caravaggio's assumed studio does once the image enters the sequence of reproduction.

Banksy's work, like those found in *This Is Not a Photo Opportunity*, can only appear in situ, a specific location, and the more they are removed from the site, the less they become what they actually are. As on a tablet, screen, phone, or the pages of a coffee table book.

Banksy's decisions on where to place his slogans are as significant as Robert Smithson deciding on Utah's Great Salt Lake, Spiral Jetty, which is surely Smithson's most magnificent piece, a significant representation of landscape art. The earthwork sculpture, is a 1,500-foot-long, 15-foot-wide coil jutting out from the shore of the lake.

The film documentation of "Jetty" only helps to propose how fractured representations are, and the actual work is one that can't be experienced ever, save for perhaps a surveying plane ride each season over multiple years from

different vantages. The scale is so wrong and disorienting in all the photos from a simple internet search that one barely has an understanding of how it must actually look.

Each thumbnail is different from the last and yet still uniquely wrong, proposing that Smithson maybe engineered something purposefully undocumentable in the same way that Great Salt Lake is. An issue of scale governed by nature, perception managed by humans, and reproduction facilitated by machines.

Banksy's work displayed here, borrows from the internet's instinctive debasement of everything but surface and slogan. His work makes souvenirs of the built world, a similar technology historically used by kitsch, the thinning of meaning as in the meme.

Memes want to exist outside of capital while remaining interested in politics, celebrity, and the bourgeoisie. Memes aim to capture all the meaning, leaving nothing substantive. The meme simultaneously affirms and disavows. Memes are how we know that a thing/thought/image belongs to everyone, and that acknowledgment is when that thing is no longer wanted, some relinquishment of property.

Maybe graffiti is anti-labor before it is anti-property. Or those two "anti" converge and hope to birth a meme. When all the things are slaughtered, the blood from the killing floor is power washed, sanitized, the floor is scrubbed anew between each shift. It is labor of one shift that censors that violence, the middle transformative space between agriculture and product. That middle space is graffiti's utopia, the smell of iron riding behind the smell of bleach, the evidence of lives lived which is the urgency to make marks.

If the internet is absorbing printed language can it do the same to Banksy's preferred substrate: buildings and space? Banksy's works require the interior of the space a bit more than the internet (for structural purposes), but it's just another reproducible surface, creating a sequence that is entirely facsimile and divorced from the positive from which it's cast.

A non-spatial landscape of language and image where there is no interiority, just slogan. Banksy's graffiti contemporaries claim that he's not a graffiti artist, since he's not dismantling the notion of property in the constructed world. Once a Banksy is made, that building folds inwards out of a sensory reality with a different set of terms than our visual reality.

The interest, interest in the capital/bank account sense, Banksy is accruing through publications like *This Is Not a Photo Opportunity*, metaphorically, isn't the anti-property anchor affixed to graffiti, but the anti-entropy part, the internet-like part.

The principle that Banksy won't pay back is the loan from his predecessors who have paid their debts of property, geography and scale. Banksy's mortgage yields this tepid collection of reproductions. Memes before the meme, a collection of tail eating meta snakes or simply a database for the next forthcoming volume for the coffee table.

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Fifth Estate #404, Summer, 2019

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