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Bringing it to the street: The Political Efficacy of Banksy's Brand in "Better Out Than In"

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Margaret Henry

Abstract

Bringing it to the Street: The Political Efficacy of Banksy's 'Brand' in *Better Out Than In*¹

Building on Antonio Gramsci's notion of the "organic intellectual," Stuart Hall proposes "instituting a genuine cultural and critical practice, which is intended to produce some kind of organic intellectual political work, which does not try to inscribe itself in the overarching meta-narrative of achieved knowledges, within the institutions" (44). While trying to resolve in my own mind the question of just what an "organic intellectual" practice would look like, the highly controversial street artist Banksy hit New York city as well as the news, turning the city into an art gallery for the masses with an "exhibition" he entitled, *Better Out Than In*. The piece that received the most press was the op-ed article he wrote that was rejected by the *New York Times* which exclaimed, "The attacks of September 11th were an attack on all of us and we will live out our lives in their shadow. But it's also how we react to adversity that defines us. And the response?.....104 floors of compromise" (Banksy, *Better Out Than In*).

Banksy's critique of the new World Trade Center seems to mirror Judith Butler's contention that, in its response to the attacks of 9/11, the United States has "miss[ed] an opportunity to redefine itself as part of a global community" (XI). In any case, Banksy's piece, as well as the entire exhibit, has elicited immense public attention. In a recent press conference Mayor Bloomberg stated in response to Banksy's New York residency:

But look, graffiti does ruin people's property and it's a sign of decay and

loss of control. Art is art. And nobody's a bigger supporter of the arts than I

¹ The website has been taken down but you can still see it by entering the url (www.banksyny.com) into the search tab at:<http://archive.org/web/> (The Wayback Machine Internet Archive).

am. I just think there are some places for art and there are some places [not for] art. And you running up to somebody's property or public property and defacing it is not my definition of art. Or it may be art, but it should not be permitted. And I think that's exactly what the law says. (Landers, Elizabeth and Watson, Ivan)

Bloomberg's response is interesting in that it brings to light issues of authority/protest, authenticity/inauthenticity, private/public, and accessibility/exclusivity. The "loss of control" caused by graffiti is an undermining of hegemonic influences and is exactly what Banksy strives for. Banksy paints, sculpts, and stages performances on private spaces to reclaim them from the corporate onslaught of consumerism and to make art available to the people. By existing in the city rather than the gallery, Banksy's work is found unexpectedly, subsequently forcing one to engage with both its political content as well as its form, if only for a moment. Art's audience is no longer limited to the intellectual echelon but is now accessible to the multitude in a form they can comprehend without first taking an art history class. Banksy, and by extension his art, works, as J. Jack Halberstam contends art should, "with others, with a class of people in Marxist terms, to sort through the contradictions of capitalism and to illuminate the oppressive forms of governance that have infiltrated everyday life" (*The Queer Art of Failure* 17).

One major criticism of Banksy has been his overwhelming success within capitalist society. His pieces sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars, a fact that many believe undermines his ability to effectuate change. In this paper, I intend to argue that Banksy's continued critique of consumerist culture, most recently illuminated in *Better Out than In*, indicates his unwavering devotion to undermining hegemonic power structures and, consequently, firmly defines him as

the epitome of the authentic street artist. Banksy has no financial need to create art, much less illegal, politically controversial, highly criticized art. In fact, the only rational reason to continue along such a disparaging path is to embody the organic intellectual. When Lauren Collins asked him in an interview conducted via email, “Why do you do what you do?,” Banksy replied ironically, “I originally set out to try to save the world, but now I’m not sure I like it enough” (*The New Yorker* 30).