

Banksy: Artist and Social Critic

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[1Banksy official logo] For the artist, social commentator, and general provocateur known as Banksy, nothing is sacred. Since the 1990s, Banksy has generated a reputation as the most controversial street artists working, and an entire subculture has grown up around his works. In 2010, Time magazine selected him for its list of the world's 100 most influential people, along with such luminaries as Barack Obama, Steve Jobs, and Lady Gaga. In this paper, I intend to examine the origins of street art in the world of graffiti and the place of street art in the larger context of the visual arts, and to conduct a representative, though necessarily incomplete, survey of the work of this captivating artist.

[2Cornbread] In 1967 in Philadelphia, a fourteen-year-old kid named Darryl McCray – aka “Cornbread” – made an effort to impress a girl named Cynthia by writing “Cornbread loves Cynthia” in spray paint on walls all over the north side of the city. Cornbread was not the first teenager to spray paint his city's walls. [3Dukes-Graffiti] As far back as the 1930s gang members in Los Angeles and other cities were using spray painted signatures and visual motifs to demarcate their territories. However, the love-struck graffiti writer named Cornbread had invented a new activity known as “tagging,” a basic form of graffiti in which the writer signs his highly stylized name or signature using spray paint. What was most unique about this new invention was the fact that Cornbread's graffiti “almost single-handedly took the idea of tagging away from gangs . . . and transformed it into an attention-grabber available to anyone.”¹

[4tagging 2 athens Greece] From that point on, the writing of one's nickname in a stylized fashion on as many surfaces as possible became a way for young, disadvantaged young people to express themselves to a large audience, a way for them to shout, “I am here and I can do something that you can't” to a society which otherwise ignored their existence. The creation of graffiti has always been a illegal act and has involved any number of criminal enterprises in its

execution: stealing the spray paint (an act known to the graffiti artist as “inventing” the paint), trespassing to access a suitable “canvas,” and defacing the property of others.

[5Gang graffiti eradication] The public response to graffiti has always been largely negative. Graffiti writers have typically been seen as vandals and their activities as destructive and anti-social. Authorities have viewed graffiti as a criminal enterprise to be squashed, and huge sums of public funds have been dedicated to thwarting the graffiti artist and erasing the products of his efforts. This reaction is based on the assumption that the impulse that drives the graffiti writer is a destructive one. However, as Norman Mailer points out in his 1974 essay, “The Faith of Graffiti,” “in the environment of the slum, the courage to display your self is your only capital, and crime is the productive process which converts such capital to the modern powers of the world, ego and money.”² In other words, in the mind of the graffiti writer, creating graffiti provides only avenue available to elevate graffiti writer above his downtrodden station and to endow him with some status. In addition, the aesthetic of the graffiti artist is such that he sees his work not as the defacement of a pristine cityscape, but the enhancement of it. To the graffiti artist, a wall with graffiti is simply more beautiful than one without it. [6Throw up 1] For the graffiti artist, it is a failing of the general public to be able to distinguish between the scribbles on a men’s room wall and the artistry of a well-executed “throw-up” or “piece.” (by way of explanation, “throw-up” and “piece” are terms to refer to a work of graffiti in which the “tag” is embellished with multiple colors, fantastical design elements, cartoon characters, and other visual effects, such as those depicted here.)

In addition to the satisfaction of having one’s existence validated through the very public presence of one’s graffiti, graffiti artists almost universally admit that the thrill of the act of creation – [7Dangerous bridge] of gaining access to forbidden, hard-to-reach, and sometimes

downright dangerous sites; [8max res default] of evading the guardians of those sites for the many hours it takes to create a piece; and of escaping unmolested – provides another impetus for this activity. Graffiti writers tend to see themselves as outlaws, defying convention and regulation, working outside the boundaries of acceptable society, and harboring a world-view that challenges the mainstream. This spirit of rebellion and iconoclasm is embodied in the messages of many of the street artists who have gained notoriety over the past couple of decades, including the artist known as Banksy.

But early graffiti was intended primarily for an audience of peers. Graffiti artists cared little about what people like you or me thought of their work. What did matter was how other graffiti artists and the members of their immediate social groups viewed their creations, and the only criticism that mattered was that rendered by other graffiti artists.

Along the way, a couple of things happened: graffiti began to be appreciated by art collectors and the owners of art galleries and the nature of graffiti began to change from spray-painted taggings to a wider range of media forms. As the variety of art forms grew, the term graffiti began to have less currency and the broader term, “street art,” came into use.

The term “street art” has come to refer to “any art developed in public spaces – that is, ‘in the streets’ – though the term usually refers to art of an illicit nature, (as opposed to, for instance, government or community art initiatives). The term can include traditional graffiti artwork, though it is often used to distinguish modern public-space artwork from traditional graffiti and the overtones of gang territoriality and vandalism associated with it.”³ [9Stenciling] In addition to graffiti, street art may include such media as stenciling, [10Wheatpasting] wheatpasting (the use of homemade wallpaper paste to affix a pre-printed image onto a flat surface), [11Sticker art] and sticker art, the application of pre-printed, adhesive-backed stickers posted in a quick-and-

dirty style called “slap tagging.” [12Olec charging bull yarn bombing] The unauthorized installation of sculptural objects and the physical alterations of such elements of the cityscape as street signs, traditional public sculptures, bike racks, fire hydrants, sidewalk grates, etc., are also included under the rubric of street art. (You may recognize this image as the Charging Bull sculpture by artist Arturo DiModica – also known as the Wall Street Bull – which a group of street artists surreptitiously covered one night with knitting in a process known as “yarn bombing.”)

With the evolution of graffiti into street art, the impetus driving the artists has changed dramatically. While many street artists began as graffiti writers, these artists are now producing works intended to capture the attention of the public at large, as opposed to an insular set of their cronies. Their work, though sometimes cryptic and esoteric, typically carries messages that speak to an array of societal issues. The message of street art is almost universally anti-establishment and revolutionary to one degree or another. Indeed, the very act of creating street art is a poke in the eye to the stewards of the properties on which the artwork is created.

So where does the artist known as Banksy fit in to this world of street art? For that matter, where does street art fit into the larger world of the visual arts? Banksy is almost certainly the preeminent figure in the world of street art and has been for well over a decade. It is his name that is most widely associated with the movement and his work that commands the highest prices at the galleries and auction houses where artistic reputations are established. But Banksy can also be seen as a successor to a line of artists who have made their names by creating and exhibiting works outside the grand tradition of the visual arts established by Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Monet, Van Gogh, Picasso, and the others. Since the early 20th century, artists have been exhibiting works valued not so much because of the artistic elements embodied in the

works themselves (elements such as color, line, perspective, shape, texture, etc.), but rather because of the relationship of the art work to society. [13Duchamp Fontaine] In 1917, Marcel Duchamp mounted a common urinal on a pedestal, titled it “Fountain,” and attempted to exhibit it in a show at the Society of Independent Artists. Such objects, known as “ready made,” became a staple of art exhibitions, raising the question of whether the quality of the art object itself was truly at the heart of its value. Certainly, few would argue that the technical excellence of today’s street artists – as attractive, engaging, and well-produced as their work might be – approaches that of works like *Starry Night*, the *Mona Lisa*, or *Water Lilies*.

While street artists such as Banksy seem to possess an absolute commitment to the value of the opinions and ideas they express through their works, they have also made it a tenet of their movement to question the monetary and even artistic value of the works they themselves produce. [14I can’t believe] This piece by Banksy pokes fun at art collectors and consumers who are willing to spend six- and seven-figure amounts on street art or the works of other contemporary artists.

While street artists ridicule the art establishment and position themselves as rebels and renegades, many of them, Banksy included, have capitalized – sometimes against their will—on the interest shown in their work by gallery owners and art collectors. [15Obama hope] One high-profile example of a street artist entering the mainstream is a work by a young California stencilist, Shepard Fairey, who created the iconic “Hope” image used by the Obama campaign during the 2008 presidential campaign. This phenomenon is suggestive of the tremendous power that the world of commercial art and advertising has to coopt the iconoclastic street artist and drag him kicking and screaming into the mainstream.

Two other well-known artists must be mentioned in any consideration of street art as a significant sub-genre of contemporary visual art. [16Basquiat barefoot] The first is Jean-Michel Basquiat, the Haitian-born artist who began spray painting graffiti on buildings in Lower Manhattan in 1976, at the age of 16. [17Basquiat untitled 1981] Like many street artists, Basquiat's images embodied commentary on such social themes as racism, colonialism, and class struggle. He achieved significant success at an early age and very quickly made the move from the street to the gallery, enjoying lucrative partnerships with such famous gallery owners as Larry Gagosian and Mary Boone, and a series of moderately successful collaborations with Andy Warhol. [18Jean Michel Basquiat Boy . . .] Basquiat moved fluidly between the seedy milieu of the streets and the rarified world of international art investors. After a short but highly-successful career, Basquiat died of a drug overdose in 1988 at age 27.

[19Haring subway] Keith Haring, too, began his career on the streets of New York or, more accurately, in the subways, where in the late 1970s he began painting images in his highly recognizable style. [20Heritage of pride] Haring's work depicted a wide range of highly political themes involving concepts of birth, death, sexuality, and war. He was known for taking on subjects like apartheid, the crack cocaine epidemic, and AIDS awareness. [21Keith Haring ignorance fear] Haring's career was marked by high-profile collaborations with artists and performers like Warhol, Grace Jones, Madonna, and the aforementioned Jean-Michel Basquiat, [22Haring Absolut] and Haring enjoyed significant commercial success through the creation of pop art pieces influenced by consumer products such as Coca-Cola, Lucky Strike cigarettes, and Absolut vodka. Apropos of his beginnings as a street artist, he considered it his mission to break down the barriers between high and low art. Like Basquiat, Haring died young, in his case at age 31 from complications of AIDS.

In addition to these two, such artists as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol all employed representations of common objects, mass-media and comic book images, and consumer items in their works.⁴

It is evident, then, that Banksy and other street artists are working within a well-established tradition in which the ordinary or the mundane is elevated to the level of high art. In the case of the contemporary street artist, this tradition is one in which the artists frequently make self-deprecating and ironic comments about their own work and the work of others. At the same time, the themes of street art speak to some of the most vexing and momentous issues facing us today. Some of these topics will be illustrated as we consider individual works by Banksy in the discussion which follows.

[23Kissing cops] At the thematic core of Banksy's work is a contempt for authority in almost any form, a posture common among graffitiist and street artists. With Banksy, however, this contempt is balanced by a self-effacing willingness to mock the value and importance of his own work. [24Rat because I'm worthless] Given these facets of the artist's personality, it is perhaps appropriate that the image that Banksy has chosen as the main icon for his work is the rat.

[25Blek rat stencils] French stencilist, Xavier Prou (aka Blek le Rat) has been cited by Banksy as his mentor and a major inspiration, and there is a clear similarity between the two artists' styles. Says Banksy, "Every time I think I've painted something slightly original, I find out that Blek Le Rat has done it as well, only twenty years earlier."⁵ Blek le Rat began employing the rat image in the 1970s stating, "I began to spray some small rats in the streets of Paris because rats are the only wild animals living in cities, and only rats will survive when the human race disappears and dies out."⁶ [26Rat with roller] The appropriateness of this image as a

representative for a street artist seems obvious, since the rat “only comes out at night, is cunning and sneaky and usually ends up causing some sort of damage to people’s property.” [27Rat out of bed] Banksy himself has spoken directly to his choice of the rat as his most iconic image: “If you feel dirty, insignificant or unloved, then rats are a good role model. They exist without permission, they have no respect for the hierarchy of society, and they have sex 50 times a day.” At one point, someone pointed out to Banksy that “rat” is an anagram of “art.” In typical self-mocking style, Banksy explains, “I’d been painting rats for three years before someone said, ‘That’s clever, it’s an anagram of art,’ and I had to pretend I’d known that all along.”⁷

Beyond the ubiquitous rat stencils mentioned above, Banksy has produced a broad corpus of works that comment on a variety of social topics. [28Banksy One Nation Under CCTV] One of the artist’s greatest antagonisms is the extent to which authorities in the United Kingdom have employed closed circuit television cameras (collectively referred to as CCTV) to keep an eye on the populace. This work, titled “One Nation Under CCTV,” produced in London in 2008, features a depiction of a child artist rolling letters on the wall under the scrutiny of a watchful security guard who is filming the act. The significant irony in this work is that Banksy had to scale the wall and erect scaffolding in order to paint the piece which is located right next to a bank of CCTV cameras that failed to capture the artist in the act.

Banksy’s output is prodigious. He has been responsible for the creation of not only thousands of stenciled images placed on surfaces on at least four continents, but countless other gallery prints, sculptures, exhibitions, happenings, installations, album covers, and one Academy Award-nominated documentary film. [29Crimewatch UK] The bulk of his output has occurred since October thirteen years ago, when he strolled into the Tate Museum in London, disguised in a dark overcoat, scarf, and floppy hat, and surreptitiously mounted a modified, unsigned oil

painting which he had found in a London street market and which he titled “Crimewatch UK Has Ruined the Countryside for All of Us.” The work, which remained on the gallery wall for several hours, viewed by dozens of unquestioning museumgoers before being removed, was accompanied by a homemade explanatory placard that provided the name of the piece, the medium (oil on canvas), and an explanatory statement which read:

“It can be argued that defacing such an idyllic scene reflects the way that our nation has been vandalized by its obsession with crime and paedophilia, where any visit to a secluded beauty spot now feels like it may result in being molested or finding discarded body parts.”

[30Banksy in the Tate] The Tate prank was videotaped and photographed by one of Banksy’s partners in crime and posted to the internet, where it became widely disseminated, significantly broadening the public’s awareness of the artist and enhancing his reputation as an audacious trickster. In 2008, he pulled a similar stunt at the British Museum where he placed on exhibition a simulated primitive rock painting depicting a hunter pushing a shopping cart.

[31Primitive painting] This piece was in place for days before being discovered. In this instance, because of the increase in Banksy’s notoriety over the intervening five years since the Tate prank, the British Museum chose to accession this piece into its permanent collection rather than discard it. Banksy has also pulled off similar stunts in New York at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Museum of Natural History.

In 2009, Banksy returned to the museum world for one of the largest exhibitions he has ever produced. Desiring to generate some publicity for the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, the main art space in Banksy’s native city, the artist’s representatives approached the museum with a proposal to allow him and his team to convert the entire museum into a unique art installation

featuring Banksy's style of humorous, ironic, sometimes whimsical street art alongside the museum's permanent collection. With, perhaps, some trepidation, the museum acceded to the idea, and "overnight the museum was transformed into a menagerie of Unnatural History" – [32Bristol fish sticks] frozen fish sticks swimming in a fish bowl . . . [33Bristol lion] a stately, blood spattered lion standing over the costume of its former trainer. . . . [34Bristol gleaners] modified paintings placed in among the museum's collection of Old Masters, [35Bristol ice cream van] and, in the main entrance hall, a burnt-out ice cream truck that pumped out an eerie sound-track of warped tunes while a giant ice-cream cone melted on its roof. [36Bristol angel bust] All in all, the exhibition featured over 100 works by the artist. Banksy touted the exhibition as "the first show he had ever done where 'taxpayers' money is being used to hang up my pictures rather than to scrape them off.'"⁸ In fact, however, this exhibition was paid for almost entirely by Banksy, who saw it as his gift to the city that had nurtured him. Over the course of its four-week run, the exhibition had 111,285 visitors, nearly six times the number of visitors to the museum during that period in the previous year. Some patrons waited in line for seven hours to gain entrance to the show.

In 2006, Banksy invaded Los Angeles with his first large-scale exhibition in the United States, titled "Barely Legal." The show featured the usual collection of jokey, provocative, tongue-in-cheek social commentary: [37Barely Legal child] a "stark image of a television camera crew filming a child among ruins as the producer holds back aid workers to allow for just one more shot; [38Barely legal how's my bombing] a panel van with a notice on the back reading, "How's my bombing?" with an 800 number that links to a Navy recruiting office in Phoenix; [39Barely legal old masters] and the usual modified old masters' works. [40Barely legal elephant] But the centerpiece of the exhibition was a live elephant, painted red and

festooned with gold fleurs-de-lis to match the room's brocade wallpaper. The elephant was Banksy's rather heavy-handed reference to "the elephant in the room," the nature of which Banksy elucidated in a handout which read: "1.7 billion people have no access to clean drinking water. 20 billion people live below the poverty line. Every day hundreds of people are made to feel physically sick by morons at art shows telling them how bad the world is but never actually doing something about it. Anybody want a free glass of wine?"⁹ The show ran for only three days, but was visited by an estimated 30,000 people, including many Hollywood luminaries, most of whom purchased art. It is estimated that Banksy cleared some three million pounds in total sales from the exhibition.

Perhaps Banksy's most audacious work to date was done in the Palestinian territories, where in 2005 he took the highly controversial, 425-mile-long West Bank barrier wall as his canvas. In Banksy's opinion, the wall "essentially turns Palestine into the world's largest open prison." During his visit there, Banksy created nine images along the barrier while braving the hostile attention of the Israeli security forces patrolling the wall, who occasionally fired shots over the artist's head and pointed guns in his direction. "Much of the art he produced on the Wall visually subverts and draws attention to its nature as a barrier by incorporating images of escape — [41Palestine Balloon Debate] a girl being carried [over the wall] by a bunch of balloons, [42Palestine Escapism] a little boy painting a rope ladder. [43Palestine hole in wall] Other pieces reveal a virtual reality that underlines the negation of humanity that the barrier represents — [44Palestine child with bucket] children in areas cut off from any access to the sea playing with sand buckets and spades on piles of rubble that look like sand, [45Palestine curtain pull] and corners of the wall peeled back to reveal imagined lush landscapes behind."¹⁰ Among the thousands of stenciled images that Banksy has produced, these nine works are certainly

among his most political and controversial. Yet even these maintain an element of the whimsical that characterizes much of the artist's work.

[46exit through the gift shop film still] So who is Banksy? Outside of a surprisingly large but exceedingly tight-lipped cadre of friends, supporters, dealers, collaborators, and fellow artists, no one knows for sure. There are those who claim to have figured out the artist's true identity using sophisticated forensic techniques (more about that later); but to date, no definitive identity has been established. And this is one of the most interesting things about Banksy: the degree of success he has had at maintaining his anonymity. Given the fact that since at least 2003 the artist has been engaging in thousands of creative acts in public spaces in numerous countries and has produced nearly a dozen publications and one Academy Award-nominated film, it is hard to imagine how he has not been "outed" by one of the hundreds of individuals with whom he has collaborated over his career.

One story may serve to illustrate the high degree of loyalty afforded to the artist. For about a decade during his early career, Banksy maintained a relationship with an art dealer named Steve Lazarides. For the period of their relationship, Lazarides served as Banksy's agent, manager, salesman, partner in crime, and, probably, best friend. Because of Lazarides' acumen as a purveyor of the Banksy brand, it is safe to say that without Lazarides, "Banksy would simply not have the recognition, the influence and the money that he has today."¹¹

However, around the end of 2007, the relationship fell apart, and the two men no longer speak to one another. Although neither has commented extensively on the break-up, Banksy made it a point to include a caption beneath Lazarides' image in the Banksy film, "Exit Through the Gift Shop," that identifies Lazarides simply as "Banksy's former spokesman." Such clearly intended disrespect might have prompted some to take revenge; but all these years later,

Lazarides maintains complete silence on the artist's true identity. Indeed, it is Banksy's ability to engender loyalty among his colleagues that may stand as Banksy's most notable attribute and the one that has had the greatest impact on his success.

Banksy's tenacity in maintaining his anonymity can be attributed to at least two factors. First, there is the illegal nature of much of what Banksy does. As the artist puts it, authenticating one of his pieces of street art as a known individual would be like entering a signed confession to a crime. However, the more cynical observers cite a second reason for Banksy's tenacious secrecy. As his good friend and fellow street artist, Shepard Fairey, puts it: "Banksy cares very much about selling art and what people think of him and he understands thoroughly that people's fantasy is a far better marketing tool than reality."¹³ Or, as Banksy himself puts it, "I don't know why people are so keen to put the details of their private life in public; they forget that invisibility is a superpower."¹⁴

What few facts we know about Banksy include these:

He was born in Bristol, England, in or sometime around 1974. He began his career as a graffiti artist in the early 1990s as part of a graffiti gang known as the DryBreadZ Crew. Beginning as a freehand artist, Banksy tells this story by way of explaining why he turned to stenciling as his primary art form:

At age 18, he was in the middle of painting a train with a gang of his friends when the British Transport Police showed up. Everybody ran, but Banksy got "ripped to shreds" by thorny bushes as he tried to make his escape. Says Banksy, "The rest of my mates made it to the car and disappeared so I spent over an hour hidden under a dumper truck with engine oil leaking all over me. As I lay there listening to the cops on the tracks I realized 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.”

“Besides,” he continues candidly, “I was 21 and crap. I wasn’t good at freehand graffiti. I was too slow.”¹⁵

Banksy’s adopted name may or may not give clues as to his true identity. There are rumors that early in his career, the artist occasionally signed his pieces with the name Robin Banks – a clear attempt to establish an outlaw persona – and there are those who insist that Robin is the artist’s true first name. However, at this moment in time such speculation remains just that.

In the March 4, 2016 on-line issue of the Evening Standard, a story appears that details the claim by a group of researchers at Queen Mary University of London that they have established Banksy’s true identity through the use of a mathematical technique known as “geographic profiling.” Using the technique, researchers “looked at the locations of 140 Banksy artworks in London and Bristol and publicly available information about addresses for [the man believed to be the artist].”¹⁶ Supposedly, the technique “takes as input the locations of these artworks, and calculates the probability of [the artist’s] residence across the study area.”¹⁷ By matching the location of the residences of ten individuals suspected of being Banksy with the locations of the artworks, the researchers have arrived, with a very high level of confidence, at the conclusion that Banksy is in fact a Bristol resident named Robin Gunningham, a name identified in a 2008 newspaper investigation. However, because the analysis rests on the assumption that the 140 artworks inputted into the database are, indeed, Banksy’s work, and because a street artist’s work is notoriously subject to forgery, it is hard to take the conclusions of the study team as definitive.

[47No future] Finally, in an article in the May 14, 2007 issue of the New Yorker, Banksy responds to the question, “Why do you do what you do?” with a wry quote: “I originally set out to try and save the world, but now I’m not sure I like it enough.”¹⁸ [48Follow your dreams Cancelled] For an artist who has focused for the past twenty years on the human failings that have created the problems faced by mankind in the 21st century, the world must, indeed, seem a hopeless place. [49I want change] Yet in a seemingly never-ending output of stenciled images on walls all over the world – images combining a unique mix of social consciousness, whimsy, antiauthoritarianism, and humor both light and dark – the artist known as Banksy continues to promote an implicit belief that in recognizing the problems we all face and in drawing attention to those issues, we may someday find a way to effectively address them and make the world a more likeable and livable place for all of its people. And besides, [50Graffiti is a crime] despite what he may say to an interviewer, I believe that Banksy is still having a lot of fun.

Notes

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⁴Waclawek, Anna, Graffiti and Street Art, Thames & Hudson Ltd., London, 2011, p. 168.

⁵Mathieson, Eleanor, and Tapies, Xavier A., Street Artists: The Complete Guide, Graffito Books: London, 2009, p. 16.

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⁸Ellsworth-Jones, Will. Banksy: The Man Behind the Wall. St. Martin's Press: New York, 2012 p. 142.

⁹Wyatt, Edward. "In the Land of Beautiful People, an Artist Without a Face." New York Times, September 15, 2006. Downloaded from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/16/arts/design/16bank.html>

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¹¹Ellsworth-Jones, p. 160

¹²Ibid., p. 99.

¹³Ibid., p. 102

¹⁴Ibid., p. 102

¹⁵Ibid., p. 57

¹⁶Marshall, Tom. Banksy's identity 'revealed' by scientists . . . using technique that could help expose terror cells. Evening Standard, March, 4, 2016. Downloaded from

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¹⁸Collins, Lauren. Banksy Was Here. The New Yorker, May 14, 2007. Downloaded from

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