



GUERRILLA STREET ARTIST BANSKY, WHOSE REAL IDENTITY IS NOTORIOUSLY MYSTERIOUS

# Spray-painting the Town Gold

**Art vs. Commerce in *Exit Through the Gift Shop***



**BRETT LAMB** explores this fascinating and in many ways perplexing film and suggests some great student activities, including a guide to making digital stencils.

**A**rmed with a spray can and stencil, Banksy – whose career as an artist started on the streets of Bristol at the age of fourteen – has achieved international notoriety for his work. His often satirical stencils have appeared on walls and monuments across the world, critiquing everything from war and capitalism to global warming and cultural imperialism. As he explains:

*The people who truly deface our neighbourhoods are the companies that scrawl giant slogans across buildings and buses trying to make us feel inadequate unless we buy their stuff. They expect to be able to shout their message in your face from every available surface but you're never allowed to answer back. Well, they started the fight and the wall is the weapon of choice to hit them back.<sup>1</sup>*

Banksy first started spray-painting walls with large, stylised letters in the classic style of New York graffiti. One night, while hiding under a garbage truck to escape police, he noticed a serial number stencilled underneath the vehicle. Using stencils, he realised, would make his work more efficient and reduce the chance of being caught. 'I got home at last and crawled into bed next to my girlfriend,' the artist wrote in *Wall and Piece*. 'I told her I'd had an epiphany that night and she told me to stop taking that drug 'cos it's bad for your heart.'<sup>2</sup>

Banksy's early stencils prominently featured rats. Banksy confesses that he didn't realise that 'rat' is an anagram of 'art' until someone told him. 'They live in quiet desperation amongst the filth,' he explains. 'And yet they are capable of bringing entire civilisations to their knees. If you are dirty, insignificant and unloved then rats are the ultimate role model.'<sup>3</sup>

From his early work as a stencil artist in the 1990s, Banksy has staged a series of increasingly audacious and subversive works that have attracted international media attention. In 2003, Banksy smuggled a work into London's world-famous Tate Modern. The watercolour, which was only noticed when the painting fell off the wall, showed an idyllic country landscape cordoned off with police tape.<sup>4</sup> In 2005, he spray-painted images on the Israeli West Bank barrier despite being threatened by Israeli security forces, who fired warning shots into the air.<sup>5</sup>

Banksy's notoriety has only increased the value of his work. In 2006, he held a critically acclaimed exhibition in Los Angeles called *Barely Legal* that featured, among other things, a painted elephant. A number of celebrities attended the exhibition, including Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. A year later, Banksy's painting *Bombing Middle England* was auctioned for £101,000.

Not everyone is impressed with the work of Britain's favourite guerilla artist. Satirist Charlie Brooker has declared that Banksy is a 'guffhead of massive proportions' responsible for 'vague, pseudo-subversive preaching'.<sup>6</sup> Others simply dismiss his work as vandalism.



ONE OF BANKSY'S MOST FAMOUS IMAGES

*Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010) is Banksy's first film. As the title would suggest, it's about the commodification of a counterculture, about what happens when a subversive art form hits the mainstream. 'Everything was going a bit crazy,' Banksy notes in the film. 'Suddenly it all became about the money. And it never was about the money.'

*Exit Through the Gift Shop* explores the commercialisation of street art through the rise of an unlikely and eccentric street artist named Thierry Guetta. At the beginning of the documentary, Guetta carries a video camera everywhere, obsessively filming his friends and family. After helping his cousin, a renowned street artist known as Invader, install his pieces on a Paris street, Guetta becomes obsessed with street art, and gathers an incredible amount of footage featuring some of the world's most prominent artists. Eventually, Guetta gets the opportunity to accompany Banksy on a tour of Los Angeles.

When Guetta finishes his film, *Life Remote Control*, it turns out to be ninety minutes of unwatchable colour and noise. On viewing the documentary Banksy declares,

*It was at that point that I realised that maybe Thierry wasn't actually a filmmaker and he was maybe just someone with*

*mental problems who happened to have a camera. It just seemed to go on and on. It was an hour and a half of unwatchable nightmare trailers, essentially like someone with a short attention span with a remote control flicking through a cable box of nine hundred channels.*

Banksy decided to edit the footage himself, encouraging Guetta to return to Los Angeles and create street art. Adopting the moniker Mr Brainwash and hiring a team of artists to realise his vision, Guetta coordinated a debut show that featured two hundred derivative paintings in a 'riot of themes and styles'. As Rhys Ifans, narrator of *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, notes, 'LA's art fans watched spellbound as a major new star was born before their very eyes.' Banksy draws a parallel with an earlier era-defining artist: 'Andy Warhol made a statement by repeating famous icons until they became meaningless, but then Thierry *really* made them meaningless.'

Many critics, including blogger Rebecca Cannon, have suggested that the entire film is a hoax and that the work in the exhibition may have been created by prominent street artists including Banksy and Shepard Fairey.<sup>7</sup> 'I don't know what it means – Thierry's a huge success,' Banksy observes. 'I mean,

## EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP REMAINS A CLEVER CRITIQUE OF HOW THE ART WORLD SLAPPED A PRICE TAG ON A SUBVERSIVE COUNTERCULTURE.

maybe Thierry was a genius all along, maybe he got lucky, maybe it means art is a bit of a joke.' Whether the documentary is an elaborate hoax or Banksy simply encouraged Guetta to become a street artist is unclear. Either way, it doesn't matter: *Exit Through the Gift Shop* remains a clever critique of how the art world slapped a price tag on a subversive counterculture.

### PREPARING TO WATCH *EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP*

- Write down your knowledge of street art, and any preconceptions you may have about it. Working collaboratively with another student, combine your lists and discuss what you know about this art form.
- Visit Banksy's official website: <<http://www.banksy.co.uk>>. Select five works from the collection and explain what you think the intention of the work is.
- Watch the mini-documentary *B Movie* on the *Exit Through the*

*Gift Shop* DVD, which focuses on Banksy's career as a street artist and provides important contextual knowledge to get the most out of *Exit Through the Gift Shop*.

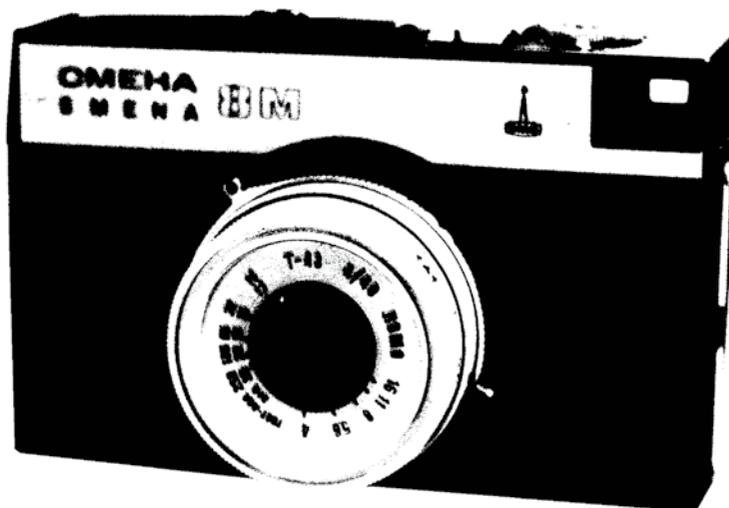
- Discuss whether you think street art is a legitimate form of expression and an alternative to other forms of media such as zines or blogs.
- Investigate the laws and graffiti management policies in your community. Identify any designated walls or areas for street art.

### AFTER WATCHING *EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP*

- At the end of the documentary, Steve Lazarides declares, 'I don't know who the joke's on – really. I don't even know if there is a joke.' Banksy himself admits that he doesn't 'really know what the moral' of the documentary is. Describe what you think the 'moral' of the documentary is.



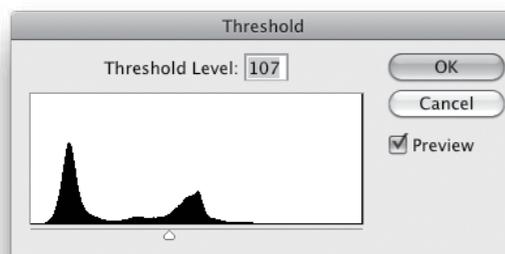
STREET ARTISTS AT WORK



## Creating digital stencils

USING ADOBE PHOTOSHOP IS AN EXCELLENT WAY TO CREATE YOUR OWN STENCIL ART WITHOUT LANDING IN LEGAL TROUBLE. TO START OFF WITH, YOU'LL NEED A PHOTOGRAPH THAT YOU WANT TO MAKE INTO A STENCIL. HIGH-CONTRAST PHOTOGRAPHS ARE BEST FOR THIS BECAUSE THEY LEND THEMSELVES TO THE STARK BLACK-AND-WHITE STYLE PREFERRED BY STENCIL ARTISTS.

1. Think carefully about the intention of your stencil art. Select an issue or idea that you feel strongly about and consider how you can convey the idea with a visual image. Browsing Banksy's work at his official website might be an interesting way to start.
2. Open your image in Adobe Photoshop.
3. If the image has a complex background, it may be necessary to isolate it by using the selection tools.
4. Select 'Image > Adjustments > Threshold'. Adjust the threshold level by dragging the triangle at the bottom of the histogram until you achieve the desired result and press 'OK'.
5. Use the Text Tool (T) to add custom lettering to your stencil. Adjust the size, typeface and weight of the font by selecting 'Window > Character'.
6. Save your document.
7. Open an image of the wall that you want to put your digital stencil on and select 'File > Place'. Select the stencil document that you've just saved and adjust its size by dragging the handles on the corner of the image, remembering to hold down the shift key so that the image maintains its correct proportions.
8. If the wall is on an angle, select 'Edit > Transform > Distort' and drag the handles on the corner of the image so that it matches the perspective of the wall.
9. Click on the stencil in the layers palette and select 'Layer > Rasterize > Smart Object'.
10. Select the stencil layer and choose 'Select > Color Range'. Click on the white part of the stencil using the eye-dropper and press 'OK'. This will select all of the white in the image. Press 'Delete' to remove that colour entirely from the stencil.
11. Click on the stencil in the layers palette and change the blending mode to 'Darken' or 'Overlay'. Reducing the opacity of the stencil layer will reveal more of the bricks underneath and make it look like it's been sprayed on the wall.



HOW YOUR OWN STENCIL ART MAY LOOK AFTER THE PHOTOSHOP ACTIVITY



A SCENE FROM *EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP*

12. Select the stencil layer in the layers palette and click on the 'FX' drop-down menu to add an 'Outer Glow' to the layer. Use the settings shown to the right to achieve a halo around the stencil, which will make it look as if it's been spray-painted.
13. If you plan to make the image into a stencil that you cut out, you can bridge any black spaces that are surrounded by white using the Brush Tool (B). This means that you will be able to cut it out without the stencil falling apart. Another method is to use multiple images, each with different areas cut out and line them up.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Banksy's official website  
<http://www.banksy.co.uk/>

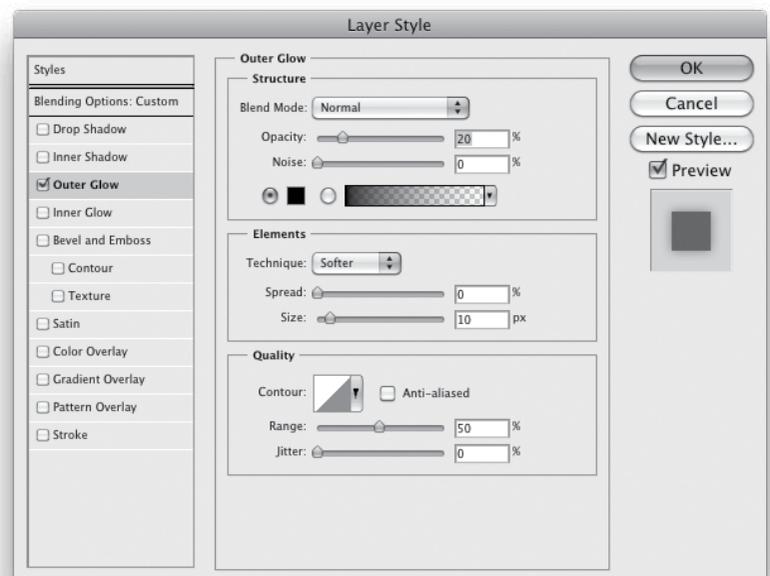
*Exit Through the Gift Shop* official website  
<http://www.banksyfilm.com/>

Banksy's opening sequence for *The Simpsons*  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DX1iplQQJTo>

Banksy opens bizarre 'pet shop' – news story  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/7662627.stm>

Banksy's book  
*Wall and Piece*, Banksy, London, Century, 2006

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## Endnotes

- 1 Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, Century, London, 2006, p. 13.
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 95.
- 4 'Graffiti star sneaks work into Tate', BBC News, 17 October 2003, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3201344.stm>>, accessed 13 February 2011.
- 5 'Art prankster sprays Israeli wall', BBC News, 5 August 2005, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4748063.stm>>, accessed 13 February 2011.
- 6 Charlie Brooker, 'Supposing ... subversive genius Banksy is actually rubbish', *Guardian*, 22 September 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/sep/22/arts.visualarts>>, accessed 13 February 2011.
- 7 Rebecca Cannon, 'The 21st Century's First WTF Art Moment: Banksy's *Exit Through the Gift Shop*', *Art Base*, 18 May 2010, <<http://blog.artabase.net/?p=1680>>, accessed 13 March 2011.