
From the Instructor

When *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, directed by British street artist Banksy, hit theatres last summer, critics asked: Was it an actual documentary film, as promoted, or an elaborate hoax? Our class—“Documentary Film: History, Theory, and Form”—came to different conclusions. The inspiration for Ethan Dubois’s inventive essay emerged from class discussion when someone mentioned the word authenticity. He began to wonder not just whether the documentary was authentic, but what makes any piece of art “authentic.”

As Ethan’s paper demonstrates, the status of artistic authenticity is vexed, dependent upon a complex calculus of internal and external forces. Authenticity is especially tenuous for street art, which often divides its audience. To some, street art merits appreciation; to others, it is grounds for arrest. Banksy’s documentary shows how the art market further complicates the status of street art: If a hack like Exit’s protagonist can make a million bucks in a day, how does that affect the integrity of others’ artwork?

Ethan’s essay succeeds not only because it takes on an ambitious set of questions about the intersection of art and commerce, but because its lively pace sustains narrative interest. Logical, eloquent, and arresting, his argument engages the formal and theoretical complexities of documentary film and the modern desire for authenticity.

— Marisa Milanese

ETHAN DUBOIS

BANKSY'S *EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP*: STREET ART AND OUR QUEST FOR AUTHENTICITY

Many in our modern culture have become concerned with the idea of authenticity. Some argue that we have lost our sense of authenticity and can no longer find a “center of self” (Erickson 122). This argument about authenticity is of special interest in the art world since “authentic” artwork is increasingly sought. No longer is it enough for a piece to employ special craftsmanship or an artistic touch, but it must be “authentic” to be worthy of exhibition (Phillips). But what makes a piece of art “authentic”? According to professor and philosopher Dr. Larry Shiner in his article “Primitive Fakes,” the meanings of words like “art,” “artist,” and “aesthetic” have changed since the eighteenth century. By classical definition, “art” means any skilled handicraft, “artist” means any skilled maker of an artifact, and “taste” means any set of values for ranking artifacts” (225). However, Shiner explains, these common words have come to take on different meanings: when used in modern discussion, “Art” suggests a distinct realm of works or performances of elevated status, “Artist” implies innovation, individualism, and a devotion to Art as a vocation, and “Aesthetic” suggests disinterested appreciation” (225). This change in our understanding of art over the past two centuries is significant because it illustrates our developing desire for authenticity. In art, we look more for individualism and originality—that is, authenticity—and, in the process, we devalue craftsmanship.

But what is authentic art, and, even more, what makes an authentic artist? In his recent documentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010), British street artist Banksy weighs in. He tells the story of French videographer Thierry Guetta, who begins to film Banksy for a potential movie about street art. Instead of creating the revealing film that he promised, however,

Guetta ends up becoming an aspiring street artist and then the center of Los Angeles pop art hype for several weeks after the opening of his 2008 art show, "Life is Beautiful." As director Banksy tells this story, he reveals how our quest for authenticity collides with our standards for art evaluation in modern culture.

Defining Authenticity

In order to properly discuss the concept of "authenticity," a term which has evolved over the course of many years, it is necessary to properly define it, and to look at some recent developments in research about the subject. Sociologist Andrew Weigert suggests that our modern conception of authenticity took hold about 70 years ago (qtd. in Erickson 123), although he points out that conversations about it have taken place for several centuries. According to professor and sociologist Rebecca Erickson, the easiest mistake when attempting to define "authenticity" is to confuse the term with "sincerity." In Lionel Trilling's book *Sincerity and Authenticity*, he defines sincerity as "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling," which suggests a specific relation to others (qtd. in Erickson 124). Sincerity, in other words, has to do with one's feelings and thoughts being in agreement with what one says. Authenticity, however, is simply being true to oneself. As Trilling says, "A work of art is itself authentic by reason of its entire self-definition: it is understood to exist wholly by the laws of its own being" (qtd. in Erickson 124). Thus, authenticity is a concept of self-reference; it has nothing to do with one's relationship to others.

Although deeply rooted in many classical and academic fields, authenticity as a social aspiration has only mainly evolved over the past few decades (Erickson 121). Our interest in authenticity today is a result of several factors that have influenced its change in recent years. According to Jeanne Liedtka in her article "Strategy Making and the Search for Authenticity," theories about the "driving forces behind this interest" are in great supply and come in two categories: those that focus on external factors and those (adopted mostly by psychologists) that concentrate on internal development (237). Several external factors, Liedtka explains, include a desire to fight back against the mass media and create a unique identity, the rise of "consumer culture," "fears of loss of meaning and freedom amidst the rise of instrumentalism and institutionalism," and the

reduced influence and significance of family and other traditional norms in our increasingly tolerant society (238). On the other hand, many developmental psychologists attribute the rising significance of authenticity to a “natural human urge that seeks psychological health, rather than as a reaction to external factors” (238). In other words, our desire for authenticity is motivated not by environmental reasons but by biological ones. In addition, Erickson argues that, most importantly, our increased attention to authenticity is a result of “the transition from industrial to postindustrial society and from modern to postmodern culture” (121).

Whatever the cause, scholars and psychologists alike agree that our modern culture does indeed place great value on authenticity—especially in the Fine Arts. Liedtka explains that a dominant theme of the authenticity discussion in the art world is “the notion of the authentic as both highly original and simultaneously rooted in familiar traditions” (239). In other words, art critics and analysts bestow authenticity on artwork based on both its originality and its relation to culture and tradition. This method of art analysis could be a result of many of the aforementioned influences, but the importance of both originality and rootedness suggests that it comes from both external factors (finding individuality and uniqueness) and internal ones (seeking psychological health).

Banksy’s Perspective

Banksy uses his film to contribute to this conversation about art and authenticity. A street artist since 1992, Banksy is known throughout the world as one of the primary proponents of graffiti art. He is also known for his contempt towards those who label graffiti art as “vandalism.” In *Exit Through The Gift Shop*, the British street artist focuses on the life of Thierry Guetta, a French cameraman who crosses paths with Banksy and ends up documenting a large amount of Banksy’s work with the intention of creating a documentary about street art. However, as *Exit* progresses, it seems to turn upon itself, as it focuses on Guetta’s entry into the street art world and his success as a copyist of Banksy. Ultimately, through the use of specific scenes and characteristics of the film, Banksy reveals the inauthenticity of Guetta’s art.

In the very opening of the movie, we see a montage of clips of street artists creating art, set to the tune of Richard Hawley’s “Tonight

The Streets Are Ours.” This brief foray gives us a privileged look into the worlds of famous “masked” artists and their craft. We see everything from artists making detailed paintings, to tagging, and even to spraying paint onto the side of a train. The viewer can almost feel the attitude and emotion of the artists as they express themselves in such a public and rebellious fashion. However, a significant question to ask is: is this authentic art? More importantly, what does Banksy think?

With our previous definition of authenticity in mind (being “true to oneself”), it follows that street art’s authenticity, or inauthenticity, has much to do with the artists’ motivations. In her article “Writing on Our Walls,” Marisa Gomez, editor of the *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform*, says, “Different motivations drive different types of graffiti, and graffiti cannot be understood or controlled without an understanding of the motivations behind its creation” (634). According to Gomez, because artists’ motivations distinguish graffiti art from vandalism, they are extremely important when seeking to understand street art. In “Our Desires Are Ungovernable’: Writing Graffiti in Urban Space,” Dr. Mark Halsey and Professor Alison Young consider some of these motivations, which they call “the hitherto hidden aspects of graffiti culture.” They argue that graffiti is, first and foremost, about pleasure—whether the emotional pleasure of expressing oneself in a public place, or simply the physical pleasure of holding a can of spray paint (276). They explain that, initially, motivations for street art included its aesthetic appeal and shared peer activity. However, as this art continued, its motivations began to include pride, pleasure, and recognition. Ultimately, street art is a form of “Identity Art” which reflects the motivations of its creators (Fine 155).

By definition, then, street art seems to be authentic—and, indeed, one of Banksy’s main focuses in *Exit* is to establish it as such. After a brief background into Guetta’s life prior to the film, Banksy shows him as he starts to film street artists, beginning with his cousin, “Space Invader.” Guetta documents the street artist’s work incessantly and starts to follow the paths of other artists like Shepard Fairey—best known for his Obama campaign poster—and Borf. These stories of real street artists, who have perfected their craft, emphasize to the viewer Banksy’s appreciation for street artists like himself, who have spent years and years developing their own styles and devoting their time to expressing themselves. This charac-

teristic of street art—true self-expression on the part of the artist—is what makes much of it authentic, according to Banksy.

However, although Banksy argues in favor of the authenticity of art made by street artists like him, he calls into question Guetta's art. While we enjoy secret shots of other street artists at work, Banksy creates an atmosphere of contempt surrounding Guetta, the filmmaker. Each time Guetta pushes his camera into the face of a celebrity or artist at work, we cringe. Tacky music plays as Guetta talks about how he wants to record every second possible, and Banksy includes a testimonial from the videographer's wife about how Guetta privileges his filming over his family: "We worry, but he doesn't care. We need him. He doesn't think!" We're similarly overcome with discomfort as Guetta begins to plaster all over town drawings of himself holding a camera, copying the styles of Banksy and the street artists he has followed for so long. We wonder if Guetta is doing this for fame or for self-expression. At this moment, we begin to understand Banksy's point of view: not all street art is authentic.

Another point that Banksy raises about the question of authenticity is street artists' emotional motivations. One example of this theme is the street artist Borf, whom Guetta interviews early in the film. Borf explains that his art is in memory of his late best friend, and it holds great emotional value to him. Laidtka points out that, since emotions are such a critical reflection of self, they are important to consider when judging authenticity:

Social psychologists...emphasize the role emotion plays in their discussions of authenticity. Because of the primary role that self-knowledge plays in uncovering the authentic self, emotions are seen as delivering critical messages to the cognitive mind about the self's true state. For them, such "undistorted perception of immediate psychological reality" serves as the foundation of the authentic. (239)

In other words, because emotions are such basic indicators of self and identity, they reflect authenticity. The emotion of pleasure, one of the primary motivations behind graffiti, seems to speak to street art's authenticity. However, Banksy's opinion differs with that of Laidtka. Guetta clearly has emotional motivations, mainly that of pleasure, as he pastes those printouts and stickers that show him holding his camera. However, Banksy still calls

into question the authenticity of Guetta's art. He believes that merely the artist's pleasure while creating art does not make it authentic; there must be something more that establishes its authenticity.

In his article "Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Authenticity in Self-Taught Art," Gary Allan Fine, an American sociologist and author, explores how self-taught artists' identities affect their art. Especially relevant is his discussion on how authenticity is bestowed and, specifically, how an artist's personal legitimacy is used to support his artwork's aesthetic authenticity in the minds of the cultural elite. This idea is specifically referenced in relation to an artist's biography. Fine says that, in addition to motivation and inspiration, artists' biographies prove the authenticity of their work:

Closely tied to the motivations and inspirations of artists are the presentations of their biographies. The biographies of self-taught artists justify their authenticity, serving as a primary criterion of evaluation. To be sure, the work itself matters, as many people have interesting biographies, but the biography invests the material with meaning. (162–3)

In other words, the biography and experience of an artist, not just his motivations, define the authenticity of his art, and an artist's background gives his work meaning. Banksy's biography, and those of the other street artists that the film follows, is lengthy. However, Guetta's biography, as an artist, is a short one. Prior to his work as a street artist, he was a videographer with hardly an artistic desire, but now he suddenly rises to prominence. Banksy objects to Guetta's lack of artistic experience; this, he claims, is an important part of an artist's identity and must be taken into account when we judge the authenticity of his work.

Ultimately, Banksy feels as if he and other street artists have been cheated. And it only gets worse, as Guetta (or Mr. Brainwash, as he begins calling himself) becomes famous and opens an enormous art show in Los Angeles (called "Life is Beautiful"), making almost one million dollars on an artistic style that he has developed in almost no time at all. One art enthusiast at the show says of Guetta's art, "It's a triumph, it will go down in history—I'm glad my friends turned me on to this." All the glowing praise of Guetta's artwork, according to Banksy, just shows how eager we can be to believe in an art piece's authenticity. Mr. Brainwash, Banksy

claims, is nothing but a hoax—he's in it for the money and the fame. As critic Peter DeBruge says, "Clearly, Banksy's big beef with the contempo art scene is the idea of selling out. Like many modern artists, Banksy began as a renegade, whereas Guetta aims straight for the iconic status of guys like Andy Warhol and Salvador Dali" (28).

Authenticity vs. Entertainment

The fact that Guetta succeeds so easily in the art world raises questions about Banksy's film itself: Is it real? Is it *authentic*? Many reviewers suggest that the film is just an elaborate, if entertaining, hoax—a "prankumentary"—created by Banksy to get artists and art critics alike to reconsider their methods for placing value on artwork. Not only does Banksy address this issue through the events of the film, but he uses a new artistic medium, the documentary itself, as well.

A central problem of the documentary form is the question of authenticity versus entertainment; in the same way that collectors desire authentic artwork, we desire an authentic experience when we watch a documentary. As Barry Grant says in his book *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, "The question of the performative has always dogged documentary. Traditional wisdom maintains that one should not stage or imitate reality; instead, the documentary filmmaker is supposed to capture it" (429). In other words, we don't want a fake, or a copy: we want to watch a film that *authentically* captures reality—a film that is true to the event it depicts. However, reality is, in fact, boring. What we ultimately desire, then, is an experience that is authentic to *us*: relevant, interesting, *and* true. Yet we are so quick to believe in the authenticity of *Exit* that we ignore its hints of artificiality—namely, the success of the bumbling and easily distracted Guetta seems too coincidental—and believe that it actually happened. By the end of the film, it seems that Banksy has played a trick on us: the authenticity of the film itself is called into question. Banksy is drawing a parallel between our approach to visual art and our approach to his film. In the same way that our eagerness to bestow authenticity on *Exit* causes us to miss the point of the film, our eagerness to call art authentic results in the success of sellouts like Guetta.

Concluding Thoughts

If Banksy has created his ultimate hoax in this film, there's no way to know for sure because, as he avows in interviews, it's a true story. However, if Guetta's career was just an elaborately created, filmed prank, it takes Banksy's questions to a whole new level: essentially, he calls on us to question the way we evaluate art. He illustrates that, just as our desire for an authentic experience when we watch a documentary influences us to place value on what may only be a complicated hoax, our desire for authenticity in art influences us to sometimes ascribe value to objects that we probably shouldn't. At the end of the film, in Banksy's last interview, he mentions one of the consequences of placing value on inauthentic art: its influence on other artists:

I don't think Thierry played by the rules, in some ways, but then . . . there aren't supposed to be any rules. So I don't really know what the moral is. I mean . . . I used to encourage everyone I met to make art. I used to think everyone should do it. I don't really do that so much any more.

In other words, because of modern standards for art evaluation, people like Guetta stifle the creativity and motivation of other artists because they rise so quickly—and yet their art isn't authentic. Banksy has been led to question even his own art as a result of Guetta's fame, and he no longer encourages other artists. Banksy alludes to these consequences but doesn't come up with a concrete answer: "I don't know what it means, Thierry's huge success and arrival in the art world. Maybe it means Thierry was a genius all along, maybe it means he got a bit lucky. Maybe art is all a big joke."

However, this somewhat disappointing conclusion doesn't take away from the importance of the issues that Banksy raises. He has influenced us to consider why we call a piece of art authentic and how that affects the livelihoods of other artists. In an increasingly changing fine arts culture where it seems as though artists learn the rules to break them, it is becoming more and more important for us to assess our standards for art evaluation, especially in the context of our quest for authenticity. This assessment may well affect the vitality of street artists—and all artists—for decades to come.

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