

The Tyranny of Fashion: Shredding Banksy

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Theme: [History](#)

The modern art world is filled with pranks and pranksters, the clowns who have decided that play counts for art. Brattish artists foist a range of projects and conceptual themes upon art galleries who, foolishly, see emperors decked in the finest wear. They refuse to consider that the wear is absent, an expensive mirage that tells to an old tale of the imperial ruler without clothes.

This is a world, of transaction, appearance and display, based on conceit and seduction, the toying by the super star artist of the necessarily gullible, and the acceptance on their part they are bearing witness to the exceptional. When Banksy's *Girl with Balloon* [was shredded](#) at Sotheby's (a sort of art styled seppuku), it was subsequently, and all too quickly, transformed into *Love is in the Bin*. Technicians in the room did not seem too fussed by the occurrence, and diligently went about their business of retouching the new piece for the market amidst nervous laughter and much tittering. Banksy's own company Pest Control granted the work a new certificate. Another prank had been played.



The anonymous woman who had initially bid for the previous painting at the point of shredding found herself in raptures, but had to play along as initially shocked. (She may well have been, but this posture seemed distinctly contrived.) The £1,042,000 was well spent, thank you very much.

"When the hammer came down last week and the work was shredded, I was at first shocked, but gradually I began to realise that I would end up with my own piece of art history," came the [observation](#) from the buyer.

Marketing executive Stephanie Fielding [feels](#) that Sotheby's would have been in on it.

"One would hope in an age of security consciousness they would have known that such a contraption was inside the artwork."

Sotheby's did little to dispel this notion, boasting that the new work had been "created in our salesroom", and was "the first work in history ever created during a live auction." Its employees also added to the tattle, a layering of playfulness.

"I don't think we knew," [came](#) the guarded receptionist, "but we're not allowed to say anymore."

Put another way, in an age constipated by its preoccupation with health and safety mania, Banksy would never have been able to pull this off without collaborating insiders and complicit agents. Not that it convinces the likes of photographer Matteo Perazzo, who clings, charmingly, to the [belief](#) that Banksy remains "opposed to the art establishment, so it would be weird if he had colluded with them." With such opponents, who needs a true resistance?

Then comes the element of complicity with and in the establishment itself. Banksy realised, long ago, that his resistance to the system was its own acceptance. His entire approach was premised on mocking something that would, in time, be seen as something to assimilate. To that end, it is unsurprising that questions should be asked of Sotheby's itself.

The same point can be made of the entire art market and the notion of "street" stencilling that used to be frowned upon as inventions of graffiti. It did not take long for such street dabbling to become the stuff of auctions, to make its way into the richest galleries and homes of private collectors.

It is fitting that nothing of this is aesthetic or remarkable. The key is the subversion of convention that, in times, becomes conventional: Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* signed by a "R. Mutt 1917" subverts conventional form to become art, turning a porcelain urinal into marketable commodity; a painting at auction is shredded, thereby creating a surge of shredding in other quarters in a blitz of increasing art value. (This can severely backfire – an owner of a Banksy print decided to vandalise his own possession, dramatically reducing its value.)

Even critics of the sober disposition of Will Gompertz [claimed](#) to be wrong in suggesting that artists for the past century had "failed to outwit and outdo Marcel Duchamp". There had been efforts to destroy and obliterate works – Robert Rauschenberg's rubbing out of a drawing by Dutch artist Willem de Kooning in 1953 stands out as a tendentious example that fell short. It took Banksy, claimed the gushing Gompertz, to make him realise "that there was an artwork hanging on the walls of a London auction house which was about to do just that", another Duchamp-like experiment that could be carried off. In what smacks of unnecessary prostration before the gimmick, he suggests that *Love is in the Bin* "will come to be seen as one of the most significant artworks of the early 21st century."

The late Australian art critic Robert Hughes, constantly sharp on the effects of speculation in art, reflected upon the phenomenon in 2004. His [speech](#) at Burlington House was a defence

of the Royal Academy, a body he hoped could be rebooted to face the degradation brought on by wealthy collectors. He had “always been suspicious of the effects of speculation in art”; after 30 years in New York he had “seen a lot of the damage it can do: the sudden puffing of reputations, the throwing of eggs in the air to admire their short grace of flight, the tyranny of fashion.”

Banksy is less talent than a search, a hunt for the next saleable stunt which might be authentic or otherwise (fake smatterings of graffiti purportedly by the artist, by way of example, were [reported](#) in Kyiv this July); less an issue of durable statement than publicity on heat. So much so that a theory doing the rounds is that the entire shredding show was an act of inauthenticity, fakery again doing its heralded rounds in the art world. Josh Gilbert, a Chicago blacksmith and artist, is one [suggesting](#) that there was “no way these blades would cut canvas or even thick paper mounted that way.” This all reeked “of misdirection”.

Banksy is the modern statement of PR, not enduring but fleeting, an attempt to be permanently newsworthy. At a time where an orange haired monster remains all powerful in garnering headlines and proffering conspiracies in Washington, tweeting with the abandon of a wannabe felon, the likes of Banksy struggle. Times must be tough, hence the shredder. What next in that tyranny of prank peppered fashion?

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