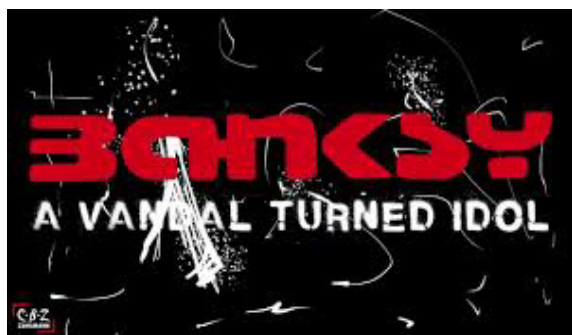


BOOK REVIEW:

Banksy – A Vandal Turned Idol. Berlin 2023/2024. **Official Exhibition Catalogue Concertbüro Zahlmann GmbH**



The purpose of this catalogue and, implicitly, of the exhibition it advertises, as it's briefly stated by its promoters, Burghard Zahlmann and Alexander Zahlmann, is to make known to a wider public a number of original works and prints by Banksy, formerly not shown in Germany. It also means to bring works out of

private collections and make them more accessible through the multimedia concept of the exhibition. Consequently, a discussion of the catalogue, cannot be separated from an assessment of the works presented, an analysis of the way they are presented and an evaluation of the audio guide provided in order to decipher the meanings of the works. The complementarity between the printed object, the catalogue itself, the spatial layout of the exhibition, the oral discourse and the visual element, provided by the artist's works, is as fascinating as the occasional discrepancies. It is perhaps fitting that one of the main features of the exhibition is a re-creation of the artist's studio. As Banksy is an elusive character, whose identity remains shrouded in mystery, the thirst for biographical details is quenched by the recreation of his studio from indirect visual evidence such as photos and videos. This suggests already that Banksy's artistic persona and his creative genius can be accessed primarily and almost solely from his works.

The spatial setting of the exhibition is dramatic, as well as evocative, as it attempts to recreate the roughness of the destitute urban landscape or the ominous feel of war zones.

One of the rather intriguing discrepancies between the catalogue and the layout of the exhibition, reflected by the audio guide is the absence from the catalogue of the introduction which wishes to emphasize the continuities between graffiti and forms of lampooning extant since Antiquity thus defining graffiti as closely related to protest and bringing to the fore its social and political concerns. Instead, the catalogue chooses to open with a brief discussion of printing and prints, inadvertently drawing attention to their commercial value on the art market. In certain ways, this is an astute choice as most of the works shown are prints, originating overwhelmingly from private collections. The catalogue, however, does emphasize the point that prints help the art travel across the world, making it less site-specific and placing it in global contexts. Moreover, if prints are made the traditional way, to a certain extent, they can be considered original as no two are identical. This inevitably limits the number of prints and establishes a hierarchy among them, as the first one is considered the best. This highlights the fact that controlling and limiting the edition of prints is a mark of commercialization.

In the wake of this discrepancy between exhibition and catalogue, the catalogue only partly follows the logic of the exhibition, dictated by the themes explored in Banksy's work, consumerism and consumer culture, police, as the catalogue dubs it, but, in reality, more of an engagement with the idea of authority, with an interesting twist concerning the lack of authority of those who work to enforce it, a provocative idea by all accounts, society, especially the carefully surveilled one, politics and war. The approach to all these themes is critical, mostly ironic. For instance, a discourse on contested authority is brought forward by works such as the *Di Faced Tenner*, a ten-pound note with lady Diana's face on one side, by a tiara-wearing *Monkey Queen*, by the *Monkey Parliament* or by the outrageous *Queen Vic*, portraying the venerable matron as a dominatrix, or *Grin Reaper*, a tongue-in-cheek image of death, winged and with a sunny face button for a face. One of the more interesting themes that Banksy engages with is the function of art and the workings of the art world, where auction houses bear the brunt of scathing criticism, as suggested by some works, such as *Morons*. Graffiti, on the other hand, and subsequently Street Art are appreciated as a form of protest, as a means to subvert rules in present society or at least, in Banksy's own words, "bring a smile to passersby". The theme of war seems to bring together the topics of politics and protest, making obvious the anti-militarist attitude present in the visual discourse.

Banksy, whoever he may be, is obviously an educated person, familiar with the visual media. This is particularly highlighted by the often-referential character of his works, which is not really commented on by the catalogue. One of these works shows a number of devotees adoring a sign proclaiming "Sale Ends Today", in a manner reminiscent of a *Sacra Conversazione*, obliquely suggesting that consumers are engaged in a devotional act. In another, Kipling's *Jungle Book* characters, albeit in their Disney guise, are easily recognizable in *Save or Delete*. Except, in this instance, they are tied up and blindfolded and set against a background of devastated forest land. *Stop and Search* features a likeness of Dorothy, with the face of Judy Garland from the Hollywood production, on her way to the Emerald City, having her basket searched by a security guard. Consumption and consumer culture are equally targeted, highlighting the pervasiveness of advertising. In this sense, one of the most relevant images is *Trolleys* where empty shopping carts are being chased by hunters set against an empty landscape reminiscent of Africa. Equally easy to read are the advertisements for gramophones, *His Master's Voice* and the logo of Paramount Pictures reinterpreted as *Paranoid Pictures*, complete with stars. *Napalm* shows a replica of the photograph of a young girl running away screaming from a war zone,¹ which has been used by the media until it acquired an almost iconic value. Except in Banksy's version, the girl is accompanied by a huge Mickey Mouse and a clown.

Other visual references are even more explicit, for instance, the portrait of Kate Moss produced in the manner that Andy Warhol used when he created the portraits of Marilyn Monroe. But there is more than a referential quality to this image. Banksy also seems to engage with Warhol's concern for anonymity, his behaviour when his face was hidden behind masks and thus rendered inaccessible to the world at large. One is led to speculate that anonymity is a concern that Banksy shares with Warhol, in his life, where he keeps his identity secret, and in his art, by replacing the singular individual image with a series of identical ones. The adoption of the rat from the work of the French stencil artist Xavier Prou, otherwise known as Blek le Rat, represents a more complex issue present in both the exhibition and its catalogue, as it brings not just inspiration, but also appropriation to the fore. Blek le Rat painted walls in Paris in the 1980s, inspired by what had been happening in New York in the late 1970s. In his turn, Banksy made the rat his own and portrayed it in various contexts, highlighting its survivor qualities and its adaptability to any situation.

¹ Roughly 50 years ago, Nick Ut photographed 9-year-old Kim Phuc burned by napalm. The headlight says *Napalm Girl. The Image of the Vietnam War*.

Some of the themes highlighted by the exhibition are provocative, such as *Dismaland*, which provides the opportunity for a stab at amusement parks in general and Disneyland in particular, aptly encapsulated in the pun that introduces the work. Inspired by the artist Jeff Gillette, this is, in a sense, an interactive project, an installation conceived by Banksy in 2015. In another project, the artist wished to bring the spirit of street art to the houses of ordinary people and thus graffiti was introduced in semi-private contexts.

Starting from the premise that Banksy understands graffiti as a form of protest (even his protagonist, the rat, is shown holding posters, suggesting that it is taking part in a protest march), one is led to see the city street as a space for public expression and engagement, and in certain ways as a highly contested space. This is very clear in *CCTV*, which hints at a culture of surveillance, where people live constantly under the watchful eye of cameras installed in public spaces. Their role in law enforcement and crime prevention is questioned by Banksy's images, such as *One Nation under CCTV*.

Conforming to their initial intent, the exhibition and the catalogue seem to capture the mood of the times and bring to the fore the fate of society and even humankind. Sometimes however, the coherence of the catalogue is likely to discard some of the complexity of the exhibition itself. For example, the catalogue does not insist on Banksy's indebtedness to rock, punk and hip hop even though several covers of Blur albums, to name just one band representative of British pop rock, are present in the exhibition as part of very interesting and thought-provoking compositions.

Aesthetically speaking, the exhibition creates a dangerous street mood, complete with dim lighting, exposed brick, concrete walls with an industrial feel to them and of course, graffiti. In lots of ways, this is mirrored by the catalogue. Its rectangular but wide shape is reminiscent of the surface of a wall, while Banksy's striking typeface is used throughout. The glossy black of the pages serves as a backdrop for the reproductions, while the dimly lit exhibition space frames the images, and the darkness of the city envelopes the graffiti.

Maria CRĂCIUN 

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
E-mail: maria.craciun@ubbcluj.ro