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Articles In Category 1998-2006

Output after Squall became primarily online

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Underground Updates

Reports, updates and bulletins

The State It's In

Editorial and commentary from Squall central

Resources

Reference and ancillary articles

Contact Squall

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Tweets by SQUALLMagazine



Metaphysical Graffiti

Out and about in Bristol with Banksy

An art activist from Bristol has been causing a right ol' stir with his brazen approach to conscious graffiti. Recent hits on the checklist include Regents Park Zoo and the Tate Gallery. *Si Mitchell* holds the ladder and manages to grab some chats with the elusive but awsomey prolific Banksy.

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"The only problem was the penguins. I didn't realise it, but they're kinda vicious really."

It's the middle of a starry Sunday night, and Britain's most maverick painter and decorator, Banksy, is up a ladder in downtown Bristol. A ten foot monkey has leapt from the spray can in his hand and has started to trash a particularly insidious looking CCTV camera.

Whilst I'm standing their at the base of the ladder he's recalling his last bit of natural history graffiti work, in Regent Park Penguin enclosure just a few days earlier.

"It's deathly quiet in the zoo at 3am. Then the penguins all started jumping in the water. I'm going: 'Shh... for fucks sake.' And they're splashing about, making a right racket. I'm writing things, that I assume a penguin would write if it was writing graffiti, right close to the floor. About a dozen of them all got out of the water and start edging towards me in a little gang making this 'aaaaarr', Mars Attacks sort of noise."

Despite Banksy's animal antics, you won't have read in the BBC's Wildlife magazine how a flock of renegade Emperor Penguins managed to daub 'Laugh now, but one day we'll be in charge' and 'I'm bored with fish' on the walls of their Regents Park enclosure.

The zoo caper was what Banksy would describe as a "well executed" piece of graffiti. Like Fume's thirty foot Westway tag, or his own stencilling of a London Underground style 'Mind the Gap' on every step leading up to the Tate gallery on the night before last year's Turner Prize.

Banksy came to his art form pretty late. He left his native Bristol in 1993, to hang out with Nottingham's DIY free party posse, after a baptism by repetitive beats at the now legendary Castlemorton Common free festival. He got into drawing when asked to do a flyer, and from there into graffiti. "Spray paint's actually quite hard to use, and I found myself painting embarrassingly bad pictures, illegally on a wall, at 21 years old. That's not acceptable."

He pauses while a police car idles at some lights not fifteen feet from where we're painting. A van partially conceals us, some of the monkey and the huge sack of paint cans. The weekend's in its death throes and the streets seem to be populated solely by cops and pissed up unlicensed taxi drivers.

"Fifteen years ago there weren't 24 hour supermarkets and boozers open round the clock. You could paint for 40 minutes on a main road without a car going past. Now you're lucky to get fifty seconds."

To overcome both his own incompetence and the need to work fast, Banksy began using stencils. Five years on, there aren't many grey walls in Bristol that don't attract the odd passing smile with an inimitable Banksy stencil. From the 'Heavy weaponry' missile-bearing elephant, to the little boy ominously nursing a sickle behind his back, as a policemen bends to talk to him. With the artist now in residence in the capital, London's walls are quickly following suit - as are a legion of cardboard-and-can handed imitators. Like every other half decent subculture idea, the marketing people are starting to tag along too, (Day One's latest album promotion being a prime example).

Apart from getting grief from the Bristol stalwarts he left behind (his reply to them was to tag a monkey riding a bomb towards Big Ben all over the city on his return), Banksy found London offered its own pitfalls.

"I don't have a motor and the nightbus to Brixton is not the speediest of getaways. Also, I got lost after doing the Tate and ended up in front of Buckingham Palace. 4am with twelve cans of paint and a bunch of stencils in the most heavily policed part of Britain - I was lucky to get out of that one." Back in Bristol, the monkey has developed an evil glint to his eye. "It's kinda my logo at the minute. I love animals, they don't have any malice. But you can make a monkey fucking malicious... if you want." He tags tonight's picture and we pack up and go.

"It's amazing the way people take different meanings out of things. I did this piece in Soho, with a masked man throwing a bunch of flowers over a giant barcode. I put 'Pest Control' on it, meaning 'the pests control the city', as opposed to the pests being controlled. This mate of mine rings me up and says: 'Are you homophobic?' I'm like, no not at all. But coz it was in Soho, and had a geezer throwing flowers, that's what they thought. Its fantastic in a lot of ways. You don't want to explain yourself too well. I guess, if I could explain it in words, I wouldn't need to do the picture. Its being fluffy in a militant way - something about going round in a balaclava and splashing colour onto buildings, its all tied in there."

Despite the infamy he's created, Banksy dismisses accusations about being any real threat to the state. "It's only a bit of painting and decorating," he says. "The real villains I know, think I'm a fucking idiot attracting so much attention." But he's openly agitated by what he calls: "Blair's castration of the politics in this country," and when asked about who inspires him, he cites the women who trashed the Hawk Jet bound for East Timor, before he names any artists.

"I got politicised during the poll tax, the Criminal Justice Act and the Hartcliffe Riots - that was Bristol's Rodney King [sparked by the death of two local lads whose motorcycle was chased into a wall by the police]. I can also remember my old man taking me down to see the Lloyds bank - what was left of it - after the 1980 St Pauls riots. It's mad to see how the whole thing of having to do what you're told can be turned on its head, and how few people it takes to grab it back."

By now, we've stopped walking and are standing on a corner, outside Bristol's Central Police Station. "Now the police," says Banksy whipping a stencil out of his bag. "They are the bane of my profession. I have to think about the old bill all the time." He gaffer tapes the cardboard to the station wall, and proceeds to spray on a stencil of two running officers. "So much about my images is governed by the police: where I put them, how quickly I can slap them up. But maybe it gives them an edge they wouldn't otherwise have." He finishes the stencil and draws in a chunky little stick man hot footing it from the cops. "You know, sitting in a studio in Cornwall where the light is beautiful. What good does that do you?" The plan was to paint the same stencil flipped round twenty yards down the wall, with a bunch of tooled up stick men chasing the cops back, but two policemen choose that moment to bundle out of the main doors. Banksy white's the eyes of the stick man and we leg it "I've never actually been nicked for graffiti," Banksy admits half an hour later, over a beer in a St Pauls blues bar. "But we've had some scrapes. We were painting 'Late Again' in eight foot letters on this passenger train and they came over the tracks in a transit. They were making a right racket, it must've ripped the bottom out of the van. But there was these high steel railings that ran as far as you could see, we had this one loose strut, that you could move and then move back. So by the time they got round the train, we were on the other side and all they could see was an unbroken fence." 'Late Again' was gone by daybreak. As Banksy points out, the more politically uncomfortable the message, the quicker it disappears.

"We did this painting on the waterfront, and this geezer turned up who actually owned the wall. I told him we worked for a mural company, gave him a blag number, and told him to go and ring my boss. He fucks off and we stick the lyrics on it, tag it and wheelspin off round the corner. It was a TV with: 'All this noise, but you aint saying nothing.' One of the speech bubbles said: 'HTV makes me want to smoke crack.' The piece is still there, but someone has carefully edited that bit out.

Its not just the law and the landowners who are in pursuit of Banksy either. Wall of Sound records have signed Banksy up as an artist after he inadvertently painted the front of their building. Damien Hirst has given him an endorsement, he's been flown out to New York to paint hotel rooms and to the Costa del Sol to jazz up a lap dancing complex. "These gangsters had bought up the old set of [failed TV series] El Dorado. True to form they tried to make me pay for it by buying the paint upfront. I'm not a remarkably clever bloke, but I understood the rip-off that was going off, and instead spent the week with this stripper going to work around various different bars. It was interesting." No doubt. A week later and we're at the launch of Banksy's first exhibition of canvasses in an arty Bristol wine bar. Like the street pieces, the pictures are big and bold and anarchic. A world away from the beautiful young things moving and shaking around The Severnshed trying not to spill their Chablis, Banksy's not there. I ring him up. He's in a bar in South London, killing time before heading off to liven up a track siding. His curiosity extends to: "Any fit birds? Any filth turned up?" As far as the art set are concerned, his absence just adds to his mystery. Portishead's Adrian Utley and members Massive Attack are there reportedly buying four figure pics.

Cops, monkeys, burning buildings. They're all represented. Some of the influences are even more discernible here - though maybe not to this crowd. One riot scene, 'People Di Every Day' (inspired by "the mob sentimentality that swept Britain when Princes Di died"), includes two figures from that ubiquitous Paris '68 brick throwers photograph. Another character is modelled on the girl, who was snapped belting a riot cop with a scaffold bar during the 1990 Poll Tax riot in Trafalgar Square. ("That was the girl I wanted to marry," says Banksy). But instead of bars and bricks, Banksy's figures throw flowers. Fluffy meets Spiky again.

A week later we meet at his studio. He's cutting out stencils to the strains of a Radio 4 phone in.

"Occasionally you get images that speak to you, from people who don't have a voice. That's what I want to do. It's not about making money," he says in reference to flogging every picture in the exhibition on that opening night. "But its a means to an end for me, not a hobby. If you go into it for any other reason than wanting to get up and put a bit of power back, then you're fucked up and you won't do well."

"I just want to make one fucking great image that goes out real cheap to every mothafucker," he says. But there's more to it than that. Unlike many of his contemporaries, the message imbedded in Banksy's paintings isn't 'look at me', but 'look around you'. They are a wake up call to the unwittingly oppressed. "To make a piece of art that actually provoked something serious to happen? I couldn't even dream of that... but yeah...I guess that's the aim." Though he empathises with direct activists, the enigmatic Bristolian feels what he does is less easily defined. "There have been times when I've wondered about what I do," he says reciting an incident when some paint bomb balloons ended up covering everything in a twenty yard radius, including a few parked cars. For similar reasons, he rarely just drops his name these days. If he does it's "the really big one and in a funny place (check out the front of Centrepoint), otherwise its subtracting and not adding to the world".

"Part of it is I'm fighting boredom," he says. "But what I perceive as boredom, other people perceive as beautiful grey buildings."

At the minute Banksy needs a chemist. "The plan is to stencil lacquer, then remove the stencil and spray on acid which would eat into the limestone. That should give you a relief image an inch deep. It's unbuffable. You just can't paint over that shit." Despite loosing a few fingertips he's yet to find an agent that will do the trick.

Until that day, his career spirals upwards. A website, www.banksy.co.uk, has been launched. He's begun what he describes as "a high profile campaign of guerilla art" in London (watch this space), and he's involved in the Burner Prize - a graffiti competition, reminiscent of 2000AD's Chopper from Oz storyline, timed to coincide with this year's Turner prize. The winner will be chosen by an all-star panel at a bash at the International Contemporary Arts Centre, on "style, skill and the ability to avoid security systems." They hope to get it banned before judgement day.

The last time I saw Banksy he told me a story about the fall of Ceausescu. In November '89, in response to a small uprising in Timisoara, Romania, the country's corrupt and brutal dictator was persuaded to address a public rally in Bucharest. A lone man in the crowd, Nica Leon, sick of Ceausescu's dreadful regime started shouting in favour of the Timisoara revolutionaries. The crowd around him, obedient to the last, thought 'Long live Timisoara!' was a new political slogan and started chanting it to. It was only when he began shouting 'Down with Ceausescu!' that they realised all was not right. They tried to get away from him, banners were getting dropped and broken in the crush and women started screaming. On the balcony, the panic sounded like booing. Ceausescu stood there ludicrously frozen, mouth opening and shutting. Then the head of Romania's security walked over to him and whispered 'they're getting in'. It was clearly audible on the President's microphone and was broadcast live across the whole country. The revolution had begun. Within a week Ceausescu was dead. Somewhere in a bar in Romania sits Nica Leon, a solitary man who changed the course of history. Somewhere in a bar in England sits Banksy, plotting his next assault of renegade colour. Power to the pair of them - may they one day meet.

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- [Trackside Tales](#) - nocturnal graffiti forays with Banksy - June 2001
- [Creative Vandalism](#) - out and about with Banksy in London - 30th May 2002
- [Paint The Town](#) - Sheffield graffiti artist Simon Sunderland was recently given a five year prison sentence for spraying colours on walls - *Sally Chesworth* interviews him in prison - Squall 14, Autumn 1996

Links

<http://www.banksy.co.uk>