



## Banksy Does New York Discussion Guide

Director: Chris Moukarbel

Year: 2014

Time: 79 min

**You might know this director from:**

Me at the Zoo (2012)

### FILM SUMMARY

Director Chris Moukarbel spent October 2013 in Los Angeles, a coast away from the chaos and excitement of legendary street artist Banksy's 31-day New York residency, "Better Out Than In." When HBO contacted the filmmaker in November to put together a film documenting this month-long event, he was stuck with the question of how could he collate footage from a completed project that he had not even witnessed?

In *BANKSY DOES NEW YORK*, Moukarbel proposes that it is the public itself that defines and dictates Banksy's artistic residency as much as—if not more than—the artist himself. The film develops through a compilation of crowd-sourced material and photos, videos, and commentary from the ground, found by scouring the Internet. With the addition of follow-up interviews with journalists, critics, Banksyphiles, art dealers, and those who took his art for profit, *BANKSY DOES NEW YORK* offers a well-rounded, cinematic look at the mayhem and magic Banksy brought to New York City in October 2013.

Arguably the birthplace and mecca of graffiti and street art, the New York City streets offer the perfect venue for Banksy's month-long residency. The project included but was not limited to immediately recognizable stencilled figures on buildings, performances, a truck of squealing stuffed animals parading through the daylight streets, and a balloon bearing his name. Once he released a photo of that day's piece on Instagram, the work then belonged to New York and her people.

A retrospective overview of the phenomenon of Banksy in the Big Apple, *BANKSY DOES NEW YORK* serves as a collection of concrete evidence provided by the public that not only did Banksy permeate their city but that they love him all the more for it. While he may remain anonymous, his legacy is public currency in New York City.

## FILM THEMES

As Banksy settles into a New York City residency, the public chases and embraces his offerings, maintaining that once something hits the street, it is theirs for keeps.

### ART OR VANDALISM

Very little commentary was provided by the New York fine art community on Banksy's residency. A snub or a simple oversight, the result still rang loud and clear: street art is a far cry from the credence offered by the conventional art world. Seen by many as vandals, graffiti and street artists continue to work underground, dodge the law, make themselves sparse, and watch as their art is erased or torn down—as shown in the case of notorious graffiti sanctuary 5 Pointz. The debate over street art and its place in the contemporary art world is a heated, ongoing one, brought into focus during "Better Out Than In."

### ANONYMOUSLY ACCEPTED

Banksy's legacy is far-reaching. Having placed his art across the globe, "Banksy really understands the necessity to make narratives simple for mainstream media," stated art-critic Hrag Vartanian. By pushing political buttons and strategically placing his pieces where the location says as much as the art itself, he incites discourse. By remaining an unknown figure, the dialogue focuses on the excitement of his anonymity and on the works of art, rarely focusing on his circumstances or his personal life. His anonymity becomes a tool he wields as he whittles away at society's complacency.

### OWNERSHIP

Banksy had little involvement in the discourse about his residency apart from Instagram images and occasional audio guides. Throughout his residency, the question of ownership arose. Displayed in the public sphere, adorning the streets, the art became a part of the city. To whom does the city belong to, but its inhabitants? New Yorkers are anything but passive, and when something calls out for attention, they take note. None of Banksy's 31 pieces were left alone for long before someone took charge and decided what to do, including white-washing, Plexi-glassing, even dismantling and putting artworks up for sale. Placing it on the street, the art became subject to the will of the collective.

### PUBLIC RESPONSE IS THE ART

Art gallery etiquette generally demands viewer distance from artworks. Street art, on the other hand, draws the audience in. Once Banksy's art was created, it took on a life of its own, fully entering the public sphere. By photographing themselves next to the art, dancing along to the music, scaling a building and bringing down the Banksy balloon, the public owned it. The daily scavenger hunt was also a part of each artwork, a hunt controlled by the public, with tweets, images, and clues defining the manner that the art would be received and handled. Those on the ground in New York City in October 2013 decided just what "Better Out Than In" had to say and how the world would perceive it in the days and years to come.

**“Graffiti is a sign of decay and loss of control.”**

Michael Bloomberg, Mayor of New York

**“It was like a giant scavenger hunt in New York City, and we were all pawns. We all played along beautifully.”**

Luna Parks, Photographer

**“With Banksy, you never know what will happen tomorrow.”**

Stephen Keszler, Gallery Owner

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. How much did you know about Banksy before watching the film? Have you seen "Exit Through the Gift Shop," his 2010 self-directed documentary? Do you consider yourself a fan of Banksy's work?
2. What is your personal relationship with/feelings about/ understanding of New York City? Has this altered after watching BANKSY DOES NEW YORK?
3. Are you a regular user of Instagram and/or Twitter? Would Banksy's street art residency "Better Out Than In" have been possible without social media?
4. What is, in your mind, the difference between graffiti and street art? Is one more legitimate than the other?
5. When is graffiti/street art vandalism, and when is it not?
6. Why do you think Banksy has fought to remain anonymous? What does his anonymity add to his artistic legacy?
7. What do you think that Banksy was trying to achieve with "Better Out Than In"? Discuss the title he selected for this residency.
8. Is street art legitimate artform? Discuss. Why did the "legitimate" art community in New York largely ignore Banksy's self-declared residency?
9. What were your impressions of gallerist Stephen Keszler? Does he have the right to sell Banksy's art without entering into any dialogue with the artist?
10. Having placed his art in the public sphere, is it theft when the public takes his art? Who owns street art? What is your definition of stealing?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- After working with him on the 2012 documentary “Me at the Zoo,” HBO contacted director Chris Moukarbel two weeks after Banksy’s New York residency was complete to create **BANKSY DOES NEW YORK**. During the time of “Better Out Than In,” Moukarbel was living in Los Angeles and was never present during the time of the residency. By searching the Internet for user-generated content primarily containing the hashtags #BanksyNY and #BetterOutThanIn, Moukarbel was able to put together the film, along with a number of interviews his team filmed.
- Chris Moukarbel went to art school in Washington, D.C., and received an MFA in Sculpture from Yale. Prior to working in film, he created the album campaign for the Scissor Sisters’ 2012 record “Night Work.”
- About halfway through the editing process, Banksy contacted Moukarbel and team in order to provide them with accurate facts regarding the “Better Out Than In” events. Regardless of this contact, Moukarbel states, “I don’t know anything more about him than I did when we started this, which may be a testament to his ability to stay anonymous.”
- Graffiti, from the Italian “graffiato” (scratched), originates from the Greek “graphein” (to write).
- Demolition on 5 Pointz began in August 2014, in order to make way for condos.
- The property constituting 5 Pointz, or The Institute of Higher Burnin’, was built in 1892 as a factory to manufacture water meters. Jerry Wolkoff, the owner since the 1970s, granted permission for it to be used for legal graffiti.
- Banksy has managed to maintain his anonymity since beginning his career as a freehand graffiti artist in Bristol, England, in the early 1990s. While hiding from the police beneath a garbage truck at the age of 18, he noticed the stenciled letters identifying the truck, and began using stencils for his street art in order to work faster. Stenciling has, since then, formed the bulk of his work. His work has appeared in America, Australia, Canada, England, France, Israel, Jamaica, and on the Israeli West Bank wall.
- Some speculate that Banksy is a woman or even a group of artists, and many say the reason for “his” anonymity is that graffiti is a crime.
- Banksy has self-published a number of books, including “Banging Your Head Against A Brick Wall” (2001) and “You Are An Acceptable Level of Threat” (2012). His first film, “Exit Through the Gift Shop” (2010), was nominated for an Oscar.
- The spread of graffiti throughout the public space, being viewed as a cultural and economic benefit to a city and not just mere vandalism, is referred to as “the Banksy effect.” Vandalism laws have been relaxed in the artist’s hometown of Bristol, where his art can be regularly spotted.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Become** a member of the global street art community. [I Support Street Art](#) is a website “designed to inform and support urban street art from all over this blue planet.”
2. **Watch** Banksy’s [video](#) released in February 2015 on his work in the West Bank.
3. **Consider** following Banksy’s example and lend your support to the [#WithSyria campaign](#), which campaigns to end the hardships suffered by the Syrian people.
4. **Watch** [EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP](#), a 2010 documentary produced by Banksy, according to the film’s website, “a fascinating study of low-level criminality, comradeship and incompetence.”

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They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**