

**Mongrel Media**  
Presents

# **BANKSY DOES NEW YORK**

**A film by Chris Moukarbel  
(87 min., USA, 2014)  
Language: English**

Distribution



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*High res stills may be downloaded from <http://www.mongrelmedia.com/>*

## SYNOPSIS

On Oct. 1, 2013, the elusive British street artist known as Banksy launched a self-proclaimed month-long residency in New York City, posting one unique exhibit a day in an unannounced location, sparking a 31-day scavenger hunt both online and on the streets for Banksy's work.

Capturing this month of madness, **BANKSY DOES NEW YORK** incorporates user-generated content, from YouTube videos to Instagram photos, from New Yorkers and Banksy hunters alike, whose responses became part of the work itself, for an exhilarating, detailed account of the uproar created by the mysterious artist.

With installations spanning all five boroughs of New York City, and including a mix of stencil graffiti, sculpture, video and performance art, Banksy touched on such wide-ranging subjects as fast-food wages, animal cruelty in the meat industry, civilian casualties in Iraq and the hypocrisy of the modern art world. Daily News reporter Beth Stebner, who covered Banksy's residency, was struck by the wide array of people drawn to his work, noting, "You had art students, you had plumbers, you had gallery owners. It just brought New Yorkers out."

A pair of Banksy hunters and dog walkers using the handle @twowaytraffic chronicled their month-long search on camera, while Stephan Kezler, owner of a Southampton gallery that buys and sells the street artist's unauthorized, illegal, public work, sought out new — and valuable — pieces.

From Queens and Staten Island to Bushwick and the Lower East Side, each new piece was revealed daily on the artist's @BANKSYNY Instagram account and website, but the exact locations of the pieces remained secret. "He made a treasure hunt where you needed to go and find something in a part of the city you've never been in before," notes Steve P. Harrington, founder of the Brooklyn Street Art Museum.

Using Twitter hashtags and posts to Facebook, Instagram and Vine, art lovers and fans searched the streets for a new and often fleeting glimpse at Banksy's work. Banksy hunter Rebecca Encalad recalls, "We would post something and then hashtag it #TheBanksyPhenomenon. It trained us on how to find things on social media."

Adding to the thrill of the chase for Banksy fans was the uncertainty of whether a work would be altered or removed before they arrived to see it. Local graffiti artists took to tagging over the pieces, while some property owners removed or obscured the works in hopes of cashing in on the Banksy craze. Eventually, the artist in residence drew the attention of Mayor Bloomberg, who stated that Banksy was defacing public and private property. Though the NYPD denied they were hunting the artist, as the press claimed, one day of the residency was canceled due to police intervention.

On Oct. 31, the final day of Banksy's residency, balloon letters spelling "Banksy" were displayed near 5 Pointz, the soon-to-be demolished graffiti landmark in Queens. As a crowd formed below the work, a group of men attempted to remove it, prompting an outcry captured by videos posted to Facebook and YouTube.

“It’s like the Internet’s almost the graffiti wall,” said one New Yorker, while another believed the residency could only be seen in person, arguing, “You can’t re-blog this. You have to experience it.” As the audio guide on Banksy’s website observed, “The outside is where art should live, amongst us, where it can act as a public service, promote debate, voice concerns and forge identities. Don’t we want to live in a world made of art, not just decorated by it?”

**BANKSY DOES NEW YORK** was directed by Chris Moukarbel; produced by Jack Turner; produced in association with Matador Content. For HBO: senior producer, Sara Bernstein; executive producer, Sheila Nevins.

## **Interview with Chris Moukarbel**

### **When did you first hear of Banksy?**

I don't remember when exactly; I've always known about Banksy as a British street artist. I have an art background and went to art school; it might have been then that I got to know his work, but not nearly as intimately as I do now after having made this film.

### **Were you in New York in October 2013?**

I wasn't in New York. I knew of Banksy's residency from the news, but I didn't really get the same full-throttle media explosion of being in town. [President of HBO Films] Sheila Nevins specifically approached me because she was inspired by what was going on with Banksy that month and wanted to represent it in a film. I had previously done a film that HBO had acquired called 'Me at the Zoo,' which also used a lot of user-generated content from the web and told a story that already existed in a public space. It seemed like a good fit to apply that style to make this film.

### **How did you go about harvesting material from social media?**

In this case, people who had posted a photo or video related to Banksy oftentimes included a hashtag, so we searched #BanksyNY and #BetterOutThanIn. When we use a hashtag, in addition to just bringing attention to a subject, we're also creating a massive online archive. Part of this project was really about accessing this archive and using it to tell a story.

### **What made certain users stand out?**

Sometimes it was just simply the amount of accurate coverage that some people had. For example, we turned the dog-walkers into characters because they were really comprehensive. They filmed themselves looking for Banksy's pieces each day. It was examples like that that made the film really exciting, because you were watching real people documenting their experiences, not even realizing if there would be an audience for it.

### **Did any piece of user-generated content surprise you?**

There was one moment at the end of the residency where one of the dog walkers, Kurt, was narrating how that last day went. Banksy's letter balloons were taken in front of his eyes, the cops were there and the fight broke out. Kurt was explaining this blow-by-blow for this unseen audience. At the same time, he was playing Banksy's website voiceover, which included the song "New York, New York." He said, "This is the song that he wanted us to hear at the end on this last day," and, "It's like we're in a movie." Then months later, I edited him into a movie to the same song and thought, "This actually is the end of our movie." It was a moment where the distance between those two worlds collapsed.

### **How do you feel about Banksy's art?**

I was always interested in the amount of notoriety that Banksy was able to achieve. Whether you would even consider Banksy a contemporary artist is debatable, but personally, I was drawn to the amount of spectacle around his work. What I saw with Banksy's residency was that he is also interested in bringing light to some of that. He often makes work that isn't specifically about the gesture or the piece itself, but about the frame around it. He also seems interested in these broader themes around the gentrification of urban space and the kind of value placed on public art. I think those broader themes were attractive to me as well and were something we tried to explore with the film.

### **Can you speak to the monetization of Banksy's work portrayed in the film?**

I think the public had these knee-jerk reactions when they realized that the Sphinx piece had been stolen in plain view. A lot of people were outraged. We connected with the men who took the piece. From their perspective, Banksy dropped this piece off in their neighborhood. It's a very charged location; there are 250 small businesses that are going to be shut down and razed to build parking and shopping for Citi Field. This area, Willets Point, is featured as a character, not only in Banksy's residency, but also in our film. These guys who had taken the Sphinx believed that because Banksy didn't report this stolen, it wasn't stolen. They said, "If we don't take it, someone else will. Some gallerist or wealthy art aficionado might take it, and what good is it going to do then? It's our neighborhood; we should be the ones to have it." Under the circumstances, it seems like a fair position for them to take.

### **What ignited the public interest about Banksy's residency?**

I think he's arguably one of the most famous artists in the world. He's done this type of residency in the past, so he knew how it was going to play out, to some extent. I think oftentimes he was baiting the public and the media. It's interesting how much social media played into this project, and that was another component to what I think Banksy was trying to pay attention to: the fact that this is public art that exists on the street, but also the new street -- and the other public place -- is the internet.

### **The film ends on a sad note about 5 Pointz: what message do you hope viewers take away about street art?**

What happened at 5 Pointz is complicated but it's also indicative of a larger issue: as real estate prices go up in a city like New York and as the city seems to privilege luxury condo development over businesses and cultural organizations, it changes the city's texture. As it becomes more expensive, it becomes more difficult for artists to live and work there, and the experience of living in a city changes as well. Gentrified space is not merely as diverse or vibrant as cities were in the past. There could probably never be another 5 Pointz in New York City and there's something very unfortunate about that.