
Unauthorized

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Critical text by Emanuela Mazzonis di Pralafra

"I wrote 'copyright is for losers' in my (copyrighted) book and still encourage anybody to take and amend my art for their own personal amusement, but not for profit or making it look like I've endorsed something when I haven't. Thanks."

(from Banksy's website)

The girl with the balloon, the kissing policemen, the masked boy throwing a bouquet of flowers, John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson holding bananas instead of guns, a judge beating a protester, the rats, the monkeys. This sequence of images - among many others - requires little explanation: it is immediately traceable to the street artist par excellence, the one without an identity, who evades the system while simultaneously depending heavily upon it: Banksy.

And again, the self-destruction of the artwork immediately after it was auctioned at Sotheby's for one million dollars - the famous girl with the red balloon. A performance carried out in the artist's absence, yet one that achieved global resonance.

We might call it the "Banksy effect": whenever the artist performs an action or creates a mural at night and in secrecy, the echo is instantaneous. An artist who has deliberately remained anonymous and yet achieved worldwide success. His figure has become a commercial and legal paradox: he critiques the concept of copyright while simultaneously acting within legal frameworks to protect his works through registered trademarks, safeguarding both his art and his identity. The appropriation of copyright, the debate surrounding authorship, and the use of preexisting imagery to create new works - all of this can be found within Brad Downey's body of work *What Lies Beneath*.

The title itself is provocative: what lies underneath? What is concealed beneath appearances? What do we perceive beyond the image before us? What we see is called into question.

Like a contemporary archaeologist, Downey brought to light a series of murals that Banksy had created in 2003 for an exhibition at Kunstraum Kreuzberg Bethanien in Berlin. Downey himself had been invited to that exhibition - his first group show in Europe.

In 2011, on the occasion of the exhibition titled *What Lies Beneath*, Downey was assigned the same room where Banksy's murals had once been displayed. He decided to uncover them by literally excavating the numerous layers of plaster that had been applied to the walls over the years.

Downey resurrected the works of an artist who has made appropriation his hallmark, using precisely the same method.

We are confronted with a striking case of unauthorized appropriation, leveraging the most debated "brand" in contemporary art with regard to intellectual property and authorship.

Like Banksy, Downey plays with the system by subverting its rules and using its own mechanisms to carry out his intervention.

They both remarkably succeed in their provocations: they generate discourse, controversy, confusion, and blur the boundaries between reality and fiction. They manipulate reality - or the works of others - to offer us a new reality to interrogate.

Standing before their works, we are forced to question the very meaning of what we are observing. And what could be more relevant today than an inquiry into authorship in the age of social media, artificial intelligence, and fake news?

Observing Downey's diptychs - where three of Banksy's murals have been literally brought back to light - we ask ourselves whether the images are authentic, manipulated, copied, or invented. After uncovering the individual fragments that composed Banksy's murals, Downey reconstructed the original image and produced a hyperspectral rendering of it - an image that can be "read" only through a close analytical process, as if excavated and examined through its own layers.

In the diptych, we see both the reconstructed image and the red wall squared segments from which the murals were extracted.

An image and an abstraction, fullness and void, life and death.

These works not only evoke the literal meaning of the term photography - writing with light - but also revive the soul of the image, illuminating what had been concealed. Downey's operation becomes more and more compelling, as he not only revives - through an illicit act of appropriation - the work of an artist whose practice thrives on ephemerality and spectacle, but goes even further.

He reopens the debate on authorship and intellectual property within the art world at a moment when Artificial Intelligence further

complicates these issues - particularly in the realm of images and photography. Downey does not employ AI, yet the association arises naturally when reflecting upon his practice. In a recent conversation with the artist, we addressed precisely this issue. Can we trust the images we see? Where does reality end and where does fiction begin? Who authors the images that saturate the web and shape our present? Downey told me that Midjourney, in his words, "is caught copying my style to train its artificial intelligence."

This implies the appropriation of his images - along with thousands of others belonging to living and deceased artists, famous and lesser known - to enrich its database and generate what Google describes (in AI-generated text) as: "Images of every kind: realistic, artistic (in the style of famous painters, comics, abstract), perfect for design, marketing, art and entertainment."

Is this, then, theft in broad daylight - or rather, in the full light of the web - of copyrighted works? What about the protection of the artist? Banksy and Downey, who began working around the same period (late 1990s / early 2000s), have anticipated by several years what the vast and troubling world of the web and artificial intelligence is now enacting at indescribable speed - raising legal, commercial, and intellectual controversies that the world must confront, regulate and legitimize. I'll leave it to posterity to decide.

BRAD DOWNEY (1980, Louisville)

is a Berlin-based artist and activist. He has a dual background in the arts, having earned a BFA in Documentary Film from the Pratt Institute in New York (1998-2003) followed by an MFA in Painting from the Slade School of Art in London (2003-2005).

This combination allows him to document his urban interventions with a filmmaker's precision and a painter's eye. His multifaceted projects range from performative actions and video to installations, paintings, and drawings. Through the use of humor, sensitivity, and precise interventions, Downey investigates the underlying structures of our cities, landscapes, and sacred sites, as well as forgotten peripheries and contested borders.

Since 2003 Brad Downey has exhibited widely in Europe, as well as in numerous international exhibitions, museums and biennials, from the Kunstraum Kreuzberg Bethanien di Berlino, in a collective show named *Backjumps: The Live Issue*, to the Tbilisi Architecture Biennale in 2020.

There have been several monographic exhibitions of Downey's work, including *Slow Motion Disasters* at Kunstraum Kreuzberg Bethanien in Berlin in 2019, and *Reverse Culture Shock* at MU Hybrid Art House in Eindhoven in 2018. Further solo exhibitions include *Flupp Blubb Boing* at Kunstverein Arnsberg in 2020, and *This Echo* at the Galerija Vžigalica in Ljubljana in 2019.

In 2020 Hatje Cantz published a 20 year survey of Downey's work entitled *Slapstick Formalism Process, Project, Object*.

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