

## Exit Through the Gift Shop, Enter via the Backdoor

John Phillips, August 2012

In the autumn of 2008 Kate Brindley, Director of Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives, received a mysterious telephone call proposing collaboration on a radically transgressive exhibition. An account of the secret negotiations that followed reads more like a Cold War Thriller, (*Trickster, Traitor, Bolder Spray*) than a description of orthodox curatorial planning. Sworn to secrecy, and beholden to hoodwink their employers the local Council, a small select curatorial team embarked on a conspiracy to hand the City's Museum, and all its treasures, over to an internationally renowned 'art terrorist', to disorganise as he pleased.

For the curatorial team, pursuing this project required a considerable leap of faith. Generally speaking, artists and curators are divided by a common interest. To demonstrate their conflicting attitudes one need do little more than offer each a single sheet of paper. Artists will immediately seek to mark and stain it, making it their own, while curators will leap to its defence, hoping to preserve its qualities for the public good. If anything went wrong, be it a single item from the collection damaged, or the opprobrium of tabloid wroth, the anonymous artist would walk away unscathed. But the curators' career prospects, even as prospective supermarket shelf stackers, let alone guardians of cultural memory, would, in all likelihood, be seriously compromised. But, as Brindley herself acknowledges, 'it was frankly a "no-

brainer”. Did I really want to become known as the Director who turned down what would become one of the most visited exhibitions in the world in 2009<sup>1</sup>.

On Friday 12 June 2009, an online press campaign announced that Bristol Museum had been ‘Banksyed’ and that a truly extraordinary exhibition would open to the public the following day. In the weeks that followed, over 300.000 visitors queued for hours to see the astonishing transformation *Banksy v Bristol Museum*<sup>2</sup>.

*Banksy: The Bristol Legacy*, (edited by Paul Gough, Bristol, Redcliffe Press Ltd., 2012, 158 pp., 98 col. and 4 b. & w. ills.) presents a series of essays that place this exhibition in context, and explore a range of relevant issues from the possible application of Grade II listed building status to selected graffiti, to the exhibition’s contribution to debates surrounding the role and function of public art and collections.

True to its subject, this volume presents views that are honest, insightful, provocative, incongruous and fun. Its conflicting voices tell stories from the very dissimilar perspectives of producers, audiences and professional commentators. Yet despite their many differences, the contributors appear united in both an admiration and annoyance with a central character that is overbearing and invisible, and a sense that an important transformation has occurred within their city. One senses both the personal discomforts and the bolder opportunities surrounding these events.

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<sup>1</sup>K. Brindley, Working with Banksy, P68

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPxn5-ADfM8>

Was *Banksy v Bristol Museum* simply hype? Was it even art? David Lee is dismissive. 'Banksy is endearing enough', he proposes, 'a hard working entertainer with a winning streetwise attitude and the odd clever quip up his sleeve, but he's no artist. No artist worth anything is a mere gag, a point scored.'<sup>3</sup> While a text attributed to Bristol Museums and Archives pronounces that 'the exhibition was quite simply the single biggest event in the history of the museum service'<sup>4</sup>.

Intertwined with the story of a mischievous interloper's disruption of dusty treasures, another narrative emerges from these essays. And while it is explored from a uniquely Bristolian perspective, its lessons are increasingly relevant to other cities. Without proposing definitive solutions, the book provides a template for a debate about the place that powerful visual statements and creative interventions, be they temporary or permanent, sacrilegious or sanctioned, can play in the everyday lives of individuals and in the identity of a city itself.

*Banksy V Bristol Museum* was a unique event. *Banksy: The Bristol Legacy* employs a generosity of vision to bring together a fascinating collection of voices that explore how we might publicly debate and assess both the legacy of art projects and the development of inclusive urban identities.

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<sup>3</sup>D. Lee, Endearing enough, but it's not art, P125

<sup>4</sup> Bristol Museums Galleries and Archives, Bristol's great art heist, p61

