



Photograph from @banksy on Instagram

CULTURE ART

Before Banksy: Art pranksters and provocateurs who Banksy'd us first

As that cynical adage goes, It's all been done before. But at least in the art world, each prank takes on a wildly different form

Mookie Katigbak-Lacuesta | Oct 10 2018



Banksy's latest stunt at a Sotheby's auction (a self-destructing artwork automated to shred itself after being sold) recalled other art pranksters who played the system with the same *wink wink nudge nudge* kind of subversion. There's a joke that's being played and it's not on the artist—which means it's on whoever believes that the numbers on a price tag equate to the value of a work of art. Other pranksters have also poked fun at institutions that house high art (what is high art anyway?), or at spectators of art who don't know what art is. Here are a few stunning and smug indictments of all of us art heathens.

Harvey Stromberg's Stickers





In 1971, Harvey Stromberg was described by the New York Times as a "photographer, or a media manipulator, or a self-made chance factor, or a guerilla artist or a fraud. All of the above. None of the above." This description set the tone for how he was regarded in the art world.

One prank he famously pulled was a photographic "exhibit" at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) where he made exact-to-scale photographs of utility objects—light switches, alarm buzzers, bricks, and keyholes, among other things. Using double-sided tape, Stromberg stuck these photographs in spaces it was customary to find them. It was described as the "longest-running one-man photo exhibit," as it took museum personnel all of two years to discover and remove the stickers. The "show" ran hitchless for two years so Stromberg threw in another prank. He decided it was time to officially "open" the exhibit at the MOMA—complete with formal invitations to both guests and media. If MOMA administrators treated the opening nonchalantly, it would encourage other such pranks; if they treated it as a criminal offense, it would cheapen their position as champions of conceptual art.

Joey Skaggs and "The Hippie Bus Tour to Queens"



Joey Skaggs and his East Village "hippie" friends would be gawked at as city curiosities by bridge and tunnel people—so he decided to change the narrative and turn the show around. In 1968, he rented a Greyhound bus and took 60 hippies to Queens where they could take snapshots of, and gawk at, normal people going about their typical, suburban preoccupations. "Look, it's someone mowing the lawn!" one can imagine one of the passengers saying, or "Look it's a man washing his car!" or even "Why's the plumber taking so long at Mrs. Robinson's house?"

Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans





Warhol's Campbell Soup Cans were either a prank or a cultural statement or both, given America's rampant consumerist culture in the 1960s. Consisting of thirty two canvases, the work featured paintings of various soup products offered by Campbell's (that's a lot of varieties of canned goop); it also made use of a printmaking method instead of a proper painting technique. Generally regarded as the world's formal introduction to pop art, Warhol's work was interpreted as a reaction to abstract expressionism, the predominant art movement of the time. In recent years, another soup can painting was sold for eleven million dollars, making the case that everything is a commodity—even a statement piece about how everything is a commodity, is a commodity.

Bobby Chabet's Angel Flores



Angel Flores was the brainchild of Bobby Chabet, father of Philippine conceptual art, and a couple of his writer friends. Chabet and company invented an artist called Angel Flores, a "classmate" at the Ateneo, who died in a motorcycle accident. Flores came with an entire backstory (he hailed from Cebu), he had an English girlfriend (Sheila), and he "died" just as he was on the rise to fame and international prestige. The story goes that Sheila mailed his Ateneo friends all of Flores' paintings, having no desire to keep anything he owned or made. The friends considered it something of a civic duty to show these artworks to the Manila art scene, given Flores' massive talent and experimental style (which could only benefit Philippine art as a whole). It would take decades before the hoax was finally revealed, but not before the group extolled Flores' virtues as an artist on local TV talk shows, and the work of Angel Flores was exhibited at the CCP.