

A Look Behind Some of the Biggest Pranks in Art History

Adam Heardman / MutualArt OCTOBER 8, 2018

Pretty-much-anonymous street artist **Banksy** was back in the headlines this weekend thanks to his **self-shredding picture**. We take a look at other classic art-world pranks that have confounded and delighted through history.



Banksy's work self-destructs at Sotheby's on Friday.

As a street artist and activist, **Banksy's career** has consisted almost exclusively of anti-establishment pranks and stunts. On Friday evening, at Sotheby's Contemporary Art auction, the hammer fell on a print of his *Balloon Girl* image at a price of \$1.1 million. Seconds later, an alarm sounded through the room and the print began feeding through the bottom of its own frame, inside which was a hidden shredder, leaving half of the work in ribbons.

Promptly, the piece's value doubled. Commodification appears to move as quickly as protest in the contemporary market-place.

Speculation already abounds as to how far Banksy collaborated with Sotheby's in setting up the stunt. It certainly seems far-fetched that the auction house's handlers wouldn't have noticed the machinery in the frame.

But the impact of the prank has been huge, bringing Banksy his biggest burst of media-attention since *Dismaland* closed. His market-value has increased. **Haters have been won over**. The search for his true identity is **back on**. All in all, it's been a successful prank.

As a space in which publicity, politics, and aesthetics can meet, 'the prank' is an established mode within the art world. Here are some of the more prominent and successful examples from art history.

1. Hogarth and Wilson's Rembrandt Roast



Centuries late to the party, artists and collectors in 1700s England were busy discovering that **Rembrandt van Rijn** was a genius. Historically underappreciated in Britain, the Dutch master was suddenly the must-have artist.

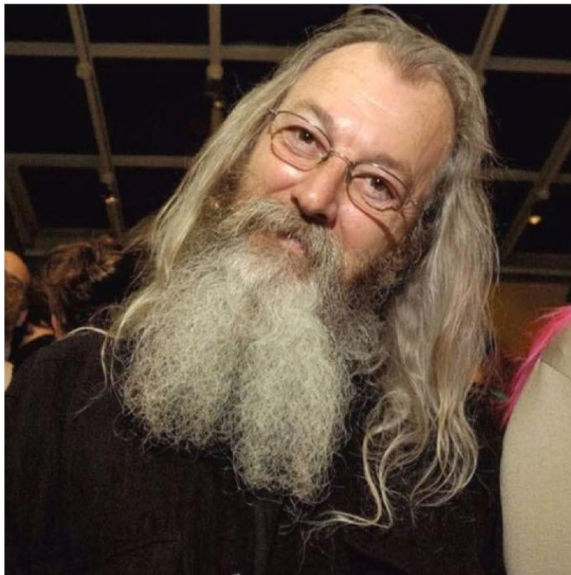
Thomas Hudson, the portrait-painter, had outbid his neighbor, Benjamin Wilson, for several prized etchings at auction. The disgruntled Wilson enlisted the help of his friend, the satirical engraver **William Hogarth**, in a revenge plot.

Together, Hogarth and Wilson produced several Rembrandt forgeries and put them up for sale. Hudson duly purchased one of the copies, even going as far as to say it showed 'the finest light and shade I have ever seen by Rembrandt.'

With the money earned, Wilson invited artists, collectors, and high society members to his home to enjoy "an English Roast". When the main course was presented on a platter, it was covered in similar forgeries. Wilson stood up and exposed Hudson's gullibility to the group. Hudson was unconvinced until Hogarth stuck a fork through one of the etchings and held it up to his face.

Many details are probably apocryphal, but this early art-market prank set a precedent for much trickery since.

2. Joey Skaggs' Fake 'Fake Parade'



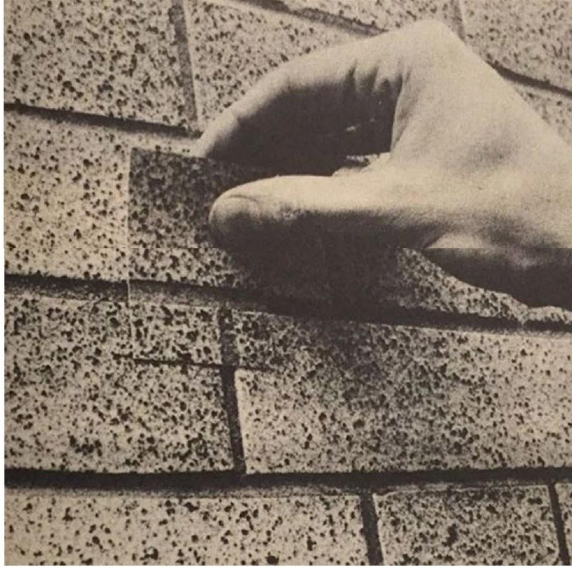
Prank-artist Joey Skaggs.

Joey Skaggs is the maybe the most prolific prankster out there. Over the years, the performance artist and writer has staged the thieving of celebrity sperm, "attempted" to "windsurf across the Pacific", and exposed Western racism by fooling people into thinking that a Chinese businessman was buying dogs to make into soup.

Every April Fools' Day since 1986, Skaggs has held a Parade with floats, banners, streamers extensive press coverage and pertinent contemporary themes. Except that the Parade doesn't ever actually take place, existing purely within the press-hype. Fake News.

Until last year, that is. In a neat reversal of his own prank, Skaggs actually did hold a real-life parade on April 1st, 2017 after 31 years of pretending. The march functioned as a protest against Donald Trump's presidency and was also the largest gathering of Trump-look-alikes in history. The imposters marched to Trump Tower and sat tweeting on golden thrones. Maybe Joey Skaggs' greatest prank was to make Fake News real.

3. Stromberg's Stickers



Trompe l'oeil stickers by Harvey Stromberg.

Like many good pranks, Harvey Stromberg's stickers are both famous and mysterious. In works he later described as "photo-sculptures", Stromberg installed over 300 adhesive-backed, life-sized photographs of fittings - light switches, door-handles etc. - in the New York Museum of Modern Art.

Many artists, among them Banksy, have pulled the stunt of placing unsolicited "artworks" inside prestigious museums. None, however, have done so with quite the subtlety or long-term success of Stromberg. Some of his stickers remained in the museum for over two years, until the artist himself held an impromptu "launch party" for his "exhibition", complete with a drinks reception served using plastic champagne flutes.

4. Voina's 'Giant Galactic Space Dick'



Members of art-activist group, Voina, in 2010.

Two things are fundamental to the nature of good prank-pulling. First is a giddy, childish excitement about 'breaking the rules'. Second is the potential for silliness to grow into broad, meaningful dissent. Both are encapsulated perfectly in the work of Russian art-collective, Voina.

In the past, they've let stray cats loose in upmarket restaurants and held public orgies protesting against politicians from Putin to Medvedev. 2010 saw their most famous prank. After tricking their way past security guards, members of Voina painted a huge phallus along the Liteiny Bridge in central St. Petersburg. The penis-pic was 289ft long and 89ft wide. When the bascule-style bridge was raised, the image pointed directly at the offices of the Federal Security Services of the Russian Federation.

5. Nat Tate



David Bowie reading from *Nat Tate: An American Artist 1928-1960* at the launch event in 1998.

Once you know that his name is a combination of 'National Gallery' and 'Tate' the whole thing seems blatant and ridiculous, but the fictional biography of the abstract artist 'Nat Tate' had many of the New York literati and glitterati fooled in the late 1990s.

With collaborative help from, among other people, Gore Vidal and David Bowie, the Scottish writer William Boyd wrote and publicized *Nat Tate: An American Artist 1928-1960*. The book was presented as a true biography charting the life of an undiscovered abstract painter who destroyed most of his own work and committed suicide by jumping off the Staten Island Ferry. At a launch event for the book in 1998 with readings by Bowie and talks by Picasso-biographer John Richardson, many critics and journalists claimed to have heard of Tate.

David Lister, now Arts Editor at the Independent, was the first to cotton on and broke the hoax open in an article published a week after the launch.

6. Andy Kaufman's Death



Dora Garcia, *I Love Andy Kaufman* (2010)

Death and comedy share a strangely symbiotic relationship. An audience can "die of laughter". A hack stand-up "dies on stage". The legendary Tommy Cooper literally did just that, suffering a heart attack during a live-televised routine and passing away shortly afterward. A sort of Black Humour holy-grail is the faking of one's own death.

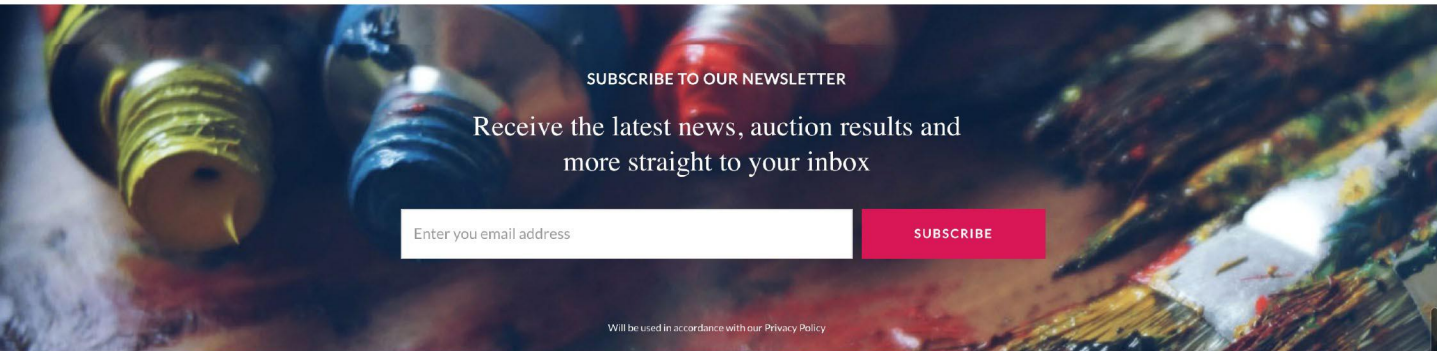
Comedian and performance artist Andy Kaufman was a prankster extraordinaire, occupying an array of characters and pulling a large number of media stunts. His life and career were defined by the unfixed and un-catch-able nature of the performed self. From beloved characters like Latka Gravas and Tony Clifton to his entirely-staged wrestling career, Kaufman kept himself one step ahead of his audience at all times.

Due to his prankster nature, and because of several references he made during his lifetime, many believe that his publicized death from lung cancer in 1984 was an elaborate hoax. In 2014, Bob Zmuda and Lynn Marguiles published a book claiming that Kaufman's death was indeed faked and that his return was imminent. Both extensively collaborated with Kaufman, and Marguiles was in a relationship with him at the time of his death.

Zmuda in particular has appeared to 'give the game away'. "The only reason I'm giving it up now", he told the New York Post in 2014, "is that Andy set a time limit on this one. Thirty years. So I've kept my part of the bargain and kept my mouth shut. But no more. The prank's over. I want him back and he's coming back".

To this day, it's unclear whether or not Zmuda's 'confession' can be trusted, or whether it's simply a Kaufman-ish publicity prank done in his honor.

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