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Is Banksy's 'Exit Through the Giftshop' a hoax too far?

A movie by Banksy has transformed a French street artist into an art-world sensation

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For your first question to someone to be "Are you real?" might seem a bit rude, but in the case of the French street artist Thierry Guetta, such basics are strangely necessary.

"This is the question everyone wants to know," he says with a sigh. "Am I real?"

It's what you get for starring in a movie by Banksy. Guetta wasn't meant to be the star; originally he was the director and the film was supposed to be a documentary about street artists; but in an audacious switcheroo the British art-prankster wrested control of the project and turned the cameras on Guetta, launching his eccentric 44-year-old French videographer on to the international art scene as an artist in his own right called Mr Brainwash. The film charts Guetta's rise from zero to art-show hero, climaxing with the opening of Mr Brainwash's first show in Los Angeles, which presold \$100,000 (£65,000) of his work. Shortly thereafter, Madonna asked him to design the cover of her greatest hits album, *Celebration*.

The blogs buzzed with rumours: that Mr Brainwash is nothing but a front for Banksy; even that he is Banksy. As the film picked up acclaim at Sundance and then Berlin, Mr Brainwash's career has taken off. A few weeks ago, on Valentine's Day, a new show of his work opened in the Meatpacking District in New York to a mixture of fashion and art crowd sipping vodka drinks served by leggy models in Afro wigs. If the film was intended as a satire on the superficiality of the contemporary art scene, the satire was going over the heads of the buyers forking out \$50,000 to

\$200,000 a canvas. "It doesn't matter if he is good or bad," one said. "He has the right connections, and that's why I am buying. Plus, I like him."

Certainly, a walk around the 15,000sq ft space reveals plenty of red stickers beside the paintings — Warholesque portraits of Michael Jackson, David Bowie, Bill Gates and the like, priced from \$10,000 to \$40,000. One of the larger works — a giant portrait of Madonna — sold to a private collector for \$200,000. "Some are sure, some are unsure, some are buying just in case," Guetta says in his broken but enthusiastic English. "People want to know: am I real? Am I joking? Am I Banksy? Is it a whole joke by Banksy? But the more they see me the more it becomes real to them. It would 'ave to be a big, big joke. Who would do it? Who would 'ire all these people?"

He waves to his helpers scurrying this way and that around big blow-up sculptures in the manner of Claes Oldenberg: a New York taxi, wrapped in a Cellophane box like a Matchbox car; a 10ft Pepto- Bismol aerosol can. He's quite open about the fact that he doesn't construct the work himself. "There might be 20 people in my bus but I am the driver," he says. "I am the one who say 'stop'. I am the one who say 'I don't like it'. I am the one who say 'the face is not right'. I am the one who say 'I want this like that'." When the work is done he embeds dollar bills and sometimes drops of his own blood into the work to authenticate them. "For the people in me who believe I do it 100 per cent," he says, pointing to a wall of portraits down which a can of paint has been slopped. "You see this? I did this yesterday. Drop some paint down that wall. I felt like the painting was nothing, so dropping some paint it become something, something artistic, something street . . ."

It's not hard to see what Banksy saw in this chatty bamboozler, with his shambolic energy, paint-spattered jeans, showstopping displays of humility and racoonish pallor. He is a dead ringer for the young Stanley Kubrick — or maybe a Gallic John Belushi, porkpie hat pushed back jauntily on his head, his heavy-lidded eyes containing just a hint of panic, as if expecting police to arrive any moment and take him away. "A truck could hit me tomorrow," he says. "But I am unstoppable. I 'ave such strength in me. Banksy knew this. That is why he chose me. Not Damien 'irst. He chose me." We draw up in front of his portrait of Banksy depicting the artist as a hooded monkey.

“He is a guy with a thousand faces,” Guetta says. “Even to me. I don’t know ’is real face.”

“You don’t even know what he looks like?”

“Even if I do know it, I wouldn’t put it.”

“But surely if you’ve met him you must have . . .”

“Whatever. I don’t put it. I would describe ’im as a guy who is taking off a mask and there is another mask. He takes off the second one and there is a third one . . .”

The person he most reminds you of is Dennis Hopper’s nutty photographer in *Apocalypse Now*, obliterating himself in rhapsodic paens to the genius of Colonel Kurtz. Banksy and Guetta first met in 2005, when the former arrived looking for walls on which to put graffiti in Los Angeles. Guetta was the guy you contacted to show you good locations. Originally from a small town just outside Paris, he had moved to LA in the early Eighties, where he worked, variously, as an estate agent, a building contractor and a fashion retailer before starting to document the street-art scene, obsessively filming his cousin, the Paris-based street artist Space Invader, Shepard Fairey (best known for his Obama poster) and Banksy, whom he always filmed in rear view or in shadow. Guetta shot 30,000ft of film, all told, including footage of flushed toilets; reviewing it, Banksy realised that most of it was unusable and that his Frenchman may be “just someone with mental problems who happened to have a camera”. That’s when he had his brainwave.

“He felt like the movie that I was coming up [with] was so crazy — and artistic, very artistic — he said the film should be about me,” Guetta says. “I was a subject more interesting than the work. I feel why not: give it a shot. He is not nobody. He is somebody who is pretty respected. I trust him like he trusts me. ‘Take the can, take the brush you go that way,’ he goes. ‘I’m taking the camera and going that way.’ We changed the rules.” In his new incarnation as Mr Brainwash, Guetta hired CBS studios, all 18,000sq ft of it. He filled it with 20,000 books for a piece about information overload. He built a 20ft giant robot out of old TV screens; and he recruited graffiti artists to fill the walls that he didn’t have time to fill himself. “He told me ‘do a small show’. But I’m a person that is kind of crazy. I like to do things and when I think of 100 things I do 2,000. I do not stop. It was like going to a country and you ’ave to ’ave a war. I put all my energy into it, everything

that I 'ave, everything that I own, every money, every penny, to make it 'appen."

If the whole stunt was intended as a joke about art and authenticity — a twist on the old "a monkey could do it" line — it appears to have far exceeded its maker's intentions. Shrouded in shadow, Banksy ends the documentary wondering if he did the right thing launching Mr Brainwash on the world. "Andy Warhol was replicating images to show they were meaningless," he says. "And now, thanks to Mr Brainwash, they're definitely meaningless." In many ways Guetta seems to be the least cynical part of the whole thing: a street hustler turned art-world naïf, wholly oblivious to the sharkfins of irony cutting through the water around him, although he says that some of the scenes in the film are a little uncomfortable to watch — particularly the scenes showing him discussing money.

"It is hard to watch yourself," he says, "I'm sure Robert De Niro has the same problem. I'm not too big or too clever. I'm pretty simple. I'm not like a person, an artist, who gives too many messages in his art. Art for me is just the smile and the beauty of it. To look at it and be happy."

Who is the butt of the joke here — the art world? Mr Brainwash? Guetta? Banksy himself? The bad faith of the film is so thick that you could stand a mop in it, but one can hardly begrudge Guetta the enthusiasm with which he now grabs at the opportunities that have been handed to him. The very guilelessness that is his saving grace as a human being may spell trouble for his career as an artist, but you can't help but warm to this eccentric Frenchman.

"I don't know why, but I feel that everything that is happened in my life is happening for a reason," he says. "I feel there has to be somebody above. Somebody above me, above you, above Banksy — above everybody — who is pulling me out of the shadows and into the light."

A power above Banksy? Now that is crazy talk.