

10 Heavy Weaponary—A Conclusion

In 2020, on Banksy's website, there is an elephant with a cruise missile on his back, an icon guarding the website's menu. Banksy's staff uses the same elephant as an email letterhead logo. Banksy called the design "Heavy Weaponary" and it has long been a programmatic motif for Banksy, but especially for his early years, i.e. roughly from 1995 until 2005, the period we dealt with in this book.

10.1 1997–1999 The Capital "A" Phase: Collaboration & Style Writing Banksy

The elephant's first (documented) appearance on a wall was in 1997 at Ashton Court, a music festival, and it served as a detail of a larger freehand style writing composition made together with other local graffiti writers. Before 1997, the dates of Banksy's works are speculation; 1997 also marks the first and last year that some of Banksy's illegal works bear a date themselves. In that year, Banksy the mural graffiti writer mostly worked freehanded. But he always used little stencils there as well—like the elephant that he combined with his name tag in a few freehand murals around that time. Those stencils were mostly used as details of style writing pieces he created with other writers, who were often more famous or established at that time than he was. During this time, Banksy was already mostly responsible for the image part of large collaborations and he was already the one in a group who organized walls, interventions, and spray-painting jobs at music festivals. For three years ('97–'99) "collaboration Banksy" was part of a graffiti writer crew. He usually collaborated with several people, mostly more known than him at that time, and most exhibitions were group shows or related to music festivals. Banksy often took the initiative himself and organized events or collaborations, a habit he kept up with later as well, for example when he set up POW and group shows like Santa's Ghetto.

However, also from 1997 onwards, Banksy started creating independent stencil graffiti, i.e. works that did not contain any freehand work, only stencils. The first was, according to Banksy, "Precision Bombing", which carried references to the freehanded graffiti writing culture ("bombing") but also to its distinction to guerilla art and stencil art ("Precision bombing"). In both works, the mostly freehanded ones and the independent stencils, Banksy used his stenciled tag, mostly a heavy futuristic sans serif stencil-like display font called "Stop",¹ designed by the famed Italian type designer

1 The editor stated this already in his 2010 book "Street Artist Banksy". Banksy illustrated the Stop font in his 2023 retrospective catalog *Cut & Run*, p. 8. He seemed to have found it in a

Aldo Novarese in 1971. This early phase, 1997–99 could also be called the “Capital A”-Banksy phase, as Banksy in this time used a capital “A” in Banksy—like in the font “Stop”, which is a font without any lower case letters. Nearly all works with the capital A signature can be dated before 2000.

It became also apparent during the research for this book that, as a freehand graffiti writer, Banksy did less illegal work than expected before 2000, especially in comparison with his later years as a stencilist. It seems that he painted 78% of his documented freehand style writing graffiti works with permission. Street artist Banksy is more a vandal than graffiti writer Banksy—at least from a juridical point of view.

Banksy seemed to have started as a graphic designer for techno parties before he started to do graffiti in a more professional way, i.e. relatively late for the average graffiti writer. Although style writing graffiti in US tradition is often associated with hip-hop, graffiti writing has a relationship with other music movements as well. Banksy’s background in hip-hop, techno and punk in particular left traces in his works, especially before 2003.

One year after the first documented “Heavy Weaponary” stencil, Banksy made his first portable, i.e. sellable, version of the motif. In this version, the elephant is once again in front of a barcode. The title is a pun on “weaponry” and “ornery,” which means grouchy, grumpy, or bad-tempered—a characteristic that seemed to apply to Banksy as well, according to Steve Lazarides. “When I met this scruffy, grumpy guy in 1997 I’d have never guessed that he would be the most famous artist of his generation,” said Lazarides, who worked as Banksy’s photographer and manager for most of the decade discussed in this book.² “Heavy Weaponary” is therefore also a self-portrait of Banksy the grumpy graffiti bomber—a slow elephant on a missile mission that nevertheless can’t be stopped. Elephants are not typically associated with aggression; they are stoic, imperturbable. The motif and its title are also funny and have a twist to them, a characteristic of nearly all Banksy works. Not only is the “Weaponary” heavy, but the elephant as well. Above this portable version of “Heavy Weaponary,” Banksy stenciled “London New York Bristol”—seemingly to say, “Who needs London and New York? Bristol is the best.” It could be argued that Bristol experienced the high point of its youth and pop culture influence in the 1990s, during which time bands like Massive Attack and Portishead pioneered the “Bristol Sound” scene. Looking back at Banksy’s shows in this book, the cheeky dismissal of London and New York in this version of

1980s edition of W. Turner Berry, Werner Pincus Jaspert, Alfred F Johnson: *The Encyclopaedia of Type Faces*, originally issued in 1953. This book was on display in Banksy’s “youth room” in the exhibition showing his influences.

2 Steve Lazarides quoted in: Susannah Butter: Banksy shredded artwork: How did he do it? *Evening Standard* 18 October 2018, <https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/arts/banksy-shredder-how-he-did-it-a3958076.html>

“Heavy Weaponary” is easily interpreted as an urge to take on the whole world after his Bristol years.

As expected, at the end of 1999, after three years of big “A” “collaboration Banksy” and rather “style writing graffiti Banksy,” he left his base Bristol to take over London. It is, however, important to note that Banksy was not just a local Bristol writer before 2000. He “lived in New York on and off for about two years”³ (1998–1999) and before that he seemed to have studied in Nottingham (circa 1992–1995).⁴

10.2 2000–2003 Increasing Size and Reach—Banksy Traveling Internationally

Banksy marked the end of his Bristol days with his first official solo exhibition there in February 2000, and his appearance in London with a first illegal organized “retrospective” (May 2000), often called the “Rivington Street show”. At this point, Banksy was still operating more like a do-it-yourself punk musician who happened to do visual graffiti; he organized his own “best of” retrospective, he was managed by a music manager and DJ (Stephen Earl, until mid 2002), worked at a record label (Wall of Sound) as a visual artist, performed spray painting at music festivals, and organized his shows more like music party events, not like gallery exhibitions. At this landmark show at Rivington Street, his London breakthrough, the stencils that had previously served more as details of his freehand works took center stage—at least in a quantitative way. This wasn’t the first time that Banksy had used stencils in this way, but starting with the May 2000 London show, he mainly switched to stencils and other media, i.e. Banksy the street artist was born. Still—in good ego style writing graffiti tradition—most works in that show can also be seen as disguised self-portraits of the street artist Banksy. Style writing graffiti replaced the role his stencils had played before—from time to time graffiti writing would appear, but usually only as a quote or a detail. His graffiti writing never fully vanished; it remained as a hint to his background and history as a graffiti writer.

One of his self-proclaimed “best of” works on the wall is again “Heavy Weaponary”, which also formed the starting point of a digital intro-animation for the launch of his website in early 2000, where Banksy’s name tag turns into the alter ego elephant with a missile.⁵ In both shows his tag was not written with a capital “A” any more, but

3 Banksy quoted in *The Enemy Within. Bristol’s Banksy bucks the system*. In: *Hip Hop Connection* 136, April 2000, p. 94.

4 Steve Beale: *Banksy and his crappy put-ups*, in: *Sleazation*, October 1998, p. 40; Si Mitchell: *Painting and Decorating*. *LEVEL* magazine, issue 08, June/July 2000, p. 66.

5 The original welcome video for banksy.co.uk. Circa 1999 or 2000. Animated by Hannah Collier. Posted on Instagram by Banksyarchive, 09.11.2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CHYbN_Al-9o/

a lower chase one. Banksy had adapted the “Stop” font and made it his own. He also stopped his frequent artistic collaborations and graffiti works, mostly created works on his own—with stencils that grew in size over time. Banksy’s early independent stencils in Bristol still were small, designed to be nearly everywhere and to be distributed repeatedly. From mid-2000 onwards, his stencils sometimes grew to a rather mural-size scale. The first of those large ones seemed to have been his Mona Lisa stencil, with Banksy combined with different attributes, an AK 47, a speech bubble, a bazooka, etc. Around 2000/2001 Banksy started creating more than life-size stencil murals, something he had spray-painted only freehandedly before.

In the first three years of the new millennium Banksy traveled a lot and made himself a name internationally. He had quite a few shows and graffiti stops in London, his new base, but also in the US, Mexico, Scotland, Germany, Japan, Australia, Austria, Denmark, France or Spain. Banksy had already spent quite some time in New York in the ’90s, and he returned frequently—in 2002, 2003 and 2005 (but also in 2008 and 2013).

Some of these early international shows, referred to as the Jubilee shows in this book, loosely dealt in a mocking way with Queen Elizabeth’s 50 years of reign, while others, for example the Existencilism shows, concurred with Banksy’s second book of the same title. For one of them, in Japan, he again used the “Heavy Weaponary” motif. There were several types of the “Heavy Weaponary” elephants; the very early version with rounded feet, one where the missile has no strap, and the traditional version used on canvases and Banksy’s website to this day. The Japanese version varied in that it had a line joining the top and bottom of the elephant’s head, and the eye is much more indistinct. Banksy constantly reworked his stencils over the years, although he could have just kept the first stencil and reused it. This is evidence of Banksy the perfectionist, but perhaps also careful undercover Banksy who would rather cut a new stencil in Japan than be stopped and identified with an older one while traveling.

Besides extensive traveling, the time around 2002 also marked an extension of media in Banksy’s shows—the first vandalized oil paintings, adding photos of outdoor works, sculptures, performance, etc., and an increasing use of larger, life-size stencils that shaped their environment and that were more site-specific. Banksy also began to use more color than the programmatic black, white and red of the early years, which is especially prominent in his first book from 2001, which was published entirely in black and white.

Every three years at that time, Banksy showcased his artistic persona by organizing a major “retrospective.” In 2003, that was Turf War in London, retrospectively his national breakthrough. Banksy has been a household name in the UK since then and most of his actions and interventions made national press from then on. It was the starting point of a less self-centered, more political but still entertaining Banksy. Turf War was Banksy’s largest solo show until then, second only to Barely Legal three years

later, which happened not in his usual destination New York but in Los Angeles, the heart of the United States' film industry. Banksy, who would later be nominated for an Oscar, had already said in 2000 that he would like to make a movie and had long been telling visual short stories. Most of his works depict a scene that occurs right before or after an incident that is left to the imagination of his audience, for example—the elephant is about to bomb a wall.

In this period Banksy mostly did still work with a photo copy machine, analogue cut and paste and projections. He got his source images from analogue clip art collections like *Crap Hound* or from books and magazines. His record sleeve designs of that times (*Badmeaningood*, *Think Tank*) were mostly converted by graphic designers like Tristan Manco, who got his analogue artwork, to digital, printable files.⁶ This also changed slowly within the years after that.

10.3 2003–2006 Less Is More and Mocking the Gallery World

In 2004, Banksy took a bit of a break. He stopped his extensive international exhibiting habit, maybe because he had already achieved the classic graffiti goal of becoming famous or perhaps because he earned enough money with his successful *Turf War* show and the online mail order gallery *POW*, which he had co-managed as mastermind in the background since the end of 2002. After 2003, the “less-ego Banksy” also stopped signing his works on the street because they might live longer if other graffiti writers envious of his fame didn't know they were his and left them alone; or, again, because Banksy had already reached his graffiti aim of getting-up (becoming famous) in that year. With his *Wrong War* campaign hinting at the Iraq war, also daily politics became a larger part of his work. Some of Banksy's works and series at that time, for instance his rats, were instantly recognizable as his even without a signature. He also mostly stopped stenciling his works more than once and went bigger and used more colors. This might be due to his growing presence online, in his picture books and in the media. It had become less necessary to formulate an idea more than once, as those motifs were shared online afterwards.

During his “year off” (2004), Banksy still continued his annual, rather playful interventions at the music festival Glastonbury and his Christmas group shows *Santa's Ghetto*. In this book, those shows are called “Secondary Use,” as Banksy rarely used new motific ideas in those shows and instead recycled old ones or made works that he seemed to take less seriously than his regular ones. 2004 until 2005 Banksy also continued to smuggle a few works into renowned museums, something he had started

6 Tristan Manco Zoom interview with the author, 4.11.20.

in 2003, which gave him much media attention. In 2005, he also created an entire exhibition out of an idea from 2001, which was to add stencils and other details to oil paintings he found at flea markets—the crude, vandalized or updated oil paintings. These years after 2003 mark a trend for Banksy towards galleries and museums, at least in a mock-up way, a tendency he already started in detail in 1999, when he—still based in Bristol—went to London to stencil “Mind the Crap” and the last step of the Tate’s stairway.

This tendency towards the gallery world came full circle as Banksy “shed his skin” for a fourth time in 2009, with the Banksy vs. Bristol museum show back in Banksy’s hometown. Like in 1998’s “Heavy Weaponary,” Banksy symbolically struck through ~~London, New York~~ and the world—“been there, done that,” so he returned to Bristol.