

Artist Shepard Fairey arrested on felony charges for Detroit graffiti

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Detroit authorities have charged world-famous street artist Shepard Fairey with malicious destruction of property, a felony, alleging that Fairey put up posters on structures owned by the city.

The artist was arrested July 6 at Los Angeles International Airport on a warrant issued by Detroit's 36th District Court. City authorities did not seek to extradite Fairey, who was later released in Los Angeles on bail set at \$75,000. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "Detroit officials opted to begin working with Fairey's attorney so the artist can turn himself in ... Fairey faces up to five years behind bars and several thousands of dollars in fines if convicted."

Ironically, Fairey's arrest comes less than two months after he completed a gigantic, 18-story-tall mural in downtown Detroit, commissioned by Dan Gilbert. Gilbert is a multibillionaire real-estate/home-loan tycoon who is leading the drive to build an upscale enclave for the upper middle class in the center of America's poorest major city. Fairey is alleged to have done the illegal tagging while he was in Detroit to paint the mural.

Gilbert's people were no doubt aware of Fairey's penchant for unauthorized street art at the time of the commission. Though he is perhaps best-known for his ubiquitous "HOPE" poster, which became a part of the 2008 presidential election campaign of Barack Obama, Fairey has, for decades, built an anti-establishment reputation by spray-painting and placing stickers and posters in public spaces without permission. (Indeed, it is likely that Gilbert and company hoped Fairey's "bad boy" image would lend them a certain amount of credibility.)

A *Detroit Free Press* article in May, headlined "Street Artist Shepard Fairey ready to tag Detroit", quotes the artist to this effect: "I still do stuff on the

street without permission. I'll be doing stuff on the street when I'm in Detroit."

The bringing of felony charges against Fairey is an act of intimidation. The local elite wants to send the message that it will punish anyone who challenges its plans. Those plans include the virtual walling-off of downtown Detroit from the social devastation in the neighborhoods, where sixty percent of children live in poverty and abandoned factories and tens of thousands of burned-out homes mar the landscape. Residents commonly compare Detroit's neighborhoods to post-shock-and-awe Iraq, an image that is not conducive to tourism, shopping and loft-apartment lifestyles.

Gilbert, Detroit's richest man, pursued equally severe charges against three teenage girls in June of 2014 after surveillance cameras recorded them tagging a downtown alley. "Unfortunately, once in a great while, degenerates who don't 'get it' crawl out of their deep dark holes and try to ruin it for the rest of us," wrote Gilbert at the time in a personal email to his 12,500 downtown employees, whom he enlisted in a witch-hunt against the youths. He attached surveillance images of the teenagers and offered to pay to paint the house of whoever identified them first.

(The cameras that captured this incident are part of Gilbert's privately owned and operated surveillance network, which covers not only public, outdoor spaces, but also includes cameras located inside the newsrooms of both of the city's major newspapers, the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News*.) *My Fox Detroit* reports that it was the Detroit Police Department's "graffiti task force," created during the city's precedent-setting municipal bankruptcy last year, which initiated the attack on Fairey. The task force is reported to have arrested 30 people in 2014, and 13 more this year, resulting in at least one jail sentence of six months.

Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, a Democrat, defended the prosecution of Fairey, telling reporters that the city has issued hundreds of tickets to graffiti taggers. Last October, Duggan attacked Detroit's famous "creative corridor"—a miles-long stretch of blighted buildings on Grand River Avenue that has been covered with murals and other art installations. After police detained several muralists—who had

permission from the owners of the building they were painting—and the city fined the owners to the tune of \$8,000, public outcry forced Duggan to climb down and apologize.

In the 1950s, when its population peaked at nearly two million people, Detroit had the highest standard of living of any major city in the country. After decades of deindustrialization, the city now perennially tops lists of America's poorest and most dangerous urban centers. Its blighted neighborhoods and abandoned, decaying factories, schools, hotels, theaters, etc., have become a world-famous symbol of social decline, a modern ruin.

The real vandals in Detroit, then, are not the artists who draw attention to or explore this situation through graffiti, murals and other public works, whether or not they ask permission. The criminals are instead to be found in the boardrooms of General Motors, Chrysler and Ford, and on the yachts of the bankers and hedge fund managers who forced the city into bankruptcy to steal the pensions of retirees, sell off public assets and increase the value of their own municipal bond-holdings.

The six-figure-salaried heads of the United Auto Workers and other unions have also actively participated by blocking any organized struggle of workers in opposition to this process. They openly supported the bankruptcy. And Gilbert, for his part, has made billions in recent years by buying up downtown real estate on the cheap, kicking out residents (including artists and working class retirees) and jacking up rents.



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