

Defending political and artistic dissent: Why Banksy's anonymity matters

Paul Mitchell
25 March 2026

For more than twenty years, the British artist known as Banksy has stood as a rare figure in contemporary culture for his exposure of state violence, imperialist war and social inequality.

Banksy's work, when it hits the target, is genuinely powerful. His stencilled art appears on walls around the world; his efforts have raised tens of millions for humanitarian causes; and his political interventions can sometimes slice through the fog of official propaganda.

Banksy's appeal has been broad and enduring. In 2017, a national poll ranked *Girl with Balloon* as the UK's favourite artwork, and the current touring exhibition *The Mystery of Banksy – A Genius Mind*—one of several ventures he has criticised for their commerciality—has travelled through 36 cities across Europe, attracting more than 3.5 million visitors.

That such a figure has survived this long without being absorbed, neutralised or destroyed by the state media apparatus is in part a testament to the importance of the anonymity he has sought.

Banksy's anonymity has acted as a democratic shield. It has allowed him to indict the crimes of the powerful in a mass popular medium without facing immediate legal sanction, corporate blacklisting, far right threats and state surveillance. It has helped make dissent possible in an increasingly authoritarian political environment. And it is precisely this shield that the ruling class—through its media, its courts and its security agencies—is now determined to tear away.

The campaign to unmask Banksy is not new. The first major attempt came in 2008, when the *Mail on Sunday* claimed he was a former Bristol Cathedral School pupil named Robin Gunningham. The aim was transparent: to puncture the aura of rebellion by exposing him as “a nice middle class boy.” The public largely ignored the stunt, but the desire to strip away Banksy's anonymity never disappeared.

This month an 8,000-word, multi-year investigation by Reuters was published, claiming to have “outed” Banksy. It was produced by an organisation whose origins lie in the information networks of the British Empire and whose “neutrality” is a fiction that cannot conceal its projection of the worldview of the capitalist state.

Reuters claims its probe serves the “public interest,” yet its own text reveals the real aim: to argue that Banksy operates “above the law” and evades forms of state control applied to others. It insists that anyone shaping “social and political discourse” warrants “scrutiny, accountability and, sometimes, unmasking,” and that Banksy's anonymity has allowed him to avoid such “transparency.” Reuters then complains that Britain's legal and political establishment is “comfortable with Banksy's messages and how he delivers them,” leaving little risk for him of “retaliation or censorship”.

Banksy refused to engage with the Reuters investigation. Pest Control, his official company, stated simply that he had “decided to say nothing.” His lawyer, Mark Stephens, argued that unmasking him would “violate the artist's privacy, interfere with his art and put him in danger,” noting a history of “fixated, threatening and extremist behaviour.” Anonymity, he stressed, is a democratic safeguard.

The Reuters investigation claims to have evidence “beyond dispute” that Banksy is Gunningham, who allegedly changed his name to David Jones in 2008 to maintain his anonymity after the *Mail on Sunday* exposé. It was conducted on a scale normally reserved for espionage, corruption or geopolitical leaks.

Reuters assigned three senior reporters, Simon Gardner, James Pearson and Blake Morrison, whose portfolios centre on national security, espionage, extremism and geopolitical conflict. These are not arts correspondents. They are specialists in the ideological and informational battles of the imperialist state, especially relating to

China, Russia and North Korea. Their assignment treats an anonymous political artist as a subject of national security interest.

Reuters' insistence on Banksy being made subject to "scrutiny" and "accountability" is a barely concealed demand that political expression must be brought under state oversight. This becomes explicit in the treatment of Banksy's Royal Courts of Justice mural, which appeared on September 8, last year—four days after the High Court moved to uphold the proscription of Palestine Action, and two days after nearly 900 people were arrested for protesting the crackdown.

The mural showed an unarmed protester lying on the ground. A judge, in black gown and white wig, stands over him, beating him with a gavel. The protester's right hand is empty. His left holds a blood-spattered placard.

The mural was removed within 48 hours, supposedly to protect the Grade I listed building, and the government has since spent £23,690 on the clean up. For a period, the removed mural still appeared as a shadow and continued to attract attention. This prompted the state to entirely fence off and conceal the shadow behind a boarded structure with a padlocked gate!

Nevertheless, the British authorities have proceeded with caution regarding Banksy himself. The Metropolitan Police has not brought charges, which can carry up to 10 years' imprisonment if the damage exceeds £5,000; they are still "making inquiries". A prosecution would require Banksy to appear under his legal name.

Given Banksy's popularity and the politically explosive subjects of his art, this is a spectacle the UK state has so far decided it would rather avoid. But Reuters is pushing the envelope in line with a sharpening authoritarian turn in Britain and internationally.

The Banksy investigation is part of a broader drive by right-wing governments to crack down on democratic rights and narrow the space in which protest, resistance and political art can exist. The UK government's latest policing White Paper outlines plans to centralise command, expand AI-driven surveillance and entrench facial recognition technologies—all designed to place political activity under permanent state monitoring.

Media institutions play a vital role by generating hysteria, framing dissent as deviant, and carrying out unmaskings in the name of civic duty.

Reuters specifically foregrounds Banksy's pro-Palestine work—murals on the separation wall in Bethlehem, the Walled Off Hotel in the West Bank, donations to Palestinian hospitals—defining solidarity with an

oppressed people as a mark of subversion.

Working near Horenka in Ukraine, Banksy produced murals in bombed-out buildings. Even regarding this work on a war armed and financed by the imperialist powers, Reuters questions "how an anonymous British artist could access a frontline zone."

The witch-hunt of Banksy extends seamlessly to Robert Del Naja, the singer-songwriter of Massive Attack. Although the report concedes he is not Banksy, as has been previously claimed, it highlights his own graffiti past and presence in Ukraine at the same time, tainting him by association. He has been repeatedly attacked by Israeli media and pro-Israel commentators.

Reuters is not simply asking who Banksy is. It is asking why he is not being policed, monitored or punished like other dissenting voices. It treats the state's escalating repression of protesters as the baseline, and Banksy's ability to continue making political art as the aberration.

The right-wing press has seized on this opening with predictable ferocity. A *Spectator* article, "The Vandalism of Banksy," dispenses with the language of public interest and moves straight to denunciation.

"Banksy is not a law-abiding man who respects private property", it states, denouncing him as a "vandal," a "nuisance," a "scourge of walls the world over." The writer revels in the prospect of the artist's arrest, insisting he should be charged not only with "vandalism of buildings" but "vandalism of culture."

What Reuters presents as a sober investigation, the *Spectator* reveals to be a call for retribution. The "respectable centre" constructs the rationale, and the right-wing press supplies the appetite for punishment.

All such attempts to target Banksy for seeking to maintain his anonymity must be strenuously opposed. Ultimately, the defence of dissenting artists requires organised, independent political action by the working class to secure democratic rights. This is inseparable from the struggle against imperialist war and austerity and constructing a political movement capable of challenging the capitalist social order.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)