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CONCLUSION

As Seen In the British Museum

In May 2005, the British artist Banksy sauntered into the British Museum carrying a plastic bag and wearing a long overcoat and a fake beard. He ambled his way through various exhibits until he reached room 49, which houses the museum's Roman Britain collection. Checking to make sure no one was looking, he pulled out a piece of graffitied cement from the plastic bag and stuck it on the wall with strong adhesive tape, just below a small statue and to the left of several Roman-era figurines in a case. Labelled '*Peckham Rock*', it looked at first glance like every other artefact in the early Britain collection.

Peckham Rock was accompanied by a label with a carefully mimicked museum caption, fake provenance and falsified index number. While the rock with its label could, maybe, pass for a genuine artefact, its iconography was a dead giveaway – even to the untrained eye. *Peckham Rock*'s iconography featured a palaeo-inspired buffalo shot full of black arrows and a lumbering hominin-like figure pushing a shopping cart. Cultural geographer Luke Dickens described the figure as 'Neanderthal' and *Peckham Rock* as a conflation of 'British activist art' and 'cave painting'.

On the whole, *Peckham Rock* is a curious piece of art. It measures roughly 15 x 25cm (6 x 9in) and is made of shattered concrete, supposedly from Peckham in the London borough of Southwark. The museum label that Banksy installed with *Peckham Rock* describes the iconography as 'primitive art' from the 'Post-Catatonic era' with 'early man venturing towards the out-of-town hunting grounds'. The artist is credited as 'Banksymus Maximus', a prominent painter in the 'Post-Catatonic', and the label notes that the

‘majority’ of Banksymus Maximus’s wall art has been ‘destroyed by zealous municipal officials who fail to recognise the artistic merit and historical value of daubing on walls’.

This was hardly Banksy’s first rogue museum installation. Two months earlier, Banksy had installed a ‘harlequin beetle with airfix weapons’ in the Hall of Biodiversity of New York’s American Museum of Natural History. The specimen was labelled *Withus Oragainstus*, endemic to the United States, and purportedly lasted 12 days in the exhibition hall. ‘Obviously, they’ve got their eye a lot more on things leaving than things going in, which works in my favour,’ Banksy wryly noted in a 2005 interview with the BBC. Back at the British Museum, Banksy slipped away after installing the piece, leaving *Peckham Rock* to its fate. It didn’t remain in an exhibition hall quite as long as the *Withus Oragainstus* beetle had, but *Peckham Rock* managed to last three days before it was found and promptly removed.

Peckham Rock challenges expectations about authenticity in a plethora of ways. The rock is actually from Hackney, not Peckham, to start with. It was carved out with a claw hammer and the motifs have an Upper Palaeolithic sort of vibe but are, obviously, contemporary. It’s art that we might expect to be on the walls of Chauvet, Lascaux or even the Roman-built London Wall, Banksy seems to be arguing, if only our ancestors had been as absorbed with mass consumerism and capitalism as we are thousands of years later. Banksy ran a competition on his website for fans to take a photo of themselves with the artefact, offering a shopping cart as a prize.

Once the rock was unceremoniously removed from the wall of the British Museum, it was designated as ‘lost property’ and that was the end of it. Tom Hockenhull, a British Museum curator, said in a 2018 interview with the

Guardian, ‘It was the cause of considerable embarrassment for the museum at the time and when Banksy asked for it back we were only too pleased to oblige.’

The Outside Institute, a short-lived gallery dedicated to graffiti, managed to borrow the piece for a collaborative exhibition in June 2005, at which *Peckham Rock* was shown as ‘on loan’ from the British Museum, further solidifying its genuine fakeness. ‘We are proud to announce that we now have on display “the Peckham rock” kindly lent to us by the British Museum and the artist Banksy,’ the label at Outside Institute read. ‘This will not be displayed anywhere else and will be returned to the British Museum for historical verification at the end of the show. If you missed it in place at the British Museum we now offer you a chance to see it in a far grander environment.’

As fate would have it, Banksy’s piece was to have another go at being on display in the British Museum. In August 2018, *Peckham Rock* was back, this time at the museum’s request. It was one of a hundred objects that British radio host Ian Hislop gathered from the British Museum’s extensive collections to display as part of an exhibition called *I Object!* The exhibition focused on ways that objects and artefacts can subvert cultural expectations and carry all the more cultural cachet for doing so. *Peckham Rock* has been the media’s darling to build up interest and press around the exhibition’s opening.

‘At the time it was somewhat embarrassing but 13 years after Banksy installed a hoax exhibit at the British Museum curators are finally seeing the funny side,’ the *Guardian* reported in August 2018. From its subversive arrival in the British Museum to becoming an official part of the museum’s collection, *Peckham Rock*, it would seem, has a lot of life yet to live.

It's hard to imagine a better genuine fake than Banksy's *Peckham Rock*. It's subversive, it's complicated – over the course of its life it's been called a fake and a hoax and eventually it has become a legitimate artefact. More than anything else, *Peckham Rock* encourages audiences to examine the intent behind the piece. 'Put on display in one of the oldest museums in the world, the rock was intended to poke fun at the consumption habits of modern Britain, promote the work and name of an artist, assert the artistic and historical value of work of this type, and berate the purveyors and enforcers of "zero-tolerance" urban policy,' Luke Dickens neatly summarised in his review of the piece. *Peckham Rock* asks its audiences to decide if it's real and, more to the point, whether they think it's authentic. It's entirely possible that Banksy is offering us exactly what we don't know we want.

The question of intent fundamentally underlies everything about authenticity and fakes. Fakes with the intent to deceive are problematic – these sorts of fakes, to be blunt, are frauds. 'Although the objects involved in these frauds have been clearly shown to be forgeries, belief in them endures,' art historian Noah Charney outlines in *Art Forgery*. 'Regardless of the proof that they have always been fraudulent, many people refuse to believe that they are anything but authentic, and of huge importance. Even forgeries that are found out have the ongoing power to change history – just as the forgers had hoped.' How we internalise and respond to stories of fakes hinges on what we make of the fakers' intent to deceive their audiences.

These fakes are the frauds like the Spanish Forger's 'medieval' paintings being sold to unsuspecting tourists in Paris and ignorant collectors. 'Fossils' like Beringer's Lying Stones, created as a joke to put Dr Johann Bartholomew Adam Beringer of the University of Würzburg in his place. Natural diamonds stuffed into experiments to try to pass

the lot off as laboratory-made. ‘Maya codices’ in which forgers can’t even be bothered to match motifs to Mesoamerican art. William Henry Ireland’s long-lost ‘Shakespearean play’, *Vortigern and Rowena*. Staging scenes in wildlife documentaries without telling audiences that the footage comes from a zoo and not the Arctic. These are all actual, technical, non-debatable examples of fakes as frauds – in each instance, the faker has traded authenticity for some sort of personal gain. As audience members who have effectively been pranked, we – as collectors, buyers, consumers or simply the naively unsceptical – are outraged at the deception and especially irked when we fall for it. ‘By neglecting actual historical objects, and championing their reimagined counterparts, we efface the past,’ historian Nir Shafir notes in an essay about fakes in the online magazine *Aeon*, pointing out that fake objects are often more ‘believable’ because they are, by design, intended to be more ‘realistic’ than their genuine counterparts.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have objects that are not easily dismissed as frauds – they have pristine provenances and unflappable origin stories. They include General Electric’s laboratory diamonds, carefully grown under the watchful scrutiny of the company’s team of scientists; flavours that, when run through a gas chromatograph, match the flavour notes of their agriculturally grown counterparts; the digital model of Chauvet Cave, and the cave’s replica counterpart, the Caverne du Pont d’Arc. These things are all exactly what their makers have always claimed that they were.

The shift towards making authentic copies of objects has required an infusion of science and technology. For decades, science’s role in the world of authentication was to ferret out fakes by evaluating the material make-up of pieces in question. Forensic tests became a way to offer proof about the legitimacy of a piece, based on whether the parts

of the piece were from the time frame the provenance claimed. These tests became especially useful when expert dealers, collectors and scholars disagreed about a painting's authenticity. (Using chemical and radiometric tests to pinpoint an artefact's age also became increasingly popular in archaeology during this time.) Early forensic tests on paintings focused on examining the paint used; analyses developed later examined the pattern of paint cracking and any repetitive layers beneath a painting, as well as examining the painting's accompanying provenance documents, offering additional insights into other methods of authentication.

Today, as a result of tests like IR spectroscopy and microscopic analyses, infrared reflectography and a plethora of dating methods that rely on chemical isotopes – all methods that have been rigorously developed and tested within the scientific community – it would seem that it is harder and harder to pass off a fake to any savvy buyer or collector. Science's role grew, in the second half of the twentieth century, to not just sort out the less-than-legitimate fakes, but also to deconstructing the material element of a fake's natural counterparts. A diamond could not be grown in a laboratory before scientists knew what comprised a diamond and how the gem was made; flavours could not be synthesised on a mass scale until researchers could map grown-food flavour notes. Science and technology have offered ways for what we're calling genuine fakes to become much more authentic.

But many of these authentic objects are not perfect material matches for what we might call their 'real' counterparts. While they might be truthful objects, we're still left to grapple with what to make of them. And this is the space where we find that not all fakes are bad. Fakes that are made with the intent to conserve scarce or problematic resources might, in fact, be clever feats of science and engineering.

For example, as natural diamonds become more and more distasteful to consumers concerned about ethically sourced gems, laboratory-grown diamonds offer a way for a 'fake' to actually become more desirable than a natural diamond. Synthetic or artificial flavours offer a way for mass-produced foods to meet the needs of an ever-growing human population with food that is palatable. Archaeological sites are delicate, non-renewable pieces of global heritage; creating replicas of places like Chauvet and Lascaux offers a way to balance tourism with the needs of the archaeological sites. Rather than sniff at the distance between the original and its copy, it's time to look at the simulacrum as its own complete, authentic thing, possessing its own specific context and filling a unique set of ethical requirements.

Authenticity, as we see, is fluid, and over the course of their lives objects can be debunked and authenticated many times. To decide if a fake is good or bad or if a 'real' object is problematic or not requires nuance, finesse and an understanding of an object's historical context. Objects don't have an intrinsic morality to them – context is everything. It's not enough to simply refer to an object's material qualities – we need to refer to stories and histories that surround it.

Here is where the interaction between intent and audience expectations shifts. The Grolier Codex – so long dismissed as a fake because of its problematic provenance – offers such a narrative for objects moving backwards and forwards along authenticity's continuum. Collectors have eventually stopped seeing the Spanish Forger's works as cheap imitations of medieval prints; they became artefacts in and of themselves, indicative of the Forger's talent and their own bit of nineteenth-century art. Similarly, William Henry Ireland's letters – especially his forgeries of his original fakes – become collectable in their own right.

These are all ways that we've negotiated how to have real and fake things mash together to create genuine fakes.

★ ★ ★

I saw *Peckham Rock* as part of the British Museum's 2018 *I Object!* exhibition and it was fantastic. It was such a popular piece, in fact, that it took a while to wade through the throngs of other museum visitors who clustered around it.

Peckham Rock was, as promised, a piece of cement with a shopping cart and spikey-backed humanoid figure at the front and centre, surrounded by a stratigraphy of museum labels. The exhibit had Banksy's original faux museum label, of course, creased and looking a bit worse for wear, but there was a new label, off to the left, that explained the hoax and how the joke was on the British Museum. Visitors who weren't familiar with the story guffawed after reading that *Peckham Rock* had survived three days before the staff took it down ('Can you even imagine?'), and several voiced opinions that if they had seen it in room 49 they wouldn't have been taken in the way other, more gullible visitors were. ('It's not even very good,' one visitor announced to his wife. 'I would never think it's genuine.') But, mostly, visitors were charmed and amused at the audacity of a hoax that would challenge something as institutionally auspicious as the British Museum. On my way out of the exhibition, I bought a wooden copy of *Peckham Rock* for my office.

Fake has become a particularly charged word in the twenty-first century. To call something fake is no longer just about whether something is a fraud or phony. Fake has become a label, a judgement and a dismissal. However, if there is one thing to take away from the collection of stories in this book, it is this: we ought to be clear and deliberate about just what we are labelling, judging and dismissing. History, culture and context shape an object's authenticity,

not decrees. And if we are to understand authenticity – the flip side of fake – then fake needs to be more than just a dog whistle.

Fakes need their stories, episodes, layered contexts, the ‘I just can’t believe it’ instances, the dramatic reveals, the ever-evolving science of chasing down frauds and forgeries, and the moments when and if they are considered authenticated. The material life of any object isn’t static, and the lives of genuine fakes are no different. When Mark Twain, in *The Innocents Abroad*, suggested the possibility that St Denis might have several skeletons if one were to reconstruct all of his remains, he nevertheless offered the observation that his mockery felt a little off. He was willing to acknowledge that maybe, even if all of the bones weren’t necessarily real, the emotion that they and their reliquary elicited was real enough, and that he wasn’t sure just how far to push his snark.

Genuine fakes offer an opportunity to explore how, why and under what circumstances we can – and ought – to accept things as authentic. Before we demand that something be authentic or dismiss something as fake, we ought to think about the purpose, intent and context of the object in question and what we would accept as the Real Thing. Those components matter because they mean that the status of these objects is ever-changing and ever-evolving.

Fakes may well let the world be deceived, as the Roman philosopher Petronius suggested, but that doesn’t mean that there isn’t important cultural history and meaning in our genuine fakes. The stories of their authenticity are still unfolding.