BRANDING SEASON

Or, The Slow Death of the Unmarketable Artist

By: paul travis phillips

Abstract

Branding Season is a hybrid essay that weaves personal narrative, cultural critique, and philosophical reflection to interrogate how branding logic—rooted in ownership, spectacle, and control—has infiltrated contemporary art and identity. Beginning with the author's first bull ride and the seared initials mistaken for his own, the piece uses metaphor and lived experience to expose how artists are trained to reduce complexity into sellable traits, hashtags, and visual coherence.

Through the lens of consumer culture, childhood performance, and systemic commodification, the essay critiques the slow death of authenticity in a world obsessed with marketability. It examines how artists, children, and entire communities are pressured into performing versions of selfhood designed for public consumption—often at the expense of curiosity, contradiction, and growth. Drawing on memory, media saturation, and institutional observation, the essay connects the logic of the cattle brand to the tactics of the algorithm, asking what is lost when art becomes digestible and artists become mascots.

At its core, *Branding Season* is a refusal: a resistance to the spectacle of consistency and a call to let the work wander, wild and uncontained.

About the author

Paul Travis Phillips stands out in the contemporary landscape as a conceptually rigorous artist whose work deeply engages with the philosophical and material limits of language, cognition, and knowledge-making. His practice spans painting, sculpture, altered books, and text-based installation—each rooted in a process of investigation rather than presentation.

Phillips draws from overlooked and often degraded materials—books, rust, graphite, mirror—not to beautify them, but to surface what gets hidden: the contradictions, failures, and margins of meaning. His work resists branding and image culture, favoring slowness, rupture, and epistemological friction over polish or product.

Rather than offering answers, Phillips asks how we come to know anything at all. His process is recursive and searching—metabolizing concepts through form without reducing them to spectacle. Based in North Carolina, his exhibitions and public projects continue to reach across disciplines, resonating with those who value depth, clarity, and conceptual risk.

He is, unapologetically, searching.

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The first bull I ever rode had my initials branded in its ass. My friend, Matt, pointed him out to me from behind the fence.

“That’s the one,” he said, grinning. “It’s got your initials all over it.”

And sure enough—four inches tall, scarred and swollen—there it was: *TP*, seared into the left flank of a red-eyed black hole of a beast.

I was fifteen, knees deep in another novel hyperfocus, too damn green to back down. I climbed in the chute roped in, dug my spurs into whatever meat I could, cinched the tail around my hand and under my pinky like ((I think I thought I’d been told,)) and nodded.

What happened next wasn’t memory loss—it was obliteration. I don’t remember the gate opening. I don’t remember being launched across the arena. When I came to, I was halfway up the fence, hip already swelling, and the sound of a false memory… that brand… sizzling in my head. TP. TP. TP.

Later that evening I learned that the “TP” emblazoned on the bull’s backside stood for Texas Pride.

I’ve never been to Texas…

Branding, in the old sense, meant fire. A hot iron pressed to flesh. Marking a cow—or a human—as someone’s property. Branding meant you belonged to someone else.
Your body said so. Your scar said so.

It was never about identity. It was about control.

Now we use the same word to describe artists “finding themselves.” I’m supposed to have a brand. To *be* a brand… Something recognizable. Consistent. Scrollable. #Hashtagable. Something that says me—but also sells me—so people can find me, follow me, and inevitably forget me.

Then I'm supposed to scramble, rebrand, and try again. All the while attempting to maintain the mystique that the new shift in my studio production is an authentic development that just so happens to align with the current trends.

According to this self-replicating system…

I should be hashtagging.
I should be producing consumable content.
I should be… easily digestible dopamine.

But I am not a cow.
And I am not for sale.

Nevertheless, the pressure lingers. I feel it every time someone asks what "kind of work" I make as an artist— as if they're deciding whether I serve dollar-menu McBurgers or dry-aged tenderloin with a side of garlic roasted Brussels sprouts.

And when I respond with something they can't swallow in a soundbite, somehow I'm the problem. As if my curiosity—as a maker and a thinker—makes them nervous. Not because what I do is inconsistent or incoherent, but because it refuses to be reduced to a soundbite or commercial break. Simply put, I don't shrink my searching into something shelf-ready. Because I'm not packaging my process as a product. I am searching.

The pressure builds…

I feel it when I'm told I need a "stronger visual identity." When I need to pay a medical bill. Or when I'm advised to wait nonchalantly in the social line—to casually "bump into" the curator, director, or collector, introduce myself, and coolly drop just enough enticing hints about my work.

Network.
Sell.
Upscale.
Brand. Brand. BRAND…

All in the most nondescript way, of course. Can't be too direct—that's invasive. Boring. Expected. Obvious.

Better to meander like cattle, hoping to become the next prized slab of meat taken to market.

I feel it differently when students show me their artist brand decks—color palettes, fonts, carefully worded mission statements about trending vulnerabilities.
It's not their fault.
This is what they've been taught—how they've been raised:

Art is a product line.
And by proxy, the artist is both logo and mascot.

Branding strategies at their core, are built on boundaries—usually arbitrary ones, drawn to carve out territory, assert ownership, and create the illusion of difference while simultaneously conforming. And it is imperative to note… these tactics weren't born in art school. They were inherited from conquest.

There's a reason the Chick-fil-A cows never wear carolina blue. That tint belongs to another field—another farmer, another brand, another hot iron. These cows stick to #E51636, the hex code for Chick-fil-A red, and it defines their territory. Even their billboard-based rebellion is branded—each cow safely aligned with corporate color, voice, and marketability misspelled messaging. No one wanders. No one wears teal.

This logic doesn't stop with cows.
It didn't stop with artists.
And it doesn't even stop with the most vulnerable among us: children.

Frequently enough, they're not just collateral—they're the target. Turned into product turned into consumer turned into product. Cud in different chambers of the same digestive track.

Children packaged for mass appeal. Children taught to perform affection, growth, and innocence for the camera.

And it's not just the ones on stage who are harmed.
The children watching—consuming the spectacle—are fed a curated fiction of what childhood looks like.
They're sold a version of growth that's been rehearsed.
A version that's been deleted, refreshed, filtered, and published.

A version of love that's been monetized.
A version of joy that's been edited, soundtracked, color-corrected, and stamped with a release date.
A version of "insight" carefully curated by their curatorial team (most frequently parents) and disseminated according to the algorithm's optimal timing.

The vulnerable come to believe in this polished mirror.
They see it as truth.
And with no one left to hold the camera—no one to witness their performance of childhood (likely because their caregivers are staring through a sheet of glass themselves)—they turn the camera on themselves, curating a commodified, screen-ready character to post to their feed.

(Feed, mind you. Like fucking food.)

And when their own messy, nonlinear, unpredictable lives don't match the script they've been taught to write, they think they've failed.
So they learn to pretend harder.

But it's not their fault.
They've been sold a simulation of personhood—delivered through the bright and burning lie of a market-ready childhood.
And it warps their relationship to creativity—away from authenticity and firmly into performance.

Everyone involved is wounded—those who perform it, and those who believe it. The harm loops outward as much as inward.
That's how spectacle works. It spreads like radiation: clean in appearance, catastrophic in effect. Sometimes with acute warnings that, if addressed early, can be mitigated with aloe.

But sometimes, it metastasizes beneath the surface until it's too late.

The Jackson 5… weren't just a band.
They were a cultural product line—an entire family engineered into a marketable dream of talent, complete with the illusion of togetherness, and the fantasy of innocence wrapped in precision.

Matching outfits.
Pre-cleared, practiced, and performed smiles.
Carefully calibrated and distributed charisma.

From the beginning, they weren't asked to grow. They were told to perform growth.
To rehearse it. To repeat it. To process it into something consumable.

Michael, especially, was trained to become more image than person. As adulthood and the illusion of independence set in, he worked with what he had been taught as a child. Over time, his voice, his body, even his face was retooled—sanded down, sculpted, and sold back to the public on a loop.

He didn't just become a brand.
He became a symptom of one.
He embodied what happens when identity is replaced by marketability.

And the cost wasn't just internal.

There were serious allegations of violence—especially involving children. Painful, complex, and publicly dissected. Whatever the full truth, what's certain is that the system commodified him before he had language for autonomy. It sold access to him. It trained him to perform affection on demand. It made his body into a product and his emotions into currency. Then it recoiled when the damage metastasized outward.

That’s how the spectacle works.
It creates the conditions, then disowns the consequences with a clean transition or a seamless swipe.

This is not forgiveness.
It is a reckoning.

The others—Jermaine, Tito, Jackie, Marlon—each carried their own scars.
Some tried to stay visible. Some disappeared. Some stayed close to the machine hoping it would give them one of their own.

None were free.

Because there is no freedom in being manufactured for consumption.

There is no safety in being edible.

The Jackson 5 weren’t just branded. They were carved and the scar tissue was made into merchandise.

This logic has wormed its way in through the roots of artists’ minds and communities, gradually stripping each nutrient-rich, newly sprouting thought. Plucking them like unwanted inconveniences that just might get out of hand if not tended to. This “cleansing” reduces the field to tasteless chewable cud—served to the same herd, grazing the same exhausted patch for far too long.

This approach flattens the field. It reduces the wildness of real work to managed, fenced-in grazing— safe, controlled, endlessly repeatable. The terrain may look green, but nothing new or interesting can grow.

Like spraying weed killer to keep the lawn “clean,” the branding model tries to eliminate anything unruly— any idea that wanders, any growth that doesn’t fit the aesthetic plan.

Yet Roundup doesn’t just kill weeds. It seeps in. It lingers. It poisons the soil and leaves traces on the hands that sprayed it.

Artists following these branding models may think they’re just keeping things tidy, just protecting their plot, clarifying their vision. But they’re poisoning their own ground, too.

Their grass becomes toxic. Uniform. Glossy. Market-ready. Bermudagrass on a suburban lawn— lush, green, cancer metastasizing in ways far worse than weeds.

But art, at its core, refuses to behave.
Not because it’s rebellious.
Not because it’s cool to be rogue—
(that’s just another form of branding identity, anyway).

Art refuses to behave because art that is living and breathing with and through its maker has needs. And those needs do not understand—nor respect—constructs like brand.

In my hometown— "the city of the arts"—there's a designated arts district downtown. It's full of galleries, nonprofits, festivals. And most of them operate with preemptive defense strategies, as if any newcomer is here to wage war.

You can't blame them. The funding is limited. The audience is small. Scarcity tends to set off a siren call to survival instinct. And survival doesn't have time for logic. It makes no room for collective curiosity. It just wants to protect the "me and mine".

So, artists form ranks.
They scramble for scraps of visibility and patronage. To do this, they water down their work. Shrink it to fit what the market demands at a local scale. And in the process, they lose sight of what made the work matter to them in the first place.

The result?
An ecosystem of distrust. Animosity. Dumbed-down opportunities. A field of branded cattle, each penned in, convinced there's only one feeding trough.

Some might call this professionalism. Or clarity. Or "building a platform." But let's not confuse presentation with purpose. Let's not pretend a poisoned field is a place where anything real can take root.

Because the truth is— the most vital work rarely grows in these environments. Not because it isn't strong, but because it isn't shallow. It doesn't rise fast enough for the algorithm. It doesn't bloom on cue. It doesn't play well with fences.

Vital work resists landscaping. It spreads underground. It seeds across boundaries, uninvited. It shows up where it's not supposed to and asks questions no one paid it to ask.

Real work needs compost.
Contradiction.
Time.
It needs to be left alone long enough to become something unexpected. And that's exactly what branding can't allow.

Branding wants predictability. Art needs risk.
Branding wants cohesion. Art needs rupture.
Branding is a contract. Art is a search.

The gates are open.
The fences were never real.
Only habits. Only fear. Only contracts we didn't mean to sign.

Let the brand fade.
Let the logos peel off.
Let the artist become unrecognizable—not incoherent, but uncontained.

Let the grass grow wild.
Let the roots tangle.
Let the dandelions split the concrete and the vines reclaim the billboard.
Let the weeds rise and choke the algorithm.

You don’t have to make work that fits.
You don’t have to trim the edges, clean up the soil, or repackage yourself for someone else’s appetite.

The field is vaster than they told you.
And the work was never meant to be fenced.