

THE ART GUYS GET LEGIT

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During his lifetime, Oscar Wilde had a problem with the prophets and professors of high culture. As successful and celebrated as he was, Wilde's work was invariably dismissed by these arbiters of historical taste as simply too sharp, too succinct, too timely, too good-hearted and too charming to have any enduring cultural impact or longevity. Time, of course, has proven these prophets to have been disastrously wrong in Wilde's case, but the intervening century has done little to change the parameters of such prophecies. The standards by which Wilde's work was found wanting a hundred years ago remain rigorously in place. Solemnity is still equated with seriousness, opacity is still equated with complexity, angst and anger are still presumed to signify commitment and, thus, longevity is still presumed to derive from the dour exegesis of "big issues." As a consequence, The Art Guys, those impudent Pimpernels of post-conceptual performance art, find themselves in a late twentieth century version of Wilde's late nineteenth century predicament, suffering beneath the curse of their own trenchant facility.

Embodying as they do many of Wilde's quicksilver virtues--his gift for the telling aperçu, his willingness to theatricalize his own complicity in the cultural machine, and his unwavering civility--The Art Guys work has always seemed too clear to be sufficiently complicated, yet too protean to be efficiently summed up. It has always been always memorable and articulate, while seeming too ephemeral to be enduring and too friendly to constitute serious critique. The outside chance remains, however, that--as the importance of being earnest becomes less and less important--The Art Guys may turn out to be as emblematic of this new belle époque as Wilde was of the last one. So we should probably take The Art Guys project seriously, and take its ebullient civility (which, in the current rhetoric of "Culture War," argues against its seriousness) seriously as well, since sociability is really what's at issue here, and one can hardly oppose a hostile anti-social rhetoric in a hostile tone. Lightness is all, in projects like this.

The Art Guys' affinities with Wilde are virtually explicit in their latest project. One can cite the origins of its title: *Suits: Clothes Make the Man*, in Wilde's insouciant insistence that "a gentleman always judges by appearances," and presume correctly that this title is to be taken (as Wilde's remark was in its time) as a sly poke at the cult of psychological interiority, disembodied virtue, and moral *sensibilité* that reigned in Wilde's time and in ours. Like Wilde, The Art Guys are making an argument for the exteriority of all cultural endeavors. More precisely, they are arguing for the impossibility of hiding anything and the possibility of denying everything. Thus, the Suits project was conceived in the Fall of 1996 as an all-out, super-public, totally social, transcontinental art event in which The Art Guys would appear at any and all events where people appear simply to make an appearance. That's what they would do: they would appear and, in doing so, embody the new rhetoric of appearances that has transformed art in our time into a spectator sport. To this end, The Art Guys set out to exploit spectatorship with a vengeance, in its every aspect, conflating the glamour of high fashion with corporate market strategies for sports and institutional marketing strategies for art.

The trick of the whole affair, the hook, would be that, technically, The Art Guys would not be the "artists" in this affair. They would get legit. They would take a step up the art-world food chain from the subservient position of "artist" to the power position of "sponsoring institution." Rather than adorning an institution with their art, they would select an artist to adorn them, as Picassos adorn the Museum of Modern Art. In search of an appropriate artist, The Art Guys met with fashion designer and fellow Texan Todd Oldham in April of 1997, and (as artists invariably do when offered the opportunity of institutional sponsorship and exposure) Oldham agreed to supply The Art Guys with a wardrobe of haut couture garments--suits and over-coats--gratis.

Having secured their artist and their art, The Art Guys quickly abandoned their curatorial function and moved into executive mode, assembling an Advisory Board of art-types to lend the project credibility. (Yours truly came on board at this point). Then, having acquired art, an artist and a sponsoring board, The Art Guys first demoted themselves to graphic designers to produce a promotional package, then promoted themselves to development officers in order to solicit corporate funding for their exhibition of Oldham's celebrated suits. This phase began in August of 1997, and since The Art Guys are not, in fact, a major institution (which could solicit patronage with the promise of a wall label, a

mention in the catalogue and logo on the ads) The Art Guys offered to advertise their corporate patrons on the work of art. The logos of the sponsoring businesses would be embroidered onto Oldham's suits, a la Nascar Racing uniforms. Simultaneously, as this marketing operation was getting under weigh, The Art Guys set out to sell their Oldham exhibition (and their swelling number of corporate sponsors) to a television production company who would market their marketing, by making a television documentary of the whole process--"process" being a sexy buzz word in late twentieth century art marketing. At this point, Cool Films came on board.

Two months later, in October of 1997, The Art Guys sold the whole nested project (The Art Guys in Todd Oldham suits, with corporate logos, with television documentation, in far flung venues, to Abrams Books who would market the whole thing with an introduction by myself, an essay by another critic and other validating accouterments. Abrams, of course, agreed to market their own marketing of The Art Guys marketing of their own marketing in newspapers and magazines. At this point, *Suits: Clothes Make the Man* could be said to have achieved a level of complex interaction with the cultural infrastructure roughly equivalent to that of a Picasso exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art at an equivalent stage of production.

All that remained was for The Art Guys, who lacked a permanent institutional site for their exhibition, to arrange a travel schedule of "suitable" venues. They had planned to fund this travel with the money they raised from the corporate sponsors whose logos now emblazoned Todd Oldham's suits, but, as it turned out, The Art Guys had underestimated the allure of the package they were promoting. A great many venues, it turned out, would *pay* the Art Guys to make an appearance in their Todd Oldham suits against possibility of their making an appearance in a television documentary or an Abrams book. Thus, according to the bizarre logic of information-capitalism, the ledger for the Suits project went into the black. The cycle of appearances completed itself in an extended ritual of mediated public sociability.

Business and institutions, it seemed, would pay to provide spectators for The Art Guys in haut couture costumes emblazoned with corporate logos so the people they delivered to the site might possibly be spectated *themselves* in the act of spectatorship, thus advertising their own venues as sites of cultural spectatorship. All of which would be only of passing interest if The Art Guys' scenario differed in any significant way from the standard exhibition project. In fact, it only differs in two ways--first, in its self-conscious candor about what is in fact going, its full disclosure of interest and self-interest, second, in its presentation of the whole nested spectacle as a work of art in and of itself. The assumption that informs most other exhibitions, of course, is that something else is going on in the midst of this social ritual--that something private and ineffable is in fact being communicated--and The Art Guys do not prove that it is not. However, *Suits: Clothes Make the Man* does demonstrate that nothing else is necessarily going on. That art may exist in a condition of full exteriority and full disclosure, and this, it seems to me, is an important point be insisted upon--and a worthy occasion for an historical flash back:

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One evening in the mid-nineteen seventies, I was one of a group of people gathered around Andy Warhol at a cocktail party at the St. Regis Hotel in New York. Andy was taking Polaroid snapshots of everyone, and, since the Mark Rothko estate was much in the news at the time, we were talking about that. At one point, someone brought up the subversive similarity between Mark Rothko's trademark painting format and Andy's soup can paintings from the Sixties. This was not a new subject. One of the jokes around the Factory at the time had been the idea that the soup cans were kind of a "modernization" of Rothko's format--Rothko adapted for assembly line production methods, as embodied in the "fauve soup cans" that employed the rigid Campbell's label design as an armature for a variety of color studies that mimicked New York School practice.

That night at the St. Regis, we were having a good deal of fun with this subject and with the serene pretentiousness of Rothko's paintings (for which, I hasten to note, Warhol had a good deal of respect). Since Andy seemed in a particularly gregarious mood that night, I decided to ask him a something I had always wanted to know. "Okay, then, " I said, "Just what, exactly, is the *difference* between a soup can and Rothko?" "That's easy," Andy said, "Mr. Campbell signs his on the front."

This remark, I have always felt, comes very close to the moral heart of Warhol's early pictures; it also provides a vantage point from which we can address the good-hearted effrontery of The Art Guys Suits, whose sponsors signatures are emblazoned on the front of Oldham's suits. Neither The Art Guys nor Warhol, I would suggest, have much patience with covert agendas, or with the hypocritical confusion of commerce and religion under the guise of art. Thus, if we

believe Andy's remark about importance of Mister Campbell signing his soup cans on the front, the soup can paintings may be taken as arguing that what is "hidden" in a painting by Rothko, or any member of the New York school, is not some spiritual insight into the nature of metaphysical reality, but artist's "name-brand" signature. By putting the "trademark label" on the back of the painting and the "soup" on the front, Andy felt that Rothko (unlike "Mr. Campbell") was disguising the essential mercantile character of the painting's transaction with the viewer in the gallery--the fact that we "buy into" paintings in much the same way that we buy soup--that we select a name-brand product and chose the flavor according to our personal taste.

In the series of paintings that followed the soup cans, called The Lifesaver Marilyns, Warhol makes this point even more explicitly. He paints a series of Marilyn Monroe images whose backgrounds match the colors of the flavors in a roll of Lifesaver candies--an "orange" Marilyn, a "mint" Marilyn, etc. Again, we select the trademark representation of "Marilyn Monroe" and then select the flavor (i. e.. color) to suit our taste. With these two series of paintings, Warhol created the first speculative art in history of the west that concerned itself with the nature of its consumption rather than the nature of its production. More importantly, he succinctly articulated the political agenda of the Pop movement, all of whose masterworks insist that art in a representative, mercantile democracy expresses itself in commercially available, physically desirable representations that acquire democratic constituencies of support in the press and in the marketplace.

To deny this, of course, is to transform the practice of art into an aristocratic pastime, an ecclesiastical project, or into academic argument--and many critics and institutions continue to prefer these constructions of art's endeavor, because in the late twentieth century, the abyss that divides cultural practice is presumptive opposition between art and commerce, with "art" standing in for mindful virtue and commerce for mindless pleasure. Pop Art constituted the first major effort to negotiate the space between them, to accommodate the innovative pleasures of mercantile society to the moral and formal virtues of "high art"--not so one might be privileged over the other, but so we might accept one without denying the other.

The initial consequence of Pop's project, however, was a thirty year counter reformation in which the mercantile component of works of art rather than being fully acknowledged as Warhol would have had it, was studiously abolished. Consequently, the primary venue for the exhibition of serious contemporary art for nearly a quarter of a century became the contemporary art institution, with its corporate sponsors, its video documentaries and lavish publications, all of which serve to perpetuate and disseminate not the fame of the art exhibited, but that of the sponsoring institution itself. All of which goes a long way toward explaining why The Art Guys, with tongues firmly implanted in their cheeks, would get out of the "artist" business and get into the "sponsoring institution" business, would symbolically exploit their buddy Todd as they themselves have been exploited.

Earlier in their careers, The Art Guys made similar forays into the critique of art's socialization. They insisted on the mercantile nature of the art gallery by selling artistic birdhouse (pace Mike Kelley) at a roadside stand. They inquired into art's purported "consumption" by making art out of food, and parodied art's presumptive "therapeutic" value by constructing minimalist sculpture out of over-the-counter medication. Now they have gone legit, moved up the food chain to do for the ostensibly non-commercial and public-spirited *kunsthalles* of contemporary art what Warhol did for Rothko. They have created a subversive allegory of public and private patronage in which everybody signs everything on the front--in which nothing is hidden, nothing is withheld, nothing is denied, nothing is communicated, and none of that matters. The Art Guys are still making art that we may judge by appearances, by what is, in fact, before our eyes.

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About Dave Hickey

Dave Hickey, recipient of a 2001 MacArthur Fellows Program "Genius Award," is recognized internationally as a critic of art and culture. He was born on December 5, 1940, in Fort Worth, Texas, and grew up in Texas and California, graduating from high school when he was 15. He studied engineering and English at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, later obtaining a B.A. from Texas Christian University in 1961 and an M.A. in linguistics from the University of Texas at Austin in 1963. In 1967, he opened the A Clean Well-Lighted Place Gallery in Austin, Texas. He later moved to New York City in 1971, where he became director for the Reese Palley Gallery, Executive Editor for Art in America, and a freelance writer. He also lived in Nashville, Tennessee, during the late 1970s where he was a staff songwriter for Glaser Publications, a musician, and a country music and rock journalist.

While his main writing focus is nonfiction, he has also published short stories. His nonfiction career includes

being art critic for Rolling Stone and The Texas Observer, and Contributing Editor for Art Issues (Los Angeles), Context, Parkett, and The Village Voice. His column, Simple Hearts, was published in Art Issues. Judges for San Antonio's 2006 Contemporary Art Month (CAM) festival created and bestowed The Hickey Award for Bravery and the Double Hickey Award for Excellence.

Hickey has staged exhibits across the USA, winning the Association of International Critics of Art's Kunsthalle Best Show 2001-2002 Award for "Beau Monde," the fourth "Site Santa Fe" biennial exhibition in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He has lectured at many museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, and the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. He has been a visiting professor at several universities, including the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University, the Otis Parsons Institute in Los Angeles, and the University of Texas at Austin. Hickey received the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather award for distinction in art or architectural criticism in 1993. He was the 1997 Cullinan Visiting Chair of Architecture at Rice University in Houston, Texas. He has been a faculty member of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas since 1992, where he has taught art theory, art criticism, and creative writing and is the Schaeffer Professor of Modern Letters.