

## DO NOT OPEN

**Shaila Dewan, published in conjunction with the exhibit "The Art Guys: Hunting And Gathering", Halsey Gallery, College Of Charleston, Charleston, SC, May 22-June 8, 1997**



Dry Duck (1996), duck trophy, doll's arm, deoderant

There are some artists one loves to hate. Then there are the Art Guys, whom one hates to love. Just exactly how the Art Guys manage to give rise to such grudges in otherwise generous hearts (and I am not the first to note that they do) is a question that bears examining. After all, it is more interesting to be perturbed than pleased. It is also more frustrating, more infuriating, and--particularly when one submits oneself to the experience again and again, as those of us who live in the Art Guys' home town do--embarrassing. We've been kissed with loud red lipstick and sneezed on, sold newspapers and a "book" (really just a book jacket) by the Art Guys, been handed business cards for "The Fabulous Art Guys" ("Never a One Man Show") and gone sheepishly along with it all, not wanting to miss any of the fun, putting "Visualize the Art Guys" bumpers stickers on our cars.

For one thing, many art lovers fancy themselves intelligent. Yet nobody can sucker punch them more easily than the Art Guys. Take their plain kraft paper box games, which are modeled after gag gifts. One has the words DO NOT OPEN engraved on the lid. If you know the Art Guys' work, you are instantly suspicious--you've been burned before. If you don't, you are perhaps bemused. Either way, curiosity will out, and you will open the box--only to be confronted, lid in one hand, box in the other, with the words DO NOT CLOSE. Bam! You are caught, and the Art Guys aren't going to do a thing for you. If you had followed instructions, sir, you wouldn't be in such a no-win situation. The Art Guys like to think this little box gives you a Zen like "direct experience with reality." Sure, just like running headlong into a brick wall, except funnier.

Like many a court jester and fool of old, the Art Guys save their own skins through humor. Sometimes the joke is dry and formal, as in the piece "Beat It, Burn It, Drown It," where they performed the title operations of a book on product testing on the book itself. Other times it's naughty, as in the piece where they asked museum patrons to chew gum and stick it to a chair. Most times, they use humor to neutralize a potentially loaded situation, idea, or object. That's what drives people so crazy. The more loaded or meaningful a subject is to you

on its own terms, the more disreputable the Art Guys seem for taking it on, and the more risk you have to take if you're going to simply enjoy them. If you were in the king's court, you would be able to take your cue from the king himself--if he's laughing, it must be okay. But you're not, so you have to decide for yourself. In the piece, "A Ton of Beautiful Women," for instance, where the Art Guys asked various women to weigh themselves in until they had clocked an actual ton, you had to ask yourself if you were offended or bemused. Could you wade through the unsavory, direct, and very clearly purposeful association of women with weight, beauty, and acquisition to find the humor? The Art Guys always challenge you to become less attached to whatever it is you're inclined to think. And since there's always a vague sense that the Guysian mockery is being directed at the audience, you must also be able to laugh at yourself.

"A Ton of Beautiful Women" is an example the Theory of Wrongheadedness, developed in around 2 A.G. (After Guys) [ART GUYS--WHEN WAS IT REALLY?], in which the Art Guys simply do the wrong thing, often at the wrong time (or for the wrong amount of time), in front of the wrong people. In fact, the Art Guys have been wrong so long it's beginning to look like right. And that's really upsetting. The hunting and fishing pieces in this show are another example of wrongheadedness--a taxidermic chicken with a cube for a head, a deer head that's really a phone, a fish that's been doctored in a body shop. Not surprisingly, the Art Guys insist they don't feel one way or the other about hunting and fishing, really (except Jack likes to fish and believes fish to be a healthy, tasty, renewable food source). In fact, they identify the button-pushing nature of the subject as a difficulty--"The problem is they're too loaded; they're too hot," Mike says. "They're full of potential sticky issues like--" Jack interjects in a thundering tone, "Man vs. nature." Mike: "Yeah, sex and death."

That is why you should never believe the Art Guys. The truth is, they love to work with loaded subjects and they have done so consistently throughout their career. Take "Goatee Off--Manifest Destiny," a 1991 piece in which they took stamps picturing Buffalo Bill Cody and cut out his beard, and stuck the beard on stamps of picturing the Native American Red Cloud. Funny? Formal? Affirmative action? Probably not the last. Instead, this piece confounds political concerns. The Art Guys work with the stuff of every day--bumper stickers, stamps, money, pills, pencils. They have a mass aesthetic, because they want to reach the masses. But like good politicians, they do not deal in the issues of every day--they only package them. Their challenge is to defuse them and get at the psychological and strategic concerns lurking beneath. Talking about the taxidermy pieces, Jack says while in life he is environmentally aware and concerned, "I don't imbue the work with my concern about natural habitat disappearing. I'm more concerned about the trophyism of it"--in other words, the need to collect and display evidence of skill, power or money. Of course, trophyism could be said to lead to environmental abuse--but you must draw your own conclusions. As I said, the Art Guys aren't going to do a thing for you. Their dogged avoidance of their own subject matter is frustrating for people who want to, er, talk turkey, duck, or chicken. But neutralization is part of what the Art Guys do--their blatant self--promotion, for example, is softened by the collaborative nature of their project. It is not a single personality receiving the glory, but a construct, "The Art Guys," which displaces the poor-taste appeal for celebrity adulation ("Art Guys Art--For the Extremely Intelligent and Physically Attractive") into a performance of marketing strategy.

The real focus of the Art Guys is inspired intervention. They confront the taxidermy trophies as unsentimentalized objects, coolly fulfilling Jasper Johns' dictum to "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it." Like the box you are not to open or close, nothing is accomplished by their activity, except the refocusing of your mind. As in their series "101 of the Greatest Sculpture Ideas" and "101 Public Art Ideas," their work is a mental exercise that works by postulating a certain situation. The ideal of the Art Guys is the pure game, the postulating of a set of rules or guidelines--quite often ridiculous, nonsensical, no-win rules or guidelines. The Art Guys traffic in charged subjects, playing against you with loaded dice, always trying to trick you into leaving your baggage at the door.