

## **AT WORK WITH: The Art Guys; In Performance: Life Imitates Art Imitating Life**

**SAM HOWE VERHOVEK, The New York Times, August 9, 1995**



MEET the Art Guys. Here in Houston, it's impossible not to.

There they were one recent day, working as clerks for 24 hours straight at the Stop N Go convenience store in Houston's museum district. They sold lottery tickets. They asked for patience when a customer couldn't get the gas pump to work and neither could they. "Hey, we're new at this," said Michael Galbreth, an Art Guy. They mopped the floor.

And they called it art.

The Art Guys are part Dada, part David Letterman, pushing the concept of performance art to the outer limits. Or maybe they're a cross between John Cage and the Smothers Brothers. Whatever. "That's the beginning and the end of the argument 'Is it art?'" said Jack A. Massing, the other Art Guy. "Well, yeah, it is -- because I'm an artist and I made it. So it is."

Groups from the National Endowment for the Arts to the Shell Oil Company Foundation seem to agree: last spring they supported "The Art Guys: Think Twice," a retrospective exhibition of the Guys' 13-year collaboration, at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston.

In the exhibition's catalogue, Lynn M. Herbert, the museum's associate curator, placed the Art Guys "within a continuum larger than just art history": the history of jesters or fools.

"Historically, fools were employed by a royal court or a household," Ms. Herbert wrote. "Their role was to provide their masters with humorous entertainment, which more often than not commented upon the politics and social mores of the day. The tradition lives on today; fools have simply been modernized to adapt to changing times."

The Art Guys' 24-hour shtick is not new. They once commemorated the winter solstice by spending the entire day in a booth at a Denny's restaurant just off Interstate 10 here, sipping coffee and eating scrambled eggs.

"This is definitely dining, and that was our intent," Mr. Galbreth deadpanned before a news camera crew, one of several news organizations that, as often happens with the Art Guys, showed up to cover their event.

"This isn't performance," Mr. Massing said. "This is behavior."

Back in the studio, the news anchor said during a news broadcast that the whole thing reminded him of an Off Broadway play he saw, one that basically involved watching a typical family just carry out their lives on the stage.

"That was it," the anchor said to a colleague. "They were just there, living, and you went and watched them. It was the only play I could get tickets to."

Mr. Massing, 36, said the anchor's comment was actually "quite brilliant" -- Mr. Galbreth, 39, called it "sophisticated" -- because it went to the heart of what the Art Guys are about. Anybody can get tickets to the Art Guys. Whether they want them or not.

In a recent performance piece called "Art Guys Blow Through Town," the pair moved through Houston with leaf blowers. To some, the work may have only conjured up the essential absurdity of leaf blowers, which often seem to be used to blow debris from one yard to another and back again.

Looked at another way, though, the act was a literal sweep through Houston's ethnic mosaic: from the Hispanic East End to Chinatown and Little Vietnam, to the largely black, largely poor Fourth Ward to very white, very wealthy white River Oaks. And maybe the blower represented an artistic appeal for a little more intermingling of much more than leaves.



The Art Guys held a book signing at the Brazos Bookstore, but because they have never written a book, they signed other authors' books instead. In a piece called "Driving Two Cars to Galveston," Mr. Massing did drive two cars 61 miles to Galveston, driving one several hundred feet, then getting out, running back to the other and driving that one several hundred feet, then returning to the first car, and so on. It took a day and a half, and he sprained his foot.

The Art Guys do produce art that can be viewed in a museum -- elaborate sculptures made from things like pennies and nonprescription drug capsules and carrots and Pringles potato chips. Some of their work clearly borders on the obsessive, like "1,000 Coats of Paint," a seven-month project in which they painted a baseball, a toothbrush, a teddy bear, a computer keyboard and several other objects 1,000 times each.

They are also pyromaniacs. For the opening of last spring's show at the Contemporary Arts Museum, they assembled designs made up of thousands of wooden matches glued to a gallery wall like dominoes arranged on a floor. Ann W. Richards, the former Governor, lighted the first match while hundreds of onlookers watched, many wondering aloud if the whole place was about to burn down.

"Listen, children, don't do this," Ms. Richards warned the younger members of her audience. "Don't do this. This is crazy. They are crazy." One by one, the matches flared and then burned out, leaving singed designs on the wall. The building survived. The Art Guys had done it before.

Still, they are best known for their performance art -- or, in many instances, endurance art. Some of it is best explained verbatim from the catalogue accompanying videos of their acts: "The Art Guys field sports questions from the audience, then lie down on suspended boards wearing drum major hats. As their heads collide, they crack a suspended egg that falls into a frying pan. A television plays the Home Shopping Network as a soundtrack repeats the name Kiki Vandeweghe" (a former professional basketball player).

It is possible, of course, that the Art Guys are more con artists than artists. Texas Monthly magazine rather huffily dismissed them several years ago as "shameless promoters of themselves and their creations, which makes them the Home Shopping Network of the Texas art world." They even have a popular bumper sticker: "Visualize the Art Gize."

But the Art Guys defend their work: It's accessible. It's democratic. "There's been some sort of breakdown between the artist and society," said Mr. Galbreth, a tall, lanky man with a shock of dark hair. He met Mr. Massing in 1982 while they were studying with the sculptor James Surls at the University of Houston.

"It's easy to overintellectualize things" and to be obscure, Mr. Galbreth said, "saying: 'Well, you don't understand me. You don't understand my work.' Whose fault is that? I think it's possible to engage the intelligentsia but at the same time not lose everybody else."

The Art Guys insist that the things they do, however absurd at first glance, have a point. The day at Denny's, for instance, represented an attempt to contrast a celebration of the solstice with the elaborate ceremonies of ancient civilizations whose lives revolved around the harvest and intense knowledge of the rhythms of nature. Or so said Mr. Galbreth.

"This is how we get our harvest today," Mr. Galbreth explained. "It comes right to your table. It comes right to your table 24 hours a day, if you want it. It's totally artificial."

Mr. Massing added: "Then the question becomes, why are we doing this? Why are we building these restaurants, and why are we keeping them open 24 hours a day? What's the deal?"

At the Stop N Go here, customers filed in and out all day. Some were impressed. "Drawing, sketching -- that's not the only thing artists can do," said Larry Green, an unemployed man who was scavenging for aluminum cans in the trash bins as Mr. Galbreth came out to pump gas. "Maybe these guys are a new type of artist."

Others were not impressed. "I just wanted to get some beer," said Oscar Gomez, a carpenter, who bought a 12-pack of Miller Lite and a large bag of Lay's potato chips from Mr. Massing. "That's not art."

In the catalogue, Ms. Herbert described the milieu of the Art Guys as "a fool's paradise -- the nebulous and convoluted world of contemporary art."

"Amidst the hue and cry of 'My kid could do that!' and 'You call that art?,' who better to jump into the fray than the Art Guys?" she added.

The Art Guys say their mission is not to send messages or make statements, but to ask questions. "Our work is not didactic," Mr. Galbreth said. "We're in the world with everybody else and we put ourselves in absurd situations, and they open up intellectual doors. And once you really start investigating the issue of absurdity, that gets very complex."