

By Karen Stuart



Skaggs as a Korean businessman selling unwanted dogs for 10 cents a pound. Photo credit: Joey Skaggs Archive

The king of the April fools, Joey Skaggs is a performance artist of a very unusual kind. Frequently harnessing the Internet as a tool of mass trickery, he has questioned authority, embarrassed high profile reporters and made the preposterous believable with a lifetime of imaginative hoaxes designed to keep us on our toes. You can learn about Joey's pranks on his Web site at www.joeyskaggs.com, but for a peek at the man behind the many masks, read on.

Joey Skaggs

PROFILE OF A PRANKSTER

IA: One of your stated goals is to encourage more thorough reporting in the media. But why choose misinformation as your means?

JS: Hoaxes to me, in the way I create and execute them, are an art form. They are not just about pointing out the foibles of irresponsible journalists. They have a bigger meaning and are not limited to "Gee, the media is stupid." My pranks are targeted to issues I think are interesting. The hoax allows me to bypass all of the traditional avenues to communicate. For example, my Celebrity Sperm Bank Auction hoax in 1976 (Skaggs created a media furor when he staged an auction of sperm from the likes of Mick Jagger and John Lennon), dealt with the issues of technology Vs morality. There is always going to be opposition. To me art is about opposition. It's about new awareness and changing the status quo. Had I chosen to write a book about sperm babies, or do a documentary film, I would have had to deal with the bureaucratic machinery of the controlling venues: publishers or studios. Rather than go that route, I chose to use the immediacy, the gullibility, the vulnerability and the instantaneous accessibility of the news media.

IA: What have been some of the greatest achievements of your work to date?

JS: First one has to define what is meant by a great achievement. For some it's getting rich. For others it's getting famous. Or both. Success for me is measured by personal satisfaction that comes from feeling that I'm being creative, that I'm being positive, that I'm communicating and challenging people to question their thinking. I try to do that with all of my hoaxes. I only work on projects that inspire me. If they inspire someone else, it's all the better.

IA: Which of your performance pieces was the most fun? Why?

JS: Dog Meat Soup, The Fat Squad, Portofess...I try to incorporate fun into everything I do. But my sense of humor can be very different from someone else's. And I know, as a satirist, that there is a dark side - satire bites. I'm challenging people to question their preconceived opinions. In the process of doing a hoax, one must be open and flexible as other people's reactions can create unusual twists. That to me is fun. Not knowing where it's going, what's going to happen. Will it succeed? Will I be arrested? It's scary, exciting, dangerous, provocative and the juice I need as an artist.

IA: What role does the Internet play in your work?

JS: I began long before the advent of the Internet, but it has certainly been an interesting addition to my arsenal of tools. I have used it to perpetrate or accentuate a number of hoaxes, from Sexonix to Stop BioPEEP to The Final Curtain. For example, I have used postings and chat rooms, created bogus Web sites, benefited from inexpensive international email correspondence, done research and used it as a voyeur to watch my own work unfold.

IA: Do you believe the internet has contributed to or reduced misinformation?

JS: There has always been misinformation. And there will always be. Whether it's the town crier, the newspaper or the Internet. You cannot blame the medium for its messages.

IA: What's your reaction to the other less sophisticated Net hoaxes and scams floating around on email (see our feature on page 42)? Do they play a valuable role?

JS: Value is up to the individual. I find them to be unimaginative, annoying, sometimes vicious, and usually stupid. For the most part, they're so lame that I'm not even amused. The world is full of shit. There's some gold. What is shit and what is gold is different to everyone. What I consider to be a waste of time and boring could be exciting and innovative to someone else. What's the alternative though? Regulation? Making Net hoaxes illegal? Only have religious propaganda? Personally I'm turned off by the "noise" but I have to remind myself to have an open mind. Fortunately, I have a delete key, which I exercise regularly. But I think the world is certainly a more interesting place because of all the variety we're exposed to.

IA: What do you think motivates the people who create these?

JS: I am speculating, but most people are frightened, discontented, angry, lonely, tired of being told what's right and wrong — pranks and hoaxes offer an opportunity to vent.

IA: What are you working on at the moment?

JS: If I told you, you wouldn't believe me. So it's best left unsaid. And just as a courtesy warning, watch out...