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## Joey Skaggs

Mandy Morrison



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**Mandy Morrison: What influenced your decision to create (performative) work that would interact in a public sphere?**

Joey Skaggs: It was 1966 and to my knowledge no one had previously challenged the status quo by presenting provocative, iconoclastic, offensive, illegal street theater using fine art.

Happenings were done in lofts, galleries or other alternative spaces like churches. I had spent over a year collecting found objects and building a 10-foot crucifix made from a telephone pole. I nailed a dead, decayed, skeletal body with exposed genitalia to it. On Easter Sunday, I dragged it on my back into

Tompkins Square Park in New York's East Village. It was my personal "scream" of protest [representing] my total rejection of religion.

This was the beginning of numerous unsanctioned performances. I decided I could create my own exhibition space publicly, using the streets of New York as my gallery and the unsuspecting public as my audience. It was the antithesis of the business of art. It wasn't done for financial gain. I was making a statement.

**MM: Audiences tend to be both fascinated by, as well as intimidated by, confrontational work. What benefits does the viewer derive from this experience? And how do you think this can affect a large politic?**

JS: Over the years I have developed numerous techniques by which to present my performances to a public audience. They span from ironic reversals to juxtapositions of realities, to confrontations that offend large groups of people, to hoaxes that sucker the mass media into reporting fictitious stories. Usually they involve actors and props, and are promoted using advertising and public relations techniques. It's using propaganda to fight propaganda. My work asks what do you believe? How did you come to believe it.

For me, the most important element is when I reveal that none of what everyone has been believing is real. That is when consciousness changes. I want people to extrapolate that they are being fooled all the time by government, corporations, religious organizations and people with an agenda.

**MM: What types of performances or experiences have been the most provocative and meaningful to you personally (or, in the case of a group, collectively)? Why?**

What's meaningful to me is to be expressive in a creative, intelligent, and responsible way, which is also why the people who help me (as volunteer experts, actors, and participants) are willing to be part of my art. I use provocation to attempt to change the way people think. [Examples can be found at <http://www.joeyskaggs.com> in the RETRO section where you can scroll the time line for specific

performances.] And, that's not always easy or popular.

The dedication, protection, and solidarity that my collaborators give freely is enormously meaningful and actually makes the work possible. Because they remind me that, no matter how strange the circumstances become (I've been threatened, physically attacked, hauled away and deposed) I have the backing of those who will be there to support the intent of the work.

I also find the pompous, irresponsibility of the press meaningful. If not for their gullibility and weakness for a good story, my access to an audience would be greatly reduced.

**MM: Do you think that American culture as a whole has become more passive regarding the political issues affecting them or merely preoccupied?**

JS: My personal experiences have put me in touch with artists, activists, educators, and individuals from all walks of life, in the U.S. and around the world. I receive many personal e-mails, as well as announcements from intelligent, concerned, aware, politically savvy people who share concerns about issues that affect humanity.

If one only looks at television programming, and entertainment, one could create a totally different hypothesis concerning passivity and preoccupation. But our culture evolves all the time.

**MM: Do you think that contemporary artists (and the art community as a whole) generally veer towards certain types of practices for reasons of fashion, conviction, or economics?**

JS: My answer is yes, yes, and yes...

BIO

Internationally notorious media prankster Joey Skaggs is an artist who has used the media as his medium since the 1960s.