

Mark My Words

The Musings of Mark Borkowski

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Joey Skaggs, Giant Bras and the Origins of Creativity

MARK BORKOWSKI / MARK MY WORDS / JIM JARMUSCH, JOEY SKAGGS, PR, STUNT / 0 COMMENTS

November 18, 2011

I've recently been running around on a kind of UK Tour, delivering a new presentation in Gateshead, Brighton and various locations in London for a range of industry events in between the rigours of my day-to-day duties.

One advantage of the thinking that goes in to this kind of offering is that along with the new ideas I discover and devise, I am reminded of some of my favourite pieces of wisdom. Amazing quotes and thoughts which get pushed to the back of my mind are suddenly thrust back in front of me- and my audiences- a couple of times a week.

One is from the great film-maker Jim Jarmusch, and it informs much of my thinking about modern communications: 'Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Authenticity is invaluable, originality is non-existent'.

In these times, it's a good insight to remember. One of the less-observed effects of the rise of the internet is that it has disabused us of the illusion of originality. Before 1996 or so, those everyday snippets of inspiration or bursts of creativity didn't get stored for later consumption and re-consumption. Nowadays they do.

Too often, people in my business forget that what we do has a proud heritage, carved out by bullshitters, showmen and mavericks. That's why I couldn't help but feel a small thrill as PRs working for the stain remover brand Vanish and the "Wear it Pink" Breast Cancer Campaign were firmly reminded that claiming total originality as a point of difference is always a risky



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business.

For those who didn't catch it, the campaign launched with a stunt whereby allegedly 'the world's largest bra' was hung across a skyscraper in central London. The news was swiftly responded to by one Joey Skaggs, a conceptual artist and genius of media manipulation of whom I've written before, pointing out that he came up with the same idea back in the 60's, except his was bigger, bolder, and immeasurably more badass. More importantly, his wasn't touted as 'world's biggest bra' (even though it probably was). The size was pertinent to its underlying feminist agenda.

Skaggs was one of the greats, a true genius. His stunts were always not only attention-grabbing but poignant, judging the zeitgeist and the instincts of the media to perfection. Above all, he was an artist, with the front page of a paper his ever-willing canvass. The best number too many to list here, ranging from his Christmas day 1968 staging of a life size Vietnamese nativity scene to his 1976 'cathouse for dogs' to the more recent 2006 'universal bullshit detector watch'.

One group of folk who should have taken a leaf out of Skaggs's book were PRs at the Guinness Book of Records, who today got a nice slew of coverage for their Guinness World Records Day. They are to be feted for the global dimension of the day, which saw record breakers around the world playing up to ironic stereotype-themed stunts (largest collection of leprechauns in Dublin et al). However, their photo ops still largely came from biggest, tallest, most- the kind of bread and butter offering a creative like Skaggs might have eschewed.

The spirit of Jarmusch's comment doesn't require that we constantly bow down and pay homage to our illustrious forebears, but it highlights an important distinction. While originality is impossible, authenticity is not. Don't claim to be the first, the best, the biggest. Instead find the same seams of genius that others have tapped, and dig deeper to find what is true and right for your project.

Another quote I've been using in my presentation sums it up. An old PR friend of mine once remarked to me that 'what matters is contacts, culture, energy, creativity, bullshit and bollocks. And of course, the last piece of coverage. We succeed because we are scum-sucking, news-junky, urban cosmopolite, ambidextrous grasshoppers'.

A true publicity showman has his nose to ground, his finger on the mouse, and always knows just what to steal and when.

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