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Jerry Johnson's "Plates," painted on a Brooklyn building in 1985, makes a statement about the technetronic age and its fast-food meals in plastic containers.

The Merry Pranksters And the Art of the Hoax

By MARK DERY

HAVEN'T YOU EVER WANTED TO PUT YOUR foot through your television screen?" asked an actor in "Media Burn," an outdoor spectacle staged in 1975 by the performance art collective Ant Farm. The answer, 15 years later, is a resounding "Yes!"

Now, a generation of artists who grew up with television are beginning to rebel against it. Following Ant Farm's lead, they are kicking a hole — metaphorically, at least — in the cathode-ray tube.

Some of today's most incendiary artists derive the structure, style and subject matter of their art from mass media. Mordantly funny, frighteningly Orwellian and very much a product of the times, their work challenges the image merchants. Moreover, it constitutes a search for truth in the technetronic age, where, increasingly, perception is reality.

These artists are "cultural jammers," exposing the ways in which corporate and political interests use the media as a tool of behavior modification. Jamming is CB slang for the illegal practice of electronically interrupting radio broadcasts, conversations between fellow hams or the audio portions of television shows. Cultural jamming, by extension, is artistic "terrorism" directed against the information society in which we live.

Mordantly funny, eerily Orwellian, media 'jammers' and billboard artists are challenging reality.

Negativland, a techno-yippie rock band, assembles bits and pieces of advertising jingles, commercial voice-overs and news-casts to make "media about media about media," as one of the group's prerecorded voices puts it. The artist Robbie Conal covers urban walls with the Madison Avenue equivalent of Dorian Gray's portrait — grotesque renderings of Oliver North, Edwin Meese and other political figures whose careers have been darkened by an ethical cloud. The billboard provocateur Jerry Johnson borrows smiling faces and gee-whiz phrases from 40's and 50's magazines to create absurdist ads that resemble the pop art of James Rosenquist in style and the punk cartoons of Gary Panter in spirit. Joey Skaggs tries to hoodwink journalists into covering his elaborately staged, exhaustively researched con jobs.

Mr. Skaggs's art is designed to dramatize the inherent dangers in a media that, according to its critics, accepts photo ops and

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buzzwords as meaningful discourse. Two weeks ago, he exposed his latest hoaxes: Comacocoon, a cybernetic vacation service with a promotional letter that promised "complete relaxation while your imagination is guided to the destination of your choice" via anesthesia, subliminal programming and computers; Hair Today offered a ghoulish remedy for baldness — scalp transplants for hairless professionals fed up with "camouflage combing... or wishful thinking."

Cultural jamming, like 60's Conceptual art, often produces no salable residue; most jammers subsidize their art through 9-to-5 jobs. Mr. Skaggs, who supports himself by selling his paintings and lecturing on communications at colleges throughout the country, observes: "What sets media jammers apart from the art world is that our work isn't designed to make money. It's designed to make a statement."

Geno Rodriguez, executive director and chief curator of the Alternative Museum in Manhattan, offers another perspective. "Some of these media artists are very effective," he says. "Certainly, the idea of guerrilla art, trying to communicate with society at large instead of an elite art group, is timely. In a sense, these pirate artists are the future."

"Unfortunately, some artists who purport to be critiquing the media are actually exploiting it, using it for self-aggrandizement."

While Mr. Rodriguez's assertion may hold true for those whose work has earned them fame in art circles, most cultural jammers will never know the 15 minutes of celebrity augured by Andy Warhol. Walking a fine line between petty crime and Conceptual art, they often labor undercover to make public statements. Their work owes its impact to the anonymity of the artist and the hit-and-run nature of the art. For these reasons, jammers are loath to predict when and where they will strike.

The San Francisco-based Negativland, for example, is set to release a 12-inch single in February that will incorporate the foul-mouthed rantings of a radio personality known for his warm-milk-and-cookies demeanor; to reveal its exact nature could result in legal action that might prevent its release. Mr. Conal has just finished a poster blitz in cities across the United States, plastering walls with unsigned paintings that look radically different from his ear-

Mark Dery is writing a book on the subject of this article, entitled "Cultural Jammers: The Information Society and Its Discontents."

These performance artists are out to expose how corporations can use the media.

lier efforts; publicity, says Mr. Conal, is beginning to undermine his potency as a cultural jammer.

Audio Dadaism For the Computer Age

The term cultural jamming was first used by Negativland in 1984 to describe billboard alteration and other underground art that seeks to shed light on the dark side of the computer age. Not exactly a rock band, not quite a theatrical company, Negativland creates audio Dada whose closest reference point is the Firesign Theater, an avant-garde comedy troupe of the 1970's.

On the cassette "Jamcon '84," a band member observes: "As awareness of how the media environment we occupy affects and directs our inner life grows, some resist. The skillfully reworked billboard... directs the public viewer to a consideration of the original corporate strategy. The studio for the cultural jammer is the world at large."

"Helter Stupid," Negativland's latest record, is a nonpareil act of cultural jamming, the aural equivalent of a moustache on the Mona Lisa. A raucous collage of newscasts, interviews and musical fragments, it documents an artful hoax perpetrated by Negativland on the American media.

In 1988, the band stumbled on an article about a 16-year-old boy who butchered his family after an argument, purportedly over the teenager's musical tastes. Inspired, Negativland issued a press release implying that the multiple ax murders were precipitated by "Christianity Is Stupid," a Negativland song that marries the fire-spitting sermon of a Pentecostal preacher to crunch rock of saurian ponderousness.

In the months that followed, the group granted interviews and dispatched communiqués, reiterating that the connection was based on rumor. Numerous hints were dropped in the hope that observant newshounds would sniff them out. During one interview, a tape loop of a voice chortling "It's a monstrous joke" could be heard endlessly repeating in the background. Nonetheless, Pulse! magazine, The San Francisco Chroni-

cle and countless other publications digested the group's disinformation, regurgitating it in article form.

In the liner notes to "Helter Stupid," the group offers insight into its prank: "Negativland chose to exploit the media's eager appetite for particularly sensational stories by becoming a subject they couldn't resist — the latest version of a ridiculous media cliché that proposes that rock song lyrics instigate murder."

Satiric Portraits Of Power Brokers

Robbie Conal and Jerry Johnson work in a similar vein. Mr. Conal, who lives in Los Angeles, paints biting satiric portraits of profiteers and power brokers, adds a punning tag line, runs them off in poster form and, with the aid of volunteers, papers major cities. One work, a cadaverous rendering of the evangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, bears the legend "False Profit." Another portrays a lipless, prune-faced Ronald Reagan framed by the words "Contra Diction." Recently, Mr. Conal rented a billboard in West Hollywood and adorned it with an image of Senator Jesse Helms looking somewhat disgruntled — understandable in light of the fact that his head was impaled on an artist's palette.

Mr. Conal is a guerrilla semiotician who asserts that "art galleries are luxury-item stores, like jewelry stores," in which cultural signs and symbols are bought and sold. With the world as his open-air gallery, he deconstructs popular culture for all to see, unscrambling the media signals with which society is constantly bombarded. "I'm interested in counter-advertising," he says, "using the streamlined sign language of advertising. I combine a stripped-down image with a one-liner to attack politicians and bureaucrats who have abused their power."

Jerry Johnson has been painting ironic murals on a building at the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Nevins Street in the Boerum Hill section of Brooklyn since 1982. His first depicted a 1940's trio in snazzy attire lounging beside a shiny car, accompanied by the admonishment "Dress right... and get a better shake out of life." Smaller lettering informed the viewer that the message was "courtesy of the President's Council on Appearances."

Completed during Ronald Reagan's first term in office, it juggled ideas about dressing for success and right-wing politics. "Cash," a 1987 work in which a glassy-eyed woman is shown dreaming of dollar signs and consumer goods, poked fun at the plummeting status of bills and coins in an age of plastic money. In "Plates," from 1985, a chef proffers an egg on a plate. It is a simple gesture that manages to be political, making points about synthetic food and polystyrene containers.

"I started doing these billboards because I had something to say, other than what I said from 9 to 5," the artist explains. "I thought, 'Why not use the existing medium and language in its most classic format to address some of the things going on today?' Billboards are honest. I have real problems with the art world, where someone can paint a painting that makes a condemnatory statement about capitalism and sell it for \$80,000. The artist gets rich and the patron sits on the painting until it appreciates, then dumps it. It's so hypocritical, it's ludicrous."

Coping With Information Anxiety

Ludicrousness, seasoned with savage wit and subversive thought in equal parts, is the tactic used by the Dallas-based Church of the SubGenius to lampoon religious cults, motivational sales programs and other forms of groupthink. Billing itself as an organization for "Scoffers and Blasphemers," the church preaches the gospel according to J. R. (Bob) Dobbs, the smirking, pipe-smoking prophet of sex, sales and slack (slack being a hard-to-define state of SubGenius enlightenment best described as a cross between couch potato and ascended master).

"Pull the wool over your own eyes," the church's literature exhorts. "Relax in the safety of your own delusions." It's a sardonic send-up of a society afflicted with "information anxiety," the post-modern neurosis that results from life lived in a vortex of factoids, trivia and prefab opinions.

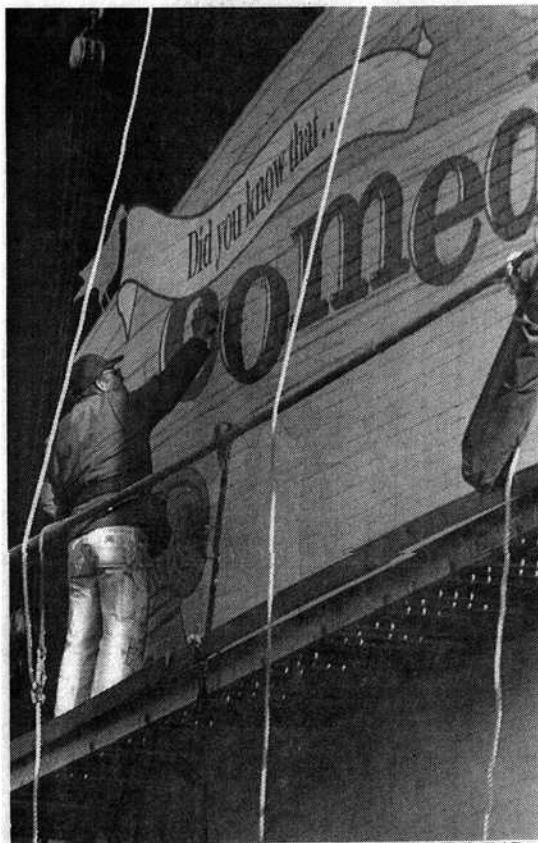
Founded in 1979 by Ivan Stang, an underground film maker, the church now claims a paying membership of more than 5,000. Its bible, "Book of the SubGenius" (Simon & Schuster), is in its sixth printing, and SubGenius rallies called Devivals draw large crowds. Clearly, the Church of the SubGenius has struck a chord.

According to Mr. Stang, known to the faithful as Sacred Scribe No. 273, the surreal cult is most popular among information addicts involved in desktop publishing and pirate radio. "This never would have happened if it weren't for Xerox machines," he informs. "There's no telling what will happen 10 years from now, when communications technologies have become cheaper and more sophisticated. I don't think big media is going to take over because small media will always be there. The more they spray, the heartier the cockroaches get."



Waring Abbott for The New York Times

A permanent cure for baldness?—In his latest hoax, *Hair Today*, Joey Skaggs passed himself off to the media as Dr. Joseph Chenango; a friend, Norman Savage, played a scap donor.



Keith Meyers/The New York Times

Absurdist ads—Jerry Johnson begins his new billboard on the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Nevins Street in Brooklyn.

Sociopolitical Satire As an Art Form

Joey Skaggs — who once convinced United Press International and WNBC-TV in New York to carry his fraudulent claim that hormones extracted from mutant cockroaches could cure arthritis, acne and radiation poisoning — would surely agree. A conceptual con artist, he is an example of cultural jamming in its purest form.

To Mr. Skaggs, a formally trained painter, sociopolitical satire is an art. "I started doing hoaxes to point out the inadequacies and dangers of an irresponsible press," he said in an interview in the 1987 book "Pranks." "Rather than sticking with oil paint, the media became my medium."

Since 1966, he has been flimflaming members of the fourth estate. He goes to great lengths, he says, to insure that no laws are broken, no innocent victims hurt, by his acts of ontological sabotage. "I don't falsify police reports or take money from the public, and I'm absolutely careful not to hurt anyone," Mr. Skaggs stresses.

"When I did the roach vitamin-pill hoax and sick people called, willing to spend any amount of money, it broke my heart. I said, 'Listen, I'm doing this to illustrate that people who say they have cures for certain diseases are charlatans.'"

In 1976, Mr. Skaggs conceptualized the Caphouse for Dogs, a canine bordello that offered a "savory selection" of doggie Delilahs, ranging from pedigree (Fifi, the French poodle) to mutt (Lady the Tramp). The Mayor's office was outraged, the now-defunct SoHo News was incensed, and WABC-TV in New York devoted a segment to it that received an Emmy nomination for best news broadcast of the year.

In time, Mr. Skaggs reappeared as the leader of Walk Right!, a combat-booted, black-clad, Guardian Angels-meet-Emily Post outfit determined to improve sidewalk etiquette. In another guise, as Jo-Jo, King of the New York Gypsies, he sported a pair of cardboard insect wings and brandished a sign demanding that the gypsy moth be renamed. Many have taken the prankster's bait; in 1982, The New York Times called Mr. Skaggs's fictitious organization, Gypsies Against Stereotypical Propaganda, "a new civil rights group."

There are those who say that Mr. Skaggs and his ilk are not artistic agitpropists but sophomoric troublemakers, or worse. Critics aver that media hoaxes are potentially as disruptive as computer viruses; they posit a situation in which the credibility of the news-gathering network has been undermined.

But Stephen Isaacs, associate dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, suggests otherwise: "When one of these media hoaxers pulls off a stunt, I find it fairly amusing. I don't think it presents a problem. You simply print a corrections column. When you admit error, it makes you more human. There's also the implication that every other fact in your paper is true."

Thomas J. Colin, managing editor of The Washington Journalism Review, adds: "From Piltown Man to fake lottery winners, the media needs to be reminded of its own hubris."

Mr. Skaggs and other jammers are questioning the contemporary world view at a time when the big picture, for most, is made up of video pixels and Benday dots, of white noise and half-truths. Cultural jamming, on its most profound level, is about remaking reality.

"The dominant culture utilizes media to promulgate the notion of the commodity as the highest form of existence," says Stuart Ewen, author of the 1988 book "All-Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture." "Cultural jammers draw upon this cacophony of fragmentary media images. At the heart of their reassemblings is the hope that there could be another kind of world, a world where rather than a devaluation of the human in favor of the commodity, there could be an understanding of the commodity in the service of the human." □

Anatomy of a Hoax

In 1989, while spending a gray winter in Hawaii listening to tourists grump about the weather, the avant-garde bunco artist Joey Skaggs dreamed up Comacocoon, the ultimate high-tech getaway. Floating, anesthetized, in a state of suspended animation, clients would take dream vacations directed by subliminal commands and a "pioneering BioImpression computer system."

Mr. Skaggs produced a glossy, eye-grabbing promotional package, which he mailed to 1,500 members of the press last month. Actresses answered phones in Comacocoon offices (Mr. Skaggs's living room) during business hours, arranging interviews with Mr. Skaggs's alter ego, the Comacocoon director Dr. Joseph Schlafer (German for "sleep").

The good doctor spoke with reporters from the German magazine Der Stern, the BBC, Elle magazine's Paris bureau, The Toronto Globe and Mail, the Italian news-

paper L'Unità and The London Mirror. An interview with Dr. Schlafer and several satisfied "clients" was taped by KYW-TV in Philadelphia for broadcast on its program "Evening Magazine." The New York Times did not try to report on Comacocoon.

Earlier this month Mr. Skaggs held news conferences at which he revealed his deception. "The hoax is just the hook," he says. "The second phase, in which I reveal the hoax, is the important part."

"As Joey Skaggs, I can't call a press conference to talk about how the media has been turned into a government propaganda machine, manipulating us into believing we've got to go to war in the Middle East. But as a media jammer, I can go into these issues in the process of revealing a hoax. Comacocoon has nothing really to do with dream vacations; it's about mind control. I'm making a statement about how easy it is for governments and big business to pull the wool over our eyes." — M. D.