

RE SEARCH

PRANKS!



DEVIOUS DEEDS AND MISCHIEVOUS MIRTH FROM:

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EARTH FIRST! ◆ BOB ZOELL ◆ ALAN ABEL ◆ HARRY KIPPER
◆ CARLO McCORMICK ◆ FRANK DISCUSSION ◆ AND MANY MORE ◆

Prank [obs. *prank* to play tricks]: trick; a malicious act; a mildly mischievous act; practical joke; a ludicrous act.

Prank to deck, adorn. M.E. *pranken*, to trim, allied to obs. E. *prink*, to trim. *Prink* is a nasalised form of *prick*; see further under *Prick*. See also *pronken*, to show off, shine, strut, parade, to display one's dress, *pronckepinken*, to glitter in a fine dress, *prunk*, show, parade, *pryken*, to make a show or display.

prank a trick (E.). An act done to shew off, a trick to make people stare; from *Prank*.

Prank Also *pranque*, *pranck*, *pranke*. Origin unascertained.

a. A trick, an act done to show off. A fold, pleat, as in the figurative sense of 'wrinkle'. A trick, a frolic. In early use, a trick of malicious or mischievous nature; a trick or action deserving of reprobation; a deed of wickedness. [ex: *This was not the first of his pranks which he (the Devil) played upon mankind after the flood.*]

b. A trick of magic, conjuring, or the like; in early times to deceive, later to surprise or amuse. [ex: *Either juggling or Magicall pranks practised by the Conjurors or Priests.*] c. A trick of a frolicsome nature, or one intended to make sport; a

mad frolic; a practical joke. [ex: *Who in all his purposes and practices, playeth pranckes of puerilitie and childishness.*

... see the child, with his thousand pretty pranks, commanded by every sight and sound . . . The pranks are not those of healthy schoolboys.]

d. Said of capricious or frolicsome actions or movements of animals, and fig. of erratic actions of machines. [ex: *We appeal to observation, whether all the various machines and utensils would now and then play odd pranks and capricio's quite contrary to their proper structures and the designs of the artificers . . . The Cat is reported to have played several Pranks above the Capacity of an ordinary Cat.*]

Prank *Prancing*, *capering*.

Prank To play pranks or tricks, formerly sometimes wicked or mischievous, now usually in frolic; to sport. [ex: *I prank with one, I use craftye and subtyll maner towardes hym . . . The little rays of sin That prank with the damask vein of the cheek . . . A little wind, born in the gorge below, was pranking with the quaking asp leaves.*]

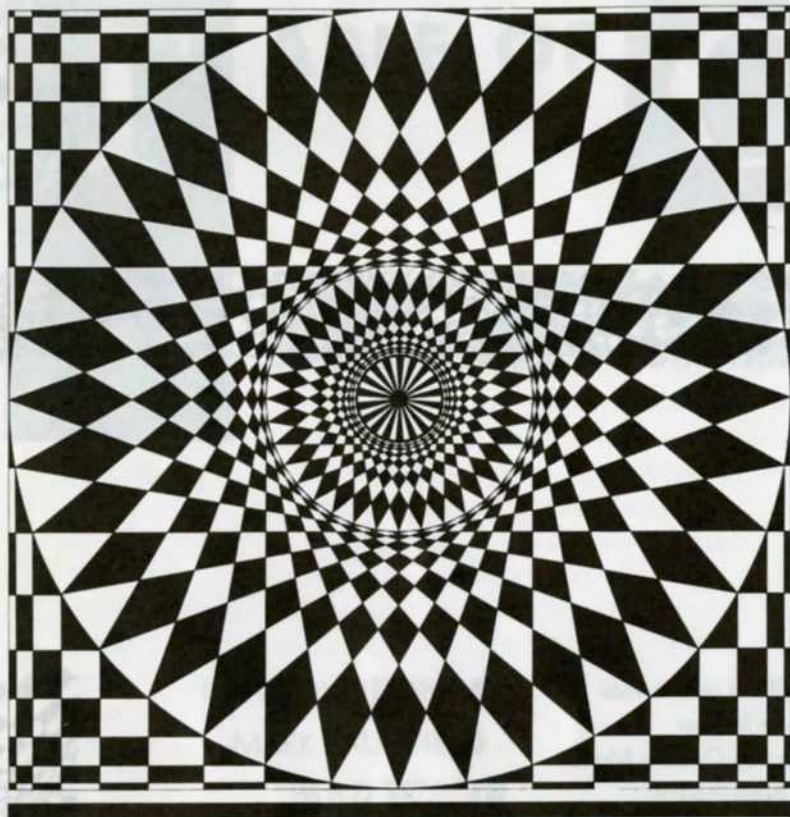
Prank [appears early on 16th c., origin obscure] *v.* (in various

senses, esp. with suggestion of display or arrogance); to caper, to dance.

Prank a. To dress, or deck in a gay, bright, or showy manner; to decorate; to deck oneself out, dress oneself up. [ex: *She spends halfe a day in pranking her selfe if she be invited to any strange place . . . As willing as you are to prancke your selves in a lookinge Glasse.*] b. To dress up. c. To deck, adorn; to brighten or set out with colours; to spangle. In various constructions, e.g. to prank (the field) with flowers, to prank (the garden or field) as a flower.

Prankful Full of pranks; mischievous, tricky; frolicsome. Hence **Prankfulness**. [ex: *Rather wounding by an unbounded prankfulness, than by a wish to inflict pain.*]

Prankish Of the nature of a prank; inclined to pranks. [ex: *My partner dear in many a prankish deed . . . She had quite dropt her prankish airs.*] Stories concerning mischievous and prankish children.] Hence **Prankishness**, trickiness, frolicsomeness; addiction to pranks. [ex: *She prankishly avoided him . . . If he were a very young man, we might be indulgent to this prankishness.*]



PRANKS. According to the *Merriam-Webster New Collegiate Dictionary*, a prank is a "trick . . . a mildly mischievous act . . . a practical joke . . . a ludicrous act." The *best* pranks invoke the imagination, poetic imagery, the unexpected and a deep level of irony or social criticism—such as Boyd Rice's presentation of a skinned sheep's head on a silver platter to Betty Ford, First Lady of the United States. Great pranks create synaesthetic experiences which are unmistakably exciting, original, and reverberating, as well as *creative, metaphoric, poetic* and *artistic*. If these criteria be deemed sufficient, then pranks can be considered as constituting an art form and genre in themselves.

However slighted by Academia, pranks are not without cul-

tural and historical precedent. A casual survey of art of the twentieth century reveals a neglected galaxy of shining star prank-events which forever altered the path of future creative activity, such as Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (a painting of prostitutes), Duchamp's *Fountain* (a urinal which he labeled "sculpture"), and Warhol's successful marketing of paintings depicting gory car crashes as six-figure "high art."

A prank connotes *fun, laughter, jest, satire, lampooning, making a fool of someone*—all light-hearted activities. Thus do pranks camouflage the sting of deeper, more critical denotations, such as their direct challenge to all verbal and behavioral *routines*, and their undermining of the sovereign authority of words, language, visual images, and social conventions in general. Regardless of specific manifestation, a prank is always an evasion of *reality*. Pranks are the *deadly enemy* of reality. And "reality"—its description and limitation—has always been the supreme control trick used by a society to subdue the lust for freedom latent in its citizens.

From the very onset of social interactions pranks play their part, instructing and enlightening the child toward the realization that *things are never what they seem*. Calling into question inherently dubious concepts such as "reality," "trust," "belief," "obedience," and "the social contract," pranks occasionally succeed in implanting a profound and lasting distrust of all social conventions and institutions.

Unfortunately, pranks are usually identified with—and limited to—pre-adult stages of development. At the point of "adulthood" the multiplication of mischief must cease; youths are supposed to "grow out of" the need to perpetrate pranks as they accept society's restriction of their spirit through the progressive conventionalization of their behavior. The role model of the *adult prankster* is a scarce archetype indeed. But—pranks *can* continue until one's dying breath: when he died, the great Surrealist Andre Breton was taken to the cemetery in a moving van.

What makes a prank "bad"? In America the outstanding socially-sanctioned prank is the college fraternity *hazing*, which means "to harass by exacting unnecessary or disagreeable work, to harass by banter, ridicule, or criticism." Usually characterized not only by unoriginality but by *conventionalized* cruelty, these pointless humiliations do nothing to raise consciousness or alter existing power relationships. They are deeds which only further the *status-quo*; they only perpetuate the

acceptance of and submission to *arbitrary authority*, or abet existing hierarchical inequities. Basically these include all pranks readily recognizable as "cliches"—those which contribute no new poetic imagery.

The word "prank" is strangely absent from academic psychology, sociology and anthropology texts which presumably exist to document and classify the full range of human behavior in this world. A recent look at the indexes of literally a hundred books in these categories revealed *no* entries! Yet even a cursory perusal of world myths and written literature will substantiate the prank as a significant, consciousness-raising, and often *pivotal* event in the ethical and creative development of the individual in society. Examples range from Coyote and Raven in American Indian mythology to the legends of Hermes and Prometheus.

A possible explanation for this mysterious lacuna may lie in the way genuinely poetic/imaginative pranks resist facile categorization, and transcend inflexible (and often questionable) demarcations between legality and illegality, good and bad taste, and right and wrong social conduct. Society imposes a grid of habit-forming pathways on its denizens to "produce results" without lateral detouring. Obviously, a minimum of ritualized language and behavior to facilitate the flow of goods and services for survival is *necessary*. However, this minimum has been well exceeded long ago. Pranks blast the rigidified politeness and behavior patterns which bespeak sleepwalkers acting on automatic pilot. They attack the fundamental mechanisms of a society in which all social/verbal intercourse functions as a means toward a future *consumer exchange*, either of goods or experience. It is possible to view *every* "entertainment" experience marketed today either as an act of consumption, a prelude to an act of consumption, or both.

Pranks challenge all aspects of "the social contract" which have ossified. Their power derives from exploration and elucidation of the inarticulate, confused areas surrounding society. They probe the territory of the *taboo*, which has always been concerned with sex and death. This shadow area, which has spawned most of the creative breakthroughs worth preserving, is also that area which society—striving above all to preserve its status quo—neglects, rejects and ignores, principally through the process of cultural censorship. Yet "true art is always there—where no one is waiting for it . . . Art does not come and lie in the beds we make for it. It slips away as soon as its name is uttered; it likes to preserve its incognito. Its best moments are when it forgets its very name." (Jean Dubuffet)

Pranks are most admirable when they evoke a *liberation of expression* . . . and challenge the *authority of appearances*. While almost all pranks mock or undermine kneel-to-authority conditioning, some do more, by virtue of disclosing more levels of black humor and metaphor, or expanding our notions of reality by gifting us with a bizarre image or metamorphosis. At a single stroke a prank can dissect an intricate tissue of artifice, exposing a rigid behavioral structure underneath.

By unHINGING the context for expectation, pranks explode the patterning which narrows and shrinks down our imaginative potential. What distinguishes a painting from wallpaper, or literature from stock market reports, is the tearing and ripping apart of old forms and structures to create new perceptions which renew and refresh life itself. All art attempts to rid life of banality; to expunge the *habituation effect* whose cause is "daily living."

Obedience to language and image must continually be challenged, if we are to stay "alive." The best pranks research and probe the boundaries of the occupied territory known as "society" in an attempt to redirect that society toward a vision of life grounded not in dreadful necessity, but rather, *continual poetic renewal*. (A society whose *exchange value* consisted in poetic images and humor rather than dollars can barely be *imagined* at this stage of world evolution.) Pranks function to evoke the parallel *Land of Make Believe*, that realm of perpetual surprise and delight where endless possibilities for fun and pleasure depend upon circumvention of habit and cliché. From their Shadow-world, pranks cast their Funhouse Mirror reflection of our workaday world. Ultimately, the territory signposted by pranks may represent our single supremely tangible freedom.

—V. Vale and A. Juno



J**OEY****S****KAGGS**

Probably the most famous television prankster alive today is NYC artist Joey Skaggs, who uses the media as a painter uses a canvas. His sociopolitical satires—put-ons—have been front page stories over the world for the past two decades. All along his objective has always been to force people to question and enter into dialogue on vital issues concerning truth in news reportage; morality, sensationalism and violence; the effects the media have on public opinion and taste; and ways viewers can decipher media more effectively. In addition to international TV, radio, newspaper and magazine coverage, he's been featured on numerous US television shows, including Phil Donahue, NBC's Today Show, The Merv Griffin Show, Entertainment Tonight, PM Magazine, and Ripley's Believe It Or Not.

A former instructor of Media Communications at New York's School of Visual Arts, currently Joey Skaggs lectures at schools around the country (write 107 Waverly Place, NYC 10011 for a brochure). He was interviewed at his New York City office by Andrea Juno.

■ JOEY SKAGGS: Let me tell you what I do in a rambling, non-sequential order. I was born October 4, 1945. My mother is a Brooklyn Italian and my father is a hillbilly from Kentucky. I'm the oldest child in a family of four children: three brothers and one sister. I'm a New York Italian cowboy. I went to the High School of Art and Design on 57th St. & 2nd Avenue; I went to the Art Students League; and I went to a school which I won't give credit to—having been kicked out. I also went to the School of Visual Arts, eventually got a degree and taught there for a number of years.

As a child I always knew I was an artist and therefore didn't have to come to terms with "who am I, and what do I want to be when I grow up?" I always aspired to be an artist, and I was a gifted child. I've always been and always will be a painter. I'm an imaginary landscape painter; I've gone from 32' gigantic triptychs to the 4"x 6" miniatures I've been doing recently to be able to work quickly and move on to another concept.

But . . . being a painter was never enough for me, because I have other things I want to say. And as a creative person I don't want to say them through a painting. I don't want to write "SCREW YOU" on a painting; I don't want to write "HYPOCRISY" on a painting. There are artists who choose words like these to write on a painting, but that is not what I paint. Therefore, I needed other mediums to express myself with.

As a very angry young artist in the '60s, I chose performance as a medium. Pieces such as these weren't called performance pieces then, they were called "happenings," and they were usually done in loft spaces or any place that allowed them to happen.

I had a very unhappy childhood, which I don't want to get into. Fortunately, going to the High School of Art and Design and being recognized as having talent, plus having a

support system outside my immediate family was a real salvation for me. Actually, being talented was a salvation for me. Through my creativity I had other ways of dealing with problems at home.

Coming from what I perceived as hypocrisy and injustice in my own personal life—being forced to adhere to certain notions which I didn't agree with—I as an individual decided that I could strike out at hypocrisy and injustice *creatively*.

■ ANDREA JUNO: Tell us about your first performance.

■ JS: Rather than blowing up Mobil Oil stations or throwing bricks through bank windows, I constructed a 10', 250

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pound crucifix, and sculpted a figure on the crucifix which utilized a real American Indian skull with real human hair and a barbed-wire crown, and I cast my own hands in hydrocal. It was a combination of metal, wood, hydrocal and plaster-of-paris, and the piece had a huge cock between its legs.

I dragged it out on Easter Sunday, 1966, in Tompkins Square Park on the Lower East Side where I lived—I had a studio on Avenue B. This was before the term "hippie" was



Joey Skaggs with Mahatma Gandhi in Washington Square Park, NYC. Photo: Bobby Neel Adams.

coined, when we were still called "beatniks" in the press.

It was quite a provocative, controversial act. And it enraged, amused, confused and provoked many responses from people. The piece was attacked by a group of youths who were quite annoyed by the philosophical (no, I don't think they got the philosophical)—*physical* reality of seeing not a sweet pink Jesus, but a tortured, decayed figure on a cross with his genitalia exposed. And the police came. This was Easter Sunday in a very eclectic neighborhood, with Ukrainian, Slavic, Polish, Puerto Rican people along with the beatniks, the hipsters.

I had a contingency of friends there who all helped out. The piece was dragged away and given sanctuary at St Marks-in-the-Bowery Church. Father Michael Allen was the minister. He frequently held poetry readings, plays, and numerous people including Allen Ginsberg gave performances there. Father Allen had visited my studio and I had told him what I was going to do. He told me I should expect trouble and that the piece could be taken to his church. I was grabbed by the police, detained, and given a summons. And I was protected from the crowd by friends.

To jump ahead of myself, for four consecutive Easters I dragged out this iconoclastic, provocative sculpture. The last year was 1969. And this time I dragged it up 5th Avenue on my back, wearing a black robe (I had long hair and a beard) through the Easter Day Parade up to the doors of St

Patrick's Cathedral, where I attempted to drag it up the steps through the cathedral and drop it in front of the altar. This was my own personal statement of anger against the hypocrisy of the church.

I had told friends what I intended to do, and they were there to photograph it and try to protect me as well. I anticipated that it would be a reenactment of 2000 years ago, and of course it was. The crowd jeered, "Kill him! Kill him!" and the police (like the Roman soldiers) grabbed me, kicked me to the ground, and stomped on the sculpture. They made me pick it up; they prodded me and made me haul it to the paddy wagon. A friend came up and helped me carry the cross.

At the last second I bolted and ran down the street, jumped into a taxicab at a red light and got away, leaving the sculpture by the police paddy wagon. I'd anticipated that I was going to get into this kind of trouble, so I had made a duplicate of the original which I still have. What the police smashed was a copy of the cross.

■AJ: How did the press react?

■JS: It was front page news in the *East Village Other*; it got media attention. Because of that, I had a sense of my own power. Now, when you are a repressed person, when you've suffered injustices, there's a lot of anger. Some people find ways of venting that anger that are destructive to themselves; some people dissipate it by being neurotic or psychotic, etc.

But many years ago I was inspired by reading about a French avant-garde group of the 1890's; a philosophical, esoteric group of people who called themselves Pataphysicians. Alfred Jarry—he wrote *Ubu Roi*—was a Pataphysician. I think they created a philosophical joke which got international attention: Pataphysics. Pataphysics is to metaphysics what metaphysics is to physics, only Pataphysics extends in either direction. *Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions.*

What does that mean? Well, what is art? Art is many things to many people, and one of the things it can be is an

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imaginary concept that you look toward expressing. So you create an imaginary problem, then you try to solve it. I have this idea, and now I'm going to execute the idea (imaginary problem, imaginary solution). Isn't art imaginary problems with imaginary solutions?

I was also inspired by other works I read, like a little story by Rene Daumal [to paraphrase]: "Once upon a time there was a miserable man who lived with his miserable old mother who made miserable meals in a cold little miserable house, and he had a miserable job with a miserable boss and was paid miserable wages. If he wanted to, he could have transformed it all into a Kingdom, and he could have been a King, and his mother could have been the Queen Mother,

and his boss could have been the Jester. But he didn't. And he died a miserable, miserable death. He *was* the world's greatest magician. But he never knew it."

The world is full of such self-made victims. When you think about that, you think about all the people who don't know how or are afraid to tap into, recognize, encourage, and nurture their own powers. Just because your history as a child made you a victim, you don't have to *continue* being one. You don't have to be a self-made victim just because you were the victim of abuse or stupidity by your parents or by society.

So, I decided that I could tap into my own power and make a stand. And being arrested and being beaten by police or by a crowd was nothing compared to the pains that I had endured as a child. I was quite willing to put it on the line and make a stand for what I believed in, and to creatively say, "SCREW YOU; I'M NOT BUYING YOUR LIES!"—which I did. And to threaten people—which I did. So my earlier works really were confrontational in a provocative way, which did endanger me.

In the '60s I rented a Greyhound sightseeing bus, filled it with 60 hippies and gave them a tour of Queens. I called it my Cultural Exchange Program. They reacted to us like we weren't supposed to be there, yet it was okay for straights and suburbanites and out-of-towners to come to the East Village with Instamatics and point them at long-haired bearded, beaded people.

As another example of my work in the '60s, I built a life-size Vietnamese village. It portrayed a Vietnamese Nativity. I spent months in the construction, and on Christmas I trucked it up to Central Park, and with actors dressed as American soldiers I led an attack on the Vietnamese village (as a statement against our involvement in Vietnam). I had been on the radio a couple of nights in advance, and made an announcement that I was doing something in Central Park on Christmas. Of course the police were there in great numbers, and numerous people were arrested.

Also in the '60s I constructed obscene, grotesque Statues of Liberty with dismembered baby bodies, and set them out on the Fourth of July as another protest against the war in Vietnam.

Another time in the '60s I rented a Greyhound sightseeing bus, filled it with 60 hippies and gave them a tour of Queens. I called it my Cultural Exchange Program. That was more of a joke, an ironic reversal, than a provocative prank, but at the time it was provocative because it threatened the people in Queens. They screamed, "We're being invaded!" They reacted to us like we weren't supposed to be there, yet it was okay for straights and suburbanites and out-of-towners to come to the East Village with Instamatics and point them at long-haired bearded, beaded people.

■ AJ: Right—*Queens is very suburban.*

■ JS: Queens *is* Suburbia. So I took hippies to Suburbia and pointed at the squares, at the people they left behind; toward the attached houses and the semi-attached houses and the Bowl-O-Rama; people mowing their lawns, washing their



Easter, late 60s in NYC: "I dragged this cross up Fifth Avenue to the doors of St. Patrick's Cathedral. This was my own personal statement of anger against the hypocrisy of the church. The police (like the Roman soldiers) grabbed me, kicked me to the ground, and stomped on the sculpture."



cars and reading the paper. That was my Cultural Exchange Program.

Well, that made the front page of every major newspaper—AP [Associated Press] picked it up. I did *The Today Show*. It was an enormously successful media piece.

There are other things I did in the '60s. For example, there was a woman whose name was Francine Godfried. Francine's claim to fame was that she was endowed with 44" mammary glands. She became a national news phenomenon for over a week because thousands of Wall Street workers would stand on top of automobiles to see Francine Godfried and her tits go to lunch. I thought that was ludicrous, so I built a 50' brassiere with a black bra and two red hearts on



"Cathouse For Dogs:
Now, for the first time, for fifty dollars you could get your dog sexually gratified. The ASPCA sent out armed investigators to get me. ABC's documentary [on me] was nominated for an Emmy as the best news broadcast of the year, and I was subpoenaed by the Attorney General for illegally running a Cathouse For Dogs."

each cup for nipples, and I attempted to fasten it around the Statue of Liberty. I failed at doing that, and then stretched it across the U.S. Treasury Building (which was the first United States Capital) on Valentine's Day. The wind billowed it out. The Wall Street workers got incensed and attacked the brassiere, ripping it to shreds along with the police. There were other things, but that gives you an idea of what I was doing in the sixties.

I made isolated news stories, but these things were not called art. These events were never attributed to the same person. No one made the connection that it's Joey Skaggs *the artist*, a socio-political satirist who is making comments about us and holding up a mirror to society. That was not the nature of the press. The press called me a beatnik, a hippie, a Yippie, a radical revolutionary—whatever was the pigeon-hole at the moment. But all the time I was always an artist.

I recognize the power of the press from having been directly involved in it. It's easy to recognize it even when you're not directly involved, but when it's happening to *you*—when your intent, content, and techniques are totally misinterpreted, twisted and editorialized, and lost, destroyed, or purposely twisted into another direction—then you see the power of it all. I not only saw it, but I was angered by it, and I decided that also in part I wanted to point that out.

So I started doing hoaxes to purposefully make a commentary about people. I thought humor was a great way of making people think, rather than hitting them over the head with something. I also wanted to point out the inadequacies and dangers of an irresponsible press.

■ AJ: How aware were you of the concept of media manipulation when you got on the front pages for the Queens bus tour?

■ JS: It was not accidental; it was by design. I had concepts that I thought would make a statement. *I was using the media as a medium.* Rather than sticking with oil paint, the media became my medium; I got involved with the phenomenon of the media and communication as my art.

In 1976, I ran an advertisement in the *Village Voice* which read:

CATHOUSE FOR DOGS

featuring a savory selection of hot bitches. From pedigree (Fifi, the French Poodle) to mutts (Lady the Tramp). Handler and Vet on duty. Stud and photo service available. No weirdos, please. Dogs only. By appointment. Call 254-7878.

I also wrote a press release about my new establishment, the Cathouse For Dogs: if your dog graduated from obedience school, if it was his birthday, if you were embarrassed to come home and find him humping a pillow, or fearful of having a party because your dog would mount your company's legs—since there were cemeteries for dogs, restaurants for dogs, clothing stores for dogs—all the amenities of life except the one that a dog would enjoy the most, now for the first time for fifty dollars you could get your dog sexually gratified.

This was not a mating service for the purpose of breeding; this was purely a sexual pleasure service. We had a wonderful bevy of bitches. We used a drug called Estro-dial to artificially induce a state of heat into our bitches who would naturally only come into heat every six months. You or your dog could choose any one of the bitches—our vet would shoot her up—she'd be ready to go, and you could

Realizing, with my limited funds and limited imagination what I'm capable of doing on an international level, just imagine what people who have other intents, with a lot more money, brains, time, and other motivations are doing, have done, and will continue to do! It becomes a very frightening reality.

have a drink, watch and relax, or have a photo taken. And if we had a bitch who was in a natural state of heat we would administer a contraceptive called Ova-ban, so your dog would have no fear of being a father.

The response was *unbelievable*. I had people willing to pay fifty dollars to have their dog sexually gratified, as well as people who came "out of the closet"—people who wanted to have sex with dogs, both male and female; people who wanted to watch their dog having sex with another human being, and it went on like that.

I waited for the press, and I didn't have to wait long—the media wanted to see this. I got together 25 actors and 15 dogs and staged *A Night In A Cathouse For Dogs* for the media. I had, for example, an actress dressed in a red dress with a red bow in her hair come out with a Saluki hound with a red sweater and red bow, and parade it in front of the male dogs being held by actors posing as customers. I, as the announcer, would say, "This is Sarah and Luba. Luba is a two-year-old Saluki hound. She has a preference for Dobermans. She's almost a virgin," and I went on like this. I had a phony veterinarian present, and I gave a lecture on dog copulation technique complete with photographs. I had a questionnaire that the fake customers would fill out: how old is your dog, has it been inoculated for rabies or distemper, do they have a certificate, why are they getting their dog laid, and so on.

Just doing a hoax is not the total performance. It's not the end of the piece or the objective. What's more important, and more difficult to do, is to get the media to come back to allow me to say why and what it means. It's more difficult than to get them to initially fall for it.

The media were there—they were the only ones who weren't actors—and they just took it hook, line and sinker. *Midnight Blue* from Manhattan's cable Channel J, which was Alex Bennet and Al Goldstein and his crew, who have videotaped every perverse sexual situation in the area, were totally grossed out by mine! They believed it. The *Soho News* ran a campaign against me. I incited the ASPCA, The Bureau of Animal Affairs, the NYPD vice squad, the Mayor's Office, and various religious and humane organizations who all took up the campaign to put me out of business, and I became the whoremaster of New York.

ABC called and wanted to do a documentary on me. I refused to allow them to see the cathouse for dogs because I didn't want to go through the *production* problem again. Every hoax I do is like doing a film or a theater piece or a commercial. It's conceived, written, produced, directed, staged, acted; there are locations, props—it's very complicated. Rather than do that every time some other media source wanted to see the Cathouse, I provided them with a videotape of the dogs humping.

ABC did what's called a wrap-around: the interview before and after, and interviewing other people; but the key to their documentary was the footage I provided them of the performance of the Cathouse For Dogs. Well, ABC interviewed me in Washington Square Park and I gave them an elaborate interview. They went out and interviewed the ASPCA, they interviewed a well-known veterinarian who was adamantly opposed to my use of drugs to induce a state of heat in the bitches, and so on.

■ AJ: *What about the ASPCA?*

■ JS: They sent out armed investigators to get me. They put up a reward poster in my hallway offering a \$200 reward for anyone who would turn me in for abusing animals. The police and various people from city agencies (in addition to the ordinary customers who phoned) were calling, all trying to get dates for their dogs to entrap me. I could have made a

fortune—I said I was going to franchise it, and have bumperstickers ("Get a Little Tail For Your Dog"). The press kept growing and the story became international. I didn't want customers—it was never my intent to defraud or deceive people for money. Deceit—yes, fraud—no. To rip people off for money—no. To make them think—yes. Hoax has a negative connotation—it's like being a con-man, exploiting people for money. I don't do that.

An artist is much different from a con-man. I am a con-man, but I'm a con-fidence, con-ceptual, con-artist. That's different.

Anyway, ABC's documentary was nominated for an Emmy as the best news broadcast of the year, and I was subpoenaed by the Attorney General for illegally running a cathouse for dogs. I made my appearance at the Attorney General's office with an entourage of my actors and revealed that it was a conceptual performance. Of course they were shocked, outraged—not believing me. I had to make a statement with a court stenographer and an Assistant Attorney General. When it was revealed that it was not true—that it was a hoax—ABC never retracted their story.

Now this is one of the issues that is a by-product of my art, a very important issue: the ethics and responsibility of investigative journalists. When we are dependent upon the media for objective truth and we are not getting it, and when it's *intentionally* not told to us, that's disinformation, deceit, and it's blatantly irresponsible, and even worse than that.

We look to them for information. They set themselves up as providers of that information. When they don't give us that information, it's for a number of reasons. In the case of the Cathouse For Dogs, they did not want their credibility as an investigative news source questioned. They didn't have the integrity to tell their viewing audience that it didn't exist, because they didn't want to look bad. They also didn't want to give me any additional unnecessary attention. Basically the news condescends to its audience and is frequently contrived. As a result, if you were only an ABC news-watcher and you didn't see any other networks saying it was a hoax, you'd still to this day think there was a Cathouse For Dogs.

In *The Total Dog Book*, published in 1984, the Cathouse For Dogs is *still* listed. This again exemplifies how information—disinformation—is perpetuated.

On a broader scale, as an artist I document the phenomenon of communication. I try to videotape my performance. I write my concept down, I set it up, I document it, I get copies of the television news interpretation, I hire a press clipping service and I collect the newspaper and magazine editorial interpretations. I tape-record my radio interviews and my telephone conversations and collect the letters and responses I get from the mail.

The communication phenomenon is somewhat like an elaborate version of the "telephone game." If there were only three people at this table and I whispered something in your ear (having written down what I was going to say), and you whispered it in the next person's ear, and the next person said what it was, then we could kind of pinpoint what went wrong. I know what I said, and I know what he said, so he got it from you or he made it up. So either you or he intentionally perpetrated a lie.

In this day and age, with electronic telecommunications instantaneously darting around the globe and people feeding off everyone else's network of nerve endings, a misspelled word or a misplaced exclamation mark can totally change the content and intent of what is being said. And it's almost impossible to determine where the accidental change came from. And that's on a mild level. It's even *intentionally* done. Governments are doing it, corporations are doing it. Individuals within the media itself are doing it, and people like

myself are doing it to make sociopolitical commentaries.

I do what I do to make a commentary, and I always tell the truth because there is a purpose in doing it. What worries me is when I'm not able to tell the truth—when for its own reasons the media doesn't want the truth to be told. Realizing, with my limited funds and limited imagination what I'm capable of doing on an international level, just imagine what people who have other intents, with a lot more money, brains, time, and other motivations are doing, have done, and will continue to do! It becomes a very frightening reality when you think about it.

■ AJ: *What is reality?*

■ JS: Right. What is reality, and how can you know what is history?

I'd also like to talk about technology and where we're going. With the ability to computer-generate photo images and do montage, collage and eventually holograms, we'll have Hitler alive in South America totally fabricated—we'll have a home movie of JFK actually screwing Marilyn Monroe, or whatever twisted historical thing we want to create. And it will be virtually impossible to detect that it's a creation, because of the advancements in technology. We are coming to the forefront technologically of a really frightening media reality. If we don't sharpen our tools now, our integrity, we're in for even bigger trouble.

My process has been an evolutionary process. I didn't start out in 1966 saying, "I think I'll show how irresponsible the media is." This evolved out of many things, but again it is not the only issue that I'm involved in in my work.

Let me go on to other performances. In the '70s, I created Giuseppe Scagolli's Celebrity Sperm Bank. I was the proprietor of a sperm bank which was having an auction of rock star sperm. I made up some ridiculous political party and made up phony endorsements, sent out press releases and ran advertisements. I got together 50 actors and staged this performance.

Let me first tell you how this came about. The year after "Cathouse," in 1976, I was going through the yellow pages and I came across Sperm Banks and said, "Hmmm" I called one up and said, "Hi, my name is Joey Skaggs. I'm a screenplay writer and I'm doing a script. I have a scene that takes place in a sperm bank, but really, I have no idea what one looks like or how it operates. I'd like to know if it's possible to take a look at your facility." The reaction was,

ABC's documentary was nominated for an Emmy as the best news broadcast of the year, and I was subpoenaed by the Attorney General for illegally running a cathouse for dogs. When it was revealed that it was not true—that it was a hoax—ABC never retracted their story.

"Who are you? We don't want cameras." I said, "Wait, wait." They said, "Do you have any references?" I said, "Sure," and they got back to me and I made an appointment for a week later.

I went up town to the sub-lobby of a very modern building a huge waiting room with circular seats with cut-outs like a bus depot so you didn't have to look at the other guy who was there to jerk off and donate or store his sperm. One wall was all glass, and on the other side of this were the techni-

cians and the scientific apparatus. On the other side of the waiting room were the masturbation rooms. A matronly woman, dressed all in white, came out and introduced herself to me. I introduced myself to her and she gave me some pamphlets to read pertaining to the history of sperm banking.

Sperm banking was invented by an Italian in the '50s. Its usage is mainly in the beef and dairy industry. You have a great bull, a great sire. What he eats he puts on in weight and he does it rather fast. He's resistant to certain diseases. So, Ferdinand is a great bull; you wish you had a whole herd of Ferdinands. Rather than ship Ferdinand around to mount and mate the cattle, or bring the cattle to Ferdinand, they devised artificial insemination.

The pamphlets went on to say when the first artificially inseminated child was conceived, and how many artificially inseminated children are born every year. I was amused and fascinated by this.

I was then given a tour of the facility. I was shown the first masturbation room: 8x10' room, black leather chair, nightstand, Kleenex tissues, wastepaper basket, and tearsheets from pornographic magazines. I didn't say anything—I was trying to hold back from laughing. I was shown the second masturbation room: same interior, slightly larger, two tranquil prints of landscapes, and a chrome coat hanger which I surmised was where you hung your pants.

Then I said (in my very straight voice), "Pardon me, but are you allowed to receive assistance?" She furrowed her brow and said, "No. In very rare instances we allow the wife, the mate, to enter the room, but we only accept manual ejaculation."

Donors were given a sterile Dixie cup which they were supposed to make their deposit in. I don't know how guys shoot into a Dixie cup—not having done it, it's still a mystery to me. Obviously they must do it somehow.

After they'd made their deposit, they'd walk out across the lobby up to the sliding window and ring the bell there. A technician then would take the sperm and place it on a digital scale which was so accurate that it would go from .001 to .002 just from the varying air currents if you waved your hand over it. I did not donate, but I was given the opportunity to see how it was all done.

For lack of technical terminology, a smidgen of the sperm was placed on a microscope slide. With the use of an electron microscope connected to a video monitor, I was shown 6-hour-old, 8-hour-old, 24-hour-old sperm, 2-headed sperm, 2-tailed sperm, dead guys, fast guys. We made jokes; we made bets who was going to get from this side of the screen to the other side first. It was quite amazing.

The procedure went on. They took another smidgen of sperm and placed it into a liquid solution and ran it through a digital sperm counter three times to get an accurate sperm count. The sperm was then placed into a straw—I don't know whose job that was or how they did it—and the straw was sealed, coded with an individual code number, and placed into a perforated metal test tube which had the code number on it, and then capped. The bank looked like an old wringer-type washing machine without the wringer apparatus on top—a tub with a lazy susan inside under liquid nitrogen frozen to 360 degrees below 0 Fahrenheit.

A technician stepped on a pedal and up from the liquid nitrogen with tubes, tanks, and alarms connected to it came the lazy susan with frozen sperm. With gloves and forceps he picked up different frozen sperm samples. Sperm is frozen for up to about ten years, and periodically they do tests on the sperm. With a tinge of paranoia, I was very concerned about that: What kind of testing? Just to test if it's still good? What kind of creatures are you making in here?

I was then told about the types of donors. As we all know, the anonymous donors are ugly medical students who never get laid. Then there's the donor who stores his own sperm. Both types of donors have to abstain from any kind of sex for a minimum of 3 days to ensure a higher sperm count.

I asked if she would explain what kinds of people are anonymous donors (besides ugly medical students). I asked her if possibly these people were doing this because they don't have to be legally, morally, financially responsible and aren't they getting some kind of kick from this? She said she preferred to think they were humanitarians.

The other type of donor would store his own sperm for a number of reasons. One, he's going to have a vasectomy. But, to safeguard against possibly changing his mind or his mate's mind, he would store his own sperm. The other reason could be that his work endangers his genitalia. He's working with radioactive material or explosives, and just to safeguard the family jewels he stores a little jism.

Another reason could be that he has contracted cancer of the prostate and is going to undergo chemotherapy which could possibly render him sterile, so rather than not be able to have children, he stores some sperm.

Another reason which was my own invention was: you store your sperm like vintage wine. Before you lose your hair, your teeth, get a pot-belly; before you do all those drugs and fuck up your chromosomes, while you've still got some good chromosomes left, you store it away.

I was fascinated by the sociopolitical implications (this is in 1976). Surrogate mothers, cloning, test-tube babies, gene-splicing, new life forms; all the legal, religious, political issues that come from technology which challenges, surpasses, threatens (however you want to look at it) morality.

I realized there was potential tremendous controversy, and that it would make a great documentary. Like, what is the Catholic response? What do Hindus believe (if you were born this way you'd be interfering with natural karma; you'd be born without a soul). What would paranoiacs say (that in the advent of World War III only certain Americans would be reproduced: thinkers or workers or sex objects or whatever). There were all kinds of implications here. Rather than attempt to do a book: to write a treatment, get a literary agent, get a publisher to sign a contract and take a year or two writing before it's out. Or attempt to do a documentary film—go to ABC, CBS, or NBC which are all in-house union production companies. Or try to raise the money independently and do a documentary which hardly ever makes money, and possibly have all this work sitting in a can on a shelf collecting dust. None of that did I want to do.

So I used the vulnerability, the gullibility of the media to gain access and make a commentary. Lots of journalists don't like it when I do that, because I'm pulling their pompous pants down and exposing them. But I am gaining access and saying something which I think is valid, which through other channels could take a long time, a lot of effort, and might not get done.

So I created Guiseppe Scagolli's Celebrity Sperm Bank with 50 actors and had them play various types of people: from groupies to lesbian militant feminists who supported this because they could have a child without having sex with a man. And I staged this elaborate performance which made national news.

■ AJ: You videotaped this?

■ JS: Yes. And to prevent journalists from coming up to see that there was no sperm bank facility, it was all closed off. Police did arrive because there was a crowd in the street. I made an announcement to the crowd, to the reporters, and to the actors.

Now I utilize actors as well as the general public who

don't know that they're involved in a performance. So when I have a crowd in the street with 50 actors it attracts a larger crowd, and when the police come there's even more of a crowd. I said, "The sperm bank was broken into, and the sperm was stolen. Bob Dylan will be donating again next Wednesday, and Mick said he'd do it in a few minutes, but "

This was when Abbie Hoffman was in hiding and I said, "There exists suspicion that Abbie Hoffman has stolen the sperm. Abbie, as you know, has had a vasectomy, and we're wondering what Abbie would be wanting with the sperm. We don't know if this is a federal kidnapping case yet—we haven't determined when life begins."

It was totally ludicrous, but it even made publications like *Record World* and other rock 'n' roll industry publications. Gloria Steinem on NBC national television awarded my sperm bank the Earl Butz Award for bad taste. She actually

In one prank I was Jo-Jo, the King of the New York Gypsies. I led a gypsy protest in front of the governor's office, shouting, "Re-name the gypsy moth!" I had this ridiculous gypsy moth illustrated on my back and this ridiculous sign which said, "GYPSIES AGAINST STEREOTYPICAL PROPAGANDA."

printed the story in *Ms.* magazine; she totally believed it. I called Gloria Steinem afterwards and told her it was a hoax and she was quite surprised, saying, "Oh! Well, next time you're doing another thing, let me know!" Sure, Gloria—very happy to tell you! So that was the celebrity sperm bank.

I did one piece as Dr Joseph Gregor, leading world entomologist with a PhD from the University of Columbia in Bogata. I said I had been working with cockroaches for years. I was fearful that we were destroying the air, the water and the soil, perpetrating a holocaust—possibly nuclear war or vast irreversible pollution. In order to survive, I believed the cockroach, which has been around for about 350 million years, had the answer. I had proved myself right—it did, I had found it, and I was now making my discovery available.

I said that I had developed a superstrain of cockroaches. I had been feeding toxins to them for three years, and my roaches had developed immunities to the toxins. When they did, I extracted their hormones and made a cockroach vitamin pill which cured arthritis, acne, anemia, menstrual cramps, and makes one invulnerable to nuclear radiation. I and my followers, my devotees (about 70) had been imbibing cockroach vitamin pills for over a year, and our colds and influenzas had all disappeared.

In order to perpetrate this, I took an apartment uptown and turned it into my laboratory/office/gallery. I boasted the world's largest collection of cockroach art: paintings, drawings, sculpture, collage, montage, a terrarium much like my fish condo containing a New York street scene with roaches running rampant—microscopes, test tubes, beakers, and 70 devotee followers. I placed ads in the now-defunct *Soho News* which read, "BE PREPARED. Mankind is destroying the planet. Metamorphosis is the answer. Roaches: a race above. For information call 254-7878." I got wacky calls, which I recorded.

"I said I had developed a superstrain of cockroaches. I extracted their hormones and made a cockroach vitamin pill which cured arthritis, acne, anemia, menstrual cramps, and makes one invulnerable to nuclear radiation. UPI bought the story hook, line and sinker: *Roach Hormone Held as Miracle Drug.*"



I sent out my press release and had my 70 actors there with a cockroach birthday cake. I had hostesses serving cockroach vitamin pills with cups of water; we had a toast and imbibed. Of the numerous journalists present, there was a representative of United Press International; UPI bought the story hook, line and sinker. The headline which ran around the country was: "Roach Hormone Held as Miracle Drug."

■ *AJ:* So this was picked up by wire services all over the country?

■ *JS:* Yes—all over the world.

■ *AJ:* They don't do much research, do they?! [looks at numerous news clippings] So all you did was send out a press release?

■ *JS:* And advertisements, plus I staged a very elaborate performance in a fake office, laboratory and gallery.

■ *AJ:* What were the 70 actors doing?

■ *JS:* They were my devotees, imbibing the roach pills. I gave a speech and they all applauded me, and they gave testimonials to the journalists as to what diseases they had and how they overcame their diseases by taking the roach vitamin pills.

I also received a phone call from the producer of WNBC news "Live at Five," and was asked to appear that night on the news. So I went on television as Dr Joseph Gregor, leading world entomologist, and gave my spiel.

When it was revealed that it was a hoax, UPI did not immediately retract the story. It took them months, and they did it in an obscure story on hoaxes buried in the back of the paper. They were furious with me (which they have been a number of times) and quite embarrassed.

You would think that out of all these publications and all these journalists—with all the editors reading—that someone would get the obvious clues: my organization's name was *Metamorphosis*, my name was Dr Joseph Gregor, and I used cockroaches. You know Franz Kafka, the famous Czech author, wrote *The Metamorphosis* about Gregor Samsor who turned into a 6-foot insect. That's so obvious, but no one got it—no one. And the clues were so obvious. Like in *The Fat Squad*—my name was Joe Bones!

■ *AJ:* You had another media blitz on how you were a hoaxster—that was in *People*.

■ *JS:* Yes, that's when the expose came out also the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. I did Phil Donahue, etc.

■ *AJ:* Talking about this cockroach hoax?

■ *JS:* Yes, as Joey Skaggs telling *why*—which brings me to an important point. Just doing a hoax is not the total performance. It's not the end of the piece; it's not the finale or the objective. What's more important, and more difficult to do, is to get the media to come back to allow me to say why and what it means. I'll admit that I've hoaxed someone, what the purpose is, what it means and how it happened. It's more difficult to get the media to cover that than to get them to initially fall for it.

■ *AJ:* Because then they have to admit that they fell for it. So how do you get them to follow up?

■ *JS:* Well, there's such a rivalry between various media sources. If ABC falls for something, NBC loves that they fell for it and NBC didn't. The fact of the matter is, *they* probably would have too, if that news story hadn't been preempted by another news story. It's always like that. Rather than have to go through setting up the same production (and each performance has its own difficulties and inherent problems), I usually only attempt to do it once. In some instances I've done them repeatedly, but it's a real pain to have to stage something over and over again for every different media source.

There's such a rivalry between various media sources. If ABC falls for something, NBC loves that they fell for it and NBC didn't.

Usually once is enough. The *Post* loves to put down the *Times* because the *Times* condescends to the *Post*. It's very easy to get the rivals to point a finger at the other guy. It's much harder to get the people who have been burned to say they've been burned.

In one prank I was "Jo-Jo, the King of the New York Gypsies." I called for a re-naming of the gypsy moth. I led a gypsy protest in front of the governor's office, shouting, "Re-name the gypsy moth!" I had this ridiculous gypsy moth illustrated on my back and this ridiculous sign which



"I called for the re-naming of the gypsy moth and led a protest in front of the governor's office. You wonder who is going to fall for this. Answer: *The New York Times!*"

said, "RENAME THE GYPSY MOTH!" on one side and on the other, "GYPSIES AGAINST STEREOTYPICAL PROPAGANDA (G.A.S.P.)." I said, "Call it the Ayatollah moth, call it the Idi Amin moth, call it the Hitler moth—we gypsies have taken enough abuse."

You would wonder *who* is going to fall for this? This is so ridiculous, so stupid—*rename the gypsy moth?* Answer: *The New York Times!*

■ AJ: *Ohmigod. [reading from paper] "Cloudy Crystal Ball for Gypsy Rights Group."*

■ JS: The author of this piece, Clyde Haberman, hates my guts. Page six of the *Post* (which loves screwing the *Times*) says, "Times Falls for the Old Switcheroo."

■ AJ: *Your name is obviously now well-known.*

■ JS: Right, but it doesn't matter! What do you know about gypsies? You don't even know their last names! You can't trust gypsies, anyhow. So you go into the whole preconceived notion that the press has created—they created disinformation and a condescending attitude about who gypsies are, anyhow. They're all fortune-tellers, they're all crooks, they're this, they're that. Using that, I did the gypsy protest march and they bought it—the *New York Times*. You can imagine how angry he was.

■ AJ: *What year was the gypsy moth?*

■ JS: 1982. In 1979 I was Sir Joseph Bucks, a multimillionaire who made my fortune from my modest beginnings shining shoes on Wall Street. I shined the shoes of stockbrokers and listened to their conversations, heard some flippant tips and became very astute at investing and became

a multimillionaire. I went back to Wall Street in a chauffeur-driven limousine, a tuxedo with white gloves, hostesses serving grapes, and classical music playing, gold leaf stuff, very posh chairs and potted palms and I shined shoes for five dollars a shine on Wall Street. I had shills in the audience as well as real people. My chauffeur served cocktails. And this made the news—they believed it.

I have to remind you that I not only do hoaxes, I use the media in whatever way I think is appropriate for the comment I want to make. Some pieces are juxtapositions of reality; some are ironic reversals. Some are direct provocative political-social comments done by creating a performance that makes a statement that is not a lie. Some are elaborately-constructed hoaxes. And there are a number of ways of gaining access. I'm not limited to one, because I don't want only to make a joke out of everything; some things are far too serious. In 1981 I did a World Hunger Performance on Thanksgiving Day.

■ AJ: *How was this received?*

■ JS: I had the Abyssinian Baptist Choir sing *a capella*. I sculpted a coffin, cooked a turkey dinner and had a real articulated skeleton of a child as a centerpiece. I blew up giant photographs of starving children which I placed on easels. It was a very horrific visual; it was not a sweet Thanksgiving Day: *how many shopping days left 'til Christmas?* It was a horrific visual, and it did get *some* media attention, though not much, because it was a stark contrast to the Macy's Day Parade. The Macy's Day Parade is pure commercialism, and that's what the press wants to feed us. That's what the media *is* in many instances.

Another performance piece I did for nuclear disarmament had a pile of dead bodies and bombs. The performers were Reagan and Brezhnev in mock battle—playful, like it was inconsequential they were having a pillow fight with nuclear bombs. It didn't matter that actors fell to the ground and there were "dead" mannequins all around. It was another direct political statement. It was not a hoax, it was a serious performance.

■ AJ: *This was out in the street?*

■ JS: In front of the U.N.

In 1971 at the New York Avant-garde Festival I did a piece with John and Yoko. This is where I was an anonymous

**Part of what I do is unknown waters.
The electronic media has only been
around for forty-odd years and is
relatively new, not like cave paintings.
Just because it's controlled by a small
number of people doesn't mean that we
can't or shouldn't have the ability to
get to it. I use its vulnerabilities
to make my own comments.**

celebrity. John and Yoko came in dirty dungarees and a Datsun; I came in a chauffeur-driven limousine and a suit. I had actors screaming, applauding, trying to interview me, photographing me. The crowd of people who were waiting to get into the festival recognized John and Yoko, but they didn't know me. They're saying, "That's John and Yoko, but who the hell is *that?*" So I was famous for fifteen minutes—I think I did it before Warhol said it.



"In 1981 I did a World Hunger Performance on Thanksgiving Day. I cooked a turkey dinner and had a real articulated skeleton of a child as a centerpiece."

■ AJ: [looking at photo] What was this Hell's Angels wedding with kids on bicycles?

■ JS: This was a satire on the Hell's Angels. I staged a mock Hell's Angel Wedding with a procession using kids on bicycles. I built an outrageous tricycle with horns and bells, lights and flags and an enormous radio and we dragged pointy shoes and sneakers and beer cans behind. The kids, my bride and I peddled up to where the Hell's Angels were parked, and distributed a case of San Juan Coco Molta non-alcoholic beverage.

Then there was the sewer monster—you know how every geographical area has a legendary monster: Loch Ness, Big Foot, and all that. You think of New York people flushing stuff down the toilet: chemicals, alligators, etc, so I created New York's legendary sewer monster. As a diversionary tactic I had a mock demonstration in front of the governor's office against the Concorde's entering New York, then I had a monster pop up out of a manhole cover and attack the protestors. It was a silly thing.

This is an opera house I used to own [shows photo]. I bought it and donated it, started a cultural arts center and it's now a federal landmark.

■ AJ: What else have you done?

■ JS: I've exhibited my paintings taught Media Communications at the School of Visual Arts in New York lectured about the media and my work at colleges and universities around the country. I've won a number of grants and awards. In general, I've spent my life exploring and experimenting with various media. I wrote a musical where the entire theater was inside a giant Cadillac, the stage was a giant dashboard, there was a live band in the radio, the actors were on the dashboard, the windshield was a film and the rear view mirror was a film. One of these days it might be produced.

I started a floating art colony consisting of a fleet of houseboats on the Hudson River in the '60s. It was eventually burned out by the Mafia. I did an Olympic sports satire

made an obscene motorcycle out of a fiberglass mannikin with an upholstered penis as a seat; I rode between her thighs. I taught at a prison for a year-and-a-half and organized inmates' art shows. I've just done what every artist does—I've tried to question and be creative in every way possible.

Another big hoax: I was the first person to cross the Pacific Ocean from Hawaii to California on a wind surfing board. It said, "Cal or Bust!" I got together approximately 200 Hawaiians and had a huge aloha party at Hanalei Bay on the island of Kauai. Three video crews were present. I said I

was setting out to reach California in approximately 40 days with hardly any provisions and they believed it. I had a stand-in double—I can't even swim! This was international news: "Man Wind Surfs from Kauai to California—Here He Comes on a Sailboard!" (UPI) "California, Here I Don't Come!—Windsurfer Reveals Hoax."

The Bad Guys Talent Management Agency was a hoax which became a reality. I have known Verne Williams for about twenty years. He was actually on my bus tour for Queens in 1968. Verne had moved to Virginia and was a professional farrier, a horseshoer and a cow hoof trimmer—he mostly worked with cows. For years Verne would write me long letters about how he wanted to come to New York and be an actor. I would fire back quick notes: "Forget it, it's the highest unemployed profession there is." He continued to write me long letters about the meaning of life and wanting to pursue his dream. I thought to myself, "Who am I to make a value judgment about what he wants to do?" and wrote him a note saying, "Listen, if you want to be an actor, don't write me letters about it—come to New York and do it."

Verne came to New York and we went out for coffee. Verne shaves his head; he looks like the kind of guy you'd fire from a cannon. He has a moustache; he's short with a really huge barrel chest. He was a professional boxer; he was actually a U.S. Army champion in 1956. He'll be 51 in August—he doesn't look it. He's still very strong, like a bulldog. That's his nickname, "Bulldog."

Verne said in his very deep voice, "Hey, Joey, you've got to help me get some commercials so I can have some residuals to hold me over until I can get some feature movie work." I said, "Verne, 25,000 actors every day eat a mile of shit just to kiss the asshole of an agent in this town. *Everybody* wants commercials with residuals! You kidding? Do you have a portfolio?" "No portfolio." "Do you have a headshot or a resume?" "No; I don't have any money." I said, "Verne, this is reality here. You have to have something to leave behind, something to mail out, you have to pound the streets. It's not easy." "That's why I want *you* to help me. If anybody can help me, *you* can." I said, "I'm flattered, Verne, but this is ridiculous." He said, "Well, you *gotta* help me."

I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. You need an agent. No one's going to be your agent if you don't have an S.A.G. card. You're not a member of AFTRA, you have no experience, you didn't study dance or voice or movement. You haven't been in Summerstock, you haven't done *anything*. I tell you

"Another big hoax: I was the first person to cross the Pacific Ocean from Hawaii to California on a wind surfing board. I said I was setting out to reach California in approximately 40 days with hardly any provisions and they believed it."



"The Bad Guys Talent Agency was a hoax which became a reality. Bad guys, bad girls, bad kids, and bad dogs—specializing in burly bouncers, slimy sleazes and venomous vixens. ABC, NBC, CBS all called me up and wanted to do a story. So I got together a group of friends, and with motorcycles, leather jackets, chains, and whips we posed. Hundreds of lunatics called me and they all wanted to be bad guys."



what: *I'll be your agent.* "Oh, okay." "But I'll tell you what I'm going to do—I'm going to specialize. I'm going to call it 'Bad Guys, Inc.' You look like a thug, so I'm going to play it up. Go to the Post Office and get me a WANTED poster. I'll make up a WANTED poster on you." "Oh, great!"

I go home. Ten minutes later Verne calls up. "Hey Skaggs, I'm at the Post Office but the fuckin' postmaster won't give me the WANTED poster. He says it's illegal to hand them out." I say, "Steal it, asshole!" and hang up on him. He comes in fifteen minutes later pissed off and throws down a WANTED poster. I set him up against the wall; I shoot a roll of film. A few days later I produce a mechanical; we mail it out. Three days after that I get a phone call from a major casting agent.

■ AJ: *So you set yourself up as an agency specializing in Bad Guys?*

■ JS: Bad guys, bad girls, bad kids, and bad dogs: Bad Guys, Inc, specializing in burly bouncers, slimy sleazes and venomous vixens.

So this casting agent calls. I don't know who he is and I don't know anything about this business. I actually have contempt for a business in which artists need permission to practice their art. But I also have empathy for artists whose work is interpretive and collaborative. The business of acting, like many businesses, is the antithesis of the creative process. And it holds all the powers.

Again, it goes back to finding your own power, taking charge and doing it. Why go to somebody and ask them if you can have a chance to practice your art—to *do your art*? It's hard for me to deal with that kind of mentality. The people who set themselves up to give you permission infuriate me: the agents, the managers, and the bullshit.

So, when this agent called me, I didn't know who he was. He woke me up. Nobody calls me that early in the morning; certainly not my friends. I said, "Who is this?" "Fabulous—I call the Bad Guys Agency and I get a bad guy!" He tells me he has my Mr Williams poster in front of him and he thinks he's fabulous for a feature movie he's casting, and would it be possible for Mr Williams to be in his office Monday at eleven o'clock? I said, "Sure, what's your name? What's your phone

number? What's your address?" He just keeps saying, "Fabulous."

I tell Verne and he's all excited. I put on a black suit and with my big black mustache I look as *bad* as Verne. I warn Verne that there are probably other actors up for this part, and I want to do a little theatrical performance to make sure we make an impression.

We barge into the office. The receptionist recognizes Verne from the headshot and calls the agent on the intercom. He comes out and shakes Verne's hand, "Pleased to meet you. I thought you'd scare us all to death."

Verne introduces me, "I want you to meet my manager, Joey Skaggs." "Oh, hi, Joey," like he's known me all his life, because I have an agency and I'm representing someone he's interested in. We go into his office and he gets the script which is Berry Gordy's *The Last Dragon*; it came out a couple years ago and had a Number One song in the Top Forty. It's a tongue-in-cheek kung-fu movie which did pretty well.

The agent is looking for Verne to read a running monologue. I say to the agent, "Verne doesn't have to read this script," and I give him a really stern look. The guy looks at me incredulously like I'm out of my mind: "What?" He looks at Verne and I look at Verne and Verne looks at me like he's thinking *Skaggs, what are you doing?* and I smack Verne in the mouth.

Now I'd told Verne that I was going to do it. Verne didn't know if I *really* was going to do it or not, and looked surprised—but not as surprised as the agent. When I smacked him in the mouth, Verne (like he was hypnotized) jumped into character. He leaped in the agent's face. Now Verne has a pet pit-bull dog named Bowser, and Verne does a great dog. He did dog all in this guy's face: "Rrrrrrr!" and the guy jumped up and back 6 feet, landed on the ground, clutched his heart like a bad B movie, composed himself and said, "Fabulous, fabulous"—he loved it.

He sent Verne out to meet the director. We stagger out into the elevator down the street, doubled over in laughter. He can't believe I did it, and I can't believe how great a dog he did

Two hours later I get a phone call: Verne has got the part,

WANTED BY THE FBI

BAD GUYS INC.



IMPOSTOR/MASTER OF DISGUISES

VERNE WILLIAMS

Aliases: TURTLE, BULL DOG, GRUNT, MAD MAN WILLIAMS, STUMPY, BUIZ

DESCRIPTION

Date of Birth: AUGUST 2, 1935
 Place of Birth: HOLYOKE, MASSACHUSETTS
 Height: 5' 6"
 Weight: 180 POUNDS
 Build: HEAVY
 Hair: BROWN
 Occupations: FARSIZER, PROFESSIONAL BOKER, ACTOR
 Scars and Marks: "JUM" TATTOO ON RIGHT HAND
 MOC: 0805T020307AAA

Eyes: BROWN
 Complexion: LIGHT
 Race: CAUCASIAN
 Nationality: AMERICAN
 Remarks: SHAVES HEAD; WEARS GENUINES; PREPARES CATTLE FOR OMBRYO TRANSPLANTS; REPORTEDLY LIKES TO JOKE OUT IN A DRESSING.
 Social Security Number Used: 012-20-4418
 Fingerprint Classification: 8 5 1 U1 3 Ref: 0

CAUTION

WILLIAMS, ALIAS "BULL DOG", IS CONSIDERED TO BE AN EXTREMELY GIFTED IMPOSTOR. HE HAS REPORTEDLY POSED AS BRITISH, IRISH, WELSH, JEWISH, GERMAN, FRENCH CANADIAN, SOUTHERN, OLD, & THING, & A HUNDRED AND A SEVERAL.

IF YOU WANT INFORMATION CONCERNING BAD GUYS, BAD GIRLS, BAD KIDS, BAD DOGS, CONTACT YOUR LOCAL BAD GUYS OFFICE. TELEPHONE NUMBER AND ADDRESS IS AS FOLLOWS: BAD GUYS INC. 187 WARENZ PLACE NY NY 10011 (212) 280-8371 JOEY SCAGGS

WANTED BY THE FBI

BAD GIRLS INC.



IMPOSTOR/MASTER OF DISGUISES

ARAS JONES

Aliases: BITCH, THE TONGUE, MS. HOOVER, MATA HARI, WOTS, MS. QUELL

DESCRIPTION

Date of Birth: MAY 16, 1952
 Place of Birth: BROOKLYN, NEW YORK
 Height: 5' 7"
 Weight: 115 POUNDS
 Build: WELT
 Hair: BLONDE
 Occupations: TELEPHONE SEX OPERATOR, ACTRESS
 Scars and Marks: SPACES BETWEEN TEETH
 MOC: 0805T020307AAA

Eyes: BLUE
 Complexion: LIGHT
 Race: CAUCASIAN
 Nationality: AMERICAN
 Remarks: SWEET TALKER, KNOWN TO TALK A MAN INTO CLIMAXING WITHIN THREE MINUTES. YOUNG BOYS BEWARE.
 Social Security Number Used: 085-42-3691
 Fingerprint Classification: 8 N 1 U1 3 Ref: 0

CAUTION

A REAL CHARMER, & HOUSE WRECKER, A HEART BREAKER. THIS WOMAN HAS ABSOLUTELY NO SCRUPLES. SHE WILL TELL YOUR WIFE. SHE MARRIES RICH TO GET PAID OFF. CAUTION: RECOMMEND THAT ALL AGENTS WHO COME IN INTIMATE CONTACT WITH HER SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ATTENTION.

IF YOU WANT INFORMATION CONCERNING BAD GUYS, BAD GIRLS, BAD KIDS, BAD DOGS, CONTACT YOUR LOCAL BAD GUYS OFFICE. TELEPHONE NUMBER AND ADDRESS IS AS FOLLOWS: BAD GUYS INC. 187 WARENZ PLACE NY NY 10011 (212) 280-8371 JOEY SCAGGS

a principal role in Berry Gordy's *The Last Dragon*, and an S.A.G. card waiver which enables him to get an S.A.G. card. He made thousands of dollars

That was only the beginning. A week after the incident with the casting agent, I'm taking my consciousness-gathering wake-up shower—it's eleven o'clock in the morning, a reasonable time to get up. The phone rings, I reach out of the shower, grab it, and it's Becky Bricker, a writer from *People* magazine (Becky has become a friend and fan of mine. She covered Dr Joseph Gregor for the feature article in *People* and went to the world hunger performance, etc). Becky wanted to know if I was responsible for the story that was circulating that the C.I.A. had absolute proof that the Soviet Union was using chemical warfare in Cambodia because they had found acid rain stains on the foliage, but upon examination it turned out to be the feces of bees? Did I do that? I said, "Becky, thanks for thinking of me, but it wasn't me. I have a funny story to tell you, though. You want to hear a funny story?" She says, "Sure."

I shut off the water and proceeded to tell her the story I've just told you about Verne. She says, "Fantastic story! I want to write this for *People*. Send me all the material." I said, "Great—bye-bye." We hang up the phone, and I say to myself, "Send her *what* material? All I have is one flyer of Verne Williams." So I spend the next two weeks creating a folio of bad guys. I have to create a package because there isn't *truth* in numbers, there's *strength* in numbers.

Strength in numbers equates to truth in numbers. When I had a vigilante organization called *Walk Right!*, if it was only me patrolling the streets no one would have believed me, but a squadron of people they believe.

Here are the bad guys clippings: *People*, *New York Magazine*, *The Star* This is Verne Williams.

■AJ: He's now an actor?

■JS: Yes. He's been Mr Clean for Proctor and Gamble, he was a guest on *As the World Turns*, was in a recent Woody Allen movie, has done commercials, and has been a guest on national and local talk shows.

On all the Bad Guys Wanted Posters I wrote ridiculous, outrageous remarks like: "Sweet talker, known to talk a man

into climaxing within three minutes—young boys beware! Caution—a real charmer, a housewrecker, a heartbreaker, this woman has absolutely no scruples; she *will* tell your wife. She marries rich to get paid off. *Caution:* we recommend that all agents who come in contact with this woman seek immediate medical attention." I called her Ms. Quell.

I created ridiculous posters like this. The agents, who are so used to milquetoast, Wonder Bread, the All-American look (they get hundreds of them everyday and throw them into the wastebasket) saw these things, enjoyed them, got a laugh, held onto them and called me.

When you appear in *People* magazine, it starts a whole other phenomenon. ABC, NBC, CBS all called me up and wanted to do a story on the Bad Guys Talent Agency. But there is no Bad Guys Talent Agency. So I got together a group of friends, and with motorcycles, leather jackets, chains, and whips we posed around here, inside and outside on the street. The news people came and then broadcasted: "If you're a mean-looking actor or model, here's the talent agency for *you!* Call Joey Scaggs at Bad Guys, Inc," and they gave out my telephone number on the air.

What happened? Hundreds of lunatics called me and they all wanted to be bad guys. I just got a part for a guy in an upcoming feature movie called *The Summoning*. He was recommended to me. He also shaves his head, has tattoos all over his body, and is six foot plus, etc. (But he just shot someone with a .38 and is now in jail.)

I got creeps lined up around the block, *real* bad guys—*real* bad girls wanting to be actors, 'cause they saw it on TV. It's everyone's dream; the media is everyone's dream: to see yourself on TV.

Every time the media called I would get together another troupe of friends and pretend we were the Bad Guys Talent Agency. I made *Entertainment Tonight*; *P.M. Magazine* did a feature on me. And it went on and on like that. As a result, casting agents now call me. I do print ads, commercials, and feature movies.

I have drawers of headshots of creeps. I get them in the mail. I now have a talent agency which I never wanted (and didn't give a damn about) that's a reality. But it's fun because

I'm able to get friends of mine and people jobs, just on guts and a hoax.

■AJ: *That is truly inspirational. What you're doing is slicing away all the residue we have in our minds that distances us from our dreams.*

■JS: Yes: "I can't do it. How do I do it? I don't know how." I used to think that P.R. meant Puerto Rican; I had no idea what P.R. meant. I learned how to do it. I'm writing a book about what I do and what it means and also a how-to. How to find that power, how to make a statement, 'cause apathy is a sick disease. Why be apathetic? You can make a difference. You can make a statement; you can be an individual and be heard, and people will listen to you.

Then I did fish condos as a joke.

■AJ: *What was fish condos in the context of media?*

■JS: It wasn't in the context of the media as much as it was another *medium* for me to express a commentary. I told you I'm a painter and a sculptor, so I invented condominiums for upwardly mobile guppies. They're little satires, only the satire usually goes over most people's heads. They look at it and say, "Oh, isn't this cute?" and don't see the satirical element there. It has a broad appeal because it's live art and it's miniatures and all that, but really there was a joke in it.

Even if I had only done one, the quantum leap of changing the whole concept of what an aquarium was to what it now can be, totally changed aquariums. They are now no longer rocks and divers and sunken treasures and ships and plastic or live plants. Now they can be anything. However, the interesting media aspect is: if I had only done one aquarium no one would come. *Life* magazine certainly wouldn't have come; I wouldn't have gone on Merv Griffin or Diane Sawyer, the CBS national news or *P.M. Magazine* again. *One* changed the concept, but *one* wasn't enough to warrant media attention.

I had to become the artist who makes fish condominiums in his studio, and I had to do a number of them to get the media coverage. So fish condominiums took off and went around the world in Italian, French, German, Dutch publications [shows them]. I just posed for *National Geographic* for a children's book on illusions which will come out in April '87. We had a little female model who posed peering through the door of the Van Gogh tank

■AJ: *Something that I've noticed is that your title changes with each piece. In this last one you're a conceptual artist.*

■JS: Yes. From beatnik, hippie, yuppie, radical/revolutionary, famous American criminal, conceptual artist, performance artist, happenings artist—they don't know how to pigeonhole me.

My vigilante organization was called "Walk Right!" It was an ad hoc committee of concerned citizens in black commando outfits, who were determined to improve sidewalk etiquette. There were 66 rules: No short people with umbrellas unless they could hold the umbrella a minimum height of 5'10" No wearing of sunglasses at night. No risque clothing on obese people. All joggers must wear underwear. Passing lanes, window-shopping lanes, slow lanes; no gesticulating, no pointing, no changing direction. We patrolled streets in New York collecting signatures from pedestrians who agreed with this idea. This was national news, but it was totally a hoax. I used my own name: President Joey Skaggs of Walk Right!

■AJ: [reading] "*to clean up the walking habits of New York. Pedestrians demand proper behavior in New York City sidewalks, outraged by the rude and offensive sidewalk behavior we encounter on a daily basis.*" What year was Walk Right?

■JS: A couple of years ago. Read this one; I want to do this



"My vigilante organization was called 'Walk Right!' It was an ad hoc committee of concerned citizens who were determined to improve sidewalk etiquette."

one every year until it becomes a parade.

■AJ: [reading] "*April 1st Parade to honor Fool of the Year ... to remedy a glaring omission in the long list of New York's annual ethnic and holiday parades. All these events fail to recognize the importance of the day designated to commemorate the perennial folly of mankind ... nominees Ed Koch, Reagan, Khadafy, Marcos.*"

■JS: Some are truly funny people; some are ludicrous people—whatever the mood of the year is.

■AJ: *You're using the language of those who take media seriously.*

■JS: Right. The key is creative press writing. The press release is the concept, and it has to have a good hook. What they all want is to *visualize* something. It has to have a visual to it, and it's best if you provide one.

At this point I want to say that I am grateful to all my friends who have lent their time, talent and energies to participate in my productions—my art. Without them I couldn't have done it. They're extraordinarily talented artists, because it takes a lot to fool case-hardened pros in New York. Even with something as ludicrous as this, you have to really have it together.

The difference between being an artist doing a painting (being in total control, and stopping, finishing, when you sense that it has a life of its own), and doing a performance like this, is that there is *no control*. I can come up with a concept and execute it, but that's where you have to give up the control. Artists don't like to give up control. But it's absolutely necessary for this work to live.

I document who it inspires, where it goes, and how it gets twisted. It's like surfing: can I catch this wave? Can I stand up on the board? How far am I going to go? Am I going to get sucked under or am I going to make it to the beach? Can I cut back into the wave a number of times and do some nuances? When do I reveal it? It's much like surfing—you *never know*. The excitement comes from not knowing.

Part of what I do is unknown waters. The electronic media

has only been around for forty-odd years and is relatively new, not like cave paintings. Just because it's controlled by a small number of people doesn't mean that we can't or shouldn't have the ability to get to it. I use its vulnerabilities to make my own comments. I'm not loved by everyone, certainly, but that's the way it goes.

■ AJ: *It seems like you can do anything.*

■ JS: You certainly can. But I don't rip people off for money or endanger them. On the surface some ideas may sound funny, but when you analyze them they're not. Or the responsibility might be too much.

For example, often artists imitate what's showing in galleries so *they* might have a chance to show in galleries. There was a time when everyone was doing masking tape and filling in straight lines, but that was never what *my* personal statement was about. At any time serious artists might be overlooked, because they're not in vogue. In fact, art can be compared to a fashion show whose "movements" are dictated by galleries.

So in the '60s I wanted to make a statement about that. At the time there was "Op" and "Pop" and "Funk" and "Junk." I decided to name *my* art movement the "The Bowel Movement," calling my first performance piece "Obstruction Art."

I thought of building a giant tunafish, putting it on the back of a truck, driving to the Lincoln Tunnel during rush hour and having six guys throw it out. I'd have my film crew there. Then after traffic was blocked for miles, the police wrecker would have to drive in and haul it out. It would be great, and I'd make my comment about the Bowel Movement—Obstruction Art.

You imagine this and it's a funny visual—you know it's going to get national news. Probably I'd be arrested, then I could make my statement. But if you think about someone possibly having a heart attack trapped in a car, or maybe a physician missing an appointment that's a life/death situation—I realized that I wouldn't jeopardize someone else's safety. The things I did made me jeopardize my *own* safety, but some pranks are just pure expressions of hostility and contempt; they're misdirected, or are just for personal gain—but what's the point?

What's important is: *What are you saying?* What's the intent; what's the content; and what's the technique of what you're doing? Does it have magic, does it live, and does it have any socially redeeming value? If you can't tell me what that is, why are you doing it?

When you're talking about "pranks," I think it's important to define prank, hoax, scam, because they have many negative connotations. And I would like to address and avoid that

It's like: every fantasy you ever wanted to do, every person you ever wanted to be, a great athlete—you can be it! You can be whoever you want to be, if only in your mind, but it becomes reality in the mind of everyone else, too! So, having created history, how can you believe in history?

association, because it's not what I'm about. To come up with some obscure justification doesn't make it for me.

I don't ever tell the police a lie, because then it would be

fraud, and it would mean filing a falsified police report which is illegal. I believe in the First Amendment, and what I do hopefully supports the First Amendment.

To have this freedom of expression as an artist under the First Amendment is wonderful; I wouldn't want to lose it. But there is a whole issue about the government's involvement with controlling the media. When the government attacks the media, I want the media to be more responsible, and not let the government take it over.

But the government is more likely to want to control the media (like Agnew, Nixon and Watergate) if the media is blatantly irresponsible, like the General Westmoreland/CBS incident. So we have all these political issues that threaten freedom of speech threaten the First Amendment. And I'm a staunch supporter of the First Amendment, even though it looks like I'm making fun of it.

For the Fat Squad hoax my name was Joe Bones. I started the hoax by sending out a press release and a copy of a contract to the media, saying that for \$300 a day, for a minimum of three days, every eight hours a commando would make you adhere to your diet (somebody nicknamed it the Rambo diet).

Now there are many people out there exploiting people, making tons of money from the preoccupation with obesity. Whether it's the Cambridge Diet, the Pritikin Diet, the rice diet, high colonics with grapefruit—whatever it is, it doesn't really matter. What matters is common sense—if you eat too much and don't exercise, you're going to gain weight. It's common sense, but common sense eludes most people.

So I created the Fat Squad and mailed press releases, and got a phone call from the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Washington Post*. A young journalist was very interested in the story, and I gave him an interview. He called back because his editor wanted verification; he wanted to talk to some of these clients of mine. I said, "This is a confidential client list. I'd have to ask them—I just wouldn't want to tell you who they are, what their problems are and how much weight they lost without their permission. They pay a lot of money and they might be embarrassed by this. Call me back in fifteen minutes and I'll see if I can find some clients who'll be willing to talk to you."

So quickly I arranged for some actors to receive phone calls at their homes. Everybody gave testimonials, and it appeared in the *Washington Post*. I also got a phone call from the *Philadelphia Enquirer*, another Pulitzer Prize-winning publication, and the journalist, a 32-year-pro, took the story hook, line and sinker and it went out to countless papers around the country, picked up by other news and wire services and independents.

The paper wanted to send out an Associated Press photographer, but I didn't want any of them sent out because they might know me. I've used my same telephone number, same address, usually the same name, virtually undisguised for years. So I sent them a photograph of myself as Joe Bones—let's make it real obvious—and nobody recognized me. And I was quoted in papers all over the country: "There's no escaping the Fat Squad. We're on the job breakfast, lunch and dinner. We're even there in the middle of the night. The Fat Squad Commandos never sleep—Joe Bones." And I love the fact that Joe Bones is quoted in publications around the world.

It's wonderful getting up in the morning and thinking, "Today I think I'll be a scientist." It's like: every fantasy you ever wanted to do, every person you ever wanted to be, a great athlete—you can be it! You can be whoever you want to be, if only in your mind . . . but it becomes reality in the mind of everyone else, too! So, having created history, how can you believe in history?



This photograph of Joey Skaggs posing with one of his fish condominiums for upwardly mobile guppies appeared in *Life* magazine. Fish condominiums took off and went around the world in Italian, French, German, and Dutch publications.

■ AJ: People who write histories go back to the media, read a press story, and might miss the little article buried six months later in the bottom of the last page that says, "Oh, by the way, that was a hoax."

■ JS: Front page news; page 30, fine print, for the retraction!

The media can be used as a tool, can be used as a weapon, or can be a victim of its own inadequacies. And that's what happens—it makes some people heroes, some villains, and it also makes itself a problem for all society.

Back to the Fat Squad: I got a phone call from the producer of the *Good Morning America* show, David Hartman (which I've already been on for fish condos). *Good Morning America* wanted to talk to some commandos, so I again gave them some names, and I gave them clients who are diabetics, clients with health problems. They were looking for the "fun" side of it; they were actually contriving their own show on the subject.

So I gave them a funny story about a woman who got a birthday gift to lose some weight, from her husband. The commandos came over, and it was a problem sexually for them, etc. That's what they wanted to hear—Americans want to hear this kind of stuff and so does the world.

■ AJ: The commandos camp out in your house, basically?

■ JS: Yes! They're there all the time: on a date, when you go to lunch, when you go to the bathroom. They shake down the room, look for hidden contraband, search any visitors who might bring you a Twinkie, and they never sleep. If you put chocolate cake near your face they'll rip it out of your hand!

I went on the *Good Morning America* show with 6 commandos (6 actors), and a fake client who was also an actress. They interviewed Joe Bones for real. Of course the *New York Post* couldn't wait to lower the boom. I asked them to hold off because there were a number of people who knew it was me; I said, "Just wait, because I've got something else bigger than this!"

The "bigger than this" was: I was invited to go on an ABC show with world-famous diet people: the son of Pritikin, the

Cambridge Diet person, and a lot more people, and talk about my diet. I figured that's what I really wanted to do: get these exploiters ("Buy my book, buy my diet, make me rich! Six months later you'll be doing another diet—we know that, but we don't care; for now we just want to take your money!"). And I wanted to go on and have them agree with me: "Yes, it's like trying to quit smoking—they *do* need support; the first 3 days are crucial, and yes, they can beat their wife or kick their dog or yell at the kids, but they can't yell at a Fat Squad commando because he or she will beat the shit out of them and tie 'em to the bed if necessary! Yes, it's a great idea!" I wanted to get a kind of endorsement from them, or even a *non-endorsement*—create a controversy with these people. But, I couldn't hold back the forces that be (who were thinking, *would someone else beat 'em to the punch and pre-empt them?*) so I never got to do the Diet Special.

I also fooled the BBC, CNN, Japanese TV, French national television, Australian television, and wire services around the world. *Now*, interestingly, the media is looking retrospectively at me—I'm not just the guy who did the Fat Squad. After 20 years of getting arrested and being beaten and condemned, I'm being applauded, and it's an interesting documentation of how values and people have changed.

I certainly don't think that I have changed that much. Originally I said, "I'm going to stand up for injustices, for hypocrisies, and make socio-political commentaries," and I have, but the times have changed. Now *Newsweek* magazine and other media credit me as an *artist* with a history, which then gives me verification: "He's done this, this and this." And I've never had that before; it was always credited to a hippie, yippie, radical revolutionary, beatnik—whatever the current term was.

■ AJ: This is also in conjunction with the rise of the artist as a media star. Never before has so much publicity been given the club scene, the Andy Warhols, Keith Harings—the artist as rock star

■ JS: And the media's doing it! It's paradoxical and wonderful