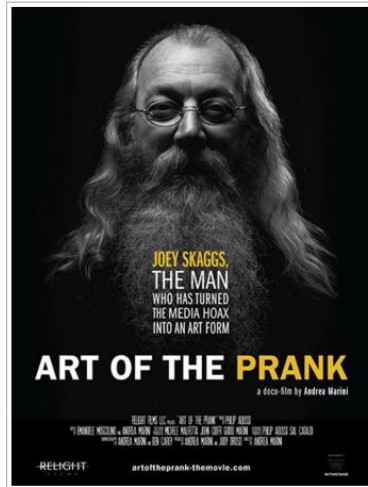


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## The Godfather of the Media Hoax

April 8, 2016 | by [Naomi Pitcairn](#) | Category: [Film](#) | [Leave a Comment](#)*Joey Skaggs, Art of the Prank, directed by Andrea Marini –*

Credit: Reight Films LLC

At the NYC premiere screening of the movie *Art of the Prank*, media satirist **Joey Skaggs**, the movie's subject and protagonist, pulled a prank. The movie screen went blank and the projectionist claimed that the disc was blank. Nobody fell for it. Unlike the mainstream media and much of the rest of the world, too many us in the 500+ audience at the SVA Theatre were already fans of the man who brought us the *Cathouse for Dogs*, *Dog Meat Soup*, *Comacocoon vacations*, *The Fat Squad diet commandos*, *Baba Wa Simba*, the *roar therapist* and *Maqdananda the psychic attorney*; all news stories, none true.

A rarity in any day and age, Joey Skaggs has succeeded in getting media attention to an issue nobody in the media wants to look at: the unreliability of the media. He has successfully fooled the mainstream news outlets over and over again with absurd but biting false narratives. It's tricky. William Blake did something similar with his two "chimney sweeper" poems. Written to be distributed as children's jingles but bringing up the serious child labor issues of the day with an ironic joviality, Blake's poems slipped his serious societal critique into the mainstream minds of children. Skaggs too, catches the viewer off guard and like with Blake's poems, his critiques are assimilated into the popular culture of the day almost by "accident." Each story is a Trojan horse.

*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. -V. Vale and A. Juno, RE/Search Magazine Issue #11*

After his initial joke, Skaggs introduced the movie on his life's work by evoking the scene from 1976 movie *Network* where Americans throw their windows open and yell "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!" and invited us all to do the same thing. Mad as hell is what Joey was back in the 1960s when the media misinterpreted anti-war [Vietnamese Christmas Nativity Burning](#) in Central Park with headlines like "Yippies Arrested for Littering" and "Cops Invade Hippie Sex Ritual." The experience made him realize that "these entities buy ink by the bucket – you don't have a chance, so you have to be prepared for that." Skaggs learned early on to always issue a mission statement about why he is doing the piece and what it means to the public, "so that the intent is clear, even if they ignore it, it's there for the record," he says.

I met Joey Skaggs at the now defunct CD company, *Voyager*, in the mid 1990s, soon after O.J. Simpson had been found not guilty. At the time Joey was working on the [Solomon Project](#) as "Dr. Joseph Bonuso Ph.D., research fellow and founding director." The "doctor" sent out more than 3,000 press releases to elected officials, judges, and law school deans. The release stated that he, "with 150 computer scientists and attorneys specializing in artificial intelligence, had developed a solution to the crisis of American jurisprudence. It was called Solomon." Solomon, btw, found O. J. guilty.

I was passionately hoping to be included. Joey has no trouble drumming up a few dozen shills on any given day. There is no fun like the fun of working on one of his hoaxes and nothing finer than lying to the institutions who have been lying to you for your whole life. It's in the details – flawless props – months of careful research and collaboration. When you work with Joey all his bases are covered from how to handle what goes wrong to what goes right. That said there are no scripts, just the scenario. If it's gypsies demanding the renaming of the gypsy moth, don't come dressed as a fairy (this happened). As long as you stay in character, you can improvise. It's easier than you would think. You can rely on the assumptions

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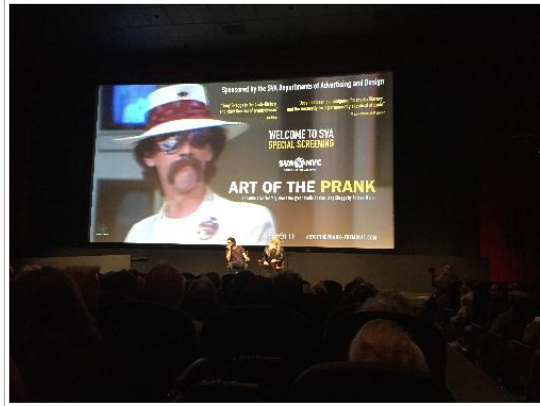
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people make every day, reading the symbols like uniforms and badges, uncritically, trustingly... "It's all smoke and mirrors," says Joey. Is it any surprise that the word hoax comes from hocus as in hocus pocus? It was all I could do not to burst out laughing as I guided CNN upstairs to Bonuso's "office" in my role of "intern."

Sometimes, when you work with Joey Skaggs, you can't help but feel sorry for your victims, if only they were not so incredibly remiss and just googled his name, or wondered why a cockroach scientist, a Dr. Josef Gregor, shows up wearing sunglasses, a panama hat and a fu manchu mustache. In their eagerness to ridicule the characters Skaggs portrays, they end up ridiculing themselves. "I need you to suspend empathy," he advises before the television camera crew shows up. It's not that Skaggs doesn't feel empathy, he just thinks the power of the press is undeserved. If Picasso's statement that "art is a lie that makes you realize the truth" is true, then Joey is right on the money.



Art of the Prank cast & crew screening at SVA Theatre, November 4, 2015, Credit Naomi Pitcairn

Skaggs has been living away from the New York art scene for a while now. He has been spending most of his time in rural Kentucky, taking care of his aging mother with the help of his partner, producer and co-conspirator, Judy Drosd. It hasn't slowed his productivity any though. In his seventies, he is still scheming up hoaxes, mentoring young artists and offering some of them, like the film's director **Andrea Marini**, a chance to prove their talents. Although Andrea might have lacked the experience of older filmmakers, Skaggs recognized his abilities, perceptiveness and the fact that he "got it" early on.

I met Marini the first time when he was filming **Mobile Homeless Homes**, where Joey, dressed (as the story in his website says) as "Recycle Man" and pedaling his Mobile Homeless Home, led a group of pissed off Muppets through the streets of New York to bring their outrage against the entire financial industry and failed government oversight to the public." Marini's professional career began in 2006 working mainly in advertising and directing music videos. In 2011 he completed the short movie "The Noise of Snow" which won multiple awards and nominations in international Film Festivals. Although he lacked extensive feature film experience, Marini lived up to Skaggs' expectations, compressing a vast body of work into a fascinating hour and 22 minutes. It took 4 years to complete the film, following hoaxes through their "hook," "line" and "sinker" phases.



Courtesy Joey Skaggs Archive





Joey Skaggs Mobile Homeless Homes protest at Goldman Sachs headquarters

Photo: Deborah Thomas, Courtesy of the Joey Skaggs Archive

#### Skaggs' work is done in three stages:

*The first stage is the "Hook": the creation and dissemination of the hoax. He uses brochures, letters and press releases, as well as actors, props and convincing locations to fool the media. Skaggs builds intentional clues into each piece. This is his way of giving the media a chance not to be fooled.*

*The second stage is the "Line": the documentation of the performance. While the hoax is ongoing, Skaggs records the media and the public's responses, and collects the print, electronic, audio and video news coverage as he monitors the evolution of the piece. He observes what happens, who does what with the story and how it gets changed.*

*The third stage is the "Sink": The exposé or revelation of the truth and the discussion about the issues underlying the performance. This is the most difficult aspect of the artist's work because the media doesn't like him pointing out their irresponsibility and lack of credibility. This is fully documented as well. It allows him to show how the media have changed the intent, content and/or the meaning of the message, either by accident or by design — and how the media deal with revealing the truth. This phase of the work inevitably offers insight into issues of the public's gullibility and irresponsibility in not questioning what the media has fed them; and the media's lack of ethics and potential to misuse power.*

And what do we get to take away? Skaggs' online manifesto leaves us with the gift of 4 take-away points that both the press and we the readers would do well to heed:

- Question authority in all its forms
- Don't give up critical analysis for wishful thinking
- Look to more than one source for information
- Question preconceived notions and prejudices

*'There's something in all of us that wants to go 'fuck you.'*

*And a good prank is a FUCK YOU."— Joey Skaggs*

[Click here](#) for a listing of showings of Art of the Prank near you.



Tagged: [Andrea Marini](#), [Art of the Prank](#), [Joey Skaggs](#), [Judy Drosd](#), [Naomi Pitcairn](#)

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