

## JOEY SKAGGS INTERVIEW

By Joe Crisafi for the upcoming Art of Storytelling book

### **What is the difference between a prankster and a scammer? How do you define what you do?**

A scammer typically does something deceptive for ill-begotten gain, usually for money or power. A prankster uses trickery to humiliate or embarrass someone, usually just for kicks. But I have a different agenda. I prank the news media and through them, the general public, to expose hypocrisy, social injustice and the misuse of power and authority.

I have always thought of the prank as fine art and I apply the same criteria to my pranks as I would to a painting or a sculpture. To me, intent is the little word with the most meaning. Having clear intention and purposeful content can elevate a prank from being shallow, hostile or vindictive to something that creatively manipulates ideas and emotions and gets people thinking about things in a different way.

I use various disciplines and tactics to attract media coverage, from press releases, brochures, print ads, bogus websites and TV commercials to elaborate unsanctioned performances with colorful characters, costumes and props.

### **What prompted you to begin questioning the authenticity of the media?**

As a young artist growing up in the 60s in New York City, I realized there is a difference between the business of art and the creative process of being an artist. There were many social and political inequities that profoundly disturbed me — the lack of civil rights, the hypocrisy of democracy, the war in Vietnam, to name a few. Rather than be dependent upon the art “scene” to express myself, which required acceptance by galleries, museums and art critics, I chose to take to the streets. My works were raw, provocative, controversial and got me in trouble with the authorities. As my stories reached the news, I watched how the mass media twisted and changed my intent to suit their own audiences and agendas.

In 1968, I attempted to construct a life size Vietnamese village on Christmas day in Central Park. It was to be a Nativity scene which I planned to attack with my “army” and burn to the ground [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/viet.html>]. My purpose was to protest the war in Vietnam. I had announced my intentions on the Bob Fass show on WBAI Radio before the event. On Christmas morning, there was a large crowd of spectators, journalists and police waiting for us, so I went to a different location in the park. As we began the performance, the police closed in and arrested numerous participants. The New York Times ran a story the next day with the headline, “Yippie ‘Nativity Scene’ Leads to Tickets for Littering.” Their slant on my anti-war protest was very typical of the time. The American public and mass media were not yet opposed to the war. Anyone who objected was considered anti-American. I saw first-hand the weakness and inherent danger in the media’s reporting of the facts.

### **Why do you find media hoaxes to be the most effective way for you to make social commentary?**

As my work evolved, I realized the importance of the media in conveying my message. For the most part, I was simply a spectacle - an isolated news story. They didn’t care about my intent. My type of anti-government, anti-religion, anti-establishment public performance was very radical at that time. Rocking the status quo was threatening. What I was doing was not an acceptable art

form. I didn't care. I was not concerned about just making art. I was interested in making commentary and hopefully effecting social change.

I was also interested in the immediacy of the media. Had I wanted to write a book, I'd have to get an agent and a publisher. If I wanted to do a movie, I'd have to find the funding to do the film. So rather than dedicating a protracted amount of time doing those types of projects, I was able to quickly access the media, get my story out there, reach millions of people, and move on to something else.

Before 1976, my works were ironic reversals, juxtapositions of reality or in-your-face confrontations. Starting with the Cathouse for Dogs in 1976 [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/cat.html>], I added hoaxing to my repertoire and began to use the media as my medium the way a painter uses a canvas. I wanted to expose the media's prejudices, irresponsibility, gullibility and vulnerability.

Realizing that humor works better than confrontation, I set out to burst the pompous, pretentious media bubble by pranking them with satire. I began creating realities that were plausible, but totally fabricated. They were designed to make you laugh and also make you think. They had hooks too enticing to ignore, like Metamorphosis, the Cockroach Vitamin Pill hoax [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/meta.html>], where I said I was a world leading entomologist using vitamin pills made from the extract of cockroach hormones to cure all the common ailments known to man. And there was the Fat Squad [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/fat.html>], an organization through which you could take out a contract on yourself to have commandos around-the-clock keep you on your diet. And the Bad Guys Talent Management Agency [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/bad.html>], an agency for bad guys, bad girls, bad kids and bad dogs. The media, in falling for these hoaxes, not only became the conduit, reporting my work as if it was real, but became part of the work itself.

One is never in control of what happens in the media and I found that to be exciting. It's one thing when you do a painting. It's just you and the surface. It's another thing when you do a media prank. You never know how it's going to turn out. Will you succeed in accessing the media? Who will fall for it? When you do expose the truth? How will they take it? Will your message be conveyed?

My point is not to condemn all journalism and all news media. It is to expose some of the inherent flaws — such as bigoted, biased, and shallow reporting. There are fantastic journalists doing significant and dangerous work trying to bring the truth to the public. They are not my target. But by accessing the media, I'm not only able to critique it, but I'm also able to get attention for issues I think are important.

### **Tell us the essential elements needed for pulling off an effective prank.**

I don't do Candid Camera-type jokes. I don't try to single out an individual. I don't do this for monetary gain. I work hard not to break the law, because jail is the last place I want to be. So here's what I think is important:

Motive. First, you need a reason. What is your subject and what are you saying? Is something profoundly disturbing you? Are you pointing out a social injustice? Do you have an agenda you want to bring attention to?

Story. Next you need a good story with an element of plausibility or some sort of universal truism. Something that deals with human needs or emotions. Then you need to add something

outrageous, sensational, sexy. Essentially, you're feeding the mark what they want to hear, presented in a way they can swallow.

It's all in the telling of the story. How do you want to tell it? Is it going to be a performance? Are you going to have a large group of people, several people or just you? Are you going to repeat it, or just do it once? Whatever you do, make sure it's well documented. Because it is essentially ephemeral. I make sure that I document everything and collect the news stories wherever they appear (print, radio, television, Internet).

Secrecy. I've been extremely fortunate to have good friends and co-conspirators who have helped keep everything a secret. I've sent impostors a number of times and have had to keep quiet for weeks to make sure the show didn't discover they'd been had before the piece aired.

When I sent my friend Norman Savage to play me on To Tell the Truth [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/truth.html>], one of the most famous game shows in American television history, where celebrity panelists try to determine which of three people claiming to be someone, is actually that person, I had to create phony IDs so he could pick up the plane ticket to California under my name. Today that would be a federal offense. Who knows what kind of shit storm it would create. And the authorities would be happy to treat you like a terrorist because the status quo does not like to be messed with. People tend to lump culture jammers and media activists in with vandals, liars and scammers so they can be dismissive.

Budget. This is a production and it has to be affordable. You need to figure out how much it's going to cost and be inventive to keep it cheap.

Patience. Things may not take off immediately.

Portability. Whatever you physically create needs to be either removable or discardable in case you have to run away. But, you might want to keep some sort of trophy to exhibit later.

Cunning, wit, and guile. You need the ability to improvise.

Support. It really pays to have a support team in case things go wrong. This could be people who can either bail you out, document what you're doing, or who are willing to jump in and rescue you.

Expect the unexpected and be prepared for failure. Some things might not work out as you hoped. For example, when I launched a protest in front of the UN for my Stop BioPEEP hoax [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/stop.html>], the news broke that President Clinton got a blow job from Monica Lewinsky. All other news was preempted for days. So, you have to be persistent and look for other ways to get your message out.

Telling the truth. This is where the fun really begins. It is essential to send out a press release revealing the hoax and explaining why you did it. The media's initial coverage will probably have been very different from your stated purpose. They rarely get the facts right, much less any subtlety or irony that you may have implanted in the project. And, they are humorless when it comes to being fooled. If the outlets you fooled won't run a retraction, find someone else who will.

I wrote a recipe called "The Well-Cooked Journalist" that lists the ingredients for a great hoax. You can find it at: [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/comm/comm15.html>].

**Some pranks, like the "Cathouse for Dogs" fell into a gray area because there were no laws in place regarding what you were supposedly doing, running a bordello for dogs. You were subpoenaed by the Attorney General's office for**

**running a house of prostitution. Are you often walking a fine line with the law and do you usually seek legal advice before you conduct a hoax?**

I do walk a fine line. And I've probably crossed it a number of times, even though it's my objective not to break the law. In 1976, there was no law on the books against running a house of prostitution for canines [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/cat.html>]. But that didn't stop the authorities from trying to arrest me after I staged a night in a bordello for dogs with 25 actors and 15 dogs, which was televised by Midnight Blue in New York.

The media quickly expressed outrage, which I encouraged by writing letters to the Soho Weekly News under bogus names, both complimenting and complaining about the service. I was inundated with telephone calls from people who not only wanted to get their dogs laid for fifty bucks, but also from people who either wanted to have sex with dogs or watch people having sex with dogs.

To fan the flames, I created an additional controversy within the controversy to keep suspicious minds from questioning the original premise: I sent out a second press release denying there was sexual activity between animals and humans. Animal protection agencies like the Bureau of Animal Affairs, the ASPCA as well as various religious and humane organizations and the NYPD Vice Squad were morally offended and pursued me. I was subpoenaed by the State Attorney General and deposed, at which point I revealed the hoax (with a Channel 5 TV news crew there to document it). Since there was no evidence that I had done anything illegal, the charges were dropped.

WABC TV news, which had done an investigative documentary about cruelty to animals, featuring my Cathouse for Dogs as its centerpiece and winning an Emmy Award for it, refused to admit they had been hoaxed. The producer said I only said it was a hoax to avoid prosecution.

When you do the kinds of performances I've done, you can certainly expect outrage. You want to rock their boat. That's how you get coverage and make your point.

Do I consult attorneys in advance? Sometimes, just so I know the parameters of what I'm dealing with. But you'd be hard pressed to find an attorney who would encourage you to do anything along these lines because the outcome is unpredictable and the most unexpected things can happen, some of which could land you in a whole lot of trouble.

An attorney's job is not just to protect you from other people, but also to protect you from yourself. Had I listened to attorneys I never would have done anything. On the other hand, I have had attorneys who have volunteered to be there for me if I needed them.

**What has been your most successful hoax in terms of the change it brought about?**

I don't know. I've tackled issues like racism, sexism, prejudice, cultural intolerance, greed and vanity in sometimes funny, sometimes provocative, sometimes ironic, and sometimes indirect ways. Examples: Dog Meat Soup [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/dog.html>], Sexonix [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/sex.html>], Save the Geoduck [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/geo.html>], and The Solomon Project [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/solo.html>].

I put it out there and it gets disseminated to a large audience. But, other than direct feedback, how does one tell if you've inspired anyone to rethink their position? It could be you're just preaching to the choir. Over the course of my career I've received numerous responses from people who have said that my work has affected them, and that's always rewarding to hear. But has it made a difference to the evolution of human consciousness? Perhaps just my own.

**Why is the reveal the most important part of your pranks?**

Each hoax is like doing a film or theater piece. It's produced, directed, staged, essentially with three acts: the "hook" — the execution of the concept; the "line" — tracking and recording who's fallen for it and what they are saying about it; and the "sinker" — the exposé. This is when I reveal to the media and the public that what they have believed is not true. Of course there is great pleasure in the "gottcha" aspect of any hoax, but I believe the "aha" moment, the revelation that you've been fooled is the most important. "Ahhhhh, I've been had. What else have I believed that I shouldn't have?"

Essentially what I'm trying to accomplish in my work is to get people to question their own belief systems and prejudices. What do you believe? How'd you come to those beliefs? Have you ever questioned the source of those beliefs? If not, why not?

**Over the years how has the media as well as the general public responded once they realize they have been duped?**

If you mean have people been upset, wanted to arrest me, physically harm or kill me? Of course! If I didn't provoke a powerful response, my work wouldn't be successful.

Generally speaking, whichever media source you fool is usually not inclined to give you the same amount of attention they gave you when you hoaxed them. So if you've had the great fortune of leading the news, most likely, the retraction, if any, will be buried somewhere else. That's because they don't want the audience to question their credibility as an investigative news source. If they give you any credit at all, they are more likely to attack you, dismiss you, trivialize you, or miss your point all together.

I don't rest though until I've found a way to get the truth out. If the mainstream media refuses to acknowledge they've been had, some alternative media will usually do the story. And then there's the Internet...

**Was there a point or a particular prank where you thought you took things too far, or the situation got bigger than you were ready for?**

It goes with the turf. I have an idea where things are going, but I never know what to expect. I try to take it as far as it will go. It's like a snowflake that turns into a snowball that turns into an avalanche. I ultimately have no control, but that's what makes it exciting. Each piece takes on a life of its own with the media becoming part of the process. Their coverage, whether biased, prejudiced or factual, only adds to the tone and duration of the controversy. The media is quite capable of contriving aspects of the story all by themselves. Dog Meat Soup is a good example of a piece that became explosive.

I wanted to address racism and cultural intolerance in society and how we position ourselves as the self-appointed cultural police of the world, with the media as the enforcers of what's acceptable and what's not. The news media, whether overtly or covertly, help to mold the way people think. Without expressly admitting it, they stream a steady flow of propaganda.

The idea for Dog Meat Soup was simple. I planned to send out a letter that was so suggestive and sensational that all I would have to do is sit back and record what happened. The letter was written in comical pidgin English from a Korean company called Kea So Joo, Inc. (which means Dog Meat Soup). It offered to buy unwanted dogs for \$.10 per pound from animal shelters. The dogs would be cooked, canned and sold at Asian markets to be consumed by humans. I had Korean

friends help execute the letter and the outgoing phone message on my answering machine, which said in both English and Korean, "Thank you for calling Kea So Joo. Please leave a message." There were small dogs yapping in the background sounding as if they were about to be thrown into a pot of boiling water.

All this hoax required was the letter, an auxiliary phone line with an answering machine, a P.O. box address at my local copy shop, and the willingness of the owner and his assistant (friends of mine who had always wanted to be in a hoax) to cover my identity if any authorities showed up.

Predictably, upon receipt of the letter, the animals rights activists and animal shelter people went berserk. They thought it was real and needless to say their responses were extremely hostile. Almost immediately, my phone rang off the hook. I received a staggering amount of voice messages and faxes and, within days, cards and letters, that were absolutely unbelievable. People were desperate to stop this business and threatened to do the most vile and despicable things to the proprietor and other non-specific Asians (because they couldn't tell the difference between Chinese, Japanese and Korean people). One said, "Why don't you go back to your home country and make a business out of selling your little dirty Asian babies to Americans as ground meat. I'm sure the world would be a better place if we killed those children instead of allowing them to grow up to think like you." Another said, "How dare you live in America." And, "Why don't you kill yourself... and send your organs to the various charities in order that worthy humans may continue life on this planet." And, "How about Asian Stew? Asian hands a specialty."

It was amazing to see people unhinged like that, so threatened over the idea of dogs being consumed. The tragedy is that millions of dogs are mistreated, tortured, abandoned, starved to death or euthanized and discarded in America every year. But that's accepted as normal. What's considered abnormal by our society is that people might eat them.

The story led the news on TV and in print in New York and around the country. Numerous networks ran stories like: "Exclusive! Dogs for food. They're man's best friend but are they a meal?" I was able to follow what was going on because I could talk on my home phone with my friend at the Luce Press Clipping service. He would read me the stories he was collecting for me as they came in. On TV, journalists ambushed Asians on the street to ask if they knew anything about this. In print, journalists blamed Asians for the dogs disappearing in local neighborhoods. Some said they had spoken with the Koreans on the phone and had made arrangements to purchase dogs. Since I never answered a single phone call, this was completely impossible. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't have pulled it off because I couldn't imitate a Korean accent. As I had anticipated, I had enraged the animal rights people who got the media to get the government to come after me. But in order to do it, both activists and journalists lied. This was outrageous, but didn't surprise me. This kind of activity happens all the time, but to watch it unfold and record the entire process just underscored my distrust of the media's ability to present the truth. To totally fabricate the story to suit their own agenda betrayed all the ethical standards of journalism. This is one of the reasons I do this - to present the reality to the public that what they are told to believe in isn't necessarily the truth. The media is a conduit for corporations, government interests, and groups with an agenda. They constantly feed us disinformation, propaganda and spin.

Back to the story: The copy shop was inundated with all kinds of pissed off authorities and journalists looking for the Korean business man. They staked the place out, terrifying my friends, who stayed true to the mission even though, in their own words, they were "shaking in their shoes." The authorities wanted to know when this guy would come in to pick up his mail and was there a street address and phone number. My friends said, "We don't know. He comes in, gets his mail and pays his bill. We don't know anything about him."

Eventually, the Dog Meat Soup phone number was traced back to my home address. Authorities then staked out my apartment building at 107 Waverly Place. This information was relayed to me by my neighbors. They said there were people on the roof tops with binoculars looking for caged dogs in my back yard. I was actually the one in a cage. The only way out of my apartment was through the back yard, over the fence and out through a neighbors front door. They all covered for me.

After the story received adequate coverage, I decided to reveal the truth. My admission was met with equal hostility and disdain by many. Some journalists refused to accept it. Others wanted to have me incarcerated. Luckily, I had agreed, in spite of huge reservations, to allow John Tierney, a journalist from The New York Times, to follow the entire hoax from beginning to end. His article in the Sunday Times Magazine was the only honest coverage of what actually happened [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/dogsinker/dogtierney.jpg>].

**In the last 15 years “culture jamming” has in a way become mainstream and taken on many new forms, “street art” being one of the most popular namely the reinterpreting of billboards by artists. It has gotten so big that corporate advertising has adopted the same guerrilla tactics that were once used against them. It has blurred the lines between advertising and satirical art. Do you think culture jamming will become less effective as it grows in popularity?**

Not necessarily less effective, but there’s definitely a lot more company in the streets. It’s not just marketers who have jumped on the bandwagon coopting these counter culture techniques. Political operatives, out to cause calamitous damage to individuals and organizations, study these tactics as well, as is evident by James O’Keefe’s “performance art” ambush of outgoing NPR executive Ron Schiller and previous to that, of ACORN, both engineered to politically embarrass and take these organizations down.

And then there are the establishment network offerings like Jon Stewart, Steven Colbert, Sacha Baron Cohen and the late night TV hosts who also frequent, or pretend to frequent, the streets with their high budget, professionally crafted humor/satire. It’s definitely challenging for independent artists to have their voices heard. But at the same time, the Internet and social networking offers all kinds of opportunities for ideas to break out. I think that ultimately creativity trumps all and there will always be room for unsanctioned satire... unless they make it illegal. It just might not be labeled as culture jamming or media activism or billboard liberation.

Dissent and rejection of the status quo have been called many things over the course of history. Culture jamming is just another buzz word for satirical cultural critique, which has always been around. It is successful because it manifests in surprising places with unexpected techniques. It causes shock and therefore draws attention. Artists will always use any canvas or technology that is available, be it the street, a wall, a billboard or the Internet, to creatively express their ideas. Once new ground is broken, trends grow and eventually subside. Advertisers will always use whatever techniques they think will reach their target audience, which is how dissent gets watered down and becomes commercialized. But it works both ways. Some of the artists who deface billboards, changing the messages in clever ways, or who create theatrical street actions, showing the social power of the flash mob, ultimately become part of the establishment themselves. Perhaps their original intent was really to grab attention and become commercially successful.

It’s naïve to think that it’s not all about marketing. It IS all about marketing. You’re either marketing a product, a service, an idea or a philosophy. It’s a shock and a disappointment when a cultural icon, someone who you think represents your values and is fearless in challenging authority, appears to “sell out” to the establishment by joining the world of commerce. But

actually, the disappointment says more about you and your fantasies than them. It's up to you to figure out what's really going on.

**Around the time the Internet really started picking up is when I noticed that major corporations like Nike, Red Bull and ESPN really started to penetrate certain street cultures. I've heard stories where ESPN purchases video content of action sports but it has to meet a certain criteria, (no cursing, no sports logos on clothes, no extremely dangerous "stunts"). So now you have major corporations controlling the media for counter cultures who's media outlets previously existed without any kind of filter. The content people are seeing is not really a true representation of what is going on in the streets. It's amazing for me to watch this unfold. With the advent of the internet I would assume it would be easier for counter cultures to hold the reigns and control their media outlets but that's not the case.**

Money, money, money. In most instances, it rules. That's just reality. Another side to that reality is that media literacy is more and more important. Not being able to tell the difference between paid advertising and a culture jam is a real problem, especially for impressionable kids.

**I believe that a lot of people voluntarily allow themselves to buy into bad information. In this day and age I feel like people as a whole at least acknowledge the fact that the media cannot be trusted 100%. Why do you suppose that people still choose to believe what they hear even though they don't fully trust the source?**

We are bombarded constantly with information meant to mold our opinion, whether about a product or a political or religious agenda. It's almost impossible to not be influenced by the disinformation fed by the media to the public. We all tend to be in denial about one thing or another, and we all seem very willing to suspend critical analysis for wishful thinking.

In 1993, when the Internet was becoming a mass medium, I did what is considered to be the first Internet hoax. It was called Sexonix [<http://joeyskaggs.com/html/sex.html>]. I sent out emails to electronic bulletin boards (precursors of forums and chat rooms) saying that three of my sexual virtual reality experience pods, en route to the Metro Toronto Christmas Gift and Invention Show, had been confiscated by Canadian border guards and that I couldn't get them back. I blasted the Canadian government's Puritanical repressive policies. I made a plea to the general public to call upon the officials to release my equipment so that Canadian citizens could experience sexual virtual reality. The BBS users were outraged and responded in my defense. When it was revealed that it was a hoax, they became righteously indignant and flamed me. Many of them considered themselves to be super intellectuals. They thought they were in a safe zone, where people were who they said they were and that everything on the Internet was true. I thought they were tremendously naive thinking the Internet was their domain, void of any sort of intervention from corporate influence or from government control or, for that matter, from me.

**I've had conversations lately about political incompetency, about the power of special interest groups and corporations and most people I talk to, conservative or liberal, exhibit a high degree of acceptance. A lot of people say, "Yeah it's fucked up, but what are you going to do?" Do you think this generation is less revolutionary than past generations? Do you think we have become too complacent as a society?**

Of course I do. I came of age in the sixties. There were all kinds of social inequities that were not acceptable to people my age. Call it naivety, call it self-importance, call it romanticized idealism...



we believed we could make a difference. We acted accordingly and our numbers grew. Much like we've seen recently in the streets of Egypt, even though it now seems they've ousted one dictator for another set of assholes.

In America today, most people are unwilling to get hit on the head, maced in the face or arrested. People are lulled by the concept of democracy, believing that change will come from politicians. We're not living in an oppressive dictatorship, so social outrage is more muted.

Certainly there are activists working in all facets of society to make the world a better place, and Occupy Wall Street shows promise, but, in general, people are softer and fatter, with a sense of entitlement. They seem to have only two keys on their keyboard, "m" and "e," and they gravitate towards what's easy.

Very little has changed over the years. We still kill one another, we're still greedy, we still pollute and we still believe in fairy tales. It's a sad reality that the consciousness of humanity hasn't evolved further.

To be a voice of dissent takes a certain mind set. It may seem like a waste of time, but the alternative, settling for apathy, mediocrity and the loss of freedom, was never a choice for me.

**You have talked before about how the media like any other business has a bottom line. Many of the other institutions that you make social commentary about, like religious institutions and the government, also operate with the bottom line at the forefront. If money trumps all, how, in a capitalist world, do we find truth?**

It's on every dollar bill. It says "In God we trust." Most people are not looking for truth. They think it already exists, recorded in some religious doctrine, like the Bible or the Koran. To me, this type of blind faith has always been the height of arrogance and cowardice. Fortunately, there are still people who have an open mind and are willing to live with uncertainty, recognizing they have more questions than they have answers.

**If there is one thought or idea that you wish to leave people with, what is it?**

If at first you don't succeed, keep on sucking until you do suck seed.