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TIERNEY
 The Big City

FALLING FOR IT

Joey Skaggs has offered me a rare chance to chronicle the creation of his art, which is why I am watching him stand in line at the Chinatown post office. He is mailing 1,500 letters proposing to buy stray dogs for the purpose of turning them into delicious canned food.

Each of these letters to dog shelters across America bears the logo of a nonexistent Korean company, Kea So Joo, which means Dog Meat Soup. The company offers 10 cents a pound for dogs that will be cooked and canned for sale to Asians fond of this traditional dish. "Dog is good food," the letter explains. "Dog is good medicine. Our business getting very big. Need more dog." It offers free pickup and a promise: "Dog no suffer. We have quick death for dog."

This is the first stage of a genre that Skaggs has been developing since the 1960s. Now 48, he began as a conventional artist in Greenwich Village: painter, sculptor, organizer of political protests. He carried a cross up Fifth Avenue on Easter, built a Vietnamese nativity scene in Central Park and gradually got annoyed at the way the press covered him. Like everyone else in America, he resented having the world explained by journalists in midtown Manhattan. He realized that many of New York's media know-it-alls are just moderately educated folks churning out information obtained from press releases and from phone conversations with strangers. They're paid to sit in windowless rooms and pretend they can see the political situation in Prague or the best place to rock-climb in Arizona. Skaggs saw an opportunity for what he calls conceptual performance art or media pieces. He has staged dozens of media hoaxes that have fooled hundreds of newspapers and television shows, ranging from network news programs to "Geraldo."

He was interviewed on ABC's "Good Morning America" as Joe Bones, the head of the Fat Squad, a group of commandos who would move in with you and physically restrain you from eating. He made The New York Times as Jo-Jo, a gypsy leading a protest against the term "gypsy moth." He has



A man claiming to be Joey Skaggs, wearing a dog mask.

been a psychic attorney, a doctor who treats baldness by transplanting scalps from cadavers and the proprietor of a canine brothel for sexually deprived pets — the Cathouse for Dogs. When he was invited to be a guest on "To Tell The Truth," he sent a friend to appear in his place and stand up at the end, claiming to be the real Joey Skaggs. It hasn't been a lucrative career, but Skaggs says that he manages to support a bohemian standard of living by giving lectures on his hoaxes, teaching (this fall he's offering "Culture Jamming and Media Activism" at the School of Visual Arts), consulting and selling paintings and sculptures.

FOR THIS PROJECT HE HAS SET UP A phone line and recorded an announcement in both Korean and English, complete with barking dogs in the background. The recipients of the letters are quick to respond. Two days after the letters are sent out, the line is swamped as Skaggs logs thousands of calls and taped messages from animal-welfare officials, the police, reporters and various appalled cow-eating Americans. Some animal lovers call him a filthy yellow devil and suggest Asians be deported, killed or canned. Dozens of newspapers and television stations carry staff-written and wire-service articles reporting investigations by concerned officials at animal-welfare groups. One article notes a possible link between the letter and the disappearance of large dogs in upstate New York; another quotes an official on Long Island as claiming "proof" that the letter is from a real company. On WWOR-TV in New York, the "Dogs for Food?" story leads the 10 o'clock evening news, introduced by frenetic music, a giant "EXCLUSIVE" banner scrolling across the screen and shots of lovable dogs barking in a kennel as a stern, reportorial voice announces: "They are companions, they are protectors, they are pets, but they are never dinner. In this country the idea of eating dog is not only illegal, it's repulsive."

Skaggs monitors it all from his apartment near Washington Square, refusing to answer the phone or

return any calls from reporters. At first this strikes me as a disappointingly passive role for a performance artist with his record, a man whose home is cluttered with thousands of clips and tapes featuring him out there actively duping the media. One wall is dominated by the Portofess, an eight-foot-high confessional booth that he mounted behind a tricycle ("Religion on the Move for People on the Go!"), pedaled to the Democratic Convention in 1992 and demonstrated for CBS and assorted newspapers (USA Today, The Daily News, The Philadelphia Inquirer) while posing as a California priest.

Now Skaggs won't even do a telephone interview. Has he lost his touch?

But then I begin to appreciate a new level of maturity in his work. What's wonderful about this media hoax is that he doesn't even have to deal with the media. The animal-welfare advocates handle all the publicity for him. His pidgin letter is comically absurd, but they can't pass up such a splendid opportunity for outrage. Like leaders of other special-interest groups, they're delighted at any chance to get attention and rally the troops for a crisis, even an imaginary crisis. And the reporters are glad to go along, even if they suspect it's a hoax, because they can cover an imaginary crisis without violating the conventions of journalism. They can be completely accurate in reporting on the outrage. As long as someone is complaining about something interesting, it's too good a story to pass up.

"These special-interest groups are screamers, and the media listen to screamers," Skaggs says. "These groups have the resources to do a better con job on the media than I can. They're the great performance artists."

After the crisis has been in the news for a week, Skaggs completes his work of art by sending a release headlined, "Dog Meat Hoax Exposed." He confesses his role and explains that his purpose has been "to bring to light issues of cultural bias, intolerance and racism," as well as to demonstrate the media's tendency to be "reactionary, gullible and irresponsible."

I'd like to join him in those sentiments, but it's a little hard to condemn the media's gullibility now that I've dutifully reported what a professional liar has told me. I've tried not to get hoaxed by Skaggs: I demanded to see his driver's license; I secretly lifted one of his letters so I could see what he was mailing; I confirmed the identity of people who left messages on his machine. But I still realize that he might be duping me somehow. I'm still willing to give him publicity for his crusade against media manipulation. As long as he's complaining about something interesting, it's too good a story to pass up. ■