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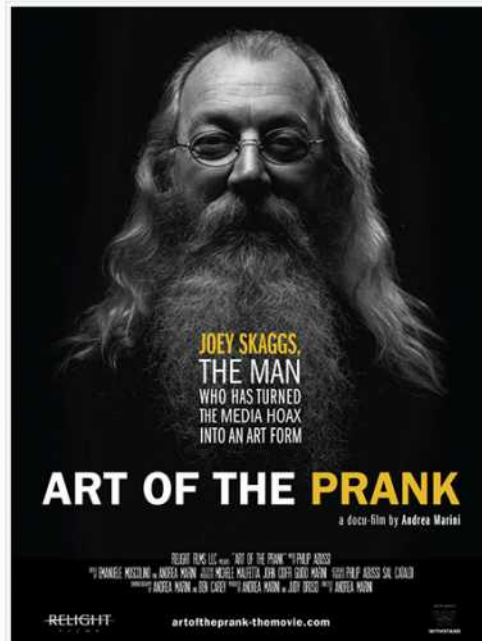
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SVA First Person: Joey Skaggs on the 'Art of the Prank'

October 30, 2015

Long before social media, hidden camera prank shows like *Punk'd* and *Jackass*, and culture-jamming activist groups like The Yes Men, SVA alumnus and former faculty member **Joey Skaggs** (BFA 1982 Media Arts) had already turned the media hoax into an art form. On November 4th at the *SVA Theatre*, *BFA Advertising* and *BFA Design* present a special screening of *Art of the Prank*, a new documentary by Andrea Marini that delves into Skaggs' evolution as an artist over the last five decades. *SVA Close UP* recently contacted Skaggs to find out more about this pioneering artist and the origins of his work. What follows is his response.



Both of my parents were very religious and neither had much education. They thought I was an alien because, from an early age, I wanted to be an artist. I was not willing to accept their views, their religious beliefs, or their political ideals. Fortunately, I was accepted into the High School of Art & Design on 57th Street and against all odds, my parents allowed me to attend. My experience there was stimulating, exhilarating and profound. I went on to attend the School of Visual Arts in the '60s, before it was an accredited college, and lived on the Lower East Side without any parental support. But I was in art school, having relationships with people from extremely diverse backgrounds, people I could finally relate to.

At an early age, I learned that the business of art and the creative process were two very different things. I was not going to let that discourage me. I circumvented the "normal" channels to exhibit my work, as there were too many pressing social issues I wanted to respond to immediately. I didn't want to wait to be accepted into a gallery (I was both a painter and a sculptor), hope for a review and a sale so that I could continue to work in a way that would ultimately imprison me to work within the system. So I literally took to the streets. There were many social-political issues that disturbed me and I felt a passion to creatively comment on them. This got me in a lot of trouble with the "authorities", as my work



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continuously challenged the status quo.



I expressed my outrage through the use of irony and satire in street performances. The work was not recognized as art; however, it garnered a lot of media attention and became news. And, like anyone at the time who didn't agree with the mainstream media's perspective, I was labeled with derogatory terms like yippie, hippie, revolutionary, radical. Society had a way of trying to wipe out those critical of it. Voices of dissent were not encouraged.

I watched how the media, in reporting on my work, twisted, contorted and contrived the intent, the content and the meaning of my messages to suit their own agendas. I realized early on how powerful the media is. I have a favorite quote and I have no idea where it came from, that goes something like, "the madman creates for himself, the poet for a loved one, and the artist for the world." To me the biggest medium to communicate with the world is the media and I use the media as my medium, like a painter uses a canvas.

Artists have always been the ones who could speak out and challenge authority. I chose to creatively stand up against the war in Vietnam, in support of civil rights and in seeking equal justice for everyone—to draw attention to social issues in an attempt to raise consciousness and hopefully encourage people to see things another way. It was provocative and confrontational. It didn't always make friends. But its intent was to elevate awareness. Which is to me what art is all about.

As my work evolved, I expanded my tactics, using ironic reversals, juxtapositions of reality, direct political statements and media hoaxes, to illustrate the inherent faults of an irresponsible press, a press that functions as a political propagandist. In other words, a lot of what was reported (and still is) is bullshit with an agenda. Discovering that agenda and revealing/exposing it to the public is what excited me.

Art school is like a laboratory. You're encouraged to learn skills and use tools so you can express yourself individually. However you use your talents ultimately depends on what you believe in. I chose to use my talents to expose truths that were hidden. SVA was supportive of me in my desire to express myself both as a student and then as an instructor.

Teaching at SVA, I had the full support of President **David Rhodes** and **Richard Wilde**, Chairman of the BFA Design and BFA Advertising departments, my immediate boss. I was fortunate to have flexibility and freedom in teaching media communications classes in the '70s and '80s, giving my students first hand experience working as my co-conspirators. In the early '90s, I created a class specifically about media activism. I was and will always be eternally grateful to SVA for the support, openness and acceptance, and for allowing what was then a very unorthodox approach to communicating.

For more information about the Art of the Prank screening, which will be followed by a Q&A with Tom Slovic and director



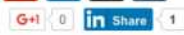
which will be followed by a Q&A with Joey Skaggs and director
Andrea Marini, [click here](#).

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