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Absolutely for Sale

Dear jaded consumer: These two Houston artists are now competing for your attention. They sell ads, they're making a vodka billboard, and their client list includes Budweiser and Target. They call it art, but what advertisers want to know is, will it work

By Shaila Dewan Thursday, Mar 19 1998

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The ad said to just do it, so the Art Guys did.

According to Advertising Age, "consumers are living inside a perpetual marketing event." The Art Guys, going those consumers one better, are becoming a perpetual marketing event. Like any number of neo-celebrities, these two longtime Houston artists are building their own mini-multimedia empire. There's going to be a book. There's going to be a movie. There's going to be an "Absolut Art Guys" billboard.

Even as the actual Art Guys -- Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth -- relax near the wood-burning stove in the former Heights mattress factory that now serves as their World Headquarters, they're promoting the Art-Guys-as-advertising-vehicle. After all, advertisements can be found on the produce stickers on your oranges, or on the educational television in your child's classroom, or on an art museum sponsor wall. So why not on artists?

"The notion of selling out is not necessarily appropriate here," says Massing, as the two Houston artists discuss their plans to conquer commerce, marketing and fashion. The centerpiece of their attack, called SUITS: The Clothes Make the Man, is purely transactional: Companies buy ad space from the Art Guys. Then, for one year, the Guys wear gray business suits, specially created by designer Todd Oldham and "handsomely embroidered" with the logos of their "clients" -- among them Budweiser, Target, Philip Morris and possibly Reebok.

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"We're not selling out," Galbreth adds. "We're selling."

As the Art Guys, the pair has long explored the intersection of money, art and everyday behavior; these latest projects are simply their most ambitious. The two have been partners since 1983, a couple of years after they met as

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his soft-sell soft-shoe. Appearances before the "youth market" on college campuses (in April, the Art Guys will lecture at the University of Texas at San Antonio and Harvard University) is one of the most valuable exposures their advertisers can hope to receive, he adds.

Clients who purchase an ad on one Art Guy's jacket will receive, absolutely free, a spot on the other Art Guy's pants. They'll get "added value elements": web-site links, a mention in the forthcoming book about the project by art book publisher Harry N. Abrams and an appearance in the documentary of the project by local production company Cool Films. Furthermore, clients' logos "will live on indefinitely, because the SUITS are special art objects and they will appear in museums and galleries throughout the world." You've heard of wearable art? Conceptual art? Commercial art? The SUITS are all of the above.

Though the unsewn, unembroidered pieces of the suits are squirreled away in the Art Guys' office awaiting their debut, already the media has seized on the project. The idea landed the Art Guys on the cover of a national magazine, Art News. The New Yorker has done a short take on SUITS, and two shows at CBS, Sunday Morning and Public Eye, argued over who would get to cover the project. But most interesting, perhaps, is the interest the country's cutting-edge marketing wizards are showing in SUITS. Some of them are taking it very seriously -- and why shouldn't they? Michael Jordan once estimated that a single appearance on Letterman promoting his new cologne was worth \$2 million. To the ad men, the Art Guys' project is likely to pay off -- or, as a LaForce & Stevens agency rep said in toothsome appreciation, "They're very bullish."

For a project like SUITS, where the ability to garner publicity is a major selling point, there is probably nothing more valuable than having a camera crew accompany you to a crucial meeting.

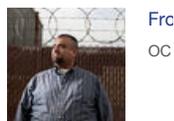
art students at the University of Houston. They live together, work together and frequently socialize together. Their public identities have blended so seamlessly that the most salient difference between the two is that Jack is the short, blond one and Mike is the tall brunet. Other than that, the contrast is more nuance than substance -- Jack is given to deadpan one-liners, Mike to naive philosophizing.

They employ both tactics while talking about the SUITS project, a mixture of humor and philosophy. The Art Guys will wear the suits, they say, at the Cannes Film Festival, at fashion and sporting events and on TV talk shows. An appearance on Late Night with David Letterman is a "definite potential reality." Though the wearing of the suits was supposed to begin in January, the Guys have found that selling is harder than they thought. The SUITS project has come to mean hours of time on the phone -- in fact, it's a nine-to-five job.

"What we deliver with the suits is extremely high-end marketing," Galbreth says, practicing

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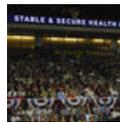
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In fact, LaForce & Stevens, the public relations firm that handles [Krispy Kreme Doughnuts](#), immediately saw the advantage in it. When the Art Guys, with CBS cameras in tow, showed up in January to talk strategy at the firm's New York office, a box of fresh, hot Krispy Kremes materialized on the meeting table, in full view of the camera.

Despite its staidly kitschy name and retro-style logo, Krispy Kreme is a master of what's called "under the radar" marketing -- nontraditional marketing that slips past the "radar" that tells consumers when they're being advertised to. Krispy Kreme never buys print or television ads. Instead, they insinuate their calorie-laden product into the world of fashion and popular culture, placing it on prime-time TV shows like E.R., giving it away backstage at runway shows (yes, the PR man insists, models do eat doughnuts), and persuading publications like the New York Times Magazine, [GQ](#) and [Allure](#) to proclaim its virtues.

The SUITS project, of course, is both under-the-radar and what business schools call "outside the box," which is why [Krispy Kreme CEO Mike Cecil](#) jumped on it right away. It's an idea that could generate a good deal of editorial copy (like what you're reading now). Since editorial copy, in theory at least, can't be bought, consumers are more likely to let it slip under their radar. And that makes it worth an awful lot -- though it costs very little. For example, GSD&M, the [Austin](#) advertising agency that handles [Southwest Airlines](#) and the [Houston Rockets](#), painted an airplane to look like a whale for the grand opening of [SeaWorld](#). Shamu One, as it was called, generated an estimated \$12 million in unpaid publicity. (Value is calculated according to a formula whose variables could include, say, the placement and size of an article, or a report's duration on the evening news.)

GSD&M was urged to participate by former governor [Ann Richards](#), a friend of the Art Guys who also serves as an adviser to the SUITS project, and who helped sell ads to Budweiser and Philip Morris as well. GSD&M purchased a spot on Mike's lapel. Companies can choose between quite reasonable "above-the-belt" and "below-the-belt" price structures, ranging from \$1,500 to \$6,000 by size. (Clients often want to know which hand the Guys use, or how tall they are, when picking their spots.) By comparison, a full-page, four-color ad in [Vogue](#) costs \$68,786. A full-page ad in the Houston Press costs \$2,869. And a company would pay an average product-placement agency about \$50,000 a year to land choice roles in film and TV for its brand.

Though the Art Guys' prices are low, Alicia Smith Kriese, GSD&M's director of business development, says the investment is risky. Publicity resulting from such a scheme could be "less valuable," she says, if it makes the company look like a "bunch of nuts." In other words, not all publicity is good publicity, even if it's practically free.

But Kriese thinks the company's support for the project is worth more as an inspiration to GSD&M employees than as a marketing tool. The project is in step with GSD&M's company line. "We're in the business of creating visionary ideas," Kriese says.

Which is exactly what the Art Guys say they're in the business of doing. "Art is ideas," Galbreth says. "Artists don't have to present their ideas in a museum."

So if art is ideas, and advertising is ideas, and the Art Guys are selling advertising on the strength of one of their ideas, then what, exactly, makes their project art?

"That's a good question," says Galbreth.

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Even corporate neophytes know the power of celebrity in clinching a deal. That's why the Art Guys asked Ann Richards to sit on their "advisory board" and their buddy Todd Oldham (whom they met through a Dallas art dealer) to make the suits.

But the Art Guys also recognized the fact that their own "brand equity" as artists would help sell them as people who could promote other brands. In that regard, their long track record, evidenced in the lavish catalog from their 1995 show at the [Contemporary Arts Museum](#), is a plus. Indeed, the SUITS project flows naturally out of the Art Guys' work up to now: They've always recognized that documentation -- preferably broadcast or printed -- was as much a part of their work as the work itself.

Never strangers to shameless self-promotion, the Guys have made their own bumper stickers, post cards and a wide variety of business cards since the mid-'80s. Their behavioral performances -- spending 24 hours in a [Denny's](#) on the winter solstice, working for 24 hours in a local convenience store, mowing the lawn of the Contemporary Arts Museum -- easily double as publicity stunts, attracting ink from the New York Times, the [Wall Street Journal](#) and Texas Monthly, and thus increasing their brand equity.

The Art Guys have also always made a point of making art accessible to a broader audience -- mostly through humor. They've made minimalist sculptures out of American cheese slices, [Tylenol](#) capsules and [Pringles](#). They've encouraged people to chew gum and stick it on a chair; they've donned lipstick and kissed every member of an audience at some of their performances. Recently, their fascination with commerce has led them to do one piece, Credit Where Credit Is Due, in which they applied to every credit card company that solicited them (can you see an [American Express](#) ad in their future?). For another piece, Hello Yes, they changed long-distance companies every time someone asked them to.

The Art Guys' use of everyday experience, and their democratic approach to art -- or their "knack for tapping into a large sector of the public," as the "fashion creative director" of Target put it -- makes them an appealing ad buy for major companies that are willing to take risks. (Target works with Kirschenbaum & Bond, the agency that literally wrote the book -- *Under the Radar* -- on outside-the-box marketing.)

The Art Guys are not the first to turn commercial tricks as art. Because Houston is such a business-oriented city, perhaps it's not surprising that one direct precursor to the Art Guys' project happened right here in town. In 1989, artist [Mark Flood](#) organized a group show of silk-screen art called "Primal Screen." To fund the exhibit, he sold ad space on the paintings themselves, charging \$100 to \$500. For a second exhibit, he even hired an ad salesperson to do the job for him. Ultimately, the [Museum of Fine Arts](#) purchased one of the works, which read simply "Your Ad Here" and included a phone number.

"An ad," Flood says solemnly, "is meaningful compared to most paintings."

The differences between "Primal Screen" and the SUITS project are instructive. While Flood sold ads to small local businesses -- discos, galleries, record stores -- with a high tolerance for controversial content, the Art Guys are aiming for squeaky clean, if adventurous, national brands. Flood is disbelieving, for example, when he learns that the rears of the Art Guys' trousers are not for sale. "There's no genital placement on the Art Guys' suits?" he asks, thinking immediately of the diaper companies who might place a premium on such real estate. "That's ridiculous! What a missed opportunity."

[Thrilled to Death](#)

[Catching Elevators](#)

While Flood's project questioned the meaning of painting, the SUITS project is about living in a marketing paradigm. Like many of the Art Guys' projects, it's behavioral rather than visual.

Then there's the punk factor. "Primal Screen" was a subversive satire of the Houston art world, complete with a press kit of faked reviews identifying the exhibit as a product of "Houston's first art movement." On the other hand, there is nothing subversive at all about SUITS. It's the kind of idea that people love because it seems subversive, but there's no criticism of commerce implied. [Andy Warhol](#) said it, and the Art Guys believe it: "Good business is the best art."

Galbreth has gotten out an issue of the New Yorker, seated himself on the couch and turned to a page marked with a big paper clip. On the page is a letter from a reader-- a "really beautiful" letter, Galbreth insists, and he proceeds to read aloud, with a fair amount of pomp and flourish: "Indeed, it seems that marketing may be the dominant paradigm of more than popular culture. It may be the next dominant paradigm of everything."

Gently, Massing suggests that the writer of the letter is actually dismayed, even cynical about the commercial onslaught. But Galbreth doesn't see it. "Cynical?" he asks, peering dubiously at the magazine. "I don't think so." Galbreth, a man who stands ready to rhapsodize on the unbridled power of the Nike Swoosh, believes the letter writer shares in his enthusiasms. To the Art Guys, the pervasive marketing of our time is far from anathema. Instead, it is a rich territory to be explored, and even exploited. Having identified the world of commerce as their subject matter, the Art Guys have wasted no time immersing themselves in it.

The Art Guys call their forays into particular subjects "investigations." In 1995, after working out with a personal trainer for a year in a piece called Bulk Up for CAM, the Art Guys "investigated" the world of male strippers by performing at La Bare, a Houston ladies' club. Then, their investigation turned out to be more of a parody -- they wore layer upon layer of clothes when they stripped, and outfitted themselves with fake, extra-long ding-dongs. But though ads -- which tell us everything from how coffee drinks can calm us ([Starbucks](#)) to what the "proper utensil" is to "stir your soul" ([Mazda](#)) -- could be said to be just as ridiculous as La Bare, the Art Guys are more awestruck than critical.

Their attitudes become apparent as they discuss the [Nike](#) ad that features [William S. Burroughs](#). Did the ad successfully co-opt the beat writer's countercultural, anticorporate message?

"I think it makes Burroughs more fascinating," Massing says. "It makes Nike more interesting, too."

"Nike uses William Burroughs to further their idea. William Burroughs uses Nike to further his ideas. That agreement is called commerce," Galbreth says.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong -- I used to think that there was -- with William Burroughs doing things for Nike or [Lion King director] [Julie Taymor](#) doing Broadway for [Disney](#)," Massing says.

Bringing the conversation back to their own situation, the Art Guys agree that their self-promotion makes the art world uncomfortable because it draws attention to the fact that art is, after all, a business. "We don't pretend," says Galbreth. "That's what bugs people about the Art Guys in the art world. It does not bug people in the nonart world. At all."

"Kodak's not going to get squeamish about [our proposal]," Massing points out. "It either meets their needs or it doesn't."

Indeed, the advertisers who've bought in are satisfied with the Art Guys' motives. "We asked them if they were kind of poking fun at the brand, at advertising," says [John Brine](#) of LaForce & Stevens. "The answer is no -- it's kind of a celebration."

In a time when the NEA is under siege for the sometimes radical art it supports, and support for the arts generally is ebbing, the fact that a couple of artists have convinced companies that they're up to good, wholesome fun -- and that the fun is a valuable commodity -- might be seen as an ironic coup. Except the Art Guys are up to good, wholesome fun. SUITS is a celebration. And as spokespeople, their charm rating must at least come close to [Sandy Duncan](#)'s. One thing the SUITS sponsors all agree on: The Art Guys are really, really, really nice.

"It's a feel-good project," says [Laurie Paolicelli](#), who purchased a spot on the suits for her employer. Paolicelli is the director of marketing for [Aerial Communications](#) in Houston, but she sounds more like an unusually hip city booster. "The Art Guys really represent Houston in such a favorable way," she says. "They really help Houston overcome some of its negative, cowboy image."

Aerial Communications, best known for buying the naming rights to the Aerial Theater at Bayou Place -- an unusual move for a wireless company -- really wants to help Houston overcome that image, and they consider themselves "enlightened" and "well-rounded" enough to recognize the city's little-publicized funky side. "Even though we're corporate," Paolicelli explains succinctly, "we really promote kind of a noncorporate ... you know."

Though cities often tout their recognition in one of Absolut Vodka's famous ads, by Paolicelli's standards, Houston probably didn't "arrive" when "[Absolut Houston](#)" debuted last fall. The ad featured a cowboy in a bullpen shaped like the famous Absolut vodka bottle. Part of Absolut's first marketing push in Texas, it was everything non-Houstonians think of when they think of Houston.

On the other hand, Paolicelli would probably say, the Art Guys' upcoming billboard is more representative of Houston's ingenious spirit. Absolut first called the Art Guys about doing a billboard a couple of years ago, and Massing says it was during a conference call with him that one of the ad men at [TBWA Chiat/Day](#), Absolut's agency, came up with the idea for what turned out to be Absolut's first billboard in Houston, Absolut Ranch. Massing says he tried to discourage the agency from doing the ad, a parody of [Cadillac Ranch](#), where a row of cars have been turned on end and half-buried. Massing, too, thought the ranch theme was too predictable for Houston.

The Art Guys submitted a round of proposals, but their project died on the vine, only to be revived again right about the time the Art Guys were thinking up the SUITS project. Absolut overcame their fear of having their logo displayed with other brands, and bought an ad on the SUITS. At the same time, they commissioned the billboard.

For artists looking to collapse the distinction between advertising and art, Absolut, whose campaign has been running since 1980, is a natural partner. In 1985, Absolut commissioned their first artist-designed ad, paying Andy Warhol \$65,000 to make a work whose only requirement was that it incorporate the Absolut bottle. At the time, artists like Warhol, [Ed Ruscha](#) and [Keith](#)

Haring had something to offer Absolut -- an association with high culture, and access to high culture's tastemaking audience.

Over time, though, Absolut has become the dominant partner in the advertising/art relationship. Now, unknown artists (who cost a few thousand as opposed to 65) get a career boost when they create an Absolut ad. Artists may not need to present their ideas in a museum, but they haven't totally cut out the middleman. Absolut itself has become an arbiter of taste -- and the company, while adventurous, chooses artists that serve its promotional needs without qualms. Enter the Art Guys, who won't say what they're being paid.

For their billboard, the Guys have returned to an earlier series, "1,000 Coats of Paint," in which they applied 1,000 layers of paint to objects such as teddy bears, telephones and eyeglasses, and then exhibited the resulting lumps. Sculptor David Poss will construct a giant Absolut bottle, and painter Bernard Brunon will, over the course of about six months, paint it -- you guessed it -- 1,000 times. Each time Brunon completes a layer, he'll flip a card that displays how many layers have been painted. Commuters will see a different color every day -- or several times a day -- and the whole project will be documented using time-lapse photography, which could then be used for a European television commercial for Absolut.

Brunon, who has requested that his logo also appear on the billboard, is excited about participating in the project, not only because it's a good part-time job with flexible hours, but because he himself wants to overcome his resistance to marketing his own work. "When I went to art school in the '70s, everything to do with marketing and money was taboo," Brunon says. "And I think that's bullshit."

The main thing the Art Guys have to learn to overcome is other people's resistance, not their own. "Everything we've ever done prior to this is like a cakewalk, a walk in the park; it's nothing," Galbreth says. Despite help from their well-connected friends, convincing the right people that SUITS is a worthwhile project has entailed endless ranks of corporate gatekeepers, transfers from department to department and conversations with people who just don't get it. Every contact is noted in a fat binder of data on prospective customers. More than 90 percent of the time, the Guys' efforts end in failure.

Playboy turned them down. BMW said no. A woman at Nike heard the word "fashion" and instantly nixed the idea (Nike is "sports apparel." They don't "do" fashion). Starbucks, MTV and AT&T said no, and Southwestern Bell claimed not to have enough money to participate.

With smaller, local companies they've approached, the Guys have had better luck. Technical Risks, Inc., a frequent underwriter on KUHF public radio, has purchased spots on both Guys' right cuffs, as has Texas Art Supply, which rarely advertises at all. Other companies have sought out the Art Guys and asked to buy an ad -- like the owner of Larry's Markets, a high-end grocery-store chain in the Northwest, who heard the Guys lecture about the project. But the Guys know that for the project to go over big, they have to have major corporate anchors.

Unless the Guys can finagle a face-to-face meeting, getting a definite answer from a large company can take weeks. And despite corporate rhetoric about innovation and leadership, the first thing most potential clients want to know about the SUITS project is -- who else is doing it? Two weeks ago, the Guys finally heard back from somebody in Reebok's "Event Marketing" department. The terse letter, which the Guys took to be a good omen, asks 1) what confirmed

brands are participating, 2) whether there are any restrictions on brands (lest Reebok's logo be contaminated) and 3) a time line for completion of the project.

So far, the Guys have filled almost half the 101 available spaces. If they reach their goal, they will rake in \$319,500. If not, they will proceed with what they have. But even if they do make their goal, Galbreth says, "We won't make any real money. Half of that will be gone in taxes." Much of the rest will be used to meet travel and other expenses (dry-cleaning, for one). Embroidering the logos will cost over \$15,000. The Guys have already far exceeded their postage budget, and they plan to spend \$35,000 on travel. The idea is to make surprise appearances wherever a major event is happening, and to visit the home cities of the advertisers.

If travel seems like a fringe benefit, it won't be after a few months, Galbreth says. "This is one of those endurance works that we're known for." In the end, they don't have a good estimate of what they'll have in the bank -- but they won't be rich. "It'd be nice. I wish it would happen. It's about making money."

But making money is not easy. "Personally, I hate selling," says Galbreth unexpectedly, after a morning of cold calls. "When people's first response is no, it wears on you.

"It's really an emotional hit when it's someone that we know should be a part of this project, we know would benefit, and they say no. It's crushing." It's also bewildering. People who make million-dollar deals often won't drop the price of a large lunch meeting on the SUITS. "I don't think that advertisers fully understand the value of it," says Galbreth. "It gives the company such a high level of perceived coolness."

Still, the Art Guys are forging ahead with their project. And if they don't sell every single ad on the suits, well, perhaps that will serve to illustrate their original assertion: Their scheme is about selling, after all. It's not about selling out.

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