

# An Interview With An Art Guy

by Frances Colpitt

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Blockhead (1996), deer trophy, concrete

FC: So let's start at the beginning.

AG: Well, the universe was said to be, at one point, so dense and heavy that it's unimaginable, and all of a sudden it exploded and material just started spreading from the center, and it's still spreading, so they think. And dust and clouds of matter coalesced into planets and stars, which exploded in constant motion. And then, one area had this big cloud of hydrogen, which coalesced into what is now our sun, and then this big glob of stuff made the earth. And then in 1959, I was born, a couple of years after Mike was born. But we were both born in a log cabin in Kentucky and grew up walking to school uphill both ways in the snow, even in the summer. And then we made this pieces of art and you came over to talk about it.

FC: Okay. Tell us about how you came up with the name of The Art Guys.

AG: The truth of the matter is I was living in Seattle and I was hanging out with some glass blowers. There was a fellow up there named Walter Lieberman, who was a glass blower and designer, and he became a good friend of mine. We could do a lot of different things together, and oftentimes when we were doing something he would say, "I am a thirsty guy, I need to get something to drink." When he was out partying, and goofing around, he'd say, "I'm a drunk guy," and then if he was happy he'd say he was a happy guy. So, when I came to

Houston I had this in my head about being a "guy" and doing different things. Mike and I were working together and I said, "We're the art guys" and it just stuck. We just thought it was funny. We thought about the pun, and the play on words, and spelling it differently. So from that point on - it was about 1981-82 that we got acquainted - we worked together sporadically for the next seven years, and he did his own work, and I did my own work.

FC: So you had identities outside of The Art Guys.

AG: Yeah, but when we got this place [an old mattress factory in Houston] in November of 1989, we decided that this would be Art Guys World Headquarters; we would be The Art Guys and we would take it as far as we could.

FC: And now you no longer have identities outside of you collaboration.

AG: No, not really.

FC: Do you have personal lives outside of you collaboration?

AG: No, we do everything together. It's kind of hard because it's tough to find dates! We do a lot of work together and we hang out a lot together, but we certainly have our own lives outside of The Art Guys.

FC: How does the process of collaboration work? Does one of you come up with an idea and the other come up with a way of executing it?

AG: It really works in every conceivable combination of that: from Mike getting an idea and making a piece and presenting it to me finished, to me doing that, to working on something specifically together where he'll work on it for a little while and I'll work on it for a little while. But the general kind of bracket for the collaboration comes in the dialogue that we've developed over a long time. A lot of our ideas are built on this ongoing dialogue, and the richness of ideas and concepts it generates. The collaboration is dynamic and has an interesting outcome because there's Mike and then there's Jack, and then there's The Art Guys. But The Art Guys are not really two people; it's really like three people. It's those three: Mike, Jack, and The Art Guys.

FC: Do you think there's an Art Guys style?

AG: Well, yeah, I think so. I don't think it's possible not to have a style no matter what you do. Let's say, for example, we tried to do many different styles - that would then be our style. It's hard to categorize, but there is definitely an Art Guys attitude. I don't know if there's necessarily a style in terms of the way a piece looks, but there's an attitude.

FC: And what's that attitude?

AG: It's difficult to verbalize, but it has to do with humor and site-relation, or site-specificity. Often, it's considered adolescent, and it's certainly derived from that attitude, but I don't think it's adolescent. In a more positive way, what we try to do is make something that's interesting to us, present it in a humorous way, and bring the audience into that in an easy manner. Mundane or simple materials are used in a funny way to imply different, deeper meanings. It's sort of a confluence of common materials meets post modern Minimalist/conceptualist attitudes, I suppose. Each of us grew up admiring Minimalist sculptors and Conceptual artists. We didn't know much about Fluxus until we started collaborating. We knew about Dadaism, of course, but Fluxus is closer to our attitude than Dada is.

FC: Can you discuss the role of humor in your work?

AG: There's a history of us talking about making different things or working on projects, and really choosing those that make us laugh the most. So, we'll think of something and it will be funny, but then we'll think of

something else and it will be funnier and we'll go with the funnier one. Groucho Marx is a good example of a humor that we like. It hits on a lot of different levels. There's a certain amount of slapstick, but then there's a rich language and rich conceptual quality to his humor and wrongheadedness, which is an important factor. So, rather than having a monotone where everything is just completely hilarious, we try to mix it up. Like a good pitcher who has a lot of different deliveries, a lot of different pitches, we have a float ball, and a curve, and a slider, and a few good fast balls once in a while...

Sometimes we'll just want to make something that's really beautiful, or we'll want to make something that has a very conceptual nature, or sometimes we just want to make things that are stupid and funny and wrong headed; and that's just a freedom that we have, like it or not. We can be very serious about a lot of stuff, but we happen to be a couple of white guys who like sports, and music, and popular culture, and literature, and film, and esoteric objects, and all sorts of different things. If you like a lot of different things you're going to produce a lot of different work, unlike artists who focus on the same thing.

FC: It's very difficult to write about your work. I always find that - in the two little pieces I've written about you - I can never convey the humor of your work in the writing. It isn't just because I'm not a comedy writer that I always feel frustrated about trying to explain how humorous the work is. I wonder if maybe (and I don't know whether this is intentional on your part) the kind of resistance that your work has to criticism isn't like the Conceptual artists' project, in the late sixties, attempting to make art that can't be criticized.

AG: Right. We don't intentionally make work that's hard to criticize. It's hard to criticize, I think, because it's serious about being funny. It's serious about different things than what are serious, if that makes sense.

FC: Do you think you get the respect you deserve?

AG: Oh, I think so, sure. The great thing about that is, and this is really true, it might not sound quite right but we don't really care! A friend of mine recently said, "I hope I don't embarrass you at this opening," before we went. I said, "I don't think you can!" I mean, I've done so many different things that I think if I can't seem to embarrass myself, I don't think anyone can embarrass me. That goes hand in hand with having respect, or getting respect. I respect what we do very much, so if someone else doesn't, it doesn't affect me too much. Not to be cavalier, but I just think: well, maybe they don't get it, or maybe it's not right for them, it's not to their taste.

What's happening recently is that we've sort of gotten - as somebody said the other day - "hot", because all of a sudden people in different parts of the country are interested in our work. I know that's going to dry up, but the saving grace is that we have this great studio here and we have more ideas than we could ever, ever make. There's just no way to slow down; you just keep going.

FC: Just make more pieces like that duck with the dildo on it. That will drive them away. I thought, when I saw that piece this morning, "That is horrible!" and I've been thinking about it all day. I can't get the thing out of my mind.

AG: Well, that was the most difficult piece to put in that show [at Lynn Goode Gallery].

FC: I bet!

AG: Because we were trying very not to do that. We've done that before and we're going to do it again. It's like a kid in the kitchen with a big jar of cookies. He knows he loves them and he wants one and he tells himself he's not going to have another one; he's already full, but he goes back in the cookie jar.

FC: I've been thinking - because it looked like it was so incredibly easy to do - how could you dare do that?

AG: You actually are the first person to verbalize it in almost the same way we thought about it. I mean, I thought: we can't put that in, it's so easy to do, but then you've got to because it brings out this incredibly rich world. There's a lot of precedence to it: it's just taking two different things and putting them together, which is a

very creative act; it's happened since the Stone Age. Unfortunately, this piece makes such a strong pun. Fuck a duck! But it embodies so much about nature and man's confrontation with it, too: Let's build a plant or factory and screw up the water and fuck those ducks! So what if their feet get dissolved when they land in the water. I don't care: fuck a duck. that's their sort of careless attitude.

FC: So the new work that you're doing with animals is ecological?

AG: In a sense.

FC: The Green Art Guys?

AG: The Green Art Guys, yeah. It's just a phase though! It doesn't matter what material you use, there are inherent qualities, whether you're using sand, or water, or pornography. You can derive all sorts of connotations and meanings from the inherent qualities of any material; and any material that you can see, touch feel, or taste has an incredible wealth of information in it. There's just so much history to every single thing - it all goes back to the Big Bang, where this conversation started - not only in human existence on the planet but in the natural world. Cell biology, or archeology, or human activity on the planet, or just studying rocks - geology; there's so much that is incredibly rich in every single thing.

FC: Do you believe in nature?

AG: Oh, completely. I completely believe in nature. I don't believe in God. I believe in energy and nature much more. I always have. I love science and biology and all that stuff.

FC: I love that car/fish: how to make a fish trophy into a car.

AG: It's called Fin. It's a piece about morphing a marlin into the back of a car. there is actually a fish under there. It was a trophy head and we bondo'ed it and sanded it. It was a very interesting the way that piece came about. We were in San Francisco last summer doing a residency [at Capp Street Project]. One night we were driving down the street and we got shot at in my truck. It was hit with two bullets. It put pretty big dents in the body. From the first night in California pretty much until the end, my car was violated by thieves, vandals, and bullets, and weather, and other traffic. When I got back, I took it to get the body work fixed. Several months later, it was like new. Mike went out to look at where the bullet holes were and he said, "You can't even tell this thing was shot at!" We had this fish hanging in the studio; we were talking about working on it for a couple of weeks. The the next day, he said, "You know how your car was fixed? I think it would be cool to do that to the fish," and then we started talking about making the fish into a car. We discussed the possibilities of morphing and what we would have to do. It was difficult to figure out because there were so many different decisions to make: we filled in the mouth, and that really helped, and cut off the sword in the front and the serration in the fin, all these different subtle things. We didn't want to take it too far away from the fish or too far toward a car. It was a fun thing to make...

Do you want some more beer? I would like another one, but I think that was all we had.

FC: Do you want to say anything else?

AG: Yes. Anything else.

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