

The Art Guys

The Appropriations Project, 1991–94



Mixed media, dimensions variable.

Above: *Appropriation #3: Sonny Burt, Bob Butler, 6/16/91, 12:17 p.m.*; 1991. Meat tenderizer with engraved gold plaque in glass and maple vitrine, 14 x 14 x 11".

The Appropriations Project consists of 15 objects "appropriated" from individuals involved with the Houston art scene. Incorporating artists, curators, critics, collectors, and museum directors, the victims of The Art Guys' project are referred to through the kitsch and mundane objects that were taken from them.

You make a conscious decision to refer to these objects as appropriated rather than stolen, how do you see this distinction functioning in relation to this work?

Appropriated is a term that was used in describing how artists would "borrow" or "steal" each others ideas. It was used often in 1980's art-speak. It is a bit like political-speak in that there are half-truths, whitewash, hyperbole, misinformation, and such, constantly used to make a point for your side or your cause. Obviously stolen connotes illegality. Appropriation is a bit softer in tone as in "setting something aside for future use," like municipal funding. Much like the US congress do with tax dollars as they see fit.

The Art Guys would never steal anything. We appropriated those objects to use again. The "lenders" ("victims" if we were talking about theft) had every chance to buy back their objects. That transaction in effect would, and did, allow us to appropriate funding (cash sale) for our own use as we saw fit. The "lenders" of these objects should thank us for including them in an art transaction, elevating their objects, all the while making it very easy on them. We did not bother them with the mundane details of loan forms, we did the photography, we presented them in nice cases with good lighting. What else could someone expect?

We liken the objects in question from *The Appropriation Project* to the work of a sound artist who samples and reconfigures work of other sound artists. We think that it is more an issue of Fair Use than thievery.

There seems to be an attempt at parody, in the pairings of some of these objects and their cited source, was this a specific intention?

No. There was no intentional meaning whatsoever regarding the objects we selected. Generally speaking, we tried to select what would seem to us to be fairly meaningless objects, that is, objects that were of little value to their owners. However, this was purely speculative on our part and in at least one case the object selected was very special to its owner.

In much of our work, there is an attempt and concerted effort to inject non-meaning. We've found that regardless of how hard we try to make things meaningless, people almost always attach some meaning to things or compare the work to some other idea rather than considering the piece for what it is. It's a curious thing people do with art. For example, people rarely look at,

say, a tree and wonder, “What does that mean?” A tree has no meaning, per se. It just is. And it’s the same with art, at least with a lot of art we do. But that doesn’t imply that we don’t gain a greater understanding of ideas or the world with art that has no meaning. Sometimes, there is an even greater awareness and understanding achieved through that which is meaningless.

In fact, the idea of meaning, whether there is such a thing, is paramount to this piece. Why does an ashtray take on sentimentality for its owner? Why do we attach meaning and feelings to things? And why do people give any extra meaning to the objects of *The Appropriations Project*? Is it because we did this overtly and consciously as “art”? Because of who was involved? Because of how the appropriated pieces are formatted and presented? Is it because we’re discussing it here and now in this context?

As we asked ourselves these questions, and as time went on throughout the project, it got to be very strange.

Whether this is true or not, early Native Americans were said to have no concept of property with regards to land. No one owned the land. How could one own land? Europeans certainly thought one could own land. And therefore, take it too. In *The Appropriations Project*, we were just getting in touch with our native European heritage. We were exercising our aesthetic manifest destiny. (Speaking of which, if you believe any of this, we have an insurance policy we’d like you to look over.)

There is an old adage that says, “You can’t take it with you.” In *The Appropriations Project*, The Art Guys set out to prove we *could* take it with us.

Is it important that the “lenders” were friends of yours?

No. Some of the people we appropriated from were not friends, technically speaking. They were all a part of the so-called art world and this was important only inasmuch as the project addressed an art world phenomenon or “movement” of appropriation that was popular at the time which included images (Richard Prince) or forms (Sherrie Levine), or music and sound (sampling). *The Appropriations Project* was our interpretation of this art world copy-cat-ism.

We were interested, however, in the reaction of people who we knew who would come to the opening of the show when these were first presented, and what their reaction would be to seeing their thing up for sale in a gallery. We thought this would be very funny. Some of the people who were friends of ours from whom we appropriated did not think it was so funny. It turned out to be a much more controversial piece than we predicted.

Including only “art world” people in the project fulfilled one of the parameters set forth before we began. In other words, we set out for ourselves a range of parameters under which we would operate within the confines of the project including who we appropriated from, relative worth of objects, etc.

As a comparison, in the *Borrowed Pens* project, wherein we “absentmindedly” acquired pens throughout our normal day for the period of a year, many of the pens we “borrowed” were from complete strangers. And another difference with *Borrowed Pens* was that we always asked if we could borrow the person’s pen before “absentmindedly” tucking it behind our ear. So, technically speaking, we were granted permission to do what we did with that piece, which means those pens could still be thought of as belonging to their original owners since they were borrowed.

Special note: We would like to publicly announce for the first time, that the pieces we presented in *The Appropriations Project* may not necessarily have been actually appropriated. Some (or all?) of the items we just claimed to be appropriated. We thought that this would add another level of interest and confusion to the project. It turns the tables to have presented so-called appropriated objects and then sell them, but it turns the tables again when we reveal years later, as we are now, that they may not have been appropriated in the first place. Uh oh