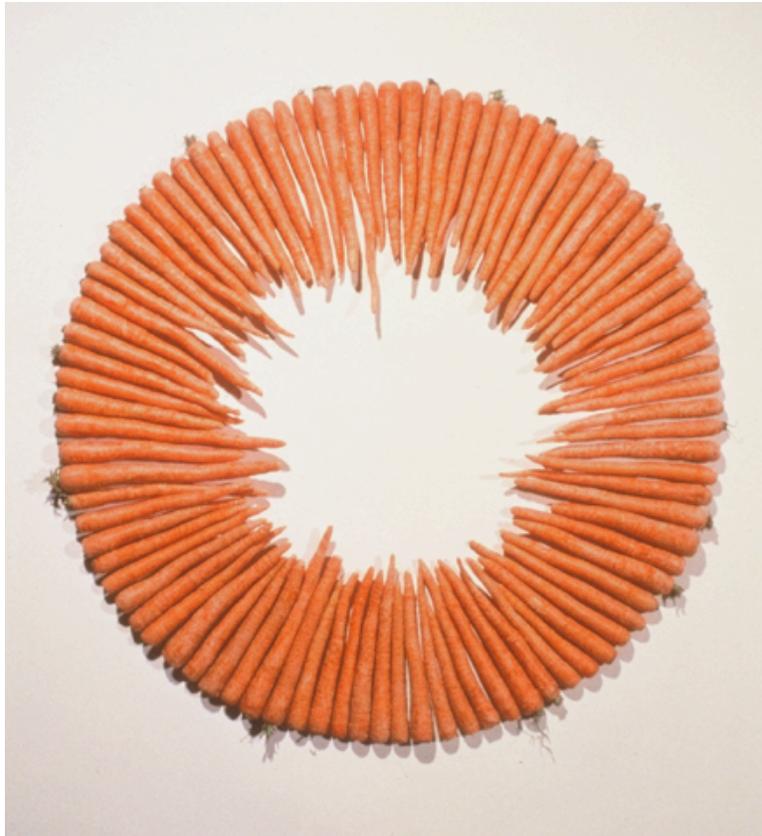


Visualize the Art Guys

Dana Self, Curator, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art

October, 1996



Carrot Ring, 1994, carrots

By creating their work from the most ordinary objects of our daily lives, the Art Guys recognize that we can be enriched by simply experiencing the quotidian as mysterious, funny, beautiful, and absurd. Through their quirky materials, they encourage us to think about the various meanings and experiences that can be culled from our everyday language and ephemera. At the same time, their playfulness also encourages us to chuckle at ourselves and the things we find around us. Because the objects that comprise their art are often funny (such as carrots, which may not be funny in and of themselves but become comical when made into art), the viewer may suspect that the Art Guys are giggling while creating their work and enjoying our reactions. However, unlike the mockery that informs some contemporary art, the Art Guys' bemused outlook on life encourages us to participate in the joke, rather than feel like the joke has been played on us. For instance, in this exhibition the Art Guys have reconfigured that seminal invention, the wheel, as carrots and as suitcases, giving us an unexpected twist on its function. Gleefully surprising us with the mundane—we may not expect to find carrots and suitcases in the museum—the Art Guys move the world into the museum or gallery space, transforming both commonplace things and institutional spaces. In doing so, the Art Guys become cultural equalizers, producing a level playing field where all things, no matter how humdrum, can become fertile sites for new and unanticipated experiences.

We find one of the most unique aspects of the Art Guys' work in the facets and nuances of language, which functions as the quiet partner of the art. It isn't merely that the titles are descriptive of the pieces—the title is

often a clue artists provide the viewer, or with which they deliberately obscure meaning-but that the titles of the Art Guys' works and performances demonstrate that language, like visual art, is one of our most fascinating and elastic tools. Because the Art Guys make "something out of nothing," they show us that anything can constitute art, including matches, money, carrots, or suitcases. They further illustrate that, since the phrase *something out of nothing* is a common cliché, even clichés can produce new meaning when the Art Guys manipulate language and our potential responses. For instance, in a performance titled *Blow Through Town*, the Art Guys literally blew through town. They walked from one neighborhood to the next, carrying leaf blowers, redistributing leaves and other detritus. In a turn of the phrase *to blow through*, we find not only a development in language, where blowing through becomes synonymous with traveling through, but also that metaphorically the Art Guys turn another phrase: *redistribution of wealth*. Although one person's trash may be another's treasure, by bringing the detritus of a poor neighborhood into a wealthy one, and vice versa, the Art Guys demonstrate how acting out language in its most pure form can become a transformative act.

While language clearly and even precisely describes the Art Guys' work, the unexpected exhilaration of finding that the work is exactly as the title suggests adds an element of surprise to the works. The Art Guys' devotion to acting out the precision of language seems inversely proportionate to our expectations. For instance, the *Suitcase Wheel* is exactly that: a 16-foot-diameter wheel comprised of old suitcases. The combination of the colors and the unusual materials may heighten our aesthetic experience of the wheel, while the silliness of a wheel of suitcases may delight our sense of the absurd. Other literally executed pieces include *99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall*, and *Cheese Grid*. It may be quite surprising to truly find 99 bottles of beer on a museum gallery wall, or to find a grid that is actually made of cheese. Speaking about another work, Art Guy Michael Galbreth states, "If you listen to something boring for a long time, it becomes interesting."¹ That same principle may be applied to works like *99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall*. We may acknowledge that, like the absurdist song, the idea of 99 actual bottles of beer on a wall may be boring. However, like a phrase which can become interesting by repetition, the bottles and the pattern they form are visually interesting, while simultaneously the lyrics of the song may play through our minds, adding to the work's absurdist appeal.

With *Cheese Grid*, the Art Guys gently poke fun at the history of minimal art. For instance, Carl Andre's floor pieces from the mid-1970s-squares of steel that form a grid pattern-represented the beauty thought to be derived from pure geometric form. With *Cheese Grid*, the Art Guys subvert the hierarchical canons of art history and art historians. By committing themselves to the idea that cheese is as viable a material as steel and other "traditional" sculptural material, the Art Guys break open both the making and critiquing of art to a wider audience, ultimately leveling the playing field. Most everyone can recognize, obtain, and work with processed cheese, whereas steel and the tools to sculpt it are much less accessible. As Michael Galbreth has said,

We're in the world with everybody else and we put ourselves in absurd situations, and they open up intellectual doors. And once you really start investigating the issue of absurdity, that gets very complex.²

Like *Cheese Grid*, *1000 Coats of Paint* draws upon the Western art historical canon. The Art Guys covered a variety of items with one thousand coats of paint, taking seven months to complete the project. The end result is a group of practically unrecognizable gray objects. A color chart accompanies the installation, allowing the viewer to see the painted history of the objects, which began as a baseball, baseball glove, stick, and 2-by-4 board. Knowing that the traditional view of Western art is sometimes seen as only the history of sculpture and painting, the Art Guys subvert both media by using paint to simultaneously reconstruct and deconstruct objects. They create a "new" sculpture by building upon an existing form with paint. Therefore, *1000 Coats of Paint* transgresses the art historical canon and encourages us to look at paint and sculpture in a new and unexpected light. In the Art Guys' hands, paint becomes an odd and alternative form of sculpture through their prankish curiosity to find out what a thousand coats of paint actually looks like.

Ironically, considering the homey and often inexpensive materials they use, money plays an important role in the Art Guys' work. While the business of art can be riddled with intricate nuances and deft maneuvers, the casual way the Art Guys use money seems to indicate otherwise. In pieces titled *No Cash Value* and *The United States*, they cut up bills to spell out the words *No Cash Value* or to create a map of the United States. Ironically, while the cut-up bills have lost their monetary exchange value, they constitute something of higher value than the bills used to create it. The Art Guys revalue rather than devalue money. In the Art Guys' unconventional pantheon of materials, money becomes one more iconoclastic vehicle for expression. In the Kemper Museum exhibition, the Art Guys obtained a large pile of money to create an entire installation. *One Hundred Dollars of American Currency Expressed in Different Denominations and Arranged in Descending Order* is comprised of every denomination of currency and coinage adding up to \$100, beginning with pennies and ending with a \$100 bill. This piece, which the Art Guys have never before executed, is a paradox in that the money is transformed into an art object, yet at the same time, the piece comprises over \$1,000 in unaltered cash (unlike *No Cash Value* and *The United States*) and is thus usable currency. Furthermore, the currency and coinage are uncirculated which creates a mystique about the piece. Uncirculated money comes directly from the Federal Reserve; here for the first time, the money, while not being used for exchange (but will be later), is put into circulation. And although this path that the currency takes from the Federal Reserve to general circulation is a far cry from the usual one, the money is now in circulation nonetheless. As usual, the Art Guys have delivered to their audience exactly what they have promised in the title of the work. Like *Penny Column*, whose "currency" is its visual interest—a column of pennies over ten feet tall—the money installation is visually and conceptually intriguing because of and in spite of the hard currency and its meanings in our society.

Some works by the Art Guys such as *All The Gum On The Sidewalk Outside Our House At 65 Capp Street*, tap into social issues. In this piece the Art Guys photographed all the discarded pieces of chewing gum smashed into the sidewalk in front of the house where they lived during a San Francisco residency. The photographs present the gum "to scale" and are displayed in a grid. The piece presents an unusual approach to mapping the city and its inhabitants. Rather than photographing the city's beauty, or the people around them, the Art Guys instead memorialize the detritus, presenting an atypical examination of the city and the block where they live. The small patches of gum become markers for the unknown and unseen people who have passed in front of their house. Because they monumentalize the ordinary things and detritus of daily life—even the grotesque—the Art Guys assert that the smallest aspect of life is cause for speculation and consideration. By dismantling the boundaries that separate art—often thought of as outside our common selves and daily experience—from life, the Art Guys present us with the rare gift of common ground and equanimity.

Notes:

1. Michael Galbreth quoted in, "It's a Guy Thing," Glen Helfand, *San Francisco Weekly*, September 6-12, 1995.
2. Michael Galbreth quoted in, "In Performance: Life Imitates Art Imitating Life," Sam Howe Verhovek, *The New York Times*, Wednesday, August 9, 1995.