

Suiting up

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Abstract

Toward the end of the 1990s The Houston based performance artists Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing, 'The Art Guys', embarked on the SUITS project. A project involving a two year exploration of the relationship between art, fashion and marketing which resulted in the publication of the book "SUITS: The Clothes Make the Man."

Through this project the Art Guys were drawn into a journey through branding, image construction, fashion, performance, sponsorship, marketing and the multiple layers of a consumer culture. The Suits project and in particular the documentation of their journey, provided in the book, are an interesting vehicle for reflection on the suit and branding in contemporary male dress.

The business suit is commonly seen as a symbol of masculinity and corporate identity. The Art Guys subvert conventional readings of the suit, using the traditional grey business suit as corporate billboard to attract and market sponsorship for their project. This paper reviews the SUITS project with a particular focus on the challenges to conventional reading of the suit presented by the project.

Key words

Suit/fashion/art

Introduction

Clothing, as one of the most visible forms of consumption, performs a major role in the social construction of identity. Clothing choices provide an excellent field for studying how people interpret a specific form of culture for their own purposes, one that includes strong norms about appropriate appearances at a particular point in time (otherwise known as fashion) as well as an extraordinarily rich variety of alternatives. One of the most visible marks of social status and gender and therefore useful in maintaining or subverting symbolic boundaries, clothing is an indication of how people in different eras have perceived their position in social structures and negotiated status boundaries. (Crane 2000:1)

The wearing of the suit has a very specific reading and expression as a *symbolic boundary*. Both artists and designers have 'played' with manipulation and or subversion of the traditional language of the suit. For example, Joseph Beuys, The Art Guys (Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing), Gilbert and George, Martin Margiela, Thom Browne and Vivienne Westwood.

Toward the end of the 1990s The Houston based performance artists Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing, The Art Guys, embarked on the SUITS project. A project involving a two year exploration of the relationship between art, fashion and marketing culminated in the publication of the book "SUITS: The Clothes Make the Man." On one of my periodic scans of a local book shop I came across this publication and although previously unaware of the Art Guys I found myself fascinated by their sojourn with the suit. I was drawn to their use of a suit in an art project, their exploration of the space between art and fashion and the way that the project acknowledged art as a business. With a wry smile on my face I found that I was compelled to buy the book and investigate further this seemingly bazaar art-media-marketing-business-fashion project.

As the project title suggest, a key element in The Art Guys projects was the suit. The business suit is commonly seen as a symbol of masculinity and corporate identity. The Art Guys subvert conventional readings of the suit, using the traditional grey business suit as a corporate billboard to attract and market sponsorship for their project. Through this project the Art Guys were taken on a journey through branding, image construction, fashion, performance, sponsorship, marketing and the multiple

layers of a consumer culture. The SUIT project and in particular the documentation of their journey, provided in the book, are an interesting vehicle for reflection on the suit and branding in contemporary male dress.

The Suit

The origins of the male suit lie in the establishment of the three piece suit by King Charles II in the late sixteen hundreds as a means of teaching the nobility about thrift.

The birth of the three-piece suit, then, meant not only the donning of a new wardrobe: it meant the fashioning of a new masculinity, a new ideology about the morality, politics, and economics of elite men's consumer practices, an ideology still prevalent today. (Kuchta 2002: 2)

These beginnings of the suit, in the form of coat, waistcoat and breeches, were a far cry from the contemporary suit. While encouraged, at the time as a symbol of thrift and inconspicuous consumption, they would today be read as quite the opposite. Over the next two hundred years the form of the suit went through many transformations and in the late eighteen hundreds evolved into a more simplified structure which reflected far more strongly the ideas of thrift, sobriety and inconspicuous consumption.

The suit has remained relatively unchanged for the past 200 years bringing with it a history and reading which has become ensconced in its form. The rules defining the suit are very specific. In *Fashion as Communication*, Malcolm Barnard discusses the syntagmatic and paradigmatic elements of the suit reinforcing that the meaning and reading comes from a socially agreed construct. The paradigmatic rules provide the parameters for differences in the elements such as the shape of the shirt collar or size of the buttons while the syntagmatic establish the guidelines for the combinations of shirt, jacket and pants in ensuring the maintenance of the concept of the suit.

Usually, shirt makers choose to have one collar per shirt: whichever collar is chosen, the rule would be that a shirt contains only one collar of a particular type. By having two collars, the *Comme Des Garçons* shirts are breaking the syntagmatic and paradigmatic rules. (Barnard 2000: p 91)

While the suit has gone through many transformations and challenges over the centuries "It remains a potent symbol of success, virility and maturity..." (Edwards 1997: 22). It is what a man wears when he wants to be taken seriously. Over this time it has been refined and established as a neutral safety net for male dress –

there is no danger of falling into the zone of conspicuous consumption or there being challenges to one's masculinity when dressed according to the rules of the suit. Lehmann describes the suit as "the one sartorial constituent of men's fashion since the early part of the nineteenth century" (2000:469). It has become a constant in the expression of masculinity.

The suit can be used as a uniform to conceal class identity. "The Business suit is beginning to be perceived as a uniform which conceals a person's identity..."(Crane 2000: 174). While other forms of men's clothing have broadened, "the business suit, is "closed". Its range of meaning has steadily narrowed." (Crane 2000: 198) There are precise rules regarding the shape, colour, proportions, lapels, collars, trouser length which define the business suit. (Crane 2000:173) The rules and closed nature of the suit place it in a neutral zone, it does not suggest an inappropriate level of interest in fashion which might challenge conventional ideas of masculinity. "A man who is considered masculine does not need to care about his appearance, because masculinity is not considered to be a function of appearance." (Crane 2000: 179)

While there have been numerous explorations into variations of the suit over the past 200 years, the grey business suit has emerged as a standard. Designers such as Thom Browne, who is a strong advocate for its place in contemporary men's wear, explore changes which still adhere to the essence of this form. In his 2007 collections Browne shortens the pants, streamlines the jacket and features the waist, however the form is still unmistakably based on the traditions and conventions of the suit. Although it should be noted that these modifications to the business suit still today challenge the reading of conventional ideas of masculinity in the wearer.

The closed rigidity of the business suit meant that it was the perfect vehicle for the Art Guys and their project. And the application of the embroidered logos clearly would challenge the rules and reading of the suit.

The Art Guys

The Art Guys have a history with the suit. Past encounters have involved the embellishment of the suit with CDs, stuffed toys, plastic bottles and car lot flags. Suits have been adorned, it appears, primarily for their participation in art car parades. In these cases various forms of ready to wear suits were transformed through the application of objects which overwhelmed the reading of the suit.

Their unconventional practice is described on the Art Guy's website and often used as part of the introduction to their work in articles and on other websites as

"...a cross between Dada and David Letterman, John Cage and the Smothers Brothers. Add a touch of Claes Oldenburg and Groucho Marx, and you've got a fair idea of the performance/conceptual art of Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing, the two Houstonians who are in year fourteen of their collaboration as The Art Guys." -- The New York Times, 1995 (<http://www.theartguys.com/>)

Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing met as students at the University of Houston in the early 1980s and soon after were developing projects together. Performance was a key element in their collaborations from the start and they formalised the commencement of their collaboration in 1983 over a public handshake in which each placed their right hand into a bucket of paint – one green the other orange – The act was carried out over a white canvas creating the work "The Art Guys Agree on Painting." (Abel 1995)

Humour is central to The Art Guys and their work. They claim that "Through our work, we like to show how the small, simple things in life bring so much happiness" (<http://www.theartguys.com/>). A visit to their website homepage immediately generates a smile. They are recognised for an irreverent approach to art and their work and ideas have been compared to artists and ideas of Fluxus from the 1960s. The Art Guys, ..."are performance artists and object-makers with an absurdist sense of humor reminiscent of Fluxus but decidedly sillier." (Colpit 1995: 122)

They employ a broad range of media and their works include sculpture, painting, video, performance art and installation. They utilise found materials, old discarded suitcases, plastic bottles, CDs, vegetables, building tools and materials, in fact anything they can lay their hands on. Materials are placed in bizarre juxtaposition or context to draw attention. Humour most often emerging as the key point of connection between the viewer and their works. It is this factor which also draws a broad audience to their work. While the Art Guys claim little focus on political or social comment in their work it is more often than not found by the viewer.

The goal of their zany art is to reach beyond traditional art audiences to the general public. They say that they don't think about the political subtext of their works; they just create, and if people see meanings in their art, that's great. But the statements aren't always conscious and

intentional. Instead, they are wonderfully bizarre and amusing. The odd juxtapositions in their pop-culture pastiches prove irreverent and ironic. Clever titles enhance the levity. (Abel 1995)

The Art Guys provide access to the arts for a broad audience and it is this popular appeal which the art world finds most irritating. For the serious artworld, they do not take themselves or their art seriously enough. It would appear from the general popular response to their work, that it meets the needs of a world confronted with serious issues. They create a commodity which meets a popular demand and a strategy which confronts many within the artworld with the realities of the business of art.

In the 1980s, artists attacked "commodity fetishism" even as artworks became investment commodities traded for absurd sums. Get with it and cut the crap, the Art Guys imply; be the commodity, and eliminate the middlemen while you're at it. Now there's the apotheosis of the current millennium. (Sherman 1998)

The SUITS project

The SUITS project was built on previous experience working with the suit as part of performance works. The Art Guys had regularly been a part of car parades in their home town of Houston, for which they created outfits constructed from readymade suits adorned with various found materials (CDs, stuffed toys, plastic bottles, grass etc). While in previous applications the suit was more of a carrier for other materials and ideas, for the SUITS project their focus became quite specifically about the language and conventions of the business suit. Suits were specially designed and constructed for this project and performance work.

Essentially The Art Guys wanted to create branded suits which they would wear to iconic locations, special events and functions across the United States for a period of twelve months July 1998- July 99. They approached New York based fashion designer Todd Oldham with the proposition. Oldham, originally a fashion designer, has expanded his practice to include interior design, film, photography, furniture and graphic design. As a fan of the Art Guys, Oldham agreed to work with them on the design and creation of the suits for their project.

A significant part of the project was the sale of space on the suits. The selling phase took twelve months with approaches made to over eight hundred companies in order to secure the sixty two investors/sponsors. It is important for any project that is dependent on sponsorship that an appropriate billboard for the logos and branding is provided; one which will appeal to potential sponsors. Securing the involvement of a noted designer, Todd Oldham, established strong brand associations for their suit billboards. The Art Guys collaboration with Oldham led to the creation of "...a pair of men's suits ...that "weave fashion, advertising, and media into a compelling social fabric". (The Art Guys Again and Again, <http://www.tfaoi.com/newsm1/n1m209.htm>)

The project was run as a business venture. Space on the SUITS was sold for between \$1,500 to \$6,000 and funds raised through the sale of advertising space was used to support the year long promotional activity program. The Art Guys stated in their letter of approach to potential customers,

"Once a sponsor selects an area and leases the add space, its corporate logo will be handsomely embroidered into the fabric of the coats and slacks in that area. The Art Guys will then wear these SUITS through the end of 1998 at as many public events as possible including art openings, galas, television talk shows, fashion events and sporting events throughout the United States and the world. Very much like fashion or media figures." (The Art Guys 2000: 36)

With the sale of space to businesses such as Absolute Vodka, Altoids, Target, Timex, and Larry's Markets and the careful integration of their logos into the cloth through machine embroidery, the resulting suits have been described as a site where "Madison Avenue meets NASCAR." (The Art Guys Again and Again, <http://www.tfaoi.com/newsm1/n1m209.htm>)

Three major events were organised specifically to present and promote the SUITS; The SUITS journey was launched with a runway show and street parade in Houston to an audience estimated to be 3,000 people, a special event "The Art Guys Take Times Square" – an eight hour runway showing of the SUITS viewed by an estimated 2,000 people - was arranged for Times Square in New York to acknowledge the involvement of Todd Oldham and to conclude the journey the SUITS Grand Finale Spectac-urama was held in Houston in July '99 – A fashion show and party held at the Grand Ballroom of The Rice in downtown Houston, the venue where it had all started. Over the twelve month period, The Art Guys wore the suits to in excess of

120 events such as major baseball games, the Houston Grand Prix, New York Fashion Week, exhibition openings and made guest appearances at promotional events such as Donut Stacking on the Morning Show and golf tournaments. They constructed "...ubiquitous product placement in the media and the phenomenon of aging rock stars marketing their futures like pork bellies on the commodities market." (Sherman 1998). The Art Guys managed to get their SUITS photographed with personalities such as Donald Trump and Lauren Hutton. They describe the SUITS as the celebrities; they were the focus of attention; they were what needed to be seen to satisfy their commitment to 'sponsors'. The Art Guys appeared in the SUITS at functions and events in order to be seen, or more to the point for their SUITS to be seen. They "were truly media whores" (The Art Guys 2000: 26) in the pursuit of their art.

Subversion of the suit

In his article "The Art Guys Get Legit", Dave Hickey draws an analogy between the response in the early 1900s to Oscar Wilde and the Art Guys, suggesting that

One can all the origins of its title Suits: Clothes Make the Man, in Wilde's insouciant insistence that 'a gentleman always judges by appearances'..." (2000: 30)

The Art Guys were very specific about their appearance. They chose a very conservative form of the suit; one which clearly embodies conventional masculine codes. They chose to have an identical pair of immaculate two piece grey wool suits with matching coats specially designed hand tailored. The suits were composed of a three button, single breasted jacket teamed with straight leg pants that fell perfectly over the shoe which are teamed with matching grey shirts and silk ties.

Superimposed onto these suits were embroidered sponsor logos. The logos were not placed onto the suits as patches but were embedded into the cloth purposefully as an integral part of the construction process. The brand billboard is fully integrated into the suit, disrupting the surface, form and function of the suit.

The Art Guys chose a form of the suit which has a very conventional, conservative syntagmatic and paradigmatic reading (Barnard 2002: 90), which only increased the jarring between its form and the superimposition of the embroidered logos. Their grey, light weight wool suits contain all the coding of bespoke tailoring and Savile Row; they were individually designed and tailored for the project. In their book

SUITS: Clothes Make the Man, we can see careful documentation of the stages in the process of the bespoke hand tailoring and fitting of the suits to the gentlemen wearers, The Art Guys.

Why not simply buy a suit off the rack? In her essay 'Buyer Beware' Shaila Dawan states that the SUITS project "...does not, as a Readymade does, suppose that daily life is aesthetic." (2000: 104) Would the choice of a readymade have made to direct a reference to daily life and left the Art Guys without an appropriate vehicle for their billboard? Their billboard needed to be attractive to the potential advertiser – it was classy – it was hand made and designer branded. What these features of the suit created was a product of distinction which held strong reference to conservative masculine values. The juxtaposition of the suit and logos provided an impressive challenge to these values.

Subversion of the suits also occurred because The SUITS were paced in a sales context – this in itself is not an unusual context for the suit, however the acceptable role for the suit is to be the invisible reflection of honesty and reliability in the salesman. In the context of the SUITS project the suits became the primary focus of attention – they were the centre of attention, in the foreground, selling the sponsors. They were extremely conspicuous.

The Art Guys also played with shifting the context of the suit between art and fashion. The suits were designed and constructed as fashion, worn in the appropriate manner and presented on the catwalk, however changes were made to the object that shifted its context. According to Barnard "It is only the context that allows the identification of a garment as fashion or nonfashion, as it is only the context that allows the identification of the correct meaning of these words." (Barnard 2002:19) The Art Guys further subvert the suit by shifting and confusing the reader – is it art or is it fashion? They confront us with a new phenomenon in fashion.

It is in its newly found presence in both high and popular culture that fashion finds itself located across both commerce and art, and now seems to be entering into a new cultural dialogue of previously opposing cultural contexts. (Taylor 2005: 446)

Under normal circumstances the suit would present and reinforce conservative behaviour in regard to public social interaction. However the Suit Guys found that public responses to their SUITS varied dramatically from this. The presence of the

logos transformed the suit to the extent that it invited comment and interaction from total strangers. This new form of the suit allowed the breakdown of norms and conventions ruling social interaction. In their interview with Todd Oldham, recorded in their book *Suits: The Clothes Make the Man*, The Art Guys spoke of the reaction of young people as reflective of contemporary attitudes to fashion and the integration of logo designs and brands into garment design. They quote comments that they received, such as “Cool! I want one of those! Where can I get one?” The Art Guys suggest that their positive responses are

“...because logos are considered by young people to be so hip these days. If you look at Tommy Hilfiger, Nike or Calvin Klein, they’ve been extremely savvy in merging their advertising (their logos) with fashion, so that they’re interchangeable and almost indistinguishable from each other.” (The Art Guys 2000: 25)

Along with this response The Art Guys also recorded that while appearing in the financial district in New York some observers found the subversion of the conventions represented in the SUITS so disturbing that they “called us names...swore at us” (2000: 20) This probably reflects the conservative attitudes maintained in the business district where a man’s professional commitment is measured through his dress - the suit. If we consider the history and meaning contained within the origins of the suit, this reaction can be understood. The disruption to the suit resulting from emblazoning it with logos transformed the business suit into a mechanism of conspicuous display. The logos confronting the viewer with symbols of conspicuous consumption, disrupting the traditions and values embedded in the language of the suit. It could be argued that it is little wonder that there was not a greater outcry from those in the business sector of New York.

Conclusion

David Kuchta comments that “In the old sartorial regime, good clothes corresponded with a good soul. Garment proclaimed status. Judging the soul by the attire was a key to social stability. (Kuchta 2002: 21) While fragments of these attitudes remain irrevocably linked to the suit and male dress, change is afoot.

The Art Guys saw the SUITS project as a conceptual art piece. When asked what it was about, their standard response was, “well we’re artists and this is a conceptual art piece in which we leased ad space to companies on these SUITS and we’re wearing them for a year everywhere we go.” (The Art Guys 2000: 20) However it is a

project which has presented the opportunity to examine the role of the suit in male dress and while The Art Guys present this work as art, it is clear that there was some subversive play going on in the space between art and fashion. According to Shaila Dewan (2000: 97), "The SUITS project is a full-service, value-added art package that offers not only endurance, performance, real-time interaction and documentation, but a residue that's both sculpture and fashion history: the SUITS themselves".

The SUITS reflect change and have been recognised for their role in questioning and subverting the traditional role and values of the suit. Following The Art Guys project The SUITS have become a part of the exhibition "Pattern Language: Clothing as Communicator", organized by Art Interactive, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Their inclusion in this exhibition recognises the SUITS themselves within the context of a body of works

"...in which artists go beyond the everyday utility of clothing, and instead use clothing, fabric and the body to invent new forms of communication and interaction between wearers, between wearers and their clothes, and between the makers of clothing and the fashion system. The artists here have used the format of garments to critique standard notions about clothing, fashion and society."

<http://www.artinteractive.org/shows/patternlanguage/>

In the context of this exhibition The Art Guys SUITS now sit alongside Joseph Beuys 1970 Felt Suit, the suit that for Beuys represented Everyman.

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