

IN BUSINESS

BY ALLISON PERKINS

Well-suited for Art

Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing, better known as the Art Guys, conquered the pop art world with an unusual offering: They created a conceptual piece that combined fashion, advertising and media in their most celebrated project to date, "SUITS: The Clothes Make the Man."

Irrepressible mavericks of the art world, the Art Guys use visual pranks and wordplays to celebrate art. Creating their own special brand of expression seems to come easy. Explaining what they create, on the other hand, appears to be, well, difficult at best for the talented pair. "It's hard to explain, being an artist. We don't do one style like painting or sculpting. We really don't know how to define it," says Galbreth. Some define it as true artistic genius.

The two arty Houstonians teamed up while they were students at the University of Houston in 1983 and created a form of post-conceptual performance art. "Our work is more a reflection of our personalities. It reflects our sensibilities," Galbreth explains. "We're serious about what we do, even if it is humorous."

So how did the inventive duo come up with the SUITS idea? The Guys were inspired by the increasing visibility of corporate sponsors at athletic events and disappointed by dwindling public support for the arts. What else was left but to sell advertising space on their own bodies?

In 1997, they asked world-renowned fashion designer Todd Oldham to design a pair of conservative, gray, wool business suits. Meanwhile, over the course of a year, the Guys contacted nearly 800 potential sponsors to advertise on their suits. It became a game to see how many rejection letters they could get from the same company. Eventually, though, 56 companies signed up for a total of 62 ads that would be embroidered on the surface of their suits.



"One of the selling points to the companies was that not only would we wear the suits for a year, but that they would probably end up being exhibited in a gallery or museum somewhere. The advertisements would live on," says Massing.

The Guys vowed to wear the suits for a full year and did, beginning in 1998. They made spectacles of themselves at venues throughout the world. They appeared at any and all events as human billboards colorfully covered in advertising logos.

The imaginative performers successfully fulfilled the one-year advertising contract and completed an associated promotional tour with appearances on PBS, CBS and CNN and in Times Square, where they exhibited their suits during an eight-hour mock fashion show.

"The SUITS project was definitely political and had a lot of statements to it," say Galbreth and Massing. "It's not what you say; it's how you say it." The SUITS project was the most difficult and intimidating work of art they had ever undertaken, but it was more successful than they had thought it would be.



THE ART GUYS: MICHAEL GALBRETH, LEFT, AND JACK MASSING

The SUITS project was a decorative way to mix the glamour of high fashion with corporate strategies for marketing while, at the same time, moving the Art Guys toward establishing themselves as creative geniuses.

The items from the "SUITS: The Clothes Make the Man" project are now part of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's permanent collection. The Guys say they truly are honored to have the suits displayed in their hometown museum. And the suits will enjoy a life well beyond the one year the Guys wore them.

The exhibition features the suits themselves, along with the shirts, overcoats and ties designed by Houstonian Selven O'Keef Jarmon. The collection is accompanied by a documentary video, photographs, drawings, preparatory collages and "The Wailing Wall," an anthology of 62 rejection letters from corporations that declined to advertise on their suits. The exhibition will be on view at the MFAH's Alice Pratt Brown Gallery and Garden through Nov. 4. ih