



Arts //

BROTHERS IN FOREARMS

TWO DUDES NAMED JOHN RUN A GALLERY SPACE LOCATED BETWEEN THEIR ELBOW AND WRIST

BY WENDY GILMARTIN

The idea behind Open Arms is a simple one: Two L.A. guys, each with a tattooed spot on one of their forearms, provide those spots as a space for artists to create work.

But John Barlog and John Burtle don't really think of themselves as curators the way someone running a conventional gallery might — they just want to show art anytime and anywhere they can, even if that means being tied together, getting glue in their arm hair, or having little objects taped or strapped on their skin.

"It is a little complicated talking about it, since we've asked that our names not be used, but we try to remove the authorship out of the project," say "the Johnz."

They've also been referred to as the space's "hosts," John and John, Traveling Open Art Display (TOAD) or nothing at all, and in this interview, quotes are attributed to both of them together.

These "hosts" take their role as self-contained public gallery space seriously, whether they participate with an artist in a traditional setting or meet one randomly walking down the street, who doodles all over their skin.

In 2007 the Johnz had one rectangle (2 inches by 4 inches) inked onto each of their left forearms, and since then, that real estate has provided a noncommercial, public exhibition space.

But the Open Arms "space" brings a very different set of logistical considerations from what an artist might grapple with in a conventional exhibition environment.

It combines a sense of permanence (the space of the tattoos themselves), mobility (into all aspects of one's daily routine) and temporality (the work could potentially wash off in the shower if the Johnz aren't careful).

"We've had people ask to break our arms or cut into our skin or put permanent tattoos, and that's not something we can do," the Johnz say.

"We have two basic rules: The piece cannot physically harm the arms, and the artist can't damage the space," they add.

But does the project rely on them being near each other at all times? How do they lead separate lives?

"We do accept projects or submissions that are only on one of us because that might be when the most spontaneous proposal happens, when we're not together," they say. "That's one of the things we enjoy, that it can function in different ways at different times."



"The Johnz" have curated artwork on their arms by Ben Lowrie, top; Fela Kim and Inger Koerselman, center; and Ethan Shoshan.

