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DAILY NEWS

WARNING: ART AHEAD

Whatever happened to the plain old pursuit of beauty?

The artist had a great idea: He would put some suspicious packages in the subway to get people thinking about bombs, terrorism and maybe even deeper stuff, like a change in the balance of power. Cool!

But this was not 11 days ago here in New York. This was 1994, in the London tube. And the artist, Brooklynite Gregory Green, took one crucial precaution: He put up plaques to explain his project, which had been approved in advance by the subway authorities.

That way, nobody had to shut the station for five hours.

Here in New York, Clinton Boisvert would have done well to follow that model. Instead, he placed 38 black boxes labeled "FEAR" around the Union Square subway station Dec. 11. After the cops dismantled the packages, they set out to find a suspect described as "artsy" by a commuter who'd seen him.

The profiling worked. Even as police were seeking, presumably, a guy with a goatee, black clothes and a tattoo, they got lucky when School of Visual Arts freshman Boisvert - goatee and black coat, yes, tattoo status unknown - turned himself in.

Apparently he had no idea his boxes would cause such a commotion "He'd have to live in a black box to be that dumb," opined a colleague.

Whether or not he intended to create havoc, I leave to the judge, But clearly he did intend to create art, and that is just as disturbing,

His sculpture class assignment had been to put a piece of art in a specific place and watch the public's reaction.

That's pretty broad. If he had placed 38 wads of gum on the subway floor, would that have been any different? How about 38 papier-maché rats? Or condoms?

My guess is, all would have been equally acceptable in class, because almost anything gets to call itself art today.

Beautiful pictures and stunning sculptures? Those are so old hat that sometimes it seems artists are running in the opposite direction, just to be considered legit.

Why can't they go back to the simple pursuit of beauty? "I don't think you can go back to anything," says Dave Tourjé, an artist in Southern California. "The only thing you can do is keep moving forward."

Forward to "FEAR" boxes. Great. "One of the functions of art is to be on the edge of what is permissible," says James Yood, a professor of art theory at Northwestern University. Provoking the middle class, he explains, is a time-honored artistic pursuit

That pursuit has led to such gross attention grabbers as Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" - a crucifix hung in a jar of pee - and the infamous dung-covered Madonna at the Brooklyn Museum of Art's "Sensation" show.

But Yood points out that even Michelangelo provoked the public in his day: His "Last Judgment" in the Sistine Chapel was criticized for too much nudity, and parts were soon painted over.

"The first person who did a painting about something that wasn't a religious subject was considered bizarre," adds Carol Oster, a Manhattan sculptor. So were such groundbreakers as the now-loved Impressionists, and the wacky Dadaists, whose claim to fame was placing a urinal in an art gallery. After that, it was anything goes.

Some of that anything is disturbing, but, indeed, does make a point. Those "Suspicious Looking Objects" in London, for instance, were part of Green's 10-year exploration of power. His bomb-centric art was trying to make people aware of how easily our world could change if a person or group embraced terrorism. Rather prescient

The difference between Green and the "FEAR" boxes is that Green identified his work as art. He wanted people to think about issues, not about dying on the way home.

Setting out to simply upset people is not art. It's self-indulgence. The art world has too much of that already.