

## **A Comedy of Values: J.S.G. Boggs and Lawrence Weschler**

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J. S. G Boggs works in the medium of India ink and high-grade currency paper woven with security threads. Lawrence Weschler works in the medium of nonfiction prose. Boggs is frequently arrested, occasionally put on trial and, so far, always acquitted in connection with the crime of making and passing counterfeit money.

Weschler is a prize-winning cultural affairs essayist and staff writer for the *New Yorker*, who for more than a decade has followed with serious if amused attention the trials and shenanigans of J. S. G. Boggs, and has chronicled them in *Boggs: A Comedy of Values* (1999).

The two artists are more similar in their life's work than first apparent: both explore "the mysterious and arbitrary nature of value." Boggs's biggest preoccupation is the insubstantial nature of paper money. It would appear both absurd and remarkable that a piece of paper could actually be worth the value assigned to it by the numbers printed upon it. When Boggs mints his own currency, he effectively poses the question: Why are two nearly identical objects (the counterfeit and the real McCoy) not identical in value? His work also poses a related and equally puzzling question: What is the value of art? The nearest he comes to an answer is that all value (particularly that of non-utilitarian objects) requires a collective act of faith.

His art reminds us of the strange weightlessness and abstraction of value-- the inherent problem, for example, with calling an English pound a pound. A one-pound note drawn by Boggs is appropriately titled, "How Much Does an Idea Weigh?" Boggs takes the trouble to protect himself from charges of counterfeiting: he makes his drawings on only one side of the paper and alters symbols and other graphic elements of authentic money.

Although he makes actual purchases with his money (a total of about \$250,000 worth of goods and services as of 1993; a good deal more by now), he informs the participants in every transaction that the money isn't legal tender.

Much of Boggs's art lies not only in the beauty of his drawings, but in the drama of the transactions themselves: awkward negotiations with skeptical waiters, cashiers and store owners. After each transaction, Boggs sells information regarding the whereabouts of his phony bill to the highest-bidding art collector who is free to negotiate the resale of the bill from the first recipient. A completed piece, suitable for exhibition in a gallery or museum, contains the framed bill as well as any "residue" of the transaction: receipts, change, photographs,

packaging, ticket stubs, etc.

Boggs's art is not without its perils. In 1986, British agents raided his London gallery and confiscated his work. The Bank of England charged him with four charges of counterfeiting British currency, punishable by up to 40 years in jail. Though acquitted, dozens of drawings remain in custody. Recently, the United States Supreme Court refused to hear his appeal of the Treasury Department's confiscation of over 1,200 "Boggs bills" and related materials. Boggs is negotiating to have the materials transferred to the Smithsonian Institution.

In addition to his numerous brushes with the law, Boggs is the occasional victim of other misfortunes resulting from his work. Swiss counterfeiters have attempted to pass off imitation "Boggs bills." An art critic once solicited a bribe. And, inevitably, art burglars once broke into his London flat and stole his phony bills. Other hardships resulted from the artist's vow to live for one year off of his currency alone.

A reluctance on the part of many merchants to accept the bills made food scarce at times. The impossibility of using pay phones and laundromats posed their own inconveniences (the artist confesses to having worn dirty clothes for much of that year).

Lawrence Weschler's interest in Boggs grows out of an ongoing preoccupation with the boundaries and definitions of value, art and authority. In the 1980's, Weschler profiled a Yugoslav performance artist whose art consisted of stripping naked, parading the streets and getting in trouble with the authorities. The author's 1995 bestseller, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, provides a tour of the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, a museum that playfully abuses the authority of museums to assign value and authenticity to its artifacts: some exhibits are false, others true, others half-true.

Weschler is perhaps best known for his New Yorker pieces that profile obsessive individuals: cartoonists, scholars, comics, artists, collectors, circus performers, etc. These pieces, many of them collected in *A Wanderer in the Perfect City: Selected Passion Pieces* (1998) often implicitly pose the question: "What is the value of a given art, field, preoccupation, obsession?" Weschler's subjects are consumed by their chosen activities, often at great personal sacrifice.

*Boggs: A Comedy of Values* is more than a profile of J. S. G. Boggs: it provides in small compass an entertaining history of money in its various forms. Also included are fascinating discussions of money as an art form, and subversive uses of money by artists in modern times.