

Boggs - A Comedy of Values

by Lawrence Weschler

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(Extracts)

(p.10) Boggs: "(...) I think money is beautiful stuff. (...) I mean, look at this thing. No one ever stops to *look* at the bills in their pocket, just stops and admires the detailing, the conception, the technique. Part of my work is intended to get people to look at such things."

(p.11) Boggs: "(...) But as far as I'm concerned, money is easily more beautiful and developed and aesthetically satisfying than the print works of all but a few modern artists. And a dollar bill is a print: it's a unique, numbered edition. (...) I'd rather have a dollar bill than just about any other modern print, even if I knew I could sell the print the very next day for several thousand dollars!"

(p.12-13) Boggs: "It's all an act of faith (...) Nobody knows what a dollar is, what the word means, what holds the thing up, what it stands for. And that's also what my work is about." (...) He pulled a crisp five-dollar bill out of his wallet. "`Five dollars.' But what's a dollar? By now, it's just an idea. For that matter, what's `five'? It doesn't exist either. I mean, you can have the numeral" - Boggs traced a 5 on the tabletop with his finger - "the written word f-i-v-e, the sound *five* as I say it. But five itself doesn't exist, except as a concept. So you've got these two ideas joined together and they represent something else: they stand in for something you might eventually buy, for instance, but nothing in particular. And then I make a drawing of a five-dollar bill, and that's *another* order of representation: it's something that represents something that represents something but nothing in particular."

(p.20-21) Boggs resumed his saga: "Back at the artists' café, Rudy (Hansruedi Demenga) had offered me one hundred Swiss francs in real money for that first one-hundred-Swiss-Franc drawing. But I explained to him how a few weeks earlier, a dealer in London had made a similar offer: he'd said he'd be willing to buy as many drawings as I could generate at face value, and we'd gotten into a fight, me insisting that as art objects they were certainly worth more than face value, and him

refusing to pay more. Things got a little heated, and finally I swore, `On my word, I will never sell these drawings. If you want one, you´ll have to go track it down and then see how much you´ll have to pay for it.` So I told Rudy I couldn´t sell it to him either. I´d already fallen into my first rule. After a couple of days, though, Rudy had told several friends about me, and he had several collectors eager to buy any of my drawings. I told him he´d have to track them down, I couldn´t remember where I´d spent them. I reached into my pocket and extracted a handful of receipts. (...) Meanwhile, Rudy suggested that I henceforth write on the back of my drawings "Galerie Demenga will redeem at face value" - supposedly this was to protect me legally. And I did do that for a few days. But after a while I stopped, because it began to feel like a con." I asked Boggs whether anyone took the Galerie Demenga up on its offer. "The funny thing was," Boggs replied, "people would go to the gallery to show their drawings and ask if it was really true that the gallery would redeem them at face value. Rudy or his assistants would say, "Absolutely," but then the people would say that they weren´t interested in selling them, they´d just been curious. Finally, in exasperation, Rudy went on the local radio station and announced, "There´s an artist here in town named Boggs who´s spending drawings of Swiss franc notes. He won´t sell any of them to me. I hereby announce that if it´s a real Boggs, the Galerie Demenga will pay *ten times* face value."After that, I *really* got popular. (...)"

(p.40-41) Jackson Pollock is said to have settled his drink bills with paintings (the lucky bartender!), and Kurt Schwitters merrily included everyday receipts in his collages (...). Boggs is by no means the first artist to have stumbled upon these precincts. Picasso, the story is told, used to go out shopping: He´d sign his checks and then dash off smart little doodles on the backs - the checks were seldom cashed. (So that Picasso truly *wasthe* modern Midas.) Years later, the Swedish artist Carl Fredrik Reuterswård made a three-dimensional bronze of Picasso´s signature, stood it on a tottering pedestal, and titled it *The Great Fetish*. He also printed and stretched-out versions of Salvador Dalí´s signature and sold them by the centimeter. Marcel Duchamp went to his dentist one day, couldn´t pay or didn´t want to, and instead drew an ornate check, filled it in and signed it, and the dentist accepted. (...)

(p.48-50) (...) Most of these other kind of work had focussed principally on internal issues of art and money: how money skews the workings of the art world, how fame skews money, what people value in art and how they express that value, and so forth. Boggs´s work by contrast, was chiefly about the world outside galleries and museums: his work takes place at a three-way intersection, that of art, money, and the everyday world. (...) Boggs is engaged in philosophical disruptions, in provoking brief, momentary tears in the ordinarily seamless fabric of taken-for-granted mundanity. The people he addresses (at least those he involves in the early stages of his enactments) are cruising along on automatic pilot - hey, he confronts them, Wake up, wake up, look down there,

what's holding this thing up, there are no visible means of support, how is it that we fly at all?

(p.62-63) (...) Why do you do it, I asked. "Because there's a lot I still don't understand about these transactions. Whenever I get the feeling I've understood, I know that just means I'm not pushing hard enough, I have to push harder, to find new ways. I know my work reflects something, resonates with something in society, but I'm not clear what. I often view my work as the symptom, but I don't know the disease."

(p.68-69) "(...) what my documentation is about is the fact that the transaction itself is the art object. (...) He has the drawing and I have the change, and these are both very specific objects. If the piece is ever to be reassembled, only those two specific entities, with their specific serial numbers, and then the various other components - all of them cross-annotated with each other - will be able to do the trick. The transaction itself thus becomes an unique object."

(p.71-72) He recounted how he'd been working very hard to develop a technique for *erasing* dollar bills. "It takes a lot of time - *a lot of time* - and it's been a trial-and-error process, but I've just about perfected a method whereby I can efface the inks on a bill and get it down to blank paper. I've got a variety of ideas as to what I might do with that. For instance, take an uncut sheet of thirty-two virgin one-dollar bills, erase one of them, and then draw it back in. Or else, entirely erase both sides of a one-hundred-dollar bill and then try to sell the blank paper for one hundred dollars - which would be an interesting transaction in itself, but might also make a nice homage to Rauschenberg who once erased a de Kooning drawing and claimed the blank sheet of paper as his own work of art. I'd also like to create my own unit of currency, the Bogg, print up a series, and then study its price fluctuations. (...)"

(p.85-86) (...) "Didn't I tell you about (William) Harnett?" Boggs asked. "It's an incredible coincidence. It turns out that there was this nineteenth-century American artist named Harnett who specialized in trompe-l'oeil canvases and was arrested by the Secret Service in 1886 on charges of counterfeiting, because he'd made four paintings depicting various denominations of dollar bills. There are all kind of eerie parallels. He was charged with four counts, I was charged with four counts. He was arrested in 1886, I was arrested in 1986. In 1880, he'd gone to live in London; I went to live there in 1980. The date of his arrest was November 23rd - a hundred and one years to the day before the date of my trial. Pretty weird, huh?" Boggs hummed the theme from the *Twilight Zone* (...)

(p.91) In my own brief foray at research into these nineteenth-century figures, incidentally, I came upon one other antecedent for Boggs's situation: the melancholy case of the great American landscape artist Ralph Albert Blakelock. Crushed by the meagerness of his earnings as an artist, he took to manufacturing his own money, million-dollar bills

with miniature landscapes and his own portrait in the middle. When he tried to cash one of these bills at a New York bank, he was apprehended and remanded to a mental asylum, where he lived out the remainder of his days.

(p.123) (...) Boggs, it seemed, had been endeavoring to give each new foray a clean, fresh edge - an edge that invariably brought him closer to The Edge. Thus, having begun by trading hand-drawn renditions of bills, he took to wondering, Why not attempt to traffic in multiples, of various sorts, initially in lithographs (would people accept those?) and then in crude engravings (would those get him in trouble?) and finally in simple photocopies? People did keep accepting them - by no means everyone, but enough people to keep things interesting - and treasury police all over the world grew more and more concerned.

(p.124-125) (toward the end of 1992) He was about to embark on what he was calling "Project Pittsburgh." He had fashioned an entirely new edition of Boggs bills - brand-new drawings in denominations ranging from one, five, ten, and twenty dollars on up to ten thousand. He'd laserprinted a million dollars "worth" of these bills - enough to fill a bulging suitcase. Starting on January 1, 1993 (...) he was going to try to spend these bills in his usual fashion, by getting people to accept them knowingly in exchange for goods and services; only this time he'd be adding a new twist: he was going to encourage anyone who accepted his bills to keep them in circulation. This time he was using the back side of the bills as well: an elaborate lacework design filigreed around five empty circles. Anyone accepting a bill was to immediately press his or her thumbprint into one of the empty circles ("just like being arrested," Boggs noted, with evident satisfaction), and the bill would not be deemed to have completed its life cycle until it had changed hands five times, acquiring a full complement of thumbprints. "I want others to share in the fascinating experience of trying to get people to accept art at face value," Boggs said, with expansive generosity. "And I, in turn, want to share in my collector's experiences of trying to track these pieces down."

(p.138) To date, he figures, he's spent well in excess of a million dollars' worth of his own drawings, and the transaction pieces in which they've resulted continue to compound handsomely in value on the secondary market, fetching upward of \$100,000. His work has been acquired by institutions ranging from the British Museum to the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Smithsonian, which eventually acquired the Sebel Town House transaction.(...)