

Interview with J.S.G. Boggs

Manuel Gonzalez



Just Say Yes
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Manuel Gonzalez, 376-393
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Manuel Gonzalez is a self-taught
In January of this year, the artist J.S.G. Boggs printed
 poet. He is currently traveling
 900 one-dollar bills, which he then spent to rent a booth at a
 throughout America with Sandra
 paper-money collectors convention. The convention organizer
 Smith in search of subjects for a
 then went out and put them into general circulation by passing
 book, *The Washing (ton) Machine*,
 them on to others who would spend them further all across
 dealing with the role of education
 America.
 in the formation of ethical be-
 havior as juxtaposed with penal
 behavioral modification. For some time, I had been interested in Boggs' work and his
 lengthy disagreement with government officials over his
 currency series. Upon hearing the news of this mass act of
 civil disobedience, I could no longer resist satisfying my
 curiosity. I wanted to meet the man who, depending on whom
 you speak with, is either mad, a con-artist or both. I found
 something other in him, and I hope the record of this brief
 encounter will help reveal the human being who lives this
 painfully slow-moving legal drama daily.

MG

JSGB

You were reluctant to give this interview, and I was surprised at that because you seem to be such an accessible and public person.

I used to have an open-door policy, and I did not discriminate. If someone wanted to talk about the work or the circumstances, the door was open, even if it was the press come to ambush me. But **I hate interviews.** I'm much more interested in conversation.

You are referring to the Dan Rather *Eye On America* television show where they portrayed you and your work in the light of color-copy counterfeiting.

Actually I was referring to *Art in America* magazine, but CBS fills the bill.

I assure you I haven't come to ambush you.

Exactly what an ambusher would say, no?

Touche.

Look, I didn't close the door because I was worried about being ambushed. Do your worst. I just got tired of doing interviews that were of little consequence to either party. There is no such thing as a stupid question, but if the question's little more than a thinly veiled fishing expedition to grab a sound bite, and no one is actually listening to the response, then **what is the point?**

I'm listening.

So am I.

(Boggs' reputation for full-frontal confrontation is well deserved.)

You mentioned your previous open-door policy—did that extend to the **police?**

What a **joke.** They did not need a search warrant. I'd invited them to the studio dozens of times. I thought they were O.K. people. The United States Secret Service had been asked to jointly prosecute in England because seven drawings were of American bills. They refused and ordered those works returned to me. I thought they were

awake. So when I moved back to America [Boggs lived ten years abroad, mostly in England] in 1988, I met with agents in every city I worked in, and finally had a meeting with the head of the counterfeiting division [ironically, that is what it is called] in Washington [D.C.]. They never would come to the studio, but **everything seemed cool.**

So when did the trouble in the America start?

Andy Maass [director of the Tampa Museum of Art, in Florida] wanted to do a show. Some other museums wanted the show too, so they designed this really beautiful color catalogue. Then, at the last minute, the Secret Service decided to swoop down on the museum and the printer, threatening **prosecution, confiscation** of work and printing presses and all sorts of **threats.**

So why didn't you stand and fight them right then and there?

Well, we would have. Andy Maass was very ready to take the whole shootin' match all the way to the **Supreme Court**, but the Secret Service had taken some negatives and the printers couldn't, and understandably wouldn't, withstand the financial impact of having their presses confiscated, so they just refused to do the job. The show was just about to open, so the catalogue was redesigned with a protest notice in the front. Maass made it

very clear to the Secret Service that if they touched one single piece of work in the museum, he'd have their guts for garters. So we didn't hear anything more from them, and figured that was the end of it.

So did the touring exhibition continue without further incident?

You mean the **show from hell?**

How do you mean?

The show started at the Tampa Museum of Art, which **fought** to have the exhibition rather than the catalogue, followed by the Carnegie Mellon University Art Gallery, which got **shut down** just after the show and turned into offices. Next stop was the Smith College Museum of Art, but a sudden funding cut caused a **cancellation.** The next stop was the Grand Rapids Museum of Art, which **closed** due to funding cuts before the work even arrived. The final stop was supposed to be Laramie County Community College, which is where I got **raided,** in 1991, by the Secret Service for the second time.

That's where they took the infamous fifteen Boggs-Bills you were trying to get back in the BBC documentary *Money Man*?

Yeah.

And was that the end of the touring exhibition?

No, Andrea Norris at the Spencer Museum in Lawrence, Kansas took the risk and gave the pinheads the finger. She was ready to go to court, and she must have had a good board of trustees ready to back her up. Anyway, she **scared the picture-police** and they took a very low profile.

So the cops have your work, fifteen Boggs-Bills. Were these hand-drawn or printed?

Printed. I made that transition in Australia. All the bills I spent down under were half hand-work and half print-work.

So the precedent for you, never mind Warhol et al, had been set for creating multiples employing the image of money?

Wait a minute. This point gets a little tiresome for me. Though all the Pop artists made images of money, they were so far from the first. . .

*(Boggs, though unable to read properly due to dyslexia, owns a small library of books proving that **the artist who has not produced an image of money is the exception** rather than the rule. From Pollack to Picasso in the twentieth century, leading back to Titian and Marinus Claeszoon Van Reymerswaele in the fourteenth century, the body of work is staggering. I urge you to seek it out, for to include it in appropriate detail here would detract from the urgent point of the moment.)*

Why didn't I know about this?

Good question. Because certain parts of the government do not want you to see this material, and they will go to great lengths to ensure that you don't! As you can see, most of these books are produced in Europe. The ones which are made in America all have these tiny little black-and-white, low resolution images of the paintings and drawings that hardly show the beauty of the work, much less hold your visual interest. And they all have these **ominous** little government **warnings** printed beneath them, so they look like reward posters in a post office rather than art.

(One catalogue alone, from an exhibition in Paris, France, Les Couleurs De L'Argent, spans the entire history of money art in beautiful full color.) You mean I can buy this book in Europe, but I can't buy it here in America?

Edward Nygren [director of the Huntington Libraries in Santa Monica, California] and Ned Rifkin [Curator of the High Museum in Atlanta, Georgia] wanted to co-curate an exhibition of money painting here in the good old YOU-ESS-AYE, but I think they finally gave up because of all the **red tape**. Besides, the catalogue would have been a dog's dinner of little black-and-white low-res thumbnails. It would have been an exhibition few institutions could back-up with the legal counsel money needed to even make invitations for the show. Certain elements of the government simply do not want people to see this work and they are glad to see legislators making laws that restrict dissemination due to their own **ignorance** of this work.

Do you mean to say the legislators are not the villains.

Of course not. Any reading of the law regarding the subject reveals a complete **lack of consideration of artistic interest** in the subject matter. If only one senator or representative had had any awareness of this body of work, there would be provisions drafted in the law to accommodate legitimate artistic usage of the image in a fine art context.

Can you tell me what **the law** says. . .

(Boggs recites passages of U.S. penal code, title 18, with particular reference to sections 474, and 504, as a monotone lawyer-android)

. . .in English rather than lawyer-speak?.

This is only a little complicated, but anyone can follow it with just a bit of thought. Supposedly, **you can't make pictures of money unless they are significantly larger or smaller than real money, and only if they are in black-and-white.** But beneath this language, there is an even more basic legal tenant, that it is wrong to make the image with bad intent. That is to say: it must be made with the intention to cheat some poor sap, and a reasonable amount of care must not have been taken to make sure that someone else can't use the work to cheat anyone who is half awake. Sorry about the double negatives.

Are you talking about color, size, or fidelity?

All of the above, plus media and socially redeeming value! None of the three you mention will alone serve the function of counterfeit money, but further you have to consider media and the ever-present unaccountable worthwhileness.

(Boggs points to a color plate in an art book)

Look at this painting, and tell me what is wrong with what I just said.

I see the painting, but I don't know exactly which of what you just said you are referring to.

Say again?

I said, I see the painting. . .

STOP! You see the painting?

Yes.

(Boggs rips out the page and holds it up with both hands.)

You see the very painting I am holding in my hands.

Yes.

How much is this painting worth?

Well, I'm not an expert.

Ballpark it.

Two million dollars?

(I laugh.)

Am I close?

You see this painting, right here in front of you, that I hold in my hands, and you guess it is worth **two million dollars**. Well. . .the painting would probably fetch ten times that at auction, but I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'll sell this painting, right here in front of you, for two hundred dollars. . .right here, this painting (*Boggs places the page in my hands*) that you hold in your hands.

Do you have this painting?

You are holding it in your hands. We have already established that. The very one you say you see before you.

But, this is not the actual painting. It is just a color illustration of the painting torn from an art book.

But, you said you could see the painting.

You are playing semantics. I meant that I could see the painting illustrated in full color printing techniques. I didn't mean to say I actually thought that this was the painting.

So am I to respond to your expression by what you said or what you meant.

Any fool could see what I meant.

Perhaps I am not just any **fool.**

(Now a flame is burning brightly, deep within his eyes, growing rapidly. He gives the impression of a madman, the devil and a nuclear melt-down all at once, and I can feel the heat searing the cheeks of my face. I would flee were it not for the undeniable sense in the fire before me.)

So, if I follow you, you can **violate** the letter of the law in any one of the three criteria without truly violating the spirit of the law. *(I breathe a quiet, imperceptible sigh of relief. I seem to have passed some test, not finding myself caught in some eternal Hell of transgression, and Boggs' fire fades to mere candle-light illumination.)*

I don't believe you will find fidelity mentioned in the legislation, but as you, not being just any fool, can see, **fidelity is inextricably connected to media**, which isn't mentioned in the law either.

But money is printed on paper and so are your works, so how can that even become a significant issue.

I would gladly put my work to the **test of the blind**, and this is a matter of public record — put my work in the hand of a blind person, and they will tell you it is not a U.S. dollar bill of any denomination.

Do you mean to tell me that you pay such strict attention to tactility in all your works? That is a very sculptural interest. So we are really talking about four areas?

Five.

Five? What is the fifth?

Worthwhileness. The unaccountable value often referred to in the courts as socially redeeming value.

It sounds as if you are talking about pornography.

Hey, it's very relevant, and **there are values we have and hold that no accountant in the whole world can find a place for in the ledger book.** What I find most fascinating is that the average person, of average intelligence, giving even the vaguest modicum of consideration can tell the difference, even if they cannot articulate how the hell they even recognize the difference in the first place. Call it cultural intuition, call it common sense, but don't underestimate the ability, or sensibility, of people.

Now you are contradicting P.T. Barnum's axiom that one can never go wrong underestimating the intelligence of the average person.

It wasn't Barnum, it was Mencken who said it. Besides, Barnum knew that **people knew they were being fooled, but they wanted to be** and enjoyed it, even when the jig was up. You have to take into consideration both the satirical sarcasm and the offense taken to condescension by the Jacksonian Democrats of the day. Barnum was a brilliant show-maker who wasted his talents on promoting promoting. I'm seeing the same people he saw, but I see them differently. Where he saw suckers, I see a people **willing to indulge in foolishness and chicanery**, willing to learn, and preferring to do both at the same time. Just look at contemporary tele-education. Bill Nye the Science Guy! God, I wish that show would have been on when I was a kid. I may even have escaped the fate of making art and lived much more comfortably doing research in a field with a bit more social respect.

(My head was spinning, and I very foolishly sought a diversion.) Are you interested in being respected?

No, I'm interested in not being disrespected. I was happy being a dishwasher at the Holiday Inn, painting and drawing in my spare time each night. But, they wouldn't leave me alone. They made me a cashier and pushed me further into being an accounting major at Miami University, Ohio so they could move me up the corporate ladder, grooming me for upper management and stealing all the time I had for making art. Not art made for the market, but real art. . . **true art.**

So now we are coming to the very heart of your work. You refuse to **sell** the life-sized works depicting existing currencies, preferring only to **spend** them, and that has ultimately lead to the current project, **Life Size and In Colour**. Explain this project to me.

Hey, I'm just washing the dishes.

