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THE ART GUYS

[ARTISTS]



illustration by Tony Millionaire

“IT’S BEEN DRIVEN INTO OUR HEADS THAT A PIECE OF ART IS SOMETHING
THAT’S COMMODIFIED AND GETS HANDED DOWN THROUGH THE AGES.
BUT THAT’S NOT WHAT ART IS.”

Issues associated with selling one’s own good name:

The possible de-authentication of self
The need to come up with a new name
Smoke, ashes, and what remains
Over-valuation



As it happens, this conversation between me and the Art Guys—Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing, the two renowned Houston-based art jesters (b. 1956 and 1959, respectively) who've been giving over their lives to an especially distinctive brand of serious play for nearly three decades now—occurred before last November's notorious Tree Wedding incident. Or rather, it was after this very conversation that the Guys asked me to co-officiate at the ceremony in question, which I agreed to do, but only on condition that I could do so in my perennial role as would-be rabbi.

And then, of course, everything went to hell. Back in 2009, against a political backdrop in which local Texas politicians were ranting about how they couldn't very well condone weddings between gay individuals because before you knew it they were going to be asked to condone weddings between people and their dogs, the Art Guys decided to marry a tree. Said wedding was not consummated at the time, however, because the tree was still underage (just what kind of deviates do you take our Guys for?) and also because the sapling had yet to find a permanent home. Then this past November, the tree having come of age (or at any rate grown taller than either of the two of them) and a permanent spot having been located, on the shady grounds of Houston's prestigious Menil Collection, a dedicatory ceremony was announced, for which I was recruited. The Guys kept insisting that they were in dead earnest about marrying the tree as such, that the whole thing was an environmentalist gesture (a gesture rendered all the more poignant in the wake of a previous summer so blisteringly hot that a substantial fraction of Houston's other trees had in fact all died), but this did not keep anti-gay-marriage activists from taking predictably angry umbrage at the whole charade, nor (somewhat more disconcertingly) gay activists from becoming righteously convinced that the Guys were trying to make fun of them. The Houston Chronicle's art critic, who is gay, led the charge, condemning both the Guys for belittling what was after all "the human rights issue of our time" and the Menil for providing them a forum from which to do so, and responding with a bracing act of self-sacrificial civil disobedience of his own (marrying a woman at a gay strip club the night before the tree ceremony). But the ceremony went on as scheduled (emotions running so high and raw that nobody even bothered to notice that in my role as rabbi, I'd taken to wearing a Palestinian kafia rather than the traditional Hebrew talit). In my talk I invoked such other eminences as rabinats Denise Levertov and Kay Ryan, and the great Houston wonder rebbe Donald Barthelme; others had their say; and by the end, everything seemed to have calmed down. Until the next day, when the Chronicle critic, unappeased, suddenly began posting a series of progressively more unhinged and vitriolic videos to the net, himself gloriously naked from the waist up, in which he detailed an earlier phase of his life when he was both a meth addict and a prostitute... and, trust me, it just got weirder and weirder from there. The Chronicle let go said critic, who then went on a national tour to further decry the whole scandal, so he wasn't even in town when, a few days later, someone attacked the tree

itself, knocking it over at knee level (at which point the local media began referring to the Guys as “the widowers”). Oy.

It goes on from there (the tree—now more of a shrub—somehow survived!), but as I say, that all came after this conversation. Which speaks for itself, though it is also, in retrospect, oddly premonitory.

— Lawrence Weschler



*“Tree Dedication Ceremony for The Art Guys Marry A Plant” 2011,
Lawrence Weschler addresses the audience © The Art Guys*

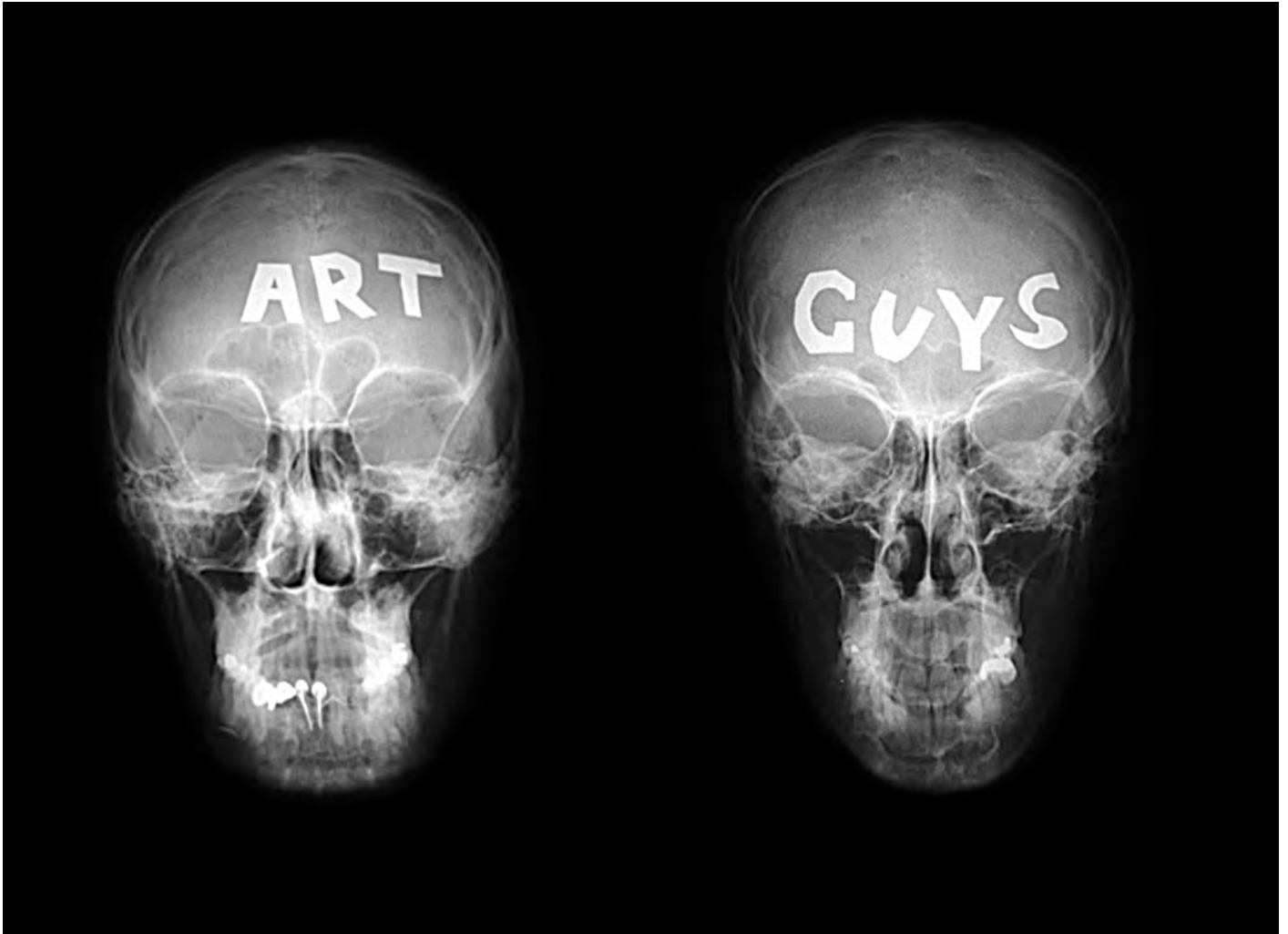
[Lawrence Weschler, the director of the New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University for the past dozen years, is a frequent contributor to our pages. His recent books include *Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences* and *Uncanny Valley: Adventures in the Narrative*. See more at lawrenceweschler.com]



PROLOGUE

January, 2011, Houston, Texas

JM - Jack Massing MG - Michael Galbreth LW - Lawrence Weschler



*"Art Guys X-rays," 1990, x-rays, x-ray display box, 21x29x4"
(words created by attaching lead tape to heads during x-ray) © The Art Guys*

JM ...This was back in 1994 when Mike and I were still living in that beautiful old glass and brick warehouse building in the Heights in Houston that we had converted into our studio, and we were getting set to drive up to Dallas to give some sort of presentation, and we were completely broke.

MG When he says we were broke, there's broke and there's really broke. We had only a few dollars between us.

JM That's not an exaggeration. We were having to borrow money for the gas for the trip. And who should walk in but Ed Kienholz, who we'd been getting to know over the past several years since he and his wife Nancy had taken to wintering in Houston, down from their place in Idaho. Now, it's not as though this was an uncommon thing to the extent that he'd ever been over. Before this it had only been with a group of other people. I don't think he'd ever come just by himself. But this day he showed up all by himself, mid-morning, just as Mike and I were rushing to be on our way for that Dallas gig. Anyway, he explained that he had something to say to us. And essentially he told us that he hadn't trusted us at first, when he first met us, and he hadn't trusted what we were doing and didn't necessarily like it.

LW Knowing Ed, he probably said, "I thought you guys were full of shit."

JM Exactly. He said he'd thought we were full of shit, he didn't believe us at all. But that then over the next few years of his getting to know us, somehow we'd proved ourselves. And he thought it would be great if we could expand what we were doing, step things up a bit, get a higher profile and get our work out into the world more. And he wanted to help us. He talked about his connections in L.A. and doing different things and blah, blah, blah.... He'd always been kind of fatherly to us ...

MG So that was very nice that he felt that way. And for some reason—you know Ed, he always had a lot of cash in his pocket. He kept that money because whenever he traveled around town, if he saw something in a junk store or a flea market that he wanted, he wanted to be able to get it right then and there. And now, suddenly, he pulled out that roll and just threw out a few hundred bucks and said he wanted to help us out a bit, which was amazing.

JM And then he said the real reason why he was there is that he wanted to challenge us to a duel, in essence, an art duel. He said that over the coming summer, we'd have to set out and make the toughest piece of art of our lives, and he was going to do the same thing. And in the fall we were going to compare notes or compare projects and see who'd won. He was throwing down the gauntlet on us. And that was the last we saw of him.

MG A few weeks later, back up in Idaho, he had a heart attack and died.

LW He'd kept his word: He had pulled off the toughest piece of his life.

JM That's exactly it. As per his instructions, he had his embalmed body placed in the passenger seat of his car—a '53 whatever it was. And he had his son Noah drive the car—the trunk full of art, some other stuff in the back seat, bottle of wine, whatever— from the service in Sandpoint out along the shores of Lake Pend Oreille and then up the switchback dirt road to his hunting lodge, where they'd had a backhoe dig out a deep ramped ditch, into which they eased the car in and buried him, car and all.

MG So Ed won.

JM Well, we didn't have a chance.

LW That's totally typical of Ed, by the way.

JM Yeah, he beat us to the punch.

MG But we're rising to his challenge now.

LW I see. That's the point of the story.



I. THE BRAND

LW Which I suppose brings us, over fifteen years on, to this current piece of yours, “Forever Yours”—your own death piece, I guess we could say. Before we get to that, though, I just wanted to layer in a little further background, specifically about some of the intervening work that has led up to it. For one thing, we might note that shortly after Ed’s death you indeed did have a pretty major career breakthrough with that first major retrospective of yours at Houston’s Contemporary Art Museum.

JM Yes, the very next year, which makes Ed’s expression of confidence in us at that particular moment all the more meaningful in retrospect. At any rate, a few years after that we embarked on a new project, which I suppose could be seen as one of the precursors for *Forever Yours*.

MG It all began on New Year's Day in 1996 when we were watching a football game on television. It was the Tostitos Bowl or something like that, at Cysco Field, brought to you by AT&T.

JM In those days, Michael Jordan was very popular. He was everywhere – on t-shirts and underpants and socks and potato chips. And we got to thinking, “Hey, if this can happen with a high visibility athlete, why can't artists claim the same territory?” Which in turn proved the departure point for *Suits: The Clothes Make the Man*, this extended conceptual/performance project wherein we leased advertising space on our own bodies to companies, embroidering their various logos to suits which we then contracted to wear everywhere we went over the next year. All of this coming out of an ongoing discussion of what art is, what it can be, what an artist is, and how artists exist in the world.

LW So you literally were spangled over with these company logos all over your suits?

JM Yeah, kind of like a racecar driver or a cyclist. Only with gray suits.



“SUITS: The Clothes Make The Man,” 1998-99,
collection the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, photo Mark Seliger © The Art Guys

MG All of that helped us focus on a wider discussion we'd been having about branding, the way our very name, "The Art Guys," under which we've been producing art since college, is essentially a brand.

LW Though, by the way, branding has altogether different connotations in Texas, right?

JM Well, right, it does: branding cattle. Which is something that we talked about, too. And there are people who have had tattoos made or scarification made for things like that. For that matter, the nomenclature essentially derives from the same source.

LW So in any case, you guys were talking about yourselves, as artists, as a brand.

JM We were talking about ourselves as a brand and we were talking about our selves as material. Rather than plywood or bronze or whatever, we were the material, in a very sort of sixties kind of performance art way, where all of a sudden there's this idea that the body is the material that you work with.

LW Indeed, it struck me, that the *Suits* project was a kind of cross between sixties performance art and Andy Warhol.

JM It is. It is a combination of those two things. There's a saying, for instance, when an art collector boasts about how he has a Warhol silkscreen he says, "Oh do you want to see my Warhol? Do you want to see my Rauschenberg?" They talk about the work using essentially the logo or the brand of the artist.

LW As in, "I have a Lamborghini" or "I only use Hermes suitcases."

JM Yes. So somewhere in here we decided that the Art Guys needed a logo as well, just like all the logos of the companies we were wearing. And we held a logo competition, sent out a prospectus, received hundreds of submissions, had the great Walter Hopps [late director of the Menil Collection] judge the thing, ended up with this submission by a British artist who used to live in Houston, Derek Boshier, which at first seemed like a joke but Walter was right, it really grew on you: simply this hand-scrawled black hole with, around it, the work *The Art Guys Logo*.



The Art Guys Logo, 1997, design by Derek Boshier, © The Art Guys

MG But around then we began to think, in keeping with this whole line of inquiry, that now we needed to trademark ourselves because in the national and international world of commerce, you need to have a trademark. Any big corporation that's doing business nationally - Enron or McDonald's or whomever - they have a trademark to protect their logo or their name from infringement by others. So we decided we needed one of those, too, especially after we had our logo, and we entered into the arduous process of registering with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. We ran into a little bit of trouble because the very terms "Art" and "Guys" were too generic for them. The trademark office was having trouble with our request, and I had a few conversations with the guy.

LW An Art Guy talking to the Trademark Guy.

MG Yes, exactly. And then, after that, in order to get it done, most of the conversations happened with our lawyer. We had to hire lawyers and do the whole thing in a standard legal manner. It took about two and a half years, but finally, around 2006....

LW You had your trademark.

MG And as soon as we had the trademark we decided, "Let's sell it."

JM After 25 years of working together and attempting to deploy the very idea of The Art Guys as a piece of art—which it really is—we decided to see what would happen if we sold it.

LW But wait a second, that's your name!



Int. Cl.: 41

Prior U.S. Cls.: 100, 101 and 107

United States Patent and Trademark Office

Reg. No. 3,462,321

Registered July 8, 2008

**SERVICE MARK
PRINCIPAL REGISTER**

The Art Guys

THE ART GUYS (TEXAS PARTNERSHIP)
5757 KNOX STREET
HOUSTON, TX 77091

FOR: ENTERTAINMENT SERVICES, NAMELY, PROVIDING A WEB SITE IN THE FIELD OF ART FEATURING IMAGES OF WORKS OF ART AND WRITTEN TEXTS AND WRITTEN SATIRE. PROVIDING ART EXHIBITIONS, IN CLASS 41 (U.S. CLS. 100, 101 AND 107).

FIRST USE 12-31-1983; IN COMMERCE 12-31-1983.

THE MARK CONSISTS OF STANDARD CHARACTERS WITHOUT CLAIM TO ANY PARTICULAR FONT, STYLE, SIZE, OR COLOR.

NO CLAIM IS MADE TO THE EXCLUSIVE RIGHT TO USE "ART", APART FROM THE MARK AS SHOWN.

SER. NO. 78-856,680, FILED 4-7-2006.

LEIGH LOWRY, EXAMINING ATTORNEY

The Art Guys Trademark, 2008, © The Art Guys

MG To put this in context, we first came up with the idea of "The Art Guys" when we were still students, as a kind of...

JM A flippant gesture.

MG Well, yes, but it was serious too. When we were in school we were very interested in conceptual performance art and all that sort of stuff. But at the time, in the early eighties, the only thing that was going on at University of Houston, where we were, was this neo-expressionist painting stuff. And there was a lot of disdain about what we were up to. And then we threw in humor on top of that. And people would say, "You guys are really on the wrong track." And the more we were discouraged, the more it seemed right, that we were on the right track. Because you want to go somewhere else. You want to stake out some new territory, hopefully. And "The Art Guys" was seriously the wrong thing to do, you know? I mean it's a dumb goddamn name. It's so dumb. Yet over the years, when we started doing these things, like Jack said, we realized The Art Guys, though flippant, at the same time we knew it was something. And so we called ourselves The Art Guys. People remember "The Art Guys" while they often don't remember our names.

LW Walter Hopps, in his essay about you, describes your work as "one damn thing after another." And maybe the "damn" part of Walter's characterization is precisely that business of working really, really hard at something yet being willing to chuck it all.

MG Maybe. But the thing is, we always do what we say we are going to do, even though it sounds like, "Oh, it's just a stunt" or "The Art Guys are pulling the wool over our eyes again." But we never do. We actually do the things we say we're going to do.

LW And now after all that work, after twenty-five years, you are willing to chuck your very name, your identity.

MG And it's funny because I think the trademark, the brand of The Art Guys, is almost more valuable than our physical selves, in some ways.

LW After all, there's nothing more valuable than your good name.

JM That's right.

LW So what happened?

MG Nobody bought it.

JM Yeah, we probably have it priced too high: \$500,000. Probably at \$500 somebody would take it. We'll have to revisit the valuation someday.

LW But wait a second. If you had sold it...

MG I wouldn't really care. If you're willing to let go of a quarter of a century of branding, it doesn't matter after that, I don't think. A name is almost like air. There's nothing there to begin with. And yet there's this document that's right there in front of our eyes that says it does exist.

LW Your trademark as a token of your identity.

MG People identify our work with the name “The Art Guys,” which in itself is a curious thing. So what happens if you separate the two, if the work has to survive unto itself, without the filter of named authorship? How then does the work stand up?

LW Well, it’s funny you say that, because as you’re speaking I’m looking past you at one of your burnt match wall drawings here in the studio. This one happens to be a skull, and I know that piece as an Art Guys' piece. In fact as a signature Art Guys piece. So then an interesting question develops: if you ever do sell your trademark, say, to Joe Schmoe, will that piece retroactively become a Joe Schmoe piece?

MG & JM That's a good question



“Skull,” 2009, spent matches on paper mounted on aluminum, 96x50” © The Art Guys

MG And exactly the kind of question we're raising. And furthermore, would that change the value of the piece? Because people want their Rauschenberg to look like a Rauschenberg and to be a Rauschenberg. They want it recognizable and verifiable. So then if we say, "Well, we're going to de-authenticate ourselves by changing our names," where does that leave the prior work and its current owners?

LW This all reminds me a little bit of that Swedish artist I mention in my *Boggs* book, about J.S.G Boggs, the money artist who drew paper currency and spent his drawings. Not for nothing did I subtitle my own book about him, *A Comedy of Values*.

MG Absolutely. We're definitely in the same terrain, though in our case it would be a onetime deal – selling our trademark and seeing what happens to everything that came before.

LW: Speaking of which, what would come after? Would you guys become “the Artists Formerly Known as The Art Guys”?

MG If it does sell, we plan to hold another contest to come up with our new name.

LW Looking back over at that burnt matchstick skull wall drawing over there, it occurs to me that this was indeed by no means the first time you have gone to all sorts of work and then be willing, as you say, to just chuck it all, literally to put it to fire.

JM Right, right.

MG We keep doing these things that have the same sort of inner structure. We build these elaborate things only to let them go up in smoke.

JM And the whole idea of smoke: I may be wrong, but I think it was Sir Walter Raleigh who was challenged by the Queen at the time to find out how much smoke weighed. And he figured out how to do it. He took a cigarette, weighed it, and then burned the cigarette and then weighed the ashes. And the resulting difference was how much the smoke weighed, which is a really brilliant way to think about it.

LW Well, yes, indeed, and ashes to ashes, that does bring us right up to *Forever Yours*.



II. THE PIECE



"Forever Yours," 2007-present, bronze busts with framed contract. © The Art Guys

JM When we occasionally talk with students, one of the very first things we try to get across is what art is. Most people in the United States think that it is the thing on the pedestal or the thing on the wall behind the glass or inside the frame, that that is the art. And we try to convince them that, no, that is not it. That thing is merely a by-product, at most just a piece of the art. It is the skin that the art has sloughed off. It is the manifestation of the idea, of all the thinking that preceded it. The idea made manifest, but as such the object is just a very small piece, the butt end, of the entire process: the residue. What remains. That's a very difficult thing for people in general to understand because it's been driven into our heads that a piece of art is something that's commodified and gets handed down through the ages. But that's not what art is.

LW Would it be correct, anticipating things, to think of a work of art as the ashes at the end of the life of art?

JM Well, that's essentially what this boils down to—or burns down to. It's the culmination of a process.

RW So okay. Let's turn to these two bronze busts on their elegant pedestals here in the studio before us, and the framed document behind them. The way I understand it, you tried to sell your name, though to date you haven't pulled that off yet. But rather than give up and pull back, it seems, you decided to push on yet further. Which is to say, to sell your very selves. Which in a sense is how I take this *Forever Yours* project of yours. For starters, maybe, can you describe it?

JM That's basically it, yes. It's the idea of putting the artist, or in our case the artists themselves up for sale, allowing someone to buy the artists, or anyway the next best thing: to buy their actual remains after they—we—die.

On one level, it's just a sort of inverse life insurance. With regular life insurance, of course, you pay for it all your life and then you die and somebody else gets the money. And what good is that for you? So we figured that if we could sell our death, essentially, and take the money now while we're still alive, that would be much better than the other way around.

LW You are proposing to sell your remains. Let's be attentive to the words here.

JM Yes, they are our remains. But it is, in a sense, it is our death. We can think of it, maybe poetically, that way.

MG The idea is to sell our cremated remains to a collector, whatever that entity may be. And those remains will one day be housed in the bronze replica busts that you see before you, busts of our two heads that we fashioned out of a complicated processes—3D scanning, computer imaging, CNC cutting, then bronze casting—to create these likenesses of ourselves, which will someday serve as cremation urns for each of us, coupled with the contractual agreement between us and the buyer, which you see there, framed behind and between the pedestals.

LW Now if I choose to be the buyer, it's not that I get to kill you the next day; I will only acquire title, as it were, to your remains, presumably after you've peaceably lived out your natural lives.

MG Correct. The contract is structured such that the funds become available to us immediately upon agreement to the transaction, at which point the collector gets the bronze urns, the framed contract, and other ancillary materials. But the piece would not be totally completed until the death of both of us, first one and then the other, presumably, at which point, our remains would sequentially be placed in their respective urns. Then the piece will be said to have achieved its final state.

LW An association I have with this piece relates to your Catholic upbringing

MG Though we are both long lapsed.

LW But let's talk about—I guess the word here is “aura,” is what we're talking about, when you enter one of those cloisters in Europe and find yourself gawking at a reliquary ostensibly containing, I don't know...

JM The tongue of St. Francis of Assisi.

LW Or whatever it is and the kind of aura that comes with that. The hushed sense of reverence wafting off of, or occasioned by the object. Which in turn, I suppose, could get us to talking about art having become the contemporary religion.

MG Yes, we've both worked in museums and we're both familiar with that comparison, that analogy.

LW Museums, for that matter, being the continuation of the Church. For hundreds of years churches were where you went to see paintings.

MG That's true.

LW And then paintings came out of churches and were put on the walls of museums, which in turn have their own high priesthood. And the hushed reverence which people used to experience in church, secular people nowadays go to museums to experience that same sense of aura, of presence before the ineffable. I think it's possible that only former Catholics could have come up with this idea.

JM I think you may be right, because if I was a Hindu I definitely wouldn't have been thinking on these levels.

LW This all reminds me of a lapsed Jewish story, the one about the Grand Rabbi So-and-So who, during a time of terrible turmoil years ago, would go into the forest and find a particular place and light a fire in a particular way and recite a particular prayer, and then declare, "Surely, God, this must be enough." And it was enough: The turmoil passed. A generation later, at a time of similar trial, his son, the Rabbi Such and Such, made his way to the right place in the forest, and though he no longer knew the special way to light the fire, he did know the prayer, and he recited it, whereupon he said, "Surely, God, this must be enough." And it was enough. A few decades later, when pogroms kicked up again, that rabbi's son no longer even knew the right place in the forest, so he stayed at home and all he could do was recite the prayer, after which he pleaded, "Still God, surely this must be enough." And it was enough. The next generation, pogroms start up again, and that last rabbi's son who isn't even a rabbi, he falls to his knees and says, "Look, Lord, I don't know the place in the forest. I don't know how to light the fire. I don't know how to say the prayer. All I know is the story. But surely that must be enough." And it was enough. God invented Man because he loves stories.

MG That's a good story.

LW It's a story about stories. And a story about what persists, what remains, as it were, after one has lapsed.



II. THE PRICE

LW We are still speaking about something fundamentally existential here. This piece conspicuously addresses matters of life and death.

JM And lapsed or not, we've given death quite a bit of thought. I've seen plenty of it myself.

LW How so?

JM I saw a person shot and killed right before my eyes one time on a street in Seattle. And I had a dear friend, our fishing buddy the great artist Lucas Johnson, die of a heart attack right in my arms. We saw a horrible car crash together where a man's body burned on the highway, we tried to save him but Mike, quite intelligently, kept me from running into the fire.

It happens to everyone, you know. It's just weird how the people who are left can see and understand how you went, but you yourself can't.



"Forever Yours," 2007-present, detail of bronze busts © The Art Guys

LW Which, by the way, is another one of those things that this piece is about. Because looking at that bust of you, Mike, I'm literally looking you in the eye but you're not there. Though you will be. And that presumptive future you—or that no-longer-you (or whatever those ashes will be)—is already looking back at me, looking me in the eye. It's all very weird: that dance of truncated gazes. Must be especially weird for you two. And in fact even more so, maybe, for you, Mike. Didn't you suddenly receive the diagnosis of a very serious cancer just as you were ramping up this project?

MG Yes.

LW Can you talk about that a little bit?

MG Sure. I can talk about that all day, but it really has no bearing on this. I think that a lot of people think that it does. There's no question that I bumped up against death.

LW What kind of cancer?

MG A rare cancer called lymphoepithelioma. In my tonsils. The treatment is...

JM Barbaric.

MG It is. It's among the worst treatments of cancer, because the radiation treatment is dangerously close to vitals—like hearing and seeing and your brain. The combination of radiation and chemotherapy does a number on you. But I have emerged from the whole thing just fine.

LW But as it was happening, it didn't give you second thoughts?

MG You know what's funny about it all is that when you're going through cancer treatment, you don't think about you're going to die. Or at least I didn't. Dying is what other people do. Not me. But then I was so zonked out on painkillers and drugs that I wasn't thinking much about anything.

LW Didn't you find out around the same time as your diagnosis that you and your wife were going to have a baby?

MG The same week. We figured we'd get it done altogether.

JM Bunch it all up.

MG Yeah, we thought, "Well, let's see. Let's get this out of the way, let's get that out of the way." Yeah, it was funny.

LW You both have wives. And you too, Jack, don't you have a son? How did your wives take to this whole scheme of yours? Jack, didn't your wife say, "Whoa, wait a second here"?

JM Yeah, she said “Whoa, whoa, whoa.” But we’d both always intended to be cremated and I explained the whole thing to her, and eventually she said, “I suppose I didn’t marry you for when you’re dead. I married you for when you’re alive. So that’s cool.” And it was fine.

LW Another of the oddities here is that, when this thing comes off, the two of you are going to be spending “all eternity” side by side alongside each other, rather than with your families.

JM Yes. Which is funny.

MG The thing is, sure, we run up against all these real-world, messy, emotional realities, but they are not what the work is about. Or maybe, rather, the thing is they get incorporated into the work, into what is, ultimately, a very interesting sculptural piece. It’s a piece of social sculpture.

JM And in its essence it’s conceptual. And, to me, the conceptual nature of the work is void of emotions. We don’t do things because we feel a certain way, we do things because we think a certain way.

LW It’s conceptual, but so is money. Of course, one of the more comic aspects of this whole project of yours is the economic/financial aspect. Granted, I say that as someone who believes that, when it comes to monetary valuation, any work of art is somewhere between worthless and priceless, anything more specific you can say about it falling into the realm of comedy.

JM We fully understand there’s commerce involved, and that commerce has to provide us with a living. In working on this specific project, though—in some senses the project of our entire lives—trying to estimate a value for the work was very difficult because the market usually determines your value. And unfortunately, we don’t really have a huge market for our work. So we were free, in a sense, to set the price for this piece.

LW It’s funny that you describe yourselves as free.

JM Meaning “unencumbered.”

MG We’ve got to be careful what we say.

JM Let's just say we're free now but pretty soon we hope to be expensive. So anyway, we came up with this almost trite number, which is a million dollars, a nice memorable catchphrase of a number.

MG Like "The Art Guys." It's clean.

JM A million dollars is a lot of money conceptually. But in reality, it's not very much money, especially when you're talking about two of us. We split it in half immediately. I have friends that I went to high school who earn more than that year after year.

LW And here you are, giving your all.

JM Giving our all. Everything we've got.

LW And not the sort of offer you'll ever be able to make again.

JM But the way we see the million dollars is it will buy us a few years to keep doing our work. And beyond that, it is enough money so that people who look on it from the outside will pay attention. Because the sum of money often becomes the hook or the discussion point in contemporary art, and that too is one of the things we want to explore.

LW Indeed, I suspect that the minute somebody spends a million dollars on it, owing to the scandalous comedy of the marketplace, it'll be that notorious piece that somebody spent a million dollars on.

MG And that's when the piece will become active.

LW The trope of those artists, what will they think of next? And the parallel trope of those crazy collectors, what won't they buy? What with all the publicity, I wouldn't be at all surprised if a few years further on down the line, it didn't do even better on the resale market.

MG All of that's very important to us because it speaks to the structure, the dialogue, that give-and-take thing that we've always been interested in. If we had donated the piece to an institution, nobody would have paid attention.

LW Another funny choice of words.

MG But all that hucksterism is wonderful. That's always been a part of our work, playing with that peculiar sort of American capitalistic approach to things. We really do love that. We're not put off by it at all. It's there and we're interested in it. And this piece had to have a level of commitment to it, in terms of the dollar amount of its price so that people would really pay attention to it. Because it's not a trivial piece. It's not a trivial idea. So there needed to be a non-trivial amount associated with it. And like it or not, people are probably going to pay more attention to the money.

LW Pay more attention.

JM Yes, the price will buy more attention.

LW I imagine in the long run, after having negotiated the open market for a few decades, this piece will eventually end up in some museum, where, actually it will be right at home.

JM How do you mean?

LW Well, museums are full of paintings of death, vanitas tableau moralizing around the theme of how "you, too, will die."

MG We talked before about the museum as church. But museums also often get talked about metaphorically as mausoleums.

JM And with us there in the collection, it would literally be the case! The piece would be accessioned as a piece of art, but gradually it would dawn on them—all the conservationists laboring over the piece with their white gloves— holy shit, we're a cemetery.

LW At which point, I suppose, you will have achieved a certain zany sort of immortality. You and all the other mummies.

