

A FOOL'S QUESTIONS

[1987]

J. S. G. BOGGS is a young artist with a certain flair, a certain panache, a certain *je ne payes pas*. What he likes to do, for example, is to invite you out to dinner at some fancy restaurant, to run up a tab of, say, eighty-seven dollars, and then, while sipping coffee after dessert, to reach into his satchel and pull out a drawing he's already been working on for several hours before the meal. The drawing, on a small sheet of high-quality paper, might consist, in this instance, of



A Boggs hundred

a virtually perfect rendition of the face-side of a one-hundred-dollar bill. He then pulls out a couple of precision pens from his satchel—one green ink, the other black—and proceeds to apply the finishing touches to his drawing. This activity invariably causes a stir. Guests at neighboring tables crane their necks. Passing waiters stop to gawk. The maître d' eventually drifts over, stares for a while, and then praises the young man on the excellence of his art. "That's good," says Boggs, "I'm glad you like this drawing, because I intend to use it as payment for our meal."

At this point, a vertiginous chill descends upon the room—or, more precisely, upon the maître d'. He blanches. You can see his mind reeling ("Oh no, not another nutcase") as he begins to plot strategy. (Should he call the police? How is he going to avoid a scene?) But Boggs almost immediately reestablishes a measure of equilibrium by reaching into his satchel, pulling out a real hundred-dollar bill—indeed, the model for the very drawing he's just completed—and saying, "Of course, if you want you can take this regular hundred-dollar bill instead." Color is already returning to the maître d's face. "But, as you can see," Boggs continues, "I'm an artist, and I drew this, it took me many hours to do it, and it's certainly worth something. I'm assigning it an arbitrary price that just happens to coincide with its face value—one hundred dollars. That means, if you do decide to accept it as full payment for our meal, you're going to have to give me thirteen dollars in change. So you have to make up your mind whether you think this piece of art is worth more or less than this regular one-hundred-dollar bill. It's entirely up to you." Boggs smiles, and once again, the maître d' blanches, because now he's into *serious* vertigo: the free fall of worth and values.

Boggs has performed variations on this experiment at restaurants, hotels, airline ticket counters, hot dog stands, hardware stores, and countless other venues, in the United States, England, Germany, France, Ireland, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy. (Although American, he has been based in London since 1980). He has drawn larger and smaller denom-

inations in each of the local currencies, and he has drawn more and less hostile reactions from each of the local citizenries. Often the maître d's and the cabdrivers and the shopkeepers have rejected his offer out of hand. But during the last two years, Boggs has managed to gain acceptance for his proposal on almost seven hundred separate occasions, in transactions totaling over \$35,000 in value.

The entire game, of course, rests on the precision of Boggs's draftsmanship, which is remarkable, and yet Boggs always goes to great lengths to make sure that his victims—his beneficiaries, his patrons, his counterparts (one is not sure quite what to call them)—understand that he is not attempting to foist his drawings off as legal tender. For one thing, they're drawn on only one side of the paper—the other side is left blank, except for Boggs's signature and documentation. And in any case, good as they are, one couldn't actually mistake them for the real thing. Not, that is, unless one happened to be the Bank of England.

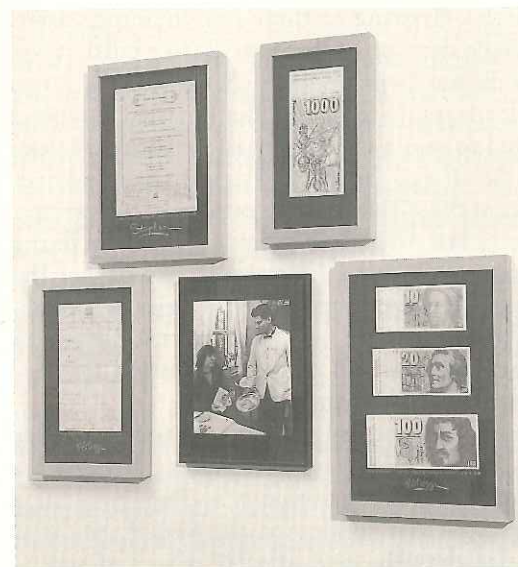
One evening in the fall of 1986, just before the opening of a London show that was to feature samples of Boggs's art, three constables raided the gallery, confiscated the work, and hauled Boggs off to jail. He was eventually released into the custody of his solicitor, but dozens of his drawings remain in the custody of the British legal system—Boggs now refers to these as "the Scotland Yard Collection"—and on November twenty-third of this year, in the Central Criminal Court building in London, better known as the Old Bailey, Boggs would be going on trial, charged under Section 18, Subsection I, of the 1981 Forgery and Counterfeiting Act, with four counts of reproducing British currency without the consent of the Bank of England.

Some saw the looming court battle as high comedy, some as low farce, some discerned a question of principle (indeed, nothing short of artistic freedom itself). Some were calling this case the art world's equivalent of the *Spycatcher* scandal. Boggs himself had at varying times seen his situation in all of these lights, but he also saw something else—his life on the

line, for *each* of those four counts, he'd been told, carried a maximum penalty of a ten-thousand-pound fine and ten years in jail.

If the Bank of England intended to exercise some sort of chilling effect upon Boggs's enthusiasms, however, they clearly failed. Despite the trauma of his arrest and the spectre of his coming trial, Boggs continued to pursue his performance investigations with undiminished passion throughout the past year. Some of the results of this curious inquiry were on view this summer at the Jeffrey Neale Gallery on Lafayette Street in the Noho district of New York City. Viewers of this, the thirty-two-year-old artist's first one-man show in New York, were quickly given to understand that as far as Boggs is concerned, the actual drawings of his various bills should merely be considered small parts—the catalysts, as it were—of his true art, which actually consists of the series of transactions they provoke. Thus, in each instance, the framed drawing of the money was surrounded by several other framed objects, including a receipt, the change (each bill signed and dated by Boggs, each coin scratched in with Boggs's initials), and perhaps some other residue of the transaction (for example, evidence of the item purchased—the cardboard carton from a six-pack of beer, a ticket stub for airline travel—or else a photo of Boggs actually handing some swank waiter his drawing and getting back his change, the very change preserved behind glass in the adjoining frame).

One piece, entitled *The Shirts off My Back*, consisted of Boggs's drawing of a one-hundred-Swiss-franc note, the four shirts he was able to purchase with it, and the receipts and change from the transaction. (All of them together were now being offered for sale at \$2,000.) Another, entitled *Buying Money* consisted of four miniature coins (a miniquarter, two mininickels, and a minipenny) that Boggs was able to purchase from Florida artist Steve Holm with his own drawing of a one-dollar bill (also displayed), and the two real quarters,



J.S.G. Boggs,
Dinner for Eight
(1987)

real dime, and four real pennies he'd received in change. (This piece was now being offered at \$750.) A third piece, entitled *Printing Money/Money in the Bank*, consisted of a single aquatint print of a Boggs etching of a one-pound note (the etching itself went under the self-answering title, *How Much Does an Idea Weigh?* and this particular print was the forty-eighth out of a run of fifty), the deposit receipt Boggs had filled out in an attempt to deposit the etching *as* one pound into his account at the local Hampstead branch of the Midland Bank, and his monthly bank statement indicating that the deposit had indeed been accepted as such (his account had been credited one pound). That piece was going for \$1,000.

Of course, the fact that all these pieces had now been gathered together, some as loans from private collections and other as entities available for purchase, raised some interesting questions about the initial transactions themselves. If, for instance, Boggs did in fact manage to purchase a ticket for a flight from Zurich to London on British Airways, worth 290

Swiss francs, with a drawing of three one-hundred-Swiss-franc notes (a single drawing of three *overlapping* bills), it was easy to see how the ten Swiss francs in change and the actual ticket stub had made it into this show. But how had the initial drawing managed to rejoin them, so that the entire transaction could now be offered for sale at \$1,500? Over and over again, the pieces at the Neale Gallery raised such questions, and as often as not last August, Boggs was right there in the gallery avid to entertain them. He seemed to feel that the show itself was merely a continuation of the series of transactions that had begun, in each case, with his taking pen to paper—and that there was still plenty of occasion for perplex, confoundment, and revelation.

He was there, at any rate, the day I happened to wander into the gallery. He was fairly easy to recognize, because his was the face on the oversize rendition of an imaginary hundred-Swiss-franc note that dominated one wall of the show. In that poster-size drawing he'd affected a sort of seventeenth-century countenance—long hair, steady, sober gaze. In that self-portrait, he looked just like the sort of royal minister who might once have contrived the very currency of the realm, an achievement for which he'd been immortalized ever after by having his face included on its bills. And indeed, in person, there is something other-timely about Boggs. He's slight of build, with a wiry, taut body, a handsome face with sharp features, smooth complexion, high cheekbones. His somewhat narrow eyes tend to stay open just a bit longer and wider than normal (the whites occasionally visible just above the brown irises), so that he projects an intensity that is usually charming but can sometimes verge on the demonic. He likes to wear wide-collared white shirts, open at the neck, which together with his cascading long brown hair make him look like a refugee from some Renaissance Faire of the 1960s—or, for that matter, of the 1690s.

When he came up to talk to me, that first afternoon at the gallery, I asked him about the presence of those initial drawings in this show. "The thing is," he explained, "there are a lot of collectors, in Europe but also here, who want to buy my

drawings of currency—but I refuse to sell them, that's the first of my rules. I simply will not sell an unspent drawing depicting an existing denomination in its exact size. Now, as you can see"—he gestured about the room—"I've occasionally painted larger canvases of actual bills, or else pastiches with aspects of several different bills all mixed together, and those I'll sell outright. But as for exact-size, existing-denomination drawings, I will only—and this is my rule number two—I will only *spend* them, that is, go out and find someone who will accept them at face value in a transaction that must include a receipt and change in real money. My third rule is that I will not tell anyone where I've spent that drawing for the next twenty-four hours: I want the person who got it to be able to have some time, unbothered, to think about what's just transpired. After that, however—and this is my rule number four—if there is a collector who I know has expressed interest in that sort of drawing, I will contact him and offer to sell him the receipt and the change for a given price. It varies, but for the change and receipt from a one-hundred-dollar dinner transaction, for example, the collector might have to pay me about five hundred dollars. The receipt should provide enough clues for the collector to track down the owner of that one-hundred-dollar drawing, but if the collector desires further clues—the exact name of the waiter, for example, or his telephone number—I'm always prepared to provide those details as well at a further fee. After that, the collector is in a position to contact the drawing's owner and try to negotiate some sort of deal on his own so as to complete the work."

Are there people who actually go along with all this—I asked Boggs—collectors who will actually pay him five hundred dollars for, say, an ordinary ten-dollar bill, three one-dollar bills, and a dog-eared receipt? He replied that he had a waiting list of eighteen such individuals right now. "I mean," he elaborated, "not all of them will accept just anything. Some are very finicky. I've got one guy who wants a fifty-dollar transaction involving clothing—painting supplies won't do, one hundred dollars won't do. I've got another guy who told me he wanted a five-dollar transaction involving drinks at

a bar. Several months later I happened to perform such a transaction, but when I called him up to tell him, he asked me which side of the bill I'd depicted in my drawing. I told him the face side, and he said no, he was only interested in the *back*. So he'll just have to wait. I don't do commissions. I can't work to order."

Boggs went on to explain some further aspects of the mysteriously compounding value of his drawings. If a collector paid him, say, five hundred dollars for the change and the receipt to one of his transactions and then went on to pay, say, another five hundred dollars to procure the art itself, he'd then have a completed work that, at current market values in New York and London and Basel, could fetch as much as two or three thousand dollars. Boggs himself prefers to deal with the collectors directly—it is to his financial advantage to do so—but, not surprisingly, many of his collectors are professionals (lawyers and stockbrokers) who don't have the time or inclination to undertake the scavenger hunt themselves and instead choose to work through agents or dealers. Sometimes his own galleries will undertake the scavenger hunts, as it were, on spec. The various arrangements and subarrangements involving fees and cuts and so forth can get fairly complex, but this doesn't seem to bother Boggs; indeed, he usually seems to find such details as fascinating as the initial transactions.

I asked Boggs whether he might like to join me next door for a bite. He looked around—things were quiet in the gallery, not much action—and agreed. As we were walking over to the café, Boggs commented, "I hope you don't think I'm doing all this as some sort of insult to money, as if I were putting money down or something. I think money is beautiful stuff." I laughed as we entered the café. "I'm serious," he said, simultaneously pulling up a seat and pulling out his wallet, rummaging around for a moment and then extracting a one-dollar bill. "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. Take this one here. This

is an absolutely splendid intaglio print. It's actually the result of three separate printing processes—two on the face side, another on the back—all done on excellent, high-quality paper. Over the years, because of the danger of counterfeiting, they've had to make these bills more and more intricate, both in terms of imagery and technique. 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. Few artists today understand the special nature of printmaking. They just try to translate their painting ideas into prints, and the results are usually mediocre. I mean, look at a Howard Hodgkin print. As a painter, he's the artist I admire perhaps more than any other in England. But in his prints, the color temperatures get lost. 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!

"And that's just talking about technique," Boggs continued. "Now look at the content, the iconography, the history. That crazy rococo profusion of leaves and scrollwork, symbolizing prosperity. The eagle with his thirteen arrows in one claw, one for each of the first thirteen states, and the olive branch in the other—and on the olive branch, the olives! And then the other half of the Great Seal, with that strange Masonic pyramid—an unfinished pyramid, one still in the process of being built. George Washington, on the facing side of the bill, was a Mason; the man who designed the seal was a Mason. There's so incredibly much of American cultural history wrapped up in this little chit of paper. And it's the same with other currencies. In England, I particularly love the fifty-pound note. On one side there's a phoenix, rising gloriously from the ashes. On the other, there's St. Paul's Cathedral. And anybody familiar with the history of England would realize that the imagery on that bill harkens back to the Great Fire of 1666—which destroyed the original cathedral along with much of the rest of London—and celebrates the long and glorious labor of reconstruction that followed."

Boggs paused for a moment, continuing to gaze at his dol-

lar. "In God we trust," he said. "Did you know that that phrase wasn't always part of our currency? They only started putting it on during the twenties and thirties as they withdrew the dollar's gold backing. It used to be you could redeem a ten-dollar bill for ten dollars in gold. In fact, originally dollars *were* coins, they were a particular kind of coin; the word derives from the word *taler*, which was short for *Joachimstaler*, which is to say the coins originally minted at the Joachimstal mine in Bohemia. Some of the early American paper bills included engravings on the back depicting the metal coins for which the paper bills could at any moment be redeemed. On the back of the five-dollar silver certificate, put out in 1886, there was a picture of five silver dollars. If you wanted to know what a five-dollar bill represented in those days, all you had to do was look at the picture on the back. But anyway, when they started withdrawing the dollar's metal backing—when you couldn't redeem your dollars for gold and in fact were no longer allowed even to possess gold on your own except as jewelry—that's when they started putting that phrase on the currency. When you could no longer trust in gold, they invited you to trust in God. It was like a Freudian slip."

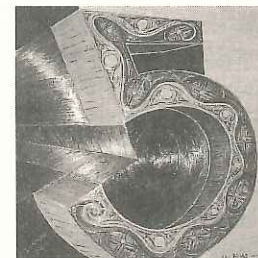
The waiter came over and Boggs ordered some coffee and a sandwich. "It's all an act of faith," he continued. "Nobody knows what a dollar is, what the word means, what holds the thing up, what it stands in for. And that's also what my work is about. Look at these things, I try to say. They're beautiful. But what the hell *are* they? What do they do? How do they do it? Take this one here." 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 not anything in particular."

The waiter delivered his order, and Boggs took a few bites. "It's incredibly difficult to make something that's worth a dollar," he said. "As much as a dollar, only a dollar, exactly a dollar. The only thing that has that exact value *is* a dollar. With anything else, its value is constantly changing—including, of course, my drawing of a dollar."

Boggs gazed down at the two bills on the table, then picked them up and slid them back into his wallet. I noticed that they were all the money he had. "Before I got into these money pieces, I was doing a series of things about numbers. I like money, but I *really* like numbers. They're incredibly beautiful: perfection in terms of manipulated geometry. Over the years they've been honed and honed, as to form, so that today, for example, the muscles you use in your hand and arm in order to make a 5 combine into a gesture that just *feels* good. And numbers comprise a universal language. You can go virtually anywhere in the world, you might not be able to understand a word of the local dialect, but if you've got the right numbers on a sheet of paper, you've got the potential for a relationship with someone. Chinese, African, American bills all bear the same numerals. This just used to amaze me.

"I'm already a little bit crazy: lock me away in a studio with a notion like that and I can just about lose it. I was doing all kinds of things with numbers—passport numbers, Social Security numbers, credit card numbers, license numbers, phone numbers . . . images of people lost in whirlpools of numbers, or buoyed on seas of numbers, portraits of people in which the faces were entirely made of numbers. Eventually I found myself just doing portraits of numbers, wild expressionist renditions of twisted three-dimensional numerals that seemed to take on a



J. S. G. Boggs, *Shooting 5* (1984)

sort of physical presence. I spent so much time with them that they started taking on *personalities* of their own. Some were quiet and sad, others stoical. I knew a 5 that was definitely spoiled and rowdy, there's no other way I could describe him. I almost started relating to them as if they were alive." Boggs sipped his coffee. "It got strange . . . real strange."

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He was silent for a few moments, staring out vacantly. I asked him about his background. For one thing, what did the J.S.G. stand for? "James Stephen George," he replied noncommittally. "My parents and my childhood friends call me Stephen, but now I prefer to go by Boggs. Actually Boggs isn't the name I was born with. My biological father and my mother divorced when I was very young; Boggs is my stepfather's name, the man I consider my father. My mother married him when I was about five, and he subsequently adopted me. I was born in New Jersey in 1955; we moved around a lot when I was a kid, but we eventually settled in Florida. My father used to be a citrus grower, now he's an investor. He's a lot more conservative than I am, he's more into the security money can provide. My mother thinks this whole money series stems from a wish on my part to please him, to make contact with him. I don't know that that's true, but it does seem like these are the first of my works he's gotten into at all. I did a large pastiche painting of an English pound note a while back, and up in the corner where an actual pound note says 'Bank of England: I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of 1 pound,' mine says, 'I promise to promise to promise to promise.' When my dad saw that, he told my mother, 'That's a brilliant work of art. People don't realize how true that is.' In fact, he'd been the one who'd explained it to me in the first place."

I asked Boggs about his educational background. "I never graduated from high school," he said. "I was kicked out of the eleventh grade." Over what? "Oh, it was nothing—just bullshit. I was accused of starting a riot in the auditorium, but it was somebody else who threw the book at the principal. Still,

it was no great loss. I was bored senseless at school. I got a job working in a printing company, and in my spare time I wrote a play, and then I started working the night shift so I could earn the extra money I needed to rent a theater and mount a production of my play. Ever since then I've been working sixty hours a week at least. For a while I managed a rock group. Then I went up to Ohio where a friend of mine had moved. I got a position in a management training program with Holiday Inn, and they sent me to Miami University there in Oxford for a semester or two. I was trying desperately not to be an artist. I was in a business program, majoring in accountancy, I was even tutoring accounting. But it wasn't working. I've tried several times to quit—Lord knows, I'd have an easier life if I could—but every time I stop making art for any length of time I go crazy, literally. I've been on intimate terms with suicidal depression."

He sighed. "Anyway, I came back to Florida, spent a year at Hillsborough Community College in Tampa majoring in art, and then, during my summer vacation in 1978, I went to London for what I thought would be a month—only, for the first time in my life I really felt *at home*. I called my parents and told them I wouldn't be coming back. I stayed on in London, though as a foreigner I couldn't afford art school and that became frustrating. That Christmas I came back here to New York, and a lawyer friend of mine said he was going to take me over to Columbia and see if he couldn't get me admitted to the arts program there. The dean of admissions was dubious (he threw out my application—after all, I hadn't even graduated from high school), but one of his assistants interceded on my behalf, and they decided to admit me on a special basis as of January 1979. And that's how I come to have a degree from Columbia."

He paused for a moment and then smiled, both crafty-sly and utterly transparent (a combination I often noticed in the days ahead). "I mean," he said, "I have a piece of paper—a blank one. They gave it to me a year later on condition I'd leave. I kept signing up for classes for which I didn't have the prerequisites—studio art, economics, Russian—and they said,