

LAWRENCE WESCHLER
IN CONVERSATION WITH
THE ART GUYS

January, 2011
Houston, Texas

JM Jack Massing MG Michael Galbreth LW Lawrence Weschler

PROLOG

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 anyway, but this was like, you know, a real father figure...

LW Though, by the way, he could be a tough father.

JM Oh, he was tough. It was tough love. But for some reason, he was radiating that gracious paternal vibe on this day, maybe partially because he was about to leave for Idaho.

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.

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.

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. When you boil it down, it's a brand.

JM And a brand has a lot to do with its positioning. We're talking in the same language that anybody in advertising would talk about a brand or the positioning of a company. So we're a small company of two, with a brand: The Art Guys.

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

JM Well, right, it does: branding cattle.

MG Which means what we ought to do is get our logo burned on people's butts.

JM 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, which was pretty widespread. We sent out a prospectus for this competition all over the world, and we hired a juror: Walter Hopps.

LW Who was not just any juror, we should note. Walter was the director of the De Menil collection here in Houston, but long before that he was the co-founder, alongside Ed Kienholz, as it happens, of the legendary Ferus Gallery in LA in the fifties. How much did he charge you?

MG I can't remember. We did pay him an honorarium, though. Mostly he just liked to sneak up to our studio and smoke. It was his way of getting out of the house or the museum and hiding out in peace.

JM The logo competition was pretty straightforward. Design students, artists, anybody, it didn't matter. There was no stipulation as to who could enter. You could draw what you thought our logo should be and send it in. And we had several hundred entrants to this competition. The winner received 101 scratch-off lottery tickets as their winnings, which was a nice way to potentially get some actual money.

MG The *potential* to be millionaires. It's all potential.

LW You are so good to the people.

MG Yes, we are.

JM So we had this exhibition in our old studio, in which we hung all the entries that were submitted. And Walter came over the day of the opening and looked at everything and picked the winning logo, by this British artist who used to live here in Houston, Derek Boshier, which seemed, at first, like a joke. But it actually was a very appropriate logo for various reason. He had simply made this black circle, almost like a hole, though not quite round with a bad edge to it. It was obviously hand painted. And he'd hand-printed "The Art Guys Logo" around this dot.

LW With the word L-O-G-O as part of it?

JM Yes, curving around, it says "The Art Guys" on the top and then at the bottom it says "Logo." Really simple and really fast and really dumb. Especially when compared to a lot of the other very sophisticated submissions. But Walter picked that one and boy was he right! So we scanned it and we started using it on everything we did including our letterhead, website and even on our printed bank checks, although we had a bit of a challenge getting the bank's check designers not to pretty it up into something more standardized. So we started incorporating it into everything we do as any other corporation would.

LW When I first saw the logo a while back, with the word "logo" included like that, it struck me that it was perfect for you because you guys indeed always do go low. You guys like to take the low road.

MG Hell, yeah.

JM Well, it's really humorous to have the word "logo" in your logo. We thought it was great. And of course Walter was laughing all the way, he really enjoyed the whole process of doing that.

LW For the sake of completeness here we should acknowledge that in addition to everything else, in an earlier part of his life, as director of the Pasadena Museum in 1963, Walter had also been the first person ever to stage a Duchamp retrospective. Which seems somehow pertinent.

MG So anyway, that's how we got our logo. 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...

LW Enron.

MG 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.

JM We ran into a little bit of trouble because there was a guy who was teaching art classes to kids somewhere, and he was calling himself the "Art Guy."

MG Not only did they have trouble because somebody else was trying to register the name, saying he was the "Art Guy," but 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.

MG Actually we'd decided to try to sell The Art Guys name before we got the trademark. Registering the trademark was going to be the only way to legitimize any subsequent sale.

LW But wait a second, that's your name! I mean, one talks about one's good name as in "I trust your good name" or "You have a good name." And yet, you were willing to sell it?

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.

JM And besides, "Fischli and Weiss" was already taken.

MG Over time we began to realize how powerful the idea of it was. It wasn't just a name, it was a brand. We knew this before we really knew what branding was. And it began to mean something, to stand for something. Because the whole thing about The Art Guys' work is to work extremely hard on something, without taking any shortcuts, and doing it the right way and at the same time being willing to chuck it all. And that's a funny place to be.

LW It's kind of like life.

MG Well, I suppose.

LW Walter Hopps, in his essay about you, describes your work as "one damn thing after another."

JM Yes.

LW 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, I think.

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

JM That's right.

LW Which is also, by the way, a very Texas kind of thing.

JM It is very Texas thing, yes.

LW So what happened?

MG Nobody has 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. It would be even weirder, in a way, than this other idea.

LW You mean than this "Forever Yours" project?

MG Yes, I mean, don't get me wrong, selling your very selves, your very bodies, is profoundly weird. It's an important thing, there's no question. But this other thing is so conceptual.

LW You mean, selling your name? Selling your trademark?

JM Yes.

MG 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 Yes. And then the idea of selling it and chucking the whole thing. 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

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, Carl Frederick Reuters, who printed out stretched-out versions of Salvador Dali's signature and sold them by the millimeter. Or for that matter, of our friend Ed Kienholz who created single swath watercolors and traded them for the amount of money he then stenciled over the face of the swath: "\$532.00" "\$871.00"

JM Yes, we have a couple of those.

LW Or for that matter of Boggs himself, 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 How bout "Fishli and Weiss"?

JM Could be. They might not have trademarked the name in which case it could be available.

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.

LW The pieces have gravity but they're weightless.

MG Yes.

JM And the whole idea of smoke, well, that's a whole 'nother issue. Probably better not to get into it.

LW No, but it's going to be important in a second, so say what you were going to say.

JM Well, 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.

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 Or it's as close to that as we can get anyway.

LW So let's describe the piece again. Walk me through it.

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 Hmm. Alright. So there are clearly going to be several things we're going to want to talk about here.

MG It's a very complex idea.

LW I'll take your word for it.

JM There's nothing romantic at all involved, first of all.

LW You talk about this being the manifestation of an idea. Was the idea at all scary to contemplate?

JM No.

MG Not in the least.

JM It was never emotional or...

MG Not in the least bit. It was funny.

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

MG Though we are both long lapsed Catholics.

LW Well, yes but I was thinking about the Catholic love of relics. The left toenail of St. Peter...

MG Oh, yes, absolutely. The fetishizing, the objects, and the saints and all that shit. Of course, if you look at those busts right now and you might say, "Well, there's nothing in them," and think, "That's just a piece of bronze" and you wouldn't have any sort of emotional connection to it. But once the piece is activated, in other words, once we're stuffed in there, then I think people are going to react to them in a different way, just by having that knowledge that we're actually in there.

LW For that matter, already now, they don't seem like other kinds of bronzes, given our knowledge of what will one day fill them. They already are somewhat weird objects.

MG Yes, yes. They're problematic.

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.

MG Yes. That's absolutely true.

LW And your piece is playing with all of that.

JM Definitely.

LW 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. That's my gift to you in response to your gifts of your stories.

JM Thank you.

III.

LW But turning things slightly, whether you are lapsed Catholics or not, 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.

LW And we've spoken about Ed Kienholz's death.

MG Yes, and others.

JM But it's going to happen. 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 when you go. I mean, you might be able to see the train coming...

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. And again, as I say, it really has nothing to do with this, except that I would have checked out a little bit too early, you know, without having seen the thing done.

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

MG About?

LW Getting that close to death...

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 But, again, what's odd to me about the confluence of those two, even though you say they don't have any bearing on this piece, surely on the one hand there was this very real existential possibility that suddenly you might actually be dead very soon, and then on top of that you were going to have a child, and, at the very least, how was he ever going to be able to visit your grave? For that matter, 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.

MG And it was pretty much the same thing with my wife. But she knew what she was getting in to when she married me.

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.

LW An interesting choice of words: “incorporated” containing as it does, the Latin word for body.

JM Yes, “corpus.” Right.

MG The point is that it all gets incorporated into what is, ultimately, a very interesting sculptural piece. It’s a piece of social sculpture. It’s all there, and for all its complications, as such, it’s pretty tidy in its form.

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.

MG Somebody I think of a lot in this context—and I do think it’s fair to consider this piece with other pieces by other artists—is Chris Burden and that early piece of his when he shot himself, or rather, when he had a friend shoot him in the arm. Because that piece was right on the edge of a spectrum, you know. It was a very violent piece and provoked a tremendous reaction at the time even though it was humble in its actuality. It took place in a hanger space like this, hardly anyone was there, and someone just shot him in the arm and that was it. But the reverberations of it were profound because of what it suggests. And the negative emotional reactions at the time! People thought it was grotesque, masochistic, flagrantly sensationalistic, attention-seeking and so forth. That it was just stupid. And of course on some levels it was, there’s no question about it. But somewhere in there, Burden spoke about the bullet piercing flesh, and he said, “At that moment I was sculpture.” And I love that quote. I love that. Because then I thought of the gesture without emotion, without passion or prejudice. And I thought well, *now* it’s interesting. If Chris had said, “Well, I’m doing this because of the Vietnam War and as a protest, I’m shooting myself...,” I’d have thought, “Fuck you. Who cares?” That would have been my take. But when he suggests, “I’m sculpture and this is about an object piercing this material,” for me that became a pretty quirky take on it. And I became very interested.

And it’s the same with this project of ours. I have no interest in this in an emotional sense, but when I say that we’re sculpture and we’re taking this material, our bodies, changing it and reformatting it in an appropriated way that people can understand, a cremated form...

LW Which reminds me of that edict of Jasper Johns: “Take something, do something to it, do something else to it.”

JM Right, right, exactly.

LW Or for that matter the way performance art was itself a sort of extension of action painting. The artist taking all the action which had previously been contained within the painting world inside the frame and taking it out into the actual world beyond the frame in the form of actual acts and actions, with his or her own body as the medium.

Speaking of which, pretty soon after you came up with the idea for “Forever Yours,” though after Mike had recovered from the cancer, you engaged in a pretty nifty performance of your own.

JM Well yes. At some point in all of this we decided we'd have a year-long auction for Forever Yours to try and sell the piece. And as a sort of promotional kick-off, we got permission to use the lobby of city hall here in Houston, which is this lovely, elegant 1930s art-deco-socialist-architecture space. We were able to do this because we knew somebody in the mayor's office. And so we sent out beautifully printed invitations, and we set a date and a time –noon– for what we were calling “a concert.” But actually...it was very simple. We had two folding tables that we draped black cloths over. We had a couple of pillows, black pillows, and we put a music stand up with a score for “The Art Guys Lie In State,” which is what we called it. And we had an alarm clock. And the alarm clock was set for 1:00 in the afternoon. And right at noon Mike and I lay down, each on our own table...

LW Nicely dressed?

JM Very nicely dressed.

MG Black suits.

JM And we just crossed our arms over our chests and we lay in state from noon to one.

LW Shades of John Cage's 4'33"?

MG Definitely.

LW People came by?

MG Oh, yes. For the viewing. A lot of people who came probably were thinking they were coming for a joke.

JM But it was very powerful at the same time. People became very quiet and very hushed, and they became reflective and all those things that you might feel when you go to a wake.

LW Even though, Twain-like, the two of you were awake at your own wake, and lying about the fact that you were lying in state.

MG There were all kinds of puns built into the situation.

LW And in fact, this funny becoming serious becoming funny becoming serious has, as we've suggested, been a longtime trademark of much of your work.

MG & JM Absolutely.

LW That suitcase piece of yours from a while back with the quote of Gustave Flaubert stenciled across it...

JM The Definition of Metaphysics: “One has no idea what it is but one laughs at it.”

LW Or that other piece of yours from years back: the skull with the clown's red rubber nose on it.

JM Another definite precursor of “Forever Yours.”

LW Which in turn, it seems to me, was banking off of the fact that the ur-skull in the Western tradition is that of Yorick, Hamlet's childhood court jester.

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rims at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? quite chap-fallen?

MG There is something of the tradition of the jester in our work, to be sure. Jesters being those people who carry the weight of the idea so that other people don't have to, the ones who will go ahead and do that for you.

LW Though infecting you with their unease, their dis-ease in the process.

MG That's the joke of the jester.

LW One of his funniest jests is to claim that he is serious. Or conversely, seeming to say something very profound, at times even quite cutting, and then pulling back and claiming that, no, he was only kidding.

MG They're the ones who point at the world and get you to look at it.

LW Or get you to see, more precisely, how there's nothing holding the whole thing up, there are no visible means of support. The whole Socratic tradition of getting you to question everything you lazily take for granted.

MG Absolutely. We like that. But like Jack says, we also don't like being labeled. We fight against that sort of stuff. But at the same time, in this instance, we welcome the accusation.

LW 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 Well, the economics behind this consists of the fact that we had to come up with a figure.

MG So to speak.

JM A figure, a sum. The notion of selling a piece of artwork. We're fully familiar with the fact that if we are going to be committed to being full time artists, we need to make a living off of our work.

LW Or, in this instance, a living off of your death.

MG It does no one any good if we can't continue to do what we do, which is to say to continue to work on our art.

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.”

LW But also meaning you don't cost a thing. Your price is zero.

JM We're *unencumbered*.

MG Yes. Unencumbered. Be careful what you 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.

MG It is, after all, the totality of us encapsulated into this thing in a physical form. When you think of it that way, it's pretty goddamn cheap, you know, for what it is.

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 Or at any rate, “in play.” I can already see the articles in *People* and the *Daily News*. The trope of those crazy 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 modeled this piece in a different manner—say, donated it to an institution, it probably would have been a fairly easy matter....

LW I wonder what kind of tax deduction you could have gotten.

JM Probably not much. But the point is, the piece wouldn't have gone anywhere. 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 There's that old saw in the museum world, regarding blockbuster shows, that the two things that really bring out the crowds are gold and death. Hence the King Tut phenomenon. And for that matter, I imagine, that 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.

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