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Networked Economies: Six Degrees of Boggs

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[1] Just as Baudelaire invented an image of originality in, and out of, the world of infinite copies, J. S. G. Boggs produces original works using the means of multiple copies. The milieu of the mass market, demanding multiple copies, changes the role of artisanal crafts. When Walter Benjamin wrote that Baudelaire "stood in uninterrupted contact with the market" by using defamation and counterfeiting as strategies, he opened the door to studying markets and economies as grist for poetic experiments. Baudelaire was "perhaps the first to conceive of an originality appropriate to the market, which was at the time just for that reason more original than any other: to invent a cliché, trivial piece of work"(Benjamin Central Park 37). Rather than simply eliminating the artisan's craft, the mass market may paradoxically create a new context for individual expression -- except now the market itself becomes the sociopoetic canvas. When aesthetic and poetic decisions embodied in artworks lead to a heightened or changed social situation, then one needs to describe these forms as *sociopoetic* rather than as artworks within particular social contexts. The social situation is part of a sociopoetic experiment.

[2] The term sociopoetic describes artworks that use social situations or social networks as a canvas; intimate bureaucracies being a type of sociopoetic work. The term sociopoetic does not define my methodology. Instead, the term describes the works studied here. Using Roland Barthes's category of the receivable, my theoretical approach studies how situations function poetically (or sociopoetically). Although I do present contextual information (the history, the participants, the politics, and the like) as entangled in the work, my focus remains on how artists and poets manipulate and score situations. Neither Cultural Studies, that examines how contexts determine aesthetic production, nor semiotics, that studies the structures of texts, enables one to focus on a third possibility: social situations that function as part of an artwork or poem (that is, sociopoetic works).

[3] In general, the availability of industrial production techniques (photocopy machines, low-end printing presses, cheaper film and video equipment, cheaper photographic equipment, and so on), and the urge for democratization of art-making has fueled an alternative art scene since the 1950s (especially in the work of groups like Fluxus and in activities like publishing artist's periodicals and establishing artists' networks). The access to multiple media released these works from a single medium or traditional forms. The questioning of the proper form for art, led to more conceptual work about social systems. For example, the Church of the Sub-Genius emerged out of underground comics' parodic attitude toward evangelical religion and corporate culture. That church explicitly combines religion with business into mailings, stencils of their Messiah called "Bob," and organizational structures somewhere between parodies of fanatic exclamations and manifestoes. Instead of using the rhetoric of being saved, one article contends that followers should "diversify" their "stock" by "investing in the god or gods of your choice"(Stang 144). Rather than dismissing modern culture in favor of a transcendent escape from the society of spectacles or mass marketed religions, the artists involved reconfigure quintessential forms of our often bureaucratized lives to provide new interpretations of contemporary and future cultures. These types of work implicitly claim that the only way *out* is *through* ; hence, their work resembles parodies of these processes and procedures as well as parodies of mass media images and combinations.

[4] As is well known, J. S. G. Boggs, starting in the mid-1980s, has drawn carefully crafted versions of currencies including the United States dollar bill. He had drawn similar bills as early as 1969, but did not begin to use them as exchangeable currency until 1984. His work has drawn the negative attention of governments investigating counterfeiting including cases against him in Australia, Great Britain, and the United States. The controversy surrounding his work has focused on the similitude of his meticulous drawings to the official bills, and critics have discussed his work as a provocation to reconsider the value of art and the value of money (Weschler). Weschler has made Boggs well-known among wide public audience, and other critics have continued the discussion about the ethical and legal value of his artworks most notably Preston K. Covey, Director of the Center for the Advancement of Applied Ethics and the art historian Sandra Smith. The remarkably similar case of the Japanese artist, Akasegawa Genpei, also involves reproducing replicas of government currency. William Marotti mentions that Akasegawa's work "might be realized politically through art" (Marotti 232). The theory presented in this essay expands on that type of politically engaged work.

[5] For Boggs, the artworks include, and are more concerned with, the transactions involved in trying to use the bills to purchase food and merchandise. His art uses the trappings of a large bureaucratic system to create an intimate community among those involved in the transactions. Typically, the final artwork consists of a framed collection of the receipt, the proper change (that Boggs later sells to the collectors), and the drawing used to make the purchase. The collector uses the receipt and other clues to track down the person who knowingly accepted a Boggs' bill for the purchase. He estimates that he has spent well over a million dollars in Boggs' Bills. If consumers legitimate national currencies with *necessary* fictions or mythologies about our dollar bills' unique and substantiated value, then Boggs' Bills create what I call an artificial mythology. My paper seeks to unpack his artificial mythology by focusing on the peculiarities of the networks as artworks he seeks to create.

[6] With all the attention focused on the controversy and government opposition to his work, the more interesting sociopoetic issues only appear as a pretext for scandals. Boggs invents a gift exchange community involved in a more intimate sense of transactions that we usually consider as impersonal. I coin the phrase, "intimate bureaucracy" to capture this type of experimental art that depends on networks of participants. Because the government has cracked down on Boggs' literal production of bills by seizing his works, and all of his art related belongings, some might look to his literal productions of bills and forget the transactions. The government is apparently more concerned with the literal bills because they have refused to return these items in spite of the fact that he was never charged with a crime. These actions were probably strategic moves by the FBI to avoid a jury trial, but it does suggest that the government considers the real threat the production of the bills rather than the actual transactions.

[7] On the one hand, the appropriation and parody of the depersonalized aspects of mass bureaucratized life appears to make the purpose of a bureaucracy absurd. On the other hand, the groups involved in using Boggs' Bills use bureaucratic distribution and production systems. The inside jokes that result from this parody, and use of, bureaucratic forms make the artists' search for more democratic forms seem insincere, but considering the works as what I call *sociopoetic* collective productions, the participants make an effort to construct non-hierarchical systems by using neutral bureaucratic distribution systems. Boggs's art is to create new forms of exchange systems not to simply parody government's currencies, but to create artificial value.

[8] Let me give you an example of one of his most recent works that will help illustrate my argument. Boggs' exhibit "Making Money" opened in Berlin on May 19, 2001. During the exhibit, he lived in the gallery, o-zwei -- pronounced... Ooh TsVie -- which translates literally as (the letter "o", and the word "two"). During the exhibit, Boggs wrote to me that he was "spending Boggs Mark or B-M (all puns intended!) instead of DM (Deutsche Mark)." The sums were considerable. On one dinner he spent a B-M 1000 Boggsnote (about \$500 U.S.) with a little over DM 500 in change."

[9] In one of his anecdotes, he recounts his experience with the exhibit and the unusual networks it created. One night Five POLIZEI (police) came to the gallery around midnight, banging on the door, shouting, and forcefully trying to twist the door handle. The lights were on, and they could see both money and Boggs-bills in the window, as well as Boggs' sculpture/performance work that includes an attache case with ONE BILLION EURO. The police wanted in! Boggs couldn't find the key to the door so he opened a window and started answering their questions.

"Who is making this false money?" they demanded.

So, the network begins with a questioning of the legitimacy of the bills; in all of the networks the Boggs' bills create, participants enter the network as soon as they recognize the currency as an apparent forgery. That is, they must appreciate that this is an alternative system to the one sanctioned by the government. The question usually suggests an initial rejection of the new network system as counterfeit. Quickly, the negative reaction and rejection become the cue for Boggs to begin his sociopoetic work. The apparently counterfeit bills are a pretext.

[10] In this case, he explained to the officers that he was an artist, and his work was not "falschgeld" (counterfeit money) but "KunstGeld" (art money). He showed them a sheet prepared by the gallery with an explanation in German. The sociopoetic work asks the participant to enter into an art network; that is, Boggs asks them to accept the money as art money suggesting an alternative world or exchange system called art. This opening was met with skepticism.

[11] Boggs then resorted to the "ace-in-the-hole", an official letter from the German Senate giving him permission to do his work in Germany. That seemed to calm them down a bit, but they still weren't so convinced, and thought that maybe they should take him and his work down to the station for further discussion. SCHISSE! (Shit!) Boggs thought. Then he grabbed one of his BM 10 notes with a picture of STEFFI (who works at the gallery) on it. It's modeled after the DM 100 note, so it isn't the same color, and the guy on the DM 10 "isn't looking too happy" compared to Steffi. The police smiled, and seemed to like it.

"Do you think this is worth ten D-Mark?" Boggs asked.

They started to bob their heads back and forth as they considered. Each raising one eyebrow, they seemed to be conceding the point. "But, well...there still might be a problem..." the officers explained. They entered into at least recognizing the possibility of a legitimate exchange network aligned with art. Much of the criticism of contemporary art and artworld practices has to do with the inflated prices and seemingly trivial endeavors. Boggs shifts the argument to make the value of the art dependent on the acceptance of the sociopoetic wager (i.e., "will you accept this as art"). The police pointed at "The EURO!"

Boggs' ONE BILLION EURO sculpture is made using 1,000 of Naples Bank Note Company's 1,000,000 Euro Notes. "Since people are not used to the Euro, perhaps they wouldn't realize it was art. I grabbed one of the 1,000,000.00 Euro notes."

"Got WechselGeld?" asked Boggs.

The police burst out laughing.

WechselGeld means "the change" in German. So, Boggs paid them a 1.000.000 Euro Note and off they went into the night. The interaction had come to focus on the sociopoetic work not Boggs' skill at reproducing features of a Euro bills or Deutsch Mark.

[12] First, there is the explicit Freudian joke about fetishism that Boggs creates with his BM notes: money as shit that the anal-retentive culture seeks to horde. Beyond his spoof of hoarding money and believing that the money itself has some intrinsic value, he wants to make transactions. He does not reject the fetishistic culture's delusion that money has intrinsic value so much as twist that mythological value to his own ends to create an artificial currency. The people who participate in the transactions accept the bills as drawings, and correctly consider the artworks as more valuable than the face value of a Boggs' Bill; so, the transactions are not exactly counterfeiting, but the United States' courts have considered the bills themselves as counterfeit bills. Two additional anecdotes highlight the importance of these transactions for an intimate bureaucratic artwork. In one instance, Boggs wanted to use one of his drawings of a bill to purchase a meal at a restaurant; the waiter agreed to accept the Boggs' Bill in lieu of the official currency. When the waiter returned with the proper change, he had drawn a picture of the change to Boggs' great delight. It is not simply Boggs' great skill at drawing original artworks based on government currencies, but on the invention of intimate gift exchanges and transactions among the participants. In 1992, Boggs planned a large scale artwork, "Project: Pittsburgh" (1993), that more completely involved the social situation as a canvas. He wanted all the participants to keep the Boggs' Bills in circulation for at least five exchanges (and to mark the bills with their thumb prints) (Weschler 128). The government intervened by threatening all of the participants with severe prosecution. For Boggs, the goal was to use the trappings of a bureaucratic system to invent a gift exchange community. People involved in this work are part of a sociopoetic experience in spite of the fact that they do not profit by collecting the works.

[13] These almost opposed values of collective action and self-promotion combined to form the alternative to more hierarchical systems of appraising art works. Mixing the apparently contradictory *collective* versus *conspiratorial* action, Boggs' intimate bureaucracy is a poetic use of the trappings of large bureaucratic systems and procedures (e.g., money, receipts, correct change, official letters from bureaucrats, etc.) to create intimate aesthetic situations including the pleasures of sharing a special knowledge or a new language among a small network of participants.

[14] In the work with the Berlin police, he uses bribery as a commentary on both the acceptance of his bill and the predictable corruption of the officers. The inside jokes that result from this parody, and use of, bureaucratic forms make the artists' search for more democratic forms seem insincere, or incomplete, because they appear to raise the bar for entrance to include only the already initiated.

[15] The temporary and artificial institutional structures Boggs builds (i.e., the exchange economies) function beyond the drawings themselves as artworks in their own right.

[16] Boggs' works ultimately comment on political economies as well as the trappings of a literal economy. Mainstream political democracies restrict the choices (candidates or products) available and level the types of interpretation (or voting) to the lowest common denominator, especially to a yes or no question, in order to reach the largest number of participants. A successful democracy is judged according to how many people have access to free and open voting, consuming, and choosing among alternatives. We confront anomalies in this form of

democracy as absurd corruption like the case in the repeating election fiascos in Florida. In Boggs' world his economies aim to reach a small communal group of participants who accept to play along with self-awareness about the situation he is proposing. In mainstream political democracies this situation would resemble getting to the voting booth to be confronted by so many radically different choices, much like the Florida fiasco, that one could only wonder how to decide on just one -- Boggs; work depends on the ambiguity of his bills -- temporarily useful for exchange, clearly not real exchangeable money (and therefore not exactly counterfeit), and dependent on the networks of participants. The intimate bureaucracy seeks to use the social situation as a canvas.

[17] Using Roland Barthes's category of the "receivable" (Barthes, *RB* 118), my theoretical approach studies how situations function poetically (or sociopoetically). Although I do present contextual information here about Boggs (the history, the participants, the politics, and the like) as entangled in the work, my focus remains on how Boggs manipulated and scored situations. Barthes distinguishes the receivable from both the readerly texts of narrative realism or the modernist writerly texts that depend on a reader's responding as if writing the text (*S/Z* 3). Literary critics and theorists have written extensively on these two other terms, and Barthes himself only mentions the third category in passing (and only once late in his career). He names the works, sent to him by his friends or acquaintances, receivable because he does not know quite what to make of these texts, but he gladly receives them. He explains that this type of "unreadable text catches hold, the red-hot text, a product continuously outside of any likelihood and whose function -- visibly assumed by its *scriptor* -- would be to contest the mercantile constraint of what is written" (*RB* 119).

[18] Barthes did not intend this definition to apply to the Boggs Bills examined here. Nevertheless, he goes on to further describe the receivable in terms of another key attribute of Boggs Bills. He explains that "this text, guided, armed by a notion of the unpublishable, would require the following response: I can neither read nor write what you produce, but I receive it, like a fire, a drug, an enigmatic disorganization" (*RB* 118). Although a literary critic may dismiss the receivable work as "unreadable," Barthes' term (and his description of how he developed the term) alludes to a more intensely *intimate* relationship with the texts received. He alludes to a network of relationships linked by sending and receiving texts as part of a network of participants. He also explicitly notes that these texts have an inherently militant attitude toward mercantile constraints of publication; and, the sender expresses this attitude *visibly*. You take a risk accepting a Boggs Bill.

[19] In conclusion, we can place Boggs in the lineage of Joseph Beuys and Marcel Duchamp who both produced their own currency -- nevermind a lineage that might begin with Baudelaire. Beuys produced his own monetary currency by creating a remarkably accurate and full color replica of some unknown country's paper currency that substitutes the standard picture of a King, Queen, President, or World Leader, with a picture on this bill of a rabbit, and instead of a Secretary of the Treasury's signature, Beuys has signed the bill himself. Of course, this lineage is not simply about parodic counterfeits and defamation of economic systems, it is about using market economies as a sociopoetic canvas. And, that lineage becomes increasingly important in the emerging networked economies of the 21st century.

[20] Artists have often imagined the combination of Surrealism and Fordism, the combination, that is, between American efficient know-how, also known as Big Business, and European Avant-Garde absurdity. Of course, this combination is always conjured as a Kafka-esque nightmare in the style of the film *Brazil*, for example. American mythologies like to keep adventurers, eccentric inventors, and out-law-heroes as rebels against large institutional power rather than as part of a collective bureaucracy. The fascination with the outsider, who goes to fight the bloated bureaucracy, still holds the popular imagination. Politicians promise to dismantle the government, cut the budget, and radically change the rules even as they propose huge increases in funding and take no action on dismantling the mechanisms of good-old-boy lobbying. What is imagined far less frequently is the possibility of a mixture of performance in the business sense and performance in the art sense. Intimate bureaucracies, works better understood in terms of processes, procedures, systems, and situations, stage a possibility -- actualized rather than utopian -- combine two apparently opposite tendencies in Western culture.

[21] The experimental tenor of these works resembles social scientific experiments. In that sense, the artworks often seem like actual social psychological experiments. Stanley Milgram, best known for his "shocking" work on obedience where volunteer "teachers" followed orders to inflict supposedly fatal shocks to "students," did less invasive work to study "communicative webs" in the late 1960s (Milgram). He wanted to study how people are connected, and his work closely parallels the work of artists' networks (and the publications that grew from those networks). He began with a randomly generated list of people living in Omaha, Nebraska. Each person on the list received a package containing instructions to write their name on a roster and send the package on to someone they knew, a friend or acquaintance, who might get the package closer to the final destination (someone who lived in Sharon Massachusetts and worked in Boston). Milgram used the mail system, and a chain-letter-like experiment, to investigate social connections. He found that it took on average only six steps to reach the final destination. The phrase, "six degrees of separation," and the implications of our links to large social webs have been explored in the play and film of the same name and in the party game "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon." In this sense, it is not Boggs' Bills that define the work, but Six Degrees of Boggs.

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