

Art, Money, and the Gift: J.S.G. Boggs' (Im)possible Currency

Hildegard Hoeller

Volume 30, numéro 1-2-3, 2010

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1025928ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1025928ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association canadienne de sémiotique / Canadian Semiotic Association

ISSN

0229-8651 (imprimé)

1923-9920 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Hoeller, H. (2010). Art, Money, and the Gift: J.S.G. Boggs' (Im)possible Currency. *Recherches sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry*, 30(1-2-3), 119–136.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1025928ar>

Résumé de l'article

À la lueur des théories du don de Lewis Hyde et de Jacques Derrida, cet article s'intéresse à l'art numismatique de l'artiste J.S.G. Boggs. En faisant se rejoindre les sphères du don et du marché, l'art de Boggs fait éclater le binarisme de Hyde et offre une solution au dilemme de l'artiste dans une société axée sur le marché. Les transactions « monétaires » de Boggs démontrent également que ses « billets d'art » rendent possible l'(im)possible don, selon l'expression de Derrida, à travers les pièges du marché de l'échange. Finalement, le travail artistique de Boggs, par le biais de l'imitation et de la différence met en lumière les absurdités de ce marché.

Art, Money, and the Gift : J.S.G. Boggs' (Im)possible Currency

Hildegard Hoeller

City University of New York / The College of
Staten Island and the Graduate Center

“It’s incredibly difficult to make something that’s worth a dollar ...as much as a dollar, exactly a dollar. The only thing that has that exact value is a dollar” (Boggs, quoted in Weschler : 13)

Hardly anyone’s art and life could be more centrally concerned with the semiotics of money than that of money artist J.S.G.Boggs, who makes, spends, and lives off his own money. When Boggs tries to circulate his handmade currency by asking ordinary people such as cashiers, bartenders, sales clerks, or postal clerks to consider accepting one of his bills instead of the usual legal tender, he engages them in profound questions about the meaning of money itself : why does it have meaning or value? How does it have or acquire such meaning or value? And what, in turn, is the value and meaning of his alternative money, his money art? A provocateur like Henry David Thoreau in his Walden experiment, Boggs confronts us with mind-boggling questions about the way we assign value and organize our lives around money. By posing these questions, Boggs’ art gets at the roles money, art, and gifts play in our lives.

Like Thoreau, Boggs had run-ins with the law. Even though he was never imprisoned for his civilly disobedient art, “treasury police all over the world can’t seem to leave the poor devil alone” (xi), as Laurence

Wechsler puts it in his wonderful book – *Boggs Comedy of Values*. Yet, regardless of Boggs’ protracted legal battles, ordinary people all over the world have accepted Boggs’ bills and, equally, major museums all over the world have purchased and exhibited the very same drawings the police tries to confiscate. By 1998, Lawrence Weschler reports, Boggs “figures, he’s spent well in excess of a million dollars’ worth of his own drawings” and “his work has been acquired by institutions ranging from the British Museum to the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Smithsonian” (138). Weschler’s earlier articles on Boggs in the *New Yorker* and his subsequent book have helped to make Boggs’ work known throughout the country; Boggs’ own transactions – since he “makes” any currencies he wants – have worldwide appeal and presence. Yet, while Boggs’ art is exhibited in major museums, it is by its very nature local : it exists within the individual transactions Boggs seeks out throughout the country (and world) and is therefore scattered – as all pieces of money are. There are few further studies on Boggs – some art reviews and commentaries but no sustained interpretations of his work beyond Weschler’s –; and yet, Boggs’ mind-boggling art connects not only to the history of painting but also to philosophy, political economy, semiotics, and an American vein of civil disobedience that makes it eminently interpretable. Indeed, Boggs shows us that the significance of money – its semiotics – lies in those areas.

When delving into the semiotics and history of money, one inevitably ends up confronting theories that connect money to gift exchange and sacrifice. For example summarizing other studies into the roots of market-exchange, Tad Crawford in his book *The Secret Life of Money* connects the meaning of money to its origin in early gift economies, or sacrificial structures that have become invisible to us : “the connection of money to ancient rituals of fertility is lost to our conscious awareness today” (42). Yet, Crawford maintains that etymology and mythology allow us to trace money’s meaning – for example through the Goddess Moneta – back to its roots in worship and sacrifice to Gods¹; being aware of the intricate connection between money and gift exchange, he argues, would allow us to use the “symbolic richness of money” to “open a path to the richness we carry within” (246). But does this archeological argument really help us reconcile money and gift exchange? Or are they, as they occur today, opposites? Lewis Hyde believes the latter. His book *The Gift Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* ponders the role the artist can play in a capitalist society and concludes that gift and money/market economies are opposing structures. The former builds community, bonds, and obligations and is the realm of artistic creation; the latter is alienating and free and leaves the artist starving. The first functions, according to Hyde, on the principle of abundance and fertility, the second on that of scarcity and depletion. Disagreeing with Hyde (and Crawford), French philosopher Jacques Derrida insists that no such alternative exists; in his eyes, even the gift inevitably gets

contaminated (ceases to exist) when it gets recognized, *i.e.* when it enters exchange. While for Hyde the gift is an important alternative to the market, for Derrida the gift is what he calls an all important “(im) possibility”, a disruption of market logic and reasoning that allows us to face goodness and God.

These debates about the gift are central to any investigation into the meaning of money, and they create a context in which J.S.G. Boggs’ art powerfully resonates. Boggs’ art infuses apparent market-transactions with the spirit of the gift, or, to put it differently, masks gift-exchanges with the trappings of money-exchange. In Hyde’s terms, he integrates the opposing worlds of market and gift-exchange; in Derrida’s, he makes the (im)possible possible. His art is a unique and utterly ingenious response to both Hyde’s and Derrida’s dilemmas; it is a stunning exploration – and perhaps even reinstatement – of the meaning of money in terms of the gift.

Boggs’ Art

J.S.G. Boggs’ art, his way of making “money” and then spending it, is designed to raise central questions about the meaning of money. Who or what gives it value? And what is its relation to art? Boggs confronts everyday people with a choice for which they have no preparation : they can either accept one of his Boggs bills or they can reject his offer and accept legal tender instead. This is by no means an easy choice since Boggs’ bills are stunning pieces of art that bear striking resemblance to legal tender but do not pretend to be legal tender they are one-sided and deviate from normal bills by, for example, depicting the Supreme Court instead of the Treasury on the ten dollar bill, or including a portrait of Boggs instead of Washington on the one dollar bill, or substituting “one” with “fun” and the United States of America with The United States of Florida as seen below.



Figure 1 : Boggs Bill

Using exchange as a form of Socratic method, Boggs asks ordinary people to consider how and why they assign value to money – and to art. He tells them that he is an artist, and that he would like them to accept his art in *lieu* of legal tender. “I was wondering whether you’d honor my drawing at face value”, he invariably urges; “it’s not legal tender, but it’s obviously worth something, and I’ve arbitrarily assigned it the price of its face value” (quoted in Weschler 57). His co-artists – those people from every walk of life he approaches – are suddenly faced with fundamental questions about their acceptance of the monetary system, the reasons they believe in the power of their currency, the role art plays in their lives and in their currencies, and the way they assign value – to anything really, but particularly to money and even more specifically to this one wondrous Boggs’ bill in front of them. Boggs brings them into a puzzling situation. Where to look for an answer? Should they look into Boggs’ eyes (is he an artist or a con-man and what’s the difference?), into their hearts (do I like this piece and is it worth its nominal value?) or to their supervisor (do I have the authority to decide?). This quandary itself is at the heart of Boggs’ art, and he is kind, respectful, and even teacherly in his responses without ever telling the person the “real” worth or the current market value of his art or what his art really consists of or that he is by now a widely recognized and exhibited (if also highly suspect) American artist. In his transactions, in other words, he raises questions about the semiotics of money, and links them inextricably to the significance of art to the lives of everyday people – outside of museums, art historical classifications, or galleries with price lists.

When people accept his bill, he insists on its value being equated with the nominal value of the bill, be it one dollar or 100; he then asks for change in legal tender. Faced with Boggs bills, people make remarkable choices. Boggs told me² that once at a diner when paying for a hamburger he gave the waitress a choice of a ten-dollar or a 100-dollar bill – she chose the 100 dollar bill even though it meant giving back so much more change!³

Once a person accepts a bill, Boggs does the necessary paperwork, or what Weschler – describing a transaction with an artist named Paraison – calls an “almost frenzied ritual of documentation” (68) :

He got the one-dollar change from Paraison and then had him draw up a receipt on a sheet of scrap paper. Meanwhile, he took the dollar bill, squeezed into its upper border the printed words “The Change” and an abbreviated summary of the transaction, and then he dated and signed it and set it aside in a special envelope. He borrowed his own drawing back for a moment and on its blank backside he likewise annotated details of the transaction – date, location, Paraison’s name and address, and the serial number of the bill that he was giving in change. He then took Paraison’s receipt and similarly annotated that, including the serial number of his own drawing, and then he slid that into his envelope as well. [...] Boggs now went on to annotate the back of the painting. He then double-checked all the annotations and, satisfied, he returned his twenty-dollar drawing to its new owner and bid

him a friendly good evening (Weschler 68)⁴.

From here, Boggs' art follows certain rules and patterns. Boggs has four rules for his art :

1. He will not sell his money drawings (those "depicting an existing denomination in its exact size" (Weschler 9));
2. He will only spend them, *i.e.* give them to those who will accept them instead of legal tender and at face value;
3. After a transaction, the person with the Boggs bill will be left alone for 24 hours to be given time to reflect on what happened;
4. Boggs will contact an interested collector and try to sell him receipt and change and give him a clue on how to find the owner of the bill (Weschler 9).

The art collector then can approach the owner in order to buy the Boggs' bill for much more than its nominal value. "It's one of the important aspects of my work", Boggs comments; "I never spend a drawing unless I am convinced that it's actually worth at least three or four times the face value at which I spend it" (quoted in Weschler 55). In that manner, the complete art piece – a record of the entire transaction – can be assembled and exhibited – if the person who accepted the Boggs bill is willing to sell it to the same collector who bought the change from Boggs. And if the collector is able to reassemble the piece – and often, as in the case of Paraison, the recipient refuses to part with the Boggs bill and the transaction is never completed (Weschler 70) –, he or she can then sell it to a museum or patron in the art market. Thus in his art Boggs explores the meaning of money by reconnecting it to art, a realm from which it has been severed. He is asking in his transactions : is money, like artistic talent, a blessing, a gift?

Hyde and Derrida

But what exactly is a gift, in the first place? The debate between Lewis Hyde and Jacques Derrida reveals the fundamental complications of thinking about the gift; it is also a fascinating dispute between two unlike "brothers", both "sons" of gift theorist Marcel Mauss to whom their writings respond⁵. One is an American public intellectual, poet, and folklorist writing for a general public, the other a French philosopher writing for intellectuals and academics; one is a structuralist stringing together myths from all over the world into one comprehensible, clear, binary-driven view of the gift economy in opposition to the market economy, the other a master and inventor of deconstruction, swirling, questioning, playing with the vicinity of opposites, the way they slide into each other, make each other possible and impossible. Here is Hyde on the gift : "The synthetic or erotic nature of the giving of a gift may be seen more clearly if we contrast it to the selling of commodities. I would begin the analysis by saying that a commodity has value and a gift does not. A gift has worth" (60). Hyde's method is one of clarity through

contrast, a dualistic method (value/worth; labor/work; profit/increase etc.) that defines gifts against commodities. Derrida's dizzying poetics of deconstruction, on the other hand, betray much about his sense of the complication or even (im)possibility of the gift :

For there to be gift event (we say event and not act), something must come about or happen, in an instant, in an instant that no doubt does not belong to the economy of time, in a time without time, in such a way that the forgetting forgets, that it forgets itself, but also in such a way that this forgetting, without being something present, presentable, determinable, sensible or meaningful, is not nothing (17).

Derrida sees the gift as the very disruption of logos, as *alogos* or a form of madness revealing another form of madness : "It is at once reason and unreason, because it also manifests that madness of the rational logos itself, that madness of the economic circle the calculation of which is constantly reconstituted, logically, rationally" (*Given Time* 1992 : 36-37). Unlike Derrida, Lewis Hyde sees in the gift not a disruption of but an alternative logic to a market-driven society, one that can contain both the ethical and the aesthetic. Either as disruption or alternative, for both men the gift is indispensable for an understanding of our economic lives.

In *The Gift* Lewis Hyde shows that the artist, with his or her gift, is always in a precarious situation in a market-driven society, which does not know how to recompense the artist for his gift. "It is the assumption of this book that a work of art is a gift, not a commodity", writes Hyde on the first page. He explains that this statement needs to be understood in two ways : in terms of "the inner life of art" and "the outer life as well ... [the life of] the work after it has left its maker's hands" (xii). So when an artist tries to give his gift to an audience, "there is nothing in the labor of art itself that will automatically make it pay. [...] Every modern artist who has chosen to labor with a gift must sooner or later wonder how he or she is to survive in a society dominated by market exchange" (xiii). There often remains a sense that an artist is selling out when his work is 'contaminated' by commercial goals and sold for money. Hyde explains : "I do not maintain that art cannot be bought or sold; I do maintain that the gift portion of the work places a constraint upon our merchandising" (xiii). Yet, society does not have a gift exchange in place that would allow the artist to function without engagement in market transactions. For Hyde then "the description of gift exchange" – as he takes it from Marcel Mauss – "[offered] me the language, the way of speaking, through which I could address the situation of creative artists" (xiv). From here, chapter by chapter, through the reading of myths and stories, Hyde offers a compelling view of two alternative realms : one of the gift, the other of the market; one of bonds, obligations, tribal structure, and fertility, the other alienating, free, a modern mass society based on the capitalist principle of scarcity and depletion. The artist, according to Hyde, "naturally" needing the former struggles to preserve his gift and survive in the latter.

Jacques Derrida, in his writings about the gift, struggles with an even more fundamentally vexing point and fear of contamination : How does any gift remain a gift once it enters the market or even any exchange at all? Once recognized as a gift, isn't it inevitably compromised by incurring a form of debt in the recipient? In a footnote on Hyde, Derrida explicitly distances himself from Hyde by claiming that the unconditionality of the gift must be absolute :

Of course, this unconditionality must be absolute and uncircumscribed. It must not be simply declared while in fact dependent in its turn on the condition of some context, on some proximity or family tie, be it general or specific (among human beings, for example, to the exclusion of, for example "animals"). Can there be any gift within the family? But has the gift ever been thought without the family? As for the unconditionality invoked by Lewis Hyde in *The Gift : Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (1983), it is explicitly limited to gifts among close friends, relatives, and most often close relatives. Which is to say that it is not what it is or claims to be : unconditional (*Given Time* footnote : 17-18).

In other words, while Hyde sees in the gift economy an ideal space for the artist and a true alternative to market exchanges that inevitably compromise (or ignore) the artist, Derrida sees the idea of a gift economy (a conscious exchange of gifts) as already compromising the gift. "For there to be a gift", he writes, "there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt" (*Ibid.* : 12). "These conditions of possibility of the gift (that some 'one' gives some 'thing' to some 'one other') designate simultaneously the conditions of the impossibility of the gift" (*Ibid.* : 12). The gift, to Derrida, is "not impossible but the impossible. The very figure of the impossible. It announces itself, gives itself to be thought as the impossible" (7). Derrida is so interested in this very impossibility because it is the site outside all calculation, outside logos, and thus the place of goodness and God for him.

Indeed, this link to goodness and God draws both men to the gift. "What is good is given back", writes Hyde as if uttering a piece of universal wisdom. Derrida concurs that the gift is connected to goodness : "The gift is evaluated as good, indeed as the very origin of what is good, of the good, and of value" (*Given Time* : 36). And for both thinkers, gifts, particularly in the ur-form of sacrifice, are connected to God. Hyde writes : "Our gifts may connect us to God as well. Sacrifice turns the face of the god towards man" (58). He explains : "We have already discussed the rites of the first fruit, a return gift that seeks to maintain relationship with the spiritual world. On the other side, the side of the gods, there are compassionate deities who approach us with gifts" (*Ibid.*). Derrida, too, sees the connection between gift and God : the gift is a way to face God, to face the Other; he devotes his book *The Gift of Death* entirely to this issue. Yet, Hyde's compassionate God is nowhere to be found in Derrida. God, to Derrida, has to be demanding and ungrateful since Derrida insists on the necessity for forgetting, the implied impossibility

of return, since return would erase the gift itself. Derrida thinks of the God who demands without giving back. His account of the myth of Abraham and Isaac serves as an example; God forces Abraham to be (ir)responsible and sacrifice his son.

The gift made to me by God as he holds me in his gaze and in his hand while remaining inaccessible to me, the terribly dissymmetrical gift of the *mysterium tremendum* only allows me to respond and only rouses me to the responsibility it gives me by making a gift of death (*Ibid.* : 33),

writes Derrida in his terrifying vision of sacrifice. One of the terrors of sacrifice is its utter loneliness : “in order that there be this gift as sacrifice, all communication between them has been suspended [...] Abraham renounces all sense and all property – that is where the responsibility of absolute duty begins” (*Ibid.* : 96). Playing with the word responsibility, Derrida sees responsibility precisely in the secretive moment where no exchange takes place – an irresponsible moment – in which Abraham is alone and “expects neither response nor reward” (*Ibid.*). Responsibility of this kind – of gift giving – is thus connected to its opposite irresponsibility, the not responding to ethical rules, the voice of reason, or any calculation. Derrida brilliantly points out that the moment before a gift is a secret, irresponsible (that is responsible) moment “outside of sense” (*Ibid.* : 97). The gift of death has to be secretly, unreasonably given, has to be an event without memory, and has to be the impossible gift Derrida’s texts insist on. Derrida’s writings on the gift swirl around the unutterable, faith – the gift – in the face of the inaccessible, forgetting father. Hyde’s text, in turn, utters faith : faith in the gift as the connection between the sacred and profane, as a way to speak to God.

Boggs, too, sees our economic exchanges, our money, as connected to God. He loves to point out that money was connected to gold, which was connected to the sun, which was seen as God, and that now, in post-gold standard days, our dollar notes conspicuously read : “In God We Trust”. It is perhaps for this reason that his artistic transactions, his explorations into the meaning of money, answer both to Hyde’s dilemma about the role of the artist and to Derrida’s dilemma about the (im)possibility of the gift at all.

Boggs and Hyde

On first sight, the parallels between Boggs’ art and Hyde’s writing about the gift seem overwhelming. Boggs started out just the way Hyde describes the starving artist’s fate. Unable to survive as an artist, he also couldn’t stop being one. He tells Weschler :

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 (Weschler 1999 : 15).

Yet, when he made art, “he couldn't pay the rent” (17). So, Boggs keenly felt the disparity between his gift and a society based on a market-logic that did not let him live. Seeing them as opposites – as alternatives –, he tried to live in one or the other. The solution to this tragic dilemma came to him the way many gifts arrive, according to Hyde out of the blue.

In 1984 Boggs found himself in a coffee shop doodling on a napkin until it turned into the drawing of “a very abstracted one-dollar bill”. The waitress noticed the bill and liked it. She offered Boggs twenty dollars for it; he replied that it wasn't for sale. Then she offered 50, yet he declined again. Then he asked what his debt was for the coffee. “90 cents”, she replied. So he paid her with his bill. She was, as Weschler describes it, “over the moon”. When Boggs left, she called out and gave him a dime in change. “For a long time” Boggs recounts, “I carried that dime around in my pocket. I'd rub it like Aladdin's lamp, and the genie of memory would appear. I still have it. I keep it in my London studio along with all my valuables” (*Ibid.* : 17). Thus, Boggs' art was born.

What happened here in Hyde's terms? Exactly according to Hyde's paradigm, Boggs, the artist, is unable to sell his gift, his work. In this instance, actually, he refuses a market exchange; the waitress interprets his refusal as a matter of price – perhaps even a bargaining technique – and doubles it. Boggs then clarifies that that is not the case; – the piece is simply not for sale. He does not want to sell a coffee-stained napkin with his drawing and one “hour's worth of perspiration on it”. Boggs refuses to sell his artistic labor, or perhaps even part of his body (his sweat); it is inalienable to him. Yet, he is ultimately willing to spend the napkin, to give it, if you wish, as a gift. In the bottom-line logic of the market, after all, Boggs might be said to give the waitress a gift of \$49.10 by using the napkin to pay his 90 cents debt instead of selling it to her for 50 dollars. She then gives him a counter-gift of 10 cents.

But of course, such a description (using market-terms to describe a gift-exchange) hardly gets at the true nature and meaning of this “money”-exchange. In a strange way, the waitress' offer to buy the napkin enables Boggs to give it to her as a payment for his coffee; the market-offer makes possible the gift. And in truth, much larger, unforgettable gifts have been exchanged. The waitress gives Boggs the much-needed appreciation of his art. She shows her appreciation in market-terms, by offering him larger and larger amounts for his piece; she translates her appreciation into money, and uses money as a language. But Boggs defies the logic of money by refusing her \$50 offer and instead “giving” her his piece of art as money. In turn, the waitress gives Boggs the gift of the full conception of his art by returning the dime; recognizing that gift, Boggs takes the dime out of circulation and turns it into a magic object, a treasure. In this exchange, beginning with the gift of the artist, Boggs' money-art was born, and both waitress and Boggs were trans-

formed. The waitress ends up not only with Boggs' money drawing but also, in Weschler's terms, "over the moon", a term that suggests a leaving of the world of the diner, of adulthood⁶ and rational calculation, of the realistic and possible for a world of endless possibilities and elation; Boggs' ability to excite the waitress through his "gift" also hints at the erotic properties of the gift Hyde mentions. And Boggs, in turn, ends up with a magic dime that he rubs like "Aladdin's lamp" for the "genie of memory" to appear; to him, it is charmed because it reminds him of a solution to the tragic dilemma of the artist. It shows Boggs a way of surviving as an artist without selling out.

What has happened, we might ask, to the boundaries and binaries between market and gift exchange that are central to Hyde's view? This incident begins with the boundaries intact – a stranger offering money for art and the artist refusing to sell –, but it ultimately blurs them. Boggs' art – the transaction between him and another person – consists in asking the very question Hyde poses : how can an artist survive in a market-driven society? But when Boggs refuses to sell his art for legal tender and insists instead on using his art as money, he turns his art from a commodity into a currency, from an object to be bought and sold for money into a medium of exchange whose value is the art itself. In this way he makes his art the measure of value rather than the object to be measured. While theoretically any piece of art could be so transformed, there is something suggestive about the piece of art being, in fact, seen as a representation of currency that might have inspired this transformation. Mimicking and defying all logic, Boggs insists on its arbitrary nominal value be it one dollar – as in this case – or 1000 Swiss Franks, for example; he enforces, one might say, on a logic of absurdity. Because Boggs' art is money (or better the exchange of money-like art pieces for money) Boggs explodes Hyde's boundaries between gift and market exchange, turning art into money, and money into art. The genius of Boggs' money art lies not just in the Boggs bill (even though his gift as an artist makes those possible) but also in its exchange. In his transactions Boggs creates co-artists (or in this ur-case simply encounters one) and gives rise to in a gift-community needed to sustain him – the very community Hyde sees as lost.

But, at the same time, it is central to Boggs' art that it defies Hyde's idea of a gift community in several ways. First, he always insists on dealing with strangers; his gifts are only directed towards strangers – not friends or family. Indeed, it is impossible to get a Boggs bill once you know about Boggs' art and know him. I have myself witnessed how some people tried to get a bill from Boggs because they admired his art, and to me there seemed to be something pathetic and embarrassing about it. Since everyone familiar with Boggs' work knows that one cannot buy the Boggs bill, such attempts have mostly involved abuses of gifts : people offering Boggs gifts and trying to elicit the counter-gift of a Boggs bill. There is a sense of contamination, to invoke Derrida's thinking, in such

attempts to manipulate the gift into a bargain. Boggs silently refuses this dynamic; he insists that his art only take place in an estranged, spontaneous situation in which the gift he gives is not recognized as such, in which a leap of faith – faith in his art – is necessary. And while there is a bond that gets created – the memory of the transaction – there is no community established beyond that. It is important that Boggs travels around, seeking those random encounters, creating a form of gift-exchange that looks like a market-exchange in the very alienated space that belongs habitually to capitalism.

Secondly, Boggs hands over the results of this gift-transaction to the market. When he contacts a dealer, they speak the language of traditional money, with the absurd twist that the money he received embellished with the receipt of the transaction become commodities. So the market-driven dealer is forced to offer, let's say, two hundred dollars for twenty cents. Boggs sells these items without any spirit of a gift; his negotiations with the dealer are strictly business, in which the dealer takes a risk. After the given time of 24 hours, the other participant, too, reenters the market when he or she may be approached by a dealer. But the encounter between those two is substantially different than that between Boggs and the art dealer; when the latter approaches the owner of a Boggs bill, his market-offer makes manifest the existence and immensity of Boggs' gift. After all, as Boggs stresses, he never spends a bill that isn't many times worth its nominal value for which he spends it. Through the market-offer by the dealer the owners of Boggs' bills understand the gift that has been given to them; they can now, in turn, either keep the gift out of the market or turn it into a profit – the latter implying Boggs' art gets completed and exhibited, but also, in the same moment, commodified. So, in a way, the market-exchange serves to pass the gift on and to augment it but also to reenter it into the market. This difficult quandary between selling and not-selling puts the recipient at the seams between gift and market-exchange without giving clear answers. Yes, there is a moral dimension in these exchanges, a way in which they give back to those who appreciate Boggs' art and take a risk, to those who make the artists survive and make art possible. Weschler comes close to the gift-aspect of Boggs art when he wonders whether it is a "sort of fairy-tale virtue test, in which the worthy agreed to sacrifice and were subsequently rewarded a hundredfold" (66)⁷. But what exactly is the reward and what is the best way to respond to it? Is it better to accept the money from the dealer and let the art live on – let it circulate like a currency – or is it better to keep it as a magic treasure? The life of the art and the artist are at stake again; and each answer is potentially the right one. Without giving clear contrasts and clear answers to these alternative economies as Hyde delineates them, Boggs explodes Hyde's oppositions between market and gift exchange and makes his co-artists think about the relation between money and art. And in this explosion of boundaries also lies his implicit response to Derrida's ruminations

about the (im)possibility of the gift.

Boggs and Derrida

Theoretically, there is, of course, no answer to Derrida's fundamental thoughts on the (im)possibility of the gift. If Hyde's book stresses the erotic nature of the gift, Derrida's writings on the gift betray an almost antiseptic, anti-erotic fear of contamination that can only revere the gift as long as no-one touches it⁸. But despite its transactional nature, Boggs' art actually resonates with Derrida's ideas in fascinating ways. Derrida posits that the gift will indeed be contaminated the minute it is consciously or even unconsciously recognized as such. The gift – the moment of decision to give – must be a terrifyingly lonely moment, a time outside of time. When Abraham decides to give God the gift of his son's death, he is utterly alone, Derrida insists; God is invisible.

Boggs offers a comedy to Derrida's tragedy. The utter loneliness of Abraham's decision, the moment of no response, is an important part of Boggs' art as well. This became utterly clear to me when I witnessed several of Boggs' transactions. Let me recount one example. I had invited Boggs and six or seven friends and colleagues to a Thai restaurant in Wellesley, Mass. But despite my explicit invitation – in which I had stressed to him that I wanted to treat everyone –, Boggs nonetheless ended up trying to "pay" with his "money". When the check was brought to our table, he took out a sheet of 5 uncut, brightly orange colored copied fifty-dollar Florida Boggs bills and offered them to the owner of the restaurant. In his usual fashion, he identified himself as an artist, telling the owner that he had made the bills and would like to spend them. Watching the owner deliberate on this offer reminded me forcefully of Derrida's book *The Gift of Death*. I had never before realized how powerfully irony is connected to loneliness and alienation. We saw – and this remains the most excruciating part of witnessing these transactions – the situation in a totally different light than the owner of the restaurant, but we were not speaking. There was that secrecy that Derrida writes about : we are alone and (ir)responsible, only answering to something or someone outside of logos. The owner of the restaurant was clearly fascinated by the bills, holding and beholding them, unable to walk away from them and yet equally unable to fully accept them. On which terms would he do so, he seemed to wonder silently? Were they an answer to the bill he had presented to us for the meal we had consumed in his restaurant? I cannot know what he thought. His thoughts were secret, and despite our presence he was alone in Derrida's terms : no-one responded. We all sat quietly withholding knowledge; some of the group – who had tried to get a Boggs bill – must have been envious of the man and his chance to get such a bill and then a visit from an art dealer 24 hours later. Surrounded by silent irony, the man was utterly alone in a world outside of logos, while staring at neatly arranged beautiful original 50 dollar bills of sorts : $5 \times 50 = 250$, right?

Ultimately, whatever went on in the secrecy of his loneliness, the man could not decide to take a leap of faith to do the unspeakable, the absolutely responsible in Derrida's terms and thus the irresponsible in terms of the market. He could not trust his fascination with the bills, listen to their wonder and beauty, abandon his market logic, and enter an unspeakable irrational realm where no logic builds bridges, no outcomes are safe, no significance stable. The transaction failed – or did it? I realized shortly after that the rejection of Boggs' bills and the preference for legal tender was still an important, transformative event for the restaurant owner. After all, in that moment of decision he had sacrificed his fascination for these bills – a fascination so palpable I was astonished at the power these bills had over this man. In either case then, I concluded, Boggs' art demanded a sacrifice : if the restaurant owner does not decide to accept Boggs' bills he sacrifices them and a world outside of logos, and if he does accept Boggs' bills rather than demand legal tender he sacrifices security for risk, he risks money. He also abandons a realm of legality by questioning the very laws of his existence as a business man. He enters a sphere of economic anarchy, where money can be made and exchanged by individuals outside of the state-approved and – enforced rules and standards. In this case the owner made, in Derrida's terms, a responsible sacrifice; he acted according to a conventional language of calculation and thus according to Derrida's terms irresponsible. He did not respond absolutely to the power of the bills, of art, of unspeakable fascination, of meaning outside of a system of meaning, the other, God. He came face to face with the other, but, in Derrida's terms, he did not enter the realm of the absolute.

While apparently appealing to logos both in form and method – “this bill is worth its nominal value, give me back exact change” – Boggs' art lies in luring us outside of this logos. The transaction, the ultimate artwork, is thus a *record* of a leap of faith not unlike the story of Abraham's sacrifice; we might read it as an absurd comic response to Abraham's tragic choice. If it gets completed, it becomes the origin of abundance and fertility. Masked under the guise of a market exchange lies a memory of gift exchange, and an escalating pattern of values follows⁹. Boggs' meticulous documentation of the transaction – receipts, exact change, serial numbers of bills – mimic the language of the market only to imply its transgression. Using the language of the possible – a rational, responsible transaction – they actually mark the moment of the (im)possible. But Boggs turns tables on Derrida as well in two important ways.

One, while Derrida insist that all exchange contaminates the gift, Boggs proves that an apparent market-exchange, which leaves each party without debt or obligation to the other because of the mutual faith in equivalence expressed through money, can indeed make the gift possible. I read all the market trappings of Boggs' art as a way of ensuring that the gift exchange remains intact. Both parties in Boggs' transaction give gifts :

one in the form of risk, of faith, of appreciation of art, of participating in art and sacrificing money, the other in insisting on the nominal value of the bill and thus spending the art and in giving time¹⁰. A day later, when a collector offers the market value of the bill, the enormity of the gift will become apparent. So both artists – Boggs and the co-artist – give, but they give in the elaborate guise of a market-exchange¹¹. This guise allows there to be no poisoning obligation to remain. The deal is done, each participant free and enriched. The market-logic functions here as the antiseptic solution that prevents the gift exchange from becoming poisonous or contaminated. It is therefore utterly important that Boggs only deals with strangers and lives a nomadic lifestyle himself; he must come and go in order to prevent the gift event from happening in time, in a way. Masking or purifying gift exchange in the trappings of market exchange, he makes, in Derrida's terms, the (im)possible possible.

Second, by absurdly insisting that his bills are worth their nominal value – which he determines Godlike (or bank-like) with the flourish of his pen – he points to an (im)possibility in our daily money transactions that is at least as daunting as the (im)possibility of the gift : the (im)possibility of equivalence. When we handle money we always insist on the equivalence, and yet also on its lack; we consent to a deal on the grounds of equivalence, but in truth we strive for profit as a lack of equivalence. Money allows us to maintain the myth of the possibility of equivalence and the faith in having made a good deal – the opposite of a gift in fact – by having violated equivalence. Sounding like a middle between Gertrude Stein and Jacques Derrida, Boggs asserts : “It’s incredibly difficult to make something that’s worth a dollar ...as much as a dollar, exactly a dollar. The only thing that has that exact value is a dollar” (Weschler : 13). Just as Derrida’s gift exists only as an (im)possibility – only as the concept without existence beyond its sign – the dollar as a measure of value exists only as an “incredible” event, an (im)possibility as well. Echoing Derrida we might say : “These conditions of market-exchange (that some ‘one’ pay someone ‘else’ for some ‘thing’ exactly what it is worth) designate simultaneously the conditions of the impossibility of such exact payment”. The dollar, as a supposed measure of such equivalence, can fulfill itself only in an absurd tautology.

Conclusion : Boggs and the Meaning of Money

J.S.G.Boggs’ art answers to both Hyde’s and Derrida’s thinking about the gift. Reconnecting the spheres of the gift and the market, Boggs’ art explodes Hyde’s binaries and creates a solution for the dilemma of the artist in a market-driven society. Boggs’ “money” transactions also show that his money art can make possible the (im)possible gift, in Derrida’s terms, through the trappings of market-exchange. Finally, Boggs’ art, through imitation and difference, exposes the absurdities of money exchange.

His artistic gift is that of imitation or mimesis – of being able to counterfeit – with a twist. Like other *trompe-l'oeil* artists, Boggs exhibits in his bills his ability to imitate life (the dollar bill, for example) to a degree that it cannot be distinguished from his paintings (the Boggs bill). His transactions, too, are imitations, mimicking market-transactions we conduct unthinkingly every day. But Boggs creates a difference that creates at least as much havoc as a counterfeit bill would. He absurdly insists on not counterfeiting and on using difference in order to create thinking about the semiotics of sameness which our money transactions imply. Not only do we use money to signify an impossible equivalence, but the value of money is also determined by our faith in its sameness. We only accept a dollar bill that we understand to be the exact same in value and meaning as another dollar-bill. Boggs stresses this fact; he offers us the possibility of sameness and then introduces differences that change the value of the bill (as either worthless since it is not a “real” dollar-bill or worth something else because it is a piece of art). But he insists, at the same time, that the differences should not lead to a difference in value. We have to accept that his one dollar Boggs bill is equivalent to our money and that its value is determined by the number 1 and the word one, which each need to be equated as well. He forces us, in other words, to consider the way in which money makes sameness a reason for equivalence and then asks us to find equivalence in difference.

The Boggs bill is definitely not a dollar bill. Boggs encodes difference in ways that themselves engage us in semiotic questions about sameness and difference. Even a cursory look at Boggs fun-bill (see figure one earlier in this essay) suggests fundamental questions about meaning : Why does Fun rhyme with One, he asks in his substitutions, and is there an equivalence between words that rhyme? And why is the spelling of these words entirely different when their pronunciation is so similar? Is the performance of language in speech fundamentally different from writing – just as money exchange is different in the actual act than in its theoretical text. What is the relation between the number 1 and the word one? Is there meaning to the fact that fun is only one letter away from “fund”? What is the difference between us (the pronoun) and US (the abbreviation for the United States)? Politically speaking the two terms can blur and erase their difference. Why could US not mean Florida instead of all the states? How do we determine a difference between states and united states? What happens when we substitute God with us – is there difference or sameness? The Boggs bill itself comes to us – as the dollar bill does, if we think about it – as a challenging lesson in semiotics, from deSaussure to Derrida.

And there is yet another sameness that Boggs explores and explodes. In a way, he shows that even these semiotic questions to be found on every dollar equate all dollars and thus erase the dollar as an object. Boggs’ money art also reinstates the signifier as something separate

from the signified; it makes us see the dollar not as a sign but as a specific, unique object. He reminds us that the money we exchange every day is art – a limited edition of an etching. “A dollar bill is a print : it’s a unique, numbered edition” (quoted in Weschler : 11). The dollar is significantly different from the concept or even genre “one dollar” with which we constantly confuse it. Indeed, in order for us to give the dollar value as one dollar we have to erase it as an object. Derrida writes about the gift : “the simple identification of the gift seems to destroy it” (14). Boggs seems to suggest that, identifying a dollar bill merely as “one dollar” rather than one specific print of an etching, means destroying that dollar as well. In the moment in which we spend a specific dollar as one dollar, we annul the dollar as art and deny its specific existence. We have erased part of its meaning, difference, and being in an impossible semiotics of sameness and equivalence.

Notes

1. In his account of the history of money, Weschler, too, points out this connection between money and the gift (25); but he does not pursue this subject further.
2. I finally met J.S.G.Boggs in the 90s.
3. And Diane Haithman reports in a *Los Angeles Times* (Sunday June 27, 1999) article entitled “Taking Things at Face Value” that “in a recent transaction in Portland, Oregon, Boggs bought a \$3 hamburger with a \$1000 Boggs Bill and received \$997 in change”.
4. I witnessed a similarly elaborate form of documentation when Boggs spent a newspaper print of one of his Boggs bills from the Babson College newspaper at the bar in the executive center of the college.
5. For a longer version of this section see “Possible and (Im)possible Gifts : Gift Theory from Marcel Mauss to Jacques Derrida and Beyond” in my book *From Gift to Commodity Capitalism and Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (Durham : University of New Hampshire Press, 2012 : 5-13).
6. The term “over the moon” is commonly traced to the nursery rhyme “Hey Diddle Diddle”.
7. Weschler does not pursue this gift-aspect any further.
8. It is for this reason that Derrida makes much of the German meaning of gift : poison.
9. Boggs recounts such an escalation in the context of charity. When asked by Jesse Walker in 2000 whether he had “ever drawn a campaign contribution” Boggs answered : “No, but I have drawn a charitable contribution. I drew a \$1 bill, which I gave to the New York Dance Company as a donation valued at \$1. They put it up for auction and sold it for \$5000. The person who bought it sold it for \$10,000. Last I heard, the current owner was offered \$25,000 but declined to accept it.” (Jesse Walker, “The Art of the Deal”, <http://reason.com/archives/2000/10/01/the-art-of-the-deal>, (retrieved 6/6/2011).
10. “The gift only gives to the extent that it gives time” (41), Derrida comments in *Given Time : 1. Counterfeit Money*.
11. One might say here that Boggs does not take a risk anymore since he knows now that he can profit from a transaction by selling his change and receipt. But Boggs also refuses to adapt his transactions to any market-demands. Olav

Velthuis recounts that “when a collector recently offered to buy all his remaining coins for \$100,000, Boggs refused. The golden rule is that [...] he does not sell his work , [...] he only ‘transacts’ it” (“In Boggs We Trust”, *tout-fait The Marcel Duchamps Studies Online Journal* volume 2, issue 4 January 2002 http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue_4/articles/velthuis/velthuis2.html (retrieved 6/6/2011)).

Bibliography

- CRAWFORD, T. (1994). *The Secret Life of Money*. New York : G.P.Putnam’s Sons.
 DERRIDA, J. (1992.) *Given Time : I. Counterfeit Money*. Chicago : UCP.
 _____. (1995). *The Gift of Death*. Chicago : UCP.
 HOELLER, H. (2012). *From Gift to Commodity Capitalism and Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*. Durham : University of New Hampshire Press.
 HYDE, L. (1979). *The Gift*. New York : Vintage Books.
 WESCHLER, L. (1999). *Boggs A Comedy of Values*. Chicago : UCP.

Abstract

This essay examines money artist J.S.G.Boggs’ work in light of gift theories by Lewis Hyde and Jacques Derrida. Reconnecting the spheres of the gift and the market, Boggs’ art explodes Hyde’s binaries and creates a solution for the dilemma of the artist in a market-driven society. Boggs’ “money” transactions also show that his money art can make possible the (im)possible gift, in Derrida’s terms, through the trappings of market-exchange. Finally, Boggs’ art, through imitation and difference, exposes the absurdities of money exchange.

Résumé

À la lueur des théories du don de Lewis Hyde et de Jacques Derrida, cet article s’intéresse à l’art numismatique de l’artiste J.S.G. Boggs. En faisant se rejoindre les sphères du don et du marché, l’art de Boggs fait éclater le binarisme de Hyde et offre une solution au dilemme de l’artiste dans une société axée sur le marché. Les transactions “monétaires” de Boggs démontrent également que ses “billets d’art” rendent possible l’(im)possible don, selon l’expression de Derrida, à travers les pièges du marché de l’échange. Finalement, le travail artistique de Boggs, par le biais de l’imitation et de la différence met en lumière les absurdités de ce marché.

HILDEGARD HOELLER is Professor of English at the College of Staten Island with an appointment in English and Women’s Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She is the author of *From Gift to Commodity : Capitalism and Sacrifice in Nineteenth Century American Fiction* (2012) and *Edith Wharton’s Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (2000), as well as co-author with Rebecca Brittenham of *Keywords for Academic Writers* (2004); she is also the editor of the *Norton Critical Edition of Horatio Alger’s Ragged Dick* (2007). Her essays have appeared in *PMLA*, *American Literature*, *Studies in American Fiction*, *ESQ*, *American Literary Realism*, *African-American Review*, *Edith Wharton Review* and other scholarly

journals and edited collections