

Forever Yours

THE ART GUYS

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Estate Planning for Artists: A Novel Approach

Kevin Concannon

Death can be a great career move for artists. Speaking about the posthumous careers of a few of his artist colleagues, Robert Longo observed: "On the one hand, it's incredibly romantic. These artists are finally getting their due. On the other hand, it's about a commodity. There's a limited supply."¹ In such cases, however, it is generally others who are getting the artists' due: the beneficiaries of their estates—and their dealers. With *Forever Yours*, The Art Guys aspire to cheat death itself, even as they reap its rewards.

Consisting of the artists' cremated remains, funerary urns in the form of bronze busts, certificates, contracts, and other related documentation, *Forever Yours* poses questions about the nature of art, its value, the value we place on artists themselves, and issues of branding and public relations that are becoming increasingly essential to the world of contemporary art. Offered for \$1,000,000, *Forever Yours* will be delivered to its collector in stages. At the time of purchase, the collector will receive the bronze busts of Jack and Mike (The Art Guys), pertinent legal documents, drawings, contracts, and other associated artifacts. The work will be completed, however, only following the deaths of both Art Guys, when their cremated remains will be delivered to the collector, who may then place them in the appropriate bronze busts.

While the philosophical questions the piece raises are rich, for The Art Guys, the transaction itself is a key element of the work.

A big part of this project is the contracting and the sale of it and the the transferal of these objects, which are the empty bronzes with the contract, going somewhere

to an individual collector or an institution or whatever and the time period between the sale of it and then the filling of the ashes, which probably will not occur at the same time. One vessel will be filled before the other, more than likely. So whoever has this thing has to deal with that aspect of it as well.²

Selling the piece while they're alive is obviously crucial to fully realize the performative aspect of the work. But the money is important as well.

We have identified a price for this at \$1 million. That's somewhat of an arbitrary choice but it's the right price. A million dollars seems like a whole lot of money, and it is quite a bit of money in one lump sum, and it's a lot of money to pay for one artwork.... We could have put a \$10 million price tag on this. But it may have put it out of reach as a reasonable sale.... That's the hook for a lot of people to enter into an artwork, its price tag. The only problem with that is that they talk about the price tag rather than the ideas or the artwork. But we decided that rather than selling it for a thousand dollars, or ten thousand dollars, we would hit that nice, round, million-dollar mark, which is this nice sort of metric that people go by in terms of quantity of money, here in the United States. Like Jack said, it had to be substantial enough for people to pay attention to it. But not out of reach. Not ridiculous.

As Jack put it, "There's a reverse life insurance aspect of it too. Rather than getting the money after you're dead, you get it before."

For more than 25 years, The Art Guys have explored the business of art—and the art of business. Their 1999 *SUITS* project, for example, investigated the role of sponsorship in the art world—and elsewhere—along with the notion of selling out. For *SUITS: The Clothes Make the Man*, The Art Guys leased advertising space on a pair of business suits designed for them by Todd Oldham. For the full year's duration of the piece, The Art Guys wore the *SUITS* in media and other public appearances, advertising their "clients" with embroidered logos, much like those found on race car drivers' jumpsuits. If *SUITS*



The Art Guys
SUITS: The Clothes Make The Man
1997-1999
Times Square, New York, 1998

challenged notions about the putative purity of art itself (while highlighting the necessary complicity with commerce on the part of the institutions that support it), *Forever Yours* takes this idea further still. While it is common for collectors and curators to refer to “their” Warhols or Shermans, this idea of “owning” an artist has gone relatively unchallenged. Of course, it’s understood that it is the artist’s work that is under discussion. Or is it? In this era of obsessive branding—at this moment when gossip has become the main fodder for twenty-four-hour news outlets—it often seems that the work itself serves merely as a relic, esteemed only because of its association with the artist.

John A. Walker, in his *Art and Celebrity*, considers the question at length. “Often the person of an artist becomes more important than their works, or the works are considered merely the expressions of the artist’s personality and lived experiences.” Yet, for Walker,

A number of questions remain: can art survive in an era of entertainment and celebrity? Can art preserve a distinct identity or will it be condemned to a minor role in celebrity culture? ... Can art perform a critical function in respect of celebrity? A harsh condemnation and rejection of the obsession with celebrity is inappropriate because the icons of popular culture fascinate virtually everyone, even academics and critics albeit at one remove.... Furthermore, celebrity is now so powerful it is like a force of nature. Even to halt it as Suzanne Moore has remarked, ‘one would have to destroy the entire media industry’ and this would surely mean destroying capitalism itself—but the supposed alternative ‘communist’ societies of the twentieth century had their own personality cults.³

3D study of Jack bronze bust
Renderings by Chris Lockwood

With *Forever Yours*, The Art Guys ask the obvious question: "What is the value of an artist? The actual people." And the media engine that drives celebrity culture is its vehicle.

That kind of populist, attention-grabbing thing, we're attracted to. And muddying the waters is OK with us. We see it potentially as a story on CNN or whatever. 'Oh, look at what these two wacky artists have done. They've sold themselves for a million dollars. Isn't that stupid? Who would do such a thing?' That goofy-ass early morning banter on populist media. We actually like that. It focuses the attention on the way art is dealt with. It's contributing to a situation where that's paid attention to. Art is an activity that is not just about deep, philosophical, big questions or whatever. Just practical, crude, shit. Exchanging money for something so you can pay your light bill. We're just interested in all that. We could donate it to an institution if we wanted to do that. But the transaction—the paying for us—is very, very important.





1



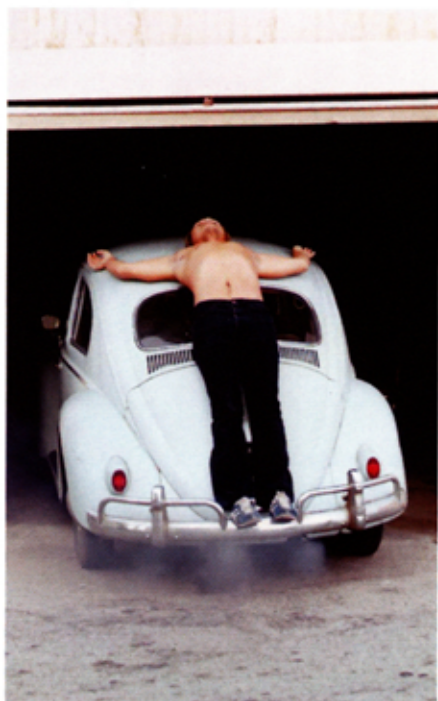
2

1. *Etruscan Cremation Mask*, originally attached to a cremation urn with bronze wires. 7th century BCE, bronze. Munich, Antikensammlungen

2. *Canopic Urn from Chiusi*, Etruscan, 600-575 BCE. Terracotta. Photographed at the Art Institute of Chicago by Mary Harrsch. Collection of the Field Museum

The bronze bust, of course, is almost as old as civilization itself. Bronzes represented sovereigns and gods. But bronze was also used for cinerary urns of lesser mortals. Etruscan cinerary urns were made of both bronze and clay. The bronzes sometimes featured images of the deceased etched or molded on their surfaces; sometimes, a bronze mask of the deceased would simply be attached to the urn. More common are the terra cotta versions, which use sculptural images of the heads of the deceased as their lids. Scholar Otto J. Brendal observed that these urns, "assimilated to human form, contained the ashes as the body contains the life and soul of a person. They were the last and lasting bodies of the dead."⁴ For The Art Guys, too, these urns are their vehicles in the hereafter.

It sets up a situation where people have to continually deal with us—like we won't quite go away. ... It's like you just can't get rid of us. So it's a final gesture, but it's a gesture that keeps on giving because you can't quite stop it. We really love that. So it's not really dead; it's setting up a situation where we are continually there all the time. So much of this is future planning.... It's like a second act. It's a posthumous performance. ... We are thinking sculpturally of the body. We're not necessarily thinking of the mourning aspects of death or the loss. We're just thinking of the materiality of the body and how it changes from one form to another. It's going to go from a living, breathing body to ash. And once it's ash it's going to then be moved by other living breathing bodies. So it's this beautiful thing where you have a collection of atoms moving another collection of atoms, but one collection



3



4

3. Chris Burden, *Trans-Fixed*, Venice, California, April 23, 1974

4. Relic from *Trans-Fixed*, 1974, two nails, 6.25 x 6.25 x 6.75 inches.

Reliquary Statue of Sainte Foy, Conques, late 10th-11th century.
Gold and gemstones over wooden core and partial human skull

of atoms is not what's known as alive and the other collection of atoms is. So when you break it down to those very, very basic sculptural ideas it becomes really, really interesting.

In a certain sense, The Art Guys are selling relics, as many performance artists have done before.

Think of the pieces of glass that [Chris] Burden had crawled over in "Through the Night Softly" (1973) or the nails hammered through his hands into the roof of a VW bug in "Trans-Fixed" (1974). 'Relics,' Burden called them, which maintain their status as evidence but that are not to be seen as valuable in and of themselves. Still, historians continue to debate the relations between performance and its objects, and the value of those objects.⁵

With *Forever Yours*, the relics are not everyday objects like shards of glass or nails; they are the mortal remains of the artists themselves: two piles of ash that enjoy an almost sacred status, traditionally. Of course, Burden's relics have a price. And so do The Art Guys.

While the business of art has always been an interest and concern of The Art Guys, *Forever Yours* also raises more conventionally spiritual questions about the afterlife. Just as Christian relics have for centuries served as avatars of sorts for the deceased holy persons they represent, credited with miraculous powers of the saints they represent, so too will the bronze busts of *Forever Yours* serve as avatars from the afterlife for The Art Guys. (The notion of the avatar, now inextricably connected with video games and other cyber realities, originated with Hinduism, in which it refers to manifestations of deities in different forms.)



Alternita.com offers portrait bust cremation urns produced by staff artists from your photographs

Let's say they end up in the Tacoma Art Museum. Well then somebody in Washington, DC, at the Corcoran wants to have this artist show that has to do with funeral things or death or whatever, some theme show. Well then the guys in Tacoma are going to have to pack these things up and ship them over to Washington DC so they can be in this exhibition so we're going to be traveling around still.

Keller and Ward have also observed that Chris "Burden's work provides one model for thinking about the relation between a practice and its media mythification."⁶ And this is certainly the case with *Forever Yours*. As Walker implied above, celebrity today is thoroughly entwined with capitalism. And the mythification of an artist contributes significantly to the market for his or her work. With *Forever Yours*, The Art Guys secure a future in bronze, the most enduring of sculptural materials. Like countless sovereigns and saints before, they will likely spend eternity alternating between storage and display, as tastes and institutional policies change.

Forever Yours was conceived with a calculated timelessness.

We wanted the most conservative, not-art-looking, statuary busts possible. We did a lot of research on the shape of the shoulders, the stand, the plaque on it— everything about it so it wouldn't be thought of as contemporary art at all. The idea is that, if they were in an institution, depending upon where it might be, you might just glance over them, like you would walk past things in the Met: "Oh, there's another masterpiece of... Egyptian Art...." It sort of disappears, and it's mundane, and we like that.

And while the nude figure—or the Roman toga—had traditionally been the device used by artists to place

The screenshot shows the Alternita website interface. At the top, the header reads "Urnes funéraires contemporaines" and "Articles funéraires design". Below this is a navigation bar with links: "Infos utiles/Paiement", "Mon Espace Pro", "Cartes virtuelles", "Nous contacter", "Livres d'or", and "Newsletter". The main content area is titled "Urne funéraire buste portrait" and features a central image of a bronze bust of a man's head and shoulders. To the left of the bust is a vertical menu with categories: "Accueil", "Faisons connaissance", "Infos utiles/Paiement", "Conditions de vente (4)", "Conseils d'achat/Législation", "Catalogue général", "Urnes funéraires", "Reliquaires", "Plaques funéraires", "Bijoux cinéraires", "Articles funéraires", "Monuments cinéraires", "Urnes pour animaux", "Pochettes pour urnes", "Devis / Commande", "Nos distributeurs", "Nos partenaires et liens", "Espace Pro", "Login", "Mon Espace Pro", "Inscription", and " Paiement sécurisé". Below the menu are logos for "PayPal", "Visa", and "Afficher le panier". To the right of the bust, there is a section titled "Urne buste" with a sub-heading "Urne cinéraire à partir d'une photo du défunt". The text describes the process: "Un véritable travail d'artiste dans la tradition de la sculpture de portrait. Entièrement sculptée à la main à l'échelle 1. Moulage en plâtre et coulage en résine naturelle. Finition peinte au choix : effet bronze, terre cuite, or... 40 H cm - 3,5 livres. Fermeture par couvercle par dessous." Below this is a "Processus de réalisation" section and a "Détails de réalisation" section. At the bottom of the page, there is a footer with "Conditions de vente", "Mentions légales", "Nos partenaires", "Nous contacter", and "Newsletter".

timeless figures in mythological realms, The Art Guys are immortalized in the signature business suits that have identified them as “working men, white collar workers, and men about town” throughout their career. Their wish that the bronze busts “disappear,” that they are “mundane,” was achieved with considerable effort although not, perhaps, of the type typically associated with such enterprises. The idea of a cremation urn in the form of a bust, as demonstrated above, is hardly new. Not is it exclusively an historical phenomenon. Even today, there are businesses that specialize in portrait bust cremation urns.⁷ Most depend upon customer-supplied photographs interpreted by a staff artist who makes a clay sculpture from which a mold is taken [see image on opposite page]. Such companies tout the artistic skills of their staff artists, whose job is to provide a flattering finished product. They are portrait artists with the same demands and expectations of any others, however unusual their niche market.

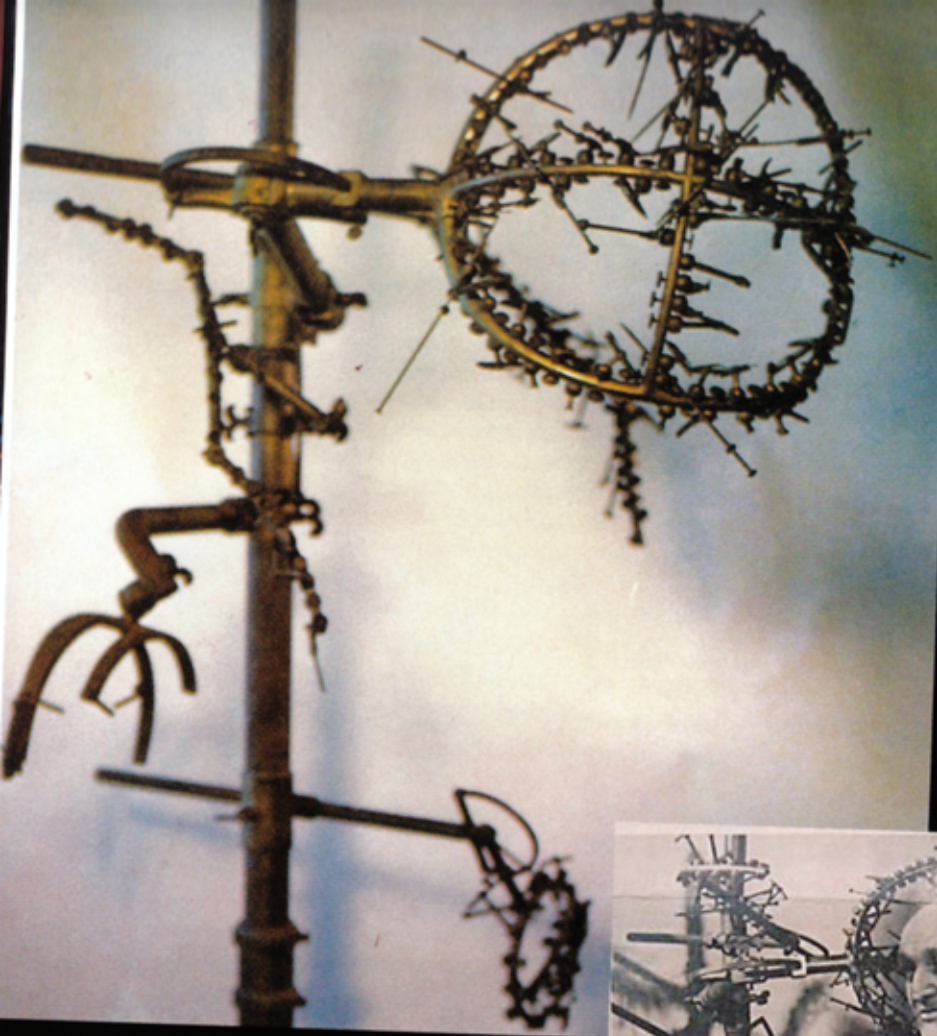
The Art Guys, however, wanted something “non-art looking.” And they got it through the use of CNC (computer numerical control) technology. “This is a much more direct and controllable way of doing it.... And for us it’s more interesting. We decided the piece was going to be highly controlled by us because it’s that final gesture.” For the portrait sittings, technicians placed laser instruments around each of the Guys, producing detailed digital maps of their heads that were subsequently fed into computer aided manufacturing machines generally known under the label of 3D Printers. Strangely, these systems seem to have their origins in a rather odd Pointing Machine created by American sculptor Joel T. Hart around 1852 [see image on next page]. Known in its day as the “crown of thorns,” the device was the first to trace live models; earlier, more familiar “pointing machines” were used primarily to make “proportional” sculpture—smaller or larger versions of traditional hand-made sculptures. Hart touted his machine as guaranteeing a more accurate likeness than possible with mere eye and hand. The sitter would be secured into a mechanical chair adjusted to fit his or her body.

The “crown of thorns” was adjusted around the victim’s head at a distance of four to five inches. Then each needle was adjusted so as to touch all protuberances and depressions of the sitter’s face and body. The blunt needles were attached to screws that allowed the needles to be moved in or out until all of them touch the sitter’s body. When all 180 needles encompassed the sitter’s body, the device was sprung open and the prisoner released. What remained was a shell of needle points that evoked all undulations of the subject’s physique “with mathematical precision.” The “artist” then applied the machine to a lump of clay and modeled it out to the point of each needle, thus obtaining a clay duplicate of the living model by smoothing and refining the features, “to seize the evanescent elixir of expression.”⁸

Like a portrait photographer’s obligatory retouching, Hart’s need to refine his subject’s features suggests the mechanical precision wasn’t quite enough. The 180 needles were apparently insufficient for the accurate likeness sought. Today, of course, such machines are more familiar in the toy department of the Museum Shop than in the galleries. 3D Pin Art toys allow users to press their face or hands (or anything else) into a grid of blunted needles to create their own “sculptures.”

Hart’s invention was soon replaced by photo-sculpture machines that placed the subject in the center of an array of cameras that produced multiple still images—from multiple angles—that were systematically mapped onto blocks of clay. The CNC process used for *Forever Yours* would seem to be a conflation of these two early practices with modern laser technology.

The interpretive post-production so crucial to Hart in his search for the “evanescent elixir of expression” is something The Art Guys consciously rejected for *Forever Yours*. The “life” Hart invested in his works with those finishing touches is at odds with the more conceptual aims of The Art Guys. Like Chris



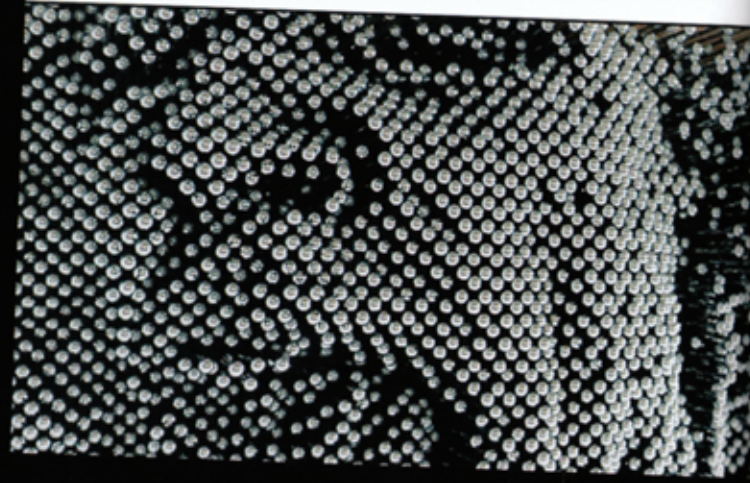
This is the original—no copies were made—of Hart's invention to speed and make more accurate the work of stationary processing, now at the Louisville Free Public Library's Art Museum. Col. Lucien Beckner, head of the museum, is posing with Hart's creation.

Joel Tanner Hart. Pointing Machine, c. 1852.

Colonel Lucien Beckner, Curator of the Louisville Free Public Library Museum with Hart's Pointing Machine.



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One of several 3D Pin Art toys commonly available in Museum Shops

Burden, whose legendary *Shoot* (a 1971 performance in which a friend shot him in the arm from a distance of 15 feet) has been discussed rather improbably as “a form in space being pierced by another form,” The Art Guys hope that the perhaps predictable emotional response their work will provoke will ultimately be subsumed into a broader conceptual framework.

There was a big debate about how to render the eye—whether the eye should have the tiny pupil—which is a negative thing in the sculpture. It is a hole into the brain; that’s how the light gets into your brain. It’s more bland without the pupils... I’m pretty much against the pupils because it adds personality to the thing. It [becomes] more of a psychological thing, and I’m not interested in projecting some sort of attitude or personality.

*Of course, eyes are more commonly discussed as a “window to the soul” than a “hole to the brain.” And with *Forever Yours*, access is denied. The work’s conceptual thrust is articulated in the most conventional of conceptual media: text. Not only do the bronze bust urns themselves deny viewers the emotional connection traditionally prized in portraiture, they are displayed with a very large legal contract.*

So all those messy complications of life and the emotions of death and all the sort of problems inherent with that, we tried to iron out in the contract as much as possible. But there are potentials that complicate it further. The purchaser/collector may die before we do, for example. And then what happens? That’s covered in the contract. But the contract, like any agreement, can also be modified. There can be addenda added to it. That would take into account any shift, say in relationships with us and the collector—or something with our lives.... There are a few things that are ironclad: the cost of the thing, the delivery of our ashes.... And there are other sorts of things that cannot be changed.

Projecting a future provenance onto *Forever Yours*, it seems almost certain that it will end up in an institution. Great works of art, unlike grandma’s ashes, sooner or later leave the family. Jack and Mike may well spend eternity in a secure, climate controlled

cubiculum—in the basement of a museum—disinterred every now and then for a visit to the galleries or a road trip. And when they see the light of day, they will once again provoke debate about the nature of art and the value of an artist. In the end, *Forever Yours* is more annuity than life insurance policy. It is the gift that keeps on giving.

1 Robert Longo, quoted in Dorothy Spears, “Death Can Be A Canny Career Move,” *The New York Times* (22 June 2008).

2 Unless otherwise attributed, all quotes are from The Art Guys’ interview with the author, 14 December 2010, Houston.

3 John A. Walker, *Art and Celebrity* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), excerpted and summarized at: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/25700849/art-and-celebrity-article-to-publicize>, accessed 2 February 2011.

4 Otto J. Brendel, *Etruscan Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978): 106.

5 Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward, Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbuster, *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 6.

6 Keller and Ward: 6.

7 The Art Guys brought several web sites with such urns on offer to my attention, including: http://www.alterita.com/rubrique_bust-urn_693840.html; <http://www.bronze-sculptors-cremation-urns-pet-sculpture-portrait.com/>; <http://cremationsolutions.com/Personal-Cremation-Urns-for-ashes-c109.html>; and <http://myfunkyfuneral.com/blog/?p=24>.

8 Michele Bogart, “For three-dimensional portraits, 19th- and 20th-century ‘sculptors’ created an array of bizarre machines,” *Smithsonian* 10, no. 3 (June 1979): 108.