



Interview with Mark Jenkins: Friday,  
November 22nd. 7pm – 8:40pm.

Bea Ogden: The Art World of Mark Jenkins.  
Art in Society.

1. Your audience is the public- part luck, part happenstance- if you could hand pick your audience, the people on the street, who would you choose?

MJ: Audience is not really the right term; I call them “actors”. The actors get involved with the piece. The sculptures create a space and the actor becomes absorbed in the space. The Audience is me, myself. People on the street are the actors and they are a part of the piece.

2. You have been to and installed in many parts of the world. Where else do you want to work?

MJ: My father is from Ashland, he will be happy to hear about this, you are in Eugene or Portland?

BYO: I attend school in Eugene, but I’m currently in Portland.

MJ: Once I began working I was invited to London by Banksy and his crew. That opened up Europe and the European stage for me. I was invited to Asia and Brazil and Russia. I receive email invitations from these sorts of places; there is not that much interest coming from the US, not that many invitations. I will be opening a gallery show in LA either March 8<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup>. I will be in LA all February getting ready for the show. It’s hard to do gallery work and street stuff at the same time. The gallery in LA is the Fabian Castanier Gallery- a French gallery. I was in Paris for a show and met the gallery owner, which opened up this connection for me. The next project I am working on this year is in Miami. An installation for Art Miami, which is part of Art Basel. It will be about “context.” When I was in Berlin working at Gestaltan it was weird. They are a publishing house and a bookshop with a studio space in back. It’s not exactly like a gallery; it is a space that supports the books. When I was in Sao Paulo I was in a working artist space where you would work with other artists. They would create and leave and you could add on or adapt what they left behind.

3. Do you name your pieces as you create them? Do you want your audience to name your pieces in their experience with your sculptures?

MJ: The fourth piece I created is the seated hoodie figure. I kept recreating it. I would put it on the street and it would disappear. Then it started to appear in my dreams, it was weird. It became a character like the Grim Reaper. I have an affectionate relationship with my sculptures, since they are hyper realistic. I project an identity into them, but, not like people, more like pets. I cast my own body, so, it's me. The girls are different. The Blondes are all called the Blondes. In Gestalten I named the girl, a Russian name, because of her clothes, I forget her name though. The Golden Ass has a definite personality, I made it three times. The pieces come back as clones, then can reincarnate, yes, I have an emotional attachment.

It is natural for the actors to name the pieces. There is a personal relationship, but the pieces are still singular. Actors project onto the piece, and that's fine. I don't want to have anything to do with the projection. It's like their reality has been warped and they ask "is this art or not art?" I don't want them to think "I am seeing a Mark Jenkins work" then dismiss it. It loses its potency when it is identified.

4. Do you feel anguish in knowing the fate of your sculptures is undetermined? Do you practice non-attachment to your sculptures? Do you ever try and "save" them from the streets?

MJ: Sometimes I feel anguish. It's kind of like sending a kid off to school, and you know the fate is probably not a good fate. It's like being a "terrible pet owner" What I'm doing is removing myself, it is a social experiment. I want to bend people's realities, change things up. However many people see it is fine- it becomes part of everything. They ask "what's gonna happen next?" it is doing something powerful. When you paint a picture and hang it in a frame it doesn't have an impact as when you make something that's real. Sculptures are not in a frame, they are in your face, it's a different way of storytelling.

I do try to actively practice non-attachment, letting go of thoughts and things. It's a nice thing to do. I feel it is good to let things go. Sculptures may end up in the landfill, that's ok. Art is coveted, it has value placed on it and it is protected as "art." As an artist creating in a coveted space is traditional, I am going in the opposite direction. I want to release it. I spend a week on a piece and a couple hundred bucks, the life span of the sculptures are unknown. Murals are faster and more permanent. I spend 5 days on a piece and that is a lot to make something so vulnerable. In Lithuania, I filled pieces with concrete to try and make them last longer, one of them was set on fire, you just can't keep them.

I've never tried to take a piece off the streets. Installations are out there for their life span. That's the life it gets. I may walk by a piece and right it, if it has fallen over, but I try to leave it alone. Try not to contaminate the social experiment.

BYO: If a museum wanted to purchase a piece for its permanent collection, would you agree to that?

MJ: Depends on the piece. I would want to make a piece behind glass, like a pinned butterfly. When a sculpture is in the street it has kinetic energy, when it is in a gallery, it has potential energy. In a museum it would be behind glass, it would be symbolic. If it was in a permanent

collection that is about preservation, like a dead butterfly, so I would want to give it in a glass case, it would be symbolic of the museum.

5. Street art is often anonymous, and fame/success is exceptionally rare- street art installations are not about gallery or book sales-so- money and fame are, probably, not your motivations- what does motivate you?

MJ: Creative ideas. I need to do something with them. I need a good outlet for creative stuff. I need to manifest positive energy, so I create. I do support myself with my art. It is my main source of income too. I sell some pieces from a gallery; I don't have to work another job.

BYO: Do you ever create pieces as gifts?

MJ: Not really. I give tape babies as tokens of friendship. When I put a piece on the street, it is like I am giving it to the street, I'm giving it away to the street, I work with that in mind. Not exactly a gift. I've never given a big one away. Occasionally my sister will house one so her kids can play with it, it is like they have big monster to play with.

BYO: DO you ever create pieces to sell and donate the money?

MJ: I get approached to make sculptures for donations sometimes, and generally I try to say "yes." I did one for a Skate Park in Afghanistan. One for a Prisoner release fund for a prisoner who was wrongly imprisoned. I have made public pieces for installation pro bono. When you are an artist, people assume that you care about things, art and other things too. That you have an awareness of issues, which is generally true. There is sometimes a problem when an organization tries to impose a social idea: like the "Hoodie Guy," people think it's about homelessness, so a homeless organization asked me to make a sculpture for them.

BYO: I found a great video about an art teacher using your techniques with her junior high students; they made tape sculptures and installed them all over their school. What you do think about that?

MJ: I think it's great. I lead workshops, sometimes they are a few days to two weeks. I teach the techniques I use. It's great, encourages DIY culture. I like to let my art have its own existence. I like to be removed from it, but workshops are fun.

6. Who are your three main inspirations- they don't have to be artists?

MJ: People turn switches on in my mind, some are artists. I am drawn to surrealists, they flip the switch on. I have to feel deeply about something to have new ideas. I read a lot of books, they are inspiring, they activate my brain, and I start spitting out ideas. I am not necessarily inspired, I have a desire to create, I just need ideas.

7. BYO: I ask people three questions: are you inspired? Are you fulfilled? Are you creating? Are you?

MJ: Hiking is a big part of what I'm about. Nature makes me feel in touch with everything, that inspires me. Fulfilled? Impossible—no. If I'm hiking then yes, I am; but in the city I feel detached. We can't really fix the city. When I was flying in a plane I see how the world is cut up. In the forest it feels vast, but there is no law of the land. It is just a patch of woods and you can see that in a plane. In the forest you can feel bugs and light, in a plane you can see that is almost gone. It's turned into agriculture. One time, I wanted to commune with nature, so I took off all my clothes; I wanted to be a natural person. I was in the forest, and I said "I want to be like an animal." I was naked without shoes and wanted to see how far I could get. I made it like 20 feet; humans are just not equipped for nature any more.

8. What frightens you?

MJ: Nothing based in reality. Knowledge of string theory is more scary than some big dude. I'd be ok with a giant bear, but, at the same time, I want to know. Like with DMT, I think that I'd like to do that sometime and be at peace with death, but no, I wouldn't do that even though it's a digestible experience. I've done drugs in the past and I know how fragile reality is, it needs to be protected to keep it here. It feels like falling through the ice and that's my biggest fear.

9. How would you describe the art world you create?

MJ: It's like any other art: you create a place you are in. Like a bicycle chain, you surround yourself, it becomes your world. It is shareable. It's a bubble I'm in, but it's a bubble others can experience. My bubble is put out there on the street and actors have no choice. Some people say "how dare you?" like when I install some guy on a roof that looks like he's going to jump. "How dare you put that into my reality?" I don't know how I feel about that. Things are inserted into my world all the time: advertisements, people driving down the street honking their horns. I'm not hurting anyone else.

Then there are other art worlds, like museums, where we're lumped into the role of artist, it's unfortunate.

BYO: You have mentioned museums often in this interview, what are your views on museums?

MJ: It's not museums themselves, but the institutions that I have trouble with. What is shown, how it's shown, it's a dirty business. It's like the music industry, good music is always out there but it can get lost: it's more democratic though. Galleries it's about who you know. If you are shown in a museum you get pushed to the top, it's like playing a game, and they take public money to do it. Someone on the board is deciding what is getting shown in the museum. In galleries, if you sell a piece and you have been shown in a museum it adds value to your art. They take public tax money and apply it to art, it increases value, and who is deciding what you should see, and what's not seen?

I enjoy workshops: people are engaged, working on body casts. You can see neurons firing and things can be fun, people can just be themselves.

BYO: How would you describe the art world in which you exist?

MJ: Do you mean community?

BYO: Yes

MJ: I don't really have an art world that I exist in, just a couple of friends in DC that make art, I travel, internationally. I teach workshops, meet people, keep in touch. I am isolated, but connect with all the people I work with. Then there is a street art community. In Sao Paolo I met Blu, and then I saw him 2 years later. Internationally I know maybe 100 or so artists. You keep running into them.

I guess Juxtapose and NY Times: that's part of it too.

I don't really have a ground up community. I am in the DC suburbs, I just chill here before going back out. I envy your ground-up community.

BYO: There is a saying here in Portland: "everyone is an artist, but we all still have to work at Starbucks."

MJ: I considered living in Portland, it's like a mini-Seattle. Everyone seems happy. It's like Berlin: a great place to live and make art but not a great place to make money. It's about the quality of life, being able to do art full time is nice. I've been doing this since 2008 and have not had to have another job. But it's a survival front, can't save money and be able to do something like buy a new car. I need to prioritize since I have no savings. It's not easy to be a full time artist. Blu could be rich, but he doesn't want to be.

I have a friend in DC that runs a nonprofit, he holds prison workshops. It's amazing to give someone a pencil and a paper and they are so happy, they are inspired to be creative.

North American laziness, it's hard to combat. Everyone is obsessed with their smart phone, and they are happy to stare into their little screens. How do you get through to them? Blu asks "how do you get them to stop and pay attention?" Maybe you have to put a dead body in the street.

BYO: I would put a huge QR code on the back of the dead body so they can engage the dead body with their smart phone. (Laughter). I believe in a Buddhist philosophy that says, "Be the river, move around the rock." The river doesn't try to move the rock, or change the rock, it just flows around it, and by flowing around it, it will, eventually shape the rock. The QR code on the back of the dead body is like being the river.

MJ: (laughter)

BYO: Have you seen the Discovery Channel video of the Blond Girl narrated monologue? What are your thoughts?

MJ: The Discovery Channel came to London to film that. The lady that came to do the film kept saying "we need something to happen!" I told them, don't bring a big camera, just something small, it's no big deal. They brought this huge camera and boom, and people kept getting out of

the way because they thought they were making a film. The lady from the Discovery channel had a huge fight with the camera guy and he quit, or she fired him. So they set up this shot—the lady, her husband is pretty famous, he made that film “The Last King of Scotland.”

BYO: About Idi Amin? That is an intense film.

MJ: Yeah, I think so. She kept saying she needed to make a “great film” a film about the blond girl. So the camera guy wanted to take a break and get lunch. We went to eat lunch. When we came back, the sculpture was gone. A fire truck came by and took it. The lady freaked out saying “That was the film!” The fire men kept the sculpture. They offered to give it back to me, but I told them I don’t take the pieces back.

BYO: That is really funny. I feel really blessed to be able to speak with you and conduct this interview. I didn’t think I would be able to interview one of my favorite artists, this is really cool.

MJ: This is flattering; it’s really cool for me too. This is unique. Usually I do press pieces for newspapers.

BYO: One last question, about plastic. Do you know about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch? The massive gyre of plastic trash in the Pacific Ocean? Your pieces, especially the ones where the torso is made of plastic bottle, makes me think about the Garbage Vortex. Do you think about where the tape you use comes from?

MJ: I’m not really sure. This is post-consumer plastic waste. I think about litter being ugly, and taking a thing I hate and giving it aesthetic value. The tape is not being littered, but I guess the sculptures could end up in the landfill. I’ve never really thought about how it’s made or where it goes.

BYO: I will send you links and info about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. What is your relationship with Scotch?

MJ: I am not sponsored by them anymore. They make large donations to the American Indian Museum. They are so much more than tape, fiber optics, and the such.

BYO: Well, I hope someday to be able to see your pieces in person. I know that it is very different to see a sculpture in person than to see it on the screen of my computer. I will be in LA next year and will visit the gallery you mentioned. Thank you so much for letting me conduct this interview. I will send you that email about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and email you a copy of this interview after I type it up. Thank you!

MJ: Thank you. Have a good night.

BYO: You too! Bye.