

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

November 17, 2019

*XXIII Pentecost, Luke 21:5-19*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

A 1995 *New York Times* article begins, “Meet The Art Guys ... working as clerks for 24 hours straight at the Stop-N-Go convenience store in Houston’s museum district. They sold lottery tickets. They asked for patience when a customer couldn’t get the gas pump to work and neither could they. ‘Hey, we’re new at this,’ [explained] Michael Galbreth, [one of the two Art Guys]. They mopped the floor. And they called [all of this] art.”<sup>i</sup>

According to the *Times*, “The Art Guys are part Dada, part David Letterman, pushing the concept of performance art to [its] outer limits.”<sup>ii</sup> Galbreth met collaborator and fellow Art Guy Jack Massing in 1982, and the pair began their creative partnership a year later. Their “work has been included in more than 150 exhibitions in museums, galleries, and public spaces throughout the United States ... Europe, and China,” and they lectured as near to us as Harvard.<sup>iii</sup>

Galbreth and Massing described their work “with terms like ‘pursuances,’ ‘disturbances,’ ‘procurements,’ and ‘doohickeys,’”<sup>iv</sup> using ordinary objects as unusual media in their sculptures – as in *Cheese Grid* (1993),<sup>v</sup> their strangely beautiful, wall-sized mosaic of American Cheese slices – and exaggerating by scale or repetition familiar actions in their “events” – as in *Loop*, driving Houston’s 610 freeway for 24 hours straight, 12 hours in one direction, and 12 hours in the other.<sup>vi</sup> Combining these static and dynamic elements, The Art Guys even “presciently anticipated our age of self-branding ‘influencers’ with *SUITS: The Clothes Make the Man* (1997-98). [An] elaborate conceptual piece ... [*The Clothes Make the Man* incorporated] leased advertising space on gray flannel suits ... Galbreth and Massing [then wore the business attire] – embroidered with 62 logs from 56 companies – in public, for a year, [around] the country.”<sup>vii</sup>

Sadly, Michael Galbreth died last month<sup>viii</sup> – too young, at the age of only 63 – and his death advanced The Art Guys’ *Forever Yours*, a special piece that will finally complete upon Massing’s death. As described in a 2007 catalogue, *Forever Yours* offers the cremated remains of the two artists ‘within accompanying bronze bust urns.’<sup>ix</sup> Thereby, The Art Guys<sup>x</sup> offer themselves for sale – price upon request! – a final commentary on our age’s commodification of everything, including our living and our dying.<sup>xi</sup>

The Art Guys accessible absurdism belies the demanding questions and commentaries beneath the surfaces of their works: *Who are we these days? What does it all mean? And, if we keep on this way, how will it all end?*

With its own absurdism, Chapter 19 of Luke's Gospel begins with Jesus entering Jericho and encountering the chief tax collector, Zaccheus.<sup>xii</sup> Zaccheus "was trying to see Jesus, but, on account of the crowd, he could not, because," as the Gospel explains, "he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore."<sup>xiii</sup> Jesus sees this man perched in the tree's branches like an oversized, awkward bird and says to him, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."<sup>xiv</sup> Zaccheus, as though this encounter all makes clear sense, says to the Lord, "I will give half my possessions give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay [them] back four times as much."<sup>xv</sup> Jesus replies, "Today salvation has come to this house ... For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."<sup>xvi</sup>

With the crowds listening, Jesus then teaches the difficult parable of the talents,<sup>xvii</sup> warning – "Take the pound from [the fearful servant who buried his] and give it to the one with ten ... [for] to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away ... After he had said this, [Jesus] went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem."<sup>xviii</sup>

With that transitional clause, Luke's Gospel launches another royal parody – this one the Palm Sunday performance piece – the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, parading into town on the smallest possible steed, celebrated by peasants who declare *him* a king.<sup>xix</sup> Riding upon the dirty rags of this destitute crowd, Jesus begins the apocalyptic we hear this morning: "If you ... had only recognized ... the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you ... They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, **and they will not leave within you one stone upon another.**"<sup>xx</sup>

Once Jesus finally reaches the Temple, he begins teaching in its courts, and, every day, "The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people [look] for a way to kill him."<sup>xxi</sup> Chapter 20 recounts the stories that Jesus shares during this time, until we hear "some were speaking about the Temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God,"<sup>xxii</sup> Jesus then repeats the imagery of his earlier admonition, "As for these things that you see, **the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another;** all will be thrown down."<sup>xxiii</sup>

This morning's appointment continues, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven ... they will arrest you and persecute you ... You will be betrayed ... But[, if you will not be led astray,] not a hair of your head will perish. [Indeed,] By your endurance you will gain your souls."<sup>xxiv</sup>

What The Art Guys' challenge with their curious exhibitions, Jesus challenges with his "Little Apocalypse" – *Who are we these days? What does it all mean? And, if we keep on this way, how will it all end?*

At that Houston Stop-N-Go, now nearly 25 years ago, “customers filed in and out all day[, and] Some were impressed [by The Art Guys]. A man scavenging for aluminum cans in the trash bins as Mr. Galbreth came out to pump gas[, observed,] ‘Drawing, sketching – that’s not the only thing artists can do ... Maybe these guys are a new type of artist.’”<sup>xxv</sup>

“[Other patrons] were not [so] impressed. ‘I just wanted to get some beer,’ [complained another customer] who bought a 12-pack of Miller Lite and a large bag of Lay’s potato chips from Mr. Massing[, working at the counter inside].”<sup>xxvi</sup> Though perhaps confirming the very capitalist commentary The Art Guys intended, this patron nonetheless declared, “[This is] not art.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

In an interview at the time, Massing retorted, “‘Well, yeah, [it is art],’ ... ‘because I’m an artist and I made it. So it is.’”<sup>xxviii</sup> Years later, he expounded, “We considered our *behavior* artwork ... [we were] was an ongoing, never-ending ‘piece of art[,] and it] didn’t matter what we were doing – whether we were creating a piece for display or playing a prank.”<sup>xxix</sup>

With thoughtfulness behind even their flippancy, The Art Guys offered their whole lives as artistic expression. Before and beyond their critical commentaries, then, their varied portfolio forwards a positive claim: every action and every moment, every object and every life, can be reconceived as the raw materials of a masterwork, a treatise and occasion of beauty and meaning, of parable and prophesy – commenting on our current reality, yes, but also pointing to a *new* reality, and even *participating* in that new realm.

So, too, Jesus invites the disciples and crowds to join him in his grand performance – a subversive installation, be sure – challenging the momentum of the status quo and inaugurating a renewed creation. From the stage magic of turning water into wine, to the drama of his preaching and teaching, to the final “disturbance” of Resurrection, Jesus invests all his life with meaning and purpose, anticipates the fulfillment of God, and invites us to do the same.

In response, our Sunday devotions are scarcely less dramatic than a conceptual art performance – and so, too, the counter-cultural priorities of our lives between! – and, while the routine of our worship might disguise our liturgy’s strangeness, realize that the stories we tell and the stuff we do here is *Cheese-Grid weird!* For we gather as “new type[s] of artist[s]” – painters and poets, actors and authors, sculptors and singers **of God’s dreams** – making and shaping meaning along multiple continuums: as the prophet, the prophesy, and the prophesied; yes, as the artist, the art, and the object of our commentaries; indeed, we are the signifier, the sign, and the subject ... in our life as the Body of Christ we become the very substance of faith!

Thereby, as we gather in one of the world’s most beautiful prayer spaces – this glorious temple of the Lord, itself an enduring work of art – we also dare join in Jesus’ cry, declaring that if the world keeps on in this way, “these [glorious] things that you see, the days will come when not one [of Trinity Church’s stones] will be left upon another;” – here, even here! – “*all* will be thrown down.” Pointing and praying, professing and pledging ourselves, we hopefully inaugurate *another* future, a holier end, where our labor is not in vain ... where we recognize those things that make for peace ... where we may live as God dreams.

That we would create a beautiful life together, I pray in the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Verhovek, Sam Howe. “At Work With: The Art Guys; In Performance: Life Imitates Art Imitating Life.” *The New York Times*, August 9, 1995.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> From *The Art Guys’ biography and resume*.

<sup>iv</sup> Rees, Christina. “Influential Houston Artist and “Art Guy” Michael Galbreth, 1956-2019.” Glasstire. October 21, 2019.

<sup>v</sup> “Cheese Grid,” from the collection of the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art.

<sup>vi</sup> Ms. Rees’ article describes *Loop*, which was part of the 2013, “year-long project 12 Events” celebrating their 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I find refreshing their exhibitions that resist reduction to a thumbnail image in an online portfolio.

<sup>vii</sup> Rees. Most of the articles around the time of Galbreth’s death reference *Suits*. Here I draw on language primarily from the Rees piece. Wearing his suit (there is a photograph in the Rees article), Galbreth looks to me like David Byrne, guitarist and lead singer of Talking Heads, also given to conceptual art.

<sup>viii</sup> Mr. Galbreth’s memorial was at Christ Church Cathedral, Houston, the cathedral church of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas.

<sup>ix</sup> Rees.

<sup>x</sup> The Art Guys’ signature is a black-and-white, hand-drawn circle, ringed with clumsy script reading, “The Art Guys Logo,” a design that endures as much as a “branding” commentary as their goofy moniker.

<sup>xi</sup> The Rees article notes, “Mr. Galbreth is in fact still for sale, price upon request.”

<sup>xii</sup> Luke 19:1-2.

<sup>xiii</sup> Luke 19:3-4a.

<sup>xiv</sup> Luke 19:5b.

<sup>xv</sup> Luke 19:8.

<sup>xvi</sup> Luke 19:9b.

<sup>xvii</sup> Luke 19:11-27.

<sup>xviii</sup> Luke 19:24-25.

<sup>xix</sup> Luke 19:28-40.

<sup>xx</sup> Luke 19:41-44.

<sup>xxi</sup> Luke 19:47.

<sup>xxii</sup> Luke 21:5. Today’s lesson begins with this verse.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Luke 21:6. While the sermon did not make room for the observation, I found interesting that the stories anticipating each piece of the apocalyptic concerned money: the parable of the talents (19:11-27) and the widow’s offering (21:1-4, immediately before today’s appointment).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Luke 21:10-12, 16a, 18-19.

<sup>xxv</sup> Howe Verhovek.

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<sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Ibid. My favorite of The Art Guys' "disruptions" is *Food For Thought*, a 24-hour performance piece commemorating the Winter Solstice "by spending the entire day in a booth at a Denny's restaurant just off Interstate 10 [in Houston], sipping coffee and eating scrambled eggs." I started building this sermon around this installation and a , but the *Times*' article's greater detail about the Stop-N-Go event inclined me in that direction. About Denny's, Galbreth remarked, "'This is definitely dining, and that was our intent.' ... 'This isn't performance,' Mr. Massing said. 'This is behavior.'"

<sup>xxviii</sup> Howe Verhovek.

<sup>xxix</sup> Glentzer, Mary. "[Art Guys legend Michael Galbreth dies.](#)" *Houston Chronicle*. October 23, 2019.