

JENNIFER BORNSTEIN AND JONATHAN HOROWITZ

JONATHAN: So, what should we talk about? What do you think would be interesting for whoever's reading this? Are we supposed to talk about art?

JENNY: I assumed that it was going to be about art.

JONATHAN: Because we're artists, and it's for an art-related publication?

JENNY: Yeah, it never occurred to me that anyone would want to know about my cooking.

JONATHAN: But when a celebrity like George Clooney is interviewed for *People* magazine, he's not going to talk mostly about acting, I don't think. He would talk about life things.

JENNY: Well, maybe we can go in both directions. Do you have any questions in mind for me?

JONATHAN: Uh, well, not really. I just worked on getting into a state of mind. I wasn't sure whether this was supposed to be an interview or a conversation.

JENNY: I actually did prepare some questions for you, but I'm embarrassed to ask you.

JONATHAN: It's OK.

JENNY: Wouldn't you know, they're about art. OK, here goes. Number one: do you think of yourself as a Conceptual artist?

JONATHAN: Well, I guess I think most art is Conceptual to a degree, so I don't really see that as a primary way to distinguish one kind of art from another. I guess that other kind of art involves an extreme mastery of something that you do with your hands. I don't think I have any of that—oh, that's not true, actually—I have editing skills. I guess I'm least like a Conceptual artist when I edit video.

JENNY: How's that?

JONATHAN: With video, the work doesn't so much precede its actualization. I usually begin with an idea and it evolves and changes through the process of editing. A lot of my other work is more about actualizing an idea, so the process of making the work isn't as significant. It's usually just very frustrating because everything usually turns out wrong.

JENNY: [Laughs] You mean physically?

JONATHAN: Yeah. How about you?

JENNY: Do I consider myself a Conceptual artist?

JONATHAN: Uh-huh.

JENNY: It's a nasty question, which I can say because I'm the one who started it. I have to admit that I had a hidden agenda. I was thinking how people throw that "Conceptual" word around a lot, and I was wondering whether in 2007 it's possible to be a Conceptual artist, or whether it even matters. For a previous generation of artists, the "Conceptual" label is very important. And maybe for our generation (are we a younger generation? I don't know what generation we are anymore)—

JONATHAN: I don't know, either. I feel older by the day.

JENNY: —it doesn't seem to matter because that battle has been fought. Maybe now it's more interesting to confuse the definition of Conceptual art than to adhere to it. So when I asked if you thought of yourself as a Conceptual artist, I was wondering whether it's possible to call oneself that, and was curious what you'd say.

JONATHAN: Yeah, like it's a way of saying "Intellectual artist." But your etchings really blur that line, I think, between smart and skilled. Funny, huh, that smart artists usually don't know how to do anything. Do you think of yourself as a very skilled drawer?

JENNY: No, I don't think I can draw at all. Wait, I take that back, because people have told me how "wrong" and "bad" my drawings are, and I'm always secretly surprised. I didn't think my drawings were wrong or bad! I thought they were right and good. But in the end, whether they are good or bad seems irrelevant.

JONATHAN: Yeah, I think I know what you mean. But you do have a knack for capturing likeness. Maybe it's because you pay attention in an interesting way. But

what about the process of etching interested you as opposed to just straight drawing or lithography (not that I know what lithography involves)?

JENNY: Drawings are unique objects with the mark of the artist's hand. Etchings are, by definition, always, without exception, multiples. They're never unique.

JONATHAN: Your etchings make me think of a primitive sort of photography.

JENNY: Etching is a pre-photographic process of reproducing imagery. That's exactly why I'm interested in it.

JONATHAN: What's your interest in primitive technology about? The idea of the primitive, both in technology and culture, seems to be a theme throughout the work, with the silent movie references, and Margaret Mead and her natives.

JENNY: Part of it is because I don't know if digital technology has helped a lot of artwork. It makes it more slick, but weirdly vacuous.

JONATHAN: So you're a romantic.

JENNY: Maybe. When I was learning about art, I was looking at the ways people like John Baldessari and Paul McCarthy used photography primitively, as a way to document ideas. And that was how I wanted to use it, too, but I didn't know how I could go further with that. I needed to find my own way.

JONATHAN: I see.

JENNY: So here's my second question: lately I've been thinking about how Conceptual art came from a time when artists were trying to make things that subverted the system, things that weren't objects, that couldn't be bought and sold. And since then, for an artist not to make objects has become an acceptable language within art, one with its own basis in commerce. There's now a market for those formerly unsalable art forms. What do you think about that?

JONATHAN: I think it would be pretty difficult and somewhat pointless to try to come up with something that couldn't be bought and sold. And why is that so problematic, anyway? Like, what's wrong with making a living? Plumbers do it.

JENNY: I don't know if there's anything wrong with that. The point is that, historically, at a certain point artists *did*

have a problem with that. And that was at least one of the reasons why artists turned to dance, performance, and temporal work, which couldn't enter the world of commerce in the same way as object-based works.

JONATHAN: I suspect that all ties to the world of commerce weren't really severed. Commerce has a sneaky way of hiding around the corner.

JENNY: Well, those works are part of the world of commerce now because, in 2007, performances are bought and sold. Which I think is pretty odd, by the way, and I always wonder why other people don't notice that.

JONATHAN: I used to have a problem with that—the documentation of art as art, where video or photography is used as a transparent filter.

JENNY: A lot of those works were documented with photography, but I don't think the photos were taken for the purpose of creating a commodity out of them. I wonder if the documentary photographs were thought of as art-objects at the time.

JONATHAN: Even if they weren't, performances have to be financed, right? What's so pure about writing grant proposals, and how's it any different to get someone with money to finance a performance or buy a ticket to one than to buy an etching?

JENNY: Yes, sometimes performances were financed, but often they weren't. I don't know if much of the work that came out of Judson Church in the '70s was financed. Maybe some of those people received grants from now-extinct sources like the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts], and maybe some of those actions were about people getting together and seeing where they could go with it. One could argue that the market for art wasn't as strong as it is today, so at that point in time it didn't make much of a difference whether artists were taking off their clothes in gyms, or putting bricks on the floor. I think a lot of the artists had day jobs, and it was possible to exist on a smaller income than it is today. Rents were cheaper.

JONATHAN: Why should art be different from absolutely everything else in our culture and require a day job? What's wrong with thinking of art as, like, a job?

JENNY: Listen, nothing is wrong with that. But I'm also idealistic. I want art to be special and secret.

JONATHAN: When I first started making single channel videos, I didn't imagine that they would have a commodity value. And I felt very comfortable with that idea, that the work was infinitely reproducible and its value couldn't be monetary. But then I realized that you could make 20,000 copies of a tape but there might not even be five people that want it. Or I discovered you can make five copies of a tape and I found that the work becomes a lot more popular all around. Collectors don't want things that cost ten dollars, they want things that cost ten thousand dollars. And galleries are, of course, have even less interest in things that cost ten dollars, because they then get only five [dollars]. And institutions as well. Not to be conspiratorial, but I think it's all connected. My experience has been that the work becoming a commodity has been a prerequisite to the work being seen by anyone at all.

JENNY: Which is a positive thing because when you make money from selling your work, you can make more work.

JONATHAN: Yeah, but none of it seems very romantic or countercultural. In a lot of ways, the art world is like a model for what's worst in the world in general.

JENNY: Actually, I have absolutely no problem with the marketing of artwork, which might sound hypocritical after everything I just said. But I don't. I love the fact that something as frivolous as a piece of cloth with some paint on it should become highly valued. It's wonderful and lawless. I just don't *understand* it. So the fact that film or video or performance is commodified is a great thing because those works are important and valuable. And artists making those works can now be supported by their art, as they should be.

JONATHAN: I think it's important to understand what it is that you need to do to sustain yourself in the world, you know? There are all sorts of different ways to do that, obviously. You can drive a cab and make art at night, or get a teaching job, or make single channel videos in small editions, or make etchings. Did that motivate your project at all, to produce something that was easier to sell?

JENNY: No. It honestly never crossed my mind that I could sell the etchings. I didn't start making them to sell them; I started making them because they intrigued me. That is, at a moment when very little interested me, something about the medium of printmaking was curious and degraded enough to arouse my interest. It seemed like making them was socially unacceptable, because nobody wanted to see them. And once I started making

them, I literally could not stop. I tried to make myself stop, but couldn't stop. Besides, the print world is very different from the art world. The print world has some fingers in the fine art world, but it's separate. The fine art world is not very interested in prints.

JONATHAN: But your prints don't just function in that print world. The Conceptual gesture almost takes precedence over their being prints at all.

JENNY: That's what I aim for, but I think the etchings read in that way to a varying degree by the viewer. Certain viewers do see them only as prints, which intrigues me. I like the fact that these works can pass in the printmaking world. And then, some people don't even see that they're prints. A lot of people call them "drawings."

JONATHAN: Uh-huh. [Pause.]

JENNY: Well...hmm...do you have any other questions for me?

JONATHAN: Let's see. We never got around to any *People* magazine questions. Do you think that talking about your personal life would be interesting or shed some light on something?

JENNY: My personal life is much too uninteresting. I can't think of a single thing about my personal life that is even vaguely worthy of anybody's attention.

JONATHAN: I don't believe it. Let's see. What would *People* magazine ask...?

JENNY: Life-changing questions?

JONATHAN: Yeah, that's good. Has anything life-changing happened to you recently?

JENNY: Um...hmm...well...um...two years ago I was in a car accident. That was definitely the most significant event in my life. It changed how I see the world.

JONATHAN: How so? Because that was presumably just a completely arbitrary kind of, like, lightning striking sort of occurrence.

JENNY: Exactly. I was driving to the paint store on a Saturday afternoon, and someone crashed into me while I was at a stop sign. I was out of commission for three months.

JONATHAN: Oh my god, I didn't realize it was that bad.

JENNY: That's because I didn't talk about it. How do you talk about something like that? You can't. It's a simple thing not to be able to use your body, and it's also not simple at all.

JONATHAN: How so?

JENNY: Well, first of all, you start to envy people who can use their bodies in a functional manner. I would see people doing the most banal things—doing the dishes, or sweeping the sidewalk—and I'd get jealous.

JONATHAN: Uh-huh.

JENNY: And then, it removed me from the world, like I'd been airlifted from my life by a helicopter. I thought that when I reentered the world, it would be the same as when I left it. But obviously it wasn't. Time had passed, things had changed. It was like I'd been caught in a time warp. Like *L'Avventura*.

JONATHAN: Wow. And how did that affect your relation to art-making?

JENNY: Well, for a long time I really wasn't fully functional. So I made etchings during this time because I really couldn't do much else. By focusing on my 3x4 inch etching plates, I was able to make the world more manageable. And my work was all I could think about. I wasn't lying in bed thinking about how I wanted to go skiing. I was thinking about how I needed to get better so I could scratch some more little lines on my etching plates. In the end, after all of that, I'll never complain about anything again. The things that I used to complain about seem very small to me now. So that's a good *People* magazine answer, right? [They laugh.]

JONATHAN: Perfect, it's very Barbara Walters, only you didn't cry.

JENNY: [Laughs] Yeah.

JONATHAN: But seriously, though, that is very interesting and obviously very relevant to what you're doing now as an artist.

JENNY: Yeah. Well, what's the most significant thing that's happened to you in the past two years on a personal level?

JONATHAN: Hmm...let's see. Um...hmm...uh....

JENNY: Maybe you don't want to share it.

JONATHAN: I might not want to...but maybe I do and just can't. I guess that struggle—of having things to talk about that I'm not able to—gets channeled into art-making. I've done a number of projects about the idea, or impossibility, of direct expression. I guess this interview-conversation would be something like that. It sounds clichéd, but I do think the need to speak in some way is central to what I do.

JENNY: That makes perfect sense.

JONATHAN: Anything you want to get off your chest?

JENNY: It's really been a pleasure. ■■