



The Art Guys

Michael Galbreth, American, born 1953, and
Jack Massing, American, born 1959

The Statue of Four Lies, 2010

Mixed media, 112 x 336 x 600 inches
University of Houston

The Statue of Four Lies—A Performance in Bronze

In front of the Cougar Village dormitories at the University of Houston, two figures stand in a small plaza, surrounded on one side by a semicircular wall of shell limestone. The limestone matches that of the nearby historic Cullen buildings down to the fluting, as does its inscription, which is in the exact same lettering. The installation thus echoes the architecture of the original buildings of the campus, which bear inscribed inspirational sentiments, like Ezekiel Cullen's "Intelligence is the only true aristocracy in a government like ours." However, the Latin inscription cut into the wall for this installation declares a very different principle: *Mundus vult decipi ergo decipatur*: "The world wants to be deceived, so let it be deceived." Although the two figures are of bronze, the archetypal medium of heroic statuary, their postures are performative, not ponderous. They stand, bending at the waist in ways that invite the viewer into the space. The figure at left bends forward, gesturing with his right hand as if pointing at something. The taller one at right leans somewhat awkwardly to the side, offering an open left hand. Dressed in formal attire, these men seem to be masters of some forgotten ceremony, caught in a moment of interaction with a now-lost audience. They bear a suspicious resemblance to their creators—Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth, two UH School of Art alumni who have made a long and successful career together as the Art Guys.

One should not underestimate the willingness of these alumni who managed to convince their alma mater to set up "slightly larger than life" statues of themselves within their lifetimes. Bronze statuary usually sits heavy and lifeless amid the whirl of campus life, but *The Statue of Four Lies* draws in passersby with



evocative, inviting gestures. The plaza designed around them gives the impression of a stage with a show already underway. A bronze suitcase and toothbrush suggest props for some kind of sketch. The engaging design and enigmatic messages of the work playfully subvert the traditional, conservative values conveyed by the medium.

The inspiration for this piece is the so-called *Statue of Three Lies*, a statue of John Harvard in Harvard Yard that was commissioned in 1884. This imposing seated figure, wearing an academic robe and stockings, glares out across the campus from a high granite plinth inscribed with the words “John Harvard | Founder | 1638.” However, this is *not* a statue of John Harvard (there is no contemporary likeness of him); he was *not* the founder of Harvard (only a financial benefactor); and Harvard was founded in 1636, *not* 1638. For Harvard students, learning the truth about this “official” public artwork is an initiation into campus life. *The Statue of Four Lies*, by contrast, intentionally monumentalizes students’ tendency to undermine official university culture.

From the outset, the Art Guys conceived their work to be performative, playful, and accessible. By giving it a title that clearly alludes to Harvard’s statue, they created a cheeky rivalry with that famous institution—their work promises not three lies but *four*, to surpass the model. Their original proposal clearly states their goals for this public artwork:

To create a “performance sculpture” with which audiences may interact.

To create an environment that is a destination, to observe and acknowledge the university campus site and to create a comfortable space whereat audiences are encouraged to pause and spend time.

To create a work that is visually and conceptually legible to a broad range of audiences so that visitors of all types may appreciate the piece.

To create a work of quality and distinction that will enhance the art collection of the University of Houston.



FALSUM IN UNO
FALSUM IN OMNIBUS
FALSUM IN NIHILO



As to the last point, the artists certainly did their homework. Shell limestone is unique to central Texas and available from a single quarry, to which they went to select the piece used to face the presentation wall. They went to great effort to then mimic the shell-patterned limestone by seeding many pounds of shells into the concrete of the plaza floor. They also underwent full body scanning in order to produce the models for the bronze casts, and contacted a Latinist (me) in order to get their inscriptions right.

The interactive component of their plan is present in the vaudevillian postures of its figures, whose feet rest on laughably low pedestals. From the beginning, the Art Guys expected students to desecrate these figures, and they have not been disappointed: Facebook reveals various ways to decorate them for Christmas, to place objects in the open hands, or to paint yogurt mustachios on the beardless one. Students tend to subvert the official culture as a rite of passage, but *The Statue of Four Lies* may be the first public work that incites them to do so. It may be the first to suggest, *officially*, that the university is a place of clever and inviting playfulness, not ponderous, forgettable, and invisible monumentality. To produce *The Statue of Four Lies*, the Art Guys had to diverge from their typical artistic output, which embraces throwaway objects (like old suitcases and toothbrushes), commercial ephemera, and shameless tomfoolery. By working in bronze and stone, they shifted to a work of slow mischief—one of frozen theatrical gestures, more corny “ta-da” than Dada.

The Art Guys have also seeded mysteries in the work that may prove more lasting than bronze—a suitable legacy of enigma for the university’s most famous absurdists. They installed a time capsule inside the wall, behind a plaque that declares it was “sealed on January 5th, 1958” and will be opened on September 26, 2026, “in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the University of Houston”—two Harvard-style lies. As a companion piece, they produced a Codex that remains a popular item in the Special Collections of the University of Houston Libraries. This wooden box contains a series of artworks and a tray of mysterious metal instruments (like a scalpel, a harmonica)—objects so rich and suggestive that they open up a sinkhole of semantic possibilities.

Richard H. Armstrong