The Village Voice: 'The Bruce High Quality Foundation Takes on Art, Money and the Fame Game' by Christian Viveros-Faune. June 26, 2013.

The Bruce High Quality Foundation Takes on Art, Money, and the Fame Game

Photo: Sam Horine

Written by CHRISTIAN VIVEROS-FAUNE for THE VILLAGE VOICE

"It's up to artists to make the art world they want." On the Acela Express from Penn Station to Providence, Rhode Island, with two members of The Bruce High Quality Foundation, it suddenly feels like the sealed windows are thrown open and a gust of cold air rushes into the rolling train. The effect of these words, spoken mid-interview, is like a sharp slap in the face. In a year that has seen wealth and power consolidate ever more—bigger galleries, the transformation of art into financial instruments, concentrated global wealth, the unmasking of Big Data—there is, apparently, at least one group of artists in New York determined to raise whirlwinds by imagining that the world can be different. ¶ Created, according to its insistently puckish literature, "to foster an alternative to everything," The Bruce High Quality Foundation has taken the art world by storm since its founding in 2004. An artist collective that revels in anonymity —they've hidden their faces behind everything from their trademark cigarette-dangling Kabuki masks to copies of the Village Voice—the Bruces have rewritten a number of cultural scripts, among them the rules of art celebrity.

"It isn't that we think biological information is the end-all," one member says over watery Dunkin' Donuts coffee before boarding. "It's just that we think it's totally irrelevant to how we want our work to be understood." Think of them as the Bruce Waynes of the art world.

Baby Bruce demonstrates BHQF's appeal across the youth demographic. Photo: Sam Horine

Though they avoid Daft Punk's robot helmets and the brightly colored balaclavas of Russian art activists Pussy Riot, the Bruces have nonetheless shunned the art world's star system by creating a fantastical, even absurd image for themselves. A shifting cast of young characters that rotate around a pair of late-twentysomethings, the artists claim to represent "the estate of Bruce High Quality," a fictional "late social sculptor" who died tragically in 2001 in the World Trade Center disaster. Anonymity, the Bruces figured out early, means control. The Bruces' Batmanning of celebrity consequently frees them to be actual working artists rather than superstar wannabes. Few ideas prove more revolutionary in a culture capsized by Warholian cliché, YouTube banality, and Deadliest Catch reality TV.

"Basically, we remain anonymous not because we don't trust celebrity, which turns out to be super useful," one member confesses, "but because we don't trust biography, which really isn't." This stance has scotched several magazine profiles (among them, one with New York magazine, which chose not to respect the Bruces' request to remain nameless). Their public face proves less a strategy than a sort of free-form experimental ethic.

Two Bruce heads photographed in the studio. Photo: Sam Horine

The choice has guided the Bruces through crazy-like-a-fox stunts, such as their 2002 full-dress restaging of Cats in Bushwick (it revived the musty Andrew Lloyd Webber vehicle as a morality tale about gentrification), to their anxiously awaited "retrospective" at the Brooklyn Museum, which opens this week. A show cheekily billed as a display "of less than 17,000 works," "The Bruce High Quality Foundation: Ode to Joy, 2001–2013" reprises the Bruces' many highlights—a significant number of which, incredibly, remain underexposed to uptown's Ferragamo loafers set—while also engaging in what might be contemporary art's ultimate Sisyphean enterprise: the reconstruction of scale versions of every object inside the Greek and Roman collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art—from kouroi to battle helmets—in Play-Doh.

"Art's most radical quality is that it's useless," says a scruffy Bruce ringleader. "People have used art for lots of purposes throughout history, but artists have to protect its uselessness—it serves as a shield against corruption." Making things with zero utility—and emphasizing that trait—is certainly one way to keep paintings, sculptures, and other objects from turning into the creative equivalent of pork bellies.

The Bruces' ideal fuses fact, fiction, history, and humor to open up art to bigger audiences and more democratic possibilities. Or, as they put it, they aim to "invest the experience of public space with wonder, to resurrect art history from the bowels of despair, and to impregnate the institutions of art with the joy of man's desiring."The Bruces employ virtually every kind of media. Their objects, actions, installations, and slideshows, however, take a backseat to larger, impossible-seeming ventures the group pulls off despite stupidly long odds. Among these are Teach 4 Amerika, an 11-city national tour of art schools the artists undertook in 2011 to protest student debt and the professionalization of arts education; the Brucennial, a populist art biennial the group runs opposite the Whitney Biennial; and BHQFU, a four-year-old "unaccredited, free, collaborative" university the Bruces created on Avenue A on the Lower East Side as "a learning experiment."

the Bruces take on history in Thank You New York (2009). Photo: BHQF

Combined, these efforts cost the Bruces upward of $350,000 a year, a chunk of change they might easily transform into a raft of Patek Philippe wristwatches, a pair of Mercedes SL convertibles, or a down payment on a Damien Hirst dot painting. But success for the Bruces—which after some effort has arrived in bucketfuls—clearly has little to do with dollars and cents. Instead, they use the fame and money they increasingly leverage to promote genuinely radical ends—namely, to create a savvy, irreverent, but ultimately idealistic parallel universe where artists can thrive and grow.Which brings me to how I come to be on a train with a pair of Bruces on the way to their solo museum show at Brown University. A kind of test run for their much bigger Brooklyn Museum exhibition, the Providence show also serves as a kickoff for a series of marquee events that include an exhibition at the "Future Moynihan Station" (a decommissioned post office) on Eighth Avenue; a fat-cat benefit auction at Carbone restaurant for BHQFU (with prominent Warhol dealer Alberto Mugrabi as auctioneer, it raised nearly $300,000 for their university); and a prominent presentation at the 12th Biennale de Lyon, one of Europe's more important art festivals.

These and other projects help shore up the Bruces' generative example as a possible alternative to contemporary art's domination by New York's auction houses and Chelsea's big-box galleries. If the Bruces can remake bohemia in the image of a bank robber's mask, the argument goes, others can, too. Best summed up by their pragmatic motto—"professional problems, amateur solutions"—the success of their punk philosophy serves the Gotham art world today as a kind of DIY pilot light."I have a great deal of faith in artists being different from other people," Scruffy Bruce says as the train pulls into Providence Station. "We have this one thing above other people: the ability to turn our disgust into a different vision."Ironically, the work on view at Brown belongs entirely to billionaire hedge-funder Steve Cohen, whose firm, SAC Capital, is under investigation for insider trading by the Securities and Exchange Commission. One might think this would collide with the Bruce ethic, but the group believes otherwise.

"Artists have always figured out ways to beat the system," says a tall, gangly Bruce who exudes the easy confidence and conviction of an athlete. "And that's basically what we're trying to do."

The Bruces' 2004 restaging of Théodore Géricault's The Raft of the Medusa on the East River. Photo: BHQF

Later, at the opening—which Cohen, his daughter, and his well-heeled adviser Sandy Heller attend—Scruffy Bruce catches me staring at a series of 10 black-and-white silkscreens of wives of convicted former financial titans called, fittingly, The Wives. "It's a work in progress," he says. "I honestly thought we were going to have put one up of Alexandra Cohen for the show."When I look over at the short, doughy Cohen—the 34th richest man in the U.S. and the bank-clerky Jay Gatsby of our age—I'm momentarily reminded of Tennessee Williams's famous put-down for squares: "a pineapple ice cream sundae." Then I remember that the man's personal fortune is estimated at $10 billion. If nothing else, the Bruces are in the game with some of the world's biggest money players, and damn their complicated financial entanglements. (Mugrabi, the Bruces' erstwhile auctioneer, has also been accused of using insider information to manipulate prices for expensive artists like Warhol and Hirst.)

"It really is an incredible thing that they are so generous with their money," their dealer, Vito Schnabel, son of painter and filmmaker Julian, says about the Bruces. "They pay themselves a salary from a foundation they've set up, but obviously lots of money goes back into the school and other projects. They live very frugally, without much flash, and now one of them is having a kid. I think what they really want is to set up a situation where they're free to try new things independently of whether they succeed or fail. As far as I'm concerned, they're doing something that's never been done before."

Schnabel, whose lack of a brick-and-mortar space allows him an enormous amount of flexibility in setting up exhibitions, is in many ways the ideal dealer for the Bruces. Young, connected, smart, and curious to try new things, he has introduced them to some of the globe's top collectors, including boldface names like Cohen, Mugrabi, industrialist and publisher Peter Brandt, real estate mogul Aby Rosen, and the Swiss collector and dealer Bruno Bischofberger, who reportedly acquires their work with clockwork regularity.Heller has speculated publicly whether Schnabel himself is "a member of Bruce," which lends discussion of the collective a cloak-and-dagger air. Their working method evokes the romance of radicals meeting in dark cafés, clandestinity, and the activist ambition of social and artistic revolution.

"We don't really expect alternative art practices by themselves to humanize global capitalism any," Tall Bruce says a week later inside their cavernous Sunset Park studio, which is full of paintings, sculptures, and Play-Doh replicas bound for the Brooklyn Museum show. "But it's not just the collectors' fault that the art world is led by money now. Artists need to step up and do their part."

Photo: Sam Horine

A floor-through located in a 19th-century industrial building, the Bruces' studio is abuzz with activity as some 10 people alternately answer phones, put the finishing touches on works, and cut museum-like vitrines from plywood that will mimic the Met's more elegant displays.Tall and Scruffy Bruce lead me to a miniature of their upcoming show. It contains tiny images of many of their earliest actions—like their 2004 restaging of Théodore Géricault's history painting The Raft of the Medusa on the East River—along with works that refer to actual history: 9/11, the 2008 stock market crash, the emerging distrust in social technology, along with references to the history of ideas, including Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged and Friedrich Schiller's poem "Ode to Joy," which became the 18th century's "We Are the World" after it was scored by Beethoven.

Yet behind the pranksterism, as Brooklyn Museum curator Eugenie Tsai has pointed out, is "a masked but very sincere utopianism" and a "perfect combination of Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys." Fundamentally, these are artists who embrace rather than shy away from big subjects, a trait that distinguishes them from many in their age cohort.So how is it that the Bruces manage to continue to take on complex, knotty phenomena like arts education, hedge fund billionaires, and Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (which they mashup with a canonical Duchamp sculpture to produce a silkscreen they call The Bachelors of Avignon)?

Daft Punk is playing at the Bruces' house. Photos: Sam Horine

"This is what working collaboratively allows us to do," they answer almost in unison. "By discussing all these things together and making up fake narratives and alternate histories, we've figured out a way to create enough freedom for ourselves so far to do whatever we want. It's never personal. Instead, it's like a super-competitive conceptualized drawing party, with editing. And we constantly push ourselves to make the stakes bigger and bigger and bigger."