

**Untitled:** 'Professional challenges. Amateur Solutions.' by Mack McFarland. August 15, 2011.

### **Professional Challenges. Amateur Solutions.**

*Feldman Gallery curator Mack McFarland interviews the Bruce High Quality Foundation in conjunction with their visit to Portland as part of their Teach 4 Amerika tour.*

In March of 2011 Pacific Northwest College of Art curator Mack McFarland engaged the Bruce High Quality Foundation (BHQF) in an email interview as the Bruces prepared to take their free and proudly unaccredited art school, The Bruce High Quality Foundation University (BHQFU) on the road in Teach 4 Amerika, presented by Creative Time, the New York-based nonprofit public art presenter. The Bruce High Quality Foundation is a group of anonymous artists who have used objects and performances in a very unique and witty form of art world critique. Teach 4 Amerika was a five-week, eleven-city, coast-to-coast road trip that crossed state lines and institutional boundaries to inspire and enable local art students to define the future of their own educational experience. In conjunction with the 2011 Open Engagement Conference presented by Portland State University's MFA in Social Practice, BHQF exhibited ephemera and insights from the trip at Pacific Northwest College of Art's Gallery 214.

*Becca Biggs*

Feature image used with permission from Matt Kowal.



PNCA students, faculty, staff and community members gather for a conversation with BHQFU in May 2011. Photo: Craig Sietsma '14

An Interview with the Bruce High Quality Foundation  
Mack McFarland, April 2011

**MACK MCFARLAND** I read that many of you met at Cooper Union, the famously free art school. Was there an experience there—or in another educational environment—that made you desire to create a school?

**BRUCE HIGH QUALITY FOUNDATION** Where did you read that? We claim no biographical material about the foundation to be accurate. It might be true that many people associated with the foundation went to art schools, but it's not our reason for starting a school. We started a school because we believe that talking to other artists is a critical component of being an artist. BHQFU is not modeled after accredited art schools.

**MM** OK, I understand that you can “neither confirm or deny” your origins. I wonder what part of BHQFU, in its architecture or process, provides for the kind of meaningful dialogue you are seeking, over say, starting a book club or dinner party?

**BHQF** Well, book clubs and dinner parties are certainly an aspect of how BHQFU has operated. The main difference might simply be that those social forums get held to the same scrutiny as the book or topic in question. Further than that though, and why we decided to create a University rather than a school, is that we are hoping to sustain a network between different social forums. So if there is a reading group on Sundays and a dinner party on Wednesday nights and a lecture series once a month—all those independently organized events can be grounded in a more singular discussion about education itself.

**MM** On the BHQFU website it is written, “Blind romanticism and blind professionalism are in a false war alienating artists from their better histories.” What do you see as “better histories?”

**BHQF** “Better histories” is stolen from Obama’s inaugural address. We imagine, for him, it refers to a kind of pragmatic social justice. For BHQFU, it’s meant to refer to a pragmatic educational model. All artists need to talk to other artists. We need each other’s help. Critique is often a difficult experience, the highly problematic work of applying words to works of art. Running away from the fascinating collaborative thing we call human knowledge is not an option. And running full bore into the boring mechanics of commerce is also not an option.

**MM** What are some of The Bruces’ strategies for a pragmatic art educational model in face of “the boring mechanics of commerce?”

**BHQF** We should be clear, we haven’t really broken the mold in terms of how a class is conducted. If you were to come to one of our critiques you’d get an experience largely similar to many of the critiques conducted in accredited art schools. The real differences are: there are no grades, attendance is completely voluntary, and whoever is leading the discussion clearly understands his or her role as a facilitator, not as an expert.

**MM** Also, you write that the art education and in particular the debt-model of art education poses “a form/content problem. Arts education is divided between the practical problems of form (e.g. money—how to get it, raise it, administer it and please the powers that control it) and the slippery problems of metaphor (e.g. education—how to learn, what to learn, why to learn.)” Can you expand upon this line of thought? Is it an issue of the metaphor or content being used? The first point is crystal clear, art school does not provide the knowledge of how to make and deal with funding.

**BHQF** I suppose what we're getting at is that art school, despite its curricular reliance on self-reflexive critical thinking, pretends that its own context is a blank slate. But art school is a power structure that ought to be subject to the same scrutiny we apply to the history of painting. If we believe arts education is important, we should be interrogating its forms.

**MM** Is this interrogation of form utilizing the methods employed by institutional critique, or some other form of examination, i.e. how an art historian may do an analysis on Pre-Raphaelite paintings within the context of the avant-garde? Perhaps we can look at Chris Burden's Five Day Locker Piece (1971) as a gesture towards the type of interrogation you're looking for.

**BHQF** We simply mean that an artist's education ought to make some time for looking at the history and theory of arts education. It's through that history that we begin to grasp how art has been gendered male, how it has been sexualized homosexual, how it has institutionalized the lone genius depressive poverty-stricken anti-social weirdo with no relevance to society. And it is through the theory of art education that we can understand how art has been instrumentalized as a tool for the rising creative business class. It's important to us that knowledge begins with a critical evaluation of where we actually are, not the magical no man's land of the academy.

**MM** Obama made famous the idea of the "teachable moment". Have you ever been in a teachable moment, either as a pupil or teacher, that has had a lasting impact?

**BHQF** We'd suppose that any event that has had a lasting impact must be a teachable moment. That sounds like a reasonable definition of experience. As the operation of the Foundation has expanded, as we've gained more attention and access within the art world, we're constantly faced with the problem of how to contend with those situations critically and creatively.

**MM** Is there a shift in meaning with the work that comes from this access? Do you foresee any lasting impacts on the University due to the attention and access?

**BHQF** We couldn't tell you how the meaning of the work has changed for others, but to our minds this was part of the plan and part of the work from the beginning. We're investigating myth-making, ambition and the construction of history—the irony of exceptionalism. So gaining access is part of the program. As for the University, we know it has helped gain support and we hope to continue to use that into the future.

**MM** What do you gain from being anonymous? Is that hard to maintain? I know folks who know you, though they have not outed you. How long do you feel you can keep this up in our age of transparency and Wikileaks? And what happens once your identities are known?

**BHQF** We aren't exactly anonymous. We just don't like the work of the Foundation being attached to individuals. The work arises out of a collaborative practice and it would be a mistake to attribute it to individuals. Plenty of people know a lot of the people who work for the Foundation. If someone felt it made an interesting story, we suppose we'd be annoyed. But hopefully people that actually care to think about the work would recognize that the biographies of Foundation employees are immaterial to the work.

**MM** As you set out on Teach 4 Amerika you are stopping at many art schools to, “learn from different models of art education and to rally art students, engaging them in dialogues around how we define ‘art education’, how it should be taught, and how we can build meaningful artistic and educational experiences locally, nationally and beyond.” This sounds a little like sowing the seeds of revolution among the students. Yet I can’t help but think about how these institutions will use your visit to boost recruitment. Is your message of revolutionizing arts institutions already recuperated into the institutions because of their sponsorship of your presence? Is there a shared co-opting in your relationship with these institutions? Does one side have the upper hand?

**BHQF** We seriously doubt that once Teach 4 Amerika actually happens that it will do anything to boost enrollment. We’re hopeful for the opposite effect.

**MM** Fair enough. There is quite a history of these phenomena of arts institutions sanctioning artists to be their critiquing consciousness, which then lends greater credibility to the institution itself. Here the artist serves in the capacity of a kind of public editor or secret shopper in corporate consumer culture. So, 1) Do you feel that you are taking on that kind of a role? and 2) As you do gain the attention and access mentioned above does BHQF begin to be subject to the kind of examination as other institutions? Is it fair to look into the deals of individual artists in this way? I am thinking of the New Museum exhibition, Skin Fruit and the controversy around the exhibition curator Jeff Koons and Dakis Joannou’s collection from which the show was culled. And lastly, are you implying that a situation where more artists were less professionalized would be an improvement, and if so, in what ways?

**BHQF** 1. We don’t really feel comfortable saying we have just one role. It’s true that in many cases critical artists are brought in to add credibility to the institution, though that is a somewhat cynical way of looking at it. Institutions may also just feel guilty for past indiscretions or the fact that they aren’t saving the world. We don’t mind helping out in that regard if it provides us a platform for our own agenda.

2. Being both an artist and an institution, it’s par for the course. We tend to side with Mr. Wilde—there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or poorly written. But artists are people too. And some of them—very few, but some—are very wealthy collectors, board members and real estate tycoons. There’s no reason to give anyone a pass.

3. It would be an improvement, certainly. The market has a flattening effect on contemporary art. Artists are afraid to take risks because they want to appear salable.

**MM** Benjamin Buchloh asked Thomas Hirschhorn “Who was more important for you, Warhol or Beuys?” When looking at your oeuvre the same thought comes to mind, yet I want to add Haacke into the equation, so, Warhol, Beuys or Haacke?

**BHQF** Haacke, for us, has been more of an entry point for how to think about the contextual politics of the art world. But he’s a seriously unfunny dude. Warhol and Beuys gave us access to the more diverse expressive possibilities within institutional critique.

**MM** Your work does contain a level of humor, sometimes absurdist, as in the press release for The BRUCENNIAL 2010: Miseducation, which claimed to bring "...together 420 artists from 911 countries working in 666 discrete disciplines..." that is not found in Haacke, or even Andrea Fraser, perhaps in a bit of Marcel Broodthaers, and yet I find a melancholy in many of your objects. Could you talk about how you employ humor and sadness?

**BHQF** Perhaps the biggest difference between BHQF and the mainstays of institutional critique, at least how they've been discussed, is that with us, we aren't inclined to instrumentalize art in the service of an ideology. We are often ideological, but we think the ultimate point of what we're doing is empathy. The point is the sharing of human feeling - wherever it falls on the spectrum. So in that sense we aren't employing humor or sadness. The shared experience of humor and sadness is an end in itself.

**MM** This interview is occurring for the 2011 Open Engagement conference—a free annual conference on socially engaged art, held in connection with the Art and Social Practice MFA program at Portland State University. Within that context I am curious to hear your thoughts regarding the language and history around social practice, participatory practice, public practice, relational aesthetics, public art, new genre, etc?

**BHQF** So much language! It's a challenge to get past all the academic bunk that fills the pages around social, participatory, relational etc. It's not that we aren't interested in knowing what we're doing, but most of the language surrounding social practice is a crime against humanity. We spend more time talking about Las Meninas and John Hughes movies than we do engaging with Bourriaud. Some worry about being relational. We worry about relating.

**MM** With BHQFU, to whom do you worry about relating? Art students, arts academics, the arts administrators?

**BHQF** We think of the participants in BHQFU the same way we think of our art audience—they are people with an abiding interest in art. Students, academics, administrators, working artists—it doesn't matter. Everyone has something to gain from the experience.

**MM** In your interview with the band Pablo Picasso for Interview Magazine you asked them the simple question "Dream gig?" I now ask you the same.

**BHQF** We have a plan to build a geodesic dome in Manhattan to house Bruce's remains and his university. We suppose the dream gig is the inaugural party.

**MM** What might be the motto or epitaph to be inscribed over the geometric entry to this mausoleum/university?

**BHQF** Professional Challenges. Amateur Solutions.