

New York Foundation for the Arts: 'Bruce Alrighty?' by Andrea Neustein. January 7, 2010.

Bruce Alrighty?



Written by ANDREA NEUSTEIN ON JANUARY 7, 2010 for NEW YORK FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS

The Bruce High Quality Foundation knows what it's doing. Maybe. An event at its donated Tribeca headquarters seems like a standard art party: great haircuts, painful shoes, Lady Gaga projected on the wall. Mounted around the room, however, are science-fair-style sign-up sheets for courses like "Occult Shenanigans in 20th/21st Century Art" and "What's a Metaphor?" This is an open house for the Bruce High Quality Foundation University, a free, unaccredited art school that prepares its students—or doesn't—for a future in which a costly MFA provides no guarantee in the art world. The Foundation has conceptually reinforced this project with manifestos that plumb the working philosophies of Joseph Beuys, Oscar Wilde, and Andy Warhol. But it's also a party. Therein lies the paradox of BHQF.

Launched in the early naughts by its five anonymous core members while they were students at Cooper Union, BHQF purports to commemorate Bruce High Quality, a fictional artist. Their early public "interventions" seem to express opposition to art world mechanisms. In 2005, for example, they chased Robert Smithson's "Floating Island" down the East River in a speedboat with a replica of one of Christo's "Gates," a stunt that got the attention of the New York Times. In 2006, the Foundation wheeled over a large-scale mask of Bruce High Quality to audition for Jeffrey Deitch's notorious "Artstar" reality show (the mask was not chosen as a contestant). In 2007, Foundation members dressed as football players and physically tackled public art sculptures. In an interview, however, the group is quick to "distinguish between ideological objection and simple revulsion." Which motivates their work? "Revulsion toward the results of market mechanisms motivates us quite a bit," they told NYFA Current via email to ensure anonymity.



BHQF's work includes a multiplicity of art objects, actions, installations, films, and catalogs, at the core of which is the University. In December, BHQF showed relics at the Susan Inglett Gallery, meant to loosely represent the University's first semester: freestanding blackboards, reminiscent of Joseph Beuys, were embellished with slogans such as, "In the future, everyone will be a foundation," plus domestic articles like ice skates and a handheld mixer. Their bookish manifesto on art education and the culture of "willful indebtedness," *Explaining Pictures to a Dead Bull*, takes contemporary art schools to task for refusing to help students respond to the art market with agency. BHQFU promises no solutions, however.

"As opposed to our accredited brethren, we don't implicitly or explicitly promise the students of BHQFU anything," says BHQF. "Everything is their burden to bear. We think artists will learn what they need when they need it. We've said it before and we'll say it again: artists are the people best suited to sorting out the problem of art education."

Clearly, BHQF is hard to pin down. In Randy Kennedy's *Times* article about their 2005 Smithsonian intervention, a woman watching BHQF's boat dock captured the mood of that event, and the collective: "We were laughing about it," she said, "But they weren't laughing." The academic rigor of their work provides an alternative to the ahistorical approach taken by many young artists. In an interview, they are articulate and quite serious. At the same time, their art has a humorous, DIY aesthetic; critics often refer to them as "pranksters," a term which they shrug off: "We call it social sculpture, but whatever gets you through the night." They express disgust with market mechanisms, but seem unusually adept at fundraising. Meanwhile, their anonymity only seems to encourage their celebrity, which is fine by them: "It isn't that we consider biological information privileged; we consider it irrelevant to how we want our work to be seen," they say. "We keep our staff anonymous not out of a distrust in celebrity, which proves useful, but out of a distrust in biography, which is not."

Accordingly, the BHQF opening in Miami was presented by Vito Schnabel and covered by the *Times Style* section. With the Whitney Biennial next on their agenda, and P.S.1's Greater New York not far behind, BHQF are certainly starting to resemble art stars themselves. On the other hand, they are hosting a "Brucennial" exhibition set to run in an alternative space

at 350 Broadway in SoHo, simultaneous with the Biennial at the Whitney. Are Bruce High Quality Foundation chasing the moneylenders out of the temple, or just redecorating?

“We don’t expect alternative art practices to help much in replacing global capitalism with something more humane,” they clarify. “As for the art world, the collectors are not the people keeping the system as it is. It’s up to artists to make the art world as they want it.”

It seems all the more appropriate, then, that BHQF’s contribution to the Whitney Biennial is “a ’72 hearse-ambulance combo converted into a portable museum about the American experience. It’s our Whitney, so to speak.” Who’s to disagree?