ALMINE RECH

# The Bruce High Quality Foundation
# Vive La Sociale!

## Sep 11 — Oct 1, 2014 | Brussels

*What you have to do is create a character. Then the character just does his best, and there's your comedy. No begging.*

Buster Keaton

The Bruce High Quality Foundation is a collective based in New York City that mixes irreverent humor, trenchant social critique, and art historical references in its work, and spans several mediums of production, including painting, sculpture, performance, and video. The group was formed in 2003 by --an undisclosed, and unknown number of-- alumni of Cooper Union, a prestigious school devoted to architecture, art, and engineering in downtown Manhattan, and its members, all of whom work under the "Bruce" moniker, and have remained anonymous.

Eschewing personal fame and glory, the group members take their name from the apocryphal story of a "social sculptor" named Bruce High Quality who allegedly died during 9/11. The Foundation's self-imposed task, then, is to continue the type of work espoused by the late Bruce and honor his legacy. The group first garnered the attention of the art world following a 2005 project, *The Gate: Not the Idea of the Thing but the Thing Itself*, in which members embarked on a precarious-looking skiff carrying a model of one of Christo's Central Park "Gates" and trailed behind Robert Smithson's "Floating Island" around the isle of Manhattan -- a proper art-establishment staged even then organized by the Whitney. The Bruce's precarious skiff was serendipitously photographed by a *New York Times* journalist reviewing the Smithson event : this fortuitous event gave birth to The Bruce High Quality Foundation in the media. Their fame and public aura has not ceased to grow since.

The group has exhibited in the 2010 Whitney Biennial, Lever House, Bruno Bischofberger Gallery, and Brown University, and was the subject of a 2013 retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. According to Eugenie Tsai, the curator of their Brooklyn Museum exhibition, "BHQF [their acronym] are not institutional animals, yet they are very much embraced by the art world. They are simultaneously insiders and outsiders, which is quite an unusual position to be in."

In addition to its own production, the group has mounted three "Brucennials," parodies of the omnipresent institutional biennial mode. The Brucennials are "a celebration of, and catalyst for, an ever-widening community of artists" -- a metaphor for the ever-sprawling and exponential numbers of artists that are coming out of art schools every year around the globe, just like BHQF itself, once born out of  a New York art school in 2003. The first Brucennial had an anything-goes approach, in which works by Basquiat and Cindy Sherman hung alongside a multitude of works by Cooper Union friends. The most recent (and purportedly final) Brucennial in 2014 featured the works of all female artists.

BHQF's recent works have dealt with the Pantheon of the history of art: giants drawn from the art historical canon, including Velázquez, Manet, Gericault, Beuys, and Warhol -- and now, for their first appearance at Almine Rech Gallery in Brussels, none other than James Ensor.

One of their most ambitious projects to date took, not an artist, but a whole museum institution as its point of focus and target: The Bruce (the short name for the Bruce High Quality Foundation) have embarked on a vast scale project that consists in re-producing the 17,000 + figures forming the entire collection of the Metropolitan Museum's Greco-Roman collection. However, the Bruce reproductions of these antique figures are made in Play-Doh. Many of the figures have a cigarette dangling from their lips, a signature-mark of Bruce himself -- an homage/caricature/reincarnation of the late Bruce. This vast, and enormously ambitious project epitomizes the paradoxical stance of the Bruce vis-à-vis art, its establishment, and its history : with its curious mix of deference and derision, homage and mockery, The Bruce High Quality Foundation appears to stand at a cross-road between Gustave Flaubert's *Bouvard* et *Pécuchet* and Buster Keaton. Bruce's insatiable appetite for art history echoes the two French characters' bound-to-fail, yet awe-inspiring, intents to map out human knowledge from A to Z, bringing the readers to laugh and cry at the same time.

The peculiar mix of seriousness and dry humor that is a defining feature of The Bruce also brings to mind Buster Keaton who also created his own character and endowed him with a life of his own (not dissimilar to the way Bruce, or his ghost): "The more seriously I took everything, and how serious life was in general, the better laughs I got."

In Brussels, The Bruce have chosen as their source of inspiration, one of the early monuments of modern art in Belgium: James Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels*, 1888 (now at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles).

James Ensor, *Christ's Entry into Brussels*, 1888 (J. Paul Getty Museum)

This modern allegory of society by Ensor offers a perfect fulcrum for The Bruce's ongoing artistic and imaginary quest. Here is how the J. Paul Getty Museum describes this crucial painting :

Ensor's society is a mob, threatening to trample the viewer--a crude, ugly, chaotic, dehumanized sea of masks, frauds, clowns, and caricatures. Public, historical, and allegorical figures along with the artist's family and friends made up the crowd. The haloed Christ at the center of the turbulence is in part a self-portrait: mostly ignored, a precarious, isolated visionary amidst the herdlike masses of modern society. Ensor's Christ functioned as a political spokesman for the poor and oppressed--a humble leader of the true religion, in opposition to the atheist social reformer Emile Littré, shown in bishop's garb holding a drum major's baton leading on the eager, mindless crowd.

The layers of similitudes and echoes between Ensor's *Christ's Entry* and The Bruce's own concerns are eerie: set between humor and tragedy, joke and prophecy, caricature and political satire; popularity and incomprehension. Ensor's work indeed offers a perfect point of 'entry' into The Bruce's own artistic personality.

This particular project will consist of several works forming a vast installation. The center of the exhibition will be occupied by a life-size reproduction of *Christ's Entry* into Brussels (8 ft x 14 ft). Around this work, various installation elements offer an update (126 years after Ensor) of this momentous (and fictive) event today: starting with a clock, reminding us of our time and date, one encounters play-doh figurines of the Twelve Apostles (alias, Bruce's companions who bear witness to Bruce's gospel); an altar piece (centering on the principal object of worship today : Television); all this amidst, throngs of beer cans, cigarette butts (Bruce's personal marker), and all kinds of detritus (all sculpted out of play-doh), and echoing the dense crowd gathering in Ensor's painting, and emblematizing the art party -- a necessary social component to the art world's functions. Indeed, one can say that the Bruce High Quality Foundation's project at large consists in offering an allegory of the Art World itself, at times serious, at times hilarious, through its multi-faceted complexities.