

Making a scene about art

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Published: August 30 2010 17:35 | Last updated: August 30 2010 17:35

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Bruce High Quality was an artist who, like his hero Joseph Beuys, believed in art's potential to transform society. Before his death in the September 11 attacks in 2001, his groundbreaking work as a "social sculptor" was balanced by a quieter, more introspective practice, interrogating the foundations of his own identity through self-portraiture. In *Self Portraits*, a show at the Fireplace Project in East Hampton, this subtle body of work is finally receiving the attention it deserves.



A video still from 'L'eau de Vie, Un Film de Jean-Luc Godard'

This is how a critic armed solely with a press release might begin a review of the exhibition organised by the Bruce High Quality

Foundation. The critic would have been duped, however, because Bruce High Quality is not an artist at all, but a conceit – invented as the cover for a Brooklyn-based art collective, which, since its founding in 2004, has become one of the most important developments in the New York art scene.

The anonymous artists behind the BHQF are usually acknowledged to be five male graduates of Cooper Union in Manhattan, now in their early thirties. They don't give interviews, but explained to me in an e-mail exchange that they see their mission as "examining the structures that make art what it is today with the intention of offering improvements".

They first appointed Bruce as their champion in 2004, when they wheeled a 7ft-tall head (made from what looks like polystyrene foam, with red lips and eyelashes like the bristles of a broom) to the Manhattan audition of *Artstar*, Jeffrey Deitch's reality television series in which young artists compete for a solo exhibition. The audition-performance was, they said in a 2009 interview, a reaction against the art market's focus on "artist as celebrity". YouTube footage of the audition reveals the sculpture of Bruce speaking in an electronic voice ("please remove your clothing and let me see your beauty free and wild") to a panel of shocked judges.

Since then, the BHQF has combined the silly and the ambitious. In 2007, they began their "Public Sculpture Tackle" in which a member of the group hurled himself against public sculptures in Manhattan, and hosted a musical, *Cats on Bowery*, in which models posed as Lloyd-Webber-style cats in vignettes echoing American Apparel advertisements. Last year they produced a zombie art-film on Governors Island entitled *The Isle of the Dead* about the death of the art world.

Recently the BHQF have launched their own institutions, starting their own biennial in 2008. Scheduled to run at the same time as the Whitney Biennial, this year's "Brucennial", organised with the help of art dealer Vito Schnabel, son of artist Julian Schnabel, was so star-studded that one critic commented that it made the Whitney's roster "look like a list of strivers". In 2009, BHQF launched a free university in New York's SoHo, the BHQFU, as a response to "professionalised" art education: it "does not seek to create an economy for artists" but rather "chooses to re-orient education away from an economy altogether".

Their growing presence has been met with a mix of excitement from those who feel that the New York art scene has become stale and overly commercial since the 1970s, and scepticism from those who, like curator and White Columns director Matthew Higgs, find it hard to know "what they are up to, or why".

Their next step is to conquer Europe, with a solo exhibition in Berlin in September, based on *L'eau de Vie, Un Film de Jean-Luc Godard* – a film they made in 2005 about the idyllic age before art fairs were invented. Then they will recreate a piece in London called "Beyond Pastoral", first shown in New York in 2007, in which the BP logo is made up of lemons and limes, wired to produce an alternative source of energy, like a potato clock. The work, they explained, "is going to feel much more timely and site-specific than it did originally, given the spill".

This tendency to make art about the art world is seen by some critics as the worst kind of navel gazing. There's a view that the BHQF are themselves the worst offenders in an art world obsessed with celebrity parties. Their 2009 group show in Miami, curated by Vito Schabel, teemed with New York's rich and famous. But artist-curator and

critic Mark Beasley, who organised the BHQF's Governors Island project in 2009, sees their use of "social capital" as no worse than any other artist's. In fact, he argued, it is "more transparent and honest than most".

At the opening in East Hampton, it was easy to agree with all sides of the debate. The witty exhibition continued the tongue-in-cheek parody of the "star-making machine of the art market", with images taken from popular culture, art and personal history (the face of Picasso, a statue of Woody from [Toy Story](#), Yves Klein's "Leap into the Void") embellished with Bruce's face (often just an oval of Tippex, some red, felt-tip panned lips and a cigarette butt).

As bright young things clustered outside the gallery, one man – perhaps a Bruce – turned up with some large mushrooms, to loud applause. Julian Schnabel – wandering about in a lumberjack shirt – was later reported to have expressed an interest in buying "Self Portrait (Woody)". Other partygoers discussed their classes in the BHQFU's upcoming semester. It was easy to feel that the gathering was as intriguing as the artwork – but then, making a scene is what the Bruce High Quality Foundation does best.

'L'eau de Vie, un Film de Jean-Luc Godard' opens at Duve Berlin September 4,
www.thebrucehighqualityfoundation.com

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