

## **AA Bronson Radical Asshole**

‘...the use of irony was itself serious...’

- AA Bronson on General Idea, in *The Confession of AA Bronson* (2011)

AA Bronson thinks his butt is revolutionary. That may be the case – I haven’t tried it – but I’m not quoting him fairly. He thinks all assholes are revolutionary. In this he joins proto-queer thinker Guy Hocquenghem, who argued that the liberation of anal pleasure from shame was one way to remake society as a whole. Homosexuality is dangerous, he claimed in *Homosexual Desire* (1972), because it shows that eroticism is not tied to reproduction. Male receptivity further disturbs the masculine/feminine, active/passive oppositions which uphold patriarchal authority and by extension marriage or other systems of ownership. This undoing of gendered mastery finds echoes in Bronson’s earlier work as a member of General Idea. From their mock beauty pageants in which the artist becomes feminised commodity, to their pose as pampered poodles, they mercilessly satirised the singular (straight male) artistic genius as a myth of the media and marketplace.

But the deaths of his partners and collaborators Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz from AIDS in 1994, and his reversion to working alone, caused not only a personal but an artistic crisis for Bronson. How could he represent himself without betraying the group’s critique of the artist as gifted individual? While his most recent work has sought to memorialise those lost to the pandemic and histories of homophobic persecution, his decision to summon the queerly departed by posing, like Joseph Beuys, as a shaman, appears to abandon the principles of GI. To be a guru in the gallery is to support the romantic idea of the artist as agent of revelation, removed from society. Yet far from being a volte-face, his apparently earnest collaborations with younger artists in exhibitions like *AA Bronson’s Garten der Lüste* (2018) engage once more in myth making, setting up the artist as elder and mentor only to dissolve that authority.

Let’s start with the shaman and Bronson’s image of revolutionary action. *We Are the Revolution* (2013) is a full-size naked portrait of the white bearded artist, clutching feathers, with more of them sticking out of his ass – part hippy guru, part rear-guard at a gay pride parade. It’s clearly a reference to Beuys’ 1972 work of the same name, a to-scale photograph of the German artist walking towards the viewer, clad in his habitual masculine get up: a mixture of political guerrilla and Indiana Jones. Beuys was accused of trying to make a revolution in his own image, giving himself the spiritual authority of shaman and political leader whilst calling for direct democracy. Marcel Broodthaers even bitchily likened

Beuys to Richard Wagner, a self-mythologizer who believed that the artist was spiritually above and apart from the rest of society.<sup>1</sup> Just the kind of claim that General Idea would mercilessly parody.

*We Are the Revolution* is both loving homage and knowing parody of Beuys. As Bronson offhandedly remarked during an in conversation at South London Gallery in 2018, 'the shaman is the most exhausted, overused metaphor for the artist'. This much can be gathered from his coating of the photograph with Warholian diamond dust, a sure sign of artistry as spectacle and commodity. The shamanistic get-up Bronson adopts also belongs to a New Age culture more associated with Western bourgeois consumerism than the radical democratisation Beuys would claim. If myths of the artist are being invoked here, they are the emptied out media mythologies of Roland Barthes. Then there is the nod to Hocquenghem with the plumed butt-plug: as the artist notes 'it's difficult to take yourself too seriously when wearing [one]'. And unlike Beuys, who strides towards the viewer demanding they identify with him, Bronson is turned to one side, inviting you to walk alongside him, not in his shadow.

Yet Bronson is also a fellow traveller with Beuys, wanting to rethink social relationships, particularly in group exhibitions which privilege communal over individual pleasures. His 2013 Witte de With show took as its inspiration Gustave Flaubert's early intertextual novel *The Temptation of St Anthony* (1874), in which sin comes not from within the hermit saint, but from books and paintings: that is to say, his desires are culturally incited rather than innate. Bronson took this notion of the self as a collection of found and half-formed images, of shame as belonging to society not to the marginalised individual, and spun it out into the form of a curated display. A Bas Jan Ader photograph here, a collaborative work there – inasmuch as his shows are self-portraits, they serve to dissipate rather than consolidate Bronson the individual, showing the self to be composed of cultural signs and social relationships. In this sense his group projects come close to GI's constructed self-portraits of the artist as mediated by the society in which they live – appearing, for example, as advertising gurus, serving capitalist spectacle.

Nor can the spiritual aspects of Bronson's output be so easily resolved as pure pastiche. His interest in Hocquenghem and 1970s sexual liberation recalls a time when many believed queerness really had a higher mission and transformative powers – albeit socially rather than metaphysically – to move beyond the politics of identity and assimilation. For this queer

<sup>1</sup> For a close analysis of Broodthaers' critique of Beuys see: Germer, Stefan, 'Haake, Beuys, Broodthaers', *October*, Vol 45, Summer 1988, pp.63-75.

thinker and others, the sex club darkroom offered a model of this new society, in which relations between public and private, self and other were rendered porous. These venues have been central to Bronson's queer brand of social sculpture, with collaborative tent-like structures such as *Cabine* (2013, with Scott Treleaven) and *Folly* (2015, with Mark Krayenhoff Van De Leur and Adrian Hermanides) recalling bathhouse architecture. Yet these works also poke camp fun at those spaces, rendering them respectively with frou-frou swags, or as a hallucinatory circus tent. By rendering the 'big top', if you will, as somewhat nelly and illusory, Bronson hints at the norms of masculinity and muscularity which pervade sex clubs, meaning that they are never quite as liberated as they could be. Even in Hocquenghem's theory, only the male asshole is able to subvert patriarchy – a kind of essentialism via the backdoor. *Cabine* and *Folly*, much like *We Are the Revolution*, are a queer marriage of those apparent opposites, irony and sincerity.<sup>2</sup> He teases at the compromised promise of sex clubs or artistic shamanism, whilst imagining they could be otherwise.

My insistence on comic irony might be surprising, since much of Bronson's recent work also relates to the histories of HIV-AIDS and homophobic persecution – territory light on laughs. Even the tents, despite their preposterous appearance, function as healing spaces, recuperating the sex club from being the den of disease and depravity imagined by Larry Kramer or Randy Shilts in the 1980s. But mordant humour has been an essential part of Bronson's approach to these histories. This can be traced back to late GI works like *Fin de Siècle* (1990), in which the three artists appear as seal cubs, a population which at that time, like gay men, was under threat. Yet the cute pups garnered much more public sympathy than did middle aged faggots, a phenomenon not lost on the artists – puppies are innocent, but queers are not. There is a marketplace even for suffering. *Fin de Siècle* finds echoes in Judith Butler's argument in *Frames of War* (2009) that refusing to mourn certain lives – those who have died from AIDS, the migrant, the criminal – is a means of dehumanising whole populations.<sup>3</sup> Even some animals get more respect.

Bronson extends this mixture of levity and seriousness from the jaws of the pandemic into the act of memorialising. *BLUE* (2013) a photograph made with Ryan Brewer, was taken in a part of Fire Island where the ashes of many gay men have been spread. Out of the bushes appears the artist and a second figure, Mark Krayenhoff Van De Leur, the artist's husband, both in blue body paint – naked, again – with Brewer painted white, all wearing long wigs.

<sup>2</sup> My thinking on this 'queer marriage' has been influenced by: Ann Pellegrini and Gavin Butt's concept of 'camp sincerity' or 'laden levity' and Jennifer Doyle's work on emotional difficulty and irony.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, Judith, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, 2009, Verso: London.

They look like shabby Smurfs, but represent the spirits of the site. The absurdism of the image is necessary – since these queer lives have been deemed ineligible for grief, they cannot be recuperated within the conventional sombre language of mourning and earnest feeling. To do so would be to erase the injustice done to them in death. Bronson instead marks their passing with an evocation of the spirit world, whilst also placing a distance between his representation and conventional social sentiment. There is sincere feeling in the work, yet because of the comedy, that feeling remains unresolved. This is what Gavin Butt means when he talks about a camp ‘splitting of seriousness from importance’.<sup>4</sup> Since hypocritical and homophobic political leaders routinely conduct themselves with gravitas, he argues that such seriousness is no longer a meaningful language for those on the margins. And let’s not forget these ashes were spread where those queers once had fun, where in life faeries really did emerge naked from the bushes and frolicked.

Bronson’s strategic playfulness allows him to acknowledge the past without resolving it, or claiming for himself the serious authority to speak for the dead. Hence his toying with shamanism, without playing it straight, in his performance-rituals *Invocation of the Queer Spirits* (2008-2014). Armed with more butt-plugs and other improbable ceremonial tools, the artist and collaborators summon the ghosts of queer communities neglected in official histories: all-male pirate ships, explorers and mediums. But since the historical record is scant, or would involve imposing present sexual definitions upon the past, these groups can only be marked imaginatively, with parody and distance, although with sincere recognition of their erasure.

Less comically, but with no less irony, Bronson has brought such strategies to bear on the colonial crimes of his great grandfather, who was involved in the cultural and physical genocide of the Siksika Nation in Canada. His chosen ritual *Artemesia for My Great Grandfather*, involves spreading mugwort, a herb traditionally used for purification. But as an act of cleaning up it can only ironically recall the same ideology of ethnic cleansing that it hopelessly tries to expunge. As the artist said in much of the press that accompanied his recent iteration of this project, *Public Apology* (2019), there can be no apologising, nor forgiveness that lays this past to rest, just as we might recognise that the work of queer mourning cannot be done.

Here perhaps is the key to the artist’s practice: an attempt to think the social through the self, from his harrowing experiences of the HIV-AIDS epidemic and state homophobia, his

<sup>4</sup> Butt, Gavin, ‘Just a Camp Laugh’, *Seriousness*, 2013, Sternberg Press: Berlin, p.56

participation in sexual liberation, to his ancestral history of colonial abuse. He relates, in 1970s sexual liberation style, the personal to the political, but without *personalising* the political ie. making it all about him. The most private desires, and even one's identity, are presented as effects of a larger culture. In place of the individual, including the individual authority to forgive and make good past trauma, Bronson offers a playful picture of connectedness and obligation to others, whether living or dead.