



This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Surviving the Last Brucennial
DIRECTORS CUT

There's a tacit understanding, amongst those who can claim an institutional memory, that conversations about the "death of art" start happening just after women (and by inclusion, others) start making it. If that's the case, good for us: hadn't men been trying to kill art for the better half of the 20th century? Barthes' seminal essay, The Death of the Author opens with an image of Balzac's castrato (a prepubescent, castrated opera singer) who, dressed in drag, sings of "woman"'s timeless capacity for the manipulation of affect. Barthes asks, "Who is speaking in this way?" before drowning himself in the text's baptismal waters. The publication of the The Death of the Author coincided with both the women's movement and the collapse of the gold standard. In other words, in the second half of the 20th century, 'Life ain't nothin' but bitches and money.'



Installation shot of 'The Last Brucennial'. Photo credit: Christen Clifford

The 2014 exhibition, The Last Brucennial was the Bruce High Quality Foundation's coup de grace, the fifth and final effort to troll the Whitney Biennale with an open-call tailgate exhibition and something of art's utopian longing. "They're enormous undertakings," a lead member of the former collective explained in a recent phone interview, "it's a huge volunteer effort, and that poses a lot of problems. Things are going to be a mess, there's going

to be issues with the door, and ultimately, you're going to produce something ugly. The work is bad and piled on top everyone else's, it immediately gets worse. You know... like a country." He pauses to reflect, "like a democracy." At a Brucennial, one could expect twice the prestige, half the professionalism and nearly ten times the amount of artists than what most would deem appropriate for an art show. like every other high-profile art show, the Brucennial's put a high premium on context and geographic proximity to top institutions. Unlike every other high-profile art show, the content was mediocre and there wasn't much difference between the people on the wall and the people in the room. Everyone was mediocre. Pat Stier was mediocre. Jenny Holzer was mediocre. The kids from the Art Students League looked great.



Installation shot of 'The Last Brucennial'. Photo credit: Art Lovers New York

“As I remember it, the location seemed rough and the space was unfinished,” writes the artist Susan Bee. Bee, a painter and designer with ties to the 1970’s Language poetry movement, was amongst an “old guard” that featured alongside both no-name artists and a number of rising Millennial artists such as Chloe Wise, Ivana Basic, and Gina Beavers. Work was hung salon style with no consideration as to who or what got hung next to who or what; install would last until up until people started walking in the door; prices were unlisted and more often than not, invented on the spot. “Since [The Last Brucennial], the art world has become even more polarized,” reports Bee. “The Brucennial represented the last gasp of a certain kind of liberal inclusive gesture that now is harder to sustain.”



'The Last Brucennial' Exhibition Trailer. Access: [Vimeo](#)

In 2014, death ain't nothin' but an institution. The art world's just the line to get in. At the Last Brucennial, two processions: one extending from the front door of the downtown, open-call group exhibition packed wall-to-wall with work by mostly no-name artists and the other leading straight to the bathroom. Both stretch around the block. Those there for the open bar found themselves back outside practically as soon as they got in; those arriving from the uptown opening of the 2014 Whitney Biennial had to wait for the plebs inside to gradually leak. A few people outside eventually managed to figure out the politics of the whole thing and slipped in with the toilet crowd, after which they got in pretty quickly. Meanwhile, security dumped a number of insiders, guilty of breaking rank, out on the sidewalk. The view from the Last Brucennial largely depended on which side of the door you were on, with the teasers providing the only definitive historical overview. The trailers attributed to the Bruce High Quality Foundation consisted exclusively of climax scenes from popular disaster movies--Ghostbusters, Independence Day, Armageddon, Twister, Deep Impact-- and culminate with the date, time, and location of the exhibition. Set to a Gary Glitter hit, the videos are an allegory for art history.

"Bruce was the last great, white male artist," the eponymous collective explained again and again to its community of willing victims, "He fell from the burning towers of the World Trade Center in 2001. And he never has to exist again." Formally a corporation, functionally an institution, theoretically an estate, and technically a front job, the Bruce High Quality Foundation is today remembered for its distinctive approach to institutional critique as well as an uncanny ability to mine art history like a natural

resource. Crucial to this was holding a mortgage on the contemporary. Ideally, five.

“I really didn’t want to do it,” Bruce continues, looking back six years later. “So I had two conditions: it had to be bigger than the previous one [Harderer, Betterer, Fasterer, Strongerer] and it had to be all women.” Then, he adds, “It also had to be the last.” This proved difficult for the art world to wrap its head around. One interviewer asked, “It’s been reported that in your e-mail calling for submissions you said that this Brucennial 1) will feature only women artists, and 2) ‘won’t focus on this aspect of the exhibition in advertising the show.’ So far, the website says nothing about gender. Those are compelling moves. Can you say more about them?”



Antonia Marsh, *Girls Only*. Photo Credit: [Art Net News](#)

By then the collective had mastered the cool, postmodern move of getting out of the viewers way. And we were all careful not to blow the gag. This was art history as usual, only without the usual ideology. The ideology was just the art. The real art was the community. Some people were really good, like Antonia Marsh, who installed a toilet on the main floor. And some people were really bad, like Christen Clifford, who peed in it. “I got there early and got in and drank so much because there was a line three blocks long and I didn't want to leave a place where everyone wanted to be,” the Feminist performance artist recalls, “Lucy Liu wouldn't let me take a picture of her. I got so drunk I peed in [Antonia Marsh's] toilet sculpture, titled Girls Only, and got kicked out.” she confesses, “I went back the next day with my kids and cleaned it up.”

“I was against the idea from the very beginning,” insists Kylie White. White was largely responsible for the installation of the 661 artist show, or at least two grand responsible, as stated on BHQF's leaked tax returns. “We're still the platform you guys are using to market something, which is nothing new, and moreover, why should this watered down harem of a group exhibition feel like it's a gift from men?” The Bay Area sculptor faced complaints from a number of individual women for blasting AC/DC full volume throughout the 10,000 sq. ft. former retail space. Meanwhile, members of the all white, all male, all avant-garde collective were spotted poured champagne into artists' mouths directly from the bottle. According to Twitter, the morning after was traumatic.

There's a photo of me from that night that comes up when you google my

name that my mother will never forgive me for. In it, I'm grinning under the pink glow of a Tracy Emin neon sculpture (her words read, "Trust yourself") in front of a self portrait in which I'm half naked. Because the installation is first-come, first-serve, and because the only deadline was 10 minutes prior to when we'd tap the keg, I'm ecstatic that my ass has landed the best real estate in the largest all-female group show in history. (This would be according to the Guinness World Book of Records, and not the annals of art history: so goes women's institutional surplus.) I recall texting my mom a pic from my boyfriend's iPhone with the neon in frame. Despite Emin's relevance, there was little I could do to assuage her outrage: "You'll never have a political career, but if that's on the internet, you'll never even be allowed to teach." Of course it was on the internet. This was the dawn of functional unemployment and Web 2.0. Again, this was 2014. Everything was a political career, and, thanks to the Bruce High Quality Foundation's "willfully unaccredited" free university, anybody could teach. They could teach alongside David Salle and the 8-ball Collective. It's what lowering barriers to entry in the art world looked like, but it was also the problem of women's inability to inhabit a language of choice in art.



The most important aspect of such gestures was this: more artists than ever before could claim they'd had a show in Manhattan, and one with an unprecedented amount of art historical involvement for a pop-up art show: Marina Abramovic, Barbara Kruger, and Cindy Sherman representing only a fraction of the institutional capital leveraged. The launch of the iPhone in 2011 meant that, by 2014, everyone would be scrambling to amass the new

and novel forms of social capital made possible by social networking. This had the effect of collapsing art's institutional horizons into a social media index. (Who needs gallery representation when you can invite 2000 people to an apartment show?) Bruce took this condition a starting point: instead of accumulating social capital, Bruce cashed in on it. Flagrantly. "The Brucennial's felt like a way to spend capital," Bruce explains, before clarifying: "Social capital. I mean, there was finance involved too..." The Bruce I'm talking to is one of the two remaining of the five member, anonymous collective: "The Brucennials were a way of cashing in on it all at once. After the Brooklyn retrospective we'd built that kind of audience." He continues: "We held onto the possibility that we could hold onto an artists community that felt like its own thing, that wasn't just about the market side of things."



'DUSTY' YELLIN, or was that . . . 'DOLLY' YELLIN ?!!!
no mistaking DUSTIN YELLIN . . . as a gender 'interloper' / BRUCENNIAL 2014.

The Brucennials flew in the face of the much-criticized trend of organizing 40 person group shows as a means to transfer creative authority from “artist” (undifferentiated mass) to “curator” (arbiter of relevance). There was no curator, and even if there was, there’d still be no one at the top: the name “Bruce”, although jampacked with relevance, bore less significance than a suggestively cropped plastic straw. The Brucennials galvanized the collective’s extensive coexhibition network into something resembling a community, and served to put eyes on the groups free and “willfully unaccredited” art school, BHQFU. The two overlapped: the 2010 edition, Miseducation, brought together 420 artists from 911 countries working in 666 discrete disciplines to redefine what an art education meant and could be. What began in 2008 as a showcase

between friends and friends of friends, out of former weed growing enterprise in Brooklyn, quickly established itself in Soho. By 2012, the Brucennial was Biggerer, Harder, Faster, Stronger; by 2014, its scale would land a Guinness World Record title.



“I remember being exhausted, freezing and exhilarated all at the same time,” writes Sophie Oakley. For the past week or so I’ve been emailing back and forth with the former BHQF studio manager. I’m touch-and-go between freelance assignments and a death in the family. She’s wrangling babies in St. Vincent. We’re each operating in at least two timezones. Oakley never brings up the F-ism word, but it’s the first word that comes to mind: “I remember about 10 days of working until midnight trying to keep a vague database (that was created by Lena) up to date with all the submissions we were getting - I think around 700,” she writes. Oakley’s emails are peppered with more details about her life now than her work six years ago, but maybe that’s because her relationship to life and work is a singular process subject to constant transformation.



Installation Shot 'The Last Brucennial'. Photo credit: [Art Lovers New York](#)

Oakley continues, “The other thing that stood out was how many depictions of vaginas there were in the show (being female only etc) but I think you can look at that in so many ways. If it was a male-only show, would it be full of penis’ or still also full of vaginas?! Or are men trained subconsciously to adopt a broader subject? Anyway, I found it interesting and put a photograph of my vagina in as my own submission.” I asked Oakley, recently a director of the now-bankrupt Blaine Southern, what it was like to have her Vagina on the wall. When she told me her story it occurred to me that her and I, and so many others, had performed the same thing. It was something that felt unprecedented, addressed to no particular audience at all. She texts me: “I felt excited and I kept the work even though it was just a cheaply

printed photo in a bought frame. I have it up in my bedroom at home-- makes me feel free!”

What most recall from the Last Brucennial is the sheer number of Vaginas on display and the state of the bathroom line. That, and, throughout the install, Bruce just sat around playing cards. There were dozens of kegs, two bathrooms, and killer dudes bartending. The two temporary bathrooms would prove the exhibitions structural brilliance: those just there to drink would be out the door fast as they had to piss; naturally, both toilets would be occupied by women. This alone made the Last Brucennial the Last of the so-called art world anybody has seen since. Nevermind that gender doesn’t work like that anymore; after Covid, parties don’t exist like this anymore. (Again, MEN were pouring champagne down women’s throats)

I’m scrolling through the 26 page roster Oakley made reference to. It’s one of the few primary source documents that remain of the event, leaked open-source via an underground art blog. (www.brucennial.com is now a parked domain that exhibits a porn page aggregate, while www.bhqfu.com aggregates online degree programs. www.bhqf.com is non-existent.) On the roster, the names of each of the 660 women that exhibited come to presence as friends. Because friendship is the highest, even above men. Exhibiting 660 artists (+1 because performance artist Christen Clifford added her six year old child) flew in the face of the much criticized 40 person group show. Still, something of the exhibitions realization, and extension into my art community today, proved that this was more than an attempt to take advantage of the hemorrhage

of recent arts graduates. Six hundred and sixty artists would constitute barely a fraction of our social media network today. And that's funny. That's the means by which we can reduce the whole to exclusively the women around us. Randon Rosenbaum's tweet in the days following the opening reads -- "Raise your hand if you were molested at the Last Brucennial." As if to suggest the only men who would show up to an all-female group show are the ones there to pick up women. I'm not trying to blame the victim here: what I'm insinuating is that there wasn't one.



Guests at the 2014 Brucennial Photo credit: Sarah Cascone

Lots of women complained, and they did so knowing they had all of the 20th century behind them. This is why we can't have nice things. But here before us are the known names and the unknown names. Here is Martha Rosler; here are the household names. Here are the names of those we hold dear and familiar: I find my name,

my best friend's name, one of my teachers names, the name of actress Lucy Liu. Most funny is that some of these names are patently fake: "Danielle Ho"'s tender pencil drawings of Philip Seymore Hofman are attributed to Los Angeles based filmmaker Dan Oh, who evidently managed to bypass the exhibitions all-female filter. Back to the roster: aside from being alphabetized, there's no apparent organizing principle.

"I met painter Clarity Haynes that night and we've since become colleagues," writes feminist performance artist Clifford, "I remember I said to a guy at the bar- 'Haha, dressing up like Schnabel to go to openings? That's hilarious.' Later, looking at the footage, I realized it was him." Clifford is of a generation of Brooklyn performance artists that reigned in the 2000's, and against the glorification of the Universal Male Artist.

The structural disadvantage that women face as artists has little to do with a prevailing, patriarchal ideology. The Last Brucennial was an attempt to prove the non-existence of men as an ideological enemy. Rather, mens ideology is the practical enemy. Sure, the Bruce High Quality Foundation was composed of a bunch of fuckboi's. Fine. But what the Last Brucennial demonstrated was that women's exposure does not increase the value of the women exposed. That value is up to us. And here's where it gets even more complicated: men's suggestion that what prohibits women's ascension into the canonic hole isn't simply *awareness* that women artists exists. Rather, it's because that awareness is an affront to arts imputed pact with the subject of revolutionary historical struggle. What drives the art market as it stands is the possibility of an historical protagonist,

necessarily modeled off the 1950's, postwar macho artist. When we talk about the "death of art" is neither the death of art nor its end, but a recasting of the subject/object distinctions that had previously defined it.



An art mom pisses in the Modernist urinal. It's a Duchampian dialectic. It's not, necessarily, a feminist art show. It's not a radical shift in arts institutions and structures. It's the crisis of representation in 2014, which marks the turning point at which Feminism ceased to become about women and from then on, became only about girls. Today, we want the art institution to be what the Bruce High Quality Foundation pretended to be so that no one would ever feel compelled to legitimize it again: at the end of the day, Bruce is nobody but an empty, white male ideological head. Bruce was the conceit. The art was a ploy— or, in the words of Chris Kraus: "Art is only a cipher for something else."

Today, what Feminism attempts to claim for the institution in 2020 is the Name-of-the Father, not the institution per se, but what makes the symbolic itself possible. Hence the Vaginas: displayed phallically, throughout the exhibition floor. What being represented? What is being denied? If Feminism in 2014 claimed the signifier,

Feminism in 2020 takes refuge in the signified. Feminism in 2020 wants the institution to be Dad. What detractors of the Last Biennial fail to recognize is exactly what women fail to recognize and make use of: that all of history comes from men, that all of “reality”, as such, comes from men, and if there’s one thing we can actually thank men for, it’s sisterhood. This is what makes the future female. It’s not that men, as such, failed: it’s our millennial absence from history. But just as it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than it is the end of capitalism, it’s easier to imagine the end of art than it is another protagonist.



Long gone are the glory days of the Beuy’s Club: Bruce is now married with kids. He can give Reality on this: “Women are told that they have to compromise either in their professional lives or their personal lives. This puts a psychological toll on women. It prevents them from sharing their fullness with the world.”



The 661'st artist. Photo credit: Sarah Cascone

The Last Brucennial will have been a terrible art show. It was an institutional crisis and one that will last beyond the allotted 6-8 time slot for a political art opening. It was both the Last and the End of an avant-garde, not against the logic of the 'eternal return' but the return of something slow and hard moving that the Italian feminists called *autocoscienza*: self consciousness. Because Feminism is not about equality any more than it is inclusion. It is, merely and in the last instance, the self-consciousness of women. If an anonymous collective of men demonstrating the impact of 700 women throughout the last century and into the new proves anything, it is that there is no Feminist point-of-view.

