

BHQFU

ARTIST

J: I am Joe K, I am the events director here at the BHQFU which is the Bruce High Quality Foundation University, more on that later. Right now we are in a temporary office for the school as a part of the spring break art fair which is a curator driven art show. And BHQFU, which is the Bruce High Quality Foundation University, is an ever changing, ever growing art education experiment that came out of a larger collaboration between artists. The Bruce High Quality Foundation is a large, large group of collaborative artists historically. It has been around ten years. They are the arbiters of the estate of the late, great social sculptor Bruce High Quality who is a fictional character or a giant foam head depending on who you are. Working collaboratively, for a great number of reasons, was preferable to working as an individual artist for a lot of the artists involved. When you work collaboratively that starts to look suspiciously like being in school. So to push that a little bit further and to insist that it is school to start expanding and questions what education pedagogy and social production and social sculpture can be is the driving force and impetus behind BHQFU which is always changing. I always started our meeting by asking everybody if we should burn the building down and quit. Which should always be an option and then everyday we move on from there. Yeah I consider myself an individual artist insofar as I think I have a mental disorder where I have a neurotic relationship to the forms of the world and the way they operate and I can't help but present possible alternatives. For that,... that sometimes manifests for me personally, historically in a altering preexisting objects. There is just a certain way things are and I want to do a thing to them. In the most simple way. I consider it a very fun mental disorder to pathologise myself. That being said my personal involvement with the school, the object of that critique and neurosis is institution building and pedagogical organizing. I am insisting on a lot of levels that what we are doing right now is art and that is up for debate. Yeah, I think it is anybody who is rendering an alternative way of thinking or looking at something and I think. You know, authorship is a big fun thing to consider. But anybody who successfully renders an alternative way of thinking about or looking at the world in a way that anybody else can care about.

A: My name is Andrea Brugler, I am the facilities manager at BHQFU and also a former artist in residence in the summer 2004. That was sort of my first connection to the school or to Bruce High Quality. I didn't know anything about either existing organizations until I applied because it was easy and free and it looked like a lot of fun. I didn't really know what I was getting into all of a sudden. I found myself months later hired by these amazing people. Part of this really great family and fighting for free education.

J: It was 2014 by the way. You said 2004. Which is cool... if it feels that way then it's true.

A: Yeah (laughs).

I probably feel more like an artist than I ever had before now that I am in this sort of family that we have made but it is so much more about like seeing others grow as well and it does kind of like, maybe I should never forget that we are all artists to begin with, but we do get caught up in being behind the scenes like drivers of this thing for a little bit.

J: Well and to a certain degree just to give some history, we used to run a really egalitarian, really anarchistic, inefficient way of running things. You know? So we have adopted a little bit of a division of labour where you know, you just make the decision who has that responsibility and who has that responsibility and that being said, we all do a little bit of everything. Like, whoever rises to the task, or seems most suited or has the best idea is sort of how it all works out organically. So, as much as I resent the sort of like militarized division of labour. That is just not how it works, but you have to put something on a business card right?

Because yeah it is the perpetual annoying question and maybe a loop back to how Bruce High Quality works. The foundation.

Everyone always wants to know who writes the lyrics and who plays the drums and internally, you know, as an art project those are often the least interesting questions about an individual's identity and autobiography and how it renders itself in the project. And then to a certain degree it almost feels private at times. It's like, as a collective artist we have produced this thing. And you're not going to like decrypt the whole thing because you know who touched what with what finger.

A: But at the same time it sort of like highlights just how institutions work in general.

J: BHQF which is the acronym for Bruce High Quality Foundation. If you take the U key and press that then you have a new name. So we added a U to it at the time. Actually, at that time I am not sure who all was involved specifically but I was around to add the U to it, and it becomes a different thing and then you can fill that U. The U is sort of like a cup shape when you type it out and then you can fill that with a lot of different things and dump it out, and refill it. No I mean the very first beginning is like a cloud of history. Sort of indeterimnable. It is hard to say where every piece of every idea came from. The curriculum originally was run by a program called "BYOU" build your own university and we just had an open door every week. This was in 2009, 10. And every week someone would show up and propose a project and in as an egalitarian was as possible people would just informally support or we would vote on what was going to happen and we tried lots of things and it happened very informally, then we went on this long tour which I can talk about later across eleven cities in the United States, doing a lot of research and vandalizing the possibilities of self organized or dis-organized free education. When we came back we got a new space and spent a good year with 30-40 peers meeting once a week developing curriculum. For almost a year we had one class called curriculum and 40 people were in the class. We were looking at the history of arts education and so on and so forth and through that class we started to invite people to teach our first semester on Avenue A. This would be 2012ish when the world was going to end. But that didn't happen so then we kept going and then from then on it has been a fairly, at arms length tapping of other adjunct faculty in terms of who is teaching. We have tried a lot. A lot of really shitty journalism has tried to encapsulate our whole programming like. "everything from this crazy thing to this crazy thing, to this crazy thing..." Um and we have our own (?) very entertainingly, and right now we are in a very conservative formal place where we have a painting critique class. That talks about paintings. They can argue that is or is not a painting. A sculpture forum. I won't list it all, but we have retreated into some pretty medium specific things. There is a lot of fights to fight and right at present the difference between painting and sculpture is not a fight to fight, so there is two different classes. That being said, we are open to a lot of experimental things. So we keep our Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays mostly free and clear in terms of our curriculum to try new things.

A: I don't teach a class but I am the study hall monitor for Friday's events which is kind of an open door hangout, free coffee, take a nap, whatever you want. But, I do attend certain classes religiously. I really like the poetry class and Sean's comedy class from last week and stuff. Which is nice because we always talk about how we get to go to school for free as our job also you know? So that is always fun. Yeah. I don't know maybe in the future I will teach a class in Spanish. I don't know.

J: Yeah it is nice to think about as it being like work-study slash, building the institution slash, like, it's all kind of... all of the possibilities are rolled into one. There used to be the flippant language like, every student is a professor and every professor is a student and that is true to a degree. Anyone can kind of take up any role at any time but it is sort of more nuanced than that. There is a lot of slippage between what happens. I taught a more discrete performance class for a year. Performance art critique class and workshop. There is a huge amount of exchange in learning and then furthermore, the institution kind of learned a lot. Collectively.

ARTWORK

J: God, I wish it was the shorter list like, what can't an artwork be. Yeah I mean, again, I think to loop back on the definition earlier it's like you know, with the right context I think anything could be an artwork. That is a very optimistic way of looking at it. You know, I wouldn't want to live in a world where a collective murder is considered an artwork but,... you know, I would listen to that proposal.

A: Well I made this thing actually, over the summer and I love it because it makes me think of Joe like talking to me about it and it's this piece that I made it's a there. It's melted candle wax on a pedestal kind of dripping with a number candles 1492 on the top. So like, melted into it. And it's something I was thinking about, you know a lot of Colonialism and memory of what these tangible commercial objects that stand for birthdays and dates meant. But, I remember I had this whole history of like artwork and fire and all these things. And I remember we were really drunk one night like super late and we were just sitting in front of the thing that was in front of us. This pedestal. You like turned around and were like, how did you feel about making an art work with fire and I remember at the time I didn't even think about it because I was so engrossed in it and it was a punch in the face and it made me realize what I was doing. That was cool.

J: If you are presupposing that an artwork is a discreet object or an event with a beginning and an end I would say, I am pretty sure we know where this artwork begins but we are not sure where it ends so, in any given point and space and time. It looks a little different as it's progressing and always changing. If you are asking for the shape of it in space and time, where the politics begin and end what part of it is art and what part of it isn't art because a lot of the work and labour of it in terms of production which on good days you feel is the highest point of art and on a bad day you feel like email. Those are all part and parcel and it is an ever-shifting balance of figuring out what percentage of which email is an art practice and what percentage of an email is... email.

PRODUCTION

J: Yeah sometimes, I do an open mic night. Which is: I decide what day and what time it is going to be based on what is going on in New York and we invite a lot of people and announce it across corporate social media and through email and through word of mouth. And we tell people to ask people, tell people this is the discreet time and space where this thing is going to happen and it is an open mic and then people arrive I have already had too much to drink and I make a long list of who wants to do what and then we let people do that until they cross a line collectively, or break a rule or whatever... or they go on too long. So it's one version of production. It goes on as long as everybody goes on or the police show up. What is another interesting way of producing?

A: I like when we went apple picking, I thought that was an event and unexpected camaraderie like I guess grew stronger with a group of people. You know, apple picking is that thing that everybody wants to do in the fall. And why not make it together, why not do it together? Just renting out a van and asking people that maybe have seen each other maybe once, maybe twice maybe never at the school.

J: Two vans

A: Two vans, to get together for a few hours apple pick and come back and feel a little closer to this community.

J: Oh yeah we made apple pie which is the most delicious thing possible out of an apple picking trip that's art but then nobody ate it and it stayed along for a long time.

A: how sturdy are we about our walls, and it turns out it is not too bad.

J: Yeah I mean that is a little bit of the sober version of picking a time to do something. And there is a lot of like, I rented two vans and asked people to email me. But that seemed, Wochenklausur, did you guys interview them on your roster, I know they did a project a long time ago in Amsterdam that was, and it was more complicated than this, but it was putting two different groups on a boat together and they just happened to be on a boat and even though we went apple picking which has no intrinsic pedagogical capital value, or pedagogical value or capital value, there were a lot of artists stuck in a van for two hours who otherwise would not have been in a van together. And it wasn't because they were friends per se, it was because they wanted to be artists with other artists and go apple picking, in equal measure. As annoying as it was to drive the van, I was privileged to have a lot of conversations with van full of artists who otherwise wouldn't be having the conversation. So that is like a really simple production.

MATERIAL

J: Yeah, I have an amazon prime account so free shipping.

A: Yeah...Iphones

J: iPhones is that material? Desire, I think desire is a really interesting material. Consent is another interesting material. What seems like an interesting material that has been in our space so far? A pigeon, someone brought a pigeon a couple of weeks ago. Problematic. It was material, I don't know if it was art. Let's start from desire; I think that is my favourite material right now.

A: Yeah it takes some kind of courage to go up those steps and join a conversation that you are not entirely prepared for.

J: Courage is a cool material

A: Yeah, desire and courage to me are kind of blending in more and more and the sort of sense of like what is material.

J: Vulnerability, I used vulnerability as a material in a sculpture last week, that was fun.

MEDIUM

J: We use every part of the buffalo, which is why they are all gone now, I guess.

A: Our medium is totes.

J: Sometimes totes yes, tote bags are really important. It's a really good way to disseminate the representation of something. I find acronyms and totes together are a really high form of artwork.

A: Also pencils

J: Right well you see when you give away a tote you don't have to carry it other people carry it for you. It works really efficiently. Mugs too, the mugs have handles. You can take them with you.

J: Oh that is a good medium; google calendar is my medium of choice. Actually.

A: Yeah google calenders

J: Yeah you can choose which colour the date is on google. So yeah, some lectures feel more orange than others, you know?

Yeah, I mean I will rephrase a lot of the things I said earlier. Art, desire and anxiety – these are not things that I can control in others but I can listen to I can try to incite these feelings and try to motivate people to do certain things. Which is inherently political but I also listen to my own vulnerabilities and let myself be manipulated as well.

PROCESS

J: I guess it usually starts with the email or anger. Or if there is something that comes into my inbox or I get upset about something, or if somebody I know is upset about something and we talk about it. And sometimes we talk about it two months later and we'll talk about it a third time three days after that time and then we will do something about it and then we will invite somebody else to get involved with it. And if that works out, that works out, and if it doesn't work out then we I invite somebody else to get involved with it. Then we talk about it some more two weeks later, then there's more email and then we start inviting more people and then we decide what time this is going to happen and then we usually pick an image and then we pick a different image and then we fix all the spelling errors and then we send invites and then we change everything and then the day comes and we do whatever happens and then ah...

A: Clean up.

J: Then we clean up, that's a really important part. Then everybody cleans up and we start all over. Actually in the interim starting from the beginning of that process, in the third day of that process I just described, the process starts in a similar way on another project, and then three days later that process starts in a similar way on another project and then some days we just decide to do stuff

A: We like to play Tetris, I feel like our schedule is Tetris. We're not sure what the next shape is, but we have some sort of idea if it will work. Yeah and then we just keep on going.

J: Yeah, I think balancing sentimentality and assessment is what we are still working on. Because there are certain things you can't throw away. Certain flyers (laughs).

We have a process we call the shitty archive which I actually stole Calla Henkel/Max Pitegoff, which is fine, it's not copyrighted. Yeah so we have a shitty archive which is just an informal way of valuing and keeping what seems to make sense. Sometimes it's more arbitrary and capricious, sometimes it's very obvious. But usually the most obvious things you are trying to save and assess are not the most fruitful to analyze. We don't do too much. We try a little bit of everything, I would say that there is no one strategy of documenting, representing, organizing information. I mean, big data is basically doing it already for us anyway so we are just waiting for big data to become affordable enough for us to just use that. Basically.

PRESENTATION

A: I think we just, try to be as honest and as open as possible. Like everything you see, all the mess that is around is like very much us and at the school it is the same way. You know? We have an open kitchen kind of mugs everywhere it's... I think we are just presenting ourselves as people.

J: Yeah presentation I don't think we have like a wholesale strategy. There aren't a lot of decisions in the beginning. So, if you want to start here, this presentation was a collaborative effort between the three of us – two or three students and then whoever is in the space, basically. And the rules of that game are ever shifting and only to find themselves when they start being broken, so there is a very wide berth. To maybe rephrase what Andrea said. I think yeah, honestly, it's a really important one and it is off putting. This is our office, we are working 8 plus hours a day here and there is an honesty to that, the three of us sitting around this table doing the thing we do which is be friends, be artists and write emails. And pick images (laughs). But at the same time, some of the Mise-En-Scene of the room is inviting, which can also be off putting. So something like a chalkboard with chalk all around it at an art fair, calling itself a school is too complicated to understand in like a neo-liberal consumer mind. People don't know if they are to contribute or to consume, if they are here to be exploited or to contribute. So I think balancing those anxieties, those positive and negative elements of our presence and our honesty being complicated by the context, the multiple contexts we are nested in is always what is going on.

A: It is almost like everybody is frightened at the idea of being able to do it themselves, or how normal and how human it feels. That is what I have experience personally. People just don't want to believe it. It needs to be a higher step, it's an art and it's a something. It is just kind of us – you and me. You could do it – this could be your table.

J: Yeah, this is maybe my agenda a little bit but when it is not clear who is being exploited or who is benefitting, people have an anxiety as a viewer and it's, I won't say we are not doing neither, but it's not exactly wearing it on it's sleeve. Who is being exploited and who is benefitting.

INTENTION

J: I hate speaking so personally about it but that is the only way to speak about this project, being an individual to learn. And that sounds really naive and simple but it's to learn individually, to learn collectively, to learn and change and to continually learn how things function. Why people behave the way they do, why institutions function the way they do. Why the art world is functioning the way it does. I think that is often unspoken but intention number one, if we had to do a prioritized list, is to learn. And on a bad day, I have to remind myself that is why we're doing this and that I am learning and that my intentions are being fulfilled. And those intentions are not a target or an object it's just a question, are you learning? And the answer is usually yes.

A: I guess I would have to say almost the opposite as well. Like, I love learning but I love de-learning probably just as much. And I think that it is something that is completely necessary and people definitely don't give it enough credit that it is important to forget all of these weird structures that you have built up from all of these other experiences and assess them in another side of the world that you can live in, which I think is what the school does for me.

METHOD

J: Yeah I guess I prefer strategies. That is a more familiar language for myself oh god I just had an argument about strategies. Someone in an application to our residency used the phrase disparate strategies. Strategies can be like sort of more similar to each other or not but that is just empty language to me so sure, one strategy is humor. so a little bit of humour. Strategies – to me is like ingredients is cooking, which is a really vapid, stupid metaphor but it's true. So, the ingredients in our kitchen...? We have a very well stocked kitchen of strategies: sometimes it's humour, sometimes it's sincerity. Sometimes it's...

A: Being a punk.

J: Yeah the abject contrarianism, flipping things upside down, changing their colour. Radical inclusivity – It's a word that gets used a lot. A phrase that gets used a lot. I know what strategies not to use and what ones feel wrong. Which are often strategies or representation that feel embarrassing or "thirsty" as we like to call it. So thirst is not a strategy we use, public thirst especially. We try not to be "suss ass randos". That is a strategy and discourage people from behaving as suss ass randos.

Yeah the taxonomy strategies, I don't know if that is fruitful for us to think about at present. It is on a case by case basis, as it should be.

ART

A: God, I don't know. I am still trying to figure it out. It is equal parts infuriating like sadness or incredible joy. I don't know yet.

J: The feels.

A: Yeah, I just know it when I feel it (laughs).

J: It's an antagonistic answer but I really like: art is another word for nothing left to lose. Um, it's you know, it's negatively defined for me in a lot of ways. Politics is a discreet practice. Media is a discreet practice, humour is a discreet practice. And art is some set of feelings and motivations and strategies that don't exactly entirely fit into some industry, into some division of labour. I think it meddles with a lot of those things, it implicates a lot of those things, it uses and exploits a lot of those things, it's subject to a lot of those things but it still persists as this realm of human behaviour. It's fun. Sometimes. It's not always fun. It's most fun when it's most sober right?

Art is as diverse to the humans on this planet ever will be and ever were.

A: You know in like cartoons where somebody gets hit over the head and then they see stars and they are like that (gesture). That is sort of what art feels like.

J: Art is making a painting of a blue duck because you have never seen a blue duck before and you wanted to see what a blue duck would look like, sometimes.

BIO *

* BHQFU is New York City's freest art school and community space offering a full curricula of critique courses, studio residencies, and special events. The educational programming is enriched by a rigorous exhibition series at the university gallery launched in 2015, FUG. BHQFU was founded in 2009 by The Bruce High Quality Foundation, it represents an alternative educational model that treats artistic knowledge as distinct from professional practices, as a knowledge born from conversations between artists and the histories they make together. BHQFU is a 501(c)3 organisation and is completely free for all students. In the interview: Andrea Arrubla and Joe Kay, BHQFU Staff March, 2015

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Credits:

The interview was conducted on March 7 2015 at SPRING BREAK Art Show, skylight at Moynihan Station, New York City.

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Filmed and recorded by: Konstanze Schuetze

Edited by: Paul Barsch

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Produced by: University of Cologne (Cologne), Institut für Kunst&Kunsttheorie