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FRIEZE

## AA Bronson's Treatise on Art and Grief

Neil Bartlett on the lessons Bronson's art practice teaches in the face of catastrophe

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BY NEIL BARTLETT IN COLUMNISTS | 15 DEC 21



In our current state of ever-evolving social and ecological catastrophe, we find ourselves needing not just inspiration, but examples of best practice – and the septuagenarian performer, installation artist, healer, zine publisher and activist AA Bronson weighs in on both counts. As one of the founding members of the art collective General Idea, Bronson was an important early responder to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Then, following the deaths from AIDS in 1994 of his life partners and General Idea co-members, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal, he has had to find ways of making work that make sense within the context of ongoing and devastating grief.

As documented in a new volume about his recent life and work, *AA Bronson's House of Shame* (2021), his response to disaster has been exemplary. The heart of the book is a 200-page selection of images of his post-General Idea performances and installations, and the selection is both large and acutely curated enough to paint a remarkably clear picture of what it might be like to experience his work in person. In the documentation of his performance *Flesh of My Flesh* (2011–18), for instance, the naked action shots of the differently aged performers beautifully convey both the work's tenderness and its frankness. At the back of the book, interviews with Bronson himself are complimented by testimonials from a dozen of his collaborators to provide a fully in-the-round portrait of the artist. Especially heartening are accounts of the way Bronson foregrounds respect in his daily practice, and how he

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lets friendship and intimacy (erotic or otherwise) continually ground it. An account by his friend, the photographer Matthias Herrmann, of Bronson's stoicism during a naked photo-shoot at a freezing-cold, outdoor queer cruising ground is a typically touching – and hilarious – example.



AA Bronson and Keith Boadwee, *PLAID*, 2015, Salzburger Kunstverein. Courtesy: the artists; photograph: © Georg Petermichl

The events of 1994 presented Bronson with a choice: to cave in or carry on. His earlier artistic practice had been all about collaboration; given that the loss of his partners could so easily have cast him in the role of the artist as heroic loner – a role which his earlier work had often sought to subvert – it is a testament to his integrity that Bronson has gone for pretty much the opposite. All of his last decade of work has once again been collaborative, and its characteristically layered and scattered aesthetic (floor-work, mess, super-imposition) bears witness to the fact his concern is always to create a shared and horizontal field of attention, rather than any kind of hierarchy.

At the same time, that historic year of loss has clearly also given him his overriding subject: namely, the relationship between the living and the dead. To this end, Bronson has centred all of his more recent work around the notion of conversations with ancestors – whether they be victims of HIV/AIDS or, as in his latest performances, historic victims of genocidal violence against the Siksika Nation of his

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Canadian homeland. In *Invocation of the Queer Spirits* (2000-13), for instance, he combines motifs from the communal erotics of his own older-generation queerness with both historic and contemporary First Nation rituals – and in so doing, stages a reinvention of himself into a kind-of generous, socially-conscious shaman. Indeed, in this shaman-like aspect of his practice, Bronson can be seen as operating a bit like Joseph Beuys – albeit a Beuys who works with butt-plugs, glory holes and drapes.



AA Bronson and Ryan Brewer, *Blue*, 2012. Courtesy: © the artists and Edition Patrick Frey

Before HIV/AIDS, radical queers were often castigated for being too narrowly concerned with their own niche issues and experiences; since HIV/AIDS, they have often been characterised as ‘only’ dealing with victimhood and rage. Bullshit. From the perspective of the current pandemic and ongoing ecological collapse, we can now see that queer elders like Bronson have, in fact, spent the last four decades of their art-making doing the heavy lifting of human survival. Their work – and their lives – provides all of us, not just the queers, with exactly the kind of pandemic-experienced (and injustice-experienced, and transformation-experienced) wisdom that we are going to need in order to successfully navigate our shared futures. Especially if we want to do that navigating with good humour or hope.

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*Main image: AA Bronson, We Are The Revolution, 2011. Courtesy: © the artist and Edition Patrick Frey*