

## Exhibition Histories

# “The Last Brucennial” 2014 837 Washington Street, New York

## *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*

Around seven hundred works by female artists crowded together under one industrial roof in the Meatpacking District, the only condition that they arrive in time for the opening. Inclusive? Yes. Organised? Not so much. Feminist? It's complicated. *Victoria Campbell* on the Bruce High Quality Foundation's “The Last Brucennial”.

Photos: Oto Gillen



View of “The Last Brucennial”  
Organised by BHQF and Vito Schnabel, New York, 2014

There's a tacit understanding amongst those who can claim an institutional memory that conversations about the “death of art” started happening just after women (and by inclusion, others) started making it. That said, in the weeks leading up to the Last Brucennial, we were all careful not to blow the gag: ask any of the 661 artists involved and there'd be nothing unusual about that year's effort to troll the Whitney Biennial with a massive tailgate party and something of art's utopian longing. Ask anyone and the only thing that distinguished the Last Brucennial from the previous editions (the 2012 one being “Harderer, Betterer, Fasterer, Stronger”, which debuted an off-off-off Broadway revival of *Animal Farm*) was that it'd be the last and arguably the most exclusive. Like the previous four Brucennials (2008/09/10/12) participants could look forward to no curatorial strategy, no press release, no credentials, and an unprecedented amount of art historical involvement for a pop-up art show: Marina Abramović, Barbara Kruger, and the late Sarah Charlesworth representing only a fraction of the institutional capital leveraged.

To compensate for the exhibition's lack of conceptual relevance (or perhaps to reinforce it), a slew

of trailers composed entirely of disaster movie climaxes – *Independence Day*, *Twister*, *The Volcano*, *War of the Worlds*, *Ghostbusters*, *Deep Impact*, etc. – “obviously” set to a Gary Glitter hit – would whet the appetite of a viewing audience whose numbers on opening night near doubled that of the exhibitors. During the opening (which raged on past midnight) members of the all-white, allmale, all-avant-garde Bruce High Quality Foundation (BHQF) could be seen pouring champagne into artists' mouths straight from the bottle. This would likely have been before complaints were addressed to the DJ, who happened to be badass Bay Area sculptor Kylie White, for blasting a soundtrack consisting entirely of 80s strip club music. If the Last Brucennial “did” anything, it would prove that art's not over until Heidi Klum screams from the bathroom line.

“I really didn't want to do it,” Bruce tells me. “[A Brucennial] is an enormous undertaking. It's a huge volunteer effort, and you know there's going to be 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 always terrible, and piled on top of everyone



View of "The Last Brucennial", 2014

else's, it gets a lot worse. You know . . . like a country." He pauses to reflect, "like a democracy".

"As I remember it, the location seemed rough and the space was unfinished," writes the artist Susan Bee. Bee was a fixture of the 70s Language movement and was amongst the canonical New York scene that included BHQF. "Since then, the art world has become even more polarised. The Brucennial represented the last gasp of a certain kind of liberal inclusive gesture that now is harder to sustain."

The former studio manager of BHQF, Sophie Oakley, chimes in: "The Brucennial and working with the Bruces especially in the first few years was an amazing experience," Oakley and I are emailing back and forth between deadlines and wrangling babies in St. Vincent Island. A lot of women I reached out to don't get back to me, but Oakley takes the time to, despite her busy schedule on what she purports to be a vacation: "I was wholly involved and lived and breathed it. I don't think that the Brucennial could have happened if everyone on the organisational end of it hadn't lived and breathed it."

But Bruce insists that the all-female group show was all a joke. "It wasn't a feminist art show. It was just an art show with all women because we

wanted to see what would happen when men just got out of the way." He adds: "There were a lot of men in the community who couldn't accept that. That surprised us."

The years leading up to 2016 were a kind of interwar period, "inter" as in internet, "war" as in the heightened social consciousness left in the wake of the Movement of the Squares (the Occupy protests, and their Greek and Spanish counterparts). The pedagogical turn in the mid-2000s, followed by these happenings and the iPhone, collapsed art's institutional horizons into a social-media index. (Who needs representation when you can invite two thousand people to an apartment show with a Facebook event?) The post-internet discourse was well underway, but the car crash at the intersection of art and technology was *Bruce High Quality*: "We came out of a tradition rooted in institutional critique, but we're dated to the internet. Back then, it felt like you had to do things in real space for it to count. Now you start on the internet and then do it in real space."

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 Tracey 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 ten 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., the "I'm with Her" and "The Future is Female." The year was 2014. Everything was a political career, and, thanks to the Bruce High Quality Foundation's "wilfully unaccredited" free university, anybody could teach. They could teach alongside David Salle and the 8-Ball Community. 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.

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 were a male-only show, would it be full of penises 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."

She and I never got the chance to talk, but between emails and WhatsApp pings, she reveals an unprecedented vulnerability with regards to her personal life. I do believe this is feminism: "I remember about ten days of working until midnight trying to keep a vague database up to date with all the submissions we were getting – I think around 700. Organisationally alone it was a feat as it was all so last-minute, we put it together in a couple of months I think, which was also how a lot of things happened at that time, I think it added to the energy of it all", she explains. "I was exhausted, freezing and exhilarated all at the same time." Sophie Oakley's vagina is the ultimate portrait of the Western Woman.

I asked Oakley, until recently a director of the now-bankrupt Blain Southern gallery, what it was like to have her vagina on the wall. When she told me her story it occurred to me that she 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 exhibition's 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. Never mind that *gender* doesn't work like that anymore; after Covid, *parties* don't exist like this anymore. (Again, they were *pouring champagne down women's throats*) "The Brucennials 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." I'm impressed because I didn't know social capital was something you could actually spend. Accumulate yes, leverage yes – but what kind of person deigns to spend it? Says Bruce: "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."

I'm scrolling through the twenty-six-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](http://www.brucennial.com) is now a parked domain that exhibits a porn page aggregate, while [www.bhqfu.com](http://www.bhqfu.com) compiles online degree programs. [www.bhqf.com](http://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 (plus one because Christen Clifford added her six-year-old child) flew in the face of the much-criticised forty-person group show. Still, something of the exhibition's realisation, and by extension into my art community today, proved that this was more than an attempt to take advantage of the haemorrhage of recent arts graduates. 660 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 Rosenbohm's tweet in the days following the opening read – "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.

Lots of women complained, and they did so knowing they had all of the twentieth century behind them. This is why we can't have nice things. But 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 teacher's names, the name of actress Lucy Liu. *Art in America* writer Nick Irvin couldn't wrap his head around it: "It's been reported that in your email calling for submissions you said that this Brucennial will feature only women artists, and '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?" Most funny is that some of these names are patently fake: Danielle Ho's tender pencil drawings of Philip Seymour Hoffman 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 alphabetical, there's no apparent organising principle.

"I really didn't want it", Bruce tells me. "So I had two conditions. It had to be bigger than the previous one. It had to be all women," he adds, "and it had to be the last." I won't bother pointing out that these are three conditions. The Last Brucennial will have been the last *because* it is all women. This concept was, up until then, overlooked: behind the testosterone-charged autotheatrics of the early avant-garde was the motto "art into life". This would require the exclusion of those for whom the distinction didn't exist in the first place: women, subalterns, children, the mentally ill. Men have been trying to kill art for most of the twentieth century. They failed, until women started doing it.

"I was against the idea from the very beginning," confers sculptor Kylie White, who was at the time a BHQF studio assistant. "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?" White would have been in good company with the number of bad feminists that came out critically in the wake of the show. "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 2000s, 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, men's ideology is the practical enemy. Sure, the Bruce High Quality Foundation was composed of a bunch of fuckbois. 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 canonical hole is their exclusion from the phallic signifier. This is an affront to art's 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 modelled off the 50s, postwar macho artist. When we talk about the "death of art" it 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 legitimise 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, 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, that which makes the symbolic itself possible. Hence the vaginas, displayed phallically, throughout the exhibition floor.



View of "The Last Brucennial", 2014

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 Brucennial fail to recognise is exactly what women fail to recognise 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. It's not that men failed. It's our millennial absence from history. This is what makes the future female. 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 the end of another protagonist.

The Bruce High Quality Foundation made the cool, postmodern move of getting out of the viewers way. (After all, the "death of the artist" is but the birth of the viewer.) What else could Bruce do? Long gone are the glory days of the Beuys 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."

On opening night: "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. Lucy Liu wouldn't let me take a picture of her. I got so drunk I peed in [Antonia Marsh's] toilet sculpture – *Girls Only* – and got kicked out," Clifford confesses, "I went back the next day with my kids and cleaned it up."

The Last Brucennial was a terrible art show. It was an institutional crisis and one that will last beyond the allotted 6–8pm time slot for a political art opening. Behind the Last Brucennial was the death of an avant-garde. In its place was something slow and hard moving that the Italian feminists called *autocoscienza*: self-consciousness. Because feminism is not about equality any more than it is about inclusion. It is, merely and in the last instance, the self-consciousness of women. If an anonymous collective of men demonstrating the impact of seven hundred women throughout the last century and into the new proves anything, it is that there is no feminist point-of-view.

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