

AA Bronson's Mirror, Mirror

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AA Bronson's *Mirror Mirror* asks a simple question: "How do we live our lives and endeavor to create profound and lasting meanings against and through the great issues of our age?" This question originates from Bronson's singular biography, and that is of course merely one man's tale. However, these events, these personages, and these political, spiritual, and philosophical questions point toward a way of reconciling oneself with one's time, and with life on life's terms.

AA Bronson's unique life as he presents it to us has been consistently public and theatrical. As one of the three members of the artists' group General Idea for their 25-plus years of working and living together, Bronson employed his persona as the stuff of art. In 1994, their collaboration in art and life ended when Bronson's partners, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal died of AIDS-related causes, and Bronson faced the daunting task of resuming life as just AA Bronson.

While tragic, this is a universal experience, and the process of rejoining life after loved ones are lost is difficult to make newly vivid. But Bronson's case is unusual, as "AA Bronson" did not exist prior to General Idea. Rather, there was a young artist and architect named Michael Tims, who was investigating avant-garde strategies for the free exchange of ideas, communal living, and ways to break down the boundaries between art and life.¹ When he met his future life-mates and joined with them to form General Idea, the group gradually evolved into a collective exploring media mythologies, for which he invented and

¹See Fern Bayer, "The Search for the Spirit," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 - 1975* (Toronto, Ontario: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 10-12.

came to inhabit the persona of AA Bronson. Through complex and wildly convoluted performance/installation events, they brought their three fictional self-creations of Bronson, Partz, and Zontal to life.

The members of General Idea were constantly obfuscating, mythologizing, and playing with fixed notions of the real. Historians have noticed that the first Miss General Idea Pageants supposedly occurred in 1968, while General Idea was not a named, functional entity until 1970.² This willful falsification was in the spirit of the group's McLuhanesque investigation of the media and General Idea's ethos was, "If it is written in a magazine, that makes it true, or at least as true as anything else."

General Idea's play with a constructionist idea of self in the early '70s seems prescient. Yet a simple household object—the mirror—fulfilled many of their goals. Mirrors are mesmerizing and seductive open metaphors, impermanent cameras, and devices for constituting self as well as examining selfhood. They became crucial to General Idea and occur frequently in Bronson's work today.

Tim Guest, art critic and a fellow traveler of General Idea's wrote:

In the mirror's reflection you gaze into a psychological enigma at the same time as you recognize your public face. General Idea made extensive use of mirrors, "mirrors mirroring mirrors, mirroring mirrors."³

²See Christina Ritchie, "Allusions, Omissions, Cover-Ups: The Early Days," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975*, 13-16.

³See Tim Guest, "From Ziggurats to Curlicues: A Few Principle Features in the Art of General Idea," *General Idea 1968-1984*, ed. General Idea and Jan Debbaut (Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1984) 17-19.

One must be cautious, though, of seeing General Idea's use of mirrors as simply celebrating the world of surface appearances. While mirrors are the primal devices in which we see ourselves in this world and through which we learn of our existence as independent beings, and in which we fix our hair and make-up, they have another aspect crucial to Bronson's purposes. They are the tools through which we may begin to question the absolute reality of the world. The mirror-world presents an unreal, uninhabitable double of our world with a reality nearly as complete as ours. If that world can appear real, yet be an illusion, what does that imply about the one we seem to inhabit? Meditations on the mirror-world urge us to consider other models of understanding perceivable reality, and open the door to ever-expanding spiritual questioning.

AA Bronson's early works are represented in *Mirror Mirror* by the two series *Mirror Sequences* and *Body Binding*. These early series of works point toward the common experience of a young soul exploring the world through the vehicle of a sensate body. In *Mirror Sequences* circular convex mirrors reflect the body disassembled into distorted puzzle pieces that we may or may not be able to reconstitute as a coherent whole. In *Body Binding*, the bodily limits of self are reiterated: elastic digs into the flesh as if diagramming its contours. It is as if the bound creature were asking incredulously, "Can this be it; can this be all I have in which to travel though the dangerous world?" It proved not to be. By joining General Idea, becoming AA Bronson, and becoming one of the preeminent drag queen/punk shamans of conceptual art, his body became much more than itself.

General Idea's work was often very funny, playing in the realm of fashion, coifed poodles, metaphorical cocktails, mass culture, and celebrity. In the giddily intoxicated '70s, living in a world without dire consequences seemed possible, and one could live life as a manifestation of one's intellect and glamour.

Tragedies happened, but they too could be played as theater. General Idea reveled in the mythical destruction of the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*.⁴ Its smoldering ruins and remaining artifacts became the subjects of many of their exhibitions. History, even fabricated history, was the stuff of opera (soap or grand), mirroring the world while exaggerating its drama to better reveal its truths.

In the 80s, however, AIDS cut a cruel path through the landscape of the best and brightest cultural practitioners of the day, and any history of the period must include the diverse responses to the pandemic. General Idea's work in this field produced poetic and political masterpieces of our times, and General Idea is understandably best remembered today for their AIDS-related works, particularly in the U.S. where their earlier work was less widely exposed.⁵ Their remake of Robert Indiana's *LOVE* icon as *AIDS* was a markedly simple gesture, reiterated in many different forms from posters to paintings to tabletop sculptures to an electronic billboard in Times Square. Along with Gran Fury's *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, ACT-UP's *Silence=Death* and Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Pillows)* billboard, this work has proven that political art does not necessarily have a short shelf life. It, like the others, has become a crucial part of our visual culture, and is taught in

⁴See General Idea, "The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion," *General Idea 1968-1984*, 33-37. While the pavilion never existed, General Idea displayed photographs of themselves fleeing from the burning building, the rubble of the "Silver Bar," and replicas of the luxurious murals of copulating poodles that had supposedly adorned its walls. The Pavilion was the home of the Miss General Idea Pageants, some of which did happen in real life, and others only in the mythic realm of General Idea.

⁵See Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, "Between Faith and Hope: General Idea's PLA©EBO Series," *General Idea's Fin De Siècle*, ed. General Idea (Stuttgart, Württembergischer Kunstverein, 1992), 61-62.

universities, available to future generations to reinterpret and use for their own strategies of resistance.

The AIDS pandemic, like the Holocaust before it, or terrorism since, has transformed our politics, passions, and souls altogether. Survivors of such tragedies cannot help but see every aspect of reality differently, and understand themselves within a continuum of common humanity and the unavoidable suffering inherent in being corporeal.

Bronson's response to personal trauma in *Mirror Mirror* is manifold, and begins, as all healing must, with the painful process of remembrance and with inventorying loss even when such truth telling is too painful to bear. Images of Felix and Jorge become visual records of their mortality, mirrored through the eyes of a beloved friend.

Although he was blind and could not see the resulting photographs, Jorge asked AA to document his emaciation as a link to his family history under the Nazis. *Jorge, February 3, 1994* speaks of the power of representations. Depiction makes the tragedy of suffering all too real in the world in which we must deal with suffering whether or not our best wishes, prayers, and actions prove futile. We must live our lives in the world of surfaces. Although that is not all there is to reality, it is the only world in which we can act directly – be it protesting government policies or caring for those who suffer.

The billboard-scale *Felix, June 5, 1994* is complex in its graphic depiction. Felix's face is so afflicted by wasting that even in death his eyes cannot close. Yet this is also an image of love. Felix is surrounded by evidence that he was cared for by those who loved him. The brightly colored fabrics which surround Felix's body and his cigarettes and remote control still within reach tell of a man finding some

joy in the small pleasures his friends could provide. That this photograph was taken at all testifies that there was a friend present at the end who wanted to remember his face—even when disease had made his visage strange and awful to those who did not know him.

Felix, June 5, 1994 exists in several versions, varying only in size. The smallest is a discrete, semi-private testament to one man's passing, a poetic marker of loss, while the largest speaks in the public language of advertising, and Felix's skeletal face becomes a public icon. As "Felix Partz," he stands in for countless others whose faces at death, whether from AIDS or some other form of tragedy, we are not privileged to know personally.

Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal are joined in *Mirror Mirror* by AA Bronson himself, naked and entombed in his self-portrait, *AA Bronson, August 22, 2000*. Many cultures make use of symbolic death rituals to mark rites of passage, but AA Bronson's symbolic death is tantalizingly confusing in the realm of post-modernity: he is a mediated creation killed off with no more suffering than the cancellation of a television series. Our standard way of thinking does not allow the cultural and the spiritual to mix. We may learn from Michel Foucault and the Dalai Lama, but we rarely integrate their lessons. It is as if their insights would by necessity contradict each other. But in Bronson's work such subversive ideas as an acceptance of impermanence and a questioning of the world of appearances, as well as any clear notion of selfhood, are derived equally from both thinker's disciplines and are combined in startling harmony.

AA Bronson, August 22, 2001 is informed by the artist's recent *Hotel Series*: self-portraits photographed in hotel rooms while traveling, a metaphoric activity for our ongoing quest for meaning. We see the exposed body of a troubled and all-too-human being, recording his lack of identity. We look into the mirrors over the artist's shoulder and share his torment. He has the gift and curse of being

alive and healthy, and his talent and mind are intact. What is not clear is what is the next right thing for him to do with that mind and talent. How do you take a suffering so immense, take its lessons to heart, and move forward?

The bitter prescription in *Mirror Mirror* is in a field of convex mirrors that spells out "Arbeit Macht Frei," the slogan the Nazis raised over the portal of Auschwitz. This innocuous phrase, that echoes the North American work ethic, is today inseparable from murder; and seeing ourselves reflected hundreds of times in these words is in itself unbearable. We are often defined by our "work", whether that be a true calling, a vocation, or simply wage earning. To continue on that path after our world has been upended can lead to a profound soul sickness. One must struggle to be alive while one is alive. It is often said "Faith without work is dead"; and one may substitute the word "art" or "love" or even "life" for "faith," and the phrase remains true.

In 1999, Bronson returned to making art.⁶ It is tempting to cheer and pretend all is well and his period of mourning is over. It is not. His art making today is the work of a haunted man trying to make sense of, and come to terms with, the unthinkable. His haunting is not pathological or pathetic; it is instead humbly human.

This exhibition is his third since his return to art. In each, his relationship to the past has changed. In this exhibition, we find the artist's willingness to lead us through the steps of the lessons he has learned. In Tibetan Buddhism all perceived reality is Karmic Theater, so that incarnations of our true selves can

⁶The exception was one piece made in 1997, *Untitled (for General Idea)* in the form of three Bertioia chairs with custom vinyl cushions. As a portrait of the three members of GI is best understood as a transitional piece in the most profound sense of the word, that of marking a significant life changing event.

learn lessons and thereby move toward Nirvana. The life Bronson shares with us today is rich in lessons that he makes available to us in a spirit of generosity.

Bronson appears to be more a youthful gadfly than a grizzled teacher in these works. Still, he speaks of himself as old. The lessons of a rich life lived over time are rare in a youth obsessed world that is forever seeking its next Britney or N' Sync. Rarely do we hear the voices of those starting on second lives, outside of spiritual retreats.

AA Bronson's life today is represented by one large photo work. *Anna and Mark, February 3, 2001* represents Mark Krayenhoff, Bronson's spouse (referred to in Bronson's writing as the man who will lead him across the desert) holding Mark's 10-day-old daughter, Anna.⁷ The politics of the image are immediate, giving rise to many complex feelings about alternative versions of the family, and the tenderness of this bearded masculine man holding a tiny infant. However, like a breaking wave, those simplistic reactions dissipate, leaving us grateful that we have bodies and are alive and sensate to share in the miracles of birth, life, and even death. Glancing from Felix's face at the end of his passage through this world, to Anna at the beginning of hers, we can only wonder what more there is to do than experience and share whatever joy and love is possible in this impermanent, finite, fragile existence? If we get a glimmer of greater wisdom, we are very lucky.

I have found no way to discuss this material in the distanced manner appropriate to a trained art historian. I am writing this paragraph on New Year's Day, staring out into a frigid but beautiful Cambridge, Massachusetts, haunted by the losses

⁷See AA Bronson, *Negative Thoughts* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001), 84.

of the past year. AA Bronson's *Mirror Mirror* is an inspiration for me in starting this new year. By the last days of the exhibition, spring will be in the air, and the promise of new life will be omnipresent. *Mirror Mirror* will help us cherish the time and the love we have.

Bill Arning, Cambridge, 2002