

AA Bronson on the ineffable presence of the erotic in his life and work

by Carlos Motta

In August 2012 I stopped by a quaint summerhouse on Fire Island Pines to meet AA Bronson, the enigmatic and unmistakable bearded artist whose work I have admired since my years as an art student. As soon as I entered the house a short summer storm began, leaving behind a trace of heat and humidity. We undressed and headed out for a walk on the beach. The shore had been transformed by the high tide forming beautiful shallow pools of clear water. We walked through this magical landscape and talked about our mutual love of Fire Island, our interest in art, our nostalgia for a radical queer culture that no longer is, and generally got to know each other, naked and curious about one another. It was a short,

unpredictable and erotic encounter that sparked a friendship and a series of collaborative projects.

AA Bronson has had a five-decade career in culture, as member of the iconic art collective General Idea, solo artist, anarchist and provocateur, educator, queer radical, spiritual healer, butt masseur, initiator of creative projects, lover of books, zines and other printed matter, founder of artist run institutions, amongst many other things. His work has focused in his own words 'on the politics of decision-making and on living life radically as social sculpture', and he is fascinated by inter-generational relationships and exchanges as the basis of his collaborations. We talk about his work and his relationship to eroticism and sex as well as his thoughts on ageing, teaching, collaboration and his experience of death.

Carlos: AA, we have the daunting and exciting task ahead of us to speak about the role of the erotic in your life and work, how should we begin? According to Wikipedia commons 'Eroticism (from the Greek, eros – 'desire') is generally understood to refer to a state of sexual arousal or anticipation of such; an insistent sexual impulse, desire, or pattern of thoughts, as well as a philosophical contemplation concerning the aesthetics of sexual desire, sensuality, and romantic love.' Several of these categories resonate to me as descriptive of your work: Sexual arousal, desire, philosophical contemplation, and the aesthetics of sexual desire, for example. How do you experience the erotic and how have you embraced it in your work?

AA: I am 67 years old, and surely that alone already implies something about the erotic and the place of the erotic in my life and work. I am living and working in Berlin for one year on a DAAD Berliner Künstlerprogramm residency,

and this seems to have marked the occasion for an avalanche of young men wanting to meet me, mostly artists but some curators too. I have limited myself to five new faces per week but even this seems daunting sometimes. I understand now why Louise Bourgeois held her famous Sunday afternoon gatherings. But in my case, the encounters are so much one-on-one that such a scenario would be impossible.



Michelangelo Buonarroti's *Dying slave* (1513-1515) was commissioned in 1505 for the tomb of Pope Julius II. Courtesy: Musée du Louvre

Yesterday for example, the day began with a visit from a young American photographer, who asked to take my portrait. We had met on GayRomeo, the infamous cruising site (many of my encounters seem to originate on sex sites), and so I warned him that my husband, the architect Mark Jan Krayenhoff van de Leur, would also be present. We sat and talked for a while. He had studied a mix of non-art subjects at NYU and is beginning his MFA at Columbia University this coming September. The portrait session began with an elaborate setup of mirrors, windows and doors in our bedroom, with Mark and I posed in various parts of the room and seen in layers of reflection. Pretty interesting, I thought. Then our clothes came off for another round of similar photos of Mark



AA Bronson

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and I naked. On the third round, he stepped into the photos himself, also naked. He is a handsome young man with tousled dark hair and a classical face and physique. When he took the pose of one of Michelangelo's slaves, the visual quotation was entirely self-evident. By the end of the rather lengthy three-hour session, he had Mark and I sitting naked on a pedestal desk while he ran back and forth to the camera (he had lost his remote, he said), setting the automatic timer, and then throwing himself across our laps in various renditions of the Pietà. I am guessing that there were at least two dozen of these shots, ending with a more conventional naked group portrait of the three of us seated side by side with him in the middle. It was a hot and sultry day and his damp warm skin

sliding repeatedly over our bodies was erotic and charged. We found ourselves sharing queer ritual space in which the erotic was the ether in which we floated, the substance that carried us in its embrace. The situation sounds sexual, but it was oddly devoid of sex. Rather, I would say that we came to be fully present in our bodies, and in our collective body, and perhaps that best defines what the erotic is for me and how it animates my life and my work.

Carlos: I like the idea that the erotic is not necessarily tied to a sexual act but it's rather about being present in time and space. Can you speak about ageing as a gay man and how this may have changed your ideas about the body, desire and, perhaps also, sex?

AA: Wow, that is quite a question! How do I answer? To start with, I have to point out that my generation was the first to be openly gay, so we had few mentors of our own, and no older generation to look up to. For the most part, we did not have institutions. We had to invent our own.



General Idea, *AIDS Wallpaper and paintings*, (1989)
courtesy: AA Bronson

And then most of the gay men of my generation, the interesting ones at least, the ones willing to take risks in life and love, died of AIDS in the late 1980s and early 1990s. So now I find myself much in demand by a younger generation of gay men who want to meet me. In some cases they want to experience my healing practice, and more than anything they want to be acknowledged and to be told that they have value as they are, for whom they are, by someone whose opinion they trust. I also find that they want to be physically touched in one way or

another. They want the intimate touch of an older friend or lover, the touch of the healer, or perhaps the touch of the shaman or priest. Growing old as a gay man, and more specifically as a gay man of my generation, is fraught with landmines of the heart.

This morning I had coffee with the same young man that I mention above, a second visit. We went to my studio near Kotbusser Tor, ostensibly so he could see what I was working on. I felt that he wanted something, perhaps sex, and he is a very desirable young man. But no, he said, he wanted to be friends, and then before too much time had passed he was naked on my worktable requesting, politely, a sort of demonstration of my healing technique, and particularly butt massage. We talked about intimacy, touch, and sex. Many young gay men are super sensitive, have weak boundaries, and want to explore them. What does it mean to be touched by an older man? His asshole was as perfect as the rest of him, firm and yielding simultaneously. He asked me about desire, what is it like as an older man to desire a younger man? Desire is a projection. Without projection, desire ceases to exist. Of course one still might be horny or acquisitive, or even allow projection a little space in

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one's life, but that is no longer desire. I know desire well. In my twenty-eighth year I suffered an emotional breakdown that seemed to eviscerate me. It was an extreme case of unrequited love, and a kind of ferocious desire engulfed me. It was a matter of identity. I had projected a piece of myself into another person and without his response I ceased to exist. I cried every day. I was inconsolable. I found my 'self' again in Venezuela, where a white witch introduced me to Santería and the life of spirits. I learned to locate the center of my own being; to exist fully in my body, to refuse projection. As I grow older, that task becomes easier. I am more conscious of projection when it raises its head within me, the old serpent. I can go with it, refuse it, or divert the energy of projection to the ends of healing. In my life, sex has come and gone in mysterious ways. My first sexual relationship was with a man when I was 21, and I experimented with both men and women throughout my twenties. I was

sexually hyperactive through my thirties and forties, exploring sexual activity, from sex clubs to sex in the streets, and eventually training in sexual tantra. I met the love of my life, Mark, at my fiftieth birthday party. Since then, the energy of sex has flowed into my healing practice. I still know that a healing is 'working' when I can feel my own energy rising, curling upwards from the perineum in a kind of internal wave. Sex has somehow been infused into the totality of being a body in good relation to other bodies.

Carlos: Shortly after we met I was fortunate to be invited over to your apartment in New York for a butt massage! I had previously heard about your healing power and I had already experienced your intense erotic presence as we slowly got to know each other in the weeks prior, but I was nevertheless anxious to commit blindly to an erotic exchange with you. I enjoyed the mixture of feelings I had beforehand, throughout and after

the massage. I remember the kindness of your touch, the smell of the room and the softness of your voice. I remember watching you work my body as if it was the most precious jewel on earth; as if my life was in your hands. I remember a series of assertive 'diagnoses' you did where you explained how this area or that organ responded to your attention. And I remember persistent focus on my asshole. I wanted you to penetrate it, to massage my insides. It was an unforgettable hour that also served as a bonding experience: I felt we knew each other better. We had been very intimate. Is creating that intimate queer space the role of a shaman? Is using the language of spiritual traditions also a political gesture?

AA: First of all, I have to say that I am surprised. I came away from our session thinking that I had done nothing at all, that your experience had been very minor, and I was somewhat embarrassed at having offered the session in the first place. So of course I am very pleased to hear that it had some effect. This happens quite often, that I think nothing has happened and then I hear, sometimes years later, that the session had enormous effect. I have learned not to judge my own sessions. I am only a medium for some greater power. I don't necessarily have any idea what has happened. In fact, if the session is a really good one, I don't remember it at all. If the task of the shaman is to stay out of the way and let something happen, then yes, I think that creating intimate queer space is exactly that. But I'm not so fond of the word shaman as it suggests that I should be wearing a theatrical costume and waving feathers about, when in fact my usual costume is a pair of black shorts, a black t-shirt, and bare feet. I try to avoid the language of the academic, and especially the language of the art world. To do that best I often

resort to the language of spiritual traditions, whether Hinduism, Buddhism,



Originating in the slave trade of Cuba, Santería draws together beliefs and rituals from West-African, Caribbean and Roman Catholic traditions. The 'way of the saints' is strongly related to healing rituals that include offerings, music dance and possession trance. Courtesy: BBC

Christianity, Santería, or some more tribal belief system. I consider all religions to be aspects of the same godhead. I find that various traditions offer different views of this strange state we are in, which is being human. Sometimes one has to mix and match these to find a portal into the reality presented by a particular person. The body/mind is a complex reality, and none of us is separate from the other.

Carlos: Your work *Felix Partz, June 5, 1994* (1994 and 1999) is one of the most beautiful and painful artworks I have seen. For me as a younger queer who wasn't around to live the worst years of the AIDS crisis, who didn't have to bury my lovers and friends, and whose sexual identity was formed equating sex with fear and death, your photograph epitomizes the emotional and political contradictions of those years. Your depiction of Felix is so respectful and caring yet you also seem to be aware of the fact that you were making an emblematic image of political death, which is infused with pain as well as with a dignified erotic charge. Can you speak about your experience of coming to



AA Bronson collaborated with Ryan Brewer on the serie *Gold, Red, Black*, (2011), taking the viewers with them along in a ritual space in Fire Island's 'magical forest', the shrubbery connecting The Pines and Cherry Grove. These woods have joined the two gay communities of the island over the past decades, and many have come here to spend their last days during the AIDS era. The trees and underbrush remain here, thick with spirit and ghosts of the past.
Courtesy: the artists, Esther Schipper

This love is implicitly erotic and it is its infinite mobility, its very animation, its ability to infuse itself within every corner of my life, like cigarette smoke, or perfume, that makes it erotic.



Ryan Brewer returns as a pale apparition to the scene of the Magical Forest with AA for the serie *Blue* (2012), photographed by Matthias Herrmann and also including AA's husband Mark Jan Kraayenhoff van de Leur in the mystical blue bodypaint. Courtesy: the artists, Esther Schipper

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terms of the pragmatic reality of death and with the drive to survive, live and continue to desire?



An ode and a farewell.
Felix Partz, June 5, 1994 (1994, 1999)

AA: Oh, you do like to ask big questions! I took that photograph of Felix about three hours after he died. He is dressed the way that he was dressed for the previous two weeks. It seemed that as he came closer to death he surrounded himself with more pattern and more color. His friends came to visit him and this is how he received them. He had asked to die at home, and so the nurses and doctors came and went in support of his last wishes. We kept his body at home for twenty-four hours after he died and his friends came again and sat with the body. Felix was never really 'sick'; he

just wasted away. His eyes are open here because there was not enough flesh on the body to close them. When I snapped the shutter on the camera, the hair stood up on the nape of my neck; an electric shock ran through my body. I knew that I would have to make this into an artwork, but when, and how? Eventually it became a series of billboards on the street and in the museum for an exhibition in Munich titled *Dream City*. We talk of the relationship between sex and death; of the ejaculation of the criminal as he falls from the hangman's noose, of the sexual frisson of danger, or of fear. I realize in retrospect that Felix wanted to look sexy on his deathbed. He wanted the dignity of being an entire person in his moment of death, and sexual presence is integral to dignity. Have I ever come to terms with death? I am not sure, but perhaps. I almost died when I was born and again when I was two. I sometimes feel that my relationship to death was forged in my early childhood. People with terminal illnesses are comfortable speaking with me. I am willing to talk about the process of dying with someone who is involved in that process. It is a great honor to learn from someone who is in the heart of this great challenge. I like to say that



AA Bronson, Blue (2012). Courtesy: the artists, Esther Schipper

from the time we are born, each of us is preparing herself to die. But of course it is not that simple. I also feel that each



With *FILE* magazine General Idea (AA Bronson, Jorge Zontal, and Felix Partz) comically commented on and engaged with mass and pop culture. The twist on LIFE magazine shows an early play with the act of logo-busting and General Ideas spirit of a playful and friendly activism. Image: *File* Vol. 5, No. 4 (1983)

of us is more of a cluster of beings than a single being, and I am interested in contacting the beings that don't necessarily show their faces on a daily basis; the ones who run the show and the ones who are preparing us for death.

When you ask about 'the drive to survive, live and continue to desire', do you mean my own? It would have been so much simpler to die with my friends and lovers in the era of AIDS. At times I felt I was dying and then I realized that, no, I was going to survive. This was not my choice. I would have preferred to die, but I do believe that I have tasks to do on this planet in this lifetime, and I am still doing them. The word 'desire' is a strange one. I exist in a human body, which is a sexual body. And I cannot exist fully without exploring the eroticism that infuses every aspect of my existence. It is part of the nature of being alive in a human body. I'm not sure if this is 'desire,' but it is something like it.

Carlos: Yes, I meant your own impulse

to survive... I often wonder about the drive to live and how it overcomes even the most devastating of circumstances like the height of the AIDS crisis for instance, where some people's worlds literally collapsed. This makes me think about fostering relationships, personal and professional, as a way to keep afloat and sane, to build systems of support and care, but also as a way to organize and to act up. Can you talk about the role of collaborations in your life and work? From your vibrant collaboration with General Idea to your most recent series of collaborations with younger artists, working 'together' seems to be at the core of your interests. At the time of this conversation you are working on a show at Witte de With in Rotterdam, entitled



The title *The Temptation of AA Bronson* alludes to Gustave Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*.

The Temptation of AA Bronson, which is in fact largely conceived around your past and ongoing collaborations, isn't it? AA: From my days as a hippie in a commune producing an underground newspaper, through the twenty-five years with General Idea, to my more recent history, I have always been more invested in collaboration than individual heroics. In the 1960s and the early 1970s, this strategy was especially political. We stood opposed to the construct of the individual genius, which is the bedrock

Freud believed that sex animates everything, and although I agree with that, I feel it is the erotic that is foundational to making art and forming relationships.

of capitalism, especially in the art world. But it also has to do with pleasure. It is a pleasure to engage with bright, sensitive and often witty minds around the subjects of culture, media, and community, and increasingly around the related subjects of ritual, spirituality, magic and sex. Working as a collaborative venture already queers the art system, and that is a pleasure too. I suppose that nothing gives me quite as much pleasure as messing around with the status quo and turning things upside down. Of course, in retrospect, I also think about the era of AIDS, when friends rallied to friends, but also to strangers. The idea of community sent out many tendrils and meant many different things to different people. *The Temptation of AA Bronson* is woven together from many very personal filaments of thought, but perhaps the most central are community and collaboration. I am especially looking forward to the opening day and evening, when simultaneous ongoing performances will transform the space into something midway between a circus and a loony bin, as my mother might have called it. The expression 'loony bin' always brought a smile to her face and was perhaps her greatest compliment. I think my mother was a witch. She died

in 1996 at the age of 94. I still feel her presence, gently nudging me forward.

Carlos: That's sweet. I'd like to ask you about the relationship between collaboration and teaching in your work. Since the 1960s you've been interested in radical pedagogy and the formation of social models for experimentation and critique. As someone that is currently collaborating with you, I can say that my experience of you has been that of a collaborator and in other ways that of a mentor. Can you share some thoughts on the practice of teaching, and mentoring? AA: My interest in radical pedagogy began in 1958 when I was enrolled in an experimental school in Toronto. I was 12 years old. Our class consisted of bright students who were under-achieving. We were all a little bored. The school year began with the 'teacher' (who was more of a facilitator) teaching us something about the program itself, about pedagogy and about the ideas on which this school was based. Within each subject of the curriculum, 'history' for example, we had to meet as a group, have preliminary discussions, devise and undertake research, and propose possible curricula. We voted on a favorite, divided it up by subject, and assigned ourselves

It is you who became the wick by which love and eroticism rose into the world, infusing our turtle-pond Shangri-la with a perfume that was new to me.

papers to write. We were encouraged to help each other in our endeavors. One strange detail stands out from the rest: Because it was run as a true democracy, issues were brought up and voted on by the class. I had a habit of wearing shorts to school, which the class deemed inappropriate and I was banned from wearing my beloved shorts. In retrospect I realize this was one of my first experiences with institutionalized homophobia. My budding sexuality was recognized for what it was, and silenced by my peers.

By the end of my second year in university I was fed up with school. I dropped out with a group of seven like-minded friends to found a commune, an underground newspaper, and a free school. Our experiments with collective decision-making, consensus, 'free sex', independent publishing, pedagogy and community, came to inform and even dominate my future approach to making art and living life.

In retrospect, it's interesting to me that none of my professors in school acted as mentors. Once I left school however, a series of individuals walked into my life who acted as role models for the future:

A sexually demonstrative psychologist who conducted group therapy for intentional communities; a professor of communication theory who taught through experiential workshops; and a sociology professor, a friend of Marshall McLuhan, who hired me to attend the first Indian Metis Youth Conference as her ears and eyes, exposing me directly to other traditions of decision-making and cultural interaction. I now realize that all three of these individuals approached me with unconditional love. Each of them acted as a gentle guide in life at a time when I was without overview or direction. Each of them was not only a mentor but also a role model of mentoring.

In my collaborations I do something similar: I prefer to let the younger artist take the lead, to be the sail that pulls us forward, while I act more as a steadying hand upon the rudder. Of course I'm not always able to be so perfectly transparent, but that is my intention.

Carlos: To end our conversation about life and work AA, I'd like to return to the idea of the erotic and challenge you to think about whether or not it manifests

throughout your practice (artist, shaman, collaborator, teacher, mentor, lover) as a kind of philosophical inquiry or a practice of '...contemplation concerning the aesthetics of sexual desire (and) sensuality...?' I am intrigued by the ways the erotic may in fact be a lens through which one can live in the world from birth to death.

AA: Richard Hamilton, the British Pop artist, once said to me that when an idea brought a smile to his face, he knew he was on the right track. Carlos, your question brings a smile to my face.

Well, why the smile, and why am I having trouble putting into words what seems so very obvious? Perhaps your question is a question about love, about unconditional love, about the love that a parent supposedly feels for a child, but which I find is far more free flowing in the universe than I had ever imagined. Freud believed that sex animates everything, and although I agree with that, I feel it is the erotic that is foundational to making art and forming relationships. Perhaps being in love, existing purely in the I-You relationship, is the description of being alive, of being human.

As I grow older, I find that I have access to a seemingly vast reservoir of love that seems to rise within me from an unknown source. This love is implicitly erotic and it is its infinite mobility, its very animation, its ability to infuse itself within every corner of my life, like cigarette smoke, or perfume, that makes it erotic. I think of myself as being in a period of my life where I am meeting and mentoring younger queer and non-queer men at what sometimes seems like an astonishing rate. But the truth is that it is not I, but rather this reservoir of love, this ineffable presence of the erotic, which calls out, rises through me, and offers itself to those who bring themselves in relation to me, and so they do. This can be confusing. I worry that

I am becoming a dirty old man, and yet to withhold my touch, or my attention, from those who so need affirmation, seems criminal. The task is to get myself out of the way and let love do what she must do. Love is the noun; eroticism is the verb, I think. I'm not sure how else to put it.

Perhaps we need an example. Today in Fire Island Pines when you came by so that we could discuss this interview and other matters, you ended up naked, in hip waders, standing knee-deep in our turtle-pond while my husband Mark took photos. It was cold and raining, not ideal conditions for such an endeavor, and yet your presence shone with a kind of clear erotic beauty. You displayed yourself to us, and to whoever might come to see the photographs, with a generosity that was not brazen so much as archetypal: like Venus or perhaps more appropriately Pan (the rubber boots your goatish hind-quarters) or even Eros; you accepted our gaze and transmuted it to gold. I am speaking in mixed metaphors, I know, but what other way is there to speak?

My example reveals itself as something else entirely. There is no touch involved and I hardly figure in the story at all. It is you who became the wick by which love and eroticism rose into the world, infusing our turtle-pond Shangri-la with a perfume that was new to me. It is one in the morning now, and I badly need to sleep. We talked briefly of death while you were here: Freud connected death and sex, Thanatos and Eros, as we all know. Perhaps it is that conversation, between death and sex that gives birth to the erotic, which in turn infuses life with meaning.