



A Letter to MONTREAL: Making Love with Jesus

AA BRONSON

FROM: AA Bronson, born Michael Tims, formerly a hippy, a member of the artists' group General Idea, and a pagan become a Buddhist; now an artist and healer, focusing on issues of queerness and healing, studying for my Master of Divinity at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and artistic director of the Institute of Art, Religion, and Social Justice, which I founded, together with my colleague Kathryn Reklis, at the seminary last year.

TO: the population of Montreal, and to the participants in the ART+RELIGION Symposium, in particular to my esteemed colleagues: Paulette Gagnon, Clarence Epstein, Tim Clark, François LeTourneux; also Boris Groys, Louis Kaplan, Iftikhar Dadi, and the rest of my colleagues speaking at this conference; to the students gathered here today and especially to the students of art or of religion; to the queer community, to the Aboriginal community, to those of colour; to all the marginalized communities that find themselves here today; and as well as to the living, also to the dead: to the French-Canadian artist Paul-Émile Borduas and his *Refus global*, which Wikipedia terms "anti-religious" but which I say is a call to spirit; to the musicians, artists, writers, poets, actors, dancers, composers, directors and others who have contributed to the artistic richness of Montreal; to the generations of witches who populated the St. Lawrence Valley; to the African and Aboriginal slaves who worked as domestics, and on farms; to all those who were persecuted for their difference, and murdered; to those who suffered from abuse as children, or adults; to those who committed suicide because of their inability to live fully as who they felt they were; to those who died of HIV and AIDS; to all the dispossessed and abandoned; to all those who have died but cannot leave this place: I invite them to join us here, in witnessing this discussion of art, religion, and social justice; for we are a community of the living and the dead.

I am here as one of many speakers at this academic conference, and I am the sole speaker whose academic affiliations are not listed: I do not speak then

Detail, AA Bronson, *Jorge*, February 3, 1994, 1994/2000, sepia on mylar. (Photo: AA Bronson)

as an academic seeking human approval, or the approval of the academy. I have lived and worked as an artist, as a queer artist, as an artist in community, for over forty years. I am here to tell you that there are no “professional” artists; to be an artist is not a “career”; art, like religion, is a calling: we are called to be present, to be present to our communities, to our society, to our world, and to tell the truth as we perceive it. To be an artist, then, is about perception. Like being a priest, or witch, or shaman, it is an exercise in consciousness.

I first came to Montreal in 1951.

I was five years old, and my father was a pilot in the Canadian Air Force. We were stationed at St. Jean d'Iberville, which at the time was a small town south of Montreal. It is now a suburb.

My primary memory of Montreal from the time is the Eaton's Department Store at Christmas. While English Canada enjoyed a certain amount of Scottish Calvinism, Montreal was quite another matter. Montrealers celebrated shopping in a way that was quite unusual for the period and prefigured the experience of consumerism that has become the main characteristic of contemporary urban life. I still have a vivid memory of a flood of bodies surging joyously up and down department store escalators: the sight was at once shocking and intensely satisfying to my young soul. Pleasure, it seemed, was a good thing, rather than a bad thing.

In St. Jean d'Iberville, we lived in a brand new fifties suburban house. Boom Boom Geoffrion, the famous hockey player, lived down the street, and our very modern next-door neighbour – she was French, of course – had a house painted orange and purple with furniture that I realize now was a mixture of Eames chairs and shelving made by balancing glass shelves on bricks – *très chic*! In the winter a sled pulled by horses delivered milk, and in the spring the same horses pulled a wagon carrying a gargantuan block of vividly yellow maple sugar. The farmer would cut off chunks with a big knife and sell them for pennies to us kids. On Sundays my parents took me to the little Anglican church on the Air Force base, which was the only English-speaking church in the area.

This church is, in a kind of backwards way, the origin of my obsession with the life of the spirit. Around about grade three, new Sunday School teachers arrived, a couple who had worked on a missionary base in Africa. Every Sunday they showed us slides of impoverished African children. At a certain point I realized that this was just baby-sitting. I was not getting the religious education I wanted and deserved. So I stamped my little foot and refused to go back, and did not step foot in a church again for several decades. To be totally transparent, I have to admit that I won an award for perfect attendance before I left, an illustrated book of bible stories with an impossibly

sexy picture of Samson, naked, with long blonde hair, and his genitalia hidden by a lion in the foreground. Even to an eight-year old, the image was provocative and arousing. I hid the book of bible stories in the bottom of my desk, and took it out surreptitiously to gaze at Samson. Perhaps this was my earliest encounter with art and religion; and also perhaps an early indicator that the life of the spirit is infused with eroticism. My great-grandfather, who was the first missionary to the Blackfoot tribes in Western Canada, would not have agreed. More about him later.

As a child, I surrounded myself with books. We moved from town to town, and in each town I raided the library and surrounded my bed with everything from palmistry and ceremonial magic to Greek mythology and Buddhism. I decided at the age of three to become an artist – and to my young mind the image of the artist was some sort of Yves Klein-like mythical priest – but by the mid-sixties I gravitated to architecture instead – it seemed more socially responsible. I attended the School of Architecture at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, and, in second year in 1966, dropped out with seven other students to found a radical commune, a free school, a free store, and an underground newspaper. The commune was based on the principles of the Diggers, a group of Protestant Christian communists founded in England in 1649. The Diggers were in vogue in radical hippy circles at the time: a group of the same name was active in San Francisco. The Digger philosophy was derived from Acts 4:32 in the New Testament: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.”

Like the early Christians, our moment of egalitarianism was brief. We invited into our community anyone who asked and so the little community grew quickly from eight people to sixty-five, one year later. At that point I left, and the commune collapsed shortly after.

There are many things I planned to drop into the text around about here: that our underground newspaper connected me to the art world, for example. An early issue featured Yoko Ono, and through the underground network I came into contact with the International Situationists. And perhaps our occasional all-naked body painting could be considered another encounter with art and the divine. Most important of all, there was our psychotherapist, Gerald, who was writing his dissertation on group therapy for intentional communities. He visited our commune monthly, gave us free therapy sessions, and eventually I traveled with him across Western Canada as a sort of apprentice, visiting co-ops, communes, and various student groups for all-day therapy sessions that borrowed freely from the newly founded and much-lauded Gestalt Therapy. Gerald was very sexy, with a full red

beard and bright green eyes, He was covered with glossy red body hair that had me quietly lusting after him. Our goal was to teach techniques of self-governance, to undo the patriarchal and hierarchical in favour of those more horizontal forms developed by the early Christians. We didn't think of what we were doing as religious, of course. But we were fully committed to social justice, and to reforming the basic structures of society. The Summer of Love came and went, and the riots started in Paris. I came to Montreal for a brief flirtation with this fair city, and with a beautiful bearded friend, before finally settling in Toronto.

I'm aware now that I am well into my paper and I have made only the faintest references to art and religion. Looking at the program of this ART+RELIGION symposium, phrases like "Religion in the Age of Digital Reproduction," "Epistemologies of Engagement," and "Traces of Deconstruction," jump out at me. But what I want to talk about is something much simpler.

In 1968 I arrived in Toronto to check out the spanking new vertical commune known as Rochdale College. Rochdale was an experiment with intentional community, living and learning on a grand scale. It was here that I apprenticed with the Coach House Press, and immersed myself in alternative publishing, and worked for Toronto's first alternative theatre, Theatre Passe Muraille, as their graphic designer, and almost immediately had the honour of being arrested for contributing to an obscene performance. Art and creativity at Rochdale were firmly enmeshed with drugs, but also with visions of social justice and utopian existence. One floor was occupied by a coven of witches, and another by a group devoted to Black Magic. It was here that I lived with my Winnipeg friend Mimi, met Jorge and Felix, and then we all moved into a wretched little house on Gerrard Street West together, and General Idea began.

Some of you are familiar with the story of General Idea. You know about our twenty-five years together, which we described like this: "We wanted to be famous, we wanted to be glamorous, we wanted to be rich. We wanted to be artists and we knew that if we were famous, if we were glamorous, we could say 'We are artists,' and we would be. We did and we are. We are famous glamorous artists." In the same manifesto, we declared ourselves cultural parasites: "we animate dead bodies and speak in alien tongues." And a few years later our very Wittgensteinian mantra: "What do you say when there is nothing to say? When there is nothing to say, shut the fuck up!"

Although there is a huge volume of artwork that came out of General Idea, we conceived of our life together as our *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Everything else was simply a fragment of something larger. In the eighties and early nineties, when HIV and AIDS entered the scene, we devoted ourselves entirely



1 | AA Bronson, *Felix, June 5, 1994*, 1994/1999, digital print of lacquer on vinyl, 213.5 × 227 cm. (Photo: AA Bronson)

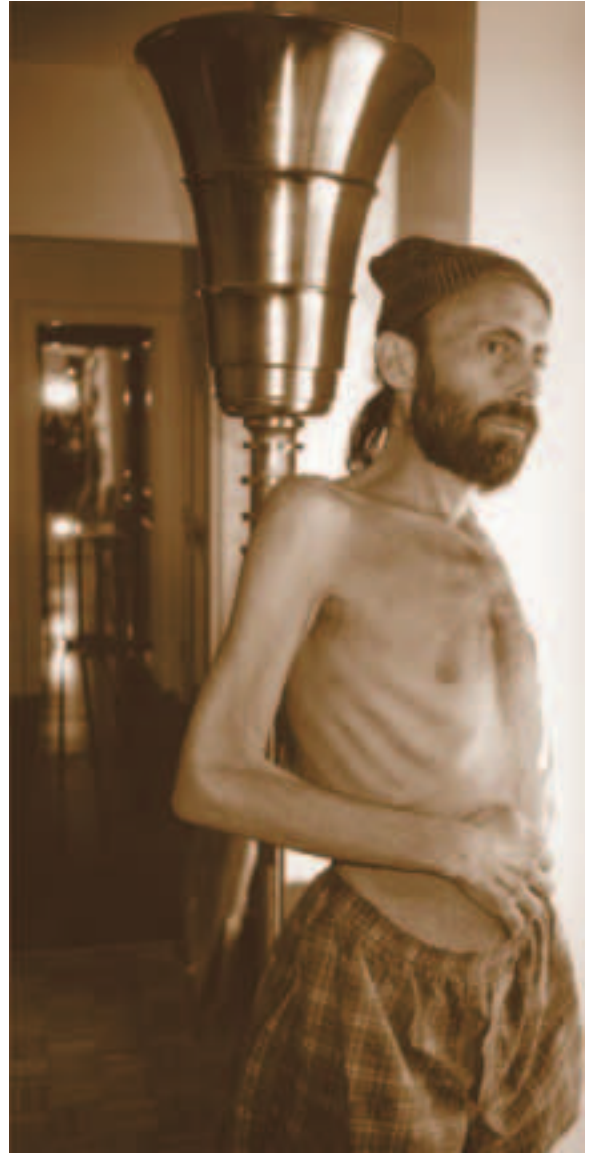
“I made this photograph of Felix a few hours after his death. He is arranged to receive visitors, and his favorite objects are gathered about him: his television remote control, his tape-recorder, and his cigarettes. Felix suffered from extreme wasting, and at the time of his death his eyes could not be closed: there was not enough flesh left on the bone.

Felix and Jorge and I lived and worked together from 1969 until 1994. This communal life ended when Jorge died of AIDS on 3 February 1994. Felix followed shortly after, on 5 June 1994.

Since Jorge and Felix died I have been struggling to find the limits of my own body as an independent organism, as a being outside of General Idea. Over the last five years I have found myself, much like a stroke victim, learning again the limits of my nervous system, how to function without my extended body (no longer three heads, twelve limbs), how to create possibilities from my reduced physicality.”

—AA Bronson, *Mirror Mirror*, 2002

to the subject of AIDS. Jorge and Felix were diagnosed in 1990. We moved from New York, back to Toronto. They declared that they wanted to die at home, and then the wonderful Canadian medical system kicked in. The doctors and nurses came to our home, with me as the primary caregiver. It was a given that they would die, and die soon, and this period of living with





2 | AA Bronson, *Jorge*, February 3, 1994, 1994/2000, sepia on mylar, three parts each 184 × 92 cm. (Photo: AA Bronson)

“About a week before Jorge died, he asked me to take these photographs. Jorge’s father had been a survivor of Auschwitz, and he had the idea that he looked exactly as his father had on the day of his release. He wanted to document that similarity, that family similarity of genetics and of disaster ... Jorge was blind when I took these photos. I had to act as his mirror in order that he could look ‘normal’. ‘Should my eyes be like this?’ he asked. ‘A little more open,’ I replied, ‘No, not quite that much.’ ”

—AA Bronson, *Mirror Mirror*, 2002

the spectre of their death was an astonishingly rich time, a time when we could talk about anything, and we did. Jorge died at home on 3 February 1994, and Felix followed soon after, on 5 June 1994 (Figs. 1 and 2).

Two years later, on my fiftieth birthday, 16 June 1996, I met my current partner, Mark Jan Krayenhoff van de Leur. We have been together ever since (Fig. 3).

What is it that I want to say by telling this abbreviated story of my own life? It seems to me that art and religion are densely intertwined in the life story of an artist. It is spirit to which we give voice. By making myself a



3 | AA Bronson, *Anna and Mark, February 3, 2001*, 2001/2002, digital print of lacquer on vinyl, 213.5 × 305 cm. (Photo: AA Bronson)

“Anna was born on January 23, 2001, ten days before this picture was taken. Mark—her father, my spouse—is holding her here for the first time, and I am recording the encounter. She weighs five pounds, and she is cherry red, still raw from the difficulty of a breach birth, one month premature. How to convey this labour of love, not the love of parent for parent, but the outpouring of love from two men, two women, towards the creation of this little being? Each of us knows the importance of love, the essential nature of unconditional love, and each of us participates in creating this movement, this flow of outwardly directed love which has created this child and which we will to carry her along in her journey through life and living.”

—AA Bronson, *Mirror Mirror*, 2002

midwife to the dying, to the death processes of Jorge and Felix, I forced myself to listen. To listen for what? Not only the subtle inner untyings by which they gradually let go. Something more profound (Fig. 4).

Now I call myself a healer. When I put my hands on someone with intention, I get information. The body speaks to me. I act as a translator between the person who has entrusted himself to me, and the intelligence of his body. This is social sculpture to an astonishing degree. At the same time, it is quite literally like working with clay. It is a collaborative process. Together we mould something out of the material of his body.

Before I move on to my own observations about art and religion in the world of contemporary art today, I will tell a story, the story of a vision. The

vision is not mine and I report it in the exact words of the person who told it to me. He asked to remain anonymous.

I had a powerful vision in the spring of 1992. I was thirty-four when this happened. I was single at the time and lived alone in a small apartment ... It happened around dawn one morning, before I would normally wake up. Jesus was in my bedroom – I could sense his presence so strongly, and in my mind I could see him as well. I couldn't actually see his face, but sometimes he was a white man with a beard, and other times he was a black man. He was incredibly beautiful in either case – I kept exclaiming in a loud whisper “You're so beautiful!!” He was wearing a fisherman's sweater, because he is a “fisher of men.”

We did a number of things together, including shopping for clothes, which is one of my favourite things. We were going together through my favourite boutiques in New York City and enjoying the beautiful clothes there. We both marvelled at the beauty and creativity we saw. We saw some of the designers I love such as Romeo Gigli and Thierry Mugler. And it's very hard to put into words, but my main impression was that Jesus loved the me-ness of me. He loved exactly who I was as a person – my personality, my character. And considering I grew up in a conservative Evangelical Protestant household where earthly pleasures were seen as sinful and distracting from spiritual concerns, this was earth-shaking.

Then, we were making love. It would have looked very strange to an observer – I was standing up and embracing the air, although in reality I was embracing Jesus. We were kissing and hugging – it was so wonderful. We went on for quite a while. I didn't actually cum, but I was very aroused.

And then gradually it started to fade. I was still feeling totally stunned as I got dressed and made my way to work. If I thought about it at all, I could see Jesus sitting next to me on the subway, holding my hand and being my friend ...

After this, I immediately started to enter the dark night of the soul. This lasted four and a half years.

*

By making love with Jesus, he found love for himself. Jesus modeled for him the joy in loving each person for who they are. How often have each of us been loved for who we are?





4 | AA Bronson, *Hanged Man*, 2002, Lambda color photographs rear-mounted to acrylic, set of three panels, each 305 × 122 cm. (Photo: AA Bronson)

“The tarot card of the same name indicates a time in one’s life when there is nothing one can do to change one’s situation. It indicates a time of internal growth and change. I made this self-portrait at a time when I did not know how to make art any more. Part of me had died with my two partners, and I had to wait for new life to come forth within me.”

Paul, in Galatians 5, says it like this: “Through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ ”

I mention Paul, and his words in Galatians, because this letter from me to you, which I am reading to you right now, takes its structure from Galatians. In struggling to find a model for a literary form that might combine the various voices I find in myself, I realized that in the Pauline letter, I had the perfect form. As most of you know – or if you don’t, you soon will – Paul wrote thirteen letters in the New Testament, of which only six are currently attributed to him, at least in Union Theological Seminary. Galatians is one of the more general: it is written to all the nations of the Gentile mission, in other words to the entire Roman Empire, which was the entire known world. It echoes those columns in *Art in America* from the late sixties that one or two of you may remember: “Letter from London,” “Letter from Paris,” and so on. Of course my content does not include the theological. One of the many voices I find in myself is intensely theological, but it is not quite ready to speak: it has been largely silenced by decades of shunning in the art world.

The divide between the art world and the world of religion is deep. The art world is uncomfortable with religion, whether progressive or fundamentalist; the world of religion is uncomfortable with contemporary art. An academic risks her career by writing seriously on art and religion; an artist who uses religious language risks being cast out of the inner circles of contemporary art.

However, the divided realms of the religious and the secular are increasingly blurred. Yoga is a Hindu practice that is ubiquitous in contemporary so-called secular culture. Various yogic schools compete using branding and marketing to promote differing methods, and differing traditions. Many yogic schools espouse a form that is devotional, while others, like hot nude yoga, appear decidedly blasphemous, and that is equally their appeal.

Consider meditation. Meditation classes abound. Wearing the two hats of alternative therapy and alternative spiritual practice, schools of meditation from Hindu and Buddhist traditions compete for our attention. This morning I googled “meditation center new york city” and was awarded with 37,000,000 links.

And yet neither yoga nor meditation is considered *verboten* by the contemporary art world, quite the opposite.

Consider Judaism: in the high-end world of New York museums – the Guggenheim, MoMA, the Metropolitan, the New Museum, and the Whitney – the majority of donors – and the majority of serious collectors of contemporary art – are Jewish. An astonishing number of successful art dealers are Jewish: many of them have mastered the art of passing as wasp.

Without Jewish money, the museums, and contemporary art as we know it, would collapse, or at least become a very different thing. It's not possible to determine to what extent these donors and dealers are religious, or secular. But on a gossip level at least, it is clear that Jewish money drives the culture machine in New York City. This financial relationship between art and religion deserves attention.

What about Tibetan Buddhism? While an artist who attends an Episcopalian church might be looked upon with suspicion, an artist who identifies as Tibetan Buddhist has an aura of depth. The Dalai Lama has worked intensely over the last forty years to reposition Tibetan Buddhism as something more akin to psychotherapy than to religion, non-threatening, and with social consequences that can be thought of as universally beneficial. Artists such as Marina Abramovic, Laurie Anderson, and Philip Glass have had their reputations burnished rather than tarnished by their involvement with the Tibetans.

A message to my fellow speakers, here in Montreal today, at this conference on art and religion: when speaking of the new presence of religion in the contemporary world, be aware of what you speak; in addition to the much-publicized fundamentalist forms of Christianity and Islam, we have many religious practices infiltrating the world of culture, as I have indicated. Both Judaism and Buddhism are more present in the world of culture than outer appearances suggest. The religions of the African diaspora, such as Santeria and Yoruba, with their personal experience of spirit, are coming out of the closet. We have a fascination with shamanism, vision quests, and other esoterica of the spiritual realm. Exploring our spiritual side has taken on new importance, especially with those who declare themselves non-religious.

This conference has not embraced religion. Boris Groys, in your keynote speech, you distanced yourself from religion and defended your lecture as "only observation." You, the speakers, and you, the organizers of this symposium, each declared academic and institutional affiliation, but no faith affiliation, or even a lack of faith affiliation. My own academic affiliation with the Union Theological Seminary is implicitly religious, and interestingly it was eliminated from all promotional materials for the conference. And I had to ask three times to have it added to the website. Such temerity!

I quote Paul in Galatians when I say: You foolish academics! Who has bewitched you? What secular demon has removed you from the divine?

I close with a prayer freely adapted from Rob Breznsky's *Prayer for Us*:¹

*We pray to the God of Gods,
the God beyond all Gods, the Girlfriend of God,
the Teacher of God, the Goddess who invented God:*

Oh Goddess Who Never Kills But Only Changes:

/

We pray these words might move You to unleash ferocious blessings on all the art+religion acolytes today.

/

*Grant us what we don't know we want,
everything we're afraid to wish for.*

/

*Oh Goddess, You Wealthy Anarchist
Burning Heaven to the Ground:*

/

Please use Your blinding magic to help us see we're wildly creative geniuses, too big for our bodies.

/

*Help us to be disciplined enough to go crazy
in the name of creation not destruction.*

/

*Teach us the difference between
self-destructive self-control and liberating self-control.*

/

*Give us bigger, better, more original sins
and wilder, wetter, more interesting problems.*

/

Show us how to purge ourselves of the wishy-washy wishes that keep us from our divine desires.

/

*Dear God of Gods, God Beyond All Gods,
Sister Lover of God, Mother of God,
Goddess who invented God:*

/

*Inspire us to become more wildly disciplined, erotically feminist, aggressively sensitive, demonically compassionate, ironically sincere, lyrically logical, insanely poised,
and orgiastically lucid.*

/

Amen. Awomen. And Ommmmmmmm.

NOTE

- 1 Rob BREZSNY, *Prayer for Us*. Accessed 31 Aug. 2011, www.freewillastrology.com/beauty/prayer.html

Lettre à MONTRÉAL : Faire l'amour avec Jésus

AA BRONSON

Le discours d'ouverture du symposium ART+RELIGION, à Montréal, fondait sa structure sur l'épître de Paul aux Galates, lettre de première importance écrite pour exhorter les croyants à rester fermes dans la foi et à adhérer aux principes éthiques mis de l'avant par Jésus. Bronson, se situant lui-même comme survivant d'un traumatisme et, en tant qu'homosexuel, comme témoin de la violence, de la maladie et de la mort qui ont affecté sa communauté, a parlé de sa révolte contre les notions d'identité individuelle et artistique et de ses tentatives de trouver sa voix théologique dans un monde où l'art contemporain n'est pas à l'aise avec le christianisme, et où le christianisme n'est pas à l'aise avec l'art contemporain.

Traduction : Élise Bonnette