

The King of Zines: AA Bronson's Reflections on Artists' Books and the Shifting Nature of Self-Publishing Culture. Interviewed by Michael Birchall

Berlin, October 2015

Michael Birchall: How did you become interested in printed matter as a practitioner, and how has this become an integral part of your work, both as a solo artist and with the collective General Idea?



AA Bronson: I can't remember when I wasn't interested, frankly. From the time I was young, I used to raid the local library, and my bed always had heaps of books around it. I've always been a book and paper kind of guy. When I was in university, in the mid-'60s, I was approached by the student newspaper about designing a monthly insert. It was an arts and culture insert, and the editor had an idea about updating it; we turned it into something more psychedelic in nature. That was my earliest direct involvement in making printed matter.

I dropped out of university in 1967 to start a commune, a free school, and a free store with a group of people in Winnipeg, Canada. We began an underground newspaper called *The Loving Couch Press*.¹ I didn't design all the issues, but I co-edited and designed about four or five of them. That was my second real publishing project. At the same time, together with Clive Russell from the commune, we began publishing *The Magazine*.² We only published two issues—and that was very artsy-fartsy, printed-pieces-in-an-envelope kind of thing—one on the theme of radical education and the other on the theme of networks.

So I was already well involved in independent publishing before; together with Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal we started up *General Idea* in 1969. I think Canadians relate to magazines, and especially did back then, because Canada is such a big spread out country with so few people. 90% of the population live within one hundred miles of the U.S. border. Our relationship to the art world back then was entirely second-hand, mostly through print media, magazines, and newspapers; TV wasn't so predominant. *Artforum* featured very largely in 1969 in the first days of *General Idea*, and also a number of other magazines. There was a British one, I can't recall the name. For each issue they offered you a multiple, and one of the issues was the Joseph Beuys "Intuition Box" (1968). We sent away for the multiple and it was an unlimited edition, and they returned the money and said it was sold out. Beuys later made more. That marked our first interest in editions. We

began to look into Beuys and his philosophy around the production of low-cost publications, and his Free University. I think that is where the biggest influences came from in relation to publishing. We made a decision then, at that point in 1969–70, that we would produce as many low-cost multiples and publications as we could possibly do, every year that we were together. We were together twenty-five years and we published more than 300 low-cost editions.



MB: Was that a conscious decision to develop General Idea as a publishing press?

AB: Already by 1971 it was clear we had a big local audience. None of them were people with money. We knew we had to relate to the world more like the Coach House Press, more like an independent publisher, rather than the way that a painter would. Our audience might be able to afford a book but not a painting.

In fact, I was an apprentice at Coach House Press when I first arrived in Toronto, in 1968. I apprenticed there for two or three years. During the first few years of General Idea, I was working there. I learned to do letterpress, to set type, and a lot about the design of books and manipulation of negatives. Coach House was very clever with how they used old-fashioned materials. They started at a time when printers were switching to offset printing and throwing away their old equipment. It was all rescued from the garbage—old-fashioned, but with a modern '60s sensibility. I learned a lot there.

MB: Where did the idea come from to start publishing?

AB: At the end of the '60s, we used “quick copy” a lot—it was a little like a photocopy would be now—a form of offset with a paper negative instead

of a metal negative. We took to publishing like ducks to water. Maybe when it started to change shape was in 1979–80, when we did the Boutique from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion (1980). We started making multiples that were props for the Boutique, and also became illustrations for the cocktail book (*The Cocktail Book* from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion, 1980). We made sets of editions that together told a story, and in themselves were a work.

MB: At that time you started producing *FILE* magazine?

AB: *FILE*³ started in 1972, so quite early. *FILE* came out of my experience of publishing underground newspapers. I realized if you just put a glossy cover on a newspaper then it looked like a magazine, and Web offset material was extraordinarily cheap. We began *FILE* out of disgust with Arts Canada.⁴ The editor, Ann Brodsky, had asked us to do something on our performance *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* at the Art Gallery of Ontario. She asked us to do the layout and everything ourselves, to make it an artists' project. In typical General Idea style, we did a parody of Arts Canada. It was identical to the rest of their magazine, and she was not happy about that, so she didn't run it. We were so pissed off, so we thought we should start our own magazine, because Arts Canada was not representing our generation, or the kinds of things that we knew were going on across the country and elsewhere. So, in 1972 we started *FILE* Magazine. It was an early example of new kind of visual magazines. A flood of these magazines followed—not only in Canada, but also internationally.

MB: Do you think there was a particular moment, a proliferation of publishing, not just in North America but also in Europe?

AB: Yes. It kind of starts in the '60s, and I think it begins with the underground newspapers, and spreads out from there. The underground newspapers mostly represented people in their early twenties, and as they got older their publishing activity began to change and morph.

By 1974, we had enormous success with *FILE*. We sent the first issue free of charge to everyone we could think of in the whole world who we wanted to see it. Which was a lot of research, pre-web days. And that spawned an almost instantaneous network.

MB: Who did you send it to?



AB: For example, Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol. We sent it to every person on the masthead of Warhol's *Interview*,⁵ which at that time was a newspaper. We found clusters of people: many artists who we were in touch with, like Gilbert & George in London. We sent off hundreds of copies all over the world. *FILE* never really took off in Canada, it was mostly overseas. Canadians seemed less interested. It did especially well in New York. We could sell more copies in one store in New York than we could in all of Canada.

MB: Did *FILE* influence you to open Art Metropole?

AB: One of the things about *FILE* was that it was a kind of communication tool between artists, and it came out of an idea about using the postal network and the whole scene of mail art that was happening at that time. Looking back on it, I see we were all very much involved in the idea of networking in a pre-electronic environment. We were all well versed in Marshall McLuhan and his ideas about the electronic revolution,⁶ and doing it as best we could in our own way. Our distribution became so good that people started sending us their publications; we thought there was a need for a distribution network.

In 1974, we opened Art Metropole, which was intended as a distribution center and archive for independent art publishing, by artists. We were able to use the distribution system from *FILE* and distribute other people's products as well as our own. Very quickly, artists approached us about distributing audio and video as well. And it grew rapidly from there.

Because of our connections, it was easy for us to get publications from Joseph Beuys, Gilbert & George, Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner, or whoever. Two years later Sol LeWitt, Lucy Lippard, and others started a similar organization, Printed Matter, Inc., in New York City.

MB: What else was going on during this period overseas?

AB: In the late '60s, Ulises Carrión opened a bookstore in Amsterdam called Other Books and So. It was half political pamphlets and half artists publishing. He was from Mexico, and Amsterdam was a major center for Latin American artists, most of them escaping various repressive regimes. In Latin America, the majority of artist books were political. The only way you could deal with the political situation as an artist was to publish. You couldn't say anything publicly, but you could make a pamphlet and give it to friends. The same situation existed in Eastern Europe behind the Iron Curtain. In Yugoslavia, Poland, and Hungary a lot of artists were making artists' books; that way they could be politically minded. Other Books and So in Amsterdam provided access to crossovers between art and politics. It was really a phenomenal store.

Then there was Ecart in Geneva, which John Armleder started in about 1971. That was a little bookstore where you could buy books by John and his friends, which they published using a mimeograph machine—he was making little artists' books and pamphlets—and that was another model. Basically he would serve tea, and people would come and look at books and art by him and his friends. John still does that today at Art Basel.

The third model came from Florence, Italy: Zona was an independent gallery started by a group of artists. It still exists now. Maurizio Nannucci organized complex exhibitions in the early '70s that were surveys of independent publishing, mostly art publishing, including historical material. The futurist material was originally published in Florence. Up until 1978–79, you could still buy early futurist publications at the original price there. An American

dealer came through town and bought every single copy, and that was the end of that. But Maurizio's exhibitions were the first to explore independent publishing in the visual arts and the collection he amassed at Zona remains one of the best in the world.



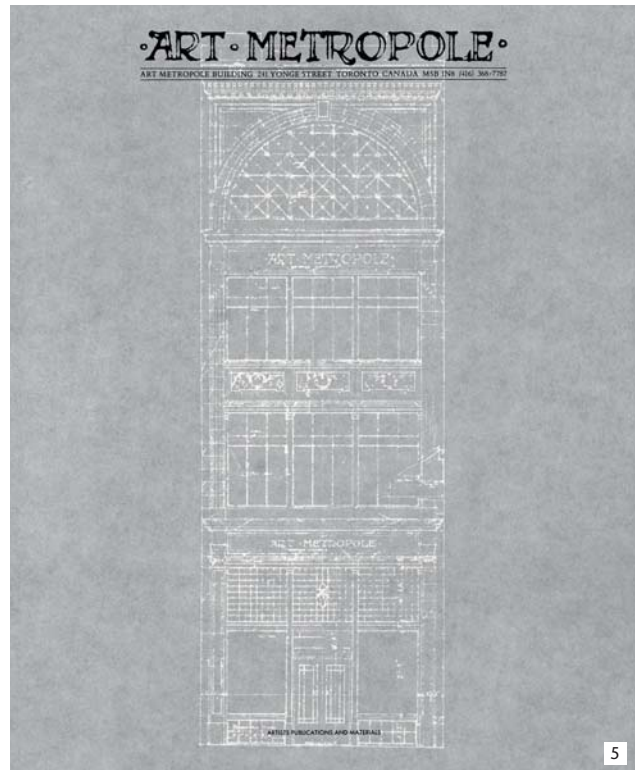
MB: How did you finance your projects?

AB: In Canada, the government brought out the Local Initiatives Grant in 1971. The idea was that young unemployed people could propose a project for their community and get materials donated by their community, and the government would pay them a minimum wage for a few months to execute their projects. Mostly this resulted in an awful lot of children's playgrounds using recycled materials. We proposed that our community was non-geographical, that it was located all across Canada, and that what artists needed was communication. They agreed to two rounds of funding before they freaked out at what we were publishing. That grant started *FILE*, and by extension Art Metropole, too.

MB: How did you coordinate the distribution and the projects to all these different places—was it through regular mail?

AB: Yes, via mail, the mail thing began around 1969; we were frankly just bored. There was nothing in the ludicrous little Toronto art world, and it was worse in other parts of Canada; there was nothing to sustain us. Everything came by word of mouth. A lot of what happened, though, came through the Coach House Press, through their publishing network of writers and poets, from California and New York and Vancouver; we met a lot of people through them, people like Allen Ginsberg. The poetry scene was a model for self-publishing, as poets were already self-publishing so freely.

There was a hunger for an exchange of materials and information. The idea of prestige and celebrity hardly existed then; the only celebs in the art world would be Salvador Dalí and Andy Warhol. The idea of being unavailable didn't exist.



MB: How did you connect to other artists in New York at this time?

AB: Warhol and Beuys were two of the first subscribers to *FILE*, and I started delivering it in person to Andy. It was while *Interview* was still a newspaper. I remember Warhol saying to Glenn O'Brien, "You know this glossy cover on this, there's just newspaper inside, look, it looks like a magazine," and the next thing I knew they were putting a color cover on *Interview*.

In 1977, we went to New York for six months to produce a New York issue of *FILE*. By that time, we had dramatically enlarged our circle of friends and acquaintances. We hosted an open house every Sunday—anyone could come. Each Sunday we would invite a new group of people, so we kept widening our ring of contacts.

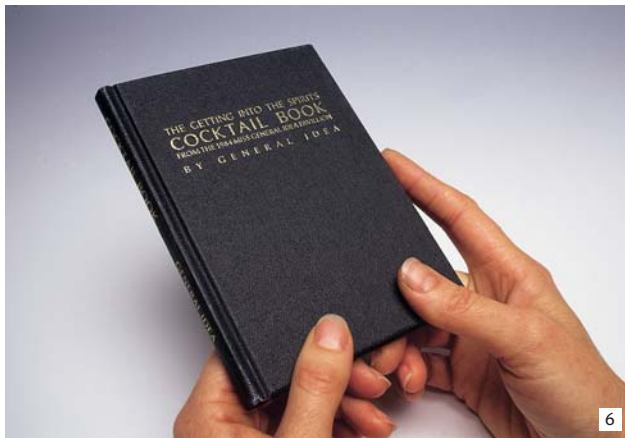
MB: During these weekend open houses, was there a particular emphasis on the queer community?

AB: Probably it was more than 50% queer, but it was much more mixed up in those days; anybody

could show up. We'd rented an apartment across the street from The Dakota on West 72nd. The '70s was all open-door policy. You could meet anyone with no problem at all. I guess Warhol being shot was the first instance when doors started to close. Even after that he was easy to see, but not how he had been.

MB: Could you say you were a dealer, an artist—how would you distinguish yourself?

AB: I would say that I worked with this group General Idea, that I was an artist. I've never thought of myself as a publisher or as a book dealer, just as an artist. Artist and healer, as I like to say now to make people uncomfortable.



MB: When and why did you move to New York?

AB: We moved in 1986, near the end of *FILE* magazine. We only produced three issues after that. We'd had a big career in Europe before that, we'd had a travelling retrospective, and the reason we moved—beyond having many friends there and loving New York—was that our career in Canada was in hiatus, every major museum had bought a major piece, and they weren't going to buy another for at least ten years; that's how it worked in Canada. At that time, all the curators in Europe were passing through New York, and many artists passed through. It was the one place where you could see everyone, meet anyone, it made a lot sense.

MB: How did you get involved with Printed Matter, Inc.?

AB: We had a strong connection with Printed Matter, Inc. from the beginning because we were sharing materials, selling many of the same things. However, as time went by, due to the AIDS/HIV

situation in New York in the mid-'80s, everything became political. The printed materials and ephemera of all kinds had a utility as well as being kind of trendy in the artists' scene. There was an explosion of printed matter. Douglas Crimp's book⁷ included a lot of printed material, examples of how artists used printed materials. I like to say that is when the West intersected with what had already been happening in Latin America and Eastern Europe.

Once Jorge and Felix were diagnosed with HIV, we went back to Toronto where we still had had our studio. They died in 1994, and I came back to New York five years later with my husband Mark. I was at sea. I wasn't sure what I was doing, how to be an independent artist, didn't want to be; I was still interested in printed materials and editions, and at that moment, Printed Matter invited me to be on their board, in 1998.

And then a lot of things happened, notably 9/11, just after Printed Matter had moved to Chelsea. They weren't eligible for the assistance to arts organizations that was offered to those below 14th Street; if they had moved to Chelsea three months later they would have been in a better state. Business completely stopped and the financial difficulties became extreme. The board asked me to take over the directorship for six months to judge whether I thought the institution could be saved or whether it should be closed.

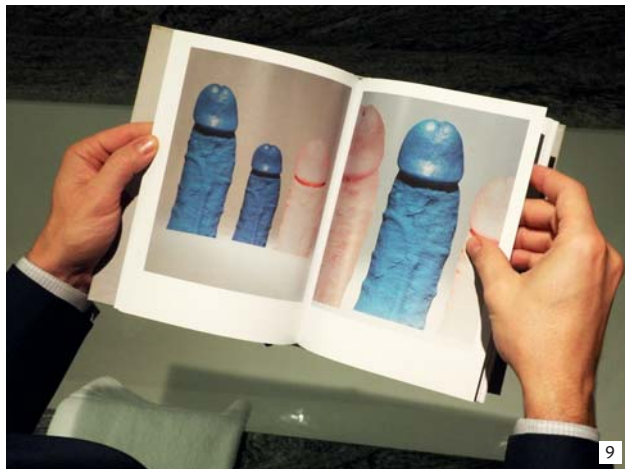


MB: Until this point you weren't involved in an institution?

AB: I ran Art Metropole from 1974-1984, and I was the president of the board for a long time after that. I published perhaps thirty books in my time at Art Metropole, and I was still doing all the organizational work around *FILE* magazine until 1989. There was this AIDS hiatus, where all my energy was going into AIDS work, then this happened.

When I started working at Printed Matter, there were essentially two bookstores in one space: "artist books" by known artists, such as Ed Ruscha,

etc., were on table tops and in glass cabinets; and on the vertical shelves were thousands of books packed closely together by artists you probably hadn't heard of. These latter books hardly ever sold. At the same time, the real community of Printed Matter were the artists who were represented on these shelves. That community always wanted something of us, to launch their new zine or publication, to hold an event at Printed Matter, and they were the people who came in the store and kept the place going. Before then, events had been fairly limited. But now we started having events, for a completely different category of artists than had been featured for some time. That's when the place really took off. It wasn't curation; there were very few value judgments. My policy was "If they ask, we say yes." It became much more of a community service, as it had been when it began—much less about curation. I like to say that it was self-curating.



MB: In some way, was this very similar to the model you had established in the 1970s?

AB: Yes, much more horizontal and meant to encourage people who really had no other outlet to

reach the world. That was more what Printed Matter, Inc. had been in the early days as well.

Out of that experience came the idea to start the NY Art Book Fair. We could showcase this kind of hidden publishing, mix it up with various audiences in a more structured way. We could have a section of people like Sternberg Press, medium-sized and small publishers, and another area for more politically minded artists, an area for zines who couldn't afford anything, and they could have their stand for free. And then a few university presses and mainstream publishers to bring in some money. Publishers like Taschen and the university presses could be mixed in in a different way. The NY Art Book Fair was an instant success, with seventy exhibitors and three thousand visitors in the first year, and most recently with some 350 exhibitors and more than 35,000 visitors, most of them in their twenties and thirties.

This turned Printed Matter, Inc. around—gave it a different visibility. It gave us access to suppliers of books as well as to the buyers of books. I think that strategy of saying "yes" is what informed the book fair and led to an enormous audience of young people.



MB: In many ways, this is indicative of the wider shifts in art publishing in the current moment?

AB: Independent publishing is proliferating at an amazing rate. I think it's partly new technologies—this makes it easier and cheaper to publish—digital printing being the most recent as opposed to on-demand printing a few years ago. At Printed Matter's L.A. Art Book Fair this year there were 950 applicants and only 250 stands to give away—that was crazy. And the number of fairs has been growing in a crazy way, too.



MB: What have you been focusing on in the last few years? You made an anthology of queer zines?

AB: I put together an exhibition of queer zines, first shown at the NY Art Book Fair in 2008. I also included it in the *Temptation of AA Bronson* at Witte de Witte in Rotterdam in 2013. For Rotterdam, we re-printed the original publication, with corrections, and added a second volume to bring it up to date, and a box. The design is based on the Whole Earth

Catalogue⁸, and the Canadian Whole Earth Catalogue.⁹ It's organized like those books, alphabetically: on the one hand a kind of catalogue raisonné, on the other hand more like a series of book reviews, with sample pages and articles. You just keep going until you've finished. We had three months to put together the original publication, and we began at A and just kept going. It just assembled itself, and arrived the day before the fair. The zines are from the collection of Philip Aarons.¹⁰ We showed queer zines again at Maureen Paley's gallery in London this year. Now it's up in Kunstverein Graz, as part of AA Bronson's *Sacre du Printemps* (2015).



MB: You are an ambassador for queer zines—one could almost call you the "King of Zines"...

AB: It keeps me in touch with the young generation. People contact me, send me a zine they've done, or wanting to meet me. Queer zines fit into my own history of publishing and totally interest me. I'm very curious how artists today are reinventing the form of the queer zine, which itself morphed out of the phenomenon of punk zines. It's interesting to see how the visual language changes as it goes along.

In more recent years, I've moved towards the zine end of things, rather than the more formally published things. Artists' books have become institutionalized. I'm not against that, I just have always been more interested in things that are done on the fly, and are less institutional. Artists are using different technologies; books like this can occur and be printed in a more casual way.

MB: In some way it is also historicizing queer history?

AB: There's a university library in the American Midwest that has an enormous archive of queer zines, but not so art-related; they have many thousands of titles. A lot of people ask why don't we include more women, but we initially had problems finding zines by women. But each time the exhibition is shown, the number of zines by trans and women artists grows dramatically. It's grown quite fast—there's also an interest in the category. For me, it starts with *LTTR* (sometimes called *Lesbians to the Rescue*) and goes from there. Women's zines seem to overlap a lot with trans stuff, especially FTM materials.

I should tell you about my own little publishing house, "Media Guru," which I began in 2004. I publish material that is mostly not very publishable, sometimes by me or my friends and sometimes my collaborations. They tend to be a little transgressive, there's even a video. *PLAID*, my collaboration with Keith Boadwee, is the 13th and most recent issue. So far I think the series is 100% queer, but that might just be a coincidence.



Notes

1 The *Loving Couch Press* was the first underground newspaper AA Bronson produced; it began in Winnipeg, Canada in 1967.

2 *The Magazine* was a collaboration in 1967-1968 in Winnipeg.

3 *FILE Magazine* was founded in 1972 by the Toronto-based artists' group General Idea (A.A. Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal). It ran for 26 issues until 1989.

4 Currently known as Canada Council for the Arts.

5 *Interview* is a publication founded by Andy Warhol in 1965.

6 See for example: Quentin Fiore and Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of*

Effects, Bantam Books, New York, 1967.

7 Douglas Crimp, *AIDS Demo Graphics*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1990.

8 *Whole Earth Catalogue* (WEC) was an American counterculture magazine and product catalogue published by Stewart Brand several times a year between 1968 and 1972.

9 The *Canadian Whole Earth Almanac* (Toronto: 1970-1972) followed similar principles to WEC, but with a more idiosyncratic choice of materials. Each issue focused on a single topic: for example, food, shelter, and healing. The organization operated informally as a sister organization to Coach House Press.

10 *LTTR* was a queer art journal started by the feminist genderqueer artist collective of the same name in New York City. They published five issues between 2001 and 2007. See: <http://www.lttr.org/about-lttr>

Captions

1 AA Bronson, *Canticle* issue 9, 1967. (Insert in *The Manitoban*, December 8, 1967, pp 4-5). Offset on newsprint. Image courtesy the artist.

2 AA Bronson and Clive Russell. *The Magazine* no. 2, 1967. Envelope: offset on paper. Contents: Mimeograph and Blueprint on paper. Image courtesy the artist.

3 AA Bronson et al. *The Loving Couch Press* (pictured: cover, image of Yoko Ono), 1968. Offset on newsprint. Image courtesy the artist.

4 *Canadian Whole Earth Almanac*, 1970. Offset on paper. Image courtesy of AA Bronson.

5 General Idea. *Art Metropole Letterhead*, 1974. Offset on onionskin paper. Image courtesy the artist.

6 General Idea. *Getting into the Spirits Cocktail Book: From the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1980. Edition of 900, signed and numbered. Hardcover. Photo by Cathy Busby courtesy AA Bronson.

7 AA Bronson. *Lana* (pictured: covers from three editions, cover of 2009 edition by Richard Prince). 1970-2009. Softcover. Image courtesy the artist.

8 General Idea. *XXX Voto*, 1995. Edition of 900. Hardcover. Published by René Blouin Gallery, Montreal and S.L. Simpson Gallery, Toronto. Photo by Cathy Busby courtesy AA Bronson.

9 Matthias Herrmann. *FH*, 2015. Edition of 550. Hardcover. Published by the Grazer Kunstverein. Image courtesy Matthias Herrmann.

10 General Idea. *FILE Magazine* vol 3 no 4, Fall 1977. Offset on paper. Image courtesy AA Bronson.

11 AA Bronson. *Untitled (Media Guru 12)*, 2015. Digital print on paper. Edition of 50, signed and numbered. Image courtesy the artist.

12 AA Bronson. *Untitled (Media Guru 8)*, 2009. Digital print on paper. Edition of 50, signed and numbered. Image courtesy the artist.

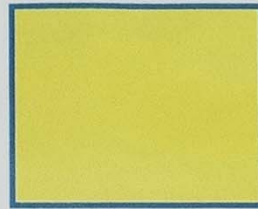
13 AA Bronson, Keith Boadwee and Georg Petermichl. *PLAID*, 2015. Media Guru #13. Digital print on paper. Image courtesy the artist.

14 AA Bronson and Phil Aarons, eds. *Queer Zines* vols 1 (second edition) and 2 (first edition). Offset on paper, boxed, published by Printed Matter Inc. and Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art, 2014.

AA Bronson lives and works in Berlin. In the sixties, he left university with a group of friends to found a free school, a commune, and an underground newspaper. This led him into an adventure with gestalt therapy, radical education, and independent publishing. In 1969, he formed the artists' group *General Idea* with Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal; for the next twenty-five years they lived and worked together to produce the living artwork of being together, undertaking 119 solo exhibitions, and countless group shows and temporary public art projects. They were known for their magazine *FILE* (1972-1989), their low-cost publications and multiples, and their early involvement in punk, queer theory, and AIDS activism. In 1974, they founded *Art Metropole*, Toronto, a publisher, distributor and archive for artists' books, audio, video, and multiples. From 1987 through 1994, they focused their work on AIDS. Since his partners died in 1994, AA has focused on collaboration and healing. From 2004 to 2010, he was the Director of *Printed Matter, Inc.*, in New York City, founding the annual *NY Art Book Fair* in 2005, and the *LA Art Book Fair* in 2013. He founded and directs the *Institute for Art, Religion, and Social Justice* at *Union Theological Seminary* in New York City, where he is Honorary Professor of Art, Religion, and Social Justice. He has taught at *UCLA*, the *University of Toronto*, and the *Yale School of Art*. He is an Officer of the *Order of Canada* (2008), and a *Chevalier de l'ordre des arts et des lettres of France* (2011). AA Bronson's work—as artist, curator, and educator—is dominated by collaboration and consensus. From his beginnings in a free school and commune, through his twenty-five years as one of the artists of *General Idea*, he has founded and developed collaborative social structures such as *Art Metropole*, the *NY Art Book Fair* and *AA Bronson's School for Young Shamans*; through his current collaborations with younger generations, he focuses on alternative distribution systems, on art as publishing, and on living life radically as social sculpture.

Michael G. Birchall is a curator, writer, and PhD candidate in Art, Critique and Social Practice at the *University of Wolverhampton*, where he is researching the role of the curator as a producer in socially engaged practices. He has held curatorial appointments at *The Western Front, Vancouver, Canada*, *The Banff Centre, Banff, Canada*, and *Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, Germany*. His texts have been published in *Frieze*, *Frieze d/e*, *thisistomorrow*, *C-Magazine*, *Modern Painters*, and various monographs and catalogues. Michael's recent curatorial projects include *Wie geht's dir Stuttgart?/How are you doing Stuttgart?* at *Künstlerhaus Stuttgart*. Since 2012, he has been lecturing on the *Curating Program* at the *Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK)*, and is co-publisher of the journal *OnCurating*. He lives and works in Berlin.

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