

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN:
*On The Edge of Everything:
 Reflections on Curatorial Practice*
 Edited by Catherine Thomas
 Banff Centre Press, 2000
 Banff, Alberta, Canada



The Boutique from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion. 1980.
 Galvanized metal and plexiglass, containing various General Idea multiples, prints, posters, and publications, overall: 60 1/2 x 133 1/2 x 102" (153.7 x 339.1 x 259.1 cm). Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Gift of Sandra Simpson 1998. © 1980 General Idea. Photo: courtesy AA Bronson

Affording the Ultimate Creative Shopping Experience: The Boutique of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion

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Museums have traditionally yearned to arrest the natural course of things: they aspire to conserve the perishable, to retain the ephemeral, to congeal process. By temperament and mission, they refuse to let go, and so restore, climate-control, document, explain, and overexplain, at times despite the intrinsic inclination and expressed intention of certain works to disappear into oblivion or dust. At a time when event-driven, performance-related works abound, one question keeps recurring to any contemporary art curator working in an object-oriented institution: How to deal with this kind of practice in the collection, balancing legitimate institutional concerns regarding security and conservation with the artist's intended reception of the work? Are some works just not meant to be collected and preserved? If so, how can they be presented and represented in the collection? To what extent are museums misrepresenting certain works, or turning them into fetishes, by making endless efforts to maintain them in the world? At what point does one decide that enough is enough? No rule can be drawn from the unique and complex

relationship that each different work brings to the world, both aesthetically and historically. Moreover, it is the curator's role to problematize the issues involved by keeping the contradictions in place—for it seems to be unavoidable, at times, to be torn between the institution's perspective and that of the artist—and to responsibly consider and sensitively propose alternatives when displaying and acquiring works that rely on interaction with the audience, and thus on actual time.

Drawing on my own still-unresolved questioning, despite a decided commitment to General Idea in general, and to their *Boutique of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* (1981) in particular, I will discuss here some of the issues around the past and future of that work by this groundbreaking, eye-opening Toronto-based artist collective. My point of departure is my personal interest in General Idea's work, which has been greatly nourished and expanded over the last five years by several enlightening conversations with AA Bronson. I was involved with General Idea on two occasions. In December of 1996, I curated a Projects exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, that included two installations central to the AIDS-related projects developed by the group after 1987, *One Day of AZT* (1991) and *One Year of AZT* (1991), from the collection of the National Gallery in Ottawa. In 1999, I assisted Kynaston McShine, the exhibition's curator, in the preparation of *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, also held at the Museum of Modern Art, which included the *Boutique*. This essay is an attempt to point to some of the complex issues raised by the display of the *Boutique* today, as it continues to maintain a degree of resistance to being institutionalized. But first I would like to describe some key aspects of the work's background.

General Idea was formed in 1969 by AA Bronson (b. 1946), Felix Partz (1945-94), and Jorge Zontal (1944-94), and was prematurely dissolved after the deaths of two of its members. Partz and Zontal granted Bronson complete power to decide on artistic issues in their name and to realize existing but never-produced projects. During twenty-five years of professional and domestic partnership—one of the longest collaborations in twentieth-century art—General Idea created work marked by elusive meaning and poignant wit that addressed both popular culture and mass media. Between 1971 and 1987, General Idea painstakingly built a complex mythology to internalize, as well as comment on, the art world. The *Boutique* was an essential part of a series of projects conceived for the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, a decentralized structure consisting of various installations dispersed around the world, collectively forming an autonomous "museum," functioning within yet unrelated to its host sites. Shaped like a dollar sign, the *Boutique* looks like a hybrid of minimalist sculpture and sales counter, an apt reflection of its dual function of artwork and shop, and of the ambivalent (and not necessarily harmonious) coexistence of its contemplative and interactive dimensions.

Fabricated by a company that produced ventilation systems, the counter showed its industrial origin: the galvanized metal structure looks remarkably similar to that used for heating systems and industrial ducts. Made at a time when the sound of cashiers still seemed outlandish in the immaculate environment of the exhibition space, the *Boutique* presaged the increasing pervasiveness of temporary shops occupying space once exclusively assigned to art. The *Boutique* functioned as a museum store inserted into galleries, exploring the increasingly visible connections associations between art, merchandise, and commerce, and offering a selection of General Idea's extensive production of publications and multiples for sale.

In its original set-up at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto in 1981, the *Boutique* was placed parallel to the gallery's wall-to-wall front window (a side of it could be seen from the street), making the gallery appear, from the sidewalk, like an ordinary shop.¹ A full-time saleswoman worked behind the *Boutique*'s minuscule, cramped counter for the duration of the show, and the public was invited to touch and handle the various items on display. Every aspect of the work contributed to its detachment from the rarefied system of aesthetic concerns and its insertion into real life or, more precisely, the commercial side of real life.

From their beginning, General Idea adopted a strategy of appropriating nonart formats from the mass media and popular culture—beauty pageants, television shows, popular magazines—inserting novel contents into highly familiar forms. The *Boutique* project allowed a foray into previously unexplored domains: the boutique culture and the mail-order catalogue. The contemporaneous issue of *File Magazine*² featured a section on the *Boutique*. The accompanying text is reproduced here, partly for its sharp and whimsical language, interweaving humour and ambiguity, irreverence and extravagance, so representative of General Idea's editorials in *File*, but especially for the background it provides for the *Boutique*. It underlines General Idea's direct treatment of issues relating to the artwork as commodity, expressed in the headline "General Idea's Cocktail Boutique from The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion: Turning Ideas into Cash and Cash into Ideas":³

The vaguest little longing ... just a yen, really ... a sense of anticipation ... a flight of fantasy ... some small inner awakening ... a fluttery hope for your wildest dreams ... That momentary twinge of ... is it guilt? ... that holds its own naughty thrill. And then ... the elation that follows. Something unattainable suddenly attained. Mine! is it really so dreadful to say it? After all, the thought is there and yes it is ... smug ... the sense of possession ... of ownership of something that is absolutely, definitely, finally perfect. Something you searched for and found and acquired. And every time you gaze upon it you feel radiant, exuberant, and content. When you feel those acquisitive urges ... the ones that can only be satiated by a financial transaction ... and the climax of possession ... Why not move up-market to a creative shopping experience? Why not commemorate your possessive urges with souvenirs of your shopping excursions and trophies of your acquisitive safaris? And there is only one place to find them. One place in all the world. And that is the boutique of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion. Browse through our catalogue and then shop in person ... or use our convenient phone and mail-order service ... unleash your buying power at the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion.

Subsequent pages of this issue of *File*, devoted to "\$ucce\$\$," feature General Idea multiples originally available at the *Boutique*, graphically presented in the magazine as supermarket weekly specials in the form of promotional handouts and coupons. The multiples relate to props from General Idea's "made-for-television videotape" *Test Tube*, and they are flamboyantly described by the artists in the magazine as "Architectonic Doric Column Test Tube Holder," "Greeting Cards 8 Cheers from the Colour Bar Lounge," "Magic Palette Attractively Packaged with 6 Magnetic Cups on Chrome Server Plus Getting into the Spirits Cocktail Book," "Liquid Assets New

Improved Soon to Be Released Frosted Plastic Cold Cash," and "Ziggurat Test Tube Holder 5 Test Tubes Included, Double Palette 5-Tube Test Tube Server Clear with Black Plexiglas Plus Chrome Handle."

With time, the conditions for the presentation of the *Boutique* naturally changed. In subsequent showings, adjustments were made to the overall display, to the multiples and publications available, and to the salesperson's schedule. At 49th Parallel in New York, when it was exhibited later that same year, a salesperson was available all day Saturdays and for a couple of hours during the week. At other times, a sign would mark the salesperson's absence. During the General Idea touring show in 1984, the *Boutique* was not included in Basel, only in Eindhoven, Toronto, and Montreal. In Eindhoven, there was no salesperson, but handling was still permitted. Likewise in Toronto, with the difference that the Art Gallery of Ontario's shop carried the multiples and publications for sale. In Montreal, the *Boutique* was installed in an entrance hall adjacent to the museum store, a situation in keeping with the ambiguous function of the piece, allowing it to bypass the museum's sales structure by offering an alternative shopping site.⁴ This kind of immediate proximity, without incorporation into the institution's store, was likewise adopted at later venues such as the ICA in London, where the *Boutique* items were handled and sold. At Spiral Gallery in Tokyo, it was presented as part of their large shop, with a member of the staff sitting in the *Boutique*.⁵ At the time of these presentations, the *Boutique* belonged to the artists, allowing them to freely add and subtract from the items on display according to the development of their production and in response to each new setting.

At this moment in the *Boutique*'s life (or its afterlife?), not only have the conditions for its presentation changed dramatically, but many aspects concerning its display can no longer be duplicated. General Idea has ceased operations since the deaths of Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz in 1994, so the once-prolific output of unlimited edition multiples and publications is no longer replaceable at will. Moreover, such items have become rare and expensive. In 1998, Sandra Simpson, General Idea's collector and former dealer, donated the *Boutique*, along with its component display items, to the Art Gallery of Ontario, giving it a home that it shares with several other key works by General Idea, many of which are kept on permanent display.

The first attempt to present it in a closed, archival format was on the occasion of the Museum of Modern Art's *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, which inadvertently turned into a laboratory for the presentation, or rather representation, of the *Boutique*. AA Bronson had to face restrictions that had never been posed, with the pains and difficulties of decision making compounded by the absence of his partners. For security and conservation reasons, the public was not allowed to handle the *Boutique*'s items. Its interpersonal and commercial dimensions had to be conveyed by a long explanatory label and photographic documentation showing a salesperson in action during the first installation at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery. Despite these attempts to draw attention to the piece's impropriety of function and location, the *Boutique* looked oddly polite in its silent self-centredness, its passive objectification standing in contrast to its former active incarnation. Perhaps unavoidably, a significant portion of the experience of the piece was lost in this documental format. The informal perusal of the objects, their potential acquisition, the exchange of money—all that remained from these experiences was their representation. The piece had turned into its memory, a residue, an index of a series of past activities, not much different from photographic and video documentation of performance art. Likewise, the

work's status as a social fact—its foregrounding of the audience and its reliance on real time and space—was only suggested. Would the social aspect of the work have been preserved if a salesperson had sat idly behind the counter? Perhaps this aspect might have been implied, but only at the risk of offering an empty reenactment, or displaying a meaningless parody, for lack of anything available for sale.⁶ What had been lost from the experience of the *Boutique* was the fanning of desire, the desire articulated in the above General Idea quotation, written in insinuating, sexy prose, advertising the Boutique, and the fantasies of possession and self-fulfillment it entails.

Similar challenges were posed at least thirty years ago, when ephemeral, dematerialized art became a particularly favoured form of expression. These strategies, hand-in-hand with land art practices and performance art, not only critiqued the art object as commodity but essentially embodied an antimuseum attitude, literally equating institutionalization to death. The disappearance, or "uncollectability," of a work was a given, negligible, or inseparable part of its meaning.⁷ In recent years, despite the profusion of work that explores unconventional, openended modes for addressing the audience, the issues at stake seem to be of different nature, notwithstanding their undeniable debt to the 1960s and 1970s. Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Rirkrit Tiravanija, for example, accounted for the institutional afterlife of a number of their works, and the instructions for that afterlife have become an intrinsic part of the work's meaning. The *Boutique* seems caught between two generations and attitudes: those who rejected the objectness of the work entirely and, most recently, those who found ways to incorporate provisions for the work's disappearance and reappearance.

Much of the *Boutique*'s power resides in its ambiguous perception by the public, in the uncertainty of looking at a shop or at an artwork. Of course, a balance is required for that ambiguity to be maintained, and perhaps that is where the main difficulty lies. Along parallel lines, one might ask if the *Boutique* is merely the stage setting for a series of actions, like some of the numerous multiples that it originally offered for sale. (Many of them appeared as props in the video *Test Tube* before turning into artworks in their own right.) Or one may see the *Boutique* as a multipart sculpture that once had an interactive component. Recently, AA Bronson considered accepting and incorporating these limitations by installing the *Boutique* on a low base, at arm's length from the visitor, clearly signalling its current institutional status. But this solution was abandoned, because the artist was understandably reluctant to diminish, beyond what time had already accomplished, the suggestion that an exchange had once taken place.

Reflection on these circumstances coloured my thinking about how a work presents itself to the audience, and the range of feelings, from generosity to antagonism, that such presentation entails. Recently, some contemporary artists have indicated a desire to renegotiate their relationship with the public, using diverse strategies to promote an inviting, and sometimes perplexing, experience. Working in contrast to the avant-garde tradition of outraging and scandalizing the public—and unlike the didactic approach of much conceptually-based work or, more recently, ideologically inflected works focusing on cultural and gender politics—these artists actively engage the viewer in a hospitable, accommodating way. Some of the situations involved promote interpersonal connections and transport intimate relations into the social realm, spanning the space between personal life and public exhibition. In a tongue-in-cheek dialogue with the traditions of institutional critique and

site specificity, they promote what could be called a situational displacement, heightening awareness of the shifting frame that defines the spaces where art is shown: spaces marked by unstated formal and ethical codes, in which accepted rules of engagement forbid ordinary reflexes of attraction: touching, taking away, tasting, sleeping with ... The *Boutique* operates in similar terms, simultaneously generating comfort and discomfort, freedom and self-consciousness, and posing, to the institution, a challenge to its powers of adaptability.

Notes:

1. To allow the gallery's door to open, in this first showing the *Boutique* had to be installed backwards; that is, the "\$" appears inverted.
 2. In April 1972, General Idea began issuing a periodical, *File Magazine*. It became General Idea's main outlet for their interest in language, as well as a powerful means of networking for artists.
 3. *File Magazine*, 5:1 (March 1981), pp. 24-25. According to AA Bronson, the text quoted here was inspired by (and whole portions of it were lifted from) an ad published in the *New York Times*, possibly for a department store such as Lord & Taylor or Bergdorf Goodman.
 4. According to AA Bronson, the multiples were for sale in this venue, though there was no staff in the *Boutique*.
 5. AA Bronson recalls that the Japanese were very much at home with the commercial dimension of the piece and were enthusiastic about carrying out its intent.
 6. Other attempts were made to breathe life into the *Boutique*, such as adding a vase of fresh flowers on the desk and extra spotlights. AA Bronson also had the idea of producing a postcard, to be given away to the public, as a way of reestablishing an interactive component.
 7. Two famous predecessors of the *Boutique*, Claes Oldenburg's *Store* and Al Ruppertsberg's *Al's Café*, do not subsist except in documentation and relics. Notwithstanding these important antecedents, the *Boutique* probably found its origins in three moments of General Idea's own multi-entrepreneurial history and prehistory: Jorge Zontal's *The Belly Store* of 1969, a Toronto storefront that was General Idea's first headquarters, and, of course, Art Metropole, the archive and artists' space the trio founded in 1974 (and still continues to operate), which established a homegrown system of communication and distribution.
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