



Asked & Answered | AA Bronson of General Idea

CULTURE, WOMEN'S FASHION | BY PIERRE ALEXANDRE DE LOOZ | OCTOBER 14, 2011 9:00 AM



Though some may regret Hedi Slimane's decision to trade the world of fashion in for the world of art, nowadays it's increasingly hard to tell the two apart, and not just at parties. As much as fashion may plagiarize from art on the runway, art likes to parody fashion's love affair with consumption. The writing has been on the wall at least since Andy Warhol's Dollar Sign paintings, although AA Bronson, the surviving member of the art trio (with Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal) General Idea, would argue that it started way earlier.

General Idea's now highly collectible magazine *File* dedicated its 1981 issue to the theme of success, with a contribution by Warhol and a dollar sign sculpture of their own contrivance on the cover. But by then General Idea had already experimented with new forms of retail like pop-ups and courted the international fashion set from their home base in Toronto for over a decade.

“Haute Culture: General Idea — A Retrospective, 1969-1994,” a retrospective curated by Frédéric Bonnet, is on view at the [Art](#)

[Gallery of Ontario](#) through December. Lighthearted and strictly serious at the same time, these provocateurs “greatly influenced” artists who glamorize themselves as artists like Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and Tracy Emin, according to Bonnet. Much of General Idea’s work was dedicated to a beauty queen from an alternative fashion world: Miss General Idea. Performance pieces aping pageants and fashion shows, metallic dresses reminiscent of Paco Rabanne, a denim-ready logo based on a seductive hand gesture, makeup, advertisements and photo shoots all revolved around this self-involved avatar. Not too long ago, T sat down with Bronson, who recently posed for a profile wearing a favorite Walter Van Beirendonck piece, to talk about how fashion and art connect.

Q.

In the last decade, luxury fashion brands have aggressively enlisted artists like Damien Hirst to help promote their products. What’s your take on the phenomenon?

A.

It’s another piece of the fabric. With General Idea, we were really interested in the idea that art could be purchased and collected by people with little money. I don’t like it when artists are only doing unaffordable work. It’s most interesting when there is a full spectrum. Richard Prince, for example, just through his production of artists’ books has produced plenty of low cost art over the years. Or last fall, Ai Weiwei did a politically provocative T-shirt for Comme des Garçons and it was cheap.

Who are your favorite fashion designers right now?

I am sure there are young designers who are as interesting but I have trouble replacing Miyake, Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons. I love Walter Van Beirendonck, but again he is part of the older generation. I feel like I got stuck in our own generation. Maybe we all get stuck there.

From very early on, General Idea used fashion as an underlying reference, like in the elaborate performance “Ms. General Idea Pageant 1971.” How did you run the contest and how did you judge it?

When we decided to do the '71 pageant, we made up entry kits with pageant rules, 8×10 glossies of the previous pageant queens, a copy of a dress and an invitation from Miss General Idea 1969, Granada Gazelle. The recipient had to choose a candidate and photograph them in the dress. We sent it out to 13 friends. Among others, we invited the head of the Canada Council on the Visual Arts and a prominent art consultant to judge. In a way the beauty pageant is a simulacrum of the art world. You have the talent contests, prizes, winners and losers. The judges chose Michael Morris from Vancouver because they felt he captured glamour without “falling into it.”

Miss General was truly general if she could also be male. At what point did you invent her?

In 1970. We were sharing a storefront on what was Toronto's Carnaby Street of sorts. We started making fake displays to amuse ourselves since we were all unemployed. We would raid the garbage from the neighboring businesses for our windows. We also hung a sign on our door that always said “back in 5 minutes.”

What was glamour to you in the 1970s?

The early '70s were like a continuation of the '60s, especially in North America and it was definitely an antiglamour aesthetic. Warhol and his factory were considered kind of gauche. David Bowie was the first one to make glamour O.K. again. Our whole emphasis on glamour was a provocation. To be glamorous in Toronto was politically incorrect and kind of ridiculous. We were always accused of being dilettantes and in a way it was provoking those same people to continue accusing us.

By the 1980s, you were better known, perhaps famous, traveling and exhibiting worldwide. How did that change things?

Certainly we had a reputation, but we were not famous. We were just part of the fabric. In the '70s the art scene was generally not quite as bad as the academic world, but it was still dumpy. Then, starting in the mid-'80s, the economy was going into high speed and it started to refashion itself as the world of glamour. Robert Longo on the cover of New York Magazine in 1986 was the first sign. Our emphasis on glamour, fame and wealth was about inhabiting a persona of the artist modeled on Warhol, Salvador Dali or even Josef Beuys for that matter, someone who has a relationship to media and is very aware of their persona as part of their work.

What was important about having a media presence? Was it that the artist has greater power to affect society?

I don't think we were that naïve. We recognized that artists are a very small part of society, but on the other hand we have a public voice and access to the rich. So we have some ability to make a difference and wanted to use that as best we could. We were also aware of media as being international. So when the AIDS subject came along we really tailored our approach to something that could circulate internationally.

The kind of criticisms you put out about consumer society with the early work becomes poignantly clear with the AIDS project. What was the reaction internationally?

Art in New York, as one critic said to me, is about pictures. It's less true today, but it certainly was true in the '80s. So in the end, two thirds of the projects we did on the subject of AIDS were in Europe. They were very interested not only in the subject of

AIDS, but also in the strategies we employed, how we used placards on the trams in Amsterdam and signage on train stations in Berlin. For us, it was like a metaphor for a virus, how an image could travel through society.

Next to the AIDS logo based on Robert Indiana's "Love," the "General Idea" poodle is probably your most well-known icon, though maybe its not as strong a statement or was it?

We decided on the poodle at a time when nobody would write about us in terms of being queer. The curator Richard Flood invited us to make a piece for a show called "Beast" at P.S. 1, which was a very peculiar choice given that he was focused mainly on the work of "new wild ones," painters from places like Naples and Berlin. They had taken over from the video and conceptual art of the '70s. In the early '80s, we made several series of a trio of fornicating poodles: the poodle is the most domestic of animals, willing to be sculpted and pruned into an artwork, willing to be objectified. The poodle stands for the queer artist. The oversize Day-Glo paintings were the finale of this period. Although they clearly depicted sex, the media described them as a metaphor for three artists working together.

Was it entirely a metaphor? Wasn't sexuality and gender central to your work?

It seems to be increasingly important to me! Susan Sontag wrote her essay on camp in 1964, but by 1986 there still hadn't been a decent response. We talked about that all the time. We were very concerned with the idea of a gay sensibility. It's a generational thing. My generation felt that sexuality was an integral part of life and could be embraced, whereas our parents and grandparents were definitely of the opposite opinion. I don't really feel part of the gay liberation movement but the sexual aspect of our work comes out of that phenomenon. It has its

social justice side, but it's also a call to celebrating pleasure as a positive force.

Correction: October 14, 2011

An earlier version of the headline incorrectly stated the name of the art trio mentioned in this story. It is General Idea, not General Interest.

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