



When the Magic Bullets Fall: AA Bronson on General Idea's Installation at MoMA

**Curators Christophe Cherix and Thomas J. Lax
talk with the artist about art in and out of time.**

AA Bronson, Christophe Cherix, Thomas J. Lax
Apr 14, 2021

Thomas J. Lax: AA, Thank you for speaking with Christophe and me. Can you tell us where you are—and, perhaps a more complex question—how are you?

AA Bronson: Greetings, always a pleasure! I am in Berlin, with my husband Mark, in our rambling Berlin apartment on Fasanenstrasse—before the Wall came down, and even before that, this was the heart of Berlin's art and culture world, but now it is pleasantly old-fashioned,

with gas street-lamps, small auction houses and galleries, spreading chestnut trees, and a generous population of Russian expats. And despite the pandemic and the almost constant lockdown, we are okay here. To be truthful, my life—as an old man—has not changed that much. Except that my occasional forays into Berlin nightlife regretfully have come to an end.

Christophe Cherix: I grew up in Switzerland, and like most people from Western Europe of my generation, my first memory of Berlin cannot be separated from the trip to get there, trying to fall asleep with a group of classmates on bunks while our train was crossing East Germany in the middle of the night. To a 13-year-old, Berlin felt like an island in the middle of a forbidden zone. I sometimes wonder if, for those who moved permanently to Berlin after Germany's reunification, this forbidden zone, instead of vanishing, hadn't stretched its perimeter to the rest of the world. In a post-COVID world, after months of isolation, are you worried to cross to the other side again?

AA: I first came here by car from Kassel in 1983, for an exhibition at the Akademie der Künste, where [General Idea](#) exhibited the very first iteration of our installation [P Is for Poodle](#). It was January, the snow was literally three feet deep, and it was 20 below. We are Canadian, so this was not a problem, and we had heard about Berlin's infamously Siberian winters. Now that is all gone, the winters are generally quite mild, rarely going below freezing. The installation was originally intended to feature three live poodles, big white König poodles, but the museum was unable to locate any in Berlin—they were French dogs, they insisted! And of course they were too difficult to import through East Germany. So they found a taxidermist instead (who coincidentally specialized in Canadian wildlife!) and the installation ended up with three fake stuffed poodles, all quite vegan, I assure you! Our crossing through the east was the scariest event of my life: we had to drive at a crawl pace between two high walls, with sentries with machine guns looking down on us, scowling. At the checkpoint, they practically took the car apart—this was still the era of German terrorists, and of course three men traveling together were looked upon with suspicion. In the end, I managed to convince them (with my high-school German, which magically came back to me under stress) that we were three artists, and their chief called a halt to the search just as one of the guards was about to open Jorge's toiletry bag with its stash of weed. A miracle! From there it was a nighttime drive through an eerie darkness—there seemed to be no lights at all in East Germany! Modern Berlin is much different. But in this era of COVID, the population is remarkably disciplined and community-minded, even in the wildest circles of Berlin nightlife. So the COVID death rate has been low, and together with the natural spaciousness of the city, it feels remarkably safe. Frankly, I am afraid to return to the USA!



Installation view, *General Idea's Magi© Bullet*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 14, 2020–summer 2021

TJL: While we were already planning on installing General Idea's work in MoMA's collection galleries, following the COVID-19 pandemic, we decided to focus on the 1992 installation [*Magi© Bullet*](#). The work is made of Mylar balloons in the shape of large antiretroviral pills and was completed just before Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz passed away from AIDS-related complications. [Installed at MoMA](#), the helium in the balloons escaped, and as they began to fall, they entered into a state of suspended animation, wandering off to far-flung galleries across the museum. What did you make of the images and videos of the balloons strewn across the museum?



Fallen balloons from *Magi© Bullet*

The balloons will fall, and the public is welcome to take a balloon home with them, so that gradually the piece will disperse into the city.

AA Bronson

AA: Yes, the idea of the piece is that the balloons will gradually fall, and the public is welcome to take a balloon home with them, so that gradually the piece will disperse into the city. The first time we showed them, in 1992, the balloons refused to come down at all: they seemed to have been fabricated with remarkably strong seams. This time, they seem to have started coming down almost immediately. When a lot come down at once, they become like phantom visitors drifting through the building, some sort of representation of spirit life, little silver ghosts—quite appropriate, I guess! I really would prefer that they come down not quite so quickly, and one or two at a time.

CC: Thomas and I were concerned that the balloons filling the ceiling would block all light in the gallery. You proposed, as you often did in the past, to add to the installation *Magi© Carpet*—a floor piece made of fluorescent light bulbs assembled next to each other in order to create a rectangular shape. How did these two works come to existence in relation to each other?

AA: The two works were created at once. They don't have to be shown together, but they have a natural affinity: together they become more. *Magi© Carpet* was made in a period when we were spending far too much time in St. Vincent's Hospital, with its dedicated AIDS ward. It was located next door to our apartment on West 12th Street. We were the primary caregivers for a friend who died there, and the image of cold fluorescent light, together with open wards of beds and the sounds of dying men, is difficult to communicate. Like many others, I found myself

galvanized rather than intimidated by the experience. In New York at that time, the dying were a part of our daily life in a way that we have not seen since. The balloons are based on the inflated silver “get-well” balloons that people would take to the hospital and tie to the foot of the bed. *Magi© Carpet*, on the other hand, is literally a bed of pain, but also the hope for a magical escape, literally a magic carpet, a carpet of light.

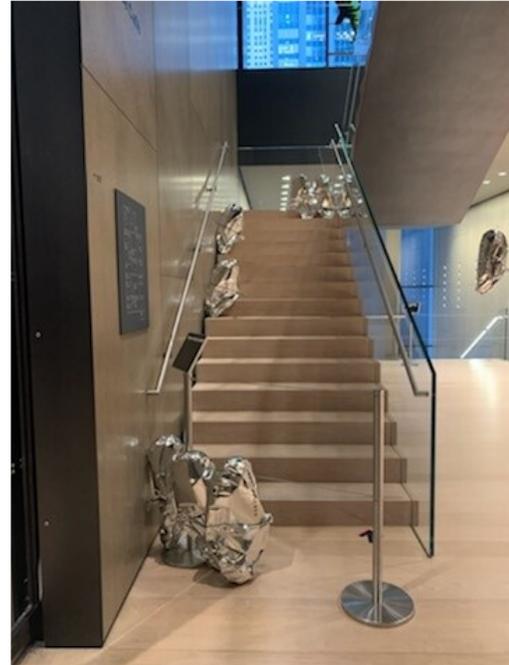
TJL: What are you currently up to? What are you making, preparing for, or concerned about? Do you see a relationship between your current interests as an artist and this work by General Idea?

AA: When Jorge and Felix died in 1994, I went through a long period of trying to not produce General Idea works. This was difficult, because for 25 years I had been embedded in the synergy that was General Idea, in essence I was General Idea, as were we all. But for another 25 years, I managed to focus on a part of myself that looked as different as possible from General Idea, beginning with death portraits of Jorge and Felix and ending with my project at the KW Institute of Contemporary Art, in Berlin, 2018. Then I thought, perhaps making art is over. And I let go of art. But that is exactly the moment when Jorge and Felix returned, and with a lot of kicking and prodding, they soon had me producing General Idea’s Great AIDS paintings, first envisioned in 1991. And now, after a year of the COVID pandemic, Jorge and Felix have returned again: I am working on a series of AIDS Cross paintings, based on Robert Indiana’s *LOVE* Cross paintings of 1968. It is, of course, the cross of the Red Cross Movement, a worldwide (but originally Swiss) symbol of health and caring. It seems especially appropriate during a pandemic! We first saw the *LOVE* Cross painting at the Ludwig Museum in 1991, and fantasized the AIDS paintings then, but the scale was too immense for us. Now I have the opportunity. I know I am in danger of churning out too many copies of our best-known image, but Jorge and Felix insist! So that is that: I cannot refuse my beloved GI boys!

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Installation view, *General Idea's Magi© Bullet*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 14, 2020–summer 2021



Fallen balloons from *Magi© Bullet*