

# ON THE VIEW

## AT THE NEW MUSEUM

### The Window on Broadway • An Installation by General Idea

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A-I-D-S. Here are four discrete letters of the alphabet which, when combined, become a cipher of often terrifying dimensions, an acronym for something which has altered the most fundamental aspects of our lives. In 1987, the collaborative group General Idea, consisting of AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal, produced a painting which featured a "simple" graphic of these letters for the "Art Against AIDS" benefit in New York. The work led to a number of projects, including posters on the streets of San Francisco, downtown Manhattan, Toronto and Berlin; site-specific installations in galleries and public buildings; and a multiple of postage stamps inserted in *Parkett* magazine. Though it appears in various guises, the reductive style of General Idea's AIDS graphic remains obstinately blank. Like some bold headline dominating the front page of a daily, it draws instant attention but appears to ignore the complex of facts, emotions and politics which surround the AIDS crisis. It is slippery, and has triggered both criticism and accolade.

General Idea's AIDS graphic can be unsettling, all the more so because it has a nagging familiarity to all those acquainted with the lore of the 1960s and early 1970s. It is a reworking of Robert Indiana's LOVE image which captured the popular imagination two decades ago. By transposing four new letters into the same typeface and psychedelic color scheme, General Idea has created an historical equation that generates its own ambiguities. What does it mean when a gallery press release proclaims that "General Idea's AIDS is an icon of the 80s as Robert Indiana's LOVE was an icon of the 60s"?

Interpretation of General Idea's AIDS project depends, to a large extent, on one's view of what Indiana's image means. If the latter is equated with the sexual revolution and, by implication, the spread of promiscuity in the 1960s, then the AIDS graphic could be read as a moral indictment. If it represents the ideal of universal love and harmony which galvanized the 1960s, then the AIDS graphic would seem like a call for compassion in less ideal times. General Idea's project communicates different messages to different people and communities: to those who see it as an artists' project versus those who mistake it for a government-sponsored campaign; to those who feel vulnerable to AIDS versus those who feel immune from AIDS; to those who are alert to the politics of representation versus those who believe the facts reported by the media; to heterosexuals versus homosexuals; to teenagers versus adults. General Idea's project brings to the fore all the conflicting opinions and questions that has rendered AIDS such a tangled issue.

The positioning of the AIDS project in The New Museum's Window on Broadway magnifies the inherent ambiguities. Facing a busy thoroughfare that mixes a working class of Hispanics, Asians and Blacks with chic Soho shoppers and gallery visitors, the Window represents a nebulous juncture between "inside" and "outside," "them" and "us." The installation, situated alongside the shop windows which line Broadway, also points to a commodification of AIDS, noted by the aggressive marketing of condoms and new drugs by pharmaceutical companies in recent years. Finally, by being shown at the same time as the retrospective of French artist Christian Boltanski, some of whose works in the Museum galleries address the Holocaust, General Idea's window raises uncomfortable parallels and discrepancies. Like most things, the work is always

colored by the multiple contexts that condition its viewing.

The tactics and effect of General Idea's AIDS project mimic that of the mass media which extrapolates ideas and facts, reducing them into abbreviated formats for public dissemination and consumption. In setting off this circulation of images, the group chose as its starting point a graphic which in itself had already proliferated the circuit. In the 1960s, popular culture appropriated Robert Indiana's LOVE painting, which had not been copyrighted, turning it

into postage stamps, key chains and cocktail napkins. In the 1980s, General Idea reversed that process with a jump start. It recovered a well-worn image, manipulated it and sent it through the many channels of mass culture. Later this year, General Idea will flood the New York City subway system with its AIDS posters. AA Bronson compares the development of the project to "releasing a virus through distribution systems." As a conceptual work, this structural mimicry of a system addresses issues not necessarily specific to AIDS. Yet, at the same time, it also returns us to some troubling questions.

A-I-D-S. Here are four potent letters of the alphabet. Does General Idea's graphic heighten our awareness of the permutations of ostensibly neutral representation? Or does it intensify both the positive and negative effects of such representation?

**Alice Yang**  
Curatorial Coordinator

General Idea is comprised of artists AA Bronson and Jorge Zontal, who are based in New York, and Felix Partz, who is based in Toronto. They have been working collaboratively since 1968.

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