

Back to Queen West has a surprise in store

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Murray Whyte

As of this morning, the tiny storefront on Gore Vale Avenue across from Trinity Bellwoods Park looks like just another casualty of either a flailing economy, rising rents in this ever-glitzifying Queen Street West neighbourhood, or a bit of both. "TOTAL SELL OFF" reads one of the signs plastering over the big, broad front window. "EVERYTHING MUST GO."

Such a fate would come as little surprise to anyone who happened into the shop over the past few weeks — a sparse selection of goods including canned vegetables, bags of popcorn, free magazines and brittle, near-dead plants were available at the consumer-friendly price of "pay what you want"— but the real answer is "none of the above."

The sharp eye would have clocked Toronto artist Kelly Mark's subtly altered exit sign — the red-block letters read "EXIST" above the door — or Kerri Reid's drips of plaster in various shapes at \$5 apiece, and exposed it for what it was: A cheeky artist's project discreetly inserted into the urban fabric, posing as a convenience store.

The "closing sale," with signs by Kim Beck, shrouds the space for its conversion — opening soon! — into a video store featuring free rentals of artists' videos offered on the honour system (no membership required) in exchange for a gesture — "you could leave a note for the artist, or maybe a bag of cookies," says Su-Ying Lee. "It's really up to you."

Lee, with Suzanne Carte Blanchenot, conceived the project in good humour, and dubbed it "Under New Management," in a nod to the constant urban commercial churn (after the video store, the interventionist prankster troupe CN Tower Liquidation will end the project's run on Aug. 28 with a lab that preserves your valuables by compressing them into a resin cube). "We just started throwing around ideas we thought were hilarious," she said.

But a simple gag it's not. They considered a pop-up gallery, open for a limited time, but wanted the project to live beyond the narrow confines of the art community.

"We thought a store would be something that people would be familiar with, and less intimidated by," Lee said.

"We didn't want to preach to the converted."

In fact, if there's any preaching here, Lee says it's inadvertent, though a little serendipity gives the project some unexpected currency. Here, dead-centre along Queen West's toney retail zone, the proverbial mom-and-pop shops have been all but erased by slick cafés and fashion retail. Convenience stores don't open here; they close.

Three blocks away, at the corner of Queen and Euclid streets, the much-loved Square Fruit Market, a neighbourhood fixture for decades, finally succumbed to rising rents and closed just as the project was preparing to open its doors.

On its final day last month, the Square Fruit Market threw a party, serving sushi to longtime patrons and inviting them to help themselves to whatever was left on the shelves.

Amid the increasingly impersonal boutique slickness of the area, it was an unheard-of act of community-minded generosity, from grateful shop owners to their loyal customers.



Under New Management is an art installation in the guise of a convenience store.

LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

It was exactly the kind of feel-good neighbourhood spirit “Under New Management” hoped to capture. Instead of a typical art opening, they had a community barbecue across the street in the park.

And then, there was the shop's loose profit motive. Katherine Hong, who minds the store most days, recalls an evolving regular customer struck by the fluid pricing.

“For him, it was all about the bargain,” she recalled. As he grabbed handfuls of chips and popcorn bags, Hong had to curb his enthusiasm. “I had to limit him to one per customer,” she said. “He was going to buy us out.”

(In the end, Lee's initial notion proved the best remedy. “I told him it was an art installation,” Hong said. “He never came back.”)

Not everyone has been so wary. Late last week, three young women wandered by the shop. They surveyed the sign indicating its status — not “closed” or “open” but “nope,” in the same friendly-familiar font, a piece by Gary Macleod — and puzzled over it, before circling back inside.

“What are these things?” one girl asked, rolling one of Reid's pieces over in her hand. “They're plaster drippings,” Hong replied. “What do you do with them?” she asked, bemused. That, Hong said, was really up to her.

One of her friends eyed Hong suspiciously and grinned. “Is this some kind of weird performance art thing?” she asked. “There's no performance,” Hong said. “It's a store. You can buy things.”

The first woman pulled two cans off the shelf — one of beans, another wrapped with a hazy photo of a darkened alleyway (a piece by Ryan Watkins-Hughes, who inserts his personally customized products onto store shelves alongside real ones).

“They're selling President's Choice here,” she said. All three giggled. “This place is cool.”