Dianne Benson on Revolutionizing the Intersection of Art and Fashion

By Ulrich Wittner

The Curatorial Retail Pioneer Talks '80s SoHo, Artist Collaborations, and What's Missing From Fashion Now

It's hard to imagine a time when SoHo was a sleepy section of the city populated by just a few art galleries and names like Jean Paul Gaultier and Issey Miyake were blips on the radar of the American fashion press. – but before Dianne Benson got there. And was just the case. Better known as Dianne B., the retail pioneer left an indelible mark on New York fashion, bringing together the worlds of style and art and awakening the city's thirst for the French and Japanese avant-garde. She collaborated with artists like Cindy Sherman and Robert Mapplethorpe, and teamed with the Kawakubo to open the first Comme des Garçons store in America.

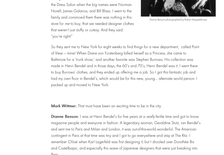
More recently, Dianne has made a name for herself as a gritty gardening guru in East Hampton. In addition to her own spectacular garden and authoring books and articles about gardening, she serves on the boards of the Long Island Museum, a museum, garden, and sculpture park founded by influential textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen, as well as overseeing East Hampton Village's 24-acre Nature Trail.

"It was the right place at the right time and I just said yes to everything that felt good and seemed fabulous to me," Dianne says of the confluence of creative forces during her NYC heyday. While good timing is certainly part of it, there's a lot to be said for her gut, her luck in discerning eye, an undaunted embrace of the new and strange, and an inexplicable spirit of creative passion—an her attributes without which the history of American fashion might have been a lot less exciting.

The Impression's Mark Wittner caught up with the retail innovator to hear about the intersection of art and fashion in '80s New York and whether that vital creative spirit can still be recaptured today.

Mark Wittner: How did you first end up in New York City?

Dianne Benson: I was a theater major in college, and I loved everything that seemed to beckon towards style, glamor, travel, all that. Instead of going to New York to try to make it as an actress, I went to work for the best store in Baltimore: Hutzler's, family-owned and very posh. At the end of the '60's during Woodstock and all that, I was an assistant in the Dress Salon where they sold dresses from Norman Norell, James Galanos, and Bill Blass. I went to the family and convinced them there was nothing in this store for me to buy. And we needed designer clothes to attract the wealthy in society. And they said "you're right!"



Dianne Benson in her garden, circa 1980

So they sent me to New York for eight weeks to find things for a new department: called Point of View – mean White Dress von Furstenberg Billed herself as a Princess, she came to Baltimore for a trunk show, and another friend, my boss Stephen Bensman, this collection was revolutionary. Bensman and I found a deal, the 800 square foot 575 Henri Bendel was it. I went there to see Dorothy Bendel, who was really defining the vibe, and I got the boutique job and held my own floor in Bendel's, which would be for the next, jeeny... alternate world person. I packed up and moved to New York.

Mark Wittner: That must have been an exciting time to be in the city.

Dianne Benson: I was at Henri Bendel's for five years at a really fertile time and got to know magazine people and everyone in fashion. A legendary woman, Geraldine Stutz, ran Bendel's and was very, very, very,