



# GENERAL IDEA

Life & Work

By Sarah E.K. Smith

ART  
CANADA  
INSTITUTE  
INSTITUT  
DE L'ART  
CANADIEN



## Contents

03

**Biography**

18

**Key Works**

48

**Significance & Critical Issues**

61

**Style & Technique**

117

**Sources & Resources**

88

**Notes**

109

**Glossary**

73

**Where to See**

126

**About The Author**

127

**Copyright & Credits**





Provocateurs General Idea (active 1969–1994) invented their history and made it reality: “We wanted to be famous, glamorous and rich. That is to say we wanted to be artists and we knew that if we were famous and glamorous we could say we were artists and we would be.... We did and we are. We are famous, glamorous artists.<sup>1</sup> The group—comprised of AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal—met in Toronto in the late 1960s and went on to live and work together for twenty-five years. General Idea ceased activities in 1994, with the untimely deaths of Partz and Zontal from AIDS-related causes.

## BEFORE GENERAL IDEA

The three individuals who became General Idea were Ronald Gabe (1945–1994), Slobodan Saia-Levy (1944–1994), and Michael Tims (b. 1946). They met in Toronto in 1969, drawn to the city's blossoming countercultural scene, and later took the names Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal, and AA Bronson, respectively. General Idea started as an anonymous group before crystallizing into an intentional three-part group.<sup>2</sup>

Gabe (Felix Partz) was raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He studied at the University of Manitoba School of Art.<sup>3</sup> In an episode that prefigures General Idea's early work in the 1970s, in 1967 Gabe made photocopies of famous works by artists for a printmaking class, including pieces by Andy Warhol (1928–1987), Frank Stella (b. 1936), Nicholas Krushenick (1929–1999), Richard Smith (b. 1931), and Roy Lichtenstein (1923–1997). He playfully titled this conceptual project *Some Art That I*

*Like*.<sup>4</sup> In 1968 Gabe travelled to Europe and Tangiers. Upon his return to Winnipeg, he created a series of ziggurat paintings, which were inspired by Islamic patterns he had viewed on his travels. General Idea later used ziggurat imagery in their work. In 1969 Gabe travelled to Toronto to visit his friend Mimi Paige at Rochdale College—ultimately, he remained in the city and made it his home.<sup>5</sup>

Saia-Levy (Jorge Zontal) was born to Yugoslavian-Jewish parents in a concentration camp in Parma, Italy, just as the Second World War was ending.<sup>6</sup> After living in Switzerland, Yugoslavia, and Israel, Saia-Levy and his family were eventually accepted as immigrants in Venezuela and settled in Caracas. He moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia, in the 1960s to study architecture at Dalhousie University. He also studied film and theatre, travelling to New York City on a regular basis to pursue acting lessons. In the late 1960s Saia-Levy studied video at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Vancouver and took performance classes with dancer Deborah Hay (b. 1941) at Intermedia.<sup>7</sup> This travel to Vancouver was significant, as it led to Saia-Levy's first meeting with Tims, who was there teaching a workshop at SFU. In 1968 Saia-Levy left Halifax with the intention of moving to Vancouver for good. Like Gabe, his stay in Toronto became permanent.<sup>8</sup> It was at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto where Saia-Levy met Tims again and was introduced to Gabe.



**LEFT:** Felix Partz wearing a monkey-fur coat, Toronto, c. 1970, photograph by Jorge Zontal **CENTRE:** Photograph of Jorge Zontal, c. 1972, photographer unknown.

**RIGHT:** Photograph of AA Bronson, 1969, photograph by Jorge Zontal. This detail is from an installation of a series of portraits of Bronson by Zontal, entitled *photographs*. The complete series has since been lost.

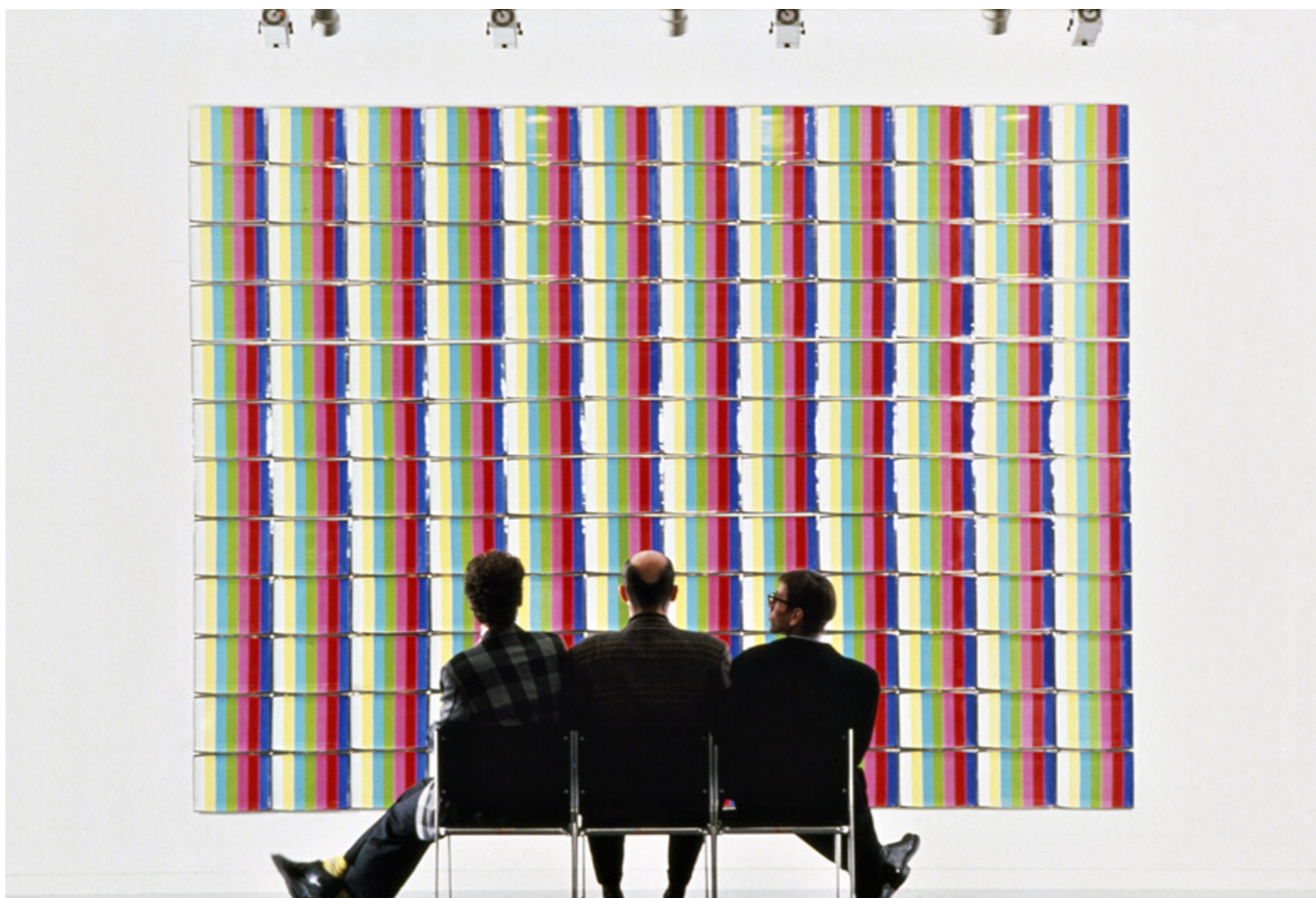


Tims (AA Bronson) was born in Vancouver in 1946 to a military family, living in cities across Canada. He moved to Winnipeg in 1964 to study architecture at the University of Manitoba. It was at university where Tims met Gabe, through their mutual friend Paige. In 1967, before completing his degree, Tims and several classmates dropped out to form an alternative community comprised of a free school, commune, free store, and newspaper. The newspaper was called *The Loving Couch Press* and Tims served as a contributing editor.<sup>9</sup> During this period Tims also worked as a volunteer apprentice for a therapist specializing in intentional communities. Through this work he travelled across Canada, which led to Tims meeting Saia-Levy in Vancouver and also put the work of Intermedia on his radar.<sup>10</sup> Tims became interested in exploring other communes, travelling to Montreal and Toronto. In Toronto he settled at Rochdale College, where he quickly became involved in Coach House Press and Theatre Passe Muraille.



LEFT: General Idea, *Mimi*, 1968–69, fluorescent acrylic and latex on canvas, 301 x 201.8 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. This is one in a series of ziggurat paintings Felix Partz completed upon returning to Canada after travelling to Europe and Tangiers. The series was later appropriated into the oeuvre of General Idea. RIGHT: Mimi Paige and Felix Partz at 78 Gerrard Street West, Toronto, c. 1969, photograph by Jorge Zontal. Gerrard Street West had had a brief period as the Carnaby Street of Toronto, with quirky fashion and flowers painted on the street. By 1969 it had been forgotten, and General Idea and friends moved into this little abandoned storefront./figcaption>

The three artists' experiences in architecture, theatre, film, art, intentional community, Gestalt therapy, and independent publishing informed their later work as General Idea. The group, according to Bronson, was born out of the "late Sixties psychedelia of student revolution, fluorescent posters, underground newspapers and Marshall McLuhan, and inspired by Canada's first artist-run centre ... Intermedia."<sup>11</sup>



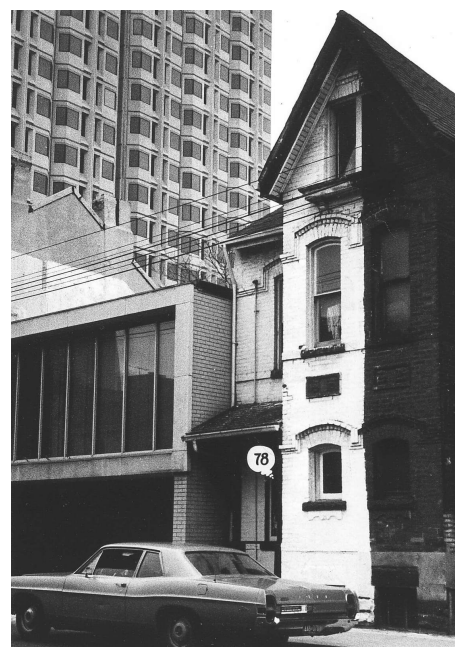
General Idea in front of *Test Pattern: T.V. Dinner Plates from the Miss General Idea Pavillion (detail)*, 1988. Collection General Idea, photograph by Tohru Kogure. This installation view is from SPIRAL (Wacoal Art Center), Tokyo, 1988.

## BECOMING A GROUP

By 1969 Ronald Gabe, Slobodan Saia-Levy, and Michael Tims were all in Toronto and came into contact at Theatre Passe Muraille during rehearsals for the production *Home Free*.<sup>12</sup> The theatre, founded out of Rochdale College—an experimental free university in Toronto—offered a countercultural scene that attracted many visual artists. As Bronson noted, “The counterculture scene was small at that time. The three major nodes were Rochdale College, Theatre Passe Muraille, and the Coach House Press.”<sup>13</sup>

Shortly after meeting, the three moved to a house at 78 Gerrard Street West in downtown Toronto along with Mimi Paige (Gabe’s then-girlfriend) and Daniel Freedman (a friend and actor).<sup>14</sup> Bronson recalls that the members of the household were unemployed and amused themselves by creating fake window displays in the house, a former store.<sup>15</sup>

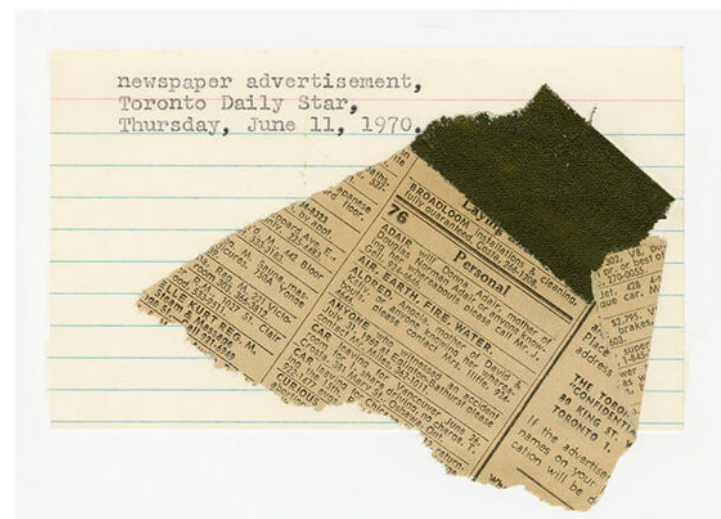
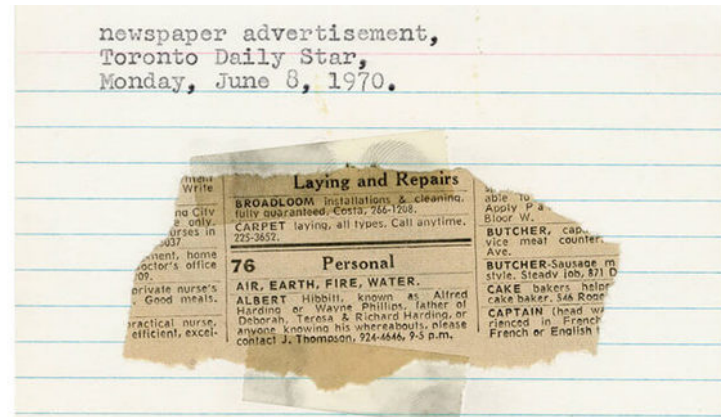
One project—targeting a nearby nurses’ residence—involved a display of romance novels about nurses. This gave the impression that the house was a bookstore, but prospective customers were prevented from visiting by a sign on the door that indicated the shopkeeper would return in five minutes.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, the group didn’t see these early experiments as artwork.<sup>17</sup>



78 Gerrard Street West, Toronto, the house where General Idea formed and lived from 1969-70, photograph by Jorge Zontal.



Subsequent installations were larger and more intricate, as well as open to the public, such as the in-house group show *Waste Age*, 1969, which featured works by Saia-Levy, Gabe, and Tims, as well as Mary Gardner.<sup>18</sup> Many early projects by the group were executed in ephemeral media, such as mail art, performance, photography, and film. Members of the house also took part in collaborations while creating individual projects in this period. For example, Gabe exhibited paintings and Saia-Levy exhibited photography, and Tims travelled to Vancouver to participate in an experimental performance.<sup>19</sup>



LEFT: AA Bronson stencilling the words "Air, Earth, Fire, Water" on the sidewalk in 1969, photograph by Jorge Zontal. This action was related to one of the group's broader concerns at that time with "Air, Earth, Fire, Water," which included a newspaper project and a work entitled *Air, Earth, Fire, Water Mantra*, 1969, performed at the exhibition *New Alchemy, Elements, Systems, Forces*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 1969. RIGHT: General Idea, *Air, Earth, Fire, Water*, newspaper advertisement in the *Toronto Daily Star* (now the *Toronto Star*), June 8 and 11, 1970, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. For this newspaper project General Idea placed an advertisement in the personals column each day for one week.

In 1970 General Idea participated in their first group exhibition, *Concept 70*, at A Space (which was in the midst of transitioning from being Nightingale Gallery) in Toronto. The group intended to show a work called *General Idea*. Bronson recounted that their name emerged as a result of a miscommunication, whereby the gallery listed the artists as General Idea. "General Idea was the name of one of the first projects we presented," he stated, "...but everyone misunderstood and thought it was the name of the group."<sup>20</sup> They decided to keep it. The name initially had no specific meaning, though it evoked the military and corporations such as General Electric. Bronson jokingly explained that it referred to the "general idea" of what the group did<sup>21</sup> and noted that the corporate reference was "radically politically incorrect at the time."<sup>22</sup> The name also helped to obscure discrete identities within the group, challenging the myth of the individual artist as genius.



Noting the casual nature of the group, Bronson later explained, “We were just a group of people having a good time.... We went everywhere together, parties, we always showed up together.”<sup>23</sup> They presented themselves theatrically: they would take special care to stage their entrance to events, arriving at gallery receptions with an entourage.<sup>24</sup>

### ESTABLISHING A TRIPARTITE IDENTITY

During the early 1970s, Ronald Gabe, Slobodan Saia-Levy, and Michael Tims assumed pseudonyms. This was a popular practice for artists involved in mail art networks. Initially, Gabe used the names Felicks Partz and Private Partz, before settling on the cheeky name Felix Partz.<sup>25</sup> Saia-Levy’s name, Jorge Zontal (pronounced “Hori-zontal”), came from a song on an old record.<sup>26</sup> Tims’s AA Bronson derived from a pen name created by the publisher of Bronson’s pornographic book, *Lena*, a novel he had written in collaboration with Susan Harrison.<sup>27</sup> Tims’s pseudonym was A.L. Bronson, but friends misremembered it as A.A. Bronson (the punctuation was later dropped).<sup>28</sup>



LEFT: General Idea, *Inside/Outside General Idea Headquarters, Toronto* (detail from the installation *Light On*), 1971, one of three chromogenic prints on Masonite, overall 20.3 x 76.2 cm, Collection General Idea. This photograph depicts the General Idea headquarters above the Mi-House restaurant at 87 Yonge Street, Toronto, c. 1971. RIGHT: General Idea and friends on the roof of 87 Yonge Street, Toronto, where they lived and worked, c. 1971–73, Collection General Idea, photograph by Elke Town. From left, front row: AA Bronson, Randy Gledhill, Daniel Freedman; back row: Granada Gazelle, Jorge Zontal, Felix Partz.

In 1970 General Idea moved to 87 Yonge Street, to a loft located above the Mi-House restaurant in the heart of Toronto’s Financial District.<sup>29</sup> The membership of General Idea in the early 1970s was intentionally amorphous. Partz noted that in the early days, “We purposely obscured actually, who General Idea was, because we were involved with working and living with a variety of people.... Everybody was seen as General Idea.”<sup>30</sup>

At this time General Idea created some work using the beauty-pageant format and the figure of Miss General Idea emerged as a muse for the group. Of the pageant, Partz explained, “It was our examination of the existing art world ... a questioning of the process by which masterpieces are created ... validated ... selected and worshipped.”<sup>31</sup> *The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1970, was staged as part of their multimedia event *What Happened*, 1970, in the Festival of Underground Theatre at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts and the Global Village Theatre. The group continued with this format for *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971, an elaborate project that culminated in a performance in Walker Court at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The pageants speak to the group’s early interest in employing satirical mimicry of popular forms as a means of social critique. As curator Frédéric Bonnet noted, the group understood that the artist “was no longer someone who made things to hang on walls, but a commentator on society.”<sup>32</sup>

In 1972 General Idea had their first exhibition at a commercial gallery: Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto. This marked the beginning of the group's relationship with gallerist Carmen Lamanna, an individual who had a significant impact on their oeuvre. That same year, when they were in their mid-twenties, Partz, Zontal, and Bronson made a commitment to live and work together until 1984.<sup>33</sup> This solidified the group's tripartite structure: as Partz explained, "It became quite clear, that Jorge, AA and myself were the actual ongoing core members of General Idea, and the ones that were most involved."<sup>34</sup>

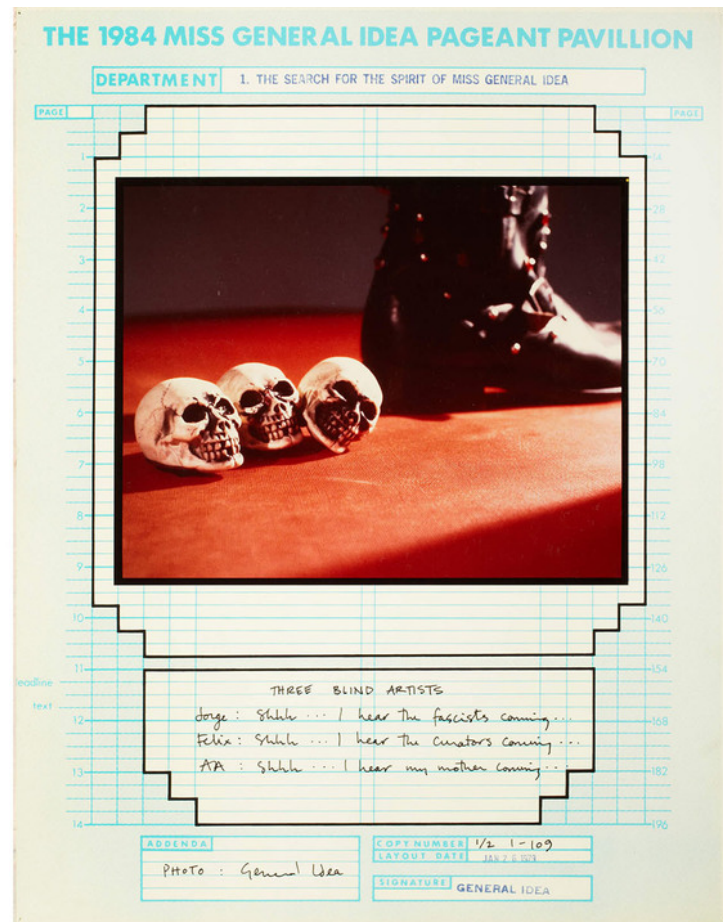
By this point the trio had established a domestic relationship, and their art production was a part of their lives together. Bronson described the significance of selecting the year 1984: "We thought of that as a kind of Orwellian symbol of the future, and I think that date kept us together: we could always say, well, it's only seven more years, or, well, it's only four more years, and so on, until our living and working together had become so habitual that we didn't know how to do anything else. We were addicted to the intensity of our own total living/working relationship."<sup>35</sup> In the mid-1970s the artists began to clarify their identity, in contrast to the previous ambiguity of the group's membership. Partz described their aim as akin to an advertising campaign: "to define who General Idea was, visually."<sup>36</sup> This can be seen in *Showcard Series*, 1975-79, and *Pilot*, 1977.

During the early 1970s General Idea founded two key institutions. The group expressed their interest in the appropriation of media formats in establishing *FILE Magazine*. Launched in 1972, the publication adopted the logo of the popular American news magazine *LIFE*. General Idea designed *FILE* to be a "parasite within the magazine distribution system."<sup>37</sup> As Bronson explained, "We knew that if it looked familiar, people would pick it up, and they did. We thought of it as a kind of virus within the communication systems, a concept that William Burroughs had written about in the early '60s."<sup>38</sup>



Felix Partz and Miss Honey on the set of *The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1970, a component of the project *What Happened*, 1970, part of the Festival of Underground Theatre, St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, Toronto, 1970, photograph by General Idea.





LEFT: General Idea, *FILE Magazine*, "Mr. Peanut Issue," vol. 1, no. 1 (April 15, 1972), web offset periodical, thirty-two pages plus cover, black and white reproductions, with eight-page insert by Dana Atchley, edition of 3,000, various collections. On the cover of this issue is Vincent Trasov as Mr. Peanut, in a photograph taken by David Hlynsky. RIGHT: General Idea, *1-109 Three Blind Artists*, 1979, chromogenic print, felt pen, and screen print on paperboard, 45.7 x 35.6 cm, edition of two with occasional artist's proofs, signed (rubber-stamped) and numbered, various collections, from Showcard Series, 1975-79.

The second institution was Art Metropole.<sup>39</sup> By fall 1973, Partz, Zontal, and Bronson had moved the General Idea studio to the third floor of 241 Yonge Street, and they established Art Metropole in the front of the space.<sup>40</sup> Art Metropole was a distribution centre and archive, which held various low-cost formats, including artists books, video and audio works as well as multiples. The aim of the institution was to create an alternative distribution system for art.<sup>41</sup> Still operating today, Art Metropole holds an important place in the history of alternative arts venues in Canada.

## AFTER THE PAVILLION

General Idea began exhibiting in European galleries in 1976 and had a vigorous European exhibition history from then on. For the next decade, as AA Bronson explains, "this was the focus of our life together."<sup>42</sup> In 1977 the group moved to a large studio space on Simcoe Street.<sup>43</sup> At this time General Idea shifted the approach to their pageant concept, taking on the role of fictional archeologists. This move was tied to the reputed destruction of the notional *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, which they reported to have been engulfed in flames during the Miss General Idea Pageant in 1984. The artists had announced and begun staging elements of this faux destruction in 1977, documentation of which was used in exhibitions and videos from that year on.<sup>44</sup>





LEFT: Performance documentation of General Idea, *The Ruins of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1977, photograph by General Idea. This performance and site-specific installation included rubble and chalk with performative elements. The work was destroyed after the project. RIGHT: General Idea, *The Three Graces (Mural Fragment from the Villa Dei Misteri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion)*, 1982, latex enamel on wood, 246 x 218 x 5 cm, Vancouver Art Gallery.

For instance, their video *Hot Property*, 1977–80, includes footage from this fictitious disaster.<sup>45</sup> Its voiceover notes that the facts surrounding this event were very much obscured: “But what actually happened, why did the Miss General Idea 1984 *Pavillion* burst to flames and burn to the ground? Was it a spontaneous reaction of the audience? Was it critical arson? Or was General Idea always planning to pull the rug out before the climax? So many unanswered questions, so many loose ends, so many ambiguities and so many clues.”<sup>46</sup> In subsequent exhibitions, General Idea presented the alleged ruins of and artifacts from the *Pavillion*. The creation of relics and ephemera from the various rooms of the *Pavillion* provided a means for General Idea to expand on different aspects of the structure using multiple media, as well as allowing the group to continue to engage in the concept of the pageant in new ways.

The figure of Miss General Idea also began to disappear from the group’s work in the late 1970s. New imagery emerged, such as the poodle, which was employed in several works. For instance, the dogs were first featured as architectural remnants from the ruins of the *Pavillion* in 1981. The trio also appeared as these animals in the portrait *P is for Poodle*, 1983/89, which was originally made for the cover of *FILE*. Other works included the large-scale paintings *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*, 1984, which depicted fornicating dayglo poodles. As symbolic representations of the artists, this trope was a coded means for the artists to address their queer identity and to push art critics to address sexuality in their work.<sup>47</sup>

General Idea received their first solo museum exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1979. The exhibition featured work produced during a residency, which was organized in collaboration with de Appel, Amsterdam. De Appel commissioned a made-for-television artwork and the exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum included the video *Test Tube*, 1979.

This attention in Europe was a significant achievement; AA Bronson noted that Switzerland, Austria, and Italy were particularly receptive to General Idea's work at this time.<sup>48</sup> Key exhibitions in the early 1980s included the Venice Biennale in 1980, where General Idea was part of the group exhibition *Canada Video*. In Venice they presented *Pilot*, 1977, and *Test Tube*, 1979. In 1982 they presented *Cornucopia*, 1982, as well as an installation that included painted constructions and works on paper, at the important exhibition

*Documenta 7* in Kassel, Germany.<sup>49</sup> That same year, they presented work in photography and performance at the Biennale of Sydney.

"Because we were so ironic," Bronson stated, "in Canada we were seen as not being really serious. Also, people would tell us that you can't be a group and be an artist, artists don't work in groups. But when we went to Europe ... we were very quickly picked up and written about in political terms, Marxist terms, because we operated as a group, because we operated by consensus, because of the critical intent inherent in the work, and I think to a certain extent because of the sexual aspect: that we were, if not clearly gay, at least sexually ambiguous."<sup>50</sup> The international critical reception of General Idea's work influenced how the group understood their practice and also filtered back to North American audiences.

In 1984 the group received recognition in the form of a large, touring retrospective titled *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*.<sup>51</sup> Bronson notes that this show was extremely important in terms of General Idea's career as it was initiated by two of the most-influential museums in the period: the Kunsthalle Basel and the Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven. The European retrospective allowed the artists to reflect on their past production and rethink their future. The group identified this moment—the symbolism of the year 1984 and their increased recognition—as a new era in their practice. "We had made that



Installation view of General Idea, *Khroma Key Klub: The Blue Ruins from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1985, installation, scenic acrylic on found Styrofoam objects, approximately 400 x 1,000 x 1,000 cm, photograph by Wim Riemens. International critical attention paid to General Idea's work preceded recognition from institutions in Canada. This installation view is from De Vleeshal, Middelburg, the Netherlands, 1985. *Khroma Key Klub* was destroyed after its exhibition.



commitment to work together 'til 1984," explained Felix Partz. "So here was 1984.... We were involved in this retrospective, but also we were involved with this conclusion of a project. Or was it?"<sup>52</sup> At this point General Idea had not yet received any recognition in the United States. Bronson also explains that though they were not taken seriously in Canada, they exhibited their work at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1984.<sup>53</sup>



LEFT: General Idea, *Self-Portrait with Objects*, 1981/82, gelatin silver print, 35.6 x 27.7 cm, edition of ten (only one produced), signed and numbered, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. The objects featured with Bronson, Zontal, and Partz are representations of General Idea's key works and iconography to date: *FILE Magazine*; a *V.B. Gown*; a poodle, and the cocktail holders *Liquid Assets*, *Architectonic*, and *Magic Palette*. This portrait demonstrates the self-reflective direction that General Idea's works took in the mid-1980s.

RIGHT: General Idea, *Nightschool*, 1989, chromogenic print (Ektachrome), 95.5 x 76.7 cm, edition of twelve plus one artist's proof, signed and numbered, various collections. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s General Idea created a series of self-portraits in which the artists projected a shared identity. *Nightschool* is just one in this series, which includes *P is for Poodle*, 1983/89, and *Playing Doctor*, 1992. Here the artists are dressed as college graduates with the Gothic tone of the work conveying the horror of the AIDS epidemic.

In 1985 General Idea was drawn to New York City.<sup>54</sup> Bronson noted the significance of displaying their work in 1986 at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York, and of representation by New York City gallery International With Monument. The group recognized New York as a key site for the circulation of artists and curators from Europe.<sup>55</sup> They rented an apartment at 120 West 12th Street in 1986, eventually adding a studio in the meat-packing district. Zontal spent more of his time in New York, while Partz remained based in Toronto, and Bronson travelled between them.



To keep their collaboration going, they communicated through telephone calls, faxes, frequent visits, and exhibition travel.<sup>56</sup> As they had many international projects in the seven years that followed, they spent much of their year together on the road. Discussing their ability to work together despite geographical distance, they affirmed that over the years General Idea had developed its own language and a group mind.<sup>57</sup>

### AIDS PROJECTS

In 1987 the artists were invited by their gallery Koury Wingate in New York (previously International With Monument) to contribute to a June exhibition in support of the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR). General Idea created a painting, *AIDS*, 1987, that mimicked Robert Indiana's (b. 1928) famous painting *LOVE*, 1966, but replaced the word "LOVE" with "AIDS." From this moment on, the majority of General Idea's work focused on addressing HIV/AIDS in ways both explicit and implicit.<sup>58</sup>



LEFT: General Idea, *AIDS*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 182.9 x 182.9 cm, private collection. RIGHT: Robert Indiana, *LOVE*, 1966, oil on canvas, 182.6 x 182.6 x 6.4 cm, Indianapolis Museum of Art.

The AIDS logo was central to many of these works, the bulk of which were temporary public art projects, as well as art created for display in museums and commercial galleries.<sup>59</sup> For example, the group created an extensive series of posters, painting installations, a sculpture, and an animation for the Spectacolor Board in Times Square, New York City, all of which were based on the AIDS logo. The group's aim was to use AIDS as a means to name what, at the time, was unnamable: raising AIDS as a topic of discussion in the public sphere.<sup>60</sup>

General Idea's works took a brazen approach to AIDS.<sup>61</sup> In the late 1980s AIDS was a taboo topic and a climate of fear surrounded the disease due to widespread and extreme homophobia. This was because initially the disease was thought to exclusively affect gay men. For instance, in 1981 the first article in the *New York Times* to address AIDS identified it as a cancer that only affected homosexuals.<sup>62</sup> This was not helped by the fact that inaccurate and inflammatory information about the disease circulated widely in the media.<sup>63</sup> Many aspects of the AIDS pandemic, including its scope and severity, were not at first understood. Tremendous prejudice—including within the medical community—was widespread given the initial impact of AIDS in the gay community and its sexual transmission. As such, there was a moral dimension to the AIDS pandemic that activists, as well as artists, sought to address.<sup>64</sup>

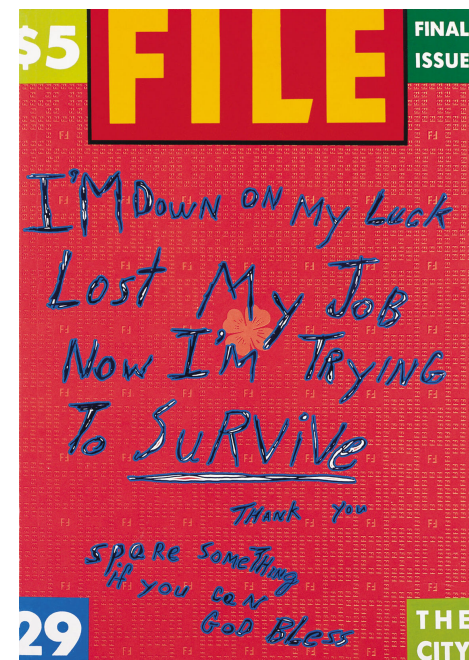
In 1989 General Idea produced the last issue of *FILE Magazine*, closing the publication after twenty-six issues over seventeen years.<sup>65</sup> This was the start of a productive but difficult period for the artists. Felix Partz was diagnosed HIV-positive in 1989; Jorge Zontal was diagnosed the following year.<sup>66</sup> The artists publicly disclosed their HIV status—Zontal addressed his illness in a 1993 interview on CBC Radio.<sup>67</sup> Such public disclosure was significant given the politics of the era and the stigma associated with the disease.

Partz and Zontal's diagnoses gave a new urgency to General Idea's projects. A key exhibition in the 1990s was the touring retrospective *General Idea's Fin de siècle*, which focused on the group's works since 1984, primarily AIDS-related projects. Initiated by the Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart, Germany, this show toured in Barcelona and Hamburg in Europe and in Columbus, San Francisco, and Toronto in North America in 1992 and 1993.<sup>68</sup>

## FINAL MONTHS

Zontal's illness manifested in summer 1993, leading to a rapid deterioration that eventually left him blind and bedridden; in Partz the disease progressed more slowly.<sup>69</sup> Bronson and Zontal left New York City and returned to Toronto. The trio again lived together under one roof, moving into a penthouse apartment in The Colonnade at 131 Bloor Street West.

The Colonnade space was enormous, accommodating their studio practice—which continued unabated—as well as medical equipment. Together with a group of close friends, Bronson took on the role of caretaker for Partz and Zontal, who both decided they would endure AIDS, which at the time was a terminal illness, at home.<sup>70</sup> In their last months together, the three worked on smaller projects. These included paintings, such as the Infe©ted Mondrian series, 1994, which appropriates and subverts the sparse linear aesthetic of the signature abstract works by Dutch painter Piet Mondrian (1872–1944). In the early 1990s General Idea received several significant honours, including the City of Toronto's Lifetime Achievement Award in 1993.



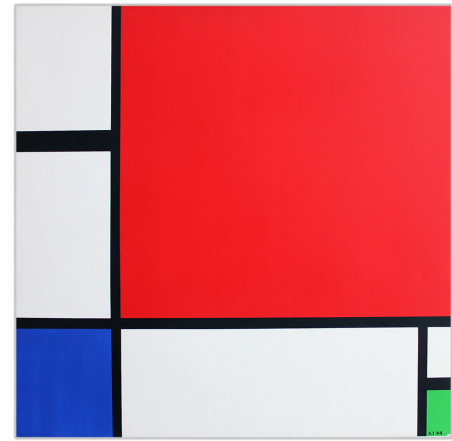
General Idea, *FILE Magazine*, "Final Issue, The City," no. 29 (1989), offset periodical, eighty-eight pages plus cover, black and white reproductions and spot colour, edition of 1,500, various collections.

The group lived full lives despite the toll of AIDS. On January 29, 1994, General Idea honoured Zontal during his last days by celebrating his fiftieth birthday with a party at the General Idea penthouse. More than one hundred guests came to the event, some flying in from as far away as Los Angeles, New York City, Zurich, London, and Amsterdam. At the party Zontal made a spirited final appearance dressed at his request as a Spanish nobleman, a reference to the El Greco (c. 1541–1614) painting *The Nobleman with his Hand on his Chest*, 1580.<sup>71</sup>

For the last two months of his life, Zontal was confined to his bed.<sup>72</sup> He died of AIDS-related causes on February 3, 1994. Partz passed away four months and two days later, on June 5, 1994. Later that year General Idea was recognized with the Jean A. Chalmers Award for Visual Arts in Toronto. Bronson showed up to accept the honour in Partz's wheelchair, wearing the white shirt with ruff donned by Zontal on his fiftieth birthday.

Reflecting in 2012, Bronson explained that he initially did not know how to be an artist outside of the group.<sup>73</sup> Some of his early solo works were tributes to General Idea. The best known of these is the portrait of Partz, *Felix, June 5, 1994*, 1994, a billboard-scale digital print of lacquer on vinyl. This image features Partz at home in his bed in the hours following his death.

*Felix* shows Partz as he was in the last three weeks of his life. It is at once striking and unsettling. Surrounded by his favourite objects—including a tape recorder, a remote control, and a package of cigarettes—Partz is dressed in a vividly patterned black and white shirt, and his head rests against an array of multicoloured cushions. Bronson notes that Partz was drawn to vibrant clothing during his illness: “As [Felix] got closer and closer to death he started wearing colours that were more alive, brighter and brighter colours. He got totally crazed with colour and pattern.”<sup>74</sup> Partz's face, with sunken eye sockets and prominent cheekbones, betrays the trauma of AIDS; he suffered from wasting so extreme that his eyes could not close. *Felix* is a poignant tribute to Partz: a means of farewell and a testament to Bronson's continued art making.



General Idea, *Infe©ted Mondrian #9*, 1994, acrylic on gatorboard, 51 x 51 cm, McCarthy Tétrault LLP, Toronto.



LEFT: Photograph of Jorge Zontal, dressed as a Spanish nobleman, at his fiftieth birthday party on January 29, 1994, photograph by Barr Gilmore. This image was featured on the invitation card for Zontal's memorial service, designed by Barbara Bloom, 1994. RIGHT: El Greco, *The Nobleman with his Hand on his Chest*, c. 1580, oil on canvas, 81.8 x 66.1 cm, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.







AA Bronson, *Felix, June 5, 1994, 1994* (printed in 1999), lacquer on vinyl, 213.4 x 426.5 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

The demand for General Idea's work has increased since the group's demise. It circulates internationally and continues to receive recognition in the twenty-first century. For instance, in 2011 a travelling retrospective was organized by the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris and another retrospective will tour Latin America in 2016–17. This latter show is linked to the publication of General Idea's catalogue raisonné. The group has also had significant exhibitions in commercial galleries. The Esther Schipper Gallery in Berlin, for example, has been particularly focused on revealing aspects of General Idea's work that were previously unknown. Other galleries, including Mai 36 Galerie in Zürich and Maureen Paley in London, are showing General Idea at art fairs internationally as well as in their exhibition programs. The group has also continued to receive accolades. Most prominently, in 2011 AA Bronson accepted on behalf of General Idea the Chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres from Frédéric Mitterand, then Minister of Culture of France.

Bronson maintains a successful solo art practice. He currently lives in Berlin.<sup>75</sup>





**General Idea's early projects mimicked popular culture formats, such as beauty pageants and picture magazines, in order to forward a critical and satirical view of art, culture, and media. In 1987 the group turned their attention to the AIDS crisis, using strategies developed over the previous eighteen years to new ends.**



## THE 1971 MISS GENERAL IDEA PAGEANT 1971



General Idea, *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971

Various media (including mail art project, performance, photography, and ephemera), dimensions variable

Various collections, including Collection of the Carmen Lamanna Estate, Toronto; documentation and ephemera held at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

*The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* is one of General Idea's best-known conceptual projects.<sup>1</sup> This mail art and performance piece was one of a series of faux beauty pageants the group created to interrogate glamour, fame, and the art world.<sup>2</sup> The project can be traced back to an earlier work by the group: *What Happened*, 1970. This multimedia piece—with a pageant component—was presented at the 1970 Festival of Underground Theatre in Toronto. The pageant format and the figure of Miss General Idea were key elements of the group's mythology, structures around which they continued to create art in subsequent years.

General Idea found sixteen potential applicants among their network—artists across North America—and mailed out entry kits to these “finalists.” The invitation promised potential competitors the chance to win “fame, fun, and fortune.”<sup>3</sup> Each kit contained rules and regulations, pageant documents, and a pageant gown. Thirteen artists responded.<sup>4</sup> Those who participated in the competition took up the task, submitting photographs that featured their choice for Miss General Idea (dressed in the provided gown). These entries were exhibited at A Space in Toronto.

The extravagant award ceremony took place in Walker Court at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, and presented a series of excerpted moments from a pageant.<sup>5</sup> The ceremony was carefully scripted and included music, speeches, and prizes. It was all captured on video as a television event, with the crowd as a stand-in for a television audience.<sup>6</sup> The competition judges were well-regarded figures in the art scene, including Daniel Freedman, David Silcox, and Dorothy Cameron. Freedman was one of the original members of General Idea and had lived with the group on Gerrard Street West and Yonge Street. In material for the pageant, he was identified as an actor, “General Idea Glamour Consultant, and the star of the MGM spectacular *Fortune and Men’s Eyes*.”<sup>7</sup> Silcox was then the Assistant Dean in the Faculty of Fine Arts at York University and had been the former head of Visual Arts at the Canada Council.<sup>8</sup> Cameron was a well-known critic and art consultant who was a regular on Canada Council juries and had given Partz his first Canada Council grant.<sup>9</sup>

The 1971 Miss General Idea crown was awarded to Vancouver artist Michael Morris (b. 1942), who at that moment announced his new name: Marcel Dot. The judges declared that his submission succeeded in “capturing ‘Glamour’ without falling into it.”<sup>10</sup>



LEFT: Vincent Trasov, *Marcel Dot*, 1971, gelatin silver print, 25.4 x 21.6 cm, Collection General Idea. This is a submission photograph from Vincent Trasov, who chose Michael Morris (a.k.a. Marcel Dot) as a contestant for *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971. RIGHT: General Idea, *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971, poster, photo screen print on salmon wove paper (edition of ten on white paper), 101.6 x 66 cm, various collections.





GENERAL IDEA

Life & Work by Sarah E.K. Smith

## GLAMOUR ISSUE 1975



General Idea, *FILE Magazine*, "Glamour Issue," vol. 3, no. 1, 1975

Web offset periodical, eighty pages plus cover, black and white reproductions and eight-page insert by Image Bank

Various collections

Created by General Idea in 1972, *FILE Magazine* ran for twenty-six issues, ending in 1989. Superficially, the publication mimicked the well-known American magazine *LIFE*, though its content did not.<sup>1</sup> The title *FILE* was a clear pun on *LIFE*, as well as an overt reference to the notion of art imitating life and life imitating art. In the artists' words, *FILE* was "a cultural parasite carried along in the mainstream blood stream of commercial distribution systems and subtly altered the body of its host."<sup>2</sup> Filled with "wisecracks, wordplay, and cryptic layers of fact and fiction," the publication provided a broad, multifaceted platform through which General Idea could further their own self-invented mythology.<sup>3</sup>



This publicity shot of various issues of *FILE Magazine* includes a double-page spread from the "Glamour" manifesto in *FILE Magazine*, "Glamour Issue," vol. 3, no. 1 (autumn 1975), 20-21, photograph by General Idea.

The "Glamour Issue" of *FILE* illuminates, in the group's words, "the story of glamour and the part it played in our art." In the issue's editorial, the members of General Idea directly address the slippage between fact and fiction: "All myth and no content. Or is it vice versa?"—this assessment reflecting General Idea's practice as a whole.

The issue's central article is "Glamour," a dense fourteen-page manifesto written by the artists.<sup>4</sup> It opens with a portrait of the trio as architects. The imagery that follows includes collages by the group (a favourite medium), as well as General Idea projects such as *Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea 1971*, 1971. The article also plays with text from philosophical and literary works by authors such as Roland Barthes (1915-1980), William S. Burroughs (1914-1997), and Gertrude Stein (1874-1946),<sup>5</sup> who were key influences on the trio. General Idea altered these text sections arbitrarily; for example, excerpts from Barthes are rewritten substituting the word "glamour" for the word "myth."<sup>6</sup> The appropriation of their work is justified by General Idea's assertion that glamour necessitates theft.<sup>7</sup> "We knew



Detail of the "Glamour" manifesto, *FILE Magazine*, "Glamour Issue," vol. 3, no. 1 (autumn 1975), 22-23, photograph by General Idea.





that in order to be glamorous we had to become plagiarists.”<sup>8</sup>

General Idea acknowledged that glamour was a taboo topic in 1975, despite their interest in embodying it and employing it for their own needs: “The ‘Glamour’ article...was written at a time when, within the art scene, it was in extremely bad taste to talk about glamour. It was the last subject in the world that anybody would mention. And the same with money and fame.”<sup>9</sup> The “Glamour Issue” typifies the way General Idea adopted existing concepts, transforming them through humour and irony.<sup>10</sup>



## SHOWCARD SERIES 1975-79



General Idea, Showcard Series, 1975-79

Serigraphed cards with photographs, each card 45.7 x 35.6 cm

Various collections, including the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto;  
the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; and Collection of the Carmen Lamanna Estate,  
Toronto

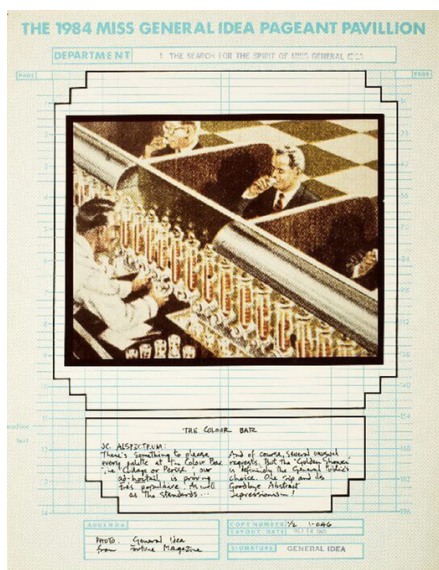


Showcard Series illuminates General Idea's developing mythology during the pivotal first decade of their work together.<sup>1</sup> It documents the many conceptual structures that shaped their work at the time and contains ideas the group advanced in subsequent projects.

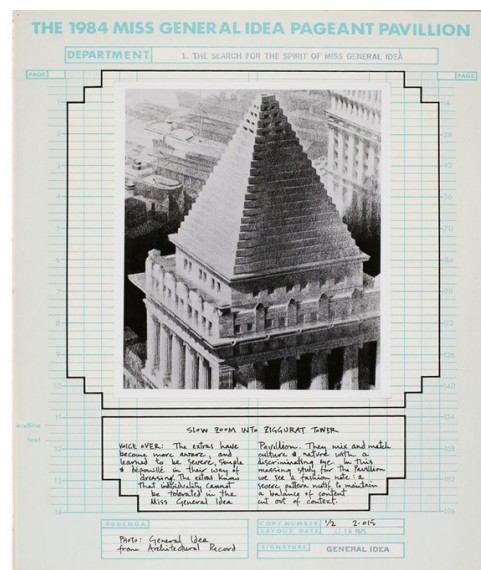
The cards in this open-ended series were produced in editions of two and were all designed in the same format: a light-blue grid that resembles a magazine layout page, with specific areas for photos and text, and labelled sections for department, addenda, copy number, layout date, and signature.<sup>2</sup> Each card is clearly titled "THE 1984 MISS GENERAL IDEA PAGEANT PAVILLION" in capital letters, connecting this work to General Idea's larger project of building—and, after 1977, recovering—this fictional *Pavillion*.

The cards are duplicates of the layout cards that General Idea used for issues of *FILE Magazine*. Stamped and dated, each card is labelled with a specific "Department," as follows: "1. The Search for the Spirit of Miss General Idea"; "2. The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant"; "3. Miss General Idea 1984"; "4. The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion"; and "5. The Frame of Reference." These categories cover the key fictional narratives that structure General Idea's work through the 1970s to the mid-1980s.

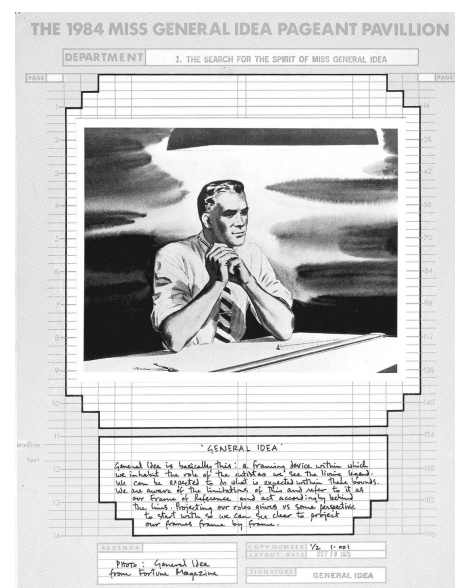
The cards feature handwritten text together with photographs by the artists, including ones that they had taken of popular magazines. General Idea considered these photographs works in themselves, rather than reproductions. There are also images of reviews of General Idea's work, as well as a few photos by other artists, which had been created for mail art networks—a means of engaging artists in a conversation about General Idea's projects. In this way, the cards are comprised of an intentional and styled selection of images chosen by General Idea.<sup>3</sup> On each card handwritten text offers information about the group. For instance, one explains how they appropriated the role of the artist: "General Idea is basically this: a framing device within which we inhabit the role of the artist as we see the living legend. We can be expected to do what is expected within these bounds."



LEFT: General Idea, 1-046 *The Colour Bar*, 1975, gelatin silver print, felt pen, and screen print on paperboard, 45.7 x 35.6 cm, edition of two with occasional artist's proofs, signed (rubber-stamped) and numbered, various collections, from Showcard Series, 1975-79.



RIGHT: General Idea, 2-015 *Slow Zoom Into Ziggurat Tower*, 1975, gelatin silver print, felt pen, and screen print on paperboard, 45.7 x 35.6 cm, edition of two with occasional artist's proofs, signed (rubber-stamped) and numbered, various collections, from Showcard Series, 1975-79.



General Idea, 1-001 *General Idea*, 1975, chromogenic print, felt pen, and screen print on paperboard, 45.7 x 35.6 cm, edition of two with occasional artist's proofs, signed (rubber-stamped) and numbered, various collections, from Showcard Series, 1975-79.



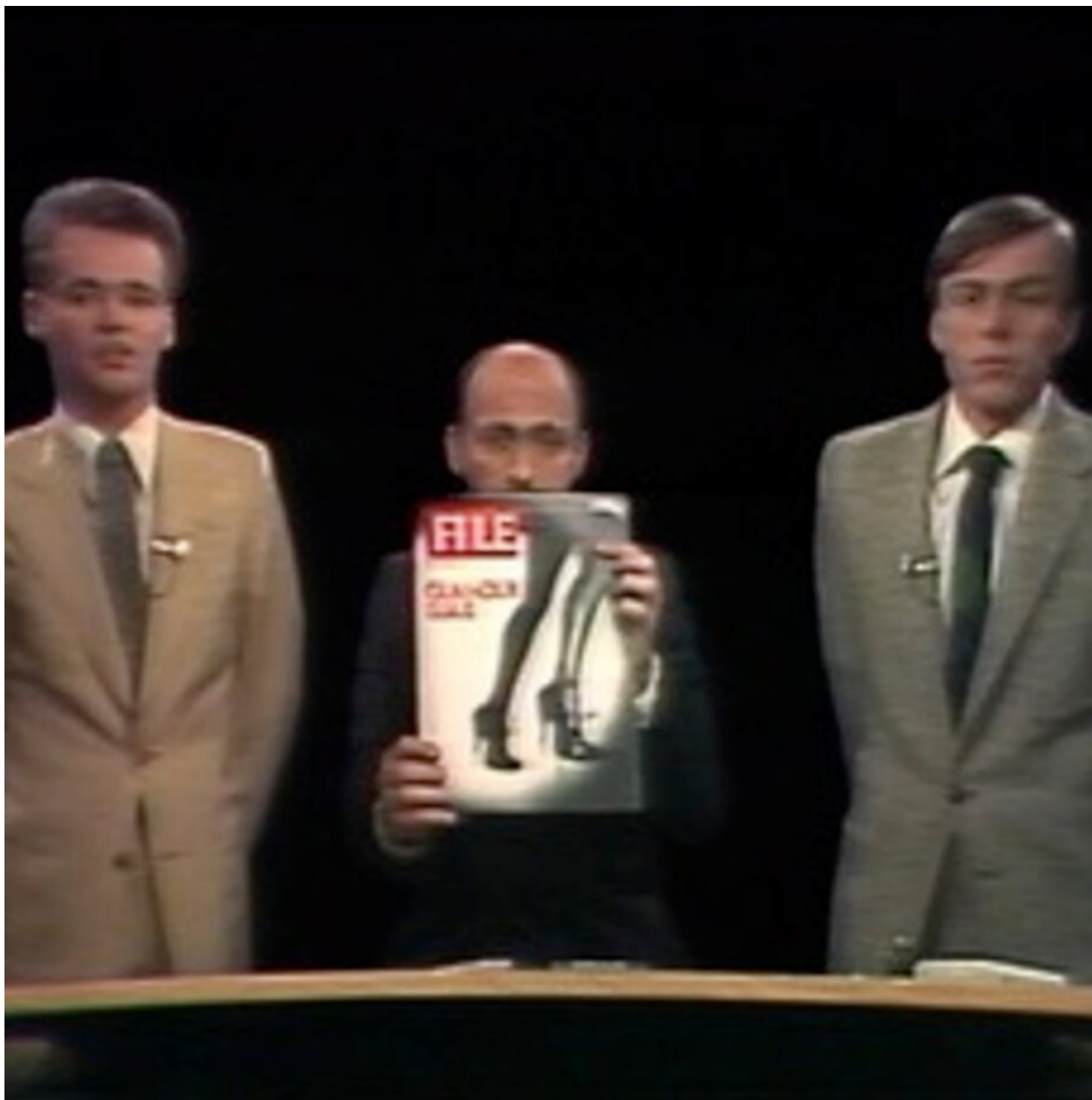
The cards also feature texts and images from previous General Idea projects, including performances, issues of *FILE Magazine*, and the *V.B. Gowns* featured in the video *Pilot*, 1977. Some cards reference nascent projects that would later be developed into fuller works: *1-046 The Colour Bar*, 1975, for example, predates the *Colour Bar Lounge* depicted in the video *Test Tube*, 1979.

General Idea conceived of the cards as expositional tools: “[Showcard Series] demonstrates as much our approach as our projects.”<sup>4</sup> The cards present facts about the group’s work and document the trio’s activities. According to curator Peggy Gale, the cards are “a collection of theses, an intellectual proposition, a diary.”<sup>5</sup>





## PILOT 1977



General Idea, *Pilot*, 1977

Video, 28 min., 56 sec.

Various collections

*Pilot* is a video work that was commissioned by TVOntario for broadcast on late night television.<sup>1</sup> It is a highly structural video divided into five segments that match the five categories in Showcard Series, 1975–79. Each of the five segments draws on three different television formats, which are used in repeating sequence. The segments are introduced by an inspirational montage wherein a voiceover describes the segment's subject as "basically this ..."<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, is followed by a "talking heads" section featuring Partz, Zontal, and Bronson, and each segment concludes with three minutes of prerecorded footage. The artists performed the work live and inserted the prerecorded segments, which function like stories within a television news program.<sup>3</sup>

Through this structure, *Pilot* conveys key facts about General Idea. For instance, the artists date their collaboration to 1968.<sup>4</sup> They also explain their intention to work together until 1984, which, Zontal says, is a "convenient way to format the future."<sup>5</sup> The video introduces several key projects by General Idea. These include *FILE Magazine*, which General Idea calls their "own media device." Introducing the "Glamour Issue," the artists discuss their legal battle with Time Life Incorporated over their appropriation of *LIFE* magazine's logo. The video also introduces the *V.B. Gowns* (venetian-blind costumes created by the group), architectural studies for *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*.<sup>6</sup> Other key elements of the group's work are featured, such as *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant*.

Blurring the lines between reality and fiction, *Pilot* is key to understanding General Idea's work from the 1970s. It demonstrates their interest in appropriating popular-culture and media formats, while introducing the group and their work to viewers. The video is significant as it marked a shift in their practice—General Idea's previous video works were conceived as television, but in *Pilot* and subsequent videos, the artists created footage for broadcast on television.<sup>7</sup>

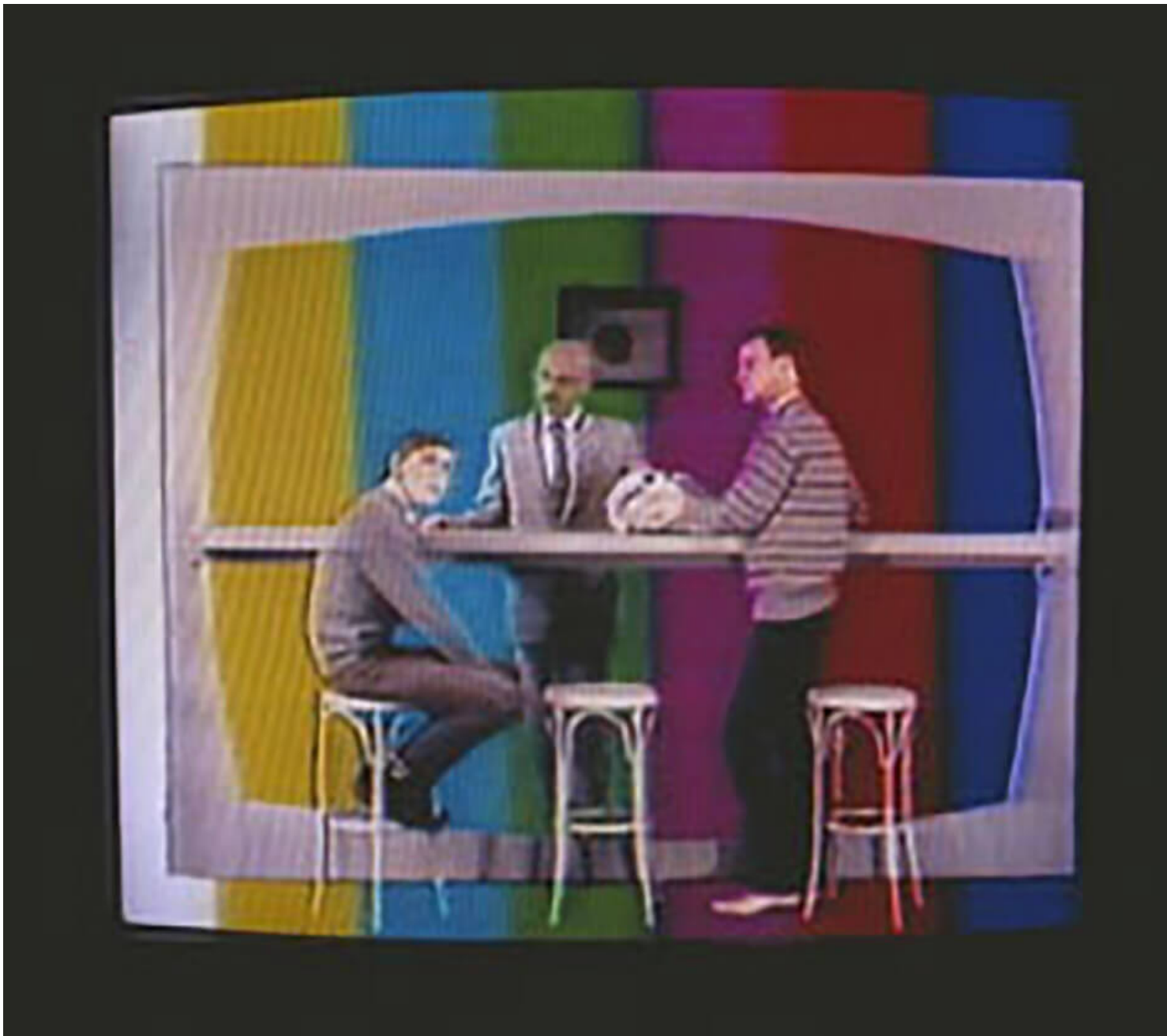


LEFT: Performance documentation of General Idea, *Going thru the Motions* in Walker Court, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, September 18, 1975, Collection General Idea, photographer unknown. Making their debut during *Going thru the Motions*, the *V.B. Gowns* acted as stand-ins for beauty pageant contestants. RIGHT: Felix Partz models *V.B. Gown #3 (Massing Studies for the Pavillion #3)* at City Hall, Toronto, 1975, photograph by General Idea.





## TEST TUBE 1979



General Idea, *Test Tube*, 1979

Video, 28 min., 15 sec.

Various collections

*Test Tube* demonstrates General Idea's ongoing interest in critiquing the media through a sophisticated appropriation of popular television formats. The video speaks to the power of media and provides a prophetic commentary on art and commerce. The Stedelijk Museum and de Appel collaborated in bringing General Idea to Amsterdam. De Appel commissioned a video for broadcast on Dutch television, while the Stedelijk Museum provided a residency.<sup>1</sup> The video was subsequently displayed in an exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in 1979.<sup>2</sup>

Like the majority of General Idea's works in this era, *Test Tube* was related to *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. The 1984 pageant and its associated *Pavillion* formed a larger conceptual structure for the group: General Idea invented narratives about these events and depicted them through their art projects. In this video, the group focuses on the *Pavillion's Colour Bar Lounge*. Jorge Zontal explains how the lounge operates as a conceptual site: "We like to think of the *Colour Bar* as sort of a cultural laboratory, where we can experiment with new cultural mixes and here we isolate members of the art scene as our control group to test the effectiveness of our intoxicating cocktail." Through this concept of the *Colour Bar Lounge*, the artists find a method for discussing how art can be consumable.

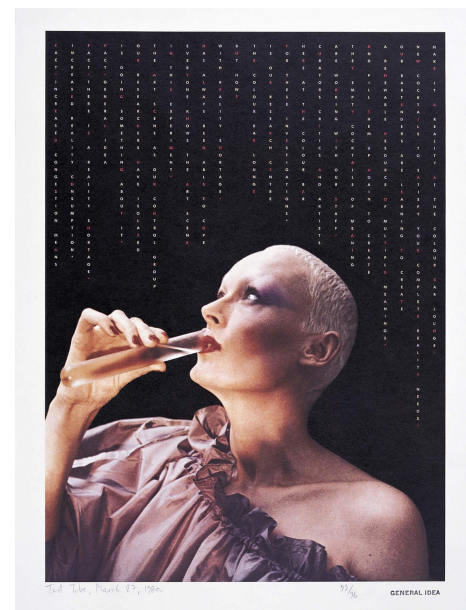


General Idea, *Colour Bar Lounge*, 1979, aluminum, glass, colour photographs, and printed cards; wall unit: 63.5 x 377 cm, floor unit: 101.3 x 380 x 24 cm; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

*Test Tube* quotes several popular television formats, including that of a news magazine, an infomercial, and a talk show. The core of the work is a soap opera-like narrative about Marianne, an artist and mother who is working on a series of paintings and debating whether or not to exhibit them.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the video she struggles with her role as an artist and her desire to succeed in the art world. Marianne's story concludes as her latest art show is deemed a success. Following this, she is pictured visiting the *Colour Bar Lounge*, where she tries one of the cocktails presented in a test tube.

Interspersed throughout Marianne's story are clips of the artists discussing media and culture, as well as short advertisements for the *Colour Bar Lounge*. Reflecting the influence of communications theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), whose work suggests that media shape the messages they produce, the artists speak directly to the issue of television formats. Zontal notes, "Television isn't just a neutral medium, television is a sensibility, a vision, a pattern of thinking."

The commercials that appear throughout the video promote a series of cocktails, including *Nazi Milk*. Through these advertisements, General Idea directly addresses the connections between art and commerce. AA Bronson later explained, "*Test Tube* talks about commodification and the artist as a participant in the world of commodification."<sup>4</sup> *Test Tube* can be read in relation to the group's earlier explorations of commerce, in projects such as *The Belly Store*, 1969.

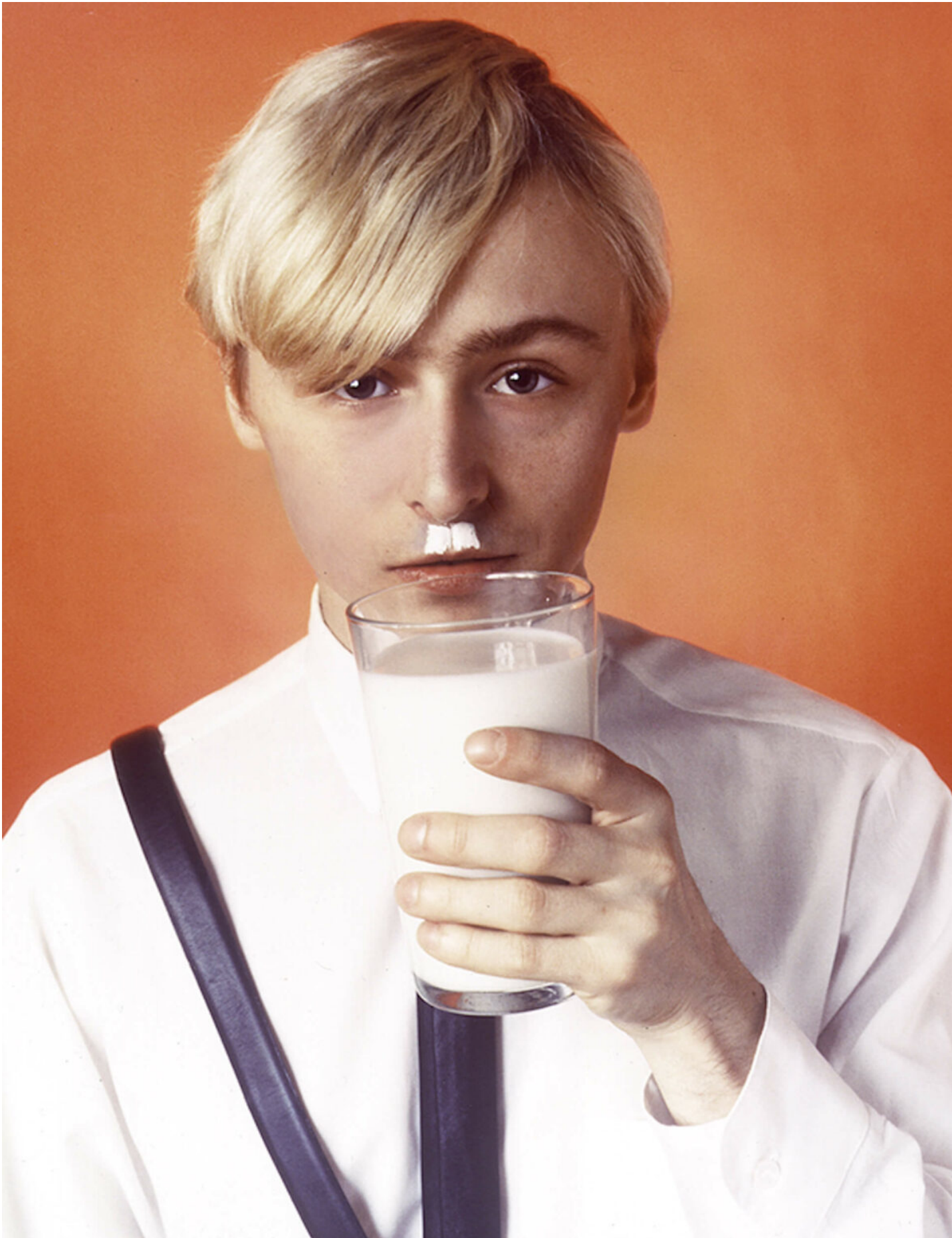


General Idea, *General Idea's Test Tube*, 1980, photolithograph on wove paper, 61.1 x 45.7 cm, various collections.





## NAZI MILK 1979



General Idea, *Nazi Milk*, 1979  
Concept featured in diverse media

*Nazi Milk* is a cocktail concept that represents the conflicting forces of innocence and evil. It is a prime example of how General Idea explored taboo subjects.

*Nazi Milk* appears in several iterations and media in General Idea's oeuvre but is always represented through Billy, a young blond man. In photographs, Billy is clad in a crisp white shirt and depicted against a bright-orange background. He raises a large glass of milk to his lips and bears a milk moustache. Looking suggestively at the viewer, Billy exudes conflicting messages. The milk he drinks alludes to health, wholesome values, and nature. His hair and moustache, however, are styled like Hitler's and he is dressed as a Nazi Youth, indicating Billy's association with Fascism.<sup>1</sup>

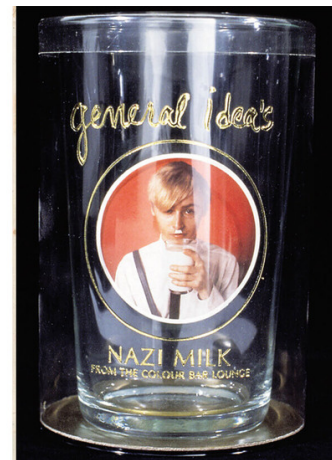
The character of Billy is connected to the larger General Idea project, *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. *Nazi Milk* was depicted as a product in an infomercial in the General Idea video *Test Tube*, 1979, which promotes a series of cocktails—each one a political metaphor. The video presents Billy holding a glass of *Nazi Milk* with a voiceover: "Billy here is all boy. Billy is the right blend.... He relies on a familiar drink with familial flavour. Everywhere boys like Billy are being initiated into the intoxicating drink: *Nazi Milk*." In this deadpan manner, *Nazi Milk* is presented as ubiquitous and familiar, troubling the idea of wholesomeness. The commercial concludes by promoting the *Colour Bar Lounge*—the bar from *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*—with a slightly disturbing call: "Drinks for the whole family at the *Colour Bar Lounge*."<sup>2</sup>

The multiple *The Getting into the Spirits Cocktail Book from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1980, repeats the faux-advertising copy of *Nazi Milk*. Describing the ingredients, it notes: "The ingredients? ... Nothing fancy ... something found in every home ..." The book also elucidates the benefits of the beverage: "It does more than just build strong minds and strong bodies."<sup>3</sup>

*Nazi Milk* was included in the mixed-media installation *Colour Bar Lounge*, 1979, and was disseminated in forms including a poster, a multiple, and a 1989 digital print on vinyl. It also served as the cover image for *FILE Magazine's* "Special Transgressions Issue," 1979.<sup>4</sup>



LEFT: Video still from General Idea, *Test Tube*, 1979, colour video, 28 min., 15 sec., various collections. RIGHT: General Idea, *General Idea's Nazi Milk Glass from the Colour Bar Lounge*, 1980, drinking glass with offset adhesive label in plastic box with gold hot-stamping; box: 15.3 x 10 (diam.) cm, glass: 15 x 9.2 (diam.) cm; various collections, photograph by Thomas E. Moore.





## THE BOUTIQUE FROM THE 1984 MISS GENERAL IDEA PAVILLION 1980



*General Idea, The Boutique from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion, 1980*  
Galvanized metal and Plexiglas, containing various General Idea multiples, prints, posters, and publications, 153.7 x 339.1 x 259.1 cm  
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

*The Boutique from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* is an installation that functions as a retail space, playing with ideas of art and commerce while also challenging the viewer's typical gallery experience. Taking the form of a three-dimensional dollar sign made of metal, the *Boutique* was designed to sell General Idea multiples and publications. Many of these multiples, made specifically for and simultaneously with the *Boutique*, reference props from General Idea's video work *Test Tube*, 1979, such as *Double Palette*, 1980, and *Liquid Assets*, 1980, both of which were designed to hold test tube-shaped glasses for cocktails. By embedding commerce within the gallery—and art within

commerce—General Idea challenged the idea of the museum as a pure space, uninfected by buying and selling.

*The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*—a fictional edifice the artists proclaimed was destroyed by fire in 1977—referred to in the *Boutique*'s title was the focus of General Idea's works between 1977 and 1986. In this period General Idea created projects about the *Pavillion* that were framed in several ways and included reconstructions of the *Pavillion*, the creation of fragments as constructs towards the future, as well as the production of archeological remains of the *Pavillion*. In this way, the past, present, and future of the *Pavillion* was constantly shifting. As AA Bronson explains, "We muddled up time, mixing the past and future." The *Boutique* is presented as an element of the future *Pavillion*.<sup>1</sup>

The functionality of the *Boutique* is central to the artists' commentary. When the work was first presented at Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto in 1980–81, it included a full-time attendant who facilitated purchases. At this initial installation, viewers were allowed to handle the items on display, because it was a retail outlet. In some subsequent displays of the work, it functioned as a shop. For example, it was shown at the ARCO art fair in Madrid; it was positioned in the middle of the gallery shop at SPIRAL in Tokyo; and a salesperson and sales were included at the 49th Parallel Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art in New York.<sup>2</sup>

Other museum displays of the work were unable to function like this due to conflicts with existing museum stores or the stigma associated with inserting commerce into the museum space.<sup>3</sup> For example, some exhibitions did not have an attendant, or did not allow for full access to the multiples, displaying them under Plexiglas.<sup>4</sup> As curator Lillian Tone explains, the *Boutique* predates a trend now common within museums: "Made at a time when the sound of cashiers still seemed outlandish in the immaculate environment of the exhibition space," she states, "the *Boutique* presaged the increasing pervasiveness of temporary shops occupying space once exclusively assigned to art."<sup>5</sup>

The *Boutique* also appeared in other General Idea projects. For instance, "The Special \$ucce\$\$ Issue" of *FILE Magazine* in 1981 was designed as an advertising insert for the *Boutique* and its inventory, promoting the multiples available at the shop. As Tone notes, "Much of the *Boutique*'s power resides in



Installation view of General Idea, *The Boutique* from the 1984 *Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1980, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, photograph by General Idea. Shaped as a three-dimensional dollar sign, the *Boutique* was designed to sell multiples, posters, prints, and publications. Installation view unknown.





# GENERAL IDEA

Life & Work by Sarah E.K. Smith

---

its ambiguous perception by the public, in the uncertainty of looking at a shop or at an artwork."<sup>6</sup>

## CORNUCOPIA 1982



General Idea, *Cornucopia*, 1982

Video, 10 min.

Various collections

Adopting the format of a museum documentary, *Cornucopia* narrates the fictional history of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* and its destruction by fire in 1977. The video was part of an installation, *Cornucopia: Fragments from the Room of Unknown Function in the Villa Dei Misteri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. Objects from this larger work, such as ceramic phalluses, comprise some of the central imagery in the video.

*Cornucopia* is a series of static images and clips, including scenes of shifting light and colour, rotating ceramic phallic shapes, and drawings, often accompanied by instrumental music. A voiceover conveys a narrative about General Idea, yet this narrator unsettles its presumed authority employing sexual innuendo and word puns. The video explains the destruction of the *Pavillion*—a fictitious event said to have happened in 1984 that enabled the group to take on the role of archeologists and create supposed ruins from the



*Pavillion*. General Idea, as the narrator notes, “reintroduced destruction into the architectural process.”

The documentation of the *Pavillion* presented in the video includes black and white line drawings depicting key elements of the General Idea aesthetic. These include ziggurat motifs, a recurring visual symbol in General Idea’s work, with lines that reference ancient stepped towers. Another central symbol is the poodle, a reference to the trio’s queer identity. The narrator speaks to the significance of the poodle, noting “its effete banal image, [and] its

desire to be preened and groomed for public appearances.” The video also references other icons and projects from General Idea’s oeuvre, including the *Colour Bar Lounge*, an element of the *Pavillion* depicted in the video *Test Tube*, 1979.

The video *Cornucopia* is significant as it reveals much of the language and imagery that occupied General Idea in the early 1980s, shedding light on the many layers of their self-referential projects. The video also demonstrates how General Idea continued to play with fiction and reality by exploring the invented ruins of the *Pavillion* in a video format imbued with authority.



General Idea, *The Unveiling of the Cornucopia* (A Mural Fragment from the Room of the Unknown Function in the Villa Dei Misteri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion), 1982, enamel on plasterboard and plywood, five panels, each 244 x 122 cm, University of Lethbridge Art Collection. This mural fragment is one of many alleged relics and ephemera from the fictional destruction of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*.

## MONDO CANE KAMA SUTRA 1984



General Idea, *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*, 1984  
Fluorescent acrylic on canvas, set of ten paintings, each 243.8 x 304.8 x 10 cm  
Collection of the General Idea Estate

*Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*, a coded depiction of General Idea's queer identity, showcases the trio's ability to mix humour and sexuality. The ten works in the piece also provide a symbolic portrait of General Idea, in line with the group's ongoing interest in self-representation. Created in a period in which sexuality was off-limits in the art world, the works explicitly reference homosexuality. In *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*, the *ménage à trois* is an apt representation of the three artists, whose art making was enmeshed with their daily lives.

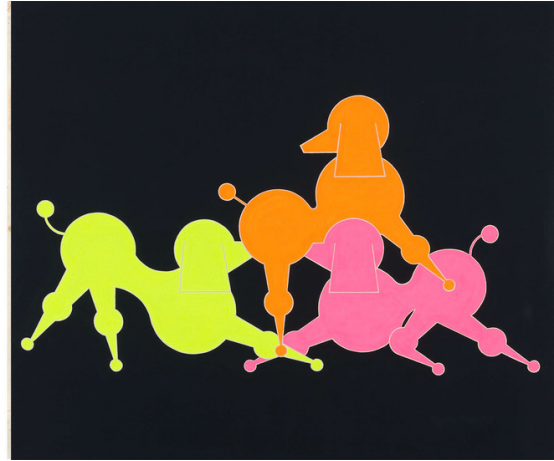
Each of these large paintings depicts a trio of stylized orange, yellow, and pink fluorescent poodle silhouettes in various sexual positions. Formally, the work is a riff on American abstract painter Frank Stella's (b. 1936) "Protractor" series, which featured raw canvas separating different colours<sup>1</sup>.



During the 1980s the poodle was a key formal device General Idea employed to represent themselves as queer artists. They seized on the poodle as a means of self-representation due to the animal's "banal and effete" presence and used it to speak to normative understandings of sexual roles.<sup>2</sup> The group continued to exploit the poodle motif, most notably in *P is for Poodle*, 1983/89, a photographic portrait in which the artists are dressed as dogs.



LEFT: General Idea, *P is for Poodle*, 1983/89, chromogenic print (Ektachrome), 75.9 x 63.4 cm, edition of three with one artist's proof, various collections.



RIGHT: General Idea, *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra* (detail), 1984, fluorescent acrylic on canvas, 243.8 x 304.8 x 10 cm, Collection General Idea.

The imagery in *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra* was featured in the prestigious art publication *Artforum*, as a work titled *Triple Entendre*, 1983, and in a 1983 issue of the artists' publication *FILE Magazine*, as well as in their video *Shut the Fuck Up*, 1985.

## SHUT THE FUCK UP 1985



General Idea, *Shut the Fuck Up*, 1985  
Video, 14 min.  
Various collections

*Shut the Fuck Up* was created for Dutch television, commissioned by the festival Talking Back to the Media.<sup>1</sup> The video provides a candid and humorous assessment of the media cliché of the artist. Aggressive and fast-paced, the video is structured in three segments: "Part I: Death of a Mauve Bat"; "Part 2: Mondo Cane"; and "Part 3: XXX (bleu)." Like *Test Tube*, 1979, each segment is subdivided, with three formats used: talking heads, found footage, and inspirational montage.<sup>2</sup> Throughout, General Idea addresses the role of art in society and critiques the artist's relationship to mass media. The group comments on art's reliance on spectacle, the lack of intelligence and agency accorded to artists by the media, and the presumption of an artist's disengagement from the world. Felix Partz notes, "We're supposed to be



romantic, untamed,” and Jorge Zontal rants, “I’m not going to play...boho to their fucking bourgeoisie.”

General Idea draws on found footage from popular television and films, using it to ironic ends. In Part 1 the artists appropriate a scene from the television series *Batman* in which the Joker presents a blank canvas as part of a painting competition. His entry is initially met with confusion, but when it is seen as symbolic of the emptiness of modern life, the Joker wins the contest. General Idea believed that the Joker was based on French artist Yves Klein (1928–1962), who had appeared on American television on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.<sup>3</sup> General Idea employs this clip to criticize art and the notion of the artist as a singular, tortured genius, which they saw as a fraudulent spectacle.



Video still from General Idea, *Shut the Fuck Up*, 1985, colour video, 14 min., various collections. This still features found footage from the 1960s television show *Batman*.

In Part 2 a series of dancing scenes is set to upbeat music and barking. This section foregrounds poodles—a significant image in General Idea’s oeuvre intended to represent the queer artist. Imagery of fornicating neon dogs is overlaid on scenes of people dressed as poodles dancing in a studio.<sup>4</sup> This footage was appropriated from an Italian television music show at the time.<sup>5</sup> The section is bookended by a dialogue between Partz and AA Bronson about artists and the media, a fast repartee filled with puns. Fittingly, the artists appear dressed as poodles.

Part 3 opens with footage from *Anthropométries*, a series Yves Klein created in the early 1960s. In these events, Klein choreographed actions that female models performed for a live audience; he directed the women to apply paint to their bodies and then press themselves against a canvas.<sup>6</sup> The paint they used was International Klein Blue, a flat, intense blue Klein invented and trademarked. In *Shut the Fuck Up*, General Idea employs Klein as a foil, a stereotypical figure of the extreme artist—much like the Joker in Part 1. As Bronson explains, “The media loved to present Klein as a clown. Before Klein, both Picasso and Dali had fulfilled this role for the media. After him, Warhol took over that role.”<sup>7</sup> In the video, the artists respond to this history, critiquing the media cliché of the artist as a buffoon.

This footage is followed by documentation of the General Idea performance *XXX (bleu)*, 1984, with voiceover of the artists explaining the work. *XXX (bleu)* appropriates Klein's Anthropométries to comic effect. It features Bronson, Zontal, and Partz with faux stuffed white poodles. The artists dip the poodles' bodies into International Klein Blue paint, then climb ladders and use them to paint three large "X" symbols on blank canvases. Partz explains the ambiguous meaning: "XXX equals poison, XXX as kisses, XXX as target, XXX as signature, XXX as epitaph."



Installation view of General Idea, *XXX (bleu)*, 1984, installation resulting from a performance; set of three canvases: acrylic on canvas, each 493.5 x 296 cm; set of three poodle mannequins: straw, synthetic fur, acrylic, each standard breed size 74 x 20 x 77 cm; overall 350 x 988 x 143.5 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. This installation view is from *Haute Culture: General Idea. A Retrospective, 1969-1994* at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2011-12.

A punchy and humorous analysis of the artist's relationship to mass media, *Shut the Fuck Up* demonstrates General Idea's critique of media formats and their mastery of video as a medium.





## AIDS 1987



General Idea, *AIDS*, 1987  
Acrylic on canvas, 182.9 x 182.9 cm  
Private collection, Chicago

*AIDS* marked a significant shift in General Idea's practice, leading to other works focused on the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The painting mimics American Pop art painter Robert Indiana's (b. 1928) 1966 work *LOVE*. For General Idea *LOVE* exemplified the spirit of universal love, an ethos that was the foundation of the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Indiana's red, blue, and green rendering of the word "LOVE" became ubiquitous, appearing on goods, including key chains, cocktail napkins, and a United States postage stamp.<sup>2</sup> Attracted by the fluidity of this image, which travelled internationally, General Idea made a visually similar painting, but replaced the word "LOVE" with "AIDS." The group created this work in response to an invitation from their gallery Koury Wingate (previously International With Monument) to contribute to a June, 1987 exhibition in support of the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR).

"Our intention with this logo was that it would...play the part of a virus itself," Bronson explained, "that it would spread within the culture and create a...visibility for the word 'AIDS,' so it couldn't be swept under the carpet, which was...what was happening."<sup>3</sup> General Idea envisioned their AIDS logo as a larger publicity campaign that would spread awareness and combat the stigma and fear surrounding the disease. They created iterations of the logo in a range of media, including sculpture, painting, wallpaper, posters, and multiples.<sup>4</sup> Public poster campaigns were initiated in cities including New York City, Toronto, Berlin, and San Francisco.<sup>5</sup>



LEFT: Robert Indiana, *LOVE*, 1966-99, polychrome aluminum, 365.7 x 365.7 x 182.9 cm, various locations. Indiana's *LOVE* first appeared as paintings and small sculptures in 1966. In 1970 the first monumental *LOVE* sculpture, made of Cor-Ten steel, was constructed for the Indianapolis Museum of Art. Since then *LOVE* sculptures have been installed around the world. The sculpture pictured is located in New York and dates from 2000. RIGHT: Installation view of General Idea, *AIDS*, 1988-90, installation consists of three paintings, *AIDS*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, each 243.7 x 243.7 cm, installed on *AIDS (Wallpaper)*, 1990, screen print on wallpaper, rolled 68.6 x 4.6 (diam.) cm, unrolled 457 x 68.6 cm, overall dimensions variable, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. This installation view is from *General Idea's Fin de siècle*, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, Germany, 1992.



Though the 1987 painting was not poorly received, the subsequent poster version was criticized by a younger generation of AIDS activists in New York, in part, for its coded approach and for not including information on safe sex.<sup>6</sup> AA Bronson later acknowledged, "It was about as bad taste as you could get at that moment to do that. That attracted us to a certain extent."<sup>7</sup> The topic of AIDS was taboo and given the context of the pandemic, General Idea's logo was shocking in its cheerful visualization and allusions to promiscuity.<sup>8</sup>

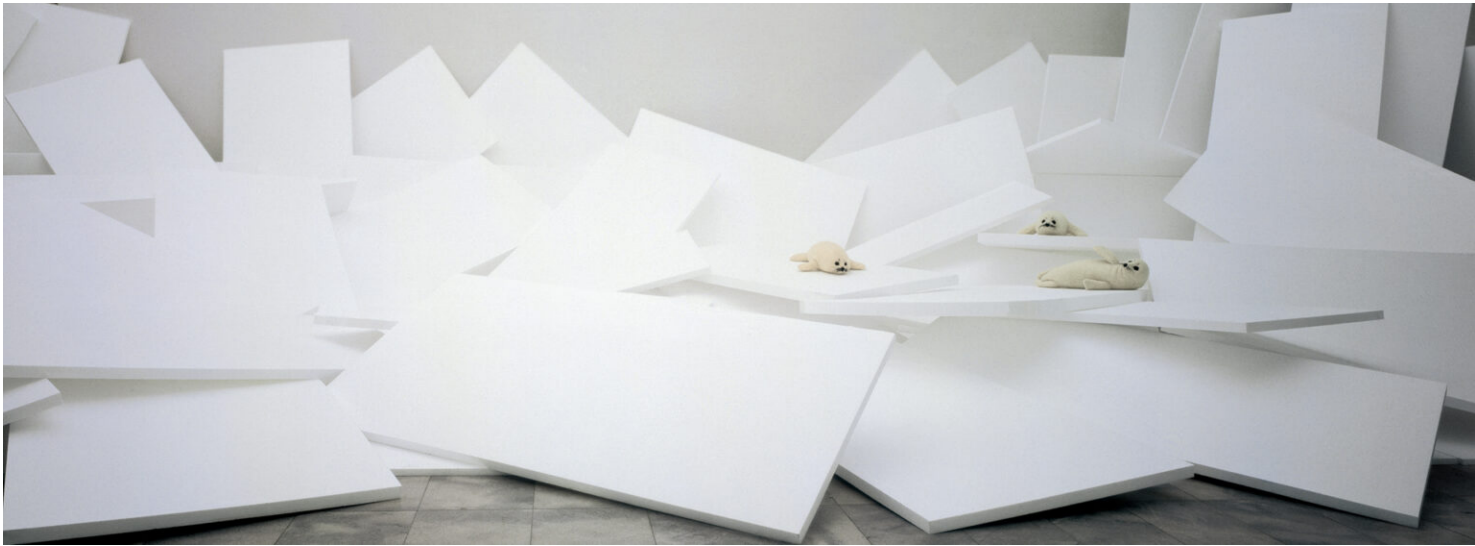
The significance and activist dimension of General Idea's AIDS logo cannot be understated, especially during a period in which great fear and a lack of information surrounded the disease. The group's attention to the AIDS pandemic took on more significance when Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal were diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1989 and 1990, respectively.<sup>9</sup> The majority of the group's work in the late 1980s and early 1990s addressed this issue. The group's



activity ended in 1994 due to the deaths of Zontal and Partz from AIDS-related causes.



## FIN DE SIÈCLE 1990



General Idea, *Fin de siècle*, 1990

Installation of expanded polystyrene with three stuffed faux seal pups (acrylic, glass, and straw), dimensions variable  
Private collection, Turin

The installation *Fin de siècle* represents General Idea's poignant commentary on those struck by the AIDS pandemic. This deeply charged work is also one of the last self-portraits the trio created in their twenty-five-year collaboration. The work was featured in the group's 1992–93 touring exhibition of the same name.<sup>1</sup>

The large-scale piece comprises a minimum of three hundred 120 by 240 centimetre sheets of Styrofoam that fill a room, creating the impression of a large field of breaking ice. Located within the landscape are three charming, artificial harp seal pups. This installation makes reference to a historic Romantic landscape painting of a shipwreck: *The Wreck of the Hope*, 1823–24, also known as *The Arctic Sea*, by German artist Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840). The artists drew on the aesthetic of this painting, recreating its forbidding Arctic Ocean landscape. The insertion of faux seal pups in the Arctic scene recalls a diorama from a natural history museum. *Fin de siècle* is an acutely moving work. Viewers are meant to question the placement of the seal pups—are they playful and cute, or are they a prelude to disaster?<sup>2</sup> It is unclear what fate they will encounter.



LEFT: Caspar David Friedrich, *The Wreck of the Hope (The Arctic Sea)*, 1823–24, oil on canvas, 96.7 x 26.9 cm, Kunsthalle Hamburg. RIGHT: General Idea, *Fin de siècle*, 1994, chromogenic print (Ektachrome), 79 x 55.7 cm, edition of twelve plus three artist's proofs, signed and numbered, various collections.



The installation can be read broadly in terms of environmentalism. AA Bronson spoke of the indefinite meanings attached to seals, noting that while environmentalists were attempting to save the seal population, the Canadian government was offering financial incentives for their deaths as a means to deal with overpopulation.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Bronson suggested that the Styrofoam ice sheets can be viewed ambiguously, as a plastic that can be recycled but is also non-biodegradable.<sup>4</sup>

*Fin de siècle* can also be read as being about the AIDS pandemic, and it is intended as a self-portrait of General Idea, with the seal pups representing Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal, and Bronson. Zontal characterized the installation as a representation of the artists "adrift in uncontrollable circumstances," alluding to the impact of the AIDS crisis, which had a direct bearing on the artists' friends and community.<sup>5</sup> Here the innocent nature of the seals, as well as their status as an endangered species, emphasizes that some lives are more valuable than others. "It's easier to sell 'save the seals,' or 'save the children with AIDS,'" Zontal maintained, "because they're cuter, rather than three middle-aged homosexuals."<sup>6</sup>





# SIGNIFICANCE & CRITICAL ISSUES

1,825 units of vacuum-formed styrene with vinyl wall-mounted capsules,  
12.7 x 31.7 x 6.3 cm each  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

This installation brings the challenges of living with HIV to the fore. Here, the artists have created plastic capsules that represent the antiretroviral drug AZT (azidothymidine), which Felix Partz was taking at the time. The installation is comprised of 1,825 pills, corresponding to the exact amount of Partz's annual dosage.<sup>1</sup>

Approved in 1987, AZT was the first drug in the United States to treat those with HIV and delay the onset of AIDS. AZT had significant side effects and was extremely toxic. Initial doses of the medication were quite high, and patients took the pills on a strict schedule throughout the day.



AA Bronson noted the personal significance of the work, as Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal were diagnosed with HIV in 1989 and 1990, respectively: "Our life was full of pills, our apartment was full of pills ... so they became part of our work," he said.<sup>2</sup> "Your watch is ringing little bells every two to four hours and you have to take two of this and four of that.... [The work] was to create that environment, a pill environment. To reproduce that feeling. To give it a physical sense of what it's like to be surrounded by pills ... a very clinical atmosphere."<sup>3</sup>

*One Year of AZT* is a stark installation of white pills divided by blue stripes. Its bare aesthetic and restricted colour palette make reference to the formal aspects of Minimalist art. The work also functions as a calendar: it speaks to the passing of time, with pills organized in daily and monthly groups.

Part of the artists' larger focus on the AIDS pandemic, *One Year of AZT* is usually exhibited together with the work *One Day of AZT*, 1991, which features five large pills, a daily dosage of the drug. The Fiberglas pills in *One Day of AZT* are on a monumental scale; each is slightly larger than a body, alluding to coffins.



General Idea, *Playing Doctor*, 1992, lacquer on vinyl, 225 x 150 cm, edition of three, various collections. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the group produced a body of work that profoundly contributed to the discourse on HIV/AIDS.



**General Idea's conceptual projects addressed key social issues, including celebrity, media communication and consumption, as well as the AIDS crisis. The group's artistic statements about queer identity were ahead of their time and pushed boundaries in the art world.**

## A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH TO COLLABORATION

General Idea embraced a conceptual approach to making art. While they had numerous influences, the collaborative aspect of their work was informed by several factors: the performative work in the 1960s that emerged from Fluxus, Happenings, and Viennese Actionism; their activity within avant-garde theatre, which in the period widely used collective techniques; the filmmaking practices of Mike Kuchar (b. 1942) and George Kuchar (1942–2011) and Jack Smith (1932–1989), who employed their social circle in their films; and Andy Warhol's (1928–1987) Factory, a site where Warhol and his circle of friends produced art.<sup>1</sup>



Performance documentation of Jim Dine, *Car Crash*, performed at the Reuben Gallery, New York, November 16, 1960, photograph by Robert R. McElroy. Happenings, such as this one, are performative works marked by the breakdown of the division between life and art.

"THREE HEADS ARE BETTER" proclaimed a 1978 issue of *FILE Magazine*, the publication the group founded in 1972.<sup>2</sup> This statement was a cheeky testament to General Idea's shared vision, and the article explained their consensus-based working model: "Our three sets of eyes perform a single point of view. Other lines of vision are tolerated around the conference table but when out in public solidarity is essential."<sup>3</sup> In this way, General Idea made clear that the identity of the group superseded the identity of its individual members. The group took on "a single point of view," and thus considered itself a single entity. Their non-hierarchical, cooperative approach was also tied to the values of community espoused in the 1960s. Additionally, the group composition critiqued the conventional public image of the artist. As General Idea explained, "Being a trio freed us from the tyranny of individual genius."<sup>4</sup>

General Idea's partnership was more than a working relationship: it extended to all aspects of the artists' lives. "[I]t was kind of an odd collaboration," Bronson explained, "in that we both lived and worked together. So it was a kind of domestic as well as an art relationship."<sup>5</sup> The group upheld their tripartite structure as a reason for their long-term success and stability between 1969 and 1994. General Idea's conceptual projects and collaborative working method stand as part of their legacy, especially as collaborative art production has gained ground in the contemporary era.<sup>6</sup>



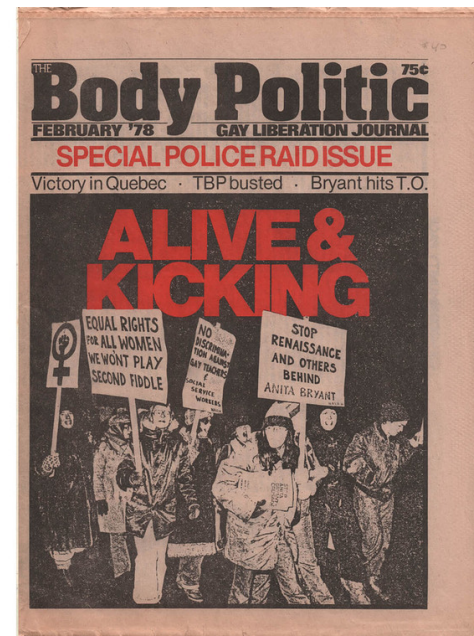
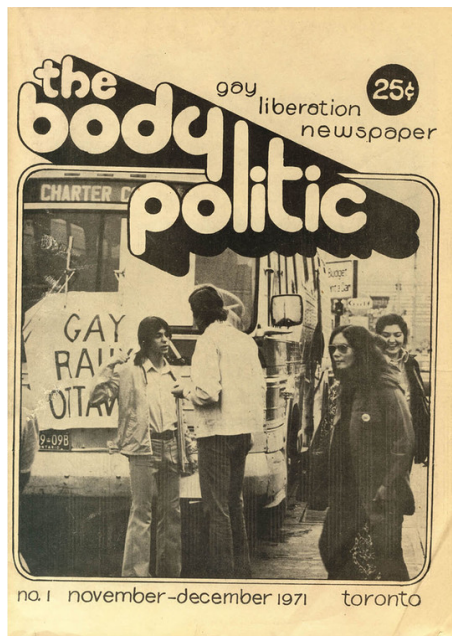


General Idea relaxes in the installation *Reconstructing Futures*, 1977, installation, mixed media, overall 274 x 432 x 1,017 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, photograph by Jeremiah S. Chechik. *From left:* Felix Partz, AA Bronson, and Jorge Zontal.

### QUEER IDENTITY

As a group of three men who identified as gay, General Idea played with notions of gender and sexuality. Their performances and imagery pushed the boundaries of sexual identity representation. While the group was active, key changes were taking place in North America with regard to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights.<sup>7</sup> In 1968, just before AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal met in Toronto, Justice Minister Pierre Trudeau introduced an omnibus bill that reformed Canadian law with regards to homosexuality, as well as abortion and contraception. This law was implemented in 1969, and, amongst other things, it decriminalized homosexuality.<sup>8</sup> That same year, New York City was rocked by the Stonewall riots, a series of violent protests against the police raid of a gay bar in Greenwich Village.

In 1971 in Toronto, shortly after General Idea began producing work, the key publication *The Body Politic* was founded. Described as “Canada’s gay newspaper of record,” it was a highly controversial and embattled publication.<sup>9</sup> In the same period, other spontaneous actions of civil resistance and community organization occurred. For instance, a series of small-scale picnics on Hanlan’s Point, Toronto Islands, began in concert with civil rights marches.<sup>10</sup> Despite these moments of declaration, equality remained elusive, and there existed widespread violence against and surveillance and repression of LGBT communities. In 1978 *The Body Politic* was charged with obscenity.<sup>11</sup> General Idea participated in a public demonstration against this censorship in January, 1979, contributing a performance titled *Anatomy of Censorship*, 1979.<sup>12</sup>



LEFT: Cover of the first issue of *The Body Politic* (November–December, 1971). RIGHT: Cover of *The Body Politic: Special Police Raid Issue* (February, 1978).

The fight for LGBT equality continued in the 1980s. Operation Soap was a pivotal moment in the Canadian fight for LGBT civil rights.<sup>13</sup> On February 5, 1981, the Toronto police coordinated a large-scale raid on four Toronto bathhouses, leading to the arrest of more than three hundred men—including Zontal.<sup>14</sup> This raid led to public outcry and large protests, which galvanized support across the country and reframed the struggle for equality as one of human rights.<sup>15</sup>

General Idea’s work should be understood in the context of this paradigm shift. Though their art is now seen as unabashedly speaking to queer identity, this theme was not addressed by critics until the mid-1980s. In the art world at the time, sexuality was not a topic that could be raised. The artists did not experience censorship; rather, this facet of their projects was simply ignored. Bronson explained, “Sexuality was kind of a dangerous subject in the art world. Sex was never touched upon. And, to call yourself a gay artist would be, of course, the death knell of your career.”<sup>16</sup>

Despite this, General Idea made many brazen and playful references to queer identity in their works, such as *Baby Makes 3*, 1984/89. In this portrait, Bronson, Zontal, and Partz are depicted in bed together, with the covers pulled up to their chins. Rosy cheeks and softly rounded faces suggest innocence and infantilization. The trio alludes to a traditional nuclear family while also suggesting a queering of this format.<sup>17</sup> This reference to family also reflects the nature of General Idea’s collaboration, as the group’s domestic lives and art production were very much entwined.



Bronson recalls the group's desire to have critics discuss their work in terms of sexuality and has said the group baited art critics by "being more and more outrageous all of the time."<sup>18</sup> For instance, *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*, 1984, clearly depicts trios of fornicating neon poodles. The poodle was a key symbol in General Idea's oeuvre, primarily intended as a clichéd image that signifies gayness in mainstream North American culture: Bronson has said, "The poodle stands for the queer artist."<sup>19</sup> Despite the overt sexual imagery in the paintings, critics discussed these works in relation to the trio's artistic collaboration. Finally, by 1986, General Idea was written about in terms of queer identity.<sup>20</sup> The shift, Bronson noted, was one of attitude: "Prior to that it was just considered embarrassing or something."<sup>21</sup>

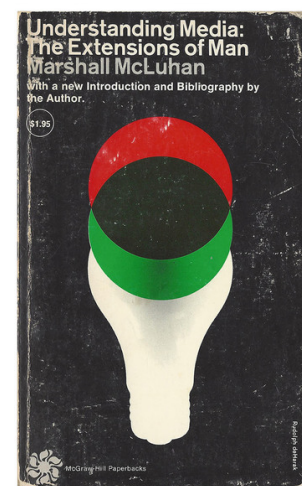
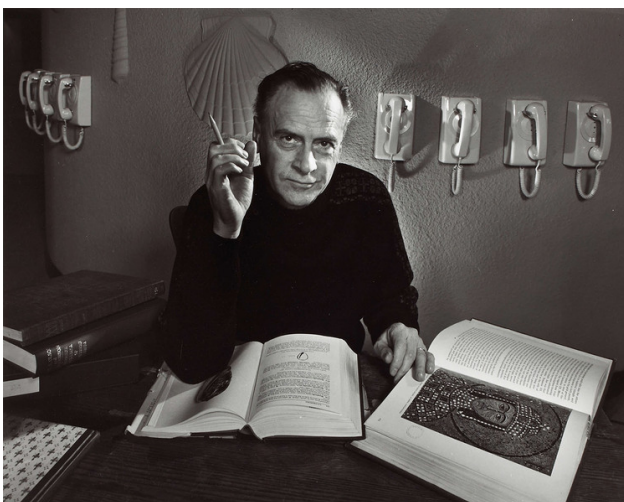


LEFT: General Idea, *Baby Makes 3*, 1984/89, chromogenic print (Ektachrome), 76.9 x 63.1 cm, edition of three plus one artist's proof, signed and numbered, various collections. RIGHT: General Idea, *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra* (detail), 1984, fluorescent acrylic on canvas, 243.8 x 304.8 x 10 cm, Collection General Idea. This painting is one from a set of ten that comprise the work.

Following the end of General Idea's collaboration in 1994, with the deaths of Partz and Zontal, some contemporary scholars—such as Virginia Solomon—have sought to address the queer dimension of the group's work.<sup>22</sup>

## THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

General Idea analyzed and critiqued media and popular culture by appropriating existing cultural structures, such as beauty pageants, magazines, and television formats, and by using mimicry, irony, and humour to subversive ends. A key influence in this regard was Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980), who rose to prominence in the 1960s with his ideas about popular culture, communication technology, and media theory.



LEFT: Yousuf Karsh, *Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980)*, 1974 (printed later), gelatin silver print, 19 x 24.1 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. RIGHT: Cover of the first paperback edition of Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965, cover design by Rudolph de Harak.

In his key writings, McLuhan addresses media and how communications technology shapes the messages it conveys and affects social organization. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964, he focuses particularly on television. This text is the source of McLuhan's pithy phrase "the medium is the message," which gained widespread popularity.<sup>23</sup>



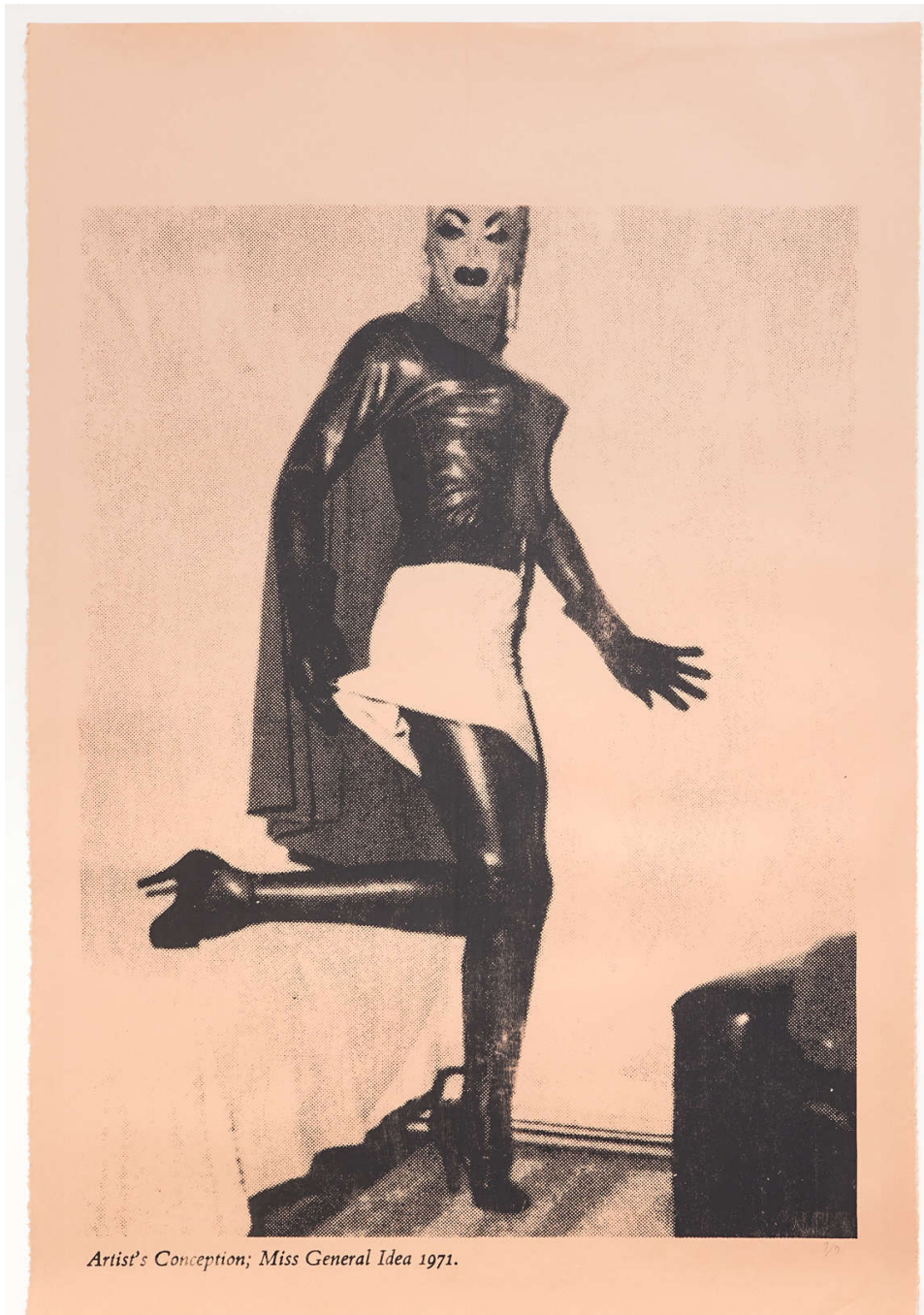
McLuhan had a broad influence on the members of General Idea, who read his books in the 1960s.<sup>24</sup> Though his influence was not limited to their thinking about television formats, McLuhan's notion that the social effects of media deserve critical analysis informed General Idea's appropriation of the beauty pageant. This made-for-television structure significantly shaped work the group made in the 1970s, especially the satirical mail art and performance work *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971. This project allowed General Idea to unpack issues of gender stereotyping and celebrity culture, topics they continued to explore in much of their work.

General Idea's appropriation of television formats can also be seen in videos, such as *Test Tube*, 1979, which quotes the structures of a news magazine, infomercial, and talk show. Notably, this work was created for television broadcast—a further infiltration of popular culture.

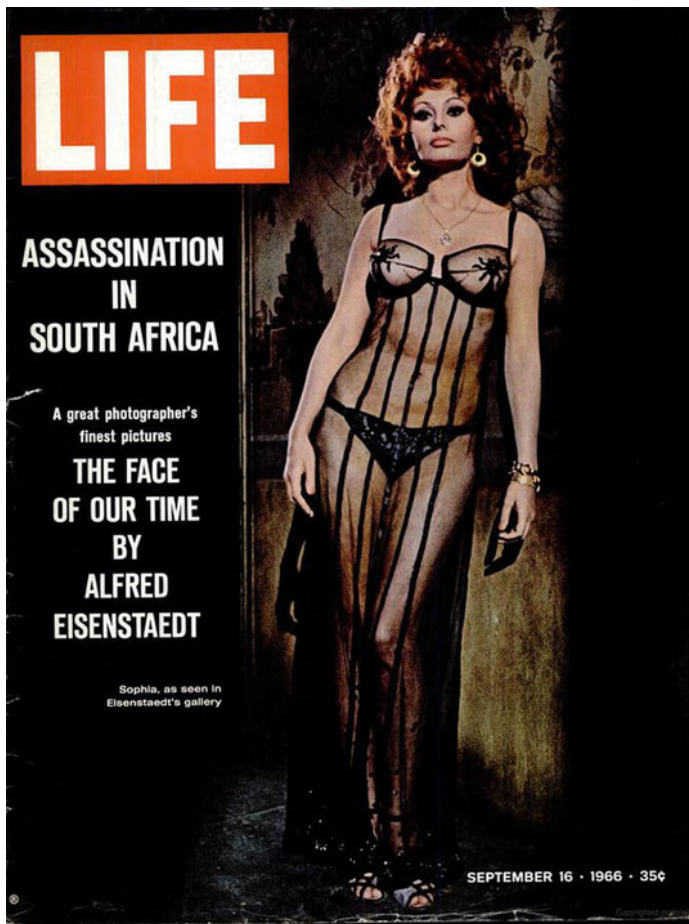
The group's exploration and appropriation of popular media extended to print culture. In 1972 they created *FILE Magazine*,

modelling the look and logo of the popular American magazine *LIFE*.<sup>25</sup> As AA Bronson explained, "We wanted something at a normal newsstand that anybody would pick up, just because of familiarity. But then they would find that it was something not at all familiar."<sup>26</sup>

General Idea's diverse works, which highlight the artifices of media, reveal the influence of McLuhan's theories on media and communications. In Bronson's words, "we were media moguls in a universe of our own making."<sup>27</sup> Through their appropriation of media and popular culture formats, the trio critiqued and satirized contemporary society and its social structures.



General Idea, *Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea 1971*, 1971, screen print on salmon wove paper, 101.5 x 66 cm, edition of nine, signed and numbered, various collections. *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* was a forum through which General Idea critiqued gender stereotyping and celebrity culture.



LEFT: Cover of *LIFE* magazine, vol. 61, no. 12 (September 16, 1966). General Idea fashioned *FILE Magazine's* look and logo after the popular American publication, here featuring Sophia Loren on its cover. RIGHT: Cover of *FILE Magazine*, "IFEL Special Paris Issue," vol. 2, no. 3 (September 1973), web offset periodical, thirty-two pages plus cover, black and white reproductions, with centrefold, edition of 3,000, various collections.

### BUILDING A CANADIAN ART SCENE

General Idea was centrally involved in the creation of artist-run culture in Canada in the late twentieth century. They contributed in several different ways and mediums, participating as key artists in the formation of the network of artist-run centres and wielding authority regarding the direction of policy-making.<sup>28</sup> Their efforts were focused through two key platforms: the publication *FILE Magazine* and the artist-run centre Art Metropole. While part of General Idea's oeuvre, both initiatives also significantly supported other artists' projects.

*FILE* is a renowned artist publication General Idea established in 1972. It ran for twenty-six issues before closing in 1989. They created *FILE*, described as "an alternative to the alternative press," in order to connect with similar artists and advance common interests.<sup>29</sup> AA Bronson explained, "The original purpose was to try and make a sort of cross-Canada network of artists. Because there was no outlet for the kinds of artists we were interested in, and we were aware that there were many people that we just didn't even know existed."<sup>30</sup>

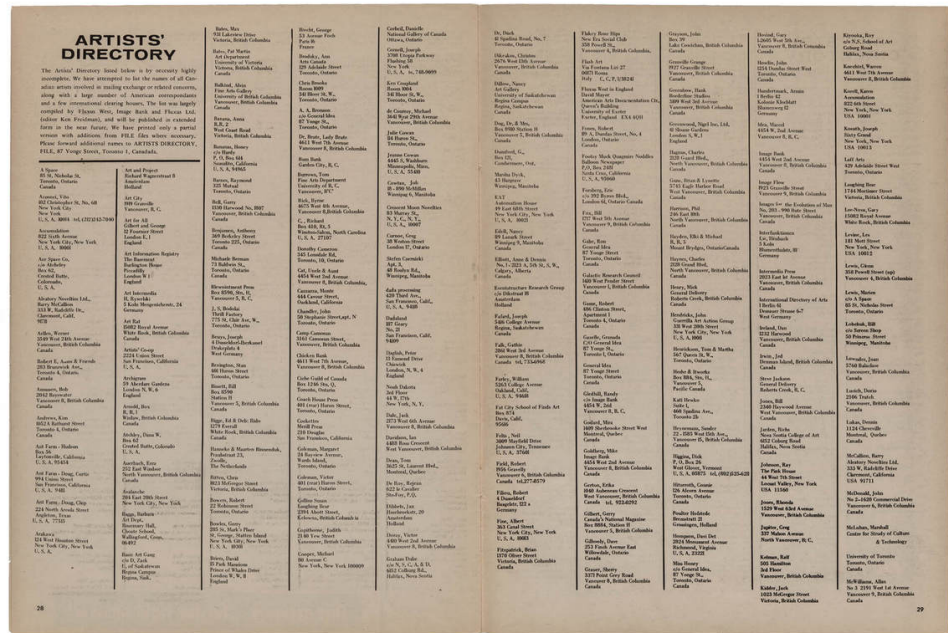




In its early years, *FILE* helped to build the Canadian art scene by providing a venue for the dissemination of artists' projects and by publishing artist directories, which connected artists across Canada and the world. In the mid-1970s, *FILE* began to focus more closely on General Idea's projects and interests, but still helped to connect communities, reaching artists in North America, Europe, and Japan. Notable early subscribers were Andy Warhol (1928-1987) and Joseph Beuys (1921-1986).<sup>31</sup>

Art Metropole is an artist-run centre founded by General Idea that continues to operate in Toronto. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, numerous artist-run centres began to emerge in Canada as a parallel structure to the existing museum system.<sup>32</sup> Initiated and managed by artists, many of these organizations were supported by the Canada Council. These not-for-profit spaces offered an alternative to the existing art venues in Canada. As Bronson notes in his "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat" essay, museums provided inadequate representation of Canadian artists.<sup>33</sup> There was a small number of isolated commercial galleries in Canada, with scant communication between them and no art fairs or any other signs of a developed commercial system. Artist-run centres provided a means of artist-led self-determination and a key source of support for experimental projects such as video works, performance art, and conceptual art, as well as exhibiting more conventional art forms.<sup>34</sup> General Idea was active in this burgeoning artist-run centre scene, which included Intermedia in Vancouver. In Toronto the group exhibited entries from *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971, at A Space, an artist-run centre founded in 1971.

General Idea established Art Metropole in 1974.<sup>35</sup> The organization's mandate is to serve as a "collection agency devoted to the documentation, archiving and distribution of all the images."<sup>36</sup> This breadth is the strength of the institution, which distributes artists' books, videos, audio works, posters, multiples, T-shirts, and more. Art Metropole also disseminated writing about new media and other art forms, for example in their "by artists" series of publications, which includes *Video by Artists* (1976), *Performance by Artists* (1979), *Books by Artists* (1981), *Museums by Artists* (1983), and *Sound by Artists* (1990).<sup>37</sup>



Double-page spread of "Artists' Directory" from *FILE Magazine*, "Mr. Peanut Issue," vol. 1, no. 1 (April 15, 1972), 28-29, web offset periodical, thirty-two pages plus cover, black and white reproductions, with eight-page insert by Dana Atchley, edition of 3,000, various collections.

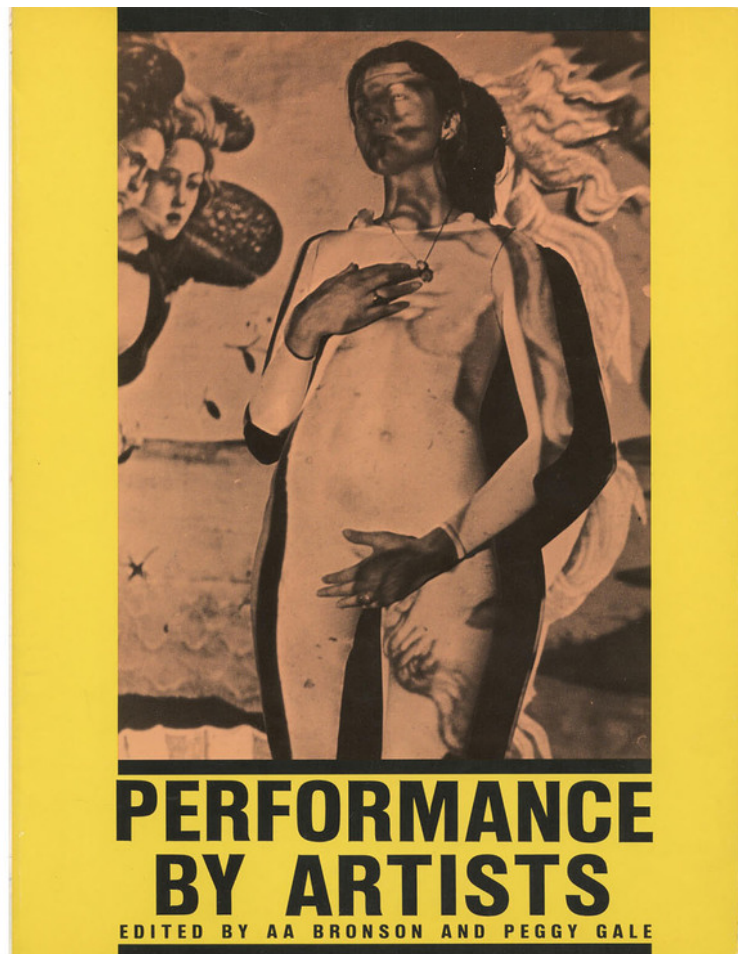
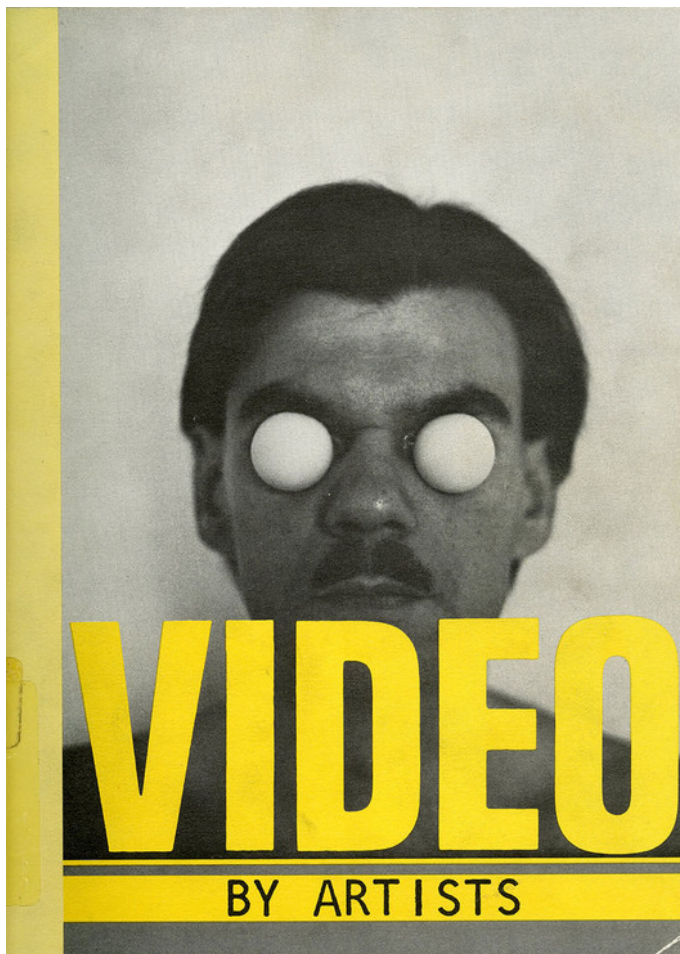




General Idea studio/Art Metropole, 241 Yonge Street, Toronto, 1974, photograph by General Idea.

General Idea founded Art Metropole in part due to the amount of mail art and ephemera they were collecting through *FILE*.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Art Metropole was conceived of as an artwork—specifically, the archive and the museum shop for *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. Felix Partz noted the importance of the organization to the group, explaining, “The actual structure and function of it, is an integral part of our work, of our overall project.”<sup>39</sup>

Through *FILE* and Art Metropole, General Idea contributed significantly to the “connective tissue” of the Canadian art scene, developing the national artistic landscape and providing a means for artists—domestically and abroad—to connect to one another and to share work.<sup>40</sup> Noting the importance of publications, organizations, and artist-run centres in the 1970s as a means for artists to coalesce into a scene, Bronson writes, “Working together, and working sometimes not together we laboured to structure, or rather to untangle from the messy post-Sixties spaghetti of our minds, artist-run galleries, artists’ video, and artist-run magazines. And that allowed us to allow ourselves to see ourselves as an art scene. And we did.”<sup>41</sup>



LEFT: Cover of *Video by Artists*, edited by Peggy Gale, Toronto: Art Metropole, 1976. RIGHT: Cover of *Performance by Artists*, edited by AA Bronson and Peggy Gale, Toronto: Art Metropole, 1979.

## COMMERCE AND CONSUMPTION

General Idea addressed consumption and commerce in diverse ways throughout their twenty-five-year collaboration. Early in their career, when they lived at 78 Gerrard Street West in Toronto, the group used the large front window of their home (a former storefront) to stage a rotating series of faux shops that subverted the store format, exhibiting all manner of found materials.<sup>42</sup> The early shop window displays by General Idea played with viewers' expectations: during the initial few projects the door to the house was always locked and a sign perpetually advised prospective customers that the shopkeeper would be back in five minutes.<sup>43</sup> General Idea's first use of the boutique format was *The Belly Store*, 1969, a collaboration with John Neon (b. 1944), where Zontal stood behind a counter and sold the multiple *George Saia's Belly Food*, 1969, which was displayed in pyramids, like canned goods.



Jorge Zontal at his sales stand in *The Belly Store*, 1969, a collaboration with John Neon, at 78 Gerrard Street West, Toronto, photographer unknown.



Later projects focused on commerce in relation to the art world, such as *Test Tube*, 1979, a video tackling commodification and the artist's role within such systems. *Test Tube*, like other General Idea endeavours, gave rise to related works in other media. In this case, as AA Bronson explained, "the making of the video became the mechanism whereby we created all these props for the video and then produced them as multiples."<sup>44</sup>

General Idea also played with the notion of commerce and art by creating boutiques designed to function as retail sites within gallery and museum spaces.<sup>45</sup> These derived from the artists' consideration of the art world: "We were observing the beginnings of the blockbuster and the way that the museums were involving themselves with the world of money and marketing," Bronson said.<sup>46</sup> *The Boutique from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1980, for instance, was a store counter made of galvanized metal and shaped like a three-dimensional dollar sign. The *Boutiques* sold a range of multiples by General Idea. These multiples included objects featured in *Test Tube*, such as *Magic Palette*, 1980, a metal tray shaped as a painter's palette accompanied by six aluminum cups. *Magic Palette* was disseminated along with a softcover book, *The Getting into the Spirits Cocktail Book from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*.



LEFT: General Idea, *Liquid Assets*, 1980, prototype for the edition, brushed aluminum, glass test tube, 27.3 17.8 x 7 cm, photograph by Peter MacCallum. This photograph was featured on the cover of *FILE Magazine*, "Special \$ucce\$\$ Issue," vol. 5, no. 1 (March, 1981). RIGHT: General Idea, *Magic Palette*, 1980, found object of anodized aluminum cups on chromed-metal palette, object: 5.5 x 19.7 x 14.5 cm, various collections, photograph by General Idea. This photograph of the multiple is featured on the cover of the paperback edition of *The Getting into the Spirits Cocktail Book from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1980.

*¥en Boutique*, 1991, was another example of General Idea's engagement with consumption. Its creation corresponded with the rising economic dominance of Japan at the time.<sup>47</sup> The *¥en Boutique* is a play on the shop format. The kiosk (which sporadically offered multiples for sale) was created by the group for museum display. The boutique format continued to hold interest for the group in the 1990s. The final boutique General Idea created was *Boutique Coeurs volants*, 1994/2001.



# STYLE & TECHNIQUE



LEFT: General Idea, *Imagevirus* (Amsterdam), 1991, chromogenic print (Ektachrome), 76 x 50.4 cm, edition of six plus one artist's proof, various collections. RIGHT: General Idea, *General Idea's Putti*, 1993, found seal-shaped soap on printed pulpboard, 4 x 8.5 (diam.) cm, edition of 10,000, some signed, unnumbered, various collections, photograph by Peter MacCallum.



The significance of General Idea's activism cannot be understated. At the time AIDS was a taboo topic surrounded by fear. Speaking to the climate of the era, artist and writer John Miller explained, "In 1987 especially, identifying oneself as HIV-positive differed from coming out. You could lose your job and your friends. Others still might want to quarantine you. Even obituaries skirted all mention of the disease."<sup>51</sup>

In the late 1980s General Idea's AIDS work took on personal significance. One of the group's closest friends (who helped in producing *Going thru the Motions*, 1975-76, and *Test Tube*, 1979) died of AIDS-related causes in 1987 in New York. The group served as primary caretakers for the last weeks of their friend's life.<sup>52</sup> Partz and Zontal were diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1989 and 1990, respectively.<sup>53</sup> Both artists publicly disclosed their status and, until their deaths in 1994, General Idea continued to create poignant and engaging artwork addressing AIDS.



General Idea, *Melting Snow Crystal Virus #4*, 1992, mixed media, 78 x 63 cm, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House, Art Museum at the University of Toronto. General Idea made ten of these mixed media works representing an image somewhere between a melting snowflake and a microscopic view of an HIV virus. Snow also shares a relationship to General Idea's interest in innocence and their use of imagery of seal pups on breaking ice to symbolize the valuing of one life over another.



General Idea produced works in photography, sculpture, and painting, and was especially active in less conventional media such as mail art, video, performance, installation, and artist multiples. Over the course of their twenty-five-year career, they maintained a consistent conceptual approach.



## APPROPRIATION

Appropriation is central to many of General Idea's artworks. The group drew on formats and aesthetics from sources in popular culture and fine art. Through mimicry, General Idea played with viewer's expectations, reworking familiar forms—from beauty pageants to works of Pop art—in order to prompt critical reflection.

*FILE Magazine* is a prominent example of General Idea's appropriation of popular culture formats. *FILE* mimicked the name and visual culture of the widely distributed American photo magazine *LIFE*. This parody, including the group's use of a similar logo, did not go unnoticed by *LIFE*, which pursued a legal claim against *FILE*. General Idea also took on media and television, for instance, by enacting a newscast and press conference in *Pilot*, 1977, and mimicking a news magazine, talk show, and infomercial in *Test Tube*, 1979. The group also engaged the store format. This can be seen in their earliest shop fronts created at 78 Gerrard Street West in Toronto and in their boutique projects, which included *The Boutique from the Miss 1984 General Idea Pavillion*, 1980, *Yen Boutique*, 1989, and *Boutique Coeurs volants*, 1994/2001.



LEFT: View of the installation General Idea, *Magi© Bullet*, 1992, consisting of 5,000 silver helium-filled mylar balloons, each 25 x 65 x 25 cm (inflated), edition of three installations plus one artist's proof, Museum of Modern Art, New York, photograph by General Idea. This installation view is from Stux Gallery, New York, 1992 (also showing General Idea *Magic Carpet*, 1992, and *Playing Doctor*, 1992). RIGHT: Installation view of Andy Warhol, *Silver Clouds*, 1966 (re-fabricated in 1994), helium-filled metalized plastic film (Scotchpak), each 91.4 x 129.5 cm, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh. Warhol made the work in collaboration with Billy Klüver. This installation view is of the Warhol Museum Series re-fabrication of *Silver Clouds* at Mostra SESC de Artes, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 2002.

The art world itself was also a source of inspiration for the group's appropriation. For example, General Idea's performance *XXX (bleu)*, 1984, mimicked the actions of a performance by French artist Yves Klein (1928–1962), while also employing his signature colour International Klein Blue. With their work *Magi© Bullet*, 1992, General Idea appropriated Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds*, 1966, an installation of silver balloons filled with helium.<sup>23</sup> *Magi© Bullet* is an installation comprised of General Idea multiples: silver pill-shaped balloons, likewise inflated with helium.

The group's paintings also drew on key works in the history of twentieth-century art. For instance, the painting series *Infe©ted Mondrian*, 1994, reworked the signature abstract patterns of the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian (1872–1944). General Idea's *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*, 1984, is a set of ten paintings that, among other things, echoes the colour and aesthetic of American minimalist painter Frank Stella (b. 1936). One of the group's most prominent appropriations was their AIDS logo, which reworked American pop artist Robert Indiana's (b. 1928) painting *LOVE*, 1966. General Idea first employed their logo in the painting *AIDS*, 1987, and went on to use it in a range of work that commented on the global AIDS crisis.

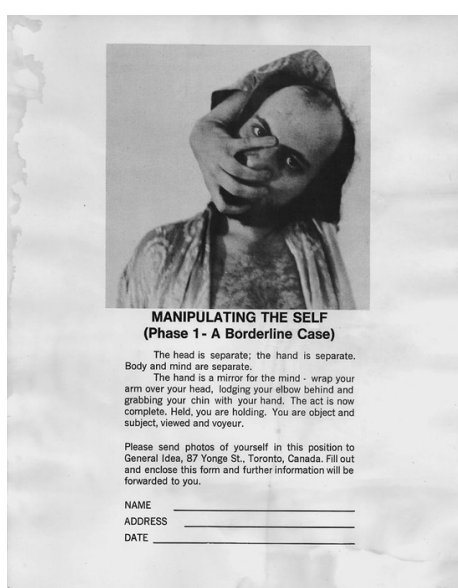
## MAIL ART

Mail art was a key means of production for General Idea in the group's early years. A medium that began in the mid-twentieth century, mail art emerged in the 1950s and continues to this day.<sup>1</sup> Mail art is created specifically for the post and is also referred to as correspondence art or postal art. These works are typically produced on a small scale and circulated via a chain-letter-like web of affiliations, often spanning large geographic distances.<sup>2</sup>

General Idea was connected to many mail artists internationally.

"We received mail from all over North America ... Europe, Eastern Europe, South America, Japan, Australia, and occasionally even India," explained AA Bronson. "Mail came from Gilbert & George, Joseph Beuys, Warhol's Factory, Ray Johnson, various Fluxus artists, and so on."<sup>3</sup> American artist Ray Johnson (1927–1995) was a key figure in the history of mail art: associated with Pop art, Johnson created the first deliberate mail art network, which he dubbed the New York Correspondance School [*sic*].<sup>4</sup> General Idea also corresponded with the Vancouver-based collective Image Bank, founded by Michael Morris (b. 1942) and Vincent Trasov (b. 1947).

Mail art incorporates all manner of images and text, especially mass-produced imagery, which is often manipulated through collage, rubber stamping, and photocopying. The medium functions outside of traditional skilled art production, bypassing the commercial gallery system through postal exchange and thereby creating its own audiences. Mail art promoted alternative formats, the democratization of art forms, and a rejection of the commercial gallery system. Two popular slogans were: "Collage or perish" and "Cut up or shut up," both of which reference artists' interest in reworking found materials.<sup>5</sup>

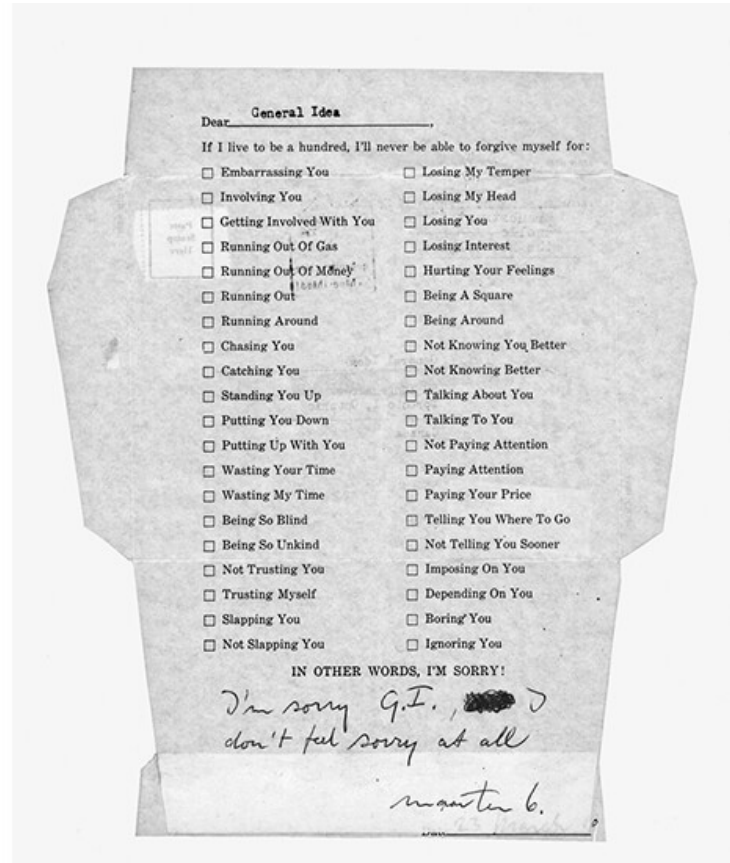
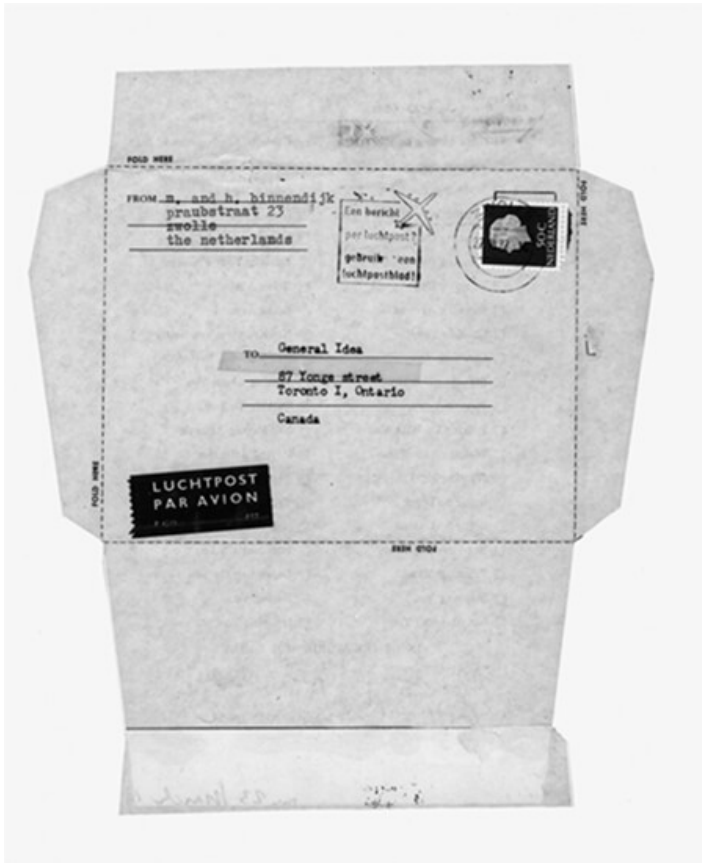


LEFT: General Idea, *Manipulating the Self (Phase 1 - A Borderline Case)*, 1970, offset on paper, 25.3 x 20.3 cm, edition of approximately two hundred, various collections. RIGHT: General Idea, *Manipulating the Self (Manipulating the Scene)*, 1973, colour offset photolithograph on wove paper, 73.8 x 58.5 cm, edition of sixty-five plus artist's proofs, signed (rubber-stamped) and numbered, various collections.





Early mail art by General Idea includes *Dear General Idea, if I live to be a hundred I'll never forgive myself for...*, 1972. This work—to which General Idea received forty-three responses—was structured as a one-page questionnaire/apology. Participants were prompted to respond to the eponymous question, checking one or more boxes that corresponded to a list of forty responses. Potential things respondents might never forgive themselves for ranged from “Wasting My Time” to “Not Knowing You Better.”



LEFT: General Idea, *Dear General Idea, if I live to be a hundred I'll never forgive myself for...*, 1972, offset on bond paper, 28 x 21.5 cm, edition of approximately one hundred, unsigned and unnumbered, various collections, photograph by The Gas Company. RIGHT: General Idea, *Dear General Idea, if I live to be a hundred I'll never forgive myself for...*, 1972.

A key aspect of mail art networks was the assumption of personas, which allowed artists to play with their identities. Often, personas made use of humorous puns or nonsensical and whimsical names. The members of General Idea gradually assumed the personas AA Bronson, Jorge Zontal, and Felix Partz, in the early 1970s.

General Idea's most elaborate and well-known mail art project was *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971. Sixteen artist-contestants were solicited to participate in this satirical beauty pageant through *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant Entry Kit*, 1971. The kit—enclosed in a box marked with a silkscreened logo—contained *The Miss General Idea Gown*, 1971, a brown taffeta dress to be modelled by all contestants. The box also contained documents explaining the rules and regulations of the pageant, and assorted ephemera conveying the history (real and invented) of the event. Thirteen artists replied to the invitation, submitting photographs of themselves (or models) in the gown, to be evaluated by the pageant judges.<sup>6</sup>





General Idea, *The Miss General Idea Pageant Entry Kit*, 1971, mixed media, dimensions unknown, edition of approximately sixteen, unsigned and unnumbered, components of original entry kits in various collections.

In the 1960s and 1970s, newsletters and publications allowed artists creating mail art to find each other. These formats also documented projects and allowed works to be seen by new audiences. Early issues of *FILE Magazine*, a publication founded by General Idea in 1972, featured mail art by prominent figures such as Ray Johnson and Robert Cumming (b. 1943).<sup>7</sup> *FILE* was a key resource as it offered an artist directory of mailing addresses of those interested in correspondence networks and published image-request lists from Image Bank until 1975, allowing artists to submit and draw on specific images for circulation. In the mid-1970s, *FILE* began to orient itself as a self-contained artist project magazine and moved away from being a mail art resource. This shift mirrored larger developments within the mail art medium.<sup>8</sup>

As *FILE* evolved, General Idea continued to collect mail art through Art Metropole.<sup>9</sup> Founded by the artists in 1974, Art Metropole is an artist-run centre that exists to this day in Toronto. One of the reasons for its founding was the volume of mail art and ephemera General Idea collected through *FILE*. Like *FILE*, Art Metropole promoted the work of other artists, within Canada and abroad, creating new networks and partnerships.

## VIDEO ART

Video was central to the work of General Idea throughout the twenty-five years they worked together. The format connected to their interest in performance art and some of their videos from the 1970s document performances staged by the artists.



LEFT: General Idea filming *Light On Documentation*, 1971–74. Jorge Zontal is pictured in the foreground, while in the background Felix Partz films with a Sony Portapak, photograph by AA Bronson. RIGHT: Video still from General Idea, *Double Mirror Video (A Borderline Case)*, 1971, black and white videotape, 5 min., 50 sec., Collection General Idea.

The advent of the Sony Portapak allowed a single individual to carry and use video recording equipment, portability that helped to spur artists' use of video. General Idea was captivated by this new technology and used the Portapak in *What Happened*, 1970. The group specifically employed video to document the *What Happened* performance and *The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1970, which were both staged at the Festival of Underground Theatre. In turn, the *What Happened* installation periodically featured video footage of the performance and also included a closed-circuit video set-up. General Idea continued to work with the Portapak for other projects in the period, including *Light On Documentation*, 1971–74, a black and white exploration of space through mirrors and light. From footage shot while making *Light On Documentation*, General Idea created *Double Mirror Video (A Borderline Case)*, 1971, which was just over five minutes long. General Idea also used the Portapak to document *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971.<sup>10</sup>

Among the works that influenced General Idea were Kenneth Anger's (b. 1927) short experimental film *Eaux d'artifice*, 1953, and *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, 1954.<sup>11</sup> The works of Canadian artist Michael Snow (b. 1928) were another influence on General Idea, particularly his renowned experimental film *Wavelength*, 1967.<sup>12</sup> Other influences included Jack Smith's (1932–1989) *Flaming Creatures*, 1963, and Susan Sontag's (1933–2004) 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" both of which helped to shape General Idea's approach to camp—a sensibility of "artifice and exaggeration."<sup>13</sup> Bronson explained, "Basically these films taught us that we should not be ashamed of or avoid camp but rather embrace it."<sup>14</sup>



As the group began to focus on the narrative of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* and its associated *Pavillion*, they used video to advance the fiction of Miss General Idea. *Blocking*, 1974, presents footage from a performance at Western Front, an artist-run centre in Vancouver, in which General Idea rehearses audience actions, including reactions and exit, in preparation for the pageant.

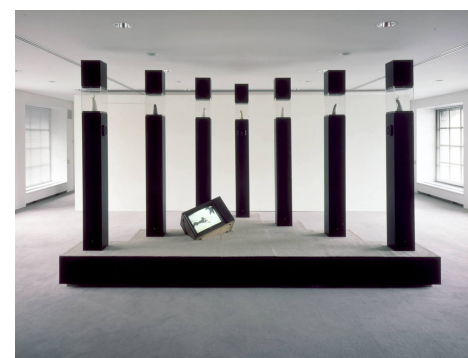
*The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* was also referenced in the video *Cornucopia*, 1982, which presents the ruins of the *Pavillion*. In 1977 General Idea asserted that the *Pavillion* had been destroyed by fire. *Cornucopia* appropriated the style of a museum documentary to convey the fictional account of the ruins of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. Along with an authoritative voiceover that conveyed puns and innuendo, the video features spinning ceramic phalluses and drawings of poodles and ziggurats. Through these fragments and images, the video presents the history of the *Pavillion*. The video also speaks to General Idea's larger oeuvre, referencing other projects by the group, including the *Colour Bar Lounge*.

Many General Idea video projects in the later 1970s and 1980s engaged with television, seeking to subvert some of its most prevalent formats. *Pilot*, 1977, *Test Tube*, 1979, *Loco*, 1982, and *Shut the Fuck Up*, 1985, were specifically created for public broadcast—fittingly, given the group's desire to infect the system.<sup>15</sup> *Pilot*, for example, uses the structure of a news show to introduce General Idea and their adoption of the pageant scheme, and incorporates some previous audience-rehearsal footage. *Test Tube* also engages with several popular television formats, including the news magazine, the infomercial, and the talk show.

General Idea helped to facilitate the development and dissemination of video art in Canada, most significantly by founding Art Metropole in 1974. A Toronto-based artist-run centre still in existence, Art Metropole collected and distributed artist videos in a period when few institutions were engaged in these endeavours.<sup>16</sup> The institution also published *Video by Artists* (1976), a key survey of video art in Canada edited by media-art curator and writer Peggy Gale.<sup>17</sup> Throughout their career, General Idea maintained an interest in video and their works kept pace with advancements in the medium.



Film still from Michael Snow, *Wavelength*, 1966-67, 16mm film, colour, sound, 45 min., National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



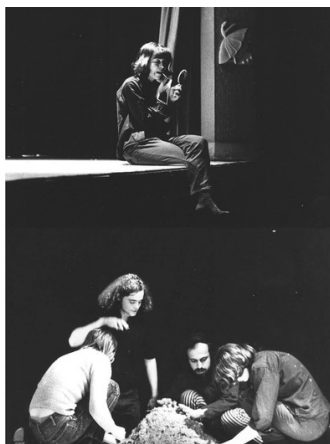
Installation view of General Idea, *Cornucopia: Fragments from the Room of the Unknown Function in the Villa Dei Misteri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1982-83, video installation, various elements with videotape *Cornucopia*, 1982, overall installation 243.8 x 426.7 x 243.8 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, photograph by General Idea. Installation view unknown.



## PERFORMANCE ART

Performance art, called body art in the 1960s, used the body in a manner that necessarily highlighted political awareness and was also tied to key developments in alternative theatre.<sup>18</sup>

The members of General Idea met in Toronto at Theatre Passe Muraille. Founded in 1968 by Jim Garrard, this progressive company was focused on eliminating the barrier between actors and audience. AA Bronson, Jorge Zontal, and Felix Partz—who were in the process of becoming General Idea—connected through the social scene that surrounded the theatre. Bronson contributed to the company in various ways in the 1960s, including poster and set design. *Laundromat Special #1*, 1969, a collaborative performance produced as part of Theatre Passe Muraille's programming, marked the first time the trio performed together. The work comprised a series of actions staged in a room with laundry-soap boxes piled on the floor and an oversized cotton bag labelled "laundry bag" suspended from the ceiling. *Match My Strike*, performed in 1969 at the Poor Alex Theatre, included Partz, Bronson, Zontal, and Mary Gardner, who used various props, including minced meat, bricks, glass, candles, and a slide projector.<sup>19</sup>



Performance documentation of *Match My Strike*, directed by Jorge Zontal and produced by John Neon, Poor Alex Theatre, Toronto, August 30, 1969, Collection General Idea, photographer unknown. Promotional materials detail the performance components: "1. Reading a letter, she is bound; 2. Dance; 3. Lights; 4. Meat ceremony, he is eating foam rubber; 5. Toe chew; and ceiling collapse."

*The Miss General Idea Pageant*, which shaped the artists' work in the 1970s, originated in the production *What Happened*, 1970, a multilayered multimedia event performed by General Idea (and friends) as part of the international Festival of Underground Theatre held at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts and the Global Village Theatre in Toronto.<sup>20</sup> The performance was based on a 1913 play of the same name by Gertrude Stein (1874–1946). The work played with the traditional roles of the actor and audience, and General Idea's version in 1970 fragmented the conventional theatre experience by staging the performance over a three-week period and having the performers record the event in multiple media—from sketching to video.<sup>21</sup> During the intermission for another play being performed at the festival, the group staged *The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*.<sup>22</sup>

Taking place in the theatre lobby, the pageant was centred on a small platform surrounded by flower arrangements discarded by a funeral parlour. During the talent portion of the pageant, contestant Miss Honey (Honey Novick) showed off her skills on the telex machine. Other contestants were costumed as bears: Belinda Bear, Danny Bear, and Rachel Bear, all of whom sang and danced. The judges declared Miss Honey the winner and crowned her Miss General Idea 1970. The pageant was documented on video. Describing the impact of the event, Partz stated, "Everyone was quite mystified as to what was going on. Because it looked quite real, because Miss Honey was quite a good actress."<sup>24</sup>



LEFT: Performance documentation of General Idea, *The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1970, a component of the project *What Happened*, 1970, part of the Festival of Underground Theatre, St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, Toronto, 1970, Collection General Idea, photograph by General Idea. Here Miss General Idea 1969, Granada Gazelle, awards the crown of Miss General Idea 1970 to Miss Honey. RIGHT: A contestant for *The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1970, a component of the project *What Happened*, 1970, part of the Festival of Underground Theatre, St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, Toronto, 1970, photograph by General Idea. Five or six contestants dressed in bear costumes, while Miss Honey, the entrant ultimately proclaimed the winner, wore a peau-de-soie gown, a fox stole, and a tiara.

The popularity of the pageant format was of central importance to General Idea and significantly shaped the artists' work going forward. Pointing to the flexibility and utility of the pageant format, curator and art historian Fern Bayer explains, "The beauty pageant format provided General Idea with a basic vocabulary of contemporary cultural clichés and allowed them to express their ideas about glamour, borderline cases, culture/nature interfaces, the role of the artist as an inspiration cultural device, the body of myths surrounding the art world, and the relationship of the artist to the media and the public."<sup>25</sup>



Installation view of General Idea, *XXX (bleu)*, 1984, installation resulting from a performance; set of three canvases: acrylic on canvas, each 493.5 x 296 cm; set of three poodle mannequins: straw, synthetic fur, acrylic, each standard breed size 74 x 20 x 77 cm; overall 350 x 988 x 143.5 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. This installation view is from *Haute Culture: General Idea. A Retrospective, 1969-1994* at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2011-12.



The group's performance *XXX (bleu)*, 1984, spoke to the connections between artists, the art world, and the media, while also referencing art history. It was performed in Geneva, Switzerland, at the Centre d'art contemporain Genève. On a set that played the part of an artist's studio, the members of General Idea performed an action in which they painted three large canvases with "X" symbols. The colour used was International Klein Blue, created by French artist Yves Klein (1928–1962), renowned for his monochromatic blue paintings. In 1960 Klein famously used nude female models as "brushes" to transfer paint to canvas. His performance was treated with the utmost seriousness—it was a black-tie event, complete with an orchestra that accompanied Klein's use of the nude women's bodies to create paintings. General Idea offered a pointed commentary on this by appropriating Klein's performance but employing three white, faux stuffed poodles, dripping with blue paint, to inscribe an "X" on each canvas.

## INSTALLATION

Contemporary installations are often described as "site-specific": they are assemblages of materials intended to reconfigure a particular space and place, often for a limited duration of time. General Idea worked with installations extensively throughout their career. Their interest in the medium intensified via their HIV/AIDS-related work in the 1990s.

General Idea's initial installations took place within their home at 78 Gerrard Street West in Toronto. *The Belly Store*, 1969, created with artist John Neon (b. 1944), for instance, made use of the living room of their house. Ambient music played while motorized "bellies" moved in tanks filled with black liquid. In the same room, the group presented *George Saia's Belly Food*, 1969. The multiple was made from plastic bottles with custom labels, which were filled with cotton batting. It was sold from a makeshift store counter that featured a cash register. This commercial set up announces the group's interest in commerce, which was elaborated in installations such as *The Boutique* from the 1984 *Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1980, *¥en Boutique*, 1989, and *Boutique Coeurs volants*, 1994/2001.



LEFT: General Idea, *Boutique Coeurs volants*, 1994/2001, lacquered metal, glass, 120 x 120 x 118 cm, Collection General Idea. This installation view is from the *Boutique Coeurs volants* exhibition at Florence Loewy, Paris, October 20, 2000–March 20, 2001. *Boutique Coeurs volants* displays eighteen of the General Idea multiple *Dick All*, 1993. RIGHT: Installation view of General Idea, *¥en Boutique*, 1989, various multiples, honeycomb aluminum, enamel paint, three aluminum tripods, video elements (*Test Tube*, 1979, or alternate), 212 x 315 x 348 cm, Collection Fonds national d'art contemporain, for the collection of Musée national d'Art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, photograph by General Idea. This installation view is from *General Idea*, Galleria Massimo De Carlo Arte Contemporanea, Milan, 1990.





# WHERE TO SEE

balloons, placemats, and dinner plates. The number of multiples they created varied in each edition according to the artists' interest and the context of the project—from editions of as few as two to editions of three hundred. In some cases, General Idea produced prototypes that were never realized as editions.

*Dinner Plate*, 1988, porcelain plate in cardboard box, label offset on paper; box: 24.5 x 31 x 2.8 cm, plate: 20 x 22.5 x 1.5 cm; first edition: edition of 238 plus eighteen artist's proofs, the first one hundred and the artist's proofs are signed and numbered, the others signed; various collections, photograph by Thomas E. Moore.

In part, the group's interest in multiples was tied to their critical interest in consumerism. AA Bronson explained, "General Idea was at once complicit in and critical of the mechanisms and strategies that join art and commerce, a sort of mole in the art world."<sup>27</sup> The artists promoted General Idea multiples through retail installations such as *The Boutique from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1980, and *¥en Boutique*, 1989. The 1984 *Boutique*, created in the shape of a dollar sign, made its commercial intentions apparent. Both boutiques were fully functioning kiosks at which General Idea multiples were sold. General Idea's founding of the artist-run centre Art Metropole is also tied to the group's interest in multiples: opened in 1974, the Toronto-based institution distributes artist editions to this day.

Many General Idea multiples closely referenced their concurrent art projects in other media. For instance, *The Getting into the Spirits Cocktail Book from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1980, is a bookwork of ersatz cocktail recipes for the drinks the group concocted in the *Colour Bar Lounge* (which appeared in their video work *Test Tube*, 1979). Similarly, General Idea translated their ongoing interest in heraldry (evidenced by a series of paintings featuring recurring imagery such as the poodle) into a series of crest multiples. *Eye of the Beholder*, 1989, for example, is a small chenille crest with a black, white, and red colour palette that shows a stylized skull with two copyright symbols for eyes. Above, the name of the group appears in capital letters.



LEFT: General Idea, *Eye of the Beholder*, 1989, chenille, embroidery on crest-shaped felt, 24 x 21 cm, unlimited edition, unsigned and unnumbered, various collections, photograph by Thomas E. Moore. RIGHT: General Idea, *XXX Voto (for the Spirit of Miss General Idea)*, 1995, offset publication, 128 pages, colour reproductions, black-linen hardcover with blue hot-stamping, 14.5 x 11 cm, edition of nine hundred plus one artist's proof, signed and numbered (rubber-stamped), various collections, photograph by Cathy Busby.

Publications, including *FILE Magazine* (1972-89), were a key component of General Idea's multiples. Their final multiple was a book project titled *XXX Voto (for the Spirit of Miss General Idea)*. This poignant reflection on the artists' long collaboration was published in May 1995, following the deaths of Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz in 1994. *XXX Voto* is based on a text by Yves Klein (1928-1962), in which he thanks his patron saint for his life. General Idea adopted this concept and dedicated their gratitude to the Spirit of Miss General Idea. The text references the three artists throughout: one line reads, "thank you three times to the third power." Bronson explained that *XXX Voto* was a reflection on the life the artists had together.<sup>28</sup>



General Idea had a long and steady career of prestigious international exhibitions during their active period (1969–1994) and following the group's demise. Today, their work continues to resonate with audiences, critics, and scholars, and especially with students and younger artists. General Idea works are exhibited internationally and held in many significant private and public collections, including those of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Art Museum of the University of Toronto; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Vancouver Art Gallery; Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston; Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal; Stedelijk





**Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent; Art Institute, Chicago; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Winnipeg Art Gallery; and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.**

### THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

General Idea left behind a wealth of materials of interest to art enthusiasts and scholars alike. The most significant collection is held in the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives (NGCLA), which currently administers the General Idea fonds. This cache contains text and audiovisuals related to the artists.

The NGCLA also holds the Art Metropole Collection, donated by Jay A. Smith, Toronto, 1999, as well as the General Idea fonds. Dating from 1969 to 1994, the General Idea archive, on long-term loan, includes invitations, postcards, photographs, clippings, periodicals, and the files and working drawings from the group's various projects. The Art Metropole Collection also contains materials by the group's contemporaries and collaborators.

In addition, the NGCLA holds the related Art Metropole fonds, as well as original copies of *FILE Magazine* (1972-89). Further archival files at the NGCLA, including the Fern Bayer fonds, hold related materials pertaining to the group's activities.



Installation view of General Idea, *One Year of AZT*, 1991, and *Pharma@opia*, 1992, taken during the touring retrospective *General Idea's Fin de siècle*, Kunstverein in Hamburg, Germany, 1992-93



## KEY EXHIBITIONS

General Idea has presented their work in numerous solo and group exhibitions dating from 1969 to the present day. For a complete list of all of their solo and group exhibitions, and a complete list of General Idea editions, publications, and multiples please see AA Bronson's website. This site also outlines the group's video exhibitions and broadcasts and the group's performances. The following exhibition list uses Bronson's website as an authoritative reference for the spelling of all exhibition titles and venues.

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS DURING GENERAL IDEA'S ACTIVE YEARS (1969–1994)

A detailed list of General Idea's exhibitions to date can be found on AA Bronson's website.

<b>1969</b>	<i>The Belly Store</i> (collaboration with John Neon), 78 Gerrard Street West, Toronto. <i>Waste Age</i> , 78 Gerrard Street West, Toronto.
<b>1970</b>	<i>Betty's</i> (collaboration with Ken Coupland and Ron Terrill), 78 Gerrard Street West, Toronto.
<b>1971</b>	<i>The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant Entries</i> , A Space, Toronto. <i>The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant Awards Ceremony</i> , Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
<b>1972</b>	<i>Light On</i> , Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto. <i>Evidence of Body Binding</i> , Galerie B, Montreal.
<b>1973</b>	<i>Luxon V.B.</i> , Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto. <i>Manipulating the Self</i> , Galerie B, Montreal.
<b>1975</b>	<i>Going thru the Notions</i> , Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto. <i>Going thru the Motions</i> , Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
<b>1976</b>	<i>Search for the Spirit</i> , Galerie Gaëtan, Geneva.
<b>1978</b>	<i>Menage à Trois</i> , Lucio Amelio, Naples. <i>Reconstructing Futures</i> , Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto; Canada House, London; Canadian Cultural Centre, Paris.
<b>1979</b>	<i>Colour Bar Lounge</i> , Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. <i>Test Tube</i> , de Appel, Amsterdam.
<b>1980–81</b>	<i>General Idea's Carmen Lamanna Gallery - The Boutique from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion</i> , Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto.





---

<b>1980</b>	The Canadian Pavilion at the 40th Venice Biennale.
<b>1981</b>	<i>General Idea</i> , 49th Parallel, New York.
<b>1982</b>	<i>Documenta 7</i> , Kassel, Germany. <i>Ziggurat Paintings (1968-69)</i> , Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto.
<b>1983</b>	<i>P is for Poodle: The Milky Way from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion</i> , Music Gallery, Toronto; Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto. <i>General Idea's Mondo Cane Kama Sutra</i> , Albert Baronian Gallery, Brussels.
<b>1984</b>	<i>General Idea's 1984</i> , Vancouver Art Gallery. <i>Baby Makes 3</i> , Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto. <i>General Idea</i> , Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst (now Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst), Ghent.
<b>1984-85</b>	<i>The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion</i> , Kunsthalle Basel. Travelled to Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal.
<b>1986-87</b>	<i>The Armoury of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion</i> , Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo. Travelled to 49th Parallel, New York; University Art Gallery, California State University, Long Beach; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo.
<b>1987</b>	<i>AIDS</i> , Koury Wingate Gallery, New York. <i>AIDS</i> (poster project), New York.
<b>1988</b>	<i>Test Pattern: T.V. Dinner Plates from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion</i> , SPIRAL, Wacoal Art Center, Tokyo. <i>AIDS</i> (window project), New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. <i>AIDS</i> (poster project), Berlin. <i>AIDS</i> (poster project), Toronto. <i>AIDS</i> (billboard project), Billboard Cafe, San Francisco. <i>The Public and Private Domains of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion</i> , Artspace, San Francisco. <i>AIDS</i> (poster project), San Francisco.
<b>1989</b>	<i>General Idea's Yen Boutique</i> , Galerie Esther Schipper, Cologne.

---



*General Idea 1968-1988*, Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne.  
*AIDS* (project for the New York Subway System), New York.  
*AIDS* (project for Spectacolor Board), Times Square, New York.  
*Nightschool: The Academy of the Miss General Idea Pavillion*, Mai 36 Galerie, Lucerne.

---

**1990**

*AIDS* (project for Amsterdam trams), Amsterdam.  
*Fin de siècle*, Koury Wingate Gallery, New York.

---

**1991**

*Green (Permanent) PLA©EBO*, Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne.  
*Red (Cadmium) PLA©EBO*, S.L. Simpson Gallery, Toronto.  
*AIDS* (project for Seattle buses), Seattle.  
*AIDS (Reinhardt)*, Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, New York.  
*AIDS* (Nauman), Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona.

---

**1992**

*Green (Permanent) PLA©EBO*, Galerie Richard Foncke, Ghent  
*Magi© Bullet*, Stux Gallery, New York.  
*Blue (Cobalt) PLA©EBO*, Galerie Montenay, Paris.

---

**1992-93**

*General Idea's Fin de siècle*, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart.  
Travelled to Centre d'Art Santa Mònica, Barcelona; Kunstverein in Hamburg;  
The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto; Wexner Center for the  
Visual Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus; San Francisco Museum of  
Modern Art.

---

**1993**

*The Armoury of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion and Related Works*, Art  
Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.  
*General Idea: Multiples*, S.L. Simpson Gallery, Toronto.

---

**1994**

*One Year of AZT / One Day of AZT*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

---

**SELECTED WRITINGS BY GENERAL IDEA**

Bronson, AA. "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as  
Museums by Artists," in *Museums by Artists*, edited by AA Bronson and Peggy  
Gale, 29-37. Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983.

*FILE Magazine*, vols. 1-6 (1972-85), and *FILE Magazine* nos. 25-29 (1986-89),  
including "Pablum for the Pablum Eaters," in vol. 2, no. 1&2 (May 1973);  
"Borderline Cases," in vol. 2, no. 3 (September 1973); and "Glamour," in vol. 3,  
no. 1 (fall 1975).

General Idea. *XXX Voto (to the Spirit of Miss General Idea)*. Montreal/Toronto:  
Galerie René Blouin/S.L. Simpson Gallery, 1995.



## ARTICLES ABOUT GENERAL IDEA

For a detailed list of writings on General Idea, see the Selected Bibliography provided on AA Bronson's website.

Allen, Gwen. "The Magazine as Mirror: FILE, 1972-1989." *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.

Bayer, Fern. "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects, 1968-1975." In *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997.

Celant, Germano. "General Idea i Canadada: Un Gruppo Canadese." *Domus* (Milan: October 1974), 52.

Cronin, J. Keri, and Kirsty Robertson. "General Idea and AIDS." In *Imagining Resistance: Visual Culture and Activism in Canada*, edited by J. Keri Cronin and Kirsty Robertson, 95-99. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011.

Decter, Joshua. "Infect the Public Domain with an Imagevirus: General Idea's AIDS Project." *Afterall* 15 (spring/summer 2007): 96-105.

Monk, Philip. "Some Like it Haute: The General Idea Retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario." *C Magazine* 112 (winter 2011-12): 10-15.

———. "Crisis (and Coping) in the Work of General Idea." *Filip* 16 (spring 2012): 107-112.

Moser, Gabrielle. "Exhibition-Making with Ghosts: The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion." *Filip* 11 (spring 2004).

Solomon, Virginia. "What is Love?: Queer Subcultures and the Political Present." *e-flux* (2013), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/what-is-love-queer-subcultures-and-the-political-present>.

Welch, Adam. "Time for Another Rewrite: The AGO's General Idea: Haute Culture, A Retrospective 1969-1994." *The Toronto Review of Books* (November 15, 2011), <http://www.torontoreviewofbooks.com/2011/11/general-idea-haute-culture>.

## KEY INTERVIEWS

Decter, Joshua, and General Idea. *Journal of Contemporary Art*, 4.1 (1991): 49-64, <http://www.jca-online.com/genidea.html>.

Enright, Robert, and AA Bronson. "Particularizing Some General Ideas: An Interview with AA Bronson." *Border Crossings* 23.1 (February 2004): 28-44.

General Idea fonds. National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives. Manuscripts Series. Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, Louise Dompierre interview, New York, July 26, 1991.





Sharp, Willoughby. "The Gold-Diggers of '84: An Interview with General Idea, Toronto." *Avalanche*(winter/spring 1973): 14-21.

## AUDIO AND VIDEO ABOUT GENERAL IDEA

Bronson, AA. "AA Bronson on Art in the 1960s." The University of Chicago, February 10, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXoWTBVVeHc>.

*This lecture by AA Bronson delves into the artists' early years and includes a discussion of numerous early projects by General Idea.*

———. "AA Bronson on General Idea's Cornucopia." San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, December 2012.

<http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/539#ixzz3abmuaycH>.

*In this short video, AA Bronson discusses the General Idea work Cornucopia: Fragments from the Room of the Unknown Function in the Villa Dei Misteri of The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion, part of General Idea's larger project The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion.*

———. "AA Bronson Reflects on Sexual Themes in the Work of General Idea." San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, December 2012.

<http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/538>.

*In this short video, AA Bronson speaks about General Idea as a collective and how the group worked to address queer lives and sexuality.*

———. "AA Bronson: Life and Work." Hart House, University of Toronto, October 28, 2014. <https://vimeo.com/111459938>.

Krishtalka, Sholem, Virginia Solomon, and Luis Jacob. "The General Idea behind General Idea: A Panel Discussion." Art Gallery of Ontario, November 16, 2011. <http://www.ago.net/the-general-idea-behind-general-idea>.

*This podcast features Sholem Krishtalka, Virginia Solomon, and Luis Jacob discussing General Idea as part of a panel held at the Art Gallery of Ontario in conjunction with the retrospective Haute Culture: General Idea—A Retrospective, 1969-1994.*

Monk, Philip. "Marshall McLuhan, General Idea, and Me!" McCready Lecture on Canadian Art, Art Gallery of Ontario, November 9, 2011.

[http://graphics.artmatters.ca/mp3/McCready-Lecture-2011.mp3?\\_sp=c63c27c7e17beacc.1432147382199](http://graphics.artmatters.ca/mp3/McCready-Lecture-2011.mp3?_sp=c63c27c7e17beacc.1432147382199).



Production photograph from the filming of *Test Tube*, 1979, with Marina Abramović drinking from a test tube in the *Colour Bar Lounge*, photograph by General Idea

## VIDEOS BY GENERAL IDEA

General Idea videos are rented and sold through the New York City-based non-profit Electronic Arts Intermix, which also offers free screenings by appointment. Several institutions hold in their collections videos by General Idea, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York (which also has a copy of General Idea's

only film, *God is My Gigolo*); Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Kunsthaus Zürich; and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. The Banff Centre for the Arts library also lends General Idea videos.

#### FURTHER READING

Bordowitz, Gregg. *General Idea: Imagevirus*. London: Afterall, 2010.

*General Idea 1968-1984*, exhibition catalogue, texts by Jean-Christophe Ammann, Tim Guest, General Idea, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, 1984.

*General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, edited by Barbara Fischer. Toronto: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003.

*General Idea: FILE Magazine*, edited by Beatrix Ruf. JRP/Ringier, Zurich, 2008.

*General Idea's Fin de siècle*, exhibition catalogue (texts by Joshua Decter, Friedmann Malsch, Louise Dompierre, Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, Jean-Christophe Ammann), Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, 1992.

*General Idea's PHARMA©OPIA*, exhibition catalogue (texts by Brigitte Rambaud, Jean-Christophe Ammann, General Idea), Centre d'Art Santa Mònica, Barcelona, 1992.

*General Idea: A Retrospective 1969-1994*, edited by Frédéric Bonnet. Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2011.

Monk, Philip. "A Space in Toronto: a History," *Künstler aus Kanada*, Stuttgart: Württembergischer Kunstverein, 1983, pp. 119-20; German translation, pp. 116-117. Access via: <http://www.philipmonk.com/a-space-a-history-1983>.

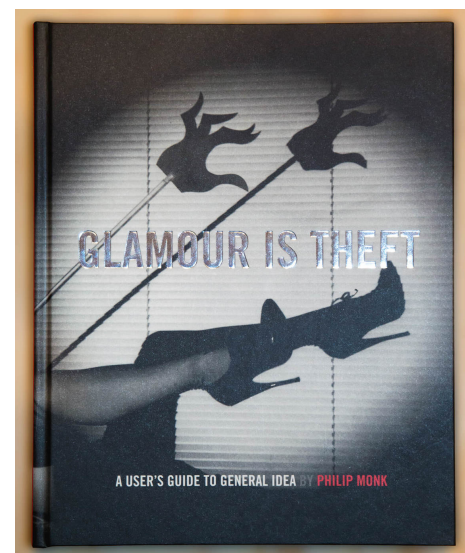
———. *Glamour Is Theft: A User's Guide to General Idea*. Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 2012.

Scott, Kitty, and Jonathan Shaughnessy. *Art Metropole The Top 100*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2006.

Trescher, Stephan. *General Idea. Die Kanadische Künstlergruppe*. Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 1996. German-language edition only.

*Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada, 1965-1980*, edited by Grant Arnold and Karen Henry. Edmonton, Halifax, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver: Art Gallery of Alberta/Halifax INK/Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, University of Toronto/Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University/Vancouver Art Gallery, 2012.

*The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975*, edited by Fern Bayer and Christina Richie. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997.



Cover of *Glamour is Theft: A User's Guide to General Idea* by Philip Monk



# GENERAL IDEA

Life & Work by Sarah E.K. Smith

---

See all five of Philip Monk's 2014 lectures, part of The Copy Cat Academy project accessible online at <http://www.copycatacademytoronto.com/philip-monk-lectures/#new-page-1>.





## NOTES

### BIOGRAPHY

1. General Idea, "Glamour," *FILE*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Fall 1975): 21.
2. AA Bronson notes that General Idea objected to the term "collective," instead choosing to model the group after a rock band. They preferred to refer to themselves as an artists' group. Bronson, correspondence with author, August 25, 2015.
3. Gabe met Bronson (then Tims), who was also a student at the university, in 1966, but they were not close. In Bronson's words, Gabe was then "known as a talented maverick." Bronson recounted viewing an installation Gabe had created at the time and being "devastated by the contemporaneity of his vision." AA Bronson, *Negative Thoughts* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2001), 29.
4. Annette Mangaard, *General Idea: Art, AIDS and the fin de siècle* (DVD, 48:00, 2007); "Felix Partz, a.k.a. Ron Gabe, April 23, 1945–June 5, 1994," Correspondence Series, Business, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. AA Bronson notes that Partz failed the course. Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.
5. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.
6. Annette Mangaard, *General Idea: Art, AIDS and the fin de siècle* (DVD, 48:00, 2007); "Jorge Zontal," Correspondence Series, Business, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
7. See "Ruins in Process, Vancouver Art in the Sixties," for an image of Zontal in Hay's workshop with other artists, <http://vancouverartinthesixties.com/archive/524>.
8. Originally, Saia-Levy had only intended to stop in Toronto to make a 16mm film about a production at Theatre Passe Muraille. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, August 24, 2015; Annette Mangaard, *General Idea: Art, AIDS and the fin de siècle* (DVD, 48:00, 2007); "Jorge Zontal," Correspondence Series, Business, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
9. AA Bronson, "AA Bronson on Art in the '60s," University of Chicago, February 10, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXoWTBVVeHc>.
10. Describing their meeting, Bronson stated, "Jorge was there, a little retiring, at the back of the group, his eyes liquid with affection for me: love at first sight." AA Bronson, *Negative Thoughts* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2001), 25.
11. AA Bronson quoted in Christina Richie, "Allusions, Omissions, Cover-ups: The Early Days," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 13.



12. AA Bronson notes that Paige introduced Gabe to Saia-Levy and Tims and advocated for them all to move in to 78 Gerrard Street West, with several other friends. Her motivation was to keep Gabe from returning to Winnipeg. Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.

13. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, August 25, 2015. Coach House Press was, at the time, also part of Rochdale College.

14. AA Bronson, "Interview with Anne Pasternak and AA Bronson," *Creative Time* (October 2008), <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2008/invocation/interview.html>; Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects, 1968-1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 29.

15. AA Bronson, "AA Bronson on Art in the '60s," University of Chicago, February 10, 2012; AA Bronson, "Interview with Anne Pasternak and AA Bronson," *Creative Time* (October 2008), <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2008/invocation/interview.html>.

16. AA Bronson, "AA Bronson on Art in the '60s," University of Chicago, February 10, 2012: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXoWTBVVeHc>.

17. AA Bronson, "General Idea—Interview with AA Bronson—Centre culturel canadien," Centre culturel canadien, June 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0istPcv8FSw>.

18. Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects, 1968-1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 32.

19. Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects, 1968-1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 38-39.

20. AA Bronson, "Interview with Anne Pasternak and AA Bronson," *Creative Time* (October 2008), <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2008/invocation/interview.html>.

21. Louise Dompierre, interview transcript, New York City, July 26, 1991: 3, Manuscripts Series, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.

22. AA Bronson, "Interview with Anne Pasternak and AA Bronson," *Creative Time* (October 2008), <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2008/invocation/interview.html>.

23. AA Bronson, "General Idea—Interview with AA Bronson—Centre culturel canadien," Centre culturel canadien, June 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0istPcv8FSw>.



24. Louise Dompierre, interview transcript, New York City, July 26, 1991: 2, Manuscripts Series, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
25. Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects, 1968-1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 23; Luke Nicholson, "Being Framed by Irony: AIDS and the Art of General Idea" (MA thesis, Concordia University, 2006), 16.
26. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.
27. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, August 24, 2015. The book went through three printings in total, with different titles and author names: *Lena* by A.L. Bronson (1968), *Lena* by A.C. McWhortle (1971), and *Lana* by AA Bronson (2009). The book was censored in Canada, as Bronson explained: "banned ... seized by the police and burned," Asher Penn, "Pre-P.C.: AA Bronson Republishes his Famous Erotica," *Art in America*, October 19, 2009, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/aa-bronson-lana>.
28. AA Bronson used this pseudonym for several pornographic novels according to Deborah Barkun, "The Artists as a Work-in-Progress: General Idea and the Construction of Collective Identity," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 48, No. 4 (2012): 459.
29. The group living at General Idea headquarters varied. In addition to Bronson, Partz, and Zontal, the residents included Daniel Freedman and Mimi Paige as well as Granada Gazelle (Sharon Venne); a transsexual opera singer Pascal (Stuart Murray); O Burst (Paul Oberst); Plastic Jack or P.J. (John R. Taylor); Noah Dakota (Noah James); and Randy Gledhill.
30. Louise Dompierre, interview transcript, New York City, July 26, 1991: 2, Manuscripts Series, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
31. Louise Dompierre, interview transcript, New York City, July 26, 1991: 17, Manuscripts Series, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
32. Frédéric Bonnet quoted in Sara Angel, "How General Idea Predicted the Future," *Maclean's*, July 28, 2011, <http://www.macleans.ca/culture/how-general-idea-predicted-the-future>.
33. Louise Dompierre, interview transcript, New York City, July 26, 1991: 6, Manuscripts Series, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
34. Louise Dompierre, interview transcript, New York City, July 26, 1991: 4, Manuscripts Series, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.





35. AA Bronson, "Interview with Anne Pasternak and AA Bronson," *Creative Time* (October 2008), <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2008/invocation/interview.html>.
36. Louise Dompierre, interview transcript, New York City, July 26, 1991: 4, Manuscripts Series, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
37. AA Bronson, interview with Paul O'Neill, *NDP#3* (2006), 2, [http://www.northdrivepress.com/interviews/NDP3/NDP3\\_BRONSON\\_ONEILL.pdf](http://www.northdrivepress.com/interviews/NDP3/NDP3_BRONSON_ONEILL.pdf).
38. AA Bronson, interview with Paul O'Neill, *NDP#3* (2006), 2, [http://www.northdrivepress.com/interviews/NDP3/NDP3\\_BRONSON\\_ONEILL.pdf](http://www.northdrivepress.com/interviews/NDP3/NDP3_BRONSON_ONEILL.pdf).
39. As AA Bronson notes, at this point, the concept of an artist-run centre did not exist. Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.
40. Art Metropole was also organized as part of Art Official Inc.
41. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.
42. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.
43. This location served as General Idea headquarters until 1993. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.
44. The destruction of the *Pavillion* was reflected in the 1977-78 exhibition *Reconstructing Futures*, first displayed at Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto. As the catalogue explained: "What had been conceived as staged pageantry evolves as the plot twists into a classic tragedy." See "Recon-Futures Catalogue and Installation," 1978, Decomposition, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, Manuscripts Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.
45. The music in *Hot Property* is credited to the Dishes, a Toronto punk band that was part of the Queen West scene in the 1970s. Notably, General Idea had numerous and significant connections to punk and new wave music in this period; for instance, working with bands including Rough Trade. Further connections can be seen through Art Metropole, which at the time was a key location in Toronto from which to access imported punk singles. General Idea also published a special issue of *FILE* titled "Punk 'Til You Puke," vol. 3, no. 4 (Fall 1977). For information on the Dishes and their connection to General Idea, see Sam Sutherland, "Hot Property: The Dishes and the Northern Origins of Queercore," in *Perfect Youth: The Birth of Canadian Punk* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2012), 94-107.
46. General Idea, *Hot Property*, 1980.
47. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 4, 2016.



48. AA Bronson, interview with Paul O'Neill, *NDP#3* (2006), 3, [http://www.northdrivepress.com/interviews/NDP3/NDP3\\_BRONSON\\_ONEILL.pdf](http://www.northdrivepress.com/interviews/NDP3/NDP3_BRONSON_ONEILL.pdf).
49. General Idea later participated in *Documenta 8* in 1987.
50. AA Bronson, interview with Paul O'Neill, *NDP#3* (2006), 3, [http://www.northdrivepress.com/interviews/NDP3/NDP3\\_BRONSON\\_ONEILL.pdf](http://www.northdrivepress.com/interviews/NDP3/NDP3_BRONSON_ONEILL.pdf).
51. *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* toured Europe and Canada in 1984-85, showing at Kunsthalle Basel; Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; and Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal.
52. Louise Dompierre, interview transcript, New York City, July 26, 1991: 30, Manuscripts Series, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
53. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.
54. The year of their New York City relocation is listed in the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, General Idea fonds finding aid as 1985, see "Photographs: Miscellaneous Series," General Idea Studio: 136 Simcoe Street, Toronto. 1977-1993. Bronson dates the move to 1986. See AA Bronson quoted in Philip Monk, "Periodizing General Idea," *Glamour Is Theft: A User's Guide to General Idea* (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 2012), 227.
55. AA Bronson, interview with Paul O'Neill, *NDP#3* (2006), 7, [http://www.northdrivepress.com/interviews/NDP3/NDP3\\_BRONSON\\_ONEILL.pdf](http://www.northdrivepress.com/interviews/NDP3/NDP3_BRONSON_ONEILL.pdf).
56. AA Bronson in conversation with author, August 24, 2015.
57. Louise Dompierre, interview transcript, New York City, July 26, 1991: 6, Manuscripts Series, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
58. Observed in the United States in the early 1980s, the term "acquired immune deficiency syndrome" or "AIDS" was proposed in 1982. AIDS was later understood to be caused by the human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV. AZT, the first antiretroviral medication used to treat HIV, was not available until 1987.
59. These works were shown internationally, with many exhibited in commercial galleries in Europe. Additionally, over seventy temporary public art projects about the AIDS pandemic were commissions by public art galleries, predominately in Europe. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 4, 2016.
60. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.



61. General Idea's approach, however, was not without critics. Other artists and activists making work explicitly about the AIDS pandemic critiqued General Idea for creating work that was too coded, as well as not including information on safe sex. As AA Bronson explains, General Idea's critics worried they were exploiting the notoriety of the disease. The group's age and status as outsiders (Canadians) contributed to a sense that they were interlopers. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.

62. This article predates the identification of HIV and use of the term AIDS. See Lawrence K. Altman, "Rare Cancer seen in 41 Homosexuals," *New York Times*, July 3, 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/07/03/us/rare-cancer-seen-in-41-homosexuals.html>.

63. Lawrence K. Altman, "30 Years in We Are Still Learning From AIDS," *New York Times*, May 30, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/health/31aids.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/health/31aids.html?_r=0).

64. Numerous artists in the world were creating work about the AIDS pandemic. In New York groups such as AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (known as ACT UP) were especially prominent. For an archive of ACT UP projects in New York see <http://www.actupny.org>.

65. General Idea produced twenty-six issues of *FILE*, three of which were double issues. The group numbered the double issues in such a way that the final issue of the publication is number 29.

66. Some ambiguity exists as to the exact dates of Partz and Zontal's HIV diagnoses. Bronson states that Partz was diagnosed in 1989, with Zontal diagnosed in 1990 (Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016). Fern Bayer suggests that Partz was diagnosed in the late summer of 1990 and Zontal in 1991 (Bayer, correspondence with author, November 27, 2015). Bayer's dates are reflected in the Finding Aid she created for the General Idea Archive at the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.

67. "A Tribute to Felix Partz," *The Arts Tonight*, CBC Radio, July 6, 1994, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, General Idea fonds, Audio, Film, and Video Works Series.

68. During this period, General Idea's long-term relationship with Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto came to a close. The partnership ended acrimoniously. Following the dissolution of their partnership with Lamanna, General Idea began working with S.L. Simpson Gallery.

69. "Felix Partz, a.k.a. Ron Gabe, April 23, 1945–June 5, 1994," Correspondence, Correspondence Series, Business, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.

70. AA Bronson, "AA Bronson on Art in the '60s," University of Chicago, February 10, 2012: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXoWTBVVeHc>. Taking on the role of caretaker had a significant impact on Bronson, informing his subsequent work as a healer and artist.





71. Annette Mangaard, *General Idea: Art, AIDS and the fin de siècle* (DVD, 48:00, 2007); "Felix Partz, a.k.a. Ron Gabe, April 23, 1945–June 5, 1994," Correspondence, Correspondence Series, Business, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
72. Annette Mangaard, *General Idea: Art, AIDS and the fin de siècle* (DVD, 48:00, 2007); "Felix Partz, a.k.a. Ron Gabe, April 23, 1945–June 5, 1994," Correspondence, Correspondence Series, Business, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
73. AA Bronson, "AA Bronson on Art in the '60s," University of Chicago, February 10, 2012: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXoWTBVVeHc>.
74. Luke Nicholson, "Being Framed by Irony: AIDS and the Art of General Idea" (MA thesis, Concordia University, 2006), 115.
75. AA Bronson, *AA Bronson*, <http://www.aabronson.com/aaindex.html>.

## KEY WORKS: THE 1971 MISS GENERAL IDEA PAGEANT

1. The bulk of the material from this project is held in the Collection of the Carmen Lamanna Estate. The National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa also holds archival materials pertaining to this work. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.
2. Joshua Decter and AA Bronson, interview, n.d., *Journal of Contemporary Art*, <http://www.jca-online.com/genidea.html>.
3. Granada Gazelle to Mrs. Campbell, Group 4, 1971, "The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant," Projects Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
4. The artist Janis Campbell declined the offer to participate in a letter that critiqued the pageant. General Idea interpreted this letter as her contest entry.
5. The artists described the site as "the only location in Toronto combining the appropriate elements of milieu, elegance and formality." General Idea to Denis Young, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, June 9, 1971, Correspondence, Group 6, 1971, "The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant," Projects Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
6. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.
7. Typed document, Group 4, 1971, "The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant," Projects Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
8. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 4, 2016.
9. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 4, 2016.



10. Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968-1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 74.

## KEY WORKS: GLAMOUR ISSUE

1. The publication was officially located within the non-profit organization Art Official Inc., chartered by AA Bronson, Jorge Zontal, and Felix Partz in 1971. Fern Bayer, Peggy Gale, Art Metropole, "Preamble," Digital Occasional Paper No. 1, January 1971-April 2006, 2, Art Metropole's Publications and Events History with Related Ephemera, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa, [https://www.gallery.ca/images/content/artmetchron\\_e.pdf](https://www.gallery.ca/images/content/artmetchron_e.pdf).

2. General Idea, "Editorial: Stretch That Social Fabric," *FILE Magazine*, 29 (1989): 3.

3. Gwen Allen, "The Magazine as Mirror: FILE, 1972-1989," *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 147.

4. The other key text in the issue was "Treatise on Gorgeousness," by John Jack Baylin, a gay Canadian artist who also went by the pseudonym "Count Fanzini." He also created the FETISH T-shirt frequently worn by Bronson.

5. Luke Nicholson, "Being Framed by Irony: AIDS and the Art of General Idea" (MA thesis, Concordia University, 2006), 121.

6. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 6, 2016.

7. See also AA Bronson, "Myth as Parasite, Image as Virus: General Idea's Bookshelf, 1967-1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 17-20.

8. General Idea, "Glamour," *FILE Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 1 (fall 1975): 22.

9. Quoted in Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968-1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 110.

10. In 1978 General Idea created a variant on the 1975 "Glamour Issue." Using about one hundred copies of the original 1975 issue, they added a screen-printed image of Toronto's CN Tower to the cover of the issue. They gave these away at *High Profile*, their fake 10th anniversary party. Fern Bayer, correspondence with author, February 17, 2016.

## KEY WORKS: SHOWCARD SERIES

1. The Art Gallery of Ontario owns the 130 cards that comprise the initial Showcard Series, 1975. The National Gallery of Canada owns 152 cards, which were donated in 1993. Other works in Showcard Series are held in various collections, including the Carmen Lamanna Collection.



2. General Idea created Showcard Series, comprising 130 cards, in 1975. These were presented in the exhibition *Going thru the Notions* at Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto, from October 18 to November 6, 1975. The artists added cards to Showcard Series until 1979. See also Peggy Gale, *Showcards* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Photography, 1993), n.p.

3. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 6, 2015. Also see Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968-1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 114.

4. Quoted in Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968-1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 113.

5. Peggy Gale, *Showcards* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Photography, 1993), n.p.

## KEY WORKS: PILOT

1. AA Bronson, in correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.

2. The "basically this" montage uses the same wording found in Showcard Series, 1975-79. These cards explain the different conceptual structures of General Idea's work.

3. AA Bronson notes that this structure was also used in *Test Tube*, 1979, and *Shut the Fuck Up*, 1984. Bronson, in correspondence with author, January 6, 2016.

4. In fact, the group did not form until 1969. However, they often revised their history to account for *The 1968 General Idea Pageant* and to link General Idea to the historic significance of 1968, which included events such as the Paris Uprising of students and workers.

5. While General Idea does not specifically cite George Orwell in *Pilot*, the year 1984 alludes to the book thematically. See Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968-1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 75.

6. Featured in various iterations, each gown comprises two or three large pyramid shapes—made of venetian-blind slats—stacked on top of one another, encompassing the body of the wearer and obscuring his or her face. The tiered silhouettes of the gowns allude to ball gowns and glamour, while their material qualities reference modern architecture and the ziggurat shape. Each *V.B. Gown* is an architectural massing study for *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. Fern Bayer, correspondence with author, August 23, 2015. For further information on the concept of the *V.B. Gowns*, see General Idea, "Form Follows Fiction," *Unmuzzled Ox* 4, no. 2 (1976): 23-39.





7. AA Bronson credits *Pilot* as a project that led to General Idea's invitation by de Appel to make a pilot project for artists' television in Amsterdam. AA Bronson, in correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.

## KEY WORKS: TEST TUBE

1. As part of their three-month residency, the trio worked with a professional crew to create the piece. The video was subsequently displayed at the Stedelijk Museum in 1979 in the group's first solo museum exhibition. *Test Tube* was, in fact, not broadcast on Dutch television as it appropriated the medium too closely. However, it was broadcast in Canada, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States. See "Test Tube," Museum of Modern Art, [https://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/film\\_screenings/11979](https://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/film_screenings/11979).

2. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016.

3. This character was played by Marianne Van Kersen.

4. Mike Kelley and AA Bronson, "Excerpts from a Conversation," in *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, ed. Barbara Fischer (Toronto: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 284.

## KEY WORKS: NAZI MILK

1. This also had a personal connection, as Jorge Zontal's father was an Auschwitz survivor.

2. The advertisement seems prophetic of the popular 1990s "Got Milk?" advertisements. In fact, *Nazi Milk* was inspired by a 1975 Canadian Milk Marketing Board campaign. Luke Nicholson, "Being Framed by Irony: AIDS and the Art of General Idea" (MA thesis, Concordia University, 2006), 29.

3. General Idea, *The Getting Into the Spirits Cocktail Book from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1980, n.p.

4. For more details on other iterations of *Nazi Milk*, see the catalogue raisonné *General Idea: Multiples, 1967-1993* (Toronto: General Idea/S.L. Simpson Gallery, 1993).

## KEY WORKS: THE BOUTIQUE FROM THE 1984 MISS GENERAL IDEA PAVILLION

1. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 6, 2016.

2. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 6, 2016.

3. AA Bronson, "Copyright, Cash, and Crowd Control: Art and Economy in the Work of General Idea," in *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, ed. Barbara Fischer (Toronto: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 25-26.

4. For a detailed discussion of the different ways the *Boutique* has been displayed, see Lillian Tone, "Affording the Ultimate Creative Shopping



Experience: The Boutique of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion," <http://artarchives.net/artarchives/liliantone/tonegeneralidea2.html>; AA Bronson, "Copyright, Cash, and Crowd Control: Art and Economy in the Work of General Idea," in *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, ed. Barbara Fischer (Toronto: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 26.

5. Lillian Tone, "Affording the Ultimate Creative Shopping Experience: The Boutique of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion," <http://artarchives.net/artarchives/liliantone/tonegeneralidea2.html>.

6. See Lillian Tone, "Affording the Ultimate Creative Shopping Experience: The Boutique of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion," <http://artarchives.net/artarchives/liliantone/tonegeneralidea2.html>.

## KEY WORKS: MONDO CANE KAMA SUTRA

1. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 4, 2016.
2. Although General Idea advanced queer identity in their work, this theme was not acknowledged by critics until the mid-1980s. "Mondo Cane Kama Sutra," *FILE Magazine*, vol. 5, no. 4 (1983): n.p.

## KEY WORKS: SHUT THE FUCK UP

1. AA Bronson notes that the commission was a collaboration with de Appel. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 4, 2016.
2. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 4, 2016.
3. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 4, 2016.
4. The poodles are from General Idea's painting series *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*, 1984.
5. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 4, 2016.
6. These were elaborate events with many elements, including specific music composed by Klein. The footage of Klein's performance in *Shut the Fuck Up* is taken from the popular 1962 documentary *Mondo Cane*. Bronson notes that Klein died shortly after its humiliating release at the Cannes Film Festival. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, March 10, 2016.
7. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 4, 2016.

## KEY WORKS: AIDS

1. AA Bronson, correspondence with artist, January 4, 2016.
2. The image was ubiquitous because Indiana neglected to obtain copyright for his work when he created it in 1966.
3. "A Tribute to Felix Partz," *The Arts Tonight*, CBC Radio, July 6, 1994, Audio, Film, and Video Works Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada



Library and Archives, Ottawa.

4. An animation of the logo was even produced for the Spectacolor Board in Times Square in New York City, where the AIDS logos were seen colliding and then turning into the LOVE logo.

5. In 1987 the poster was originally put on the streets in downtown New York City. In 1989 a version was made specifically for display on the New York subway and exhibited in the subway cars, but not on the platforms. In this way, the work was disseminated throughout the city and reached viewers of various socioeconomic classes in different neighbourhoods. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 4, 2016.

6. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 4, 2016.

7. "A Tribute to Felix Partz," *The Arts Tonight*, CBC Radio, July 6, 1994, Audio, Film, and Video Works Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.

8. See Rachel Wolff, "Love, Robert Indiana," *Departures* (December 11, 2013), <http://www.departures.com/art-culture/art-design/love-robert-indiana>.

9. Some ambiguity exists as to the exact dates of Partz and Zontal's HIV diagnoses. Bronson states that Partz was diagnosed in 1989, with Zontal diagnosed in 1990 (Bronson, correspondence with author, January 6, 2016). Fern Bayer suggests that Partz was diagnosed in the late summer of 1990 and Zontal in 1991 (Bayer, correspondence with author, November 27, 2015). Bayer's dates are reflected in the Finding Aid she created for the General Idea Archive at the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.

## KEY WORKS: FIN DE SIÈCLE

1. This show was exhibited at Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart; Centre d'Art Santa Mònica, Barcelona; Kunstverein in Hamburg; The Power Plant, Toronto; Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

2. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 4, 2016.

3. "A Tribute to Felix Partz," *The Arts Tonight*, CBC Radio, July 6, 1994, Audio, Film, and Video Works Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.

4. "A Tribute to Felix Partz," *The Arts Tonight*, CBC Radio, July 6, 1994, Audio, Film, and Video Works Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.

5. "A Tribute to Felix Partz," *The Arts Tonight*, CBC Radio, July 6, 1994, Audio, Film, and Video Works Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.





6. "A Tribute to Felix Partz," *The Arts Tonight*, CBC Radio, July 6, 1994, Audio, Film, and Video Works Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.

## KEY WORKS: ONE YEAR OF AZT

1. AA Bronson, correspondence with artist, January 6, 2016.

2. AA Bronson, "AA Bronson on Art in the '60s," University of Chicago, February 10, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXoWTBVVeHc>.

3. "A Tribute to Felix Partz," *The Arts Tonight*, CBC Radio, July 6, 1994, Audio, Film, and Video Works Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.

## SIGNIFICANCE & CRITICAL ISSUES

1. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 10, 2016.

2. General Idea, "Three Heads are Better," *FILE Magazine*, vol. 4, no. 1 (summer 1978): 14–15.

3. General Idea, "Three Heads are Better," *FILE Magazine*, vol. 4, no. 1 (summer 1978): 15.

4. General Idea, "Three Heads are Better," *FILE Magazine*, vol. 4, no. 1 (summer 1978): 14.

5. AA Bronson, "AA Bronson Reflects on Sexual Themes in the Work of General Idea," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, n.d., <http://www.artbabble.org/video/sfmoma/aa-bronson-reflects-sexual-themes-work-general-idea>.

6. In Canada this is demonstrated by groups such as VSVSVS and BGL (who represented Canada at the 2015 Venice Biennale).

7. Speaking to this period, Bronson noted: "In 1969 I had never heard the expression 'gay.' My generation had to dream up what it was to be homosexual in the wake of the sexual revolution, a revolution in which homosexuality was almost never mentioned, except as a literary device." AA Bronson, *Negative Thoughts* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2001), 58. Additionally, it is worth noting that the gay and lesbian civil rights and liberation movement had been going on globally, on numerous fronts, since the 1940s.



8. Of this decriminalization, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau famously remarked, "There's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation." CBC Digital Archives, "Trudeau: 'There's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation,'" n.d., <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/omnibus-bill-theres-no-place-for-the-state-in-the-bedrooms-of-the-nation>. AA Bronson also cautions about reading too much into the impact of this bill on General Idea. To put it in perspective, he explains that the 1968 riots in Paris meant more to the group at the time. Bronson, correspondence with author, January 10, 2016.

9. *The Body Politic* had a widespread and significant national influence on the gay and lesbian movement and ran until 1987. Brenda Cossman, "Censor, Resist, Repeat: A History of Censorship of Gay and Lesbian Sexual Representation in Canada," *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 21, issue 45 (2013): 52.

10. In the 1980s, Toronto Pride Week took shape as a series of community- and corporate-sponsored entertainment events that occur around the last week of June. This week was formally recognized by the City of Toronto in 1991. See Dylan Young, "How Pride Became the Biggest Festival in Toronto," *Daily Brew*, June 25, 2015, <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/blogs/dailybrew/how-pride-became-the-biggest-festival-in-toronto-181756734.html>; Chris Bateman, "A Brief History of Pride in Toronto," *BlogTO*, June 28, 2012, [http://www.blogto.com/city/2012/06/a\\_brief\\_history\\_of\\_pride\\_in\\_toronto/](http://www.blogto.com/city/2012/06/a_brief_history_of_pride_in_toronto/).

11. These charges were part of the broader debates over pornography and censorship in Canada in this period. In 1979 *The Body Politic* was acquitted, but further charges against the publication led to legal battles that continued into the early 1980s. See Brenda Cossman, "Censor, Resist, Repeat: A History of Censorship of Gay and Lesbian Sexual Representation in Canada," *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 21, issue 45 (2013): 52-53.

12. Louise Dompierre, interview transcript, New York City, July 26, 1991: 24, Manuscripts Series, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. While General Idea protested the charges against *The Body Politic*, the group's work was not aligned with the publication. Emphasizing the significance of irony in General Idea's work, Bronson made this distinction clear: "*The Body Politic* ... had a very particular gay aesthetic, very political and very ... not ironic. No irony. It had no trace of irony, which is odd actually, because I always think of irony as an extremely gay characteristic." Luke Nicholson, "Being Framed by Irony: AIDS and the Art of General Idea" (MA thesis, Concordia University, 2006), 122. Douglas Durand, "General Idea: Image and enforcement," *The Body Politic* 64 (June/July 1980): 31.

13. As John Paul Frederick Halferty notes, Operation Soap is referred to as Toronto's Stonewall. See Halferty, "Political Stages: Gay Theatre in Toronto, 1967-1985," (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2014), 14.

14. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 10, 2016.



15. John Paul Frederick Halferty, "Political Stages: Gay Theatre in Toronto, 1967–1985," (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 2014), 14.

16. AA Bronson, "AA Bronson Reflects on Sexual Themes in the Work of General Idea," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, <http://www.artbabble.org/video/sfmoma/aa-bronson-reflects-sexual-themes-work-general-idea>.

17. Later, representations of the trio as babies were further sexualized in works such as *Oh Baby, Baby, Baby* (a.k.a. *Untitled (Oh Baby Oh Baby Oh Baby and Untitled #1)*, 1984, a painting that depicts the silhouettes of three babies in a sexually suggestive position.

18. AA Bronson, "AA Bronson Reflects on Sexual Themes in the Work of General Idea," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, <http://www.artbabble.org/video/sfmoma/aa-bronson-reflects-sexual-themes-work-general-idea>.

19. The poodle appears in many General Idea projects in the 1980s. For instance, in conjunction with an exhibition, the group created *Ghent Flag*, 1984, a flag for the city of Ghent, Belgium, in which they replaced the lion (traditionally featured on the flag) with a poodle. The reception of this work was controversial. Bronson, writing to his parents, explained, "[C]ity hall is in an uproar—the mayor has made a public statement in favour of poodles (poodles are alert while lions sleep)—the papers love it—today the Minister of Tourism was caricatured in the paper as a General Idea poodle. Today 50 full-size flags go up around the city." See Bronson, Correspondence, "Ghent Flag," 1984, Project Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa; Pierre Alexandre de Looz, "Asked and Answered: AA Bronson of General Idea," *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, October 14, 2011, <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/14/asked-answered-aa-bronson-of-general-interest/?hpw&r=0>.

20. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 10, 2016.

21. Hywel Tuscano, "Barking at the Door," October 27, 2004, *Daily Xtra*, <http://www.dailyxtra.com/vancouver/barking-at-the-door-54337?m=/privacy-policyterms-of-use>.

22. Art historian Virginia Solomon suggest the group "presents an alternative and expanded notion of sexuality as part of its subcultural politics." See Solomon, "What Is Love? Queer Subcultures and the Political Present," *e-flux*, 2013, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/what-is-love-queer-subcultures-and-the-political-present>.

23. Other McLuhan books in the 1960s included *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 1962; *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*, 1967; and *War and Peace in the Global Village*, 1968. McLuhan was extremely prolific and published works before and after this decade. For a complete listing see "Marshall McLuhan: Bibliography," <http://www.marshallmcluhan.com/bibliography>.





24. AA Bronson as quoted by Fern Bayer, correspondence with author, August 24, 2015.
25. This parody led to significant repercussions in June 1974, when the mimicry of *FILE* came to the attention of Time Life Incorporated. The organization sued for trademark infringement. Addressing this battle in the pages of *FILE*, the artists conceded defeat to secure the ongoing success of the publication under the headline "FILE Chose Life over LIFE." See "Editorial," *FILE Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 3 (spring 1977): 17; subsequently, the *FILE* logo was redesigned.
26. Luke Nicholson, "Being Framed by Irony: AIDS and the Art of General Idea" (MA thesis, Concordia University, 2006), 120.
27. AA Bronson, *Negative Thoughts* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2001), 83.
28. For further information on the history of artist-initiated activity in Canada see *From Sea to Shining Sea*, edited by AA Bronson, René Blouin, Peggy Gale, Glenn Lewis (Toronto: The Power Plant, 1987).
29. General Idea, "Editorial: Stretch That Social Fabric," *FILE*, 29 (1989): 3.
30. Louise Dompierre, interview transcript, New York City, July 26, 1991: 28, Manuscripts Series, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.
31. AA Bronson quoted in Maria Fusco, "That's Life!" *Frieze* 119 (November-December 2008): [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/thats\\_life](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/thats_life).
32. The first artist-run gallery was founded in Montreal in the late 1940s. Intermedia, established in 1967, was the first artist-run centre funded by the Canada Council and set the mould for what an artist-run centre might be. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 10, 2016.
33. See AA Bronson, "The Humiliation of Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums by Artists," in *Museums by Artists*, ed. AA Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983).
34. AA Bronson notes that in addition to artist-run centres, the Vancouver Art Gallery was one of the few existing outlets for experimental work in the 1960s and 1970s. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 10, 2016.
35. The artist-run centre took its name from the Art Metropole Building in which it was housed. Located at 241 Yonge Street in Toronto, this business had been an artists' supply company. General Idea appropriated the logo on the façade of the building to use for the letterhead of their new artist-run centre. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 10, 2016.



36. Fern Bayer, Peggy Gale, Art Metropole, "Preamble," Digital Occasional Paper No. 1, January 1971–April 2006, 2, Art Metropole's Publications and Events History with Related Ephemera, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa, [https://www.gallery.ca/images/content/artmetchron\\_e.pdf](https://www.gallery.ca/images/content/artmetchron_e.pdf).

37. Art Metropole also published various other books, such as Jeff Wall's book *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel* (1991). Writings by artists were also a priority at Art Metropole. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 10, 2016.

38. By the late 1980s, the Art Metropole Collection had grown to such proportions (more than 13,000 items) that it was placed at the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, as a gift from J.A. Smith, Toronto, 1999. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, February 3, 2016.

39. Louise Dompierre, interview transcript, New York City, July 26, 1991: 35, Manuscripts Series, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.

40. AA Bronson uses the term "connective tissue" in his essay "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums By Artists," in *Museums by Artists*, ed. AA Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983).

41. AA Bronson, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums By Artists," in *Museums by Artists*, ed. AA Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), 30.

42. In an interview, Bronson noted the group used local garbage. See Luke Nicholson, "Being Framed by Irony: AIDS and the Art of General Idea" (MA thesis, Concordia University, 2006), 103; Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968–1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968–1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 29.

43. For a description of the window displays at 78 Gerrard Street West see Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968–1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968–1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 29.

44. Mike Kelley and AA Bronson, "Excerpts from a Conversation," in *General Idea Editions 1967–1995*, ed. Barbara Fischer (Toronto: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 284.

45. Bronson noted the difficulties of staging *The Boutique of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1980, and the *Yen Boutique*, 1991, within museums. See AA Bronson, "Copyright, Cash, and Crowd Control: Art and the Economy in the World of General Idea," in *General Idea Editions 1967–1995*, ed. Barbara Fischer (Toronto: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 25–26.



46. Mike Kelley and AA Bronson, "Excerpts from a Conversation," in *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, ed. Barbara Fischer (Toronto: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 284.

47. AA Bronson, "General Idea," in *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 174.

48. This was perhaps compounded by different readings of the work within the United States. The Indiana image was interpreted in the U.S. in relation to the free love movement of the 1960s, which led General Idea's painting to be read as a suggestion that AIDS was the result of free love. This reading was different in Canada and Europe, where Indiana's painting was understood as speaking to brotherly love. See Mike Kelley and AA Bronson, "Excerpts from a Conversation," in *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, ed. Barbara Fischer (Toronto: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 287; Luke Nicholson, "Being Framed by Irony: AIDS and the Art of General Idea" (MA thesis, Concordia University, 2006), 58-59; "A Tribute to Felix Partz," *The Arts Tonight*, CBC Radio, July 6, 1994, Audio, Film, and Video Works Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.

49. "A Tribute to Felix Partz," *The Arts Tonight*, CBC Radio, July 6, 1994, Audio, Film, and Video Works Series, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.

50. General Idea purchased the floral-scented hand soaps due to their resemblance to the seals in *Fin de siècle*, 1990. They then added a beer-coaster base (printed pulpboard).

51. John Miller, "AIDS (1987)," in *General Idea Editions 1967-1995*, ed. Barbara Fischer (Toronto: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, 2003), 291.

52. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 10, 2016.

53. Some ambiguity exists as to the exact dates of Partz and Zontal's HIV diagnoses. Bronson states that Partz was diagnosed in 1989, with Zontal diagnosed in 1990 (Bronson, correspondence with author, January 3, 2016). Fern Bayer suggests that Partz was diagnosed in the late summer of 1990 and Zontal in 1991 (Bayer, correspondence with author, November 27 2015). Bayer's dates are reflected in the Finding Aid she created for the General Idea Archive at the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.

## STYLE & TECHNIQUE

1. Warhol's work was created in collaboration with Billy Klüber.

2. Seeta Peña Gangadharan, "Mail Art: Networking Without Technology," *New Media & Society*, vol. 11, no. 1 & 2 (2009): 285.





3. Networks for mail art can be formed in an ad hoc manner or through the creation of mailing lists and calls soliciting work on different themes. Often, projects are created through exchange: an artist sends art to another artist, who adds to it and then either returns it to the original producer or mails it on to another node in the network for further creative intervention.

4. AA Bronson, interview with Paul O'Neill, *NDP#3* (2006), 2, [http://www.northdrivepress.com/interviews/NDP3/NDP3\\_BRONSON\\_ONEILL.pdf](http://www.northdrivepress.com/interviews/NDP3/NDP3_BRONSON_ONEILL.pdf).

5. This name made reference to the New York School of painting. Ina Blom, "How To (Not) Answer a Letter: Ray Johnson's Postal Performance," *PAJ* 86 (2007): 7.

6. Gwen Allen, "The Magazine as Mirror: *FILE*, 1972-1989," *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 159.

7. Three individuals turned down the invitation: Robert Fones, Ray Johnson, and Father Malachi. Janis Campbell also declined to participate on the grounds that the competition was "sexist exploitation," but the group included her letter of decline as an entry. See Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968-1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 67.

8. Cumming, for instance, created a project for the first issue of *FILE* under the headline "Behind a Big Story There May be Another One." He created a simple map of the contours of the North American continent and asked readers to "Locate and draw from memory the Canadian/American border." Cumming compiled the submissions from *FILE*'s readership and created a composite image that showed a knot of borders, revealing the diversity of opinions. See *FILE Magazine*, "Mr. Peanut Issue," vol. 1, no. 1 (April 1972).

9. For instance, Ray Johnson proclaimed the end of the New York Correspondance School [sic] in a satirical obituary in 1973.

10. The Art Metropole collection is now housed at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. For a list of artists whose work in mail art is held within the collection, see [https://www.gallery.ca/fr/bibliotheque/content/list\\_mailcorr.pdf](https://www.gallery.ca/fr/bibliotheque/content/list_mailcorr.pdf).

11. The Portapak employed half-inch video format, which subsequently became obsolete. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, January 11, 2016.

12. Of Anger's work, Bronson explained, "We played it again and again in our rather cold and barren General Idea loft, stunned into (stoned) silence by its cold blue luminosity." AA Bronson, "Queer Cinema from the Collection: Today and Yesterday," Museum of Modern Art, <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/films/1161>; AA Bronson, correspondence with author, August 24, 2015.

13. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, August 24, 2015.



14. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, August 24, 2015; Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html>.

15. Bronson explained that General Idea frequently discussed Susan Sontag's article on camp in the early years of working together. AA Bronson in correspondence with author, August 24, 2015.

16. *Test Tube* was ultimately not disseminated this way.

17. AA Bronson notes that no other video distributors existed, but that there was an existing artists' video organization in Vancouver at the time. AA Bronson, correspondence with author, February 3, 2016. Art Metropole continued to disseminate video work to institutions until 1987, when it changed its focus to domestic distribution due to the emergence of specialized organizations such as Vtape in Toronto.

18. A companion volume was produced in 1986, titled *Video by Artists 2*, edited by Elke Town. These books were part of a larger series of Art Metropole publications that foreground artists' writings in relation to specific media. Other volumes in the series include *Performance by Artists* (1979), edited by AA Bronson and Peggy Gale; *Books by Artists* (1981), by Tim Guest and Germano Celant; *Museums by Artists* (1983), edited by AA Bronson and Peggy Gale; and *Sound by Artists* (1990), edited by Dan Lander and Micah Lexier.

19. The group made use of the body in many works in this period, including *Body Prints*, 1969; *Mirror Sequences*, 1969-70; and *Evidence of Body Binding*, 1971. See Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968-1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 35-36.

20. See "Performances" on the General Idea website, <http://www.aabronson.com/GI/perform2.htm>.

21. In the early years of General Idea, the membership of the group was much more fluid and, at times, intentionally obscured.

22. Fern Bayer provides a description of the complex performance and recording activities that comprised *What Happened*, 1970. See Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968-1975," in *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 44-46.

23. General Idea retroactively crowned Mimi Paige Miss General Idea 1968. Granada Gazelle was crowned Miss General Idea 1969. No pageant event occurred in either of these years, but these winners contributed to substantiating the constructed history of the pageant.

24. Louise Dompierre, interview transcript, New York City, July 26, 1991: 18-20, Manuscripts Series, Manuscripts for Publications and Artworks, General



Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.

25. Fern Bayer, "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968-1975," *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 75.

26. This point was emphasized by AA Bronson, correspondence with author, February 3, 2016.

27. AA Bronson, "Copyright, Cash, and Crowd Control: Art and Economy in the World of General Idea," *General Idea Editions: 1967-1995* (Mississauga: Blackwood Gallery, 2003), 27.

28. AA Bronson, "AA Bronson on Art in the '60s," University of Chicago, February 10, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXoWTBVVeHc>.





## GLOSSARY

### **Anger, Kenneth (American, b. 1927)**

A celebrated and controversial underground filmmaker who made his first film, the often-banned *Fireworks*, at age fifteen. His films and books demonstrate a lifelong fascination with the occult and the scandals of Old Hollywood. Anger's influence has been wide-ranging, from commercial and experimental filmmakers to artists working in other media.

### **artist-run gallery/centre**

A gallery or other art space developed and run by artists. In Canada these include YYY and Art Metropole in Toronto, Forest City Gallery in London, Western Front in Vancouver, and formerly Véhicule Art Inc., Montreal, The Region Gallery, London, and Garret Gallery, Toronto. Not-for-profit organizations, these centres exist outside the commercial and institutional gallery system. They aim to support the production and exhibition of new artworks, dialogue between artists, and avant-garde practices and emerging artists.

### **A Space, Toronto**

A not-for-profit, artist-run exhibition space that emerged out of Toronto's Nightingale Gallery in 1971. A Space was an important centre for innovative art in all disciplines throughout the 1970s and remains a key site for the exhibition of contemporary visual art in Toronto. Its programming emphasizes inclusivity and political engagement.

### **Barthes, Roland (French, 1915–1980)**

A major figure in twentieth-century intellectual history, Barthes was a semiotician, literary and social critic, philosopher, and essayist. Works such as *Writing Degree Zero*, 1953, and *Mythologies*, 1957, helped to usher in structuralism as a dominant theoretical framework, while *Camera Lucida*, 1980, his rumination on photography, remains one of the most influential books of photo theory ever written.

### **Beuys, Joseph (German, 1921–1986)**

A versatile visual artist, performer, teacher, and political activist whose "expanded concept of art," as he put it, held that every individual could act creatively and that creativity could infuse every aspect of life. Animals are an important theme in Beuys's frequently Symbolist and expressionistic works. He also made use of felt and fat in his artworks, materials that held personal symbolism for him.

### **Burroughs, William S. (American, 1914–1997)**

A prolific and celebrated Beat Generation writer, best known for the novel *Naked Lunch*, 1959. Permeated with an anarchic attitude, his work influenced later countercultural groups including hippies and punks. His life was famously marked by drug and alcohol addiction, criminality, and violence, including the murder of his second wife in Mexico, for which he never served a sentence.



## **Canada Council for the Arts**

A Crown corporation created in 1957 by the parliamentary Canada Council for the Arts Act. The Canada Council exists to encourage art production and promote the study and enjoyment of art in Canada. It provides support to artists and arts organizations from across all artistic disciplines, including visual art, dance, music, and literature.

## **Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto**

A Toronto gallery opened in 1966 by the Italian emigré Carmen Lamanna, a near-mythic figure in the Canadian art scene for more than three decades. The gallery's stable included many of the most important and cutting-edge artists of its day, from Ron Martin, Ian Carr-Harris, and Paterson Ewen to General Idea and Joanne Tod.

## **Coach House Press**

Established in 1965 and housed in a coach house in downtown Toronto, this printing press is also a long-standing independent Canadian publisher, primarily known for its printing business and its fiction and poetry. Michael Ondaatje, Andre Alexis, Anne Michaels, Christian Bök, and Guy Maddin are prominent Canadian writers who have been published by the press.

## **Cumming, Robert (American, b. 1943)**

An artist and educator whose technical mastery extends to photography, printmaking, painting, and sculpture. Among his best-known works are photographs of his own conceptual drawings and constructions—intellectually layered, witty works that refer to science and art history. He has taught art at universities around the United States since the 1960s.

## **El Greco (Greek, c. 1541–1614)**

Painter, sculptor, and architect considered the first master of the Spanish School. Born Doménikos Theotokópoulos in Crete, El Greco settled in Toledo, Spain, in 1576, where he executed major commissions throughout his career, including the prized altarpieces *Espolio*, 1577–79, and *Burial of Count Orgaz*, 1586–88.

## **Fluxus**

A movement started in Germany in 1962 defined by an attitude of rebellion against artistic conservatism and professionalism rather than a particular style. Street art and festivals figured prominently in Fluxus activities, which were eventually centred in New York City and lasted until the early 1970s. Major influences were the composer John Cage and the artist Marcel Duchamp.

## **Freedman, Daniel (n.d.)**

Daniel (Danny) Freedman was an actor who lived at 78 Gerrard Street West with AA Bronson, Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal, and Mimi Paige. He was a judge of *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971, a performance held at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



## **Friedrich, Caspar David (German, 1774–1840)**

One of the major Romantic painters, and the most exemplary of the movement's German practitioners. Friedrich's dramatic landscapes—seascapes and mountains, forests and farmland—are both realistic and symbolic, painted in meticulous detail but expressive of the artist's deeply held mystical and spiritual beliefs.

## **Happenings**

Beginning in the early 1960s, these precursors to performance, film, and video art, Happenings were associated with George Maciunas and the international art group Fluxus. These ephemeral performances challenged conventional views of what was meant by "art," breaking down the barriers between art and life and subverting traditional, academic notions of the authority of the artist. Happenings tended to be collaborations and involve audience participation.

## **Hay, Deborah (American, b. 1941)**

A highly conceptual and experimental dancer and choreographer who has often worked with largely untrained dancers, though she herself trained with the luminaries Merce Cunningham and Mia Slavenska. Hay has written four books on her artistic practice and experiences as a dancer, most recently *Using the Sky: A Dance*, 2015.

## **Image Bank, Vancouver**

An artists' correspondence network founded in 1969 in the tradition of the New York Correspondence School by Vancouver conceptual artists Michael Morris, Gary Lee-Nova, and Vincent Trasov, who took the respective names Marcel Dot (later, Marcel Idea), Artimus Rat, and Myra Peanut. Participants exchanged ideas, information, and materials through the post in a spirit of collaboration, with Morris and Trasov keeping track of addresses and image requests.

## **Indiana, Robert (American, b. 1928)**

Principally known as a Pop artist (and for his famous LOVE design, featuring the word in uppercase with a slanted letter "O"), Indiana was equally important to the development of hard-edge painting and assemblage art. He has often made text a central part of his paintings, screen prints, and sculptures.

## **Intermedia, Vancouver**

A short-lived non-profit organization established in 1967 to encourage Vancouver's budding art scene and artistic community. Intermedia, which initially went by the name Intermedia Society, hosted exhibitions, workshops, seminars, and gatherings with the support of federal arts agencies. It became an important meeting place for artists and a site of creative exchange, spawning various West Coast artistic and literary movements before ceasing operations in 1972.

## **International With Monument, New York City**





A slick, market-savvy Conceptual art gallery that opened in New York's East Village in 1983, when most other galleries in the area were showing Neo-Expressionist works in distinctly bohemian spaces. Among the artists to show there were Jeff Koons, Peter Halley, and Meyer Vaisman (a co-founder of the gallery, with Elizabeth Koury).

## **Johnson, Ray (American, 1927–1995)**

A collage and performance artist, early practitioner of mail art, and leading light among New York Pop and Conceptual artists. Studied at Black Mountain College under Josef Albers and Lyonel Feininger, formerly of the Bauhaus, as well as Robert Motherwell. Johnson was a feverishly creative artist, for whom the boundary between art and life was all but non-existent.

## **Klein, Yves (French, 1928–1962)**

An important figure in the history of Minimal, Pop, and performance art, known for his interest in "pure colour" and his invention of International Klein Blue, the pigment he used in many of his famed monochrome paintings. He was also a sculptor, writer, and—significantly for a Westerner of his time—judo master.

## **Krushenick, Nicholas (American, 1929–1999)**

A forerunner to the Pop art movement in America, Krushenick was a painter known for his fusion of Pop art and abstraction. Hard-edged black lines surrounding bright, solid colours in abstract formation characterize his work, particularly of the 1960s. His work is held by major public institutions, including New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

## **Kuchar, Mike (American, b. 1942), and George Kuchar (American, 1942–2011)**

Twin brothers and experimental filmmakers, active from their teenage years on the New York film scene alongside Andy Warhol, Stan Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, Michael Snow, and Joyce Wieland. The Kuchars' renowned 8mm films include *I Was a Teenage Rumpot* (1960) and *The Devil's Cleavage* (1973)—ultra-low-budget versions of Hollywood genre movies.

## **Lamanna, Carmen (Italian/Canadian, 1927–1991)**

Gallerist in Toronto who opened the pivotal Carmen Lamanna Gallery in 1966. An Italian émigré, Lamanna was a central fixture in the Canadian art scene and represented key artists including General Idea, Ron Martin, Ian Carr-Harris, Paterson Ewen, and Joanne Tod.

## **Lichtenstein, Roy (American, 1923–1997)**

A significant American Pop artist known for appropriating the forms of comic books. His large-scale paintings enlarge the motifs of his source material, highlighting their artificiality and the compositional rules that govern their appearance. In the 1960s Lichtenstein began to work with offset lithography, the medium of commercial printing.

**Masciuch, John (Canadian, b. 1944)**

An active member of the 1960s Vancouver art scene who creates light-and-sound sculptures. These are sometimes interactive, activated by the viewer's body. Also known as John Neon, Masciuch began collecting neon tubes to use in his work beginning in the late 1960s, eventually amassing five thousand of them.

**McLuhan, Marshall (Canadian, 1911–1980)**

A media theorist and public intellectual who became an international star with his 1964 book *Understanding Media* and who garnered a committed following within the 1960s counterculture. His phrase "the medium is the message" has reached the status of popular aphorism. He developed and directed the Centre for Culture and Technology (now the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology) at the University of Toronto.

**Minimalism**

A branch of abstract art characterized by extreme restraint in form, most popular among American artists from the 1950s to 1970s. Although Minimalism can be expressed in any medium, it is most commonly associated with sculpture; principal Minimalists include Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and Tony Smith. Among the Minimalist painters were Agnes Martin, Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland, and Frank Stella.

**Mondrian, Piet (Dutch, 1872–1944)**

A leading figure in abstract art, known for his geometric "grid" paintings of straight black lines and brightly coloured squares, whose influence on contemporary visual culture has been called the most far-reaching of any artist. Mondrian saw his highly restrictive and rigorous style, dubbed Neo-Plasticism, as expressive of universal truths.

**Morris, Michael (British/Canadian, b. 1942)**

A versatile artist who has worked under multiple pseudonyms (including Marcel Dot and Marcel Idea) and in media from paint to video. Morris often works collaboratively and has emphasized the importance of artists' networks throughout his career. Exemplifying this tendency is the Image Bank, a system for the exchange of information and ideas between artists, which he co-founded with Vincent Trasov in 1969. He (as Marcel Dot) was crowned Miss General Idea in 1971 in *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant, 1971*, an elaborate performance General Idea staged at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

**New York Correspondance School [sic]**

The first mail art network, initiated by Ray Johnson in the mid-1950s. Members exchanged objects and messages through the post. By the 1970s mail art had grown into an international movement, with artists corresponding through similar networks around the world.



A Toronto gallery founded in 1968 by Chris Youngs, an American expatriate, and an important site for experimental and Conceptual art. Its group show *Concept 70*, 1970, was one of the first in Toronto to include video art. In 1971 Nightingale became A Space, an artist-run centre.

## **Novick, Honey (Canadian, n.d.)**

An icon of the Toronto counterculture since the 1970s, Novick is a singer, songwriter, voice coach, and poet who performs folk standards, children's songs, avant-garde jazz, and classical music in seven languages. She has sung for Pierre Elliott Trudeau, at Carnegie Hall, and at the opening of Walker Court at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Using the pseudonym Miss Honey, she won *The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1970, General Idea's first such event.

## **Paige, Mimi (n.d.)**

An artist and muse of General Idea. She was involved in the collective's early events and publications, and also appears in some of their videos, including *Loco*, 1982. She was one of four people crowned Miss General Idea in the collective's satirical and experimental beauty pageants (Paige was retroactively crowned winner of the 1968 *Miss General Idea Pageant*).

## **Pop art**

A movement of the late 1950s to early 1970s in Britain and the United States, which adopted imagery from commercial design, television, and cinema. Pop art's most recognized proponents are Richard Hamilton, David Hockney, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein.

## **Rochdale College**

Rochdale College was founded as a free university in 1968, structured around a co-op living space. A haven for idealists in its early years, the college later fell into disrepute, harbouring drugs and alleged gang activity, as well as having financial problems. The college was closed in 1975.

## **Smith, Jack (American, 1932–1989)**

An important figure in the New York underground cinema scene of the 1950s and 1960s, despite gaining little recognition during his life. Smith was inspired by B movies and interested in exaggerated performance, and while his films are campy and sexually provocative they are also poignant commentaries on sincerity and theatricality.

## **Smith, Richard (British, b. 1931)**

A painter and teacher whose work typically explores the communicative potential and functions of basic geometric forms. It combines elements of both Pop art and Minimalism, styles that Smith first encountered and experimented with when he moved to New York City from London in 1959.



**Snow, Michael (Canadian, b. 1928)**

An artist whose paintings, films, photographs, sculptures, installations, and musical performances have kept him in the spotlight for over sixty years. Snow's Walking Woman series of the 1960s holds a prominent place in Canadian art history. His contributions to visual art, experimental film, and music have been recognized internationally. (See *Michael Snow: Life & Work* by Martha Langford.)

**Sontag, Susan (American, 1933–2004)**

A New York intellectual and activist who first gained notoriety in the 1960s with her essay "Notes on Camp," Sontag was a theatre artist, wrote and directed films, and wrote short stories, novels, and critical essays that challenged traditional notions of art interpretation and consumption. Her stories and critical essays were published widely, including in the *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Granta*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and *Art in America*.

**Stein, Gertrude (American, 1874–1946)**

An important figure in literary modernism, through landmark works of fiction, poetry, and drama. She was also known for her early support of modernist artists, including Juan Gris and Pablo Picasso. Born in Pennsylvania, Stein lived in Paris her entire adult life, with her partner, Alice B. Toklas.

**Stella, Frank (American, b. 1936)**

An Abstract Expressionist painter and sculptor and a major figure in American art. Stella often works in series, developing a formal theme over an extended period. Primarily a painter and printmaker, he began taking on decorative commissions in the 1990s; the Princess of Wales theatre in Toronto features decorations and vast murals by Stella.

**Theatre Passe Muraille Company, Toronto**

A Toronto theatre founded in 1968 out of Rochdale College with a mandate to develop new Canadian plays. Passe Muraille remains an integral part of the city's theatre scene, producing experimental and eclectic work by a wide range of artists from diverse communities and disciplinary backgrounds.

**Trasov, Vincent (Canadian, b. 1947)**

A painter, video artist, and performance artist interested in networks of artistic exchange. Trasov's work is often collaborative and media-based; he co-founded the Image Bank with Michael Morris in 1969 and also collaborated with several artists (including Morris) to found the Western Front Society, a Vancouver artist-run centre, in 1973. The following year he ran for mayor of Vancouver as his alter ego, Mr. Peanut.

**Viennese Actionism (Wiener Aktionismus)**

Founded in the 1960s, this Viennese group of performance artists deliberately attempted to shock its audiences in order to highlight the violence of society. Performances are known for including blood and feces. Artists principally associated with the group are Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler.

**Warhol, Andy (American, 1928–1987)**



One of the most important artists of the twentieth century and a central figure in Pop art. With his serial screen prints of commercial items like Campbell's Soup cans and portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis, Warhol defied the notion of the artwork as a singular, handcrafted object.

## **Western Front, Vancouver**

A Vancouver artist-run centre founded by eight artists in 1973. A locus of innovative artistic activity throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it played a key role in the development of interdisciplinary, ephemeral, media-based, performance, and electronic art. It remains an important centre for contemporary art and music.



The works of General Idea are held in public and private collections internationally. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, is a prime location at which to learn more about the group, as the gallery has a large collection of their work, and its Library and Archives holds issues of FILE Magazine, as well as the General Idea fonds and the Art Metropole Collection.





Many of General Idea's works were produced as multiples in editions of various sizes. Noted below is a selection of institutions that hold at least one multiple in their respective collections. Although the following institutions hold the works listed, they may not always be on view.

---

## AGNES ETHERINGTON ART CENTRE

Queen's University  
36 University Avenue  
Kingston, Ontario, Canada  
613-533-2190  
[agnes.queensu.ca](http://agnes.queensu.ca)

In addition to the work featured here, the Agnes Etherington Art Centre holds a large collection of General Idea's print editions.



### **General Idea, *General Idea's Putti*, 1993**

Found seal-shaped soaps on  
printed pulpboard  
4 x 8.5 (diam.) cm

---

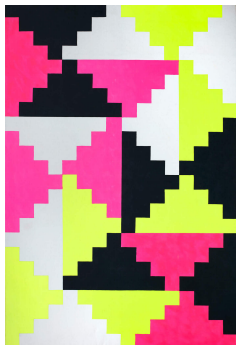


---

## ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

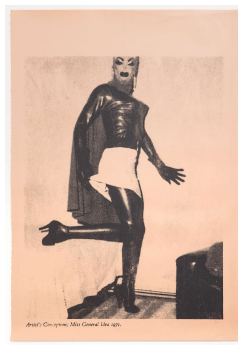
317 Dundas Street West  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
1-877-255-4246 or 416-979-6648  
ago.net

In the early 1990s the Art Gallery of Ontario began acquiring a definitive collection of General Idea, covering their twenty-five years of output and distinct periods of work. The gallery was able to acquire one major work and a group of minor works for each period. Since that time the AGO has continued to add General Idea works to its collection and has recently added an archival collection of invitation cards, source books, catalogues, and smaller editions to its in-depth holdings.



**General Idea, *Mimi*, 1968-69**  
Fluorescent acrylic and latex on canvas  
301 x 201.8 cm

---



**General Idea, *Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea* 1971, 1971**  
Serigraph on wove paper  
101.5 x 66 cm

---



**General Idea, *Manipulating the Self (Manipulating the Scene)*, 1973**  
Colour offset photolithograph on wove paper  
73.8 x 58.5 cm

---



**General Idea, *Showcard Series*, 1975-79**  
Serigraphed cards with photographs  
Each card 45.7 x 35.6 cm

---

# SOURCES & RESOURCES



**General Idea, AIDS, 1988-90**

*AIDS paintings*, 1988, acrylic on canvas, each 243.7 x 243.7 cm  
*AIDS (Wallpaper)*, 1990, screen print on wallpaper, rolled 68.6 x 4.6 (diam.) cm, unrolled 457 x 68.6 cm  
Overall installation dimensions variable

---



**General Idea, AIDS Ring, 1993/96**

Sterling silver in black velvet-covered jewellery box, title card (photocopy on vellum), in white-card box  
Box: 7 x 6 x 4.5 cm, various ring sizes

---



**General Idea, XXX Voto (for the Spirit of Miss General Idea), 1995**

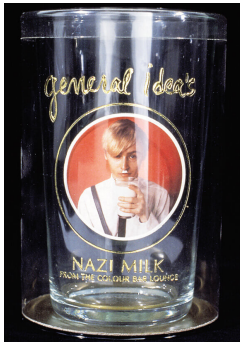
Offset publication, 128 pages, colour reproductions, black-linen hardcover with blue hot-stamping  
14.5 x 11 cm

---



## FRAC NORD-PAS DE CALAIS

503 Avenue des Bancs de Flandres  
Dunkirk, France  
+33 (0)3 28 65 84 20  
francnpdc.fr/



**General Idea, *General Idea's Nazi Milk Glass from the Colour Bar Lounge*, 1980**

Drinking glass with offset adhesive label in plastic box with gold hot-stamping  
Box: 15.3 x 10 (diam.) cm, glass: 15 x 9.2 (diam.) cm



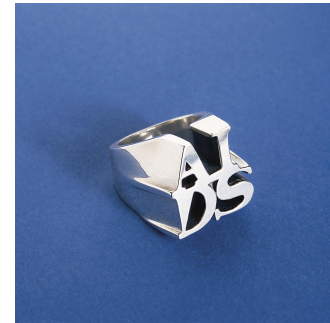
**General Idea, *Test Pattern: T.V. Dinner Plate*, 1988**

Porcelain plate in cardboard box, label offset on paper  
Box: 24.5 x 31 x 2.8 cm, plate: 20 x 22.5 x 1.5 cm



**General Idea, *Eye of the Beholder*, 1989**

Chenille, embroidery on crest-shaped felt  
24 x 21 cm



**General Idea, *AIDS Ring*, 1993/96**

Sterling silver in black velvet-covered jewellery box, title card (photocopy on vellum), in white-card box  
Box: 7 x 6 x 4.5 cm, various ring sizes



**General Idea, *General Idea's Putti*, 1993**

Found seal-shaped soaps on printed pulpboard  
4 x 8.5 (diam.) cm



---

## JUSTINA M. BARNICKE GALLERY AT HART HOUSE

Art Museum at the University of Toronto  
7 Hart House Circle  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
416-978-8398  
[artmuseum.utoronto.ca](http://artmuseum.utoronto.ca)



**General Idea, *Melting Snow***  
***Crystal Virus #4*, 1992**  
Mixed media  
78 x 63 cm

---

## KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH

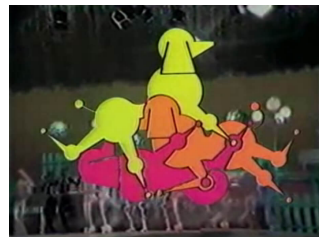
Heimplatz 1  
CH-8001 Zürich, Switzerland  
+41 (0)44 253 84 84  
[kunsthau.ch](http://kunsthau.ch)



**General Idea, *Test Tube*, 1979**  
Video, 28 min., 15 sec.



**General Idea, *Cornucopia*, 1982**  
Video, 10 min.



**General Idea, *Shut the Fuck Up*, 1985**  
Video, 14 min.

---



---

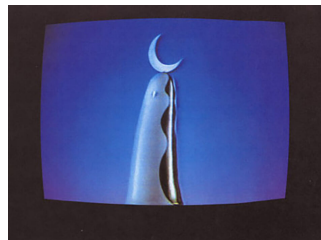
## MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL

185 Ste-Catherine Street West  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada  
514-847-6226  
[macm.org/en](http://macm.org/en)

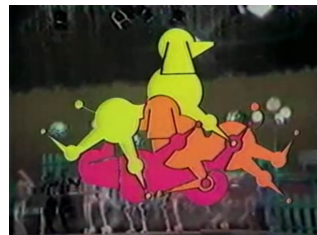


**General Idea, *Manipulating the Self (Manipulating the Scene)*, 1973**

Colour offset  
photolithograph on  
wove paper  
73.8 x 58.5 cm



**General Idea, *Cornucopia*, 1982**  
Video, 10 min.



**General Idea, *Shut the Fuck Up*, 1985**  
Video, 14 min.

---

## MUSÉE LÉON DIERX

Rue Sainte-Marie  
Saint-Denis, Île de la Réunion, Africa  
+33 2 62 20 24 82



**General Idea, *Baby Makes 3*, 1984/89**

Chromogenic print (Ektachrome)  
76.9 x 63.1 cm

---





---

## MUSÉE NATIONAL D'ART MODERNE

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris  
Place Georges Pompidou  
Paris, France  
+33 (0)1 44 78 12 33  
[centrepompidou.fr/en](http://centrepompidou.fr/en)



### **General Idea, *Yen Boutique*, 1989**

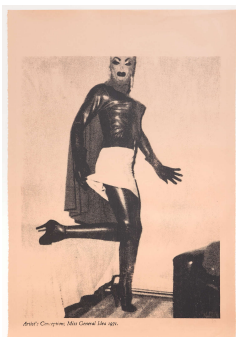
Various multiples, honeycomb  
aluminum, enamel paint, three  
aluminum tripods, video elements  
(*Test Tube* or alternate)  
212 x 315 x 348 cm

---

## MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

111 West 53 Street  
New York, New York, USA  
212-708-9400  
[moma.org](http://moma.org)

The Museum of Modern Art holds a very large collection of General Idea's editions in various media and also holds major installations.



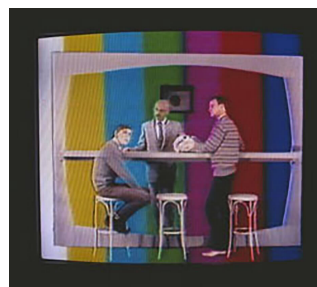
### **General Idea, *Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea 1971*, 1971**

Screenprint on brown  
latex  
101.5 x 66 cm



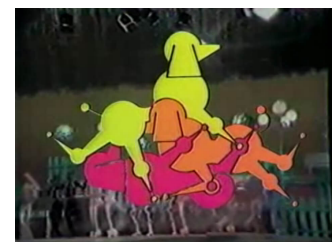
### **General Idea, *Manipulating the Self (Manipulating the Scene)*, 1973**

Colour offset  
photolithograph on  
wove paper  
73.8 x 58.5 cm



### **General Idea, *Test Tube*, 1979**

Video, 28 min., 15 sec.



### **General Idea, *Shut the Fuck Up*, 1985**

Video, 14 min.



**General Idea, *Eye of the Beholder*, 1989**

Chenille, embroidery on crest-shaped felt  
24 x 21 cm



**General Idea, *Magi© Bullet*, 1992**

Silver helium-filled mylar balloons  
Each 25 x 65 x 25 cm (inflated)



**General Idea, *AIDS Ring*, 1993/96**

Sterling silver in black velvet-covered jewellery box, title card (photocopy on vellum), in white-card box  
Box: 7 x 6 x 4.5 cm, various ring sizes



**General Idea, *XXX Voto (for the Spirit of Miss General Idea)*, 1995**

Offset publication, 128 pages, colour reproductions, black-linen hardcover with blue hot-stamping  
14.5 x 11 cm

## NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

380 Sussex Drive  
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
613-990-1985  
gallery.ca

The National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives has three distinct archival holdings that contain a wealth of material related to General Idea. These are the Art Metropole Collection, the General Idea Collection, and the Fern Bayer fonds. In addition to these, the museum holds a group of major installations dating from the early 1970s to the 1990s.



**General Idea, *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971**

Poster, photo screen print on wove paper  
101.6 x 66 cm



**General Idea, *Double Mirror Video (A Borderline Case)*, 1971**

Black and white videotape, 5 min., 50 sec.



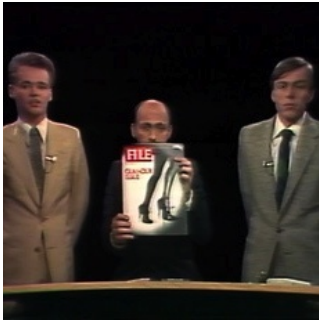
**General Idea, *Manipulating the Self (Manipulating the Scene)*, 1973**

Colour offset photolithograph on wove paper  
73.8 x 58.5 cm



**General Idea, *Showcard Series*, 1975-79**

Serigraphed cards with photographs  
Each card 45.7 x 35.6 cm



**General Idea, *Pilot*, 1977**

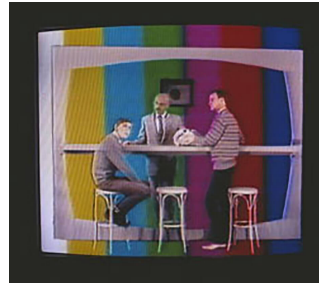
Video, 28 min., 56 sec.



**General Idea, *Reconstructing Futures*, 1977**

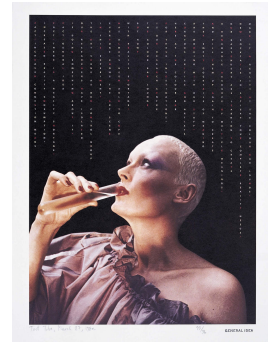
Installation, mixed media

Overall installation  
274 x 432 x 1,017 cm



**General Idea, *Test Tube*, 1979**

Video, 28 min., 15 sec.



**General Idea, *General Idea's Test Tube*, 1980**

Photolithograph on wove paper  
61.1 x 45.7 cm



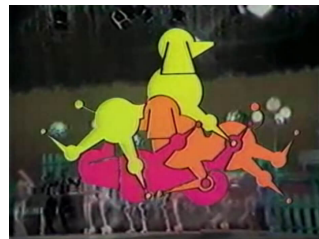
**General Idea, *Self-Portrait with Objects*, 1981-82**

Gelatin silver print  
35.6 x 27.7 cm



**General Idea, *Cornucopia*, 1982**

Video, 10 min.



**General Idea, *Shut the Fuck Up*, 1985**

Video, 14 min.



**General Idea, *AIDS*, 1989**

Powder-coated metal (steel), with stickers, felt pen, and assorted items added by the public  
201 x 198.8 x 100.5 cm



**General Idea, *Nightschool*, 1989**

Chromogenic print (Ektachrome)  
95.5 x 76.7 cm



**General Idea, *One Day of AZT*, 1991**

Five units of Fiberglas and enamel  
Each 85 x 213.3 x 85 cm



**General Idea, *One Year of AZT*, 1991**

1,825 units of vacuum-formed styrene with vinyl wall-mounted capsules  
Each 12.7 x 31.7 x 6.3 cm



**General Idea, *Playing Doctor*, 1992**

Lacquer on vinyl  
225 x 150 cm





**General Idea, *AIDS Ring*, 1993/96**

Sterling silver in black velvet-covered jewellery box, title card (photocopy on vellum), in white-card box  
Box: 7 x 6 x 4.5 cm, various ring sizes



**General Idea, *Fin de Siècle*, 1994**

Chromogenic print (Ektachrome)  
79 x 55.7 cm

## SAMMLUNG FALCKENBERG

Deichtorhallen Hamburg  
Wilstorfer Straße 71, Tor 2  
Hamburg, Germany  
0049 (0) 40 3250 6762  
sammlung-falckenberg.de

The Sammlung Falckenberg/Deichtorhallen Hamburg has a very fine collection of major works from the 1980s and 1990s, especially one of General Idea's large-scale pill installations, *Red (Cadmium) PLA©EBO*, 1991, and a complete set of the group's self-portraits.



**General Idea, *Nazi Milk*, 1979-90**

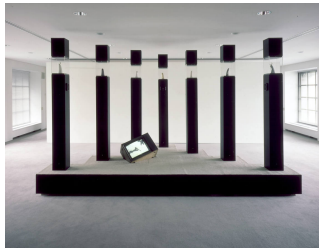
Chromogenic print (Ektachrome)  
78.9 x 58.6 cm



---

## SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

151 3rd Street  
San Francisco, California  
415-357-4000  
sfmoma.org



**General Idea, *Cornucopia*:**  
*Fragments from the Room of*  
*Unknown Function in the Villa Die*  
*Misteri of the 1984 Miss General*  
*Idea Pavillion, 1982-83*

Video installation, various  
elements with videotape

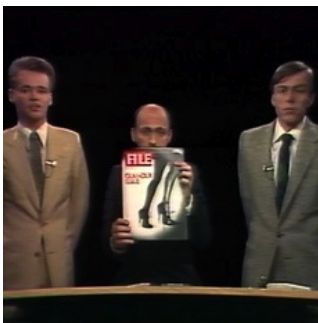
*Cornucopia*, 1982

Overall installation 243.8 x 426.7 x  
243.8 cm

---

## STEDELIJK MUSEUM AMSTERDAM

Museumplein 10  
Amsterdam, Netherlands  
+31 (0)20 5732 911  
stedelijk.nl



**General Idea, *Pilot*,**  
**1977**

Video, 28 min., 56 sec.



**General Idea, *Test Tube*,**  
**1979**

Video, 28 min., 15 sec.



**General Idea,**  
***Nightschool*, 1989**

Chromogenic print  
(Ektachrome)  
95.5 x 76.7 cm



---

## UNIVERSITY OF LETHBRIDGE ART GALLERY

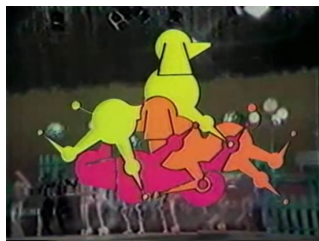
4401 University Drive  
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada  
403-329-2666  
[uleth.ca/artgallery](http://uleth.ca/artgallery)



**General Idea, *The Unveiling of the Cornucopia* (A Mural Fragment from the Room of the Unknown Function in the Villa Dei Misteri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion), 1982**

Enamel on plasterboard and plywood  
Five panels, each 244 x 122 cm

---



**General Idea, *Shut the Fuck Up*, 1985**

Video, 14 min.

---



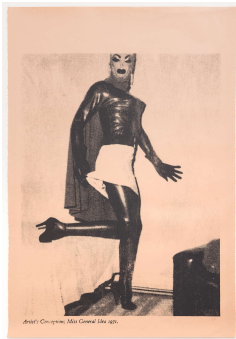


---

## UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO ART CENTRE

Art Museum at the University of Toronto  
15 King's College Circle  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
416-946-8687  
artmuseum.utoronto.ca

The University of Toronto Art Centre has a collection that includes prints, posters, multiples, and ephemera spanning General Idea's twenty-five-year career.



**General Idea, Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea 1971, 1971**

Screen print on buff paper  
101.5 x 66 cm



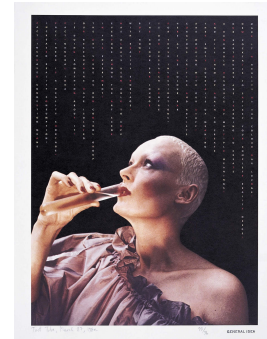
**General Idea, The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant, 1971**

Poster, photo screen print on wove paper  
101.6 x 66 cm



**General Idea, General Idea's Nazi Milk Glass from the Colour Bar Lounge, 1980**

Drinking glass with offset adhesive label in plastic box with gold hot-stamping  
Box: 15.3 x 10 (diam.) cm, glass: 15 x 9.2 (diam.) cm



**General Idea, General Idea's Test Tube, 1980**

Photolithograph on wove paper  
61.1 x 45.7 cm



**General Idea, Test Pattern: T.V. Dinner Plate, 1988**

Porcelain plate in cardboard box, label offset on paper  
Box: 24.5 x 31 x 2.8 cm, plate: 20 x 22.5 x 1.5 cm



**General Idea, Eye of the Beholder, 1989**

Chenille, embroidery on crest-shaped felt  
24 x 21 cm



**General Idea, XXX Voto (for the Spirit of Miss General Idea), 1995**

Offset publication, 128 pages, colour reproductions, black-linen hardcover with blue hot-stamping  
14.5 x 11 cm



---

## VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

750 Hornby Street  
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada  
604-662-4719  
[vanartgallery.bc.ca](http://vanartgallery.bc.ca)



**General Idea, *Nazi Milk*, 1979-90**

Chromogenic print  
(Ektachrome)  
78.9 x 58.6 cm



**General Idea, *Three Graces: Mural Fragment from the Villa Dei Misteri*, 1982**

Latex enamel on wood  
246 x 218 x 5 cm



**General Idea, *Test Pattern: T.V. Dinner Plate*, 1988**

Porcelain plate in  
cardboard box, label  
offset on paper  
Box: 24.5 x 31 x 2.8 cm,  
plate: 20 x 22.5 x  
1.5 cm

---



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### SARAH E.K. SMITH

Sarah E.K. Smith is an assistant professor of communication and media studies at Carleton University. Her research focuses on contemporary art and cultural institutions. Smith's current project explores the relationship between Canadian curators and museums and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Smith is affiliated faculty in the Bachelor of Global and International Studies at Carleton University. She is also affiliated faculty at Queen's University, where she works with graduate students in the cultural studies program. Before starting at Carleton University, Smith held a Banting Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Alberta (2016) and a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Postdoctoral Fellowship at Harvard University (2014–16). In 2015 Smith was the Canada-U.S. Fulbright Visiting Research Chair in Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California. Smith received her PhD in art history from Queen's University and in 2014 was awarded the Governor General's Academic Gold Medal. She has worked as an independent curator and held the position of curator of contemporary art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario. Major exhibition projects to date include *I'm Not Myself At All: Deirdre Logue and Allyson Mitchell* (2015) and *Sorting Daemons: Art, Surveillance Regimes and Social Control*, co-curated with Jan Allen (2010–11).



**"The work of General Idea captured my attention when I was an art student in Kingston and learned that the faux destruction of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* had been enacted in a performance in the very city I was living in. As a collective, General Idea had an enormous impact—within Canada and internationally—through their work and their efforts to shape the Canadian art scene. I am interested in the activism of the group, how they used visual culture to critique the structures of the art world, and, most prominently, how they explored issues surrounding AIDS."**





## COPYRIGHT & CREDITS

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

#### From the Author

This project gave me the opportunity to connect with AA Bronson and Fern Bayer, who kindly provided pivotal insights into the development of General Idea, filling gaps in my archival research and contributing to my understanding of the group and its history. I am extremely grateful to both AA and Fern for their willingness to share.

I would also like to express my sincere thanks to Philip Dombowsky, who facilitated my research into the General Idea fonds, the Art Metropole fonds and the Fern Bayer fonds at the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives. I thank him for his time and patience during my extended research visit in 2014. While at the Library and Archives, I also benefited from the help of Cyndie Campbell, who gave me keen insights into the General Idea materials. As well, Peter Trepanier provided assistance, facilitating my access to original issues of *FILE Magazine*. Coinciding with my visit, Trepanier's exhibition *Then Again: A Celebration of Art Metropole's 40th Anniversary* was on display. This served as a perfect backdrop to the research I was conducting.

It has been a pleasure to work with the fantastic team at the Art Canada Institute during the production of the online book—including Sara Angel, Anna Hudson, Kendra Ward, Cliodna Cussen, Dominique Denis, Eve Renaud, Meg Taylor, John Geoghegan, and Emily Lawrence. The text also benefitted immensely from the guidance of Shannon Anderson and Sholem Krishtalka during the editing process.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Lynda Jessup at Queen's University who initially brought the work of the ACI to my attention and encouraged me to connect with the initiative.

#### From the Art Canada Institute

This online art book was made possible thanks to its Title Sponsor: the Hal Jackman Foundation. Much gratitude goes to the Lead Sponsor for the Canadian Online Art Book Project, Title Sponsor for this publication: BMO Financial Group.

The Art Canada Institute gratefully acknowledges the other sponsors for the 2015-16 Season: Aimia, Consignor Canadian Fine Art, Gluskin Sheff + Associates Inc., K. James Harrison, and Sandra L. Simpson, and TD Bank.

Thanks also to the Art Canada Institute Founding Patrons: Sara and Michael Angel, Jalynn H. Bennett, the Butterfield Family Foundation, David and Vivian Campbell, Albert E. Cummings, Kiki and Ian Delaney, the Fleck Family, Roger and Kevin Garland, the Gershon Iskowitz Foundation, The Scott Griffin Foundation, Michelle Koerner and Kevin Doyle, Phil Lind, Sarah and Tom Milroy, Nancy McCain and Bill Morneau, Gerald Sheff and Shanitha Kachan, Sandra L. Simpson, Pam and Mike Stein, and Robin and David Young; as well as its Founding Partner Patrons: The Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation and Partners in Art.

The ACI gratefully acknowledges the support and assistance of the Art Gallery of Ontario (Tracy Mallon-Jensen, Donald Rance, and Jim Shedden); Art Gallery



of York University (Michael Maranda); Art Museum at the University of Toronto (Heather Pigat); Art Resource; Bijutsu Shuppan-Sha (Noriko Takahashi); Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (Colin Deinhardt); Carmen Lamanna Estate; Electronic Arts Intermix (Karl McCool and Anny Oberlink); Esther Schipper GMBH (Anna Mándoki and Isabelle Moffat); Florence Loewy (Camille Azaïs); Getty Research Institute (Sarah Sherman); McCarthy Tétrault LLP; National Gallery of Canada (Raven Amiro and Philip Dombowsky); Sammlung Falckenberg/Deichtorhallen Hamburg (Goesta Diercks); Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (Hetty Wessels); The Gas Company; Tohru Kogure (Naomi Yamada); University of Lethbridge Art Gallery (Juliet Graham); Vancouver Art Gallery (Danielle Currie); De Vleeshal Zusterstraat (Julia Mullié); Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart (Silke Albrecht); and Pierre Antoine, Nick Ash, Cathy Bushby, Jeremiah S. Chechik, Barr Gilmore, Peter MacCallum, Cheryl O'Brien, Michael Snow, and Vincent Trasov.

We also would like to acknowledge the image research assistance of Fern Bayer, AA Bronson, and Sholem Krishtalka.

---

## IMAGE SOURCES

Every effort has been made to secure permissions for all copyrighted material. The Art Canada Institute will gladly correct any errors or omissions.

---

### Credit for Cover Image



*One Year of AZT*, 1991, with *One Day of AZT*, 1991. (See below for details.)

---

### Credit for Banner Images



Biography: General Idea, *XXX (bleu)*, 1984. (See below for details.)



Key Works: General Idea, *Nazi Milk*, 1979. (See below for details.)

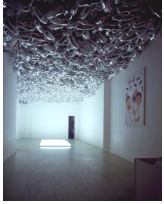


# GENERAL IDEA

Life & Work by Sarah E.K. Smith



Significance & Critical Issues: General Idea, *AIDS*, 1988. Installation view outside of S-Bahnhof Westend, Berlin, part of *Vollbild AIDS: Eine Kunstaussstellung über Leben und Sterben (AIDS Full Blown: An Exhibition about Living and Dying)*, Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, Berlin, 1988-89. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



Style & Technique: *Magi*© *Bullet*, 1992. (See below for details.)



Sources & Resources: *No Mean Feet*, 1973-74. Courtesy of AA Bronson and Esther Schipper, Berlin. © General Idea. Photo credit: Nick Ash.



Where to See: *The Armoury of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1985-90. Installation view from the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Art Gallery of Ontario, gift from the Volunteer Committee Fund, 1990 (90/91). © General Idea.

---

## Credits for Works by General Idea



1-001 *General Idea*, 1975. From Showcard Series, 1975-79. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Vivian and David Campbell, 1994 (94/535.250). Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



1-046 *The Colour Bar*, 1975. From Showcard Series, 1975-79. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Vivian and David Campbell, 1994 (94/535.44). © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.





# GENERAL IDEA

Life & Work by Sarah E.K. Smith



1-109 *Three Blind Artists*, 1979. From Showcard Series, 1975-79. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Vivian and David Campbell, 1994 (94/535.102). © General Idea.



2-015 *Slow Zoom Into Ziggurat Tower*, 1975. From Showcard Series, 1975-79. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Vivian and David Campbell, 1994 (94/535.121). © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



78 Gerrard Street West, c. 1969. Photograph by Jorge Zontal. Courtesy of General Idea.



AA Bronson stencilling the words "Air, Earth, Fire, Water" on the sidewalk, 1969. Photograph by Jorge Zontal. Collection General Idea, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. © General Idea.



*AIDS*, 1987. Private Collection. Courtesy of Esther Schipper. © General Idea. Photo credit: Zindman/Fremont.



*AIDS*, 1988-90. Installation view from General Idea's *Fin de siècle*, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, Germany, 1992. Courtesy of General Idea and Württembergischer Kunstverein. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Robert and Lynn Simpson, 1997 (98/48.1-.3). © General Idea.



*AIDS*, 1989. Installation view shows the sculpture at General Idea's *Fin de siècle*, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, 1992. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 2001 (no. 45923). Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Pierre Antoine.



*AIDS Ring*, 1993/96. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Peter MacCallum.



*Air, Earth, Fire, Water*, newspaper advertisement, June 8, 1970. Collection General Idea, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. © General Idea.



*Air, Earth, Fire, Water*, newspaper advertisement, June 11, 1970. Collection General Idea, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. © General Idea.



*Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea 1971*, 1971. Courtesy of General Idea and Esther Schipper, Berlin. © General Idea. Photo credit: Andrea Rossetti.



*Baby Makes 3*, 1984/89. Courtesy of Deichtorhallen Hamburg/Sammlung Falckenberg and Esther Schipper, Berlin. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



*Boutique Coeurs volant*, 1994/2001. Installation view from *Boutique Coeurs volants*, Florence Loewy, Paris, October 20, 2000–March 20, 2001. Courtesy of General Idea and Florence Loewy. © General Idea.



*Colour Bar Lounge*, 1979. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (81/72). Purchased 1981. © General Idea.



Contestants participating in *The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*, a component of *What Happened*, St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, Toronto, 1970. Photograph by General Idea. Collection General Idea, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. © General Idea.



*Cornucopia*, 1982. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix. © General Idea.



*Cornucopia: Fragments from the Room of the Unknown Function in the Villa Dei Misteri of The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion*, 1982-83. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



*Dear General Idea, if I live to be a hundred I'll never forgive myself for...*, 1972. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: The Gas Company.



Detail of the "Glamour" manifesto, *FILE Magazine*, "Glamour Issue," vol. 3, no. 1 (autumn 1975), 22-23. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



Double-page spread of "Artists' Directory," *FILE Magazine*, "Mr. Peanut Issue," vol. 1, no. 1 (April 15, 1972), 28-29. National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. © General Idea.



*Eye of the Beholder*, 1989. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Thomas E. Moore.





# GENERAL IDEA

Life & Work by Sarah E.K. Smith



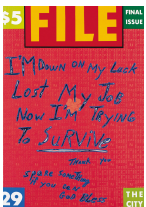
Felix Partz and Miss Honey on the set of *The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1970. Photograph by General Idea. Collection General Idea, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. © General Idea.



Felix Partz modelling *V.B. Gown #3 (Massing Studies for the Pavillion #3)*, 1975. Photograph by General Idea. Collection General Idea, General Idea fonds, Library and Archives, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © General Idea.



Felix Partz wearing a monkey-fur coat, Toronto, c. 1970. Photograph by Jorge Zontal. Courtesy of General Idea.



*FILE Magazine*, "Final Issue, The City," no. 29 (1989). Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Peter MacCallum.



*FILE Magazine*, "Glamour Issue," vol. 3, no. 1 (autumn 1975). Various collections. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Peter MacCallum.



*FILE Magazine*, "IFEL Special Paris Issue," vol. 2, no. 3 (September 1973). Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Peter MacCallum.



*FILE Magazine*, "Mr. Peanut Issue," vol. 1, no. 1 (April 15, 1972). Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Peter MacCallum.



*Fin de siècle*, 1994. Courtesy of General Idea and Esther Schipper, Berlin. © General Idea.



*Fin de siècle* (detail), 1990. Installation view from *General Idea's Fin de siècle*, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, Germany, 1992. Photograph courtesy of General Idea and Württembergischer Kunstverein. Private Collection, Turin. © General Idea.



General Idea and friends on the roof of 87 Yonge Street, Toronto, c. 1971-73. Photograph by Elke Town. Collection General Idea.



*General Idea's Nazi Milk Glass from the Colour Bar Lounge*, 1980. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Thomas E. Moore.



*General Idea's Putti*, 1993. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Peter MacCallum.



General Idea Studio/Art Metropole, 241 Yonge Street, Toronto, 1974. Photograph by General Idea. Collection General Idea, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.



# GENERAL IDEA

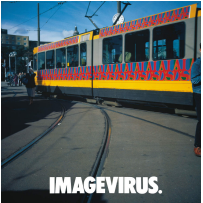
Life & Work by Sarah E.K. Smith



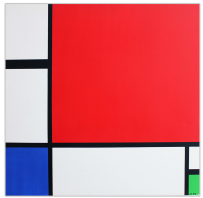
*General Idea's Test Tube*, 1980. Various Collections. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Peter MacCallum.



*Granada Gazelle, Miss General Idea 1969 Displays the Entry Kit* (detail from *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant Documentation*), 1971. Carmen Lamanna Estate. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



*Imagevirus (Amsterdam)*, 1991. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



*Infe©ted Mondrian #9*, 1994. Collection of McCarthy Tétrault LLP. © General Idea.



*Inside/Outside General Idea Headquarters, Toronto* (detail from the installation *Light On*), 1971. Collection General Idea. © General Idea.



Installation view of *One Year of AZT*, 1991, and *Pharma©pia*, 1992. View from *General Idea's Fin de siècle*, Kunstverein, Hamburg, Germany, 1992-93. Photograph from Collection General Idea, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



Jorge Zontal at his sales stand in *The Belly Store* installation, 1969. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea.



Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz during the filming of *Light On Documentation*, 1971-74. Photograph by AA Bronson. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea.





*Khroma Key Klub: The Blue Ruins from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1985. Installation view, De Vleeshal, Middleburg, the Netherlands, 1985. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Wim Riemens.



*Liquid Assets*, 1980. Detail from cover of *File Magazine*, "Special \$ucce\$\$ Issue," vol. 5, no. 1 (March 1981). National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. © General Idea. Photo credit: Peter MacCallum.



*Magi© Bullet*, 1992. Installation view from Stux Gallery, New York, 1992. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of Esther Schipper, Berlin, and Stux Gallery. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



*Magic Palette*, 1980, from a detail of *The Getting into the Spirits Cocktail Book from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion*, 1980. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



*Manipulating the Self (Manipulating the Scene)*, 1973. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (no. 74/18), purchased 1974. © General Idea.



*Manipulating the Self (Phase 1 - A Borderline Case)*, 1970. Photograph Courtesy of Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, and Esther Schipper, Berlin. © General Idea.



Marina Abramovic during the filming of *Test Tube*, 1979. Photograph by General Idea. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea.



*Melting Snow Crystal Virus #4*, 1992. Art Museum at the University of Toronto, gift of Sandra Simpson, 2011.11. © General Idea.



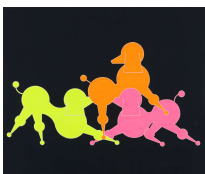
*Mimi*, 1968-69. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased 1987 (87/21). © General Idea.



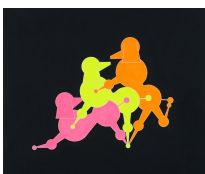
Mimi Paige and Felix Partz at 78 Gerrard Street West, Toronto, c. 1969. Photograph by Jorge Zontal. Courtesy of General Idea.



*Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*, 1984. Installation view from *Haute Culture: General Idea. Une retrospective, 1969-1994*, Musee d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2011. Collection General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Pierre Antoine.



*Mondo Cane Kama Sutra* (detail), 1984. Collection General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



*Mondo Cane Kama Sutra* (detail), 1984. Collection General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



*Nazi Milk*, 1979. Courtesy of Deichtorhallen Hamburg/Sammlung Falckenberg and Esther Schipper, Berlin. © General Idea.



*Nightschool*, 1989. Courtesy of Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and General Idea. © General Idea. Photo Credit: General Idea.



*One Year of AZT*, 1991, with *One Day of AZT*, 1991. Installation view from *General Idea's Fin de siècle*, The Power Plant, Toronto, 1992. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, *One Day of AZT* gift of Patsy and Jamie Anderson, Toronto, 2001 (no. 41032.1-5); *One Year of AZT* purchased 1995 (no. 37688.1-1825). Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Cheryl O'Brien.



*P is for Poodle*, 1983/89. Courtesy of Deichtorhallen Hamburg/Sammlung Falckenberg and Esther Schipper, Berlin. © General Idea.



Performance documentation of *Match My Strike*, directed by Jorge Zontal, produced by John Neon, Poor Alex Theatre, Toronto, August 30, 1969. Photographer unknown. Collection General Idea. Photograph of original documentation courtesy of Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

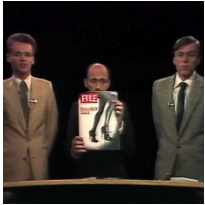


Performance documentation of *The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*, a component of the project *What Happened*, St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, Toronto, 1970. Collection General Idea. Photograph by General Idea. © General Idea.





*photographs* (detail), 1969, by Jorge Zontal. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea.



*Pilot*, 1977. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix. © General Idea.



*Playing Doctor*, 1992. Courtesy of General Idea and Esther Schipper, Berlin. © General Idea.



Publicity shot of various issues of *FILE Magazine*. Includes a double-page spread from the "Glamour" manifesto in *FILE Magazine*, "Glamour Issue," vol. 3, no. 1 (autumn 1975), 20-21. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



*Self-Portrait with Objects*, 1981/82. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, purchased 1985 (no. EX-85-142). © General Idea.



Showcard Series, 1975-79. Installation view from *The Art Gallery of York University Presents: The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion*, Fall 2009, curated by Philip Monk, Art Gallery of York University, Toronto. Various collections. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of York University. © General Idea. Photo credit: Michael Maranda.

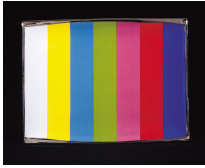


*Shut the Fuck Up*, 1985. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix. © General Idea.



# GENERAL IDEA

Life & Work by Sarah E.K. Smith



*Test Pattern: T.V. Dinner Plate*, 1988. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Thomas E. Moore.



*Test Tube*, 1979. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix. © General Idea.



*The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, 1971. Various collections. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Peter MacCallum.



*The Miss General Idea Pageant Entry Kit*, 1971. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



*The Ruins of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1977. Performance documentation by General Idea. © General Idea.



*The Three Graces (Mural Fragment from the Villa Dei Misteri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion)*, 1982. Vancouver Art Gallery, Acquisition Fund (VAG 87.33 a-b). © General Idea.



*The Unveiling of the Cornucopia (A Mural Fragment from the Room of the Unknown Function in the Villa Dei Misteri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion)*, 1982. University of Lethbridge Art Collection, purchased 1986 with funds provided by the Canada Council Special Purchase Assistance Program (1986 113). © General Idea. Photo credit: Jane Edmundson, University of Lethbridge Art Gallery.



The words "Air, Earth, Fire, Water" stencilled onto the sidewalk by AA Bronson, 1969. Photograph by Jorge Zontal. Collection General Idea, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. © General Idea.



Unknown installation view of *The Boutique* from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion, 1980. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Sandra Simpson, 1998 (98/355). Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



Unknown installation view of *The Boutique* from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion, 1980. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Sandra Simpson, 1998 (98/355). Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.



V.B. Gowns featured in a performance view of *Going thru the Motions*, Walker Court, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, September 18, 1975. Collection General Idea. © General Idea. Photographer unknown.



Video still from *Double Mirror Video (A Borderline Case)*, 1971. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix. © General Idea.



Video still from *Shut the Fuck Up*, 1985. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix. © General Idea.



Video still from *Test Tube*, 1979. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix. © General Idea.



*XXX (bleu)*, 1984. Installation view from *Haute Culture: General Idea—A Retrospective, 1969-1994*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2011-12. Photograph courtesy of Art Gallery of Ontario and General Idea. Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of Sandra Simpson, 1993 (94/5). © General Idea.





# GENERAL IDEA

Life & Work by Sarah E.K. Smith



*XXX Voto (for the Spirit of Miss General Idea)*, 1995. Courtesy of General Idea and National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © General Idea. Photo credit: Cathy Busby.



*¥en Boutique*, 1989. Installation view from General Idea, Galleria Massimo De Carlo Arte Contemporanea, Milan, 1990. Fonds national d'art contemporain, for the collection of Musée national d'Art moderne–Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea.

---

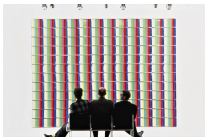
## Credits for Photographs and Works by Other Artists



*Car Crash*, 1960, by Jim Dine. Performed at the Reuben Gallery, New York, November 16, 1960. Photograph by Robert R. McElroy. Courtesy of Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2014.M.7). © J. Paul Getty Trust.



*Felix, June 5, 1994*, 1994, by AA Bronson. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (no. 40633). © AA Bronson.



General Idea in front of an installation of *Test Pattern: T.V. Dinner Plates from the Miss General Idea Pavillion* (detail), 1988. Installation view, SPIRAL (Wacoal Art Centre), Tokyo, 1988. Photograph by Tohru Kogure. Courtesy of Bijutsu Techo, Bijutsu Shuppan Sha. Collection General Idea, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.



General Idea relaxing in *Reconstructing Futures*, 1977. Photograph by Jeremiah S. Checkik. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1983 (no.28286.1-31). Courtesy of General Idea.



*Glamour is Theft: A User's Guide to General Idea* by Philip Monk. (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 2012). Courtesy of the Art Gallery of York University.



# GENERAL IDEA

Life & Work by Sarah E.K. Smith



*Jorge Zontal*, c. 1972. Photographer unknown. Collection General Idea, General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.



*Jorge Zontal*, January 29, 1994. Photograph by Barr Gilmore. Courtesy of General Idea.



*Life*, vol. 61, no. 12 (September 16, 1966).



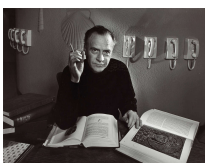
*LOVE*, 1966, by Robert Indiana. Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana, James E. Roberts Fund (67.8).



*LOVE*, 1966-99, by Robert Indiana. Installed in New York, New York. Photograph by Hu Totya.



*Marcel Dot*, 1971, by Vincent Trasov. Collection General Idea. © Vincent Trasov.



*Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980)*, 1974 (printed later), by Yousuf Karsh. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, gift of Estrellita Karsh, 2009, in memory of her husband (no. 42604). © Yousuf Karsh Estate.



# GENERAL IDEA

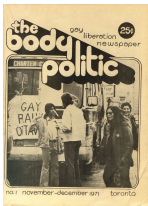
Life & Work by Sarah E.K. Smith



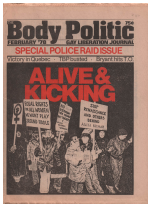
*Performance by Artists*, edited by AA Bronson and Peggy Gale, Toronto: Art Metropole, 1979. Courtesy of Art Metropole.



*Silver Clouds*, 1966 (re-fabricated in 1994), by Andy Warhol in collaboration with Billy Klüver. Installation view from Mostra SESC de Artes, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 2002. Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburg. © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, inc. / SODRAC (2016).



*The Body Politic*, November-December 1971. Courtesy of Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, Toronto.



*The Body Politic: Special Police Raid Issue*, February 1979. Courtesy of Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, Toronto.



*The Nobleman with his Hand on his Chest*, c. 1580, by El Greco. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid (P00809).



*The Wreck of the Hope (The Arctic Sea)*, 1823-24, by Caspar David Friedrich. Hamburger Kunsthalle.



*Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* by Marshall McLuhan, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965. Cover design by Rudolph de Harak.



# GENERAL IDEA

Life & Work by Sarah E.K. Smith

---



*Video by Artists*, edited by Peggy Gale, Toronto: Art Metropole, 1976.



Video still from *Wavelength*, 1966-67, by Michael Snow. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1970. © Michael Snow.





## BOOK CREDITS

### **Publisher**

Sara Angel

### **Executive Editor**

Kendra Ward

### **French Editorial Director**

Dominique Denis

### **Image Research Manager**

Cliona Cussen

### **Senior Web Manager**

Simone Wharton

### **Editors**

Shannon Anderson

Sholem Krishtalka

### **Copy Editor**

Claire Crighton

### **Proofreader**

Heather Sangster

### **Translator**

Eve Renaud

### **Digital Layout Managers**

Sara Rodriguez

Simone Wharton

### **English Layout Associate**

Heather Pierce

### **French Layout Associate**

Alicia Peres

### **Design Template**

Studio Blackwell



---

## COPYRIGHT

© 2016 Art Canada Institute. All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-1-4871-0092-6

Art Canada Institute

Massey College, University of Toronto

4 Devonshire Place

Toronto, ON M5S 2E1

## Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Smith, Sarah E.K., 1983-, author

General Idea : life & work / Sarah E.K. Smith.

Includes bibliographical references.

Contents: Biography – Key works – Significance & critical issues – Style & technique – Sources & resources – Where to see.

Electronic monograph.

ISBN 978-1-4871-0093-3 (pdf).– ISBN 978-1-4871-0094-0 (mobile).

1. General Idea (Artists' collective)–History 2. Art, Canadian–20th century I. Art Canada Institute, issuing body II. General Idea (Artists' collective). Works. Selections. III. Title.

NX513.Z9G4637 2016

700.92

C2016-900891-6