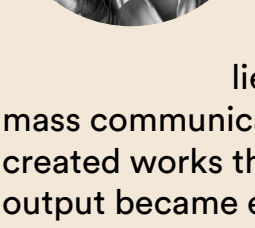
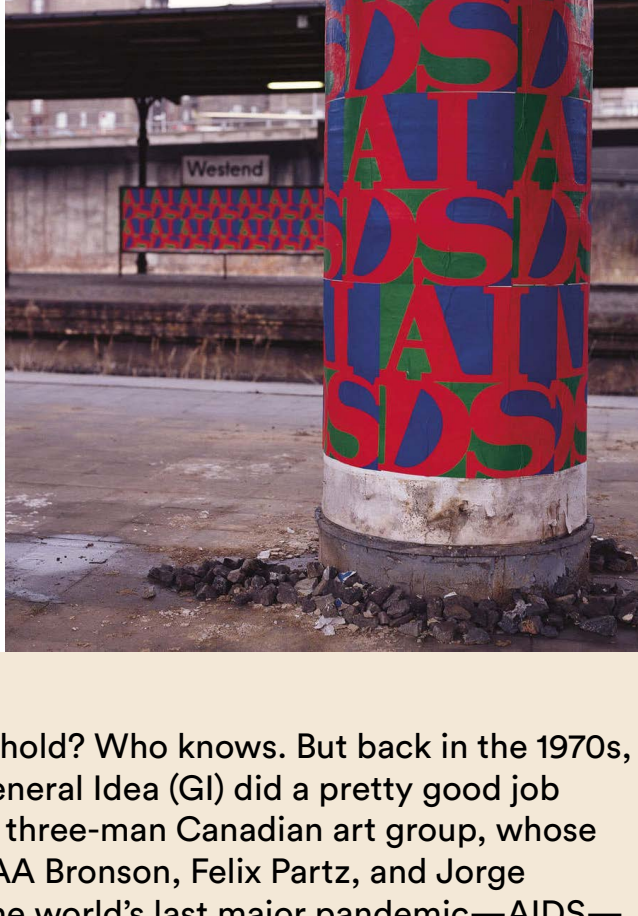
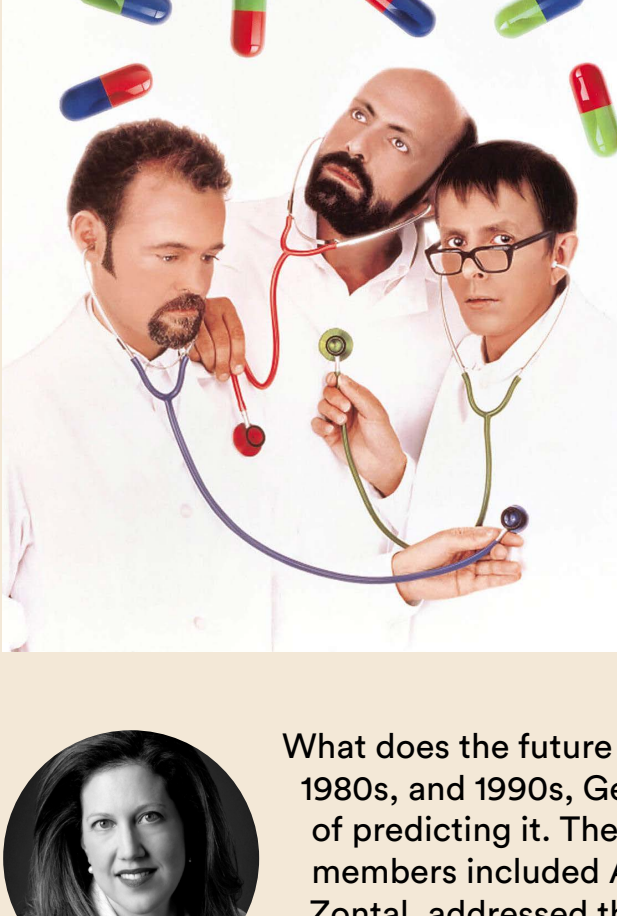


SEEING THE FUTURE WITH GENERAL IDEA

What the art of AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal can teach us about tomorrow



What does the future hold? Who knows. But back in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, General Idea (GI) did a pretty good job of predicting it. The three-man Canadian art group, whose members included AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal, addressed the world's last major pandemic—AIDS—with such candor and brilliance that we're using today's newsletter to look at what GI's art might tell us about what lies ahead and how to handle it. Using every available form of mass communication—including TV, mail, balloons, and contests—the artists created works they could spread “like a media virus.” From 1987 onward, their output became exclusively focused on bringing attention to the pandemic; Partz and Zontal were later diagnosed with HIV (in 1994 both died of causes related to AIDS). As ACI's publication *General Idea: Life & Work* by Sarah E. K. Smith reveals, today it is clear that GI's art had remarkable prescience. The following excerpts show what we can learn from it.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

WE ARE BETTER TOGETHER



General Idea, *P is for Poodle*, 1983/89, various collections

“THREE HEADS ARE BETTER” declared General Idea in 1978. Bronson, Partz, and Zontal refused to apply an individual signature to any of their works, believing that art's future lay in collaboration, appropriation, and subversion. Their group identity superseded their individuality, and the non-hierarchical, cooperative, and community approach freed them from “the tyranny of individual genius.” The artists upheld the tripartite structure as a reason for their long-term success and stability between 1969 and 1994. Their conceptual projects and working method stand as part of their legacy, especially as collective art production has gained ground in the contemporary era. GI's focus on self-documentation foreshadows Facebook, and the group's belief in the end of the individual signature has come to pass on websites like Wikipedia.

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TAKE IT OUTSIDE



General Idea, *Imagevirus (Amsterdam)*, 1991, various collections

In 1987 General Idea created a work, titled *AIDS*, that mimicked the famous painting *LOVE*, 1966, by Robert Indiana (1928–2018), but replaced the word “LOVE” with “AIDS.” From this moment on, the AIDS “logo,” as it became known, was central to GI's oeuvre, with many projects being presented as temporary public art. 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; in Amsterdam the artists covered city trams with it, recording the intervention in *Imagevirus (Amsterdam)*, 1991. The group's aim was to use the series as a means to name what, at the time, was unnameable and raise AIDS as a topic of discussion in the public sphere.

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MAKE THE EVERYDAY INTO ART



General Idea, *One Year of AZT*, 1991, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

In 1989 and 1990, respectively, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal were diagnosed with HIV. *One Year of AZT* speaks to how the passing of time became marked by medications, with pills organized in daily and monthly groups. In this installation, the artists have created plastic capsules that represent the antiretroviral drug AZT (azidothymidine), which became essential to their routine. “Your watch is ringing little bells every two to four hours and you have to take two of this and four of that,” said Bronson. “[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.”

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BEWARE OF CONTRADICTIONS



General Idea, *Fin de siècle*, 1990, private collection

This deeply charged installation—made of three hundred 120- by 240-centimetre sheets of Styrofoam that fill the room—is one of the last self-portraits General Idea created. Viewers are meant to question the placement of the adrift seal pups, who represent the trio. Are they playful and cute, or a prelude to disaster? Here GI offers a poignant commentary on those struck by the AIDS pandemic, as well as on the planet's complex ecological situation. While environmentalists were attempting to save the seal population, the Canadian government was offering financial incentives for the animals' deaths as a means to deal with overpopulation.

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CREATIVITY AT A DISTANCE



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

General Idea's creativity continued to surge after 1986 when they physically separated, yet continued working together. After the group recognized New York as a key site for the circulation of artists and curators from Europe, Toronto, and Bronson travelled between the two cities. Despite geographical distance the trio kept their collaboration going via calls, faxes, and frequent visits, during which they made items like this chenille crest—one of GI's “multiples”—low-cost works of art meant to be distributed in the manner of books, rather than as precious art objects. These works affirmed that over the years GI had developed a unique language and a group mind.

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FOCUS ON THE FUTURE



General Idea, *The Three Graces (Mural Fragment from the Villa Dei Misteri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion)*, 1982, Vancouver Art Gallery

Inspired by a desire to interrogate glamour, fame, and the art world, General Idea staged a performance at the Art Gallery of Ontario: *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, an event that challenged gender norms as contestants included men and women. It became a critical part of the group's identity, but in 1977 the artists decided to forge a new future by fictionalizing the past. GI presented the alleged ruins of and artifacts from the pageant pavilion, reporting that it had burst into flames and burned to the ground.

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