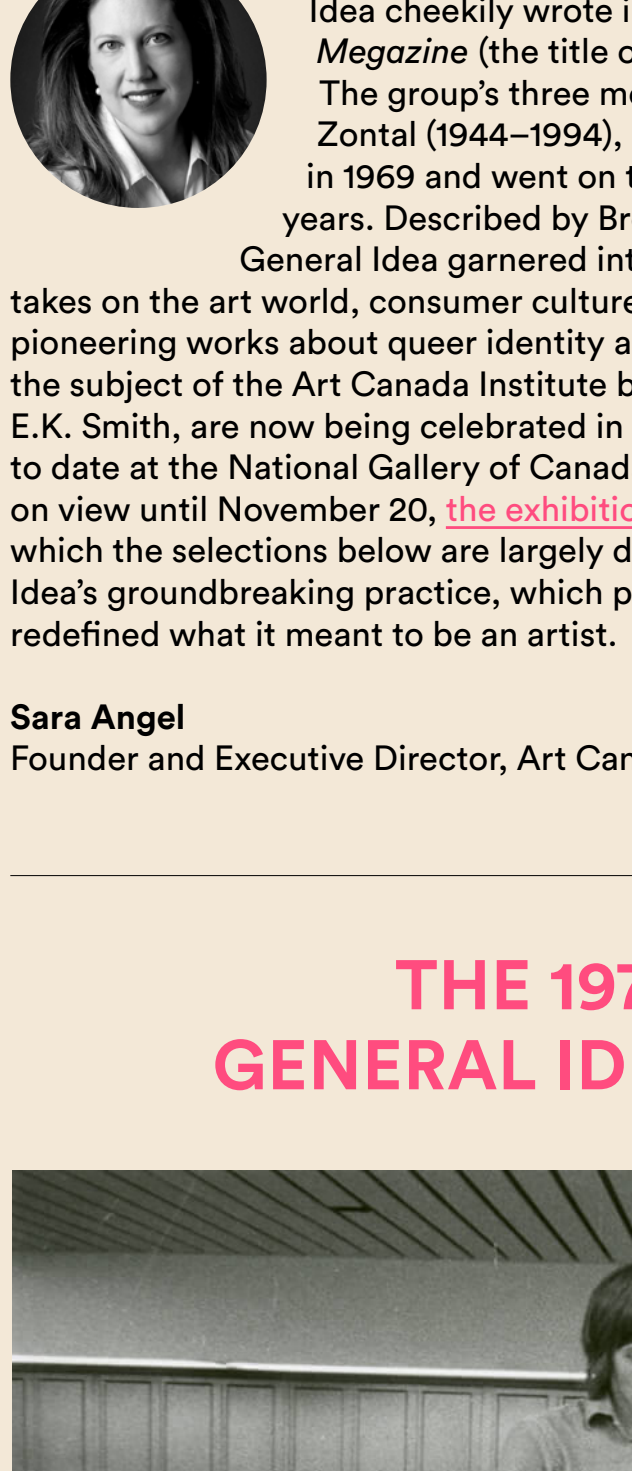


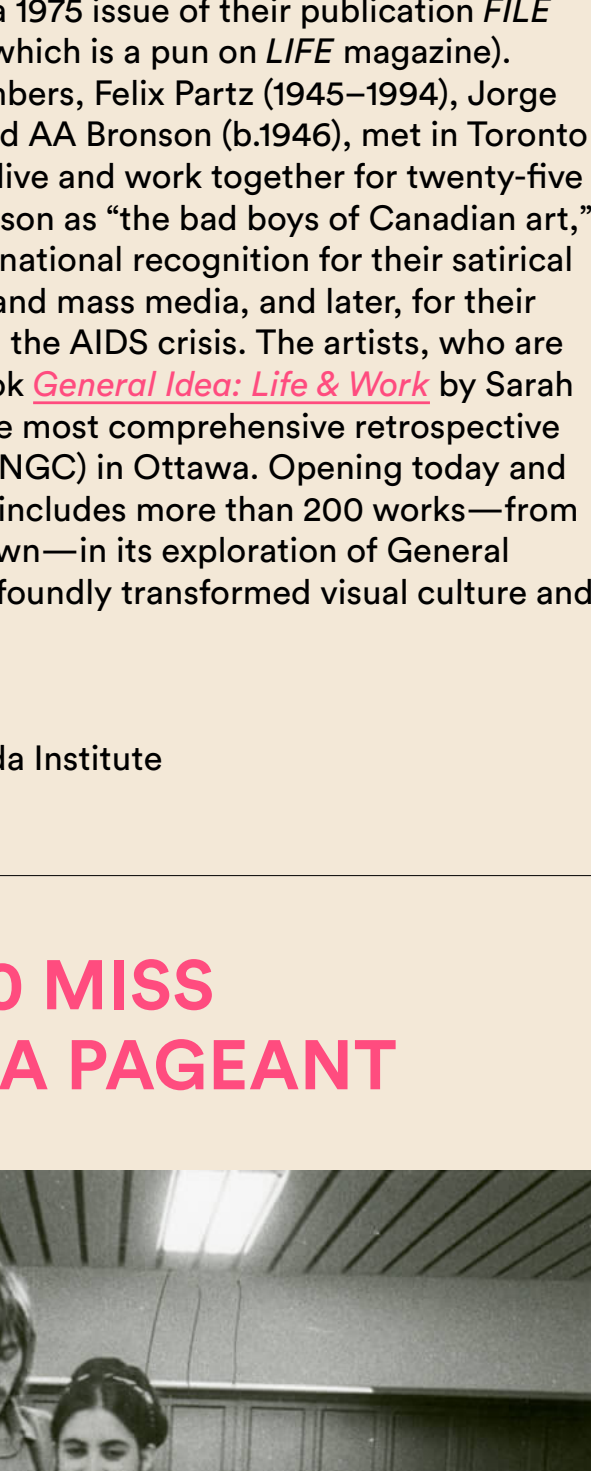
JUNE 3, 2022

GENERAL IDEA QUEERING CANADIAN ART

Emerging out of 1960s counterculture, the pioneering Toronto-based artist trio known as General Idea became famed for their provocative critiques of celebrity, media, and consumption as well as for their taboo-breaking works about the AIDS crisis. A new retrospective at the National Gallery of Canada highlights the group's immense impact within our country and internationally.



General Idea, *Baby Makes 3*, 1984/89, various collections.



General Idea, *Self-Portrait with Objects*, 1981–82, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



"We wanted to be famous, glamorous and rich," General Idea cheekily wrote in a 1975 issue of their publication *FILE Magazine* (the title of which is a pun on *LIFE* magazine). The group's three members, Felix Partz (1945–1994), Jorge Zontal (1944–1994), and AA Bronson (b.1946), met in Toronto in 1969 and went on to live and work together for twenty-five years. Described by Bronson as "the bad boys of Canadian art," General Idea garnered international recognition for their satirical takes on the art world, consumer culture, and mass media, and later, for their pioneering works about queer identity and the AIDS crisis. The artists, who are the subject of the Art Canada Institute book *General Idea: Life & Work* by Sarah E.K. Smith, are now being celebrated in the most comprehensive retrospective to date at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) in Ottawa. Opening today and on view until November 20, [the exhibition](#) includes more than 200 works—from which the selections below are largely drawn—in its exploration of General Idea's groundbreaking practice, which profoundly transformed visual culture and redefined what it meant to be an artist.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE 1970 MISS GENERAL IDEA PAGEANT



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.

Before Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal, and AA Bronson became the art trio known as General Idea, the three created *The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*. As Partz explained, it was a one-day performance that compared the art world to a beauty pageant and questioned "the process by which masterpieces are created ... validated ... selected and worshipped." He is seen here in this photograph with Miss Honey (Honey Novick) as Miss General Idea. The performance was a part of the Toronto Festival of Underground Theatre at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts and the Global Village Theatre. Miss General Idea and the beauty-pageant format would become central to the group's work over the next several years.

[Learn more](#)

FILE MEGAZINE



General Idea, *FILE Magazine*, "Glamour Issue," vol. 3, no. 1, 1975, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.



General Idea, *FILE Magazine*, "Special Global Downtown Issue," vol. 4, no. 3, 1980, various collections.

In 1972 General Idea established *FILE Magazine*, which ran until 1989 and borrowed the widely recognized logo of the American news magazine *LIFE*. Continuing their interest in mimicking popular forms as a means of social critique, the group saw the publication as a "parasite within the magazine distribution system." As AA Bronson explained, "We knew that if it looked familiar, people would pick it up, and they did." Its content, however, differed from *LIFE* by containing "wisecracks, wordplay, and cryptic layers of fact and fiction" through which General Idea developed their own self-invented mythology. The publication also unabashedly addressed taboo subjects with humour and irony, such as in the 1975 "Glamour Issue." It was released "at a time when, within the art scene, it was in extremely bad taste to talk about glamour," recalled the group. "It was the last subject in the world that anybody would mention."

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TEST TUBE

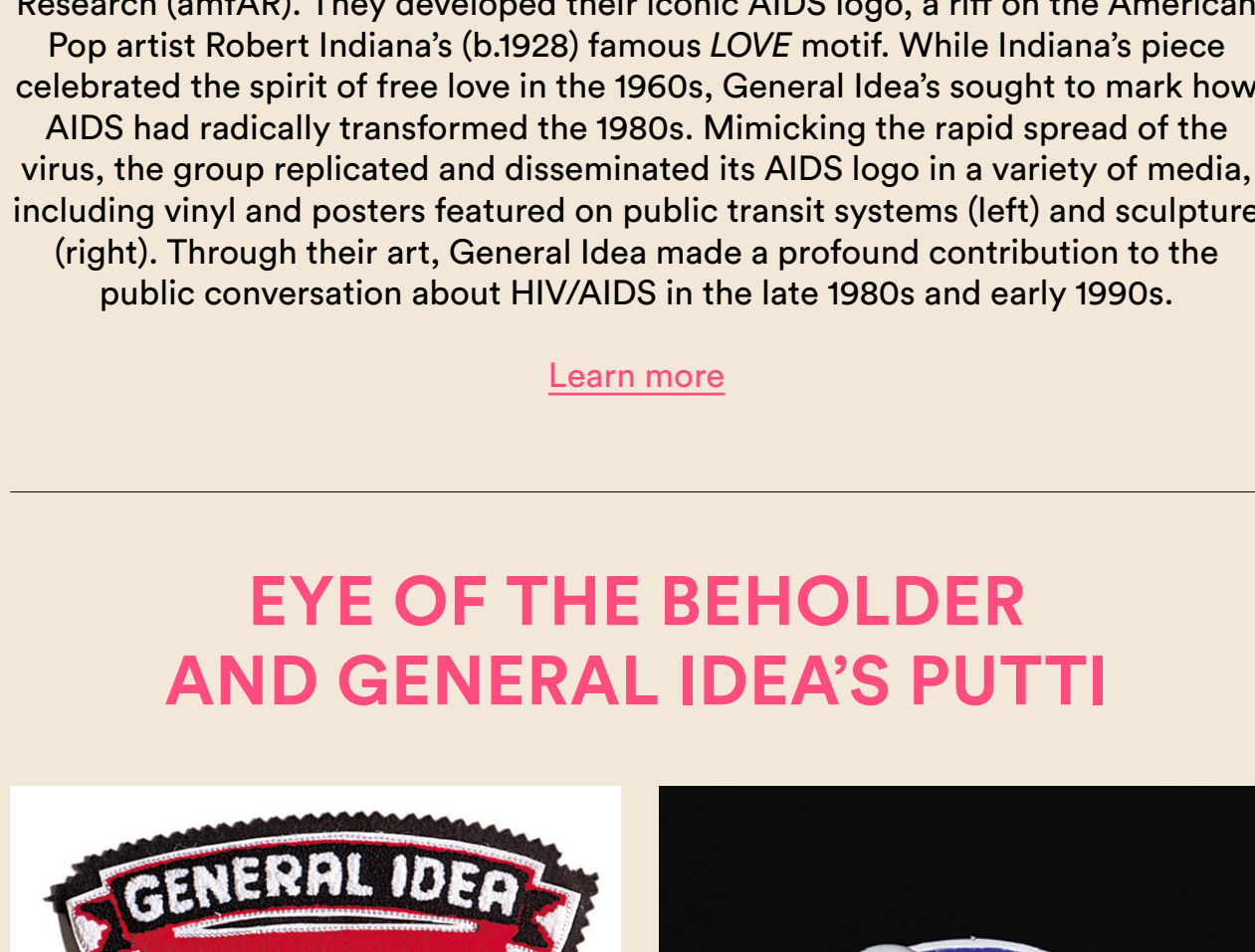


General Idea, *Test Tube*, 1979, various collections.

General Idea began receiving significant attention in Europe in the mid-1970s, and by 1979 the group secured its first solo show at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Among the exhibition's works was *Test Tube*, 1979, a made-for-television piece of art that, AA Bronson explained, "is structured in a talk-show format, alternating with a faux soap opera, alternating with General Idea commercials." The video demonstrates the group's practice of borrowing popular formats to examine the power of media and the relationship between art and commerce. After its display at the Stedelijk Museum, *Test Tube* was exhibited at the Venice Biennale the following year in 1980.

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NAZI MILK



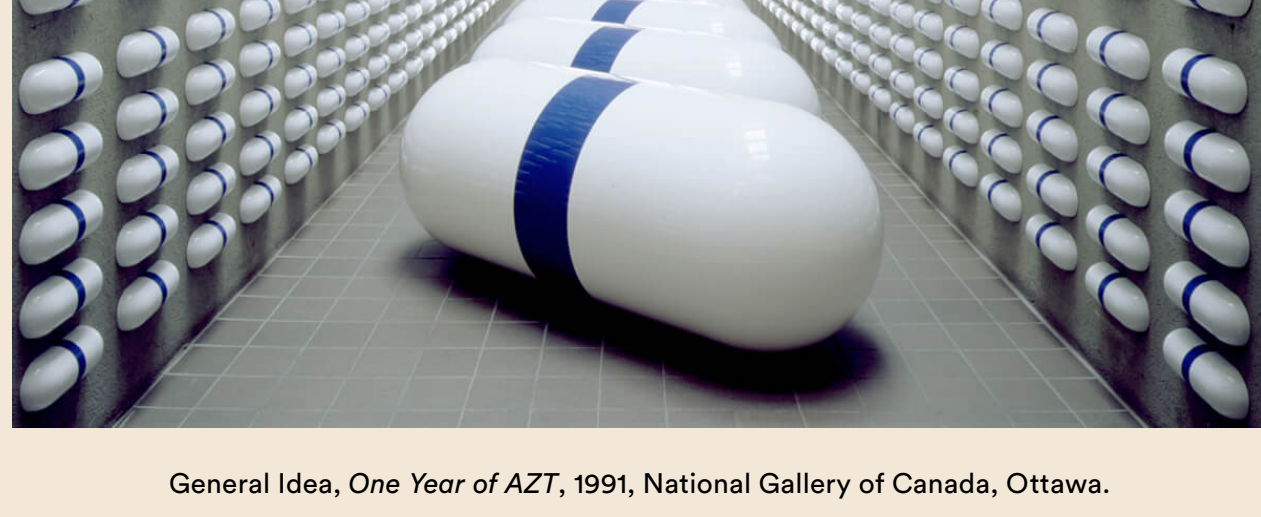
General Idea, *Nazi Milk*, 1979, Courtesy of Deichtorhallen Hamburg/Sammlung Falckenberg and Esther Schipper, Berlin.

This image, one of General Idea's most iconic works, features a young, blonde man raising a large glass of milk to his lips. His resulting moustache and hair are reminiscent of Hitler, and he is dressed as a Nazi Youth, indicating his affiliations with Fascism, and troubling the common association of the staple beverage with health, wholesome values, and nature. Employing the language of advertising to explore a taboo subject, the work was first included in General Idea's video *Test Tube*, 1979, in a segment about "Fascism implicit in the structure of the family," according to AA Bronson. *Nazi Milk*, 1979, was later disseminated in a variety of forms, including as a billboard in Toronto's subway system and as the cover image for *FILE Magazine*'s "Special Transgressions Issue" (1979).

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MONDO CANE KAMA SUTRA

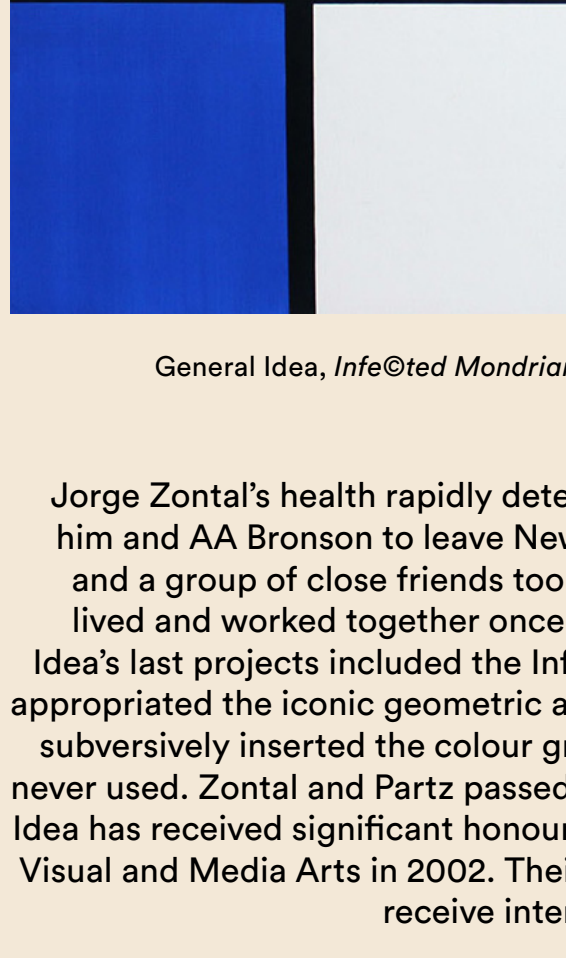


General Idea, *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*, 1984, Collection of the General Idea Estate.

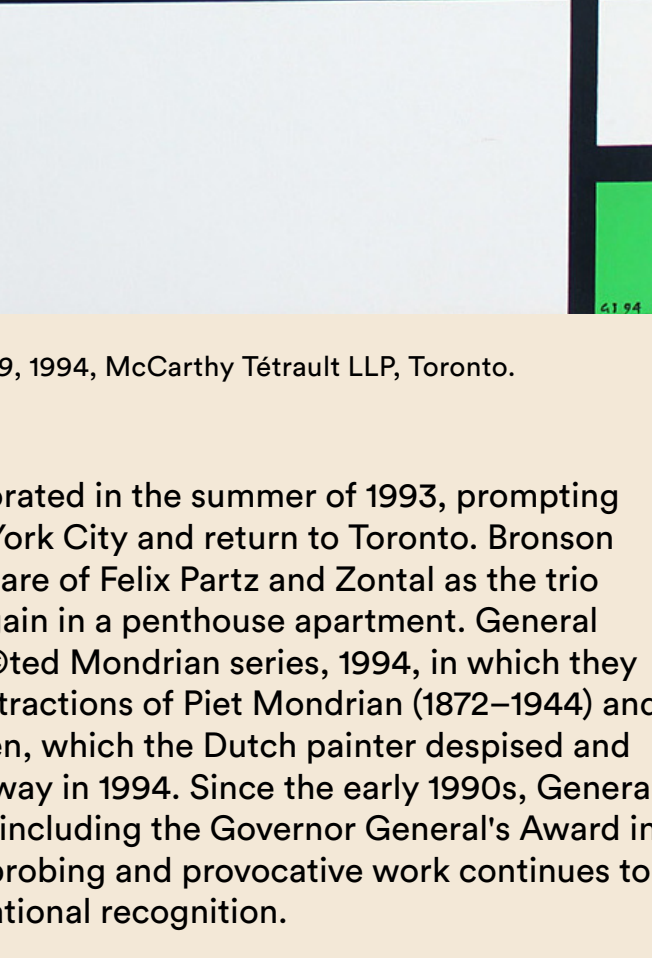
During the 1980s, representations of gay identity were strictly off-limits in the art world—something that General Idea boldly challenged with *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*, 1984. The series depicts a group of stylized fluorescent poodle silhouettes in various sexual positions. The group chose the motif of the poodle for its "banal and effete" presence and used it to address normative views of sexual roles. Yet, the paintings did not initially produce the intended response. "We thought, okay, it's 1984, now people are going to address the queer content in our work—they're going to be forced to," recalled AA Bronson. "Instead, the first review that appeared talked about them as a metaphor for three artists working together. No mention of the sexual implications of the images. It was really funny, and we thought, oh my God, art critics! [laughs]"

[Learn more](#)

AIDS



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

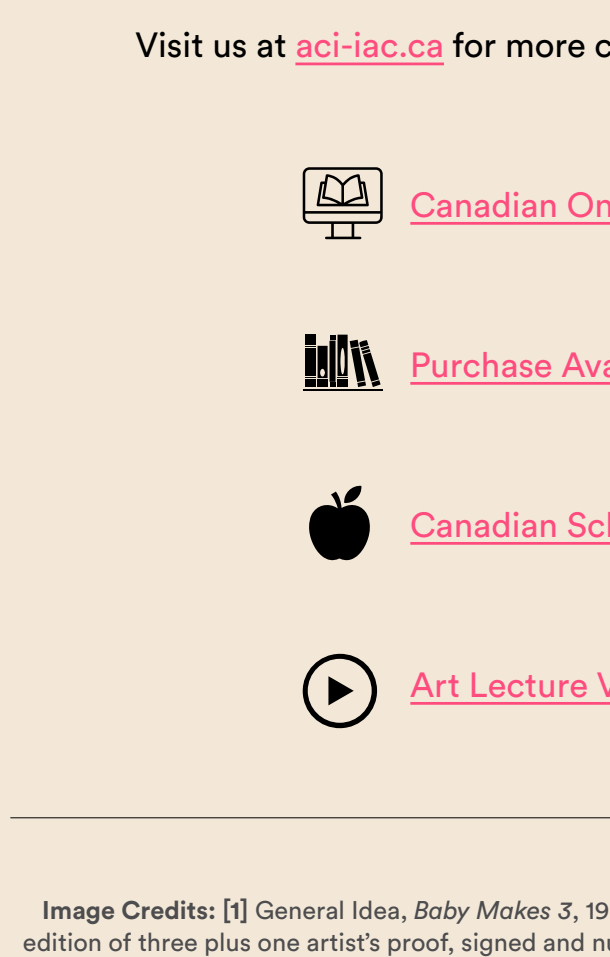


Installation view of *AIDS*, 1989, at General Idea's exhibition *Fin de siècle*, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, 1992, photograph by Pierre Antoine.

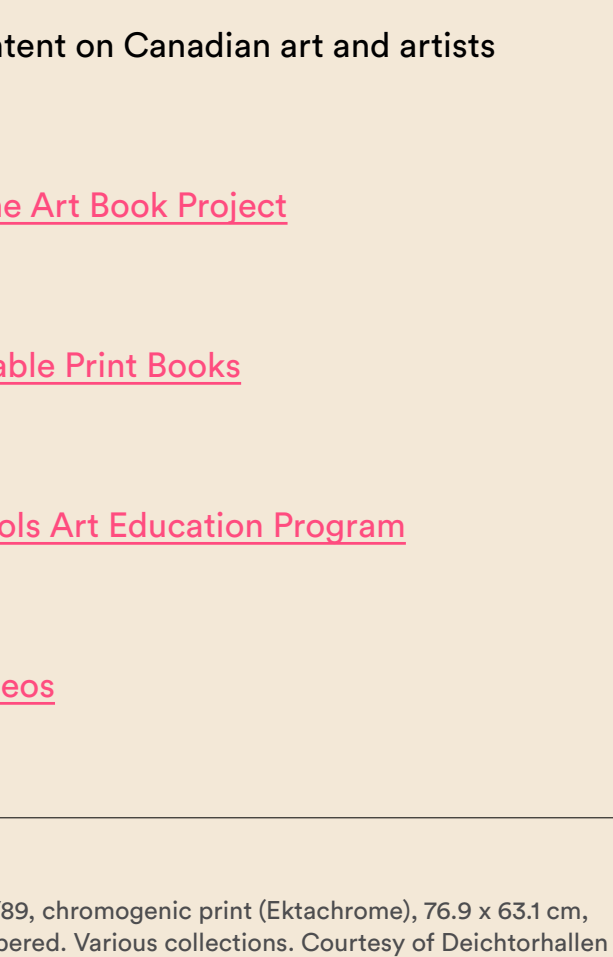
In 1987 General Idea was invited by their gallery Koury Wingate in New York to create a work for an exhibition in support of the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR). They developed their iconic AIDS logo, a riff on the American Pop artist Robert Indiana's (b.1928) famous LOVE motif. While Indiana's piece celebrated the spirit of free love in the 1960s, General Idea's sought to mark how AIDS had radically transformed the 1980s. Mimicking the rapid spread of the virus, the group replicated and disseminated its AIDS logo in a variety of media, including vinyl and posters given out on public transit systems (left) and sculpture (right). Through their art, General Idea made a profound contribution to the public conversation about HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

[Learn more](#)

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER AND GENERAL IDEA'S PUTTI



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



General Idea, *General Idea's Putti*, 1993, various collections.

Central to General Idea's work was the creation of multiples—a series of identical art objects, usually a signed limited edition made specifically for selling. This practice was tied to the group's examination of consumerism. "[We were] at once complicit in and critical of the mechanisms and strategies that join art and commerce, a sort of mole in the art world," explained AA Bronson. The group produced edition-based pieces that were low-cost and intended to be shared and circulated, such as *Eye of the Beholder*, 1989 (left), a small chenille crest bearing a stylized skull with two copyright symbols for eyes and the name of the group above. *General Idea's Putti*, 1993, was a large-scale gallery installation at the Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art in Winnipeg consisting of ten thousand seal pup-shaped hand soaps placed on beer coasters. Visitors were invited to take one in exchange for a monetary donation to a local AIDS charity.

[Learn more](#)

ONE YEAR OF AZT

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

In 1989, Felix Partz was diagnosed HIV-positive, followed by Jorge Zontal the following year. Part of General Idea's larger focus on the AIDS epidemic, the installation *One Year of AZT*, 1991, conveys the challenges of living with HIV. "Our life was full of pills, our apartment was full of pills ... so they became part of our work," AA Bronson said. The piece consists of 1,825 plastic capsules displayed on gallery walls, representing Partz's annual dosage of the antiretroviral drug AZT (azidothymidine). The installation is typically exhibited together with *One Day of AZT*, 1991, a row of five massive pills referring to the daily dosage of the medication. The fibreglass forms, slightly larger than a human body, bring to mind coffins.

[Learn more](#)

INFE©TED MONDRIAN #9

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

Jorge Zontal's health rapidly deteriorated in the summer of 1993, prompting him and AA Bronson to leave New York City and return to Toronto. Bronson and a group of close friends took care of Felix Partz and Zontal as the trio lived and worked together once again in a penthouse apartment. General Idea's last projects included the *Infe©ted Mondrian* series, 1994, in which they appropriated the iconic geometric abstractions of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) and subversively inserted the colour green, which the Dutch painter despised and never used. Zontal and Partz passed away in 1994. Since the early 1990s, General Idea has received significant honours, including the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2002. Their probing and provocative work continues to receive international recognition.

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Image Credits: [1] 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. Courtesy of Deichtorhallen Hamburg/Sammlung Falckenberg and Esther Schipper, Berlin. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea. [2] General Idea, *Self-Portrait with Objects*, 1981–82, montage gelatin silver print, 35.6 x 27.7 cm, edition of ten (only one produced), signed and numbered. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1985 (no. EX-85-142). © General Idea. Photo: NGC. [3] 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. Collection General Idea. General Idea fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. © General Idea. [4] General Idea, *FILE Magazine*, "Glamour Issue," vol. 3, no. 1, Autumn 1975, offset periodical, 35.5 x 28 cm. Art Metropole fonds, Art Metropole Collection, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa, Gift of Jay A. Smith, Toronto, 1999. © General Idea. Photo: General Idea Archives, Berlin, courtesy the artist. [5] General Idea, *Test Tube*, 1979, video, 28 min., 15 sec. Various collections. Courtesy of Electronic Arts. [6] General Idea, *FILE Magazine*, "Special Global Downtown Issue," vol. 4, no. 3, 1980, various collections. [7] General Idea, *Nazi Milk*, 1979, concept featured in diverse media. Courtesy of Deichtorhallen Hamburg/Sammlung Falckenberg and Esther Schipper, Berlin. © General Idea. [8] 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. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea. [9] General Idea, *Imagevirus (Amsterdam)*, 1991, chromogenic print (Ektachrome), 76 x 50.4 cm, edition of six plus one artist's proof. Various collections. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea. [10] Installation view of *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, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, photograph by Pierre Antoine. Installation view shows the sculpture of General Idea's *Fin de siècle*, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, 1992. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 2001 (no. A5923). Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. [11] 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. Courtesy of General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: Peter MacCallum. [12] General Idea, *One Year of AZT*, 1991, 1,825 units of vacuum-formed styrene with vinyl, wall-mounted capsules, 12.7 x 31.7 x 6.3 cm each. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (S7688-1-1825, 410321-5). [13] General Idea, *Infe©ted Mondrian #9*, 1994, acrylic on galvalume, 51 x 51 cm. Collection of McCarthy Tétrault LLP, Toronto. © General Idea.