

ARTNEWS

Mitchell-Innes & Nash Now Represents the Estate of General Idea

BY *Alex Greenberger* POSTED 06/13/17 4:01 PM

In New York in the 1980s, *Imagevirus*—an artwork that reconstituted Robert Indiana’s brightly colored *LOVE* to read instead as “AIDS”—was a familiar signpost on walls and in subway cars around the city. Aggressive in its politics and visual language, the project by the activist collective General Idea was an integral piece of art history at the time. In the years since, however, General Idea has faded from such familiar view. The last major exhibition of the group in New York was in 1996, as part of the Museum of Modern Art’s “Projects” series, and a retrospective that began last year at the Museo Jumex in Mexico City never traveled to America.



New Yorkers will now be reacquainted with General Idea by way of the gallery Mitchell-Innes & Nash, which has taken on representation of the group’s estate—with a first exhibition scheduled for this November.

“They reinvented the idea of artist activism,” Lucy Mitchell-Inness, a co-owner of the gallery, told *ARTnews*. “They took on ideas—those often demonized or ignored—with a boldness that was unheard of at the time. [General Idea] came of age in a period that saw pivotal changes in queer conceptualism and postmodernism. They led the charge in decentralization and intervention within the institutional framework.”

Made up of three members—AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal—General Idea first united in Toronto in 1969 and continued to work together until 1994, when Partz and Zontal died of AIDS-related causes. Over three decades, the group pondered the circulation of images and ideas, and, in the later stages of its work, actively fought to bring the AIDS crisis to prominence.

Among the group’s early activities were Miss General Idea Pageants, for which participants could apply to be judged by how beautiful they were. The artists

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

considered the preen-and-praise scenario a metaphor for the art world, and the project, as per invented mythology and ephemera that surrounded it, would have climaxed in a pageant pavilion that instead burned down in a fire that never actually happened.

To honor beauty queens who won their pageants, General Idea began creating brightly colored “Ziggurat Paintings,” which took the stepped-pyramid shape of Mesopotamian and Aztec structures and repeated them to make them more abstract. A work would be dedicated to each winner, and some in that series will be on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash’s first General Idea show this fall.

In the ’70s, the collective also began putting out issues of *FILE*, a magazine that mimicked the epochal publication *Life* to the point where the magazines’ logos might be conflated. By appropriating the form of pageants and publications as well as, in other cases, documentaries and advertising, General Idea was able to move art outside the gallery space, often in political ways.

“Commercial galleries did not always have the power or importance that they have today,” Bronson, the sole living General Idea member, told *ARTnews*. “In 1969, when we began, we needed a strategy to reach out into the world at large, and our methods emerged from that need. We thought of ourselves as networked before the idea of networking appeared. We were able to contact the people and places that interested us—and to participate in the larger world.”