

ART

DECEMBER 13TH, 2017

General Idea in Perspective

by Mark Bloch



Installation view of *The Estate of General Idea: Ziggurat*, 2017, Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes and Nash. © General Idea.

The Estate of General Idea (1969-1994) had their first exhibition with the Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery on view in Chelsea through January 13, featuring several “ziggurat” paintings from the late 1960s, alongside works on paper, photographs and ephemera that highlight the central importance of the ziggurat form in the rich practice of General Idea.

It got me thinking about the unique Canadian trio’s sumptuous praxis and how it evolved from humble roots in the underground of the early 1970s to its sophisticated position atop the contemporary art world of today. One could say that the ziggurat form is a perfect metaphor for a staircase of their own making that they ascended with grace and elegance, which is true. But they also had to

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aggressively lacerate and burn their way to the top, armed with real fire, an acerbic wit and a penchant for knowing where to apply pressure. Even the tragic loss of two thirds of their members along the way did not deter their rise, making the unlikely climb all the more heroic.



General Idea, *VB Gown from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant, Urban Armour for the Future*, 1975, Gelatin Silver Print, 10 by 8 in. 25.4 by 20.3 cm, Courtesy Mitchell-Innes and Nash. © General Idea.

The ancient architectural structure of steps leading up to a temple symbolizes a link between humans and the gods and can be found in cultures ranging from Mesopotamia to the Aztecs to the Navajos. The stark, deceptively geometric paintings mask General Idea's rich story tied to their utilization of the form and eliciting branding, queer identity, an invocation of "spatial politics," and the careful construction of the group's myth itself, using glamour and iconography to reflect a society susceptible to subconscious fetishization and holding brand awareness as its highest ideal.

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From the *Miss General Idea beauty pageants* and the *Miss General Idea Pavillion*, an architectural proposal for a “superstructure of containment formats” to the publication of *FILE* magazine, to the establishment of their shop, Art Metropole, a blurry blend of fact and fiction as well as art, design and life, have made the avant-garde brand of General Idea, Inc. a revered name in both real art circles as well as a pretend art world of their own making. Their cultural production of the glamorous art star image, simultaneously self-mocking and a critique of the larger art milieu, seduces viewers with mystery and intellectual posturing again in this show in the large Mitchell-Innes & Nash art space in Chelsea, combining fantasy with a hint of truth that comes to life in our “real world” in these colorful, carefully executed, and in some cases even restored, charmingly checkered ziggurat paintings and related cultural bric a brac that stunningly beckons from vitrines.

“We didn’t believe in progress as a concept. We were interested in how it dominated the post-war imagination,” AA Bronson, the one surviving member of the General Idea trio, said in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist from the show’s illustrated catalogue. “If you look at business magazines from the ‘50s, for example *Fortune Magazine*, the advertising features a lot of skyscrapers, which are always stepped... the ziggurat came to represent the future, the strength of progress and technological change and the male power of construction.”

After one of Bronson’s partners in the three-man General Idea group, Felix Partz, created the first series of Ziggurat paintings in 1968-69 before the inception of the group identity, the works were absorbed into their collective oeuvre via their *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* project, a fictional structure which would purportedly have housed *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant*, had it not burned down in 1977, literally and figuratively, leaving, we are told, just a bare ziggurat-shaped foundation of the actual-size floor plan of *The Pavillion’s* audience seating area.



General Idea (a project of Ron Gabe, aka Felix Partz), *Burning Ziggurats*, 1968, Set of 4, gelatin silver print, 9 × 12.5 cm each, Courtesy Mitchell-Innes and Nash. © General Idea.

Partz's *Burning Ziggurats* (1968-1969) and *Ziggurat Paintings Project* (1968-1994) created the foundation for *the Pavillion* and the 1968 paintings on these themes that reemerged between 1969 and 1971 as aspects of portraits in the *Miss General Idea* beauty queens that were precursors to the imagined *1984 Pageant*.

In 1970, General Idea embarked on their defining journey that took them from their performance *What Happened* up to the destruction in 1977 of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*—which marked a definitive aesthetic turning point. From the conceptual, ephemeral and performative to the sculptural, pictorial and videographic, the imagined *Pavillion* took its position as the indispensable cornerstone of the collective's work going forward. Partz's *Painting Series* evolved into a group meditation on the '84 *Pavillion* as shared space: a future building for living and working, with apartments, bathrooms, a mezzanine level, artists' studios, and a space for what eventually became Art Metropole, their honest to goodness General Idea archive and eventual store.

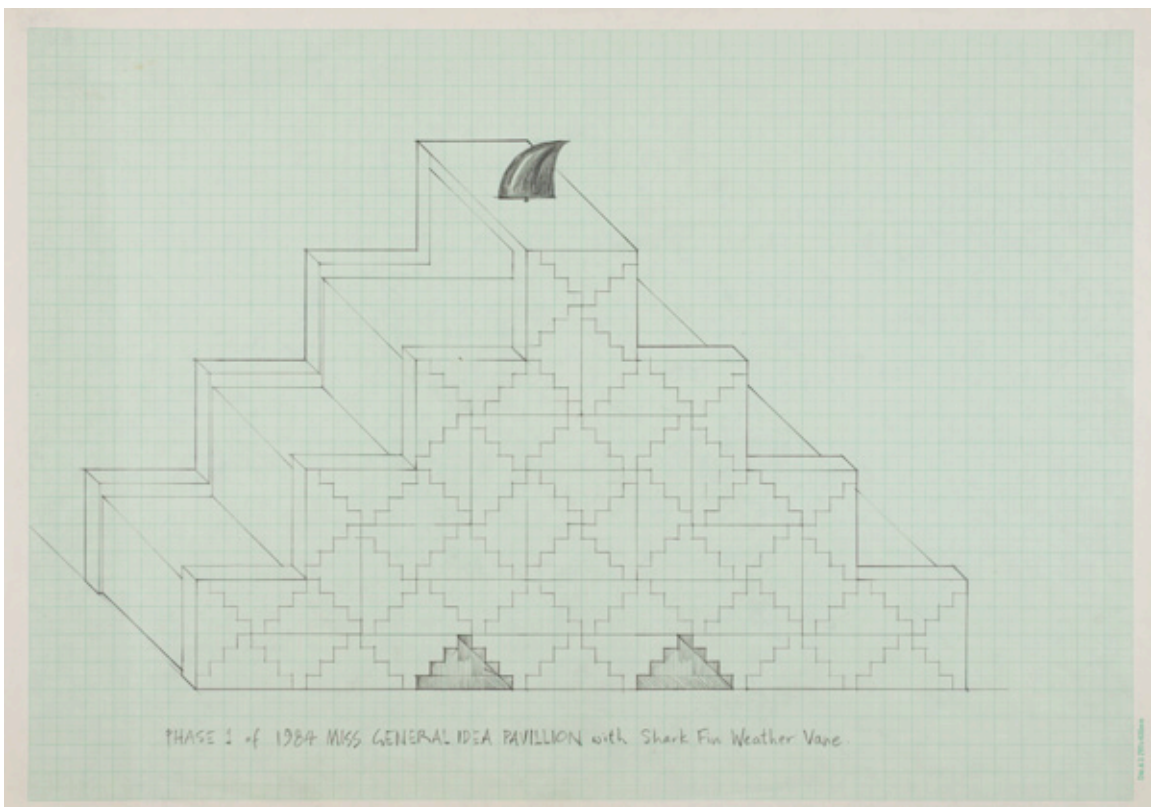
But instead, 1977 became the year when ruins of the beauty pageant's home, the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, was presented as documentation of

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performances and photographs of a ziggurat structure engulfed by flames, redrawing the border lines between realization and imagination.

In 1986, General Idea returned to the ziggurat paintings as a group, realizing Partz's sketches from 1968-69 that had never been completed. The later paintings are four-inches deep, corresponding to the height of each of the ziggurat's steps. Several architectural drawings in this exhibit locate the tiered form within imagined space. In the showcases, silver gelatin prints depict the VB Gown (1975), a "venetian blind" dress for *Miss General Idea* that manifests the ziggurat pattern.

General Idea was a collaborative endeavor by three Canadian artists, Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal and AA Bronson, who, as their own self-created legend insists, were active beginning 1967 or '68 through to their most important work—from 1987 through 1994—



General Idea, *Phase 1 of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion with Shark Fin Weather Vane*, 1975, Graphite on graph paper, 29.7 × 42 cm, Courtesy Mitchell-Innes and Nash. © General Idea.

addressing not ziggurats or *The Pavillion* but the AIDS crisis that intruded on their lives. General Idea was attracting attention with over 75 public art projects

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when both Partz and Zontal died of AIDS in 1994. The three artists divided their time between Toronto and New York before returning to Toronto for the last few months of their time together. Bronson continues to work and exhibit as an independent artist, and was the director of Printed Matter in Chelsea between 2006 and 2011. He has showed independently since, while continuing to champion General Idea's collective work.

In 1972, they put themselves on the map by founding *FILE Magazine*, a publication that served a dual purpose: 1) elaborating their own ideas with editorials and 2) providing a virtual forum for members of the mail art network from different places and contexts to interact. *FILE*, a parody itself (of *LIFE Magazine*), garnered a worldwide following and inspired many imitators and parodies itself (including my own *C-NILE* and *D-NILE*). Then, the documenting of General Idea's own activities in *FILE* took on increasingly more importance in the mid-1970s, providing the Canadian scene with a mechanism for dispersing General Idea information as it maintained relationships it had created with international artists through the increasingly recognizable *FILE* brand.

The consolidation of a network of emerging artists through "mail art" projects and *FILE* then led General Idea to found Art Metropole in 1974. An artist-run space that still occupies a central place in the Canadian contemporary art scene, the store offered an alternative platform for the exhibition and dissemination of artists books, video, audio, and electronic media. This ideal setting for the sale of multiples, began as a live archive to preserve the legacy of work that utilized the collective's experimental formats. "Art Metropole—the whole archiving thing, that's quite a part of *The Pavillion* to us; the archive and the network it establishes." General Idea said about their non-profit space in a press release, became as much of an icon within the contemporary scene as their ziggurats and *FILE*.

The development of the pageants and other performative projects and then *FILE* during the mid-1970s led to this circulation of objects, evoking earlier art experiments such as Claes Oldenburg's 1961 *The Store* that bridged the boundary between art installation and shop in a rented storefront on East Second Street in Manhattan where Oldenburg put objects handcrafted in plaster and fabric on sale/exhibition and Fluxus and the *Fluxhall* space conceived in

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New York by George Maciunas in 1963, a performance venue and pop-up shop selling *FluxYearboxes* and *Fluxkits*—collectively assembled works of art as consumer objects. The Canadians had been in personal touch with members of both the Fluxus and Pop scenes via the then-burgeoning correspondence art network and Art Metropole certainly reflected that—then and now.



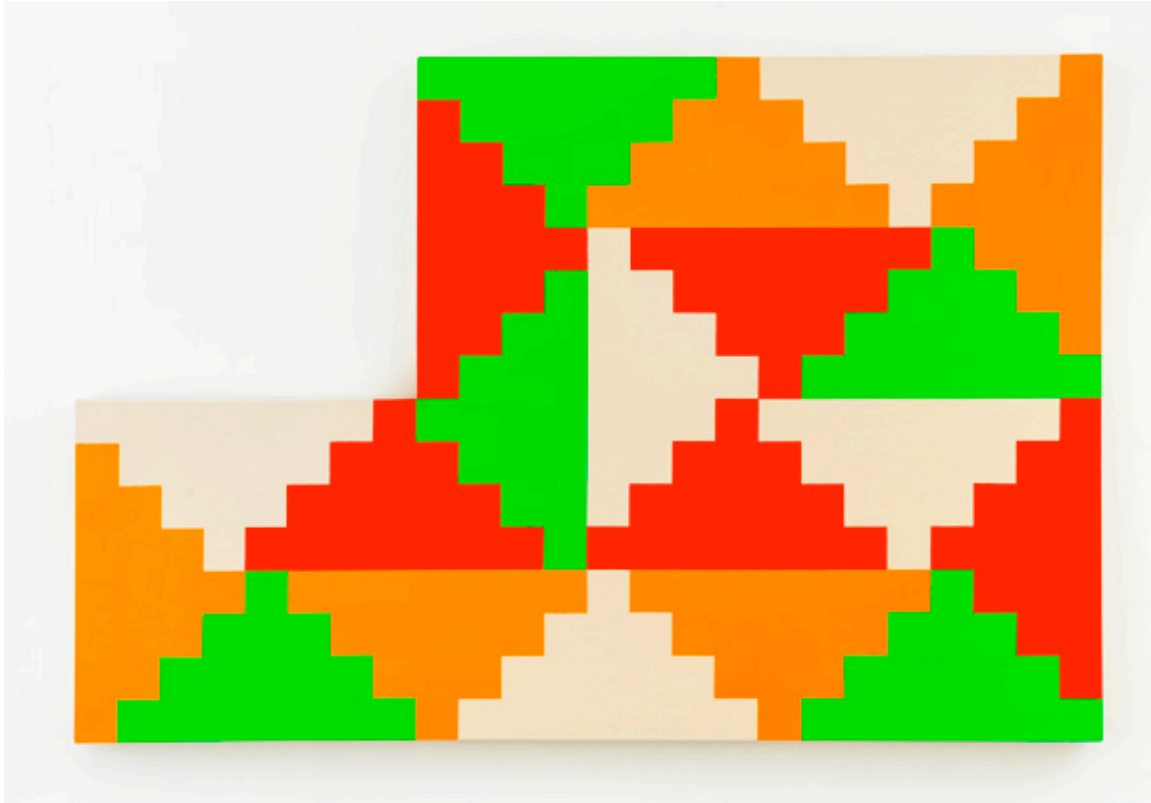
General Idea (a project of Ron Gabe, aka Felix Partz), *Burning Ziggurats*, 1968, Set of 4, gelatin silver print, 9 × 12.5 cm each, Courtesy Mitchell-Innes and Nash © General Idea.

General Idea thus pushed forward a wing of the conceptual art movement that embraced the expression of ideas in multiples and multi-media, fostering a Canadian artist-run culture that has lasted decades and rewired international art history. With Art Metropole an independent entity and General Idea's work well-represented in the permanent collections of numerous museums, the General Idea Archive, now residing at the Library of the National Gallery of Canada, has become a center point for a national myth come to life and exportable, as it is currently in New York.

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In retrospect, their sardonic, ironic interest in self-mythologization, spectacle, appropriation of language and images, media deconstruction, the semiotics of advertising and commerce, all clearly present from the early days of the group, was a persistent strategy that propelled them ahead of their peers and ahead of their time. The trio's interest in the forms and methods of popular culture and mass-media influenced by the writing of their fellow Canadian Marshall McLuhan, as well as William Burroughs and the Situationist International, allowed them to create a half-fictional system that self-referenced and self-legitimized their way under the skin of their local art scene and then the world as the clever *FILE Magazine* moved them from art galleries to newsstands and then back to museums.

The group's "collective consciousness" adopted the name General Idea in 1970, although at first they also signed projects as individuals. The collective then included Mimi Paige (Felix Partz's first girlfriend), an actor named Danny Freedman, Pascal, a transvestite friend who lived with them for some time and Granada Gazelle, a visitor from across the street, whose real name was Sharon Venne.



General Idea, 1968 *General Idea Shaped Ziggurat Painting #1*, 1986, Fluorescent acrylic, acrylic, latex on, unprimed canvas, 62 1/2 by 94 1/2 by 4 in. 158.8 by 240 by 10.2 cm. Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes and Nash. © General Idea.

But the three principles came from three separate arts-related worlds and stayed. “AA” came from architecture, photography, design, writing and publishing projects as Michael Tims, (born June 16, 1946, Vancouver, Canada). He attended the University of Manitoba in the School of Architecture then dropped out with a group of friends to found a commune and free school where he became involved in writing and publishing as an editor for the Loving Couch Press and involved with the commune and radical education movements.

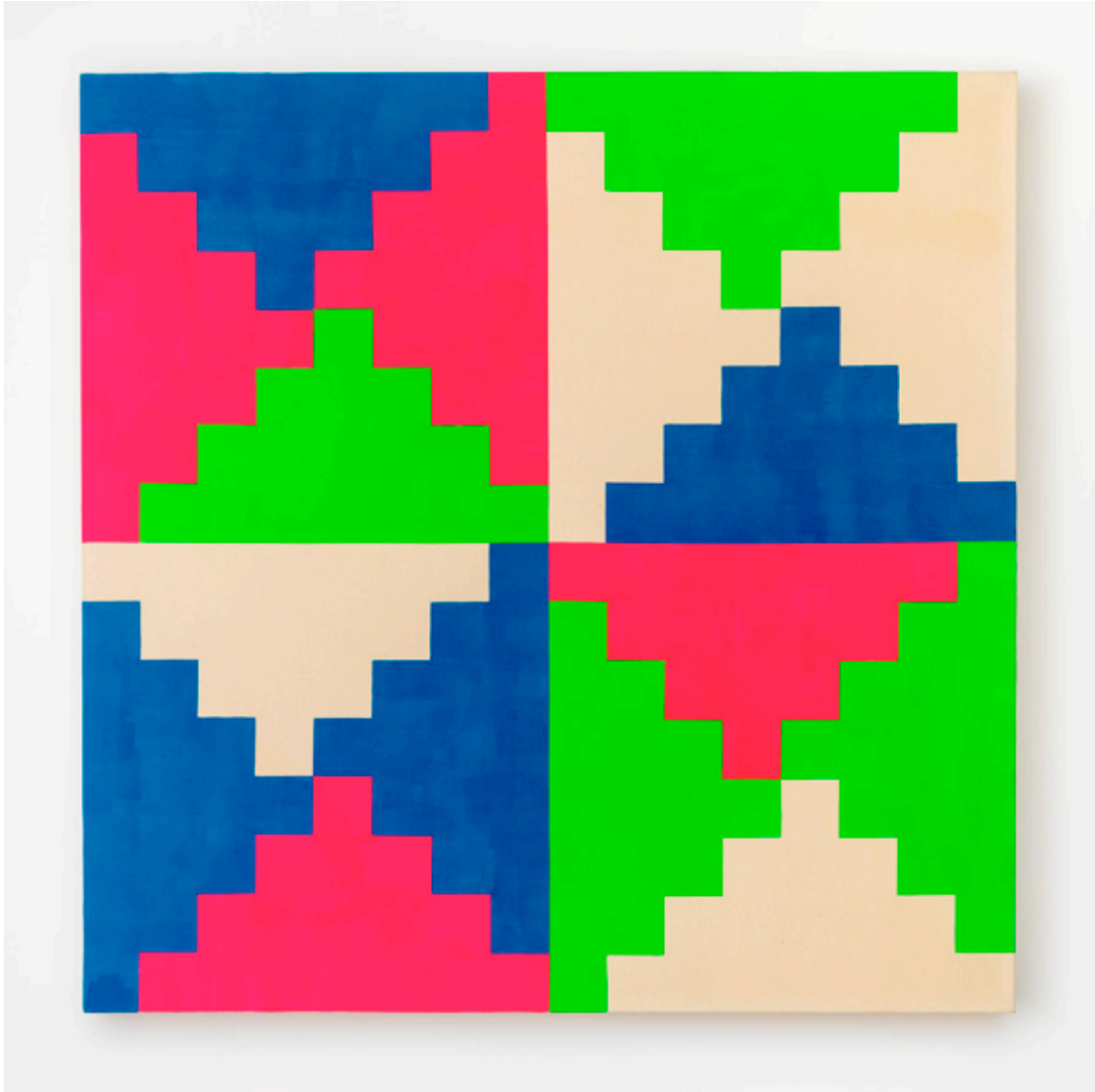
AA’s work as one of the editors of *The Loving Couch Press* is an example of the influence of the Situationists’ revolutionary mindset that originated in France and spread in the late 1960s to student institutions everywhere, including places frequented by the curious young Bronson/Tims.

Felix Partz (aka Ronald Gabe, born April 23, 1945, Winnipeg Canada; died 1994, Toronto) came from the fine art, writing and performance world also as a student at the University of Manitoba, but studied painting until he developed a casual acquaintance with Bronson.

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Jorge Zontal (aka Slobodan Saia-Levy born January 28, 1944, Parma Italy; died 1994, Toronto) arrived in Caracas, Venezuela as a post-WWII refugee then gravitated to photography, performance, theater and screenwriting via Dalhousie University as an architecture student who became increasingly involved with filmmaking. This interest led to acting lessons in New York. By 1968, he had studied video recording at Simon Fraser University and established links with postmodern dance and the Vancouver art scene where he eventually met Bronson.

Bronson/Tims came to Toronto in 1969, specifically to investigate and participate in the Rochdale College's experiment in free student-run alternative education and co-operative living. Partz's then-girlfriend Mimi Paige was involved there, and Partz (aka Gabe) arrived to visit her and to find a gallery. Zontal (aka Saia-Levy) arrived to film a documentary at Theatre Passe Muraille where the three (and Paige) subsequently became involved.



General Idea, 1968 *General Idea #1*, 1986, Fluorescent acrylic, acrylic, latex on unprimed canvas, 63 by 63 by 4 in. 160 by 160 by 10.2 cm. Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes and Nash. © General Idea.

Before long, the four, along with the actor Freedman, moved into a house at 78 Gerrard St, which eventually became their headquarters.

After they used the locale for various installations and filmmaking endeavors, Bronson's interest in correspondence networks and mail art led to a series of chain-letter correspondence art projects and it was through this participation in the post that the pseudonyms arose. Gabe became Private Partz, then Felicks Partz, and finally Felix Partz. Tims took on the name AA Bronson when a confusion of his nom de plume occurred while co-writing an erotic novel with a

woman and Saia-Levy was named Jorge Zontal after a jazz tune, “I Just Want to be Horizontal”.

Cut to the eighth issue of *FILE Magazine*, General Idea’s periodic publication that ran from 1972 to 1989, and a text there can be read as a retroactive manifesto of the trio’s artistic production. This essay, titled “Glamour”—which was also the title of this issue from 1975—presents their identity in relation to glam, blurring the boundary between reality and myth.

“This is the story of General Idea and the story of what we wanted. 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 never felt we had to produce great art to be great artists. We knew great art did not bring glamour and fame. We knew we had to keep a foot in the door of art and we were conscious of the importance of berets and paint brushes. We made public appearances in painters’ smocks. 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.”

What Happened took the title of Gertrude Stein’s famous play *What Happened: A Play in Five Acts* (1913). It was a multimedia event organized for the International Festival of Underground Theatre at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts and the Global Village Theatre in Toronto. Among the performances that occurred during one of the intermissions was the *1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*, in which a Miss Honey (Novick) performance won over the jury. Granada Gazelle, *Miss General Idea* 1969, had established the genealogy of the beauty pageants as part of their iconography and legend, with the coronation of Mimi Paige as the first *Miss General Idea* in 1968, a retroactive invention because at that point the group members had not yet met. (Her inclusion thus gave rise to the “alternative fact” that General Idea was formed in 1968.)

In the *1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, their major project for the year, performed at the Art Gallery of Ontario, finalists were asked to respond with a series of photographs of themselves modeling the *Miss General Idea Gown*. Correspondent Marcel Dot, aka Michael Morris of the Image Bank in Vancouver, was proclaimed *Miss General Idea 1971*. The Image Bank, a parallel, simpatico and equally important collective on the west coast of Canada led by Morris, Gary

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Lee Nova and Vincent Trasov, had emerged in Vancouver. A photograph sent by Dot/Morris was chosen because it “captured ‘Glamour’ without trying to”. After being proclaimed *Miss General Idea 1971*, Dot changed his name to Marcel Idea as the image became one of both group’s most iconic works. General Idea had created the pageant as both image and concept, both a charade and ‘fetishization’ and now a mechanically reproduced object had been elevated to muse status. The seamless manifestation of all these functions had merged camp, Duchamp’s readymades and ideas laid down by varying degrees of Gertrude Stein, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Brion Gysin and Robert Smithson as well as the aforementioned Situationists, all of whom had influenced General Idea and the Image Bank.

The ‘71 *Pageant*, a successful but enormous undertaking prompted the members of General Idea to decide that they couldn't face organizing such an event on an annual basis. Establishing that the next *Pageant* would take place in 1984, an homage to George Orwell’s famous work, the group's future projects and performances would be either prep for, or straightforward rehearsals of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, to be built as a venue to hold the pageant of that year. “That date kept us together,” AA Bronson has remarked, “Our living and working together had become so habitual that we didn’t know how to do anything else.”



General Idea (a project of Ron Gabe, aka Felix Partz), *Burning Ziggurats*, 1968, Set of 4, gelatin silver print, 9 × 12.5 cm each, Courtesy Mitchell-Innes and Nash. © General Idea.

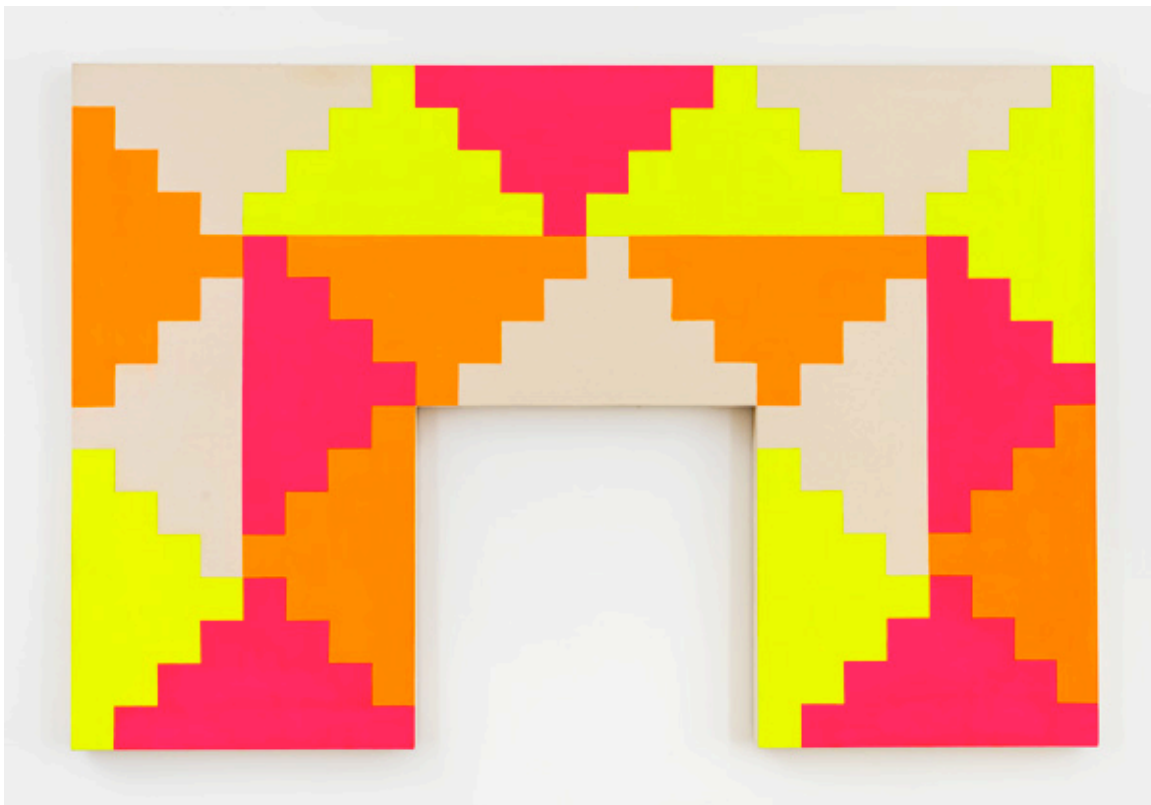
Around the same time as this '71 shift, General Idea left their Gerrard Street location for 87 Yonge Street and initiated many small and large-scale mail art projects including the “Orgasm Energy Chart,” inviting participants to document their orgasms for a timetable and “Manipulating the Self” in which interested parties were asked to photograph themselves reaching around to the side of their head in an awkward pose, and send the results to General Idea to be published in an eponymous publication. Such projects were facilitated via contact with what evolved from Ray Johnson’s New York Correspondence School, the explosion of underground activity becoming known as “mail art” via a “mail art network” that was creating new access to stale art institutions.

Thus, in 1974, General Idea opened Art Metropole, an archive, shop and distribution centre for artist's multiples and ephemera. An announcement came via *FILE Magazine*: “Art Metropole intends to keep abreast of the tide, housing and distributing evidence of activity and imagery: megazines [sic], publications, videos, correspondence, snapshots” and an archive conceived as a repository for

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mail art material, ephemera and objects that General Idea received and collected with a mission of “the documentation, archiving and distribution of all the images”. Founded as a non-for-profit distributor, it soon became an alternative to that era’s few institutionalized art venues. With other initiatives supported by the Canada Council, it has since been acknowledged for playing an instrumental role in enriching the art scene of the 70s. The first Art Metropole was located in the General Idea Studio, now at 1490 Dundas Street West in Toronto.

By the time the group announced, via a theatrical extravaganza (done as part of a residency in Kingston, Ontario), the destruction of the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* in 1977, coinciding with their increasing profile in Canada, the US and Europe, the group’s use of then-outré concepts such as glamour, effeminacy, camp and kitsch, and by extension, homosexuality was fully embraced, contributing to the overt public affection for queer culture opening in the various strata of the forbearing world of art at the time.



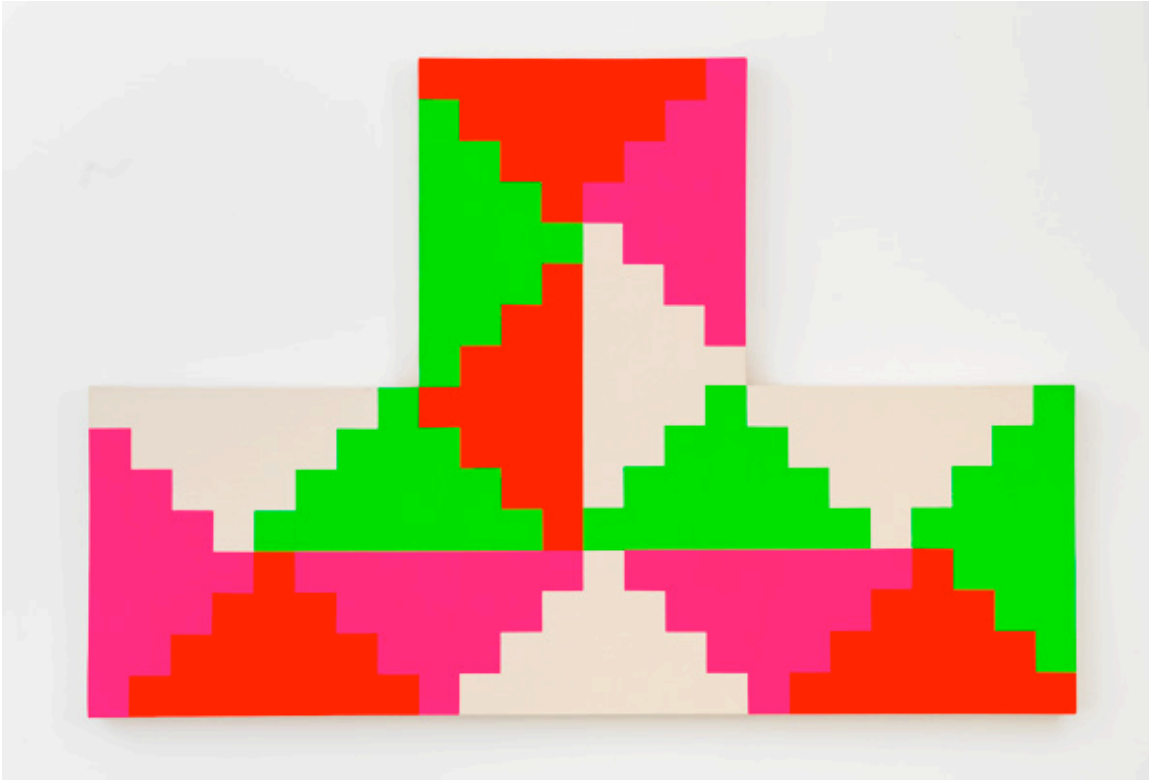
General Idea, *1968 General Idea Shaped Ziggurat Painting #5*, 1986, Fluorescent acrylic, acrylic, latex on unprimed canvas, 63 by 94 1/2 by 4 in. 160 by 240 by 10.2 cm. Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes and Nash. © General Idea.

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Adopting the poodle as their mascot and often represented by *The Hand of the Spirit*, an effete, arched hand made of Plexiglas, mounted on a wand-like handle, the stage was set for the utilization of uncanny branding that would carry them to their AIDS related work. Seen in the ephemera supporting this ziggurat show, *The Hand of the Spirit* originally appeared as a prop in winning contestant Vincent Trasov's mailed entry for the 1971 *Pageant*. Later, General Idea referenced homoeroticism with irony and humor with projects such as *Jockey Short Shopping Bag* (1991/1998).

But in 1980, when the group created the *Boutique of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* as both a display strategy and potential point of sale for the collective's multiples at a self-sufficient Art Metropole, the General Idea group had established themselves as a omnipresent entity locally with enough sway to create a backlash against non-material art practices in the city's small art scene. An increase in anti-LGBT policing in Toronto at the time, with Zontal even caught in a routine bathhouse raid performed by police, steadily shifted their focus on New York's downtown art scene and relocation here in 1986 for AA and Jorge, with Felix commuting from Toronto.

Their first AIDS painting, an appropriation of Robert Indiana's by-then ubiquitous LOVE logo substituting the letters L-O-V-E with A-I-D-S, was, according to plan, shocking to the general public but also controversial among AIDS activists at a time when that scene was bifurcated between a distanced, ironic approach and unambiguous and direct positioning.



General Idea, 1968 *General Idea Shaped Ziggurat Painting #2*, 1986, Fluorescent acrylic, acrylic, latex on unprimed canvas, 62 3/4 by 94 3/8 by 4 in. 159.4 by 239.7 by 10.2 cm. Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes and Nash. © General Idea.

Groups such as DIVA (Damned Interfering Video Activists), and the Metropolitan Health Association plastered explicit messages in the New York subway system to educate the public on the right way to put on a condom or use needles, moving the discussion from public service to survival. This corresponded with the Canadian collective's practice they called *IMAGEVIRUS* in which posters of the AIDS painting were hung across New York, San Francisco and Berlin. Some militants interpreted General Idea as going against what activist artists should be doing. The response to government inaction on AIDS advocated by groups like ACT UP, founded in 1987 and its sub-group Gran Fury, was to turn the letters of General Idea's appropriated A-I-D-S logo into R-I-O-T.

Meanwhile, Partz had been commuting back and forth from Toronto to New York for most of this period. Due to declining health, he remained in Toronto, imminently opting for home hospice care. Zontal and Bronson, living in New York since 1986, relocated to Toronto to join him in 1993. Both Zontal and Partz died in Toronto a year later, a few months apart, in the same apartment in The

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Colonnade where the three artists had lived, constantly surrounded by friends and assistants.

In 1995, a year after Partz and Zontal's deaths, AA Bronson entrusted art historian Fern Bayer with the Estate of General Idea, which constitutes one of the main bodies of their oeuvre and includes crucial originals from series that appeared as editions. In 1999, Art Metropole's own extensive collection was donated to the National Gallery of Canada; a compilation of pieces by General Idea from this archive is included in this exhibition.

As AA Bronson confessed, speaking of the collective: "We had abandoned our hippie backgrounds of heterosexual idealism, abandoned any shared belief that we could change the world by activism, by demonstration, by any of the methods we had tried in the 1960s—they had all failed."



VB Gown from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant, Urban Armour for the Future Gelatin silver print. 10 x 8 inches. Courtesy Mitchell-Innes and Nash. ©General Idea.

Borrowing the All-American idea of viruses as creative forces popularized by William Burroughs, Bronson continued, “We abandoned bona fide cultural terrorism, then, and replaced it with viral methods.” The General Idea idea, having permeated New York’s Chelsea district via Mitchell-Innes & Nash’s

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presentation of the ziggurat paintings and supporting ephemera, is a unique chance for a first hand look at these viral invaders on the body of the art world.

“We maneuver hungrily, conquering the uncontested territory of culture’s forgotten shells—beauty pageants, pavillions, picture magazines, and other contemporary corpses.” Bronson has said. “Like parasites, we animate these dead bodies and speak in alien tongues.”