

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Wallpaper*

AA Bronson on the radical, enduring legacy of General Idea

General Idea, an art group that pioneered a queer aesthetic, is celebrated in a retrospective at the National Gallery of Canada (opened during Pride Month and running until 20 November 2022).

Surviving member AA Bronson speaks about their origins, and impact on art and social justice

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Evidence of Body Binding 1971 gelatin silver transparencies mounted in fluorescent lightboxes 20.3 × 30.5 × 8.6 cm each National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa Purchased 1973 (17143.1-15) © General Idea Photo: NGC

Few collectives have marked art history of the 20th century like General Idea. Emerging out of 1960s Canadian counterculture movements, the conceptual trio – AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal – spent 25 years pranking the art world with their witty take on societal ills, from late-capitalist consumerism to popular media and the Aids crisis. (Partz and Zontal both died as a result of the virus in 1994.) Now, the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa is celebrating the group's history with the most comprehensive retrospective to date, featuring over 200 works that span [painting](#), video, [sculpture](#), installations and archival material. 'There are many shifts and surprises from space to space,' Bronson tells me over the phone. 'Because of the size of the gallery, there was a possibility to do something pretty amazing.'

While remembered as a sophisticated art threesome, General Idea started out as a commune of sorts when, in 1969, half a dozen friends moved into a small storefront on Toronto's bohemian Gerrard Street West. 'Most of us were unemployed and looking for entertainment,' Bronson remembers. 'So, we started staging fake shops in our front window to keep ourselves busy and, somehow, that grew into a practice.' Early projects were ephemeral in nature, involving mail art, experimental performances and other interventions. For their first group show in 1970, they submitted a work titled General Idea, which the gallery misunderstood as being the collective's name. 'So, we became General Idea!' Bronson laughs. Within a few years – after establishing the iconic mock periodical *FILE Magazine* – the original membership dissolved, largely due to Toronto's booming real-estate market. 'We were unable to find another equivalent space where seven or eight people could both live and work,' Bronson says. 'It just all fragmented and we ended up with Jorge, Felix, and I.'

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Right: *Self-portrait with Objects* 1981–82 montage, gelatin silver print 35.6 × 27.7 cm National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa Purchased 1985 (EX-85-142) © General Idea Photo: NGC. Left: *FILE Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Glamour Issue) Autumn 1975 offset periodical 35.5 × 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

General Idea cultivated a queer aesthetic before there even was a language to talk about it. As early as 1970, the group began staging Dadaesque beauty contests as a satirical performance of art and popular culture. Throughout the rest of the decade, iterations of the Miss General Idea concept unravelled in the form of archaeological fragments from the ill-fated fictional ‘1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion’. Once done and dusted, the pageant fantasy was substituted by the equally camp motif of the poodle, which came to dominate the group’s work in the 1980s. Three loose canines first appeared in one explicit [painting](#) at MoMA PS1 in 1982 and soon found their way onto custom flags, escutcheon scarves, fluorescent canvases and photographic self-portraits. ‘It would have been the kiss of death to call yourself a gay artist,’ Bronson remembers of that era. The poodles, then, became a coded trope for their ménage à trois at a time when no critics were prepared to discuss sexuality. ‘They wrote about them as being a metaphor for collaboration,’ Bronson laughs. It wasn’t until the mid-to-late 1980s that an appropriate discursive framework emerged. ‘We felt like, all these years, we’d been making work as an excuse for somebody to invent Queer Theory,’ says the remaining poodle.

As the Aids crisis intensified in the late 1980s, the group – who had then relocated to New York – increasingly turned their attention to the pandemic. From that period, *IMAGEVIRUS* remains their best-known work: an appropriation of Robert Indiana’s famed 1960s ‘LOVE’ logo whose four letters General Idea swapped for ‘AIDS’. Much like the poodles, the Aids motif first appeared on a [painting](#) before spreading across multimedia formats – subway posters, public sculptures, an animated billboard on Time Square and advertising banners from San Francisco to Berlin – mimicking the mechanisms of viral transmission long before ‘going viral’ was a thing.

While the work is celebrated today, it wasn’t always the case. Turning ‘LOVE’ into ‘AIDS’ appeared as an obscene semiotic gesture that divided New York’s Aids community. The artistic branch of ACT UP (Aids Coalition to Unleash Power), Gran Fury – known for its safer sex campaigns and guerrilla interventions – soon responded with its own appropriation of the work, this time spelling out ‘RIOT’. ‘There was kind of a cultural split between us,’ Bronson remembers. ‘First of all, there was a generational difference – we were in our early forties, and they were in their early twenties. Plus, we were from a different country, and we couldn’t go to demonstrations because we were afraid of being deported – we were living in the States illegally.’

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AIDS 1987 offset print on paper 68.4 × 68.5 cm 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

Since Partz and Zontal's deaths, Bronson – who now lives in Berlin – has continued making art while overlooking the group's estate. 'I have to pick and choose so much as to what one can show,' Bronson says of the countless retrospectives staged in recent years, including at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Museo Jumex in Mexico City and MALBA in Buenos Aires. But this thriving legacy wasn't always a given. Like many other artists affected by the Aids crisis, the collective had to manoeuvre strategically to avoid the interference of unsupportive family members. 'Essentially, we incorporated General Idea with the three of us as equal partners, then Jorge and Felix each left their shares of the company to me,' Bronson explains. 'That was before the possibility of marriage. That was the only way to truly protect it, otherwise, all sorts of claims could be made.' After Ottawa, the current retrospective will travel to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and to another yet-to-be-announced venue in Europe. Long live Miss General Idea.

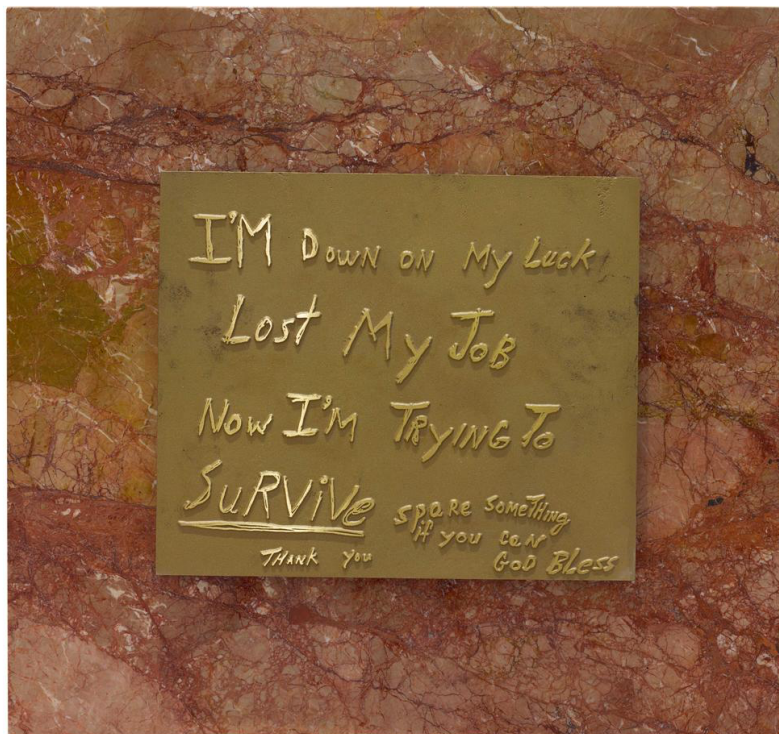


Snobird: A Public Sculpture for The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion 1985 polyethylene bleach bottles, monofilament. Courtesy Carmen Lamanna Gallery Collection, Toronto installation view, *General Idea*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 2022 © *General Idea* Photo: NGC

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The Three Graces (Mural Fragment from the Villa dei Misteri of The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion) 1982 latex enamel on wood 246 × 218 × 5 cm Collection of Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund (VAG 87.33 ab) © General Idea Photo: General Idea Archives, Berlin, courtesy the artist



Homeless Sign for Trump Tower 1989 marble, bronze 68.6 × 75.6 × 6.4 cm Collection of Mario J. Palumbo © General Idea Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto