



General Idea's AA Bronson on Q: A visual companion guide

In a Q interview, the artist reflected on General Idea's legacy of artistic troublemaking

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Between 1969 and 1994, the Canadian art collective General Idea shook up the establishment with gonzo projects that combined pop culture and LGBTQ+ activism. With a massive retrospective opening at the National Gallery of Canada, the trio's sole surviving member, AA Bronson, joined Tom Power to reflect on General Idea's legacy of artistic troublemaking. (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa)

General Idea was a collective of three Canadian artists — AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal — that formed in 1969.

The trio was anti-establishment, queer and punk. Most importantly, they made art with a wink and a smile, becoming known for cheeky projects like staging a beauty pageant for artists and sending strangers mail with intimate questions.

General Idea proved that art could be provocative and fun while still tackling issues that matter, like the AIDS crisis, which had a huge influence on their work. Sadly, AIDS led to the deaths of two of the group's members.

Bronson is the sole surviving member of General Idea. He joined [Q's](#) Tom Power from his home in Berlin to discuss the National Gallery of Canada's massive new retrospective celebrating the group.

Follow along with the conversation using this visual companion guide.

Where General Idea began

General Idea got started in a house in Toronto on 78 Gerrard Street West. AA Bronson described how he and his roommates began making art largely because they were unemployed, broke and looking for ways to entertain themselves.

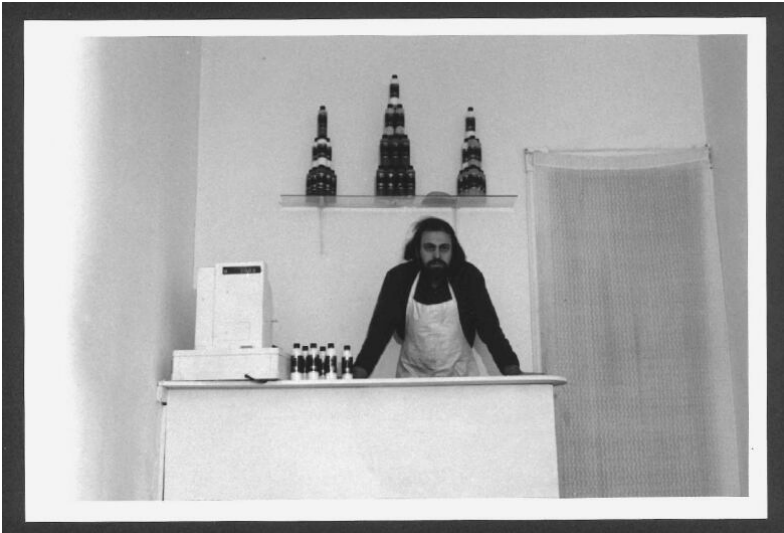
"Horrible little house that was," he said. "I'm surprised it wasn't condemned by the city. There was no shower in the house so we hooked up a wading pool in the basement with the hose.... We had no money but lots of chutzpah."

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The house in Toronto where General Idea got started, on 78 Gerrard Street West. (General Idea Archives)

The Belly Store with George Saia's Belly Food

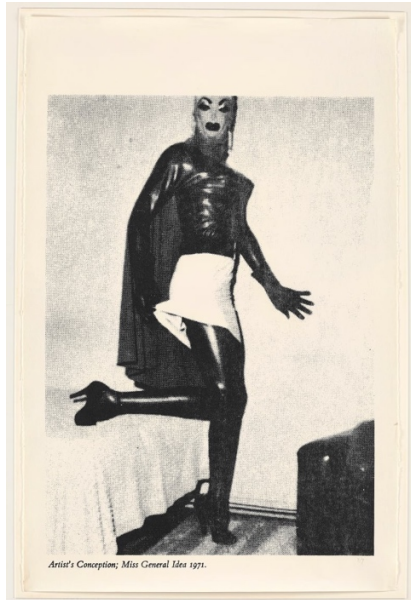


The Belly Store with George Saia's Belly Food, 1969. Pictured: the artist Jorge Zontal behind the counter of one of General Idea's early home boutiques. (General Idea Photo: General Idea Archives, Berlin, courtesy the artist)

In this photo, Zontal stands behind the counter of one of General Idea's early home boutiques. "A store window had been built into the front of our house so we began making fake stores just to entertain ourselves," said Bronson. "We even put a little note on the door that said 'Back in Five Minutes.'"

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Artist's Conception: Miss General Idea 1971



Left: Artist's Conception; Miss General Idea 1971. Art Metropole Collection, National Gallery of Canada, Library and Archives, Ottawa Gift of Jay A. Smith, Toronto, 1999. (General Idea Photo: NGC) The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant, 29 August 1970, performance as part of What Happened, St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, Toronto. (General Idea Photo: NGC)

In the early 1970s, General Idea began running a beauty pageant of sorts. They invited fellow artists to compete for the title of "Miss General Idea" in a competition that would parody celebrity culture, beauty standards and gender stereotyping.

Pictured above is a photo that went out in the submission package for the Miss General Idea Package. This artist's conception provided an example of sorts for the participants.

The Miss General Idea Pageant was held on Aug. 29, 1970.

P is for Poodle



General Idea, P is for Poodle, 1983/89. (General Idea. Photo: General Idea Archives, Berlin, courtesy the artist)

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Despite being a running theme throughout their work, Bronson said that most media covering General Idea ignored their sexuality and the queer subtext in their work. They started depicting themselves as poodles as a representation of themselves as gay men. This was a way of egging the media on and challenging them to talk about LGBTQ+ issues.

"Back in those days, you couldn't say you were a gay artist or you would have zero career immediately," he said. "We were constantly pushing the critics to talk about it so that we didn't have to. We got so frustrated with being unable to bring sexuality into the discussion of art that we dreamt up the idea of our self-portraiture as poodles. That kind of did it."

AIDS Framed (spoof of Robert Indiana's famous Love sculpture) | AIDS 1987



Left: AIDS 1987 acrylic on canvas. 182.9 × 182.9 cm. Private collection, courtesy Blondeau & Cie. (General Idea Photo: Blondeau & Cie) Right: 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)

Bronson said the logo, a spoof of Robert Indiana's *Love* sculpture, served to raise awareness of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

"At that moment, AIDS infamously still hadn't been mentioned by an American president," he said. "But it was beginning to create devastation in the cultural worlds and gay worlds.... It was a disease that was otherwise being hidden or covered up."

The General Idea AIDS campaign reached countries around the world. Here, pedestrians walk by the poster in New York City.

Interview produced by Vanessa Greco.