

# MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

## Artlyst

### General Idea Get Retrospective At National Gallery Canada

2 June 2022



Installation shot @ Maureen Paley Photo: © Artlyst 2020

From June 3 and on view until November 20, 2022, the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) will present the most comprehensive retrospective exhibition of [General Idea](#).

Formed as part of the 1960s Toronto counterculture, General Idea was a radical artist-led group founded in Toronto by AA Bronson (b. 1946), Felix Partz (1945–1994) and Jorge Zontal (1944–1994). Together they invented a groundbreaking and provocative multi-disciplinary practice that challenged social and artistic norms and altered the development of postwar art over 25 years – from the group’s formation in 1969 to the deaths in 1994 of both Partz and Zontal from AIDS-related illnesses.

This major retrospective of General Idea will bring together more than 200 works, including installations, paintings, drawings, videos, sculptures, publications and archival material, to explore the crucial role General Idea played in developing art and activism in Canada, the United States and Europe. The exhibition will also chart General Idea’s influence on future generations of creators, informing new ways of reimagining and changing our world through art.

Known for their anti-establishment outlook and their early involvement in punk, queer theory and AIDS activism, General Idea critiqued consumer culture and social inequities in their work, examining mass media, the art economy, queer identity and the AIDS crisis. Organized chronologically, the exhibition will examine General Idea’s comprehensive approach to art-making, showing they were artists, performers, architects, publishers, shopkeepers, anthropologists and more.

General Idea frequently borrowed from mass media and advertising, harnessing humour and parody to probe the production, circulation and consumption of images and culture. Much of this satirical work prefigured current concerns surrounding social media and image distribution. They were known for their prolific production of low-cost multiples, and in the 1970s, they used faux-beauty pageants to satirize the glamour and consumerism of the contemporary art world. *For example, the 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* (1971) involved real submissions from artists and culminated in an elaborate awards ceremony. From 1975 to 1984, General Idea produced a series of works focused on their gesamtkunstwerk, *The Miss General Idea Pavillion*, a fictional edifice intended to house the ultimate Miss General Idea Pageant. Conceived as a decentralized museum, its fragments located in institutions around the world, the fictional *Pavillion* would comment on the structure of the art world, deconstructing the myths surrounding museums, archives and artefacts.

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AA Bronson Founding Member of General Idea Photo: © Artlyst Taken @ Maureen Paley

In the 1970s, General Idea founded two critical institutions which attest to their important place in the history of independent publishing and artist-run culture. *FILE Magazine* (1972–1989) was a periodical that appropriated LIFE magazine’s format and whose first subscribers included Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol. *Art Metropole* was a publishing and exhibition platform that has been selling and distributing artists’ books, audio, video and multiples in Toronto since 1974.

From 1987 to 1994, General Idea’s work responded to the AIDS crisis. Appropriating Robert Indiana’s famous *LOVE* series, they made their logo substituting the word “AIDS.” Initially a painting, they later produced an animation for the Spectacolor Board in New York’s Times Square and created poster campaigns that spanned cities from San Francisco to Berlin. A 1989 sculptural iteration of this *IMAGEVIRUS* series is on display on the Plaza of the National Gallery of Canada, and its graffitied surface invites audiences to mark its surface. Also, from this period, the exhibition will include the significant installation *Pharma@opia* (1992) in which three large-scale pills float in the air for visitors. This work was initially designed for Las Ramblas in Barcelona, described by Bronson as a ‘warning’ because the AIDS crisis had yet to impact Spain.

The exhibition is curated by Adam Welch, PhD, Associate Curator of Canadian Art, NGC, with the close collaboration of AA Bronson.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a significant new publication which will stand as the definitive resource on General Idea. The 756-page magazine will explore their performances and actions, their work on city streets, and their work in museums and galleries. Edited by Adam Welch and designed by Garrick Gott, it includes a preface by AA Bronson, a conversation between Bronson and curator Beatrix Ruf, and contributions from leading voices on contemporary art and its intersections with literature, commerce, and activism.

General Idea has had more than 100 solo exhibitions and countless group exhibitions internationally and has produced a wide range of public art projects. The group was awarded the Bell Canada Award in Video Art in 2001, The Governor General’s Visual Art and Media Award in 2002, and the Skowhegan Medal in Multimedia in 2006.

GENERAL IDEA JUNE 3–NOVEMBER 20, 2022 National Gallery Canada

This exhibition will tour the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and another European venue in 2023.