

# MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

## EXBERLINER

### AA Bronson on AIDS, irony and the General Idea retrospective at Gropius Bau

Following the deaths of Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal, AA Bronson is the last surviving member of artist group  
General Idea.

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Photos: Makar Artemev

The celebrated artist group General Idea are renowned for their irreverent and satirical approach to the art world.

Made up of three Canadian artists, the group influenced generations with their conceptual and media-based works. Their art was often presented in unconventional forms: posters, pins, postcards, wallpaper and their mouthpiece arts and culture magazine, *File Magazine*.

Formed in Toronto in 1967, the group's work used humour, satire and subversive images to address ideas of consumerism, mass media, social inequities and identity. In their later years, much of their work tackled the AIDS crisis, which claimed two of their three members.

General Idea's surviving member, AA Bronson, has continued to work as an independent artist, directing the non-profit New York arts space Printed Matter, Inc and setting up the New York Art Book Fair. Much of the group's archive is on long-term loan to the National Gallery of Canada, which launched a retrospective of their work in 2022. That retrospective – the most extensive exhibition of their work in decades – is in Berlin through mid-January.

We sat down with Bronson to talk about what it's like to present partially posthumous work, the group's work in their final days and life after General Idea.

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**General Idea are getting massive amounts of recognition for their pioneering work in the 1970s and 1980s, but with the untimely death of your fellow members Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal of AIDS-related causes, is it a mixed feeling celebrating your achievements without them?**

Believe me, they're around. I know if I'm doing something they don't approve of. I really get that sense. Like a kick to the back!

**This exhibition at the Gropius Bau is surely the biggest General Idea has ever had?**

Well, this is its third stop after the National Gallery of Canada and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, but it is physically the biggest show because of the 'Fin de siècle' installation. I should say that the plastic is 100% recycled and reusable for other projects.

**From the beginning, General Idea didn't fear being provocative. One room of the exhibition is dedicated to the series of paintings from the 1980s, 'Mondo Cane Kama Sutra', geometrical variations on repeated orgies involving three fucking poodles. At the time, it must have been shocking...**

They are still a little bit. Back then, the North American art world really didn't have a sense of humour. If you had a sense of humour, then you weren't an artist, it was against the rules. Irony was not allowed. Everyone presumed it was a self portrait of the three of us. But if you look at the poodles, they're clearly fucking but they're completely genderless. It's a good piece for the gender discussions going on at this time.

**General Idea investigated what an artist might be, asking questions of authenticity. Like your repeated use of the copyright symbol, the one image that couldn't be copyrighted...**

Back then, not many people were thinking about copyright. We were all reading Marshall McLuhan, who was the hot guy in the 1960s for communication and media theory. We were exploring all these ideas with our *File Magazine*.

**There are some amazing stories of you all living together in a ramshackle space in Toronto when you first started out, bored and unemployed. You started making art with whatever lay around you...**

Well, we were living in a storefront, so we put it to use. Setting up 'George Saia's Belly Food' to sell multiples. Back then we had no shower, so we hooked up a hose in the basement to a wading pool just so we could wash.

**People were fascinated by the idea of General Idea being in a polyamorous 'throuple' relationship. You really played with that idea, pioneering visual representation of non-normative romantic relationships...**

We were a bit ahead of the curve. We always said that queer theory had to be invented because of us. And art critics never knew how to write about us. They saw us as these 'crazy guys'. But I was talking to one of the curators the other day, Adam Welch. If you look at General Idea's works in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, there's nothing that suggests sexuality. They haven't bought anything that's even a little bit daring.

**Is that down to prejudice?**

The thing about gay men is how nice they are. In Canada, anyway! But yes. There's a whole world out there that's not represented in museums. And I think it'll take quite a while to change. It is interesting though, The National Gallery in Canada did buy 'Evidence of Body Binding' in the early 1970s, one of the first works we sold: light boxes showing wires wrapped around parts of the body. It has an edge to it but it's dry and conceptual enough for them to buy it.

**The famous self portraits of the three of you are woven throughout the exhibition, from the collage of young naked beefcakes to the increasingly heavy and upsetting 'The End of the (Western) World', with the three of you as cowboys riding off into the sunset.**

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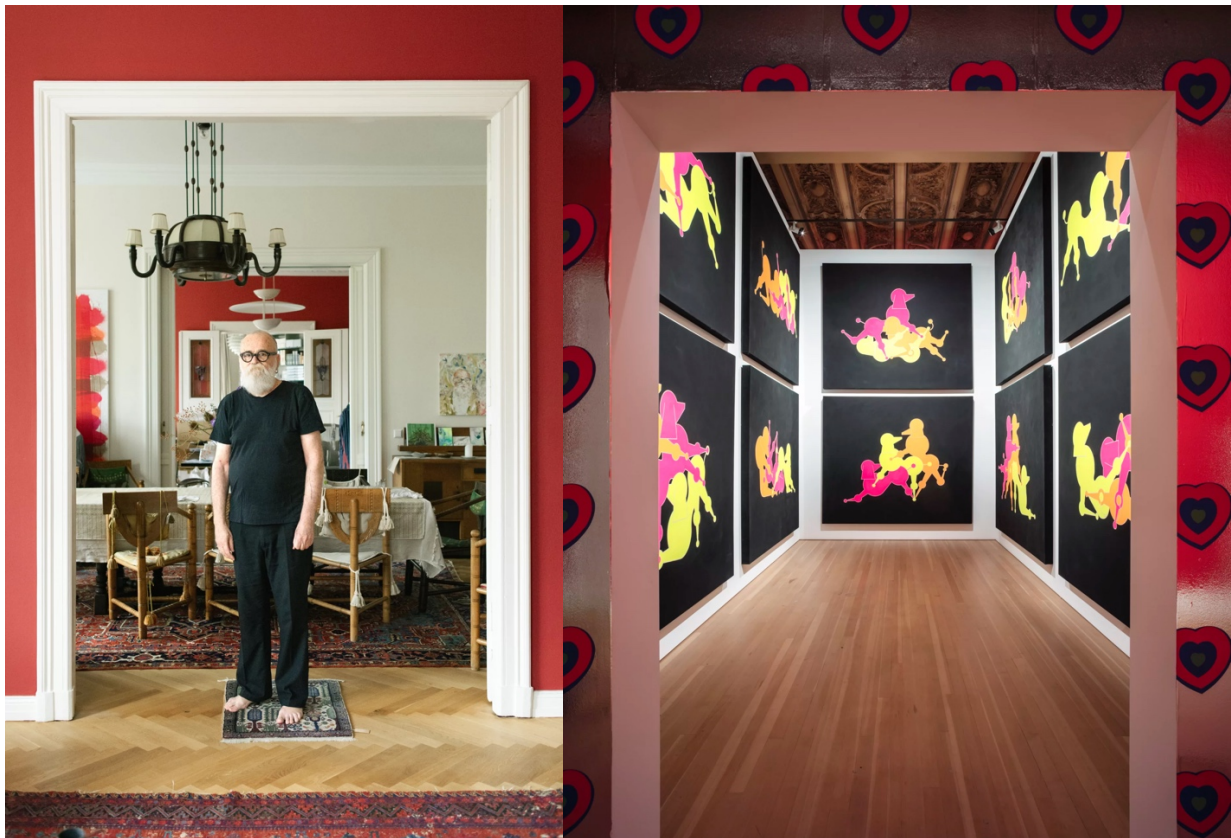
The 'Night school' portrait is probably the heaviest one. Felix had been diagnosed but Jorge hadn't. But Felix hadn't actually told us, so we didn't know what to do about it.

## He was scared to tell you?

Scared is probably not the right word. He wasn't the kind of guy who was scared of anything. But he couldn't handle it. All our friends were dying and the government was doing nothing. We lived next door to the main AIDS hospital in New York by coincidence, so everybody would end up there and I remember cleaning and kitchen staff refused to enter that ward. The ward was full of visitors and a big table covered in food people had brought with them – way better than the hospital food. People were dying very quickly, just a matter of weeks. It was a very extreme scene, it was really a scene of death.

## With the state doing nothing, did you feel you had to start changing attitudes?

Well, we weren't American and a lot of people trying to change it were American. So I don't think there's too much we could have done, so we focused on being international instead. When we did the AIDS logo [artwork], there was no language on it, except the word AIDS. We didn't include any public health information on the poster about safe sex. So the local community was very negative about us. But it was a poster we could put up anywhere in the world.



© Gropius Bau, Luca Girardini

**That symbol went all around the world, and part of its potency was the fact that it referenced Robert Indiana's famous 1960s 'Love' artwork.**

It depended on which country you were in. In Europe and Canada, the 'Love' logo was taken to mean love thy neighbour. In the US, the 'Love' logo was taken to be about free sex. So they interpreted it as: "If you have sex, you'll get AIDS". Which, as Canadians, we didn't mean at all.

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**The current show has astounding colour and energy, with bright heraldic signs and wallpaper, yet when you made these works you were dealing with these incredibly serious, difficult themes...**

Well, Jorge and Felix were dying. So, at the end, we were definitely aware of all that. But it was an approach which did not sit well with Americans in New York, where we lived then. They assumed our use of red, green and blue for the AIDS posters was cynical, that we were cashing in. But who's going to buy a painting that says AIDS on it? If you're going to cash in, it's not the right way to do it.

**Who was most critical?**

Well the entire gay population of Manhattan was against us. Americans back then didn't like foreigners. And when it came to these works, they turned against us en masse. But interestingly, once Jorge and Felix died, they changed their minds and started to support us.

**You're allowing people to mark and deface the large stainless steel AIDS sculpture that's standing outside the Gropius Bau...**

But people are so nervous about doing it! This city has more graffiti than any other city in the world, and they're doing these tiny little marks.

**Canadians are stereotyped by Americans as being polite and well-mannered. What drove you to be such troublemakers?**

Jorge didn't fit into anyone's idea of what a Canadian should be, he was a Sephardic Jew, a refugee who settled in Venezuela after the war and then came to Canada to get away from his parents.

**Why was he running from his parents?**

They were very controlling about how they wanted his life to be. Jorge was born in a concentration camp in Italy that was exclusively for pregnant women. Once the children were born, the mothers were then moved off to a regular one. All of the families managed to get together and a big escape was planned, but the husbands were caught and his father was sent to Auschwitz. They reunited after the war and were then shunted from country to country before ending up in Venezuela – where they had to pretend they were Roman Catholic. So you can imagine how traumatised his parents were. Jorge joined his uncle in Halifax, who had also been in a concentration camp.

**When the diagnosis came for Jorge and Felix in 1994, did it spur you to complete unfinished projects?**

Oh yes, we went into high gear. That last year we produced just an immense quantity of work. Lots of drawings and instructions left for works to be completed after their death and so on.

**You've had a highly successful artist career after General Idea. Did you find it difficult to separate your work from what you did together?**

As a solo artist, I was never able to really successfully do it. I went for five years without doing anything. And then I started to work in ways that were as different from General Idea as possible and still true to myself. But in the end, I just kind of ran out of steam. And now I'm old enough, I don't have to do anything!

*General Idea, Gropius Bau, Kreuzberg, through Jan 14, 2024*