

ARTnews

How Legendary Queer Canadian Art Group General Idea Predicted Meme and TikTok Culture

By Melanie Scott | July 11, 2022 11:40am



General Idea, *Self-portrait with Objects*, 1981–82. ©GENERAL IDEA/NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

When [General Idea](#) first started making art in the 1960s, the older generation was already getting its share of shock from the sex, drugs, and rock and roll that defined the era. But nothing could prepare them for what was coming courtesy of artists [AA Bronson](#), Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal.

In a first, the [National Gallery of Canada](#) is acknowledging the group (don't call them a "collective," Bronson, the only surviving member, said) with a massive survey of their work from its very beginnings. After its run in Ottawa, the show is set to head to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

What started as an experiment grew into a powerful force in the Canadian contemporary art milieu. Up to that point, no one talked much about non-normative sexual and gender identity. General Idea *wanted* to talk—and so they did, starting a conversation that might not otherwise have happened in polite, middle-class society.

Based on the show, it's clear that there wasn't a plan for the group from the get-go. The three artists were living in a commune in Toronto with other creative types who departed one by one, leaving Bronson, Partz, and Zontal behind.

"We modeled ourselves after a rock band," said Bronson in an interview from his home in Berlin. As one of the didactic panels at the entrance to the show declares: "We wanted to be famous, glamorous, and rich ... we were and we are." Among the works on display are paintings, drawings, installations, multiples, sculptures, texts, photographs, test tubes, video, balloons, and myriad pieces of ephemera. Much of it was from others working on the edge of the outré creative

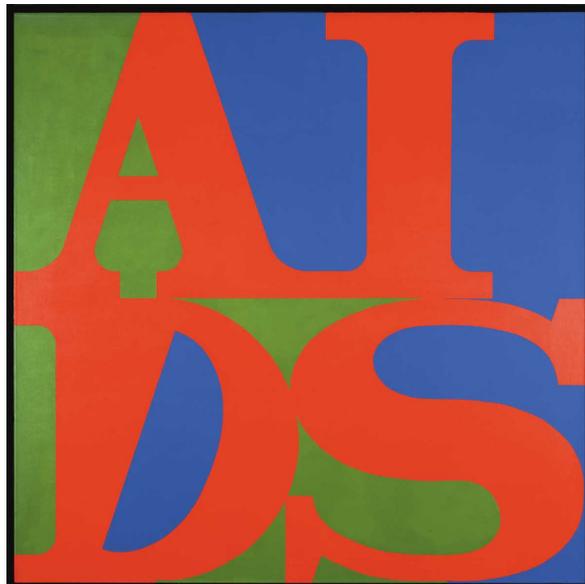
MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

movement, much of it was—and still is—provocative (butt plugs, bondage, creations that put feminism to the test). Lest one think this sounds incohesive, it is not: General Idea may not have had a plan, but they commandeered concepts from, among others, media scholar Marshall McLuhan and writer William S. Burroughs, blatantly repurposing them into an eloquent narrative of the times.

In 1972, General Idea started a publication that riffed off *LIFE Magazine*, a stalwart of the publishing industry that was read by millions. General Idea's version, *FILE*, was loaded with stolen content (numerous examples are on display in the show). In one edition, said Bronson, excerpts from Roland Barthes's 1957 book *Mythologies* were incorporated, word for word. People would pick it up from the newsstand thinking it was LIFE, which was part of the artistic intent.

Other pieces continued this kind of artistic theft. An installation that doubled as a bona fide retail boutique toyed with Marcel Duchamp's 1936 work *Coeurs Volants*. An iconic landscape painting by Canadian artist Tom Thomson was used as a background for a piece referencing HIV treatment.

"What we were doing," Bronson said, "was considered to be morally and ethically corrupt."



General Idea, *AIDS*, 1987. ©GENERAL IDEA/COURTESY BLONDEAU & CIE/PRIVATE COLLECTION

Canada may not have been ready for Bronson and his collaborators, and they considered moving to Europe, but everybody was going to New York where plenty of others were pushing the artistic envelope. In spite of what Lawrence Weiner told them—that New York was the best place to connect with Europeans, but "Don't expect the Americans to like you"—that's where they went. General Idea officially moved to New York in 1986.

At around the same time General Idea came to New York, AIDS arrived in the city. "On one hand," Bronson said, "it was a perfect opportunity. On the other hand, it seemed to be kind of in bad taste."

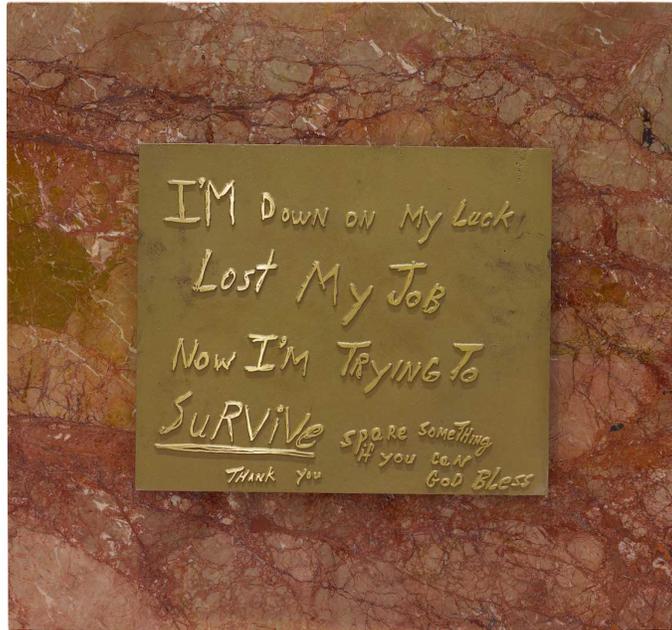
As AIDS took hold, General Idea responded. "It started as a project," said Bronson, "and it became something that took over our lives." They had already stolen Burroughs's idea of the "viral image" by using the mail system to distribute what Bronson termed "mass market souvenirs." These arrived in the form of a certificate announcing that the recipient was henceforth the proud owner of an original General Idea work—the piece of mail itself. Here was a virus that was killing their friends. The irony was not lost on them.

Robert Indiana's famous *LOVE* image served as a template for one of their first responses to the health crisis. General Idea switched out the letters, replacing them with AIDS. This was akin to a pre-web meme, and like the disease, it went viral, appearing on T-shirts, posters, stamps, wallpaper, and banners, and as advertisements on public transit. The burgeoning pandemic became their muse, as did the hedonism and consumerism of the 1980s.

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Adam Welch, the curator the National Gallery of Canada's General Idea exhibition, was born after the group began making this work. He learned of them as a young, gay man in Toronto, and noted their output retains every bit of the impact it would have had in its day. "To see them address the issue [of AIDS] so boldly really made an impression on me," he said.

After meeting with Bronson, Welch proposed the show to the National Gallery, which had been the first institution to buy work from General Idea, but had never organized a retrospective. Welch believes homophobia played a role in the gallery's failure to recognize the brilliance of what General Idea had achieved. "Historically," he said, "we've been a more conservative museum," acknowledging that times are changing.



General Idea, *Homeless Sign for Trump Tower*, 1989. ©GENERAL IDEA/PHOTO ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO/COLLECTION OF MARIO J. PALUMBO

Welch observed that the group was thinking about mutation before HIV, and long before Covid. It's as if the work predicted our obsession with repurposing and disseminating imagery. Welch observed that Bronson is a huge fan of social media, which seems a natural path in light of the art practice. "Can you imagine General Idea on TikTok?" Welch asked.

Partz and Zontal did not live to see how their practice would predict life in the 21st century. Both died of AIDS-related illnesses in 1994, though they kept working until the end. "They knew their time was limited," said Welch, "and they wanted to secure a legacy."

The work from that era references their experiences as their health declined. *Pharma@opia* (1992) is an installation of AZT capsules (the drug that was developed to treat AIDS). *Magic Bullet*, fabricated in the same year, features pill-shaped helium-filled Mylar balloons—the reference to Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds* and similarities to Jeff Koons's shiny dogs are unmistakable—which float until the helium depletes and they fall to the ground. As stated by Welch in the exhibition catalogue, "the balloons transmute from a gallery installation into a multiple, an act of dissemination and remembrance."

Looking back to the group's beginnings, Bronson recalled, "We never did anything unless all three of us agreed, which means there are a lot of things we never did." Despite this tenet, the current exhibition shows how prolific they were. They initially predicted they would keep working together until 1984, then disband. "But by then it was a bad habit," said Bronson. The year 1984 came and went, and General Idea kept stealing, resulting in a rich collection of masterful work.