

ARTFORUM

Dan Adler on General Idea at the National Gallery

Dan Adler | January 2023



General Idea, *Evidence of Body Binding*, 1971, fifteen gelatin silver transparencies mounted in fluorescent light boxes, overall dimensions variable, each element 8 × 12 × 3 3/8".

Curated with sensitivity and wit by Adam Welch, this comprehensive survey of General Idea, the largest to date, began in an unexpectedly understated way: Visitors traversed a small octagonal space, whose walls were adorned with a faint pattern in green, orange, and white. It took the viewer a moment of repose to find the titular acronym repeated throughout *White AIDS Wallpaper*, 1991—its ironic design based on Robert Indiana’s LOVE insignia—and, in the process, (re)consider how that disease affected the many communities and publics in which the collective operated, sometimes through subtle infiltration rather than splashy provocation. Rightly refusing to give in to sentimental memorializing, the exhibition treated the illness—which claimed two of the group’s three members, Felix Partz (1945–1994) and Jorge Zontal (1944–1994)—as a thing meant to be sliced and diced by the Cuisinart of their imagination, turning the word into a specious brand logo, a punching bag, and a semiotic treasure trove. An appropriately ambitious 755-page catalogue demonstrated the formidable diversity and import of GI’s expressive enterprise, emphasizing how they blurred boundaries between art, promotion, and elements of stereotypically “gay” decor, such as wallpaper and window treatments, while maintaining a rigorous Conceptualist strategy that continually shifted between various mediums.

Entering the first expansive gallery, a viewer found that this multiplicity was strikingly apparent: A far brighter wallpaper—rendered in the group’s trademark RGB (red, green, and blue) palette—served as support for five larger-than-life lacquer-on-vinyl self-portraits. These works featured several examples of the group’s now-famous iconography (pills, poodles), which were successfully and notoriously circulated via sundry formats—including the group’s *FILE Magazine* (1972–89)—as either subtle or literal signifiers of queer sexualities and satirical critiques of culture industries,

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such as fashion and entertainment. Given pride of place on an opposite wall, however, was *Portrait of General Idea*, 1969–70 a small tongue-in-cheek collage depicting three beach boys, one of whom is bare-bottomed, hanging from an exercise bar. The images for the piece were lifted from an assortment of beefcake rags. Yet another sort of self-portrait stood nearby: Executed with extreme care, *Evidence of Body Binding*, 1971, features fifteen floor-bound light boxes housing black-and-white photographs that capture portions of AA Bronson’s naked physique, bound with elastic thread: The solemn piece eschews the normally campy and vivid GI aesthetic.

General Idea refused to be confined to a singular format, material, author, or medium. Because of this, their oeuvre extends rainbowlike across the semantic spectrum and includes works that, at first glance, seem utterly unsexy. Venetian blinds, for example, became integral to the group’s grandiose vision for their “Miss General Idea Pavillion” projects. While the pavilion was never fully realized in physical form, it was imagined over many years through a series of detailed plans, designs, performances, posters, photographs, and venues. Indeed, these mundane metal slats served various functions: For instance, a trio of *V.B. Gowns*, all 1975, were suspended from wires and slowly rotated, like oddball haute couture in a showroom. GI used these steel strips to investigate both everyday behaviors and fetishistic fantasies, as we see in *Going thru the Notions*, 1975, a selection of blueprint drawings for the pavilion that depict people peering through the blinds longingly, posing in them for glamour shots, or wearing them as cumbersome, sensory-depriving armor. GI impressively “queered” these modernist and rectilinear gridded structures via perverse humor and a Situationist sense of utility.

But amid all the biting social satire and playful mockery, the show offered moments of genuine, and at times sobering, reflections on history, including the 1984 series of “Atomic Blast” paintings that feature mushroom clouds, a kind of Warholian homage made just two years before the Chernobyl disaster, or the installation *Fin de siècle*, 1990, a vast fractured field of more than three hundred polystyrene panels that form an icy habitat for a trio of cute but vulnerable-looking fake seals. One might see these creatures as alter egos for the group, surrounded by the gelid enormity of Nature—a ridiculous scenario, perhaps, but a surprisingly sincere and affecting one, too.

- Dan Adler