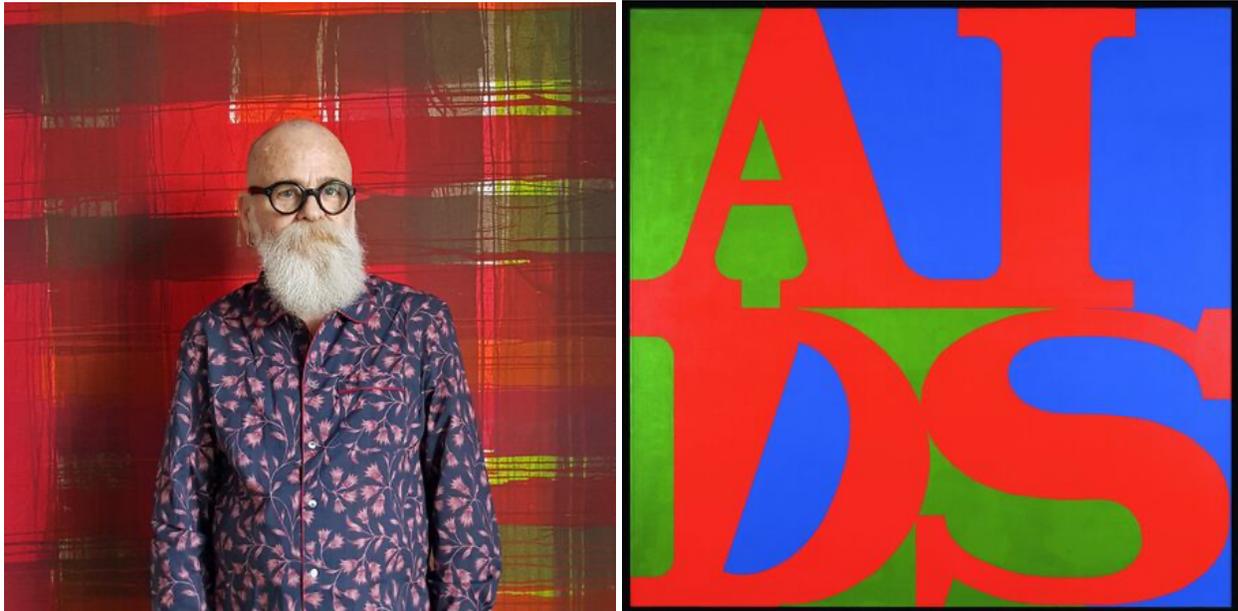




How Artist Collective General Idea Made the Art World Pay Attention to the AIDS Crisis

Josie Thaddeus-Johns | Apr 12, 2023 12:47PM



Left: Portrait of AA Bronson by Mark Jan Krayenhoff van de Leur. Courtesy of the Stedelijk Museum. Right: General Idea, *AIDS*, 1987. © General Idea. Courtesy of Blondeau & Cie.

Four block capital letters in a serif font on a contrasting background, arranged into a cube shape. This could be the familiar format of works in Robert Indiana’s 1964 series “Love.” But it is also a description of the “AIDS” paintings created by the Canadian collective General Idea, who made their own versions in the 1980s. By producing posters, paintings, and other materials bearing the name of the disease, the trio turned Indiana’s gesture into a call to action that was hard to ignore.

General Idea has always caused dissent. From performance works involving faux shops and beauty pageants to provocative photography, and immersive installations that riff on the works of other artists, their oeuvre is multidisciplinary and irreverent. This month, a retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam recontextualizes the group, bringing together works from across their 25 years of practice.

Why do this retrospective in 2023? “Because I might be dead next year,” said AA Bronson, chuckling, in a recent interview with Artsy. At 77, the sole surviving member of General Idea has been tasked with speaking for all three of the group’s members since 1994, when Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal both died from AIDS-related illnesses. The group met in Toronto, where they created satirical performances and the inside joke-laden, manifesto-meets-mail-art phenomenon FILEmagazine (a play on Life magazine). They later moved to New York, where they produced the “AIDS” works, initiated before Partz and Zontal received their diagnoses.

“At the beginning, we would only have given an interview if all three of us were sitting there,” said Bronson. “But around 1976 or so, we realized that our points of view had grown together intimately enough that any one of us could represent the group.” Nonetheless, nearly 30 years later, he still hears his collaborators’ voices pointing out caveats in the back of his mind “like a married couple.”

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General Idea, installation view of Green (Permanent) PLA©EBO, 1991, in “General Idea” at the Stedelijk Museum, 2023. © General Idea. Photo by Peter Tjhuis. Courtesy of the Stedelijk Museum.

Amsterdam was always an important location for the group, and the Stedelijk Museum was where they had their first institutional show in 1979. “It became our European home,” said Bronson, who is now based in Berlin. The artist is pleased with the way the retrospective (which was also shown at the National Gallery of Canada last year, and will continue to Berlin’s Gropius Bau in the fall) has been laid out with works arranged thematically, rather than chronologically. “I find that really refreshing: It feels new and not like something out of a textbook,” he said.

In the show, General Idea’s prankish takes on the media take center stage, like in the 1985 work Shut The Fuck Up, a faux television show about famous artists that turns art world clichés into farce. By repurposing the strategies of contemporary media into humorous barbs, the group critiqued the formats of mass media—its lack of nuance, flattening churn, and constant thirst for attention. In 2023, it’s clear that social media has only exacerbated these tendencies.



General Idea, Imagevirus (New York Subway), 1991. "General Idea: Broken Time" at Museo Jumex, Mexico City

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“I think we pretty much anticipated where all that was going,” Bronson said. “The problems with the media are the same as they’ve always been. They’re just more extreme.” He cites 1960s media theorist and fellow Torontonian Marshall McLuhan as an influence: “It was impossible to come from Canada and not be hyper-aware of the media. When you turn on the television in Canada, mostly you get American television. They’re all saying ‘we this’ and ‘we that’ but it’s not ‘we’ for us,” he said, describing how the American media dominance produces a kind of dissonance for those outside the United States. “It creates a kind of critical state of mind.”

General Idea applied this critical mindset equally to the art world. In *Gold Diggers of '84* (1972), for instance, the trio mailed postcards to MoMA, the Louvre, and the National Gallery of Canada. Half-elaborate performance piece, half-practical joke, the cards’ messages stated that they were artworks—a way to cheekily suggest General Idea was collected by those institutions. They also frequently referenced the characteristic imagery of other artists in their work: Yves Klein’s infamous use of a specific blue becomes a farcical talking point in *Shut The Fuck Up*, for instance.



General Idea, installation view of “General Idea” at the Stedelijk Museum, 2023. © General Idea. Photo by Peter Tjhuis. Courtesy of the Stedelijk Museum.

Works inspired by Piet Mondrian, such as *INFE©TED Mondrian #2* (1994), meanwhile, have the Dutch artist’s familiar geometric patterns, but controversially include green—a color that Mondrian himself famously hated. According to Bronson, this inclusion was seen as so sacrilegious that at least one American museum board that owned works by Mondrian refused to acquire these works. All of these works have ended up in Europe, he said, where General Idea’s sense of humor has seemed to play differently.

Throughout their career, General Idea saw their works treated with dissonant opinions, and the group saw themselves as “infecting” the art world with their irreverent works—another way to remind viewers of the virus that was imperiling the gay community.

The “AIDS” works, for instance, when printed as posters and plastered all over San Francisco, were frequently torn down. “There was a lot of violence aimed at those poor posters,” said Bronson. At the same time, he acknowledged that the simplicity of the works allowed viewers to project their own views onto them. “The AIDS poster is just four letters,” he said. “In a way, it has no content. Usually, people assume that their point of view is the poster’s point of view, which is interesting.”

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General Idea, installation view of *AIDS Sculpture*, 1989/2021, in “General Idea” at the Stedelijk Museum, 2023. © General Idea. Photo by Peter Tjihuis. Courtesy of the Stedelijk Museum.

Today, of course, these works take on another tone. More than 40 years into the ongoing HIV epidemic, their function is not just to raise awareness, but to remember the vast number of lives lost to AIDS over decades. At the Stedelijk, a huge sculpture of the disease’s four block letters sits outside the museum, which immediately turned into a canvas for museum visitors: “It became a memorial—people are writing names,” said Bronson. As well as a provocation, this bold public sculpture represents General Idea’s inclusive attitude to viewers: “The work is only successful if the work reaches out to the audience and involves [them].”

Another work in the retrospective, *Magi© Bullet* (1992), uses the format of an Andy Warhol work, *Silver Clouds* (1966), and positions hundreds of silver helium-filled balloons in the shape of pills inside the gallery walls. During the early 1990s, pills became an urgent part of the lives of Bronson, Partz, and Zontal. These floating versions in the work, however, are doomed to fail. Beginning on the gallery’s ceiling, they slowly descend over the course of the show. Deflated “pills” can be taken home by visitors, as a characteristically tragicomic nod to the lives lost during that period, but one that makes the viewer a participant.

“The work as a whole became a kind of abstract thing because it involves so many people,” Bronson said. “I’m always meeting people who have something.”