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Art Is a Drug

General Idea's art was poised on a razor's edge between complicity and critique; it is an inescapable precedent for thinking about artistic production in the twenty-first century.

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General Idea: *Untitled (AIDS with four black cockroaches)*, 1993. Christopher Burke/General Idea/Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

A handsome bald guy with dark features and a closely cropped beard appears in close-up against a black background. With genial authority and indefinite foreign inflection he declares:

> Art's central myth is the myth of the individual genius. Each year new art stars are found to satisfy the appetite, the psychological and economical needs of consumerism in the art community. And each year the art stars of the past are ratified and mummified in retrospectives and monographs at museums and art magazines.

The camera slowly pulls back, revealing two other young men standing on either side of him. They're all in their early thirties, dressed in suits, radioactively insouciant. "I'm Jorge Zontal," the central figure continues, "and with me I have AA Bronson and Felix Partz…. In the next thirty minutes we're going to tell you about the art of General Idea."

From there the grainy video burlesques a television special: spoken interludes punctuating slideshows with smooth voice-overs; buttery 1970s Muzak playing over a procession of retro-futuristic illustrations from the 1940s, architectural diagrams, and General Idea's own collages and installations. With a Canadian accent and slight lisp, Partz delivers a characteristically elliptical description of the group's overriding artistic project, a beauty pageant:

> Miss General Idea is basically this: an ideal framing device for arresting attention without throwing away the key. Hints of flesh and bone content are framed by the beauty's only skin-deep context. We are surfacing on the surface of our desire, defined by the intersection of differing points of view. Elevated she reigns, idealized she contains, artfully she maintains, dominantly she sustains, our interest.

Since crowning Marcel Dot as Miss General Idea in 1971, the three men have been working toward the next pageant, Miss General Idea 1984, and refining every aspect of the spectacle: designing the "pavilion" in which it will take place, choreographing and rehearsing audience reactions, and constructing countless images and objects that will envision, clarify, and ultimately embody this abstract entity—the "Spirit of Miss General Idea."

The video concludes with a "press conference" that finds the trio standing onstage like politicians and fielding fevered questions. Their delivery is deadpan; their answers at once coy, incendiary, and ironic. Someone asks, "Are you saying that an artist should endear himself to the public?" Partz replies:

> There are many examples of art and artists disliked by the very people they affect. But by the same token, much art that is loved by critics and the public falls sadly short of its goals. This is not to suggest that art should be grating or irritating or hated to be effective. Well, it would be really great if we could always do art that wins awards, that's praised by critics and the public and still manages to be culturally operational, to sell itself and its contents. But alas, this magic combination is elusive.

Another asks: "Do you feel then that an artist should aim at a specific audience?" Bronson grins beneath his pencil-thin mustache: "It's a shame that so many artists are only beginning to understand what we've known all along—it isn't art unless it sells." The video cuts back to the trio in the studio. Partz adds, "And it isn't art unless the audience responds." "To provide the necessary climax to this thirty minutes," Zontal announces, "we want you all to play your part in this scenario with a standing ovation." It ends with footage from one of their performances, verbally directing a crowd to stand and cheer like a good TV audience, which it does perfectly.

Pilot, as the video was called, was broadcast on April Fool's Day 1977 at 11 PM on TVOntario to Toronto and surrounding areas, and across the US border to Buffalo and Detroit. It allowed the three members of General Idea to tell their story, which they continued elaborating for decades, shifting details and emphasis with each iteration, until the fable was as hard and glittering as a diamond. Assuming the role of artists as critics, they injected themselves into a variety of cultural situations, testing what could be communicated through varying formats. In 1972 they created FILE *Megazine* as their artistic and conceptual mouthpiece, and in 1974 founded Art Metropole, a hub for exchanging and selling artists' books and multiples—editions of inexpensive art objects. These two projects connected artists and writers across North America and around the world, cross-pollinating an alternative culture.

General Idea was also intentionally, insistently, and incessantly annoying. Between 1969 and 1994 its members crafted a multipronged thorn for sticking into as many sides as possible. For instance, it can only have been a provocation for three men to recast a beauty pageant as conceptual art shortly after Miss America became a highly visible target of feminist protest in 1968. Similarly, *Pilot* is a satire of the professionalization of the artist and the emerging demands of the art market. Bronson's final pitch for "selling out"—the ultimate taboo in their radical scene, ironic as it was in 1977 given the almost unsellable art they were making—was acid-tinged with aspiration. Over General Idea's twenty-five-year collaboration, it produced a stream of paintings and sculptures that were indeed shown and sold in galleries, satisfying the "psychological and economical needs of consumerism" while continuing to plumb what those needs actually might be.

This ambiguity, poised on a razor's edge between complicity and critique, is why General Idea is an inescapable precedent for thinking about and making art in the twenty-first century. Its influence has risen in

step with the "ratification and mummification" it mocked, culminating in a major retrospective at the National Gallery of Canada (now at the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam) and an exhibition at the Drawing Center in New York (now at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain in Geneva), each accompanied by fulsome publications.

Throughout the 1960s several strains of conceptual art and the counterculture converged in an international mail art scene. Participants developed elaborate personas, complete with name games and eccentric iconography, and traded collages as well as information on their artistic projects, political protests, and experiments in alternative living. Collectives proliferated. These exchanges formed a genuinely parallel art world with its own rules, pitched against the system of commercial galleries and museums. Out of this firmament Slobodan Saia-Levi, Ronald Gabe, and Michael Tims met in Toronto in 1969 and changed their names to Jorge Zontal, Felix Partz, and AA Bronson respectively. Living together in a house that was almost a commune, they began involving one another and a large group of collaborators in various art projects, adopting the name General Idea in 1970.

General Idea harnessed the energies of mail art in FILE, the most ambitious publication of its kind, conceived as an inexpensive artwork sold by subscription and at bookstores and newsstands. It scrupulously replicated *Life*'s oversized 11" x 14" format and its logo of white sans serif block letters on a red rectangle in the upper-left corner of the cover, rearranging them to spell "FILE." On the cover of the first issue, dated April 15, 1972, was a black-and-white photo of their West Coast collaborator Vincent Trasov in a Mr. Peanut costume, vamping with cane and top hat in front of the Vancouver skyline. Adopting the visual identity of Henry Luce's quintessential American magazine, General Idea was having its way with images thoroughly monetized, trademarked, and deeply embedded in the North American psyche, releasing Planter's dandy corporate mascot to his own adventures abroad. Their inaugural editorial, titled "Some Juicy and Malicious Gossip," teases:

> We are concerned with the web of fact and fiction that binds and releases mythologies that are the sum experience of artists and non-artists in co-operative existence today. Every image is a self image. Every image is a mirror.

The appropriated logo and cover persisted until 1976, when it was changed following a lawsuit from Time Inc. The legal drama generated much facetious coverage in FILE, which reclaimed the cease and desist order as a kind of artistic triumph.

The megazine's interior was designed as elaborate image-text collages recalling the techno-positivist communication theorist Marshall McLuhan's picture book with Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage* (1968), as well as the countercultural prophets William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin with their cut-up techniques. General Idea adapted many ideas and phrases from Burroughs, including his dictum "Language is a virus," a mechanism of social control that perpetuates itself within its host through speech, broadcasts, and publications. "Image is virus" became its catchphrase. Over the better part of twenty years General Idea created an oracular "voice" in FILE, blending the positive and negative perspectives of McLuhan and Burroughs into a complex engine of theorization, cultural analysis, and literary fiction. Importantly, and above all else, they insisted that FILE was a "frame" in which to resituate found materials, sharing the ideas and activities of wide swaths of artists and integrating many different kinds of work into their own.

One year and four issues into FILE, AA Bronson expanded the implications of the project in a looping Gertrude Stein–influenced essay called "Pablum for the Pablum Eaters":

> History is very simple. It is very clear that history is just another reality, fact tied with fiction, distorted by the viewing and seen through the seeing of others. History then is a very simple matter a very simple a very rich medium and one to play with. Very few people are playing with history and

> historical process. Certainly the men that are making history are being made history. Very few are making the making of history.

By then General Idea had self-consciously been experimenting with the facts of its own historiography as an art material, eschewing individual authorship. When the group crowned Miss Honey as Miss General Idea 1970, they retroactively named Mimi Paige Miss General Idea 1968 and Granada Gazelle Miss General Idea 1969, complete with recreated footage and staged photographic evidence, stretching the official "founding" of General Idea back to 1968—a year before the members had met and two years before the collective was named. In 1971, after orchestrating a live performance of the pageant that crowned Marcel Dot—aka Marcel Idea, aka Michael Morris—as Miss General Idea 1971, it was decided that she would reign for the next thirteen years. In the intervening time the group would focus on preparing a parodic *Gesamtkunstwerk* for crowning Miss General Idea 1984, in honor of George Orwell's dystopia.

The trio began taking publicity portraits of themselves playing different parts—visionary architects hunkered over drawings, looking wistfully into the future, or overseeing construction. Each aspect of the upcoming pageant could be prototyped and realized parasitically in other institutions, like the Color Bar Lounge, the "cocktail bar" for the 1984 Miss General Idea pageant: a steel dollar bill–shaped counter displaying various artworks, editions, and issues of FILE that were for sale, thus turning their first solo museum show at the Stedelijk in the Netherlands into a boutique. The Color Bar Lounge also occasioned their next faux TV special, *Test Tube*, filmed in Amsterdam in 1979. This time the artist's studio became a laboratory, and they played scientists in coats. Standing in front of a television color bar test pattern, Partz explained their explorations of art and commodification in new terms:

> You know the mass media are like a vast pharmaceutical complex developing new cultural elixirs of an unprecedented intoxication. Look at music, psychology, sociology—they've all been electronically manufactured into a consumable form. But art remains a curious and elitist drink. Despite its unique flavor and heady cultural properties, it has never been effectively exploited. Now General Idea has taken the necessary risks to isolate this potent culture and introduce the infectious mutations into the mainstream. These cocktails are the medium in which the culture is grown and transferred to the host. And everyone is a host at the Color Bar Lounge…

Images weren't only viruses; art was an ideological drug.

With 1984 drawing near and seeming to signal the end of the group's collaboration, there was a bewildering production of new objects, installations, exhibitions, and publications. The closer it came, the more remote and fantastical the preparations seemed—faux archaeological artifacts, shreds of badly faked frescoes and ruined antiquities with titles like *The Unveiling of the Cornucopia (Mural Fragment from the Room of the Unknown Function in the Villa dei Misteri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion)* (1982), both the painting and the name a pastiche of the flagellation scene in Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries. The trio appeared in new personas: as babies, airbrushed and tucked into a pastel bed, or wearing woolly hats with long dog ears. Poodles emerged as their ultimate surrogates: ambivalent, effeminate, and exquisitely groomed creatures, like art and artists, designed to be kept by the rich.

The pavilion was never intended to be built, nor was the elaborate festival ever staged. Instead a major traveling exhibition gathering all the preparatory work marked the arrival of 1984. In their own mythology the pavilion was actually destroyed. In the aftermath, the work General Idea made had a dazed quality, still half-heartedly elaborating the 1984 Miss General Idea pageant after the fact, as in the heraldic poodle plaques meant to adorn *The Armoury of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion* (1985–1990). The timeline is strategically confusing, and various kinds of work continued simultaneously.

Still, there was an overarching move away from the ephemeral, performance-based projects of the 1970s and toward a focus on the art galleries and museums the trio had so long antagonized. For instance, in 1986 they

produced a series of *Pasta* paintings in which formalist geometric abstraction spoofed the color and shapes of corporate logos—the blue, white, and gold horizontal bands of Visa or the overlapping red and orange circles on a white ground of MasterCard—on a surface covered with evenly spaced elbow pasta (its "C" shape an apparent nod to the copyright symbol). They also made paintings bluntly depicting "©" in denim, linen, bleach, and gold leaf. These mystifyingly flatfooted gestures came after the subtle critiques of authorship and ownership the trio had been waging for almost twenty years. If they function more cynically as commodities, it was partly commentary on the rapacious art market that emerged for painting in the 1980s. General Idea was no longer the iconoclastic upstart it once had been, but middle-aged and mid-career.

General Idea relocated to New York City in 1986, while maintaining its studio back in Toronto. By the mid-1980s the AIDS epidemic was tearing through its carefully cultivated community, and friends began rapidly and horrifically dying. General Idea had brainstormed making a piece that altered the letters of Robert Indiana's LOVE (1964) into "AIDS," the four letters stacked two by two in a square. Initially the members dismissed the gesture as in "bad taste." But the idea lingered. When asked to contribute work to a fundraiser for the Foundation for AIDS Research in 1987, the group returned to it, painting "AIDS" as a logo in Indiana's red, green, and blue color scheme (see illustration at beginning of article). Soon it also screen-printed poster versions to paste up in downtown Manhattan.

ACT UP had already papered the city with its "Silence = Death" posters earlier that year. Young artist-activists, including those in ACT UP, saw General Idea's AIDS poster as a sardonic riposte and were shocked by its callous ambivalence. What was General Idea actually trying to say? That love leads to AIDS? It deflected the intensity and direction of their own finely tuned agitprop. (Firing back in 1988, the collective Gran Fury made its own version, changing the letters to spell "RIOT" in red, black, and gold, as an appropriately political response.)

Employing General Idea's long-used terminology, these AIDS works were collectively called *Imagevirus*. Beyond posters in city streets around the world, *Imagevirus* found its way onto billboards, buses, and the Spectacolor board in Times Square, and was reproduced as stamps, wallpaper, paintings, scarves, T-shirts, large public sculptures, and sterling silver rings. The AIDS logo appeared in places far outside the art world, taking on a life of its own, seemingly endlessly replicating itself, the way the group had theorized since the 1960s.

By 1990 both Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal had been diagnosed as HIV-positive. With both artists facing a death sentence, their long structural analysis of media, consumerism, and communications, utilizing the language of "virus" and "pharmaceuticals" as commodities—all the ground they'd laid over the previous twenty years—was now eerily poised to meet the moment. In one 1991 installation the group usurped the logic of impersonal, serial forms in minimalist sculpture, installing 1,825 white plastic wall-mounted lozenge forms around a room to create a visualization of "one year of AZT"—five pills a day. At this point in the epidemic the poisonous drug AZT was the only option for people trying to stay alive another year, if they could even get it. Coffin-sized high-gloss fiberglass pill sculptures named PLA©EBO represented the useless control drugs given to dying patients in medical trials.

These elaborate installations were characterized by an unusual blend of humor, anger, and deep sadness, as in *Magi© Bullet* (1992), in which the gallery ceiling was covered with helium-filled silver Mylar balloons floating above a cold bed of florescent lights. It was an homage to Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds* (1966), with the balloons reshaped like life-saving pills; the imaginary medication, a cure, was just out of reach, then slowly the balloons sank until they were merely shiny trash on the ground. *Fin de siècle* (1990) crammed a room with approximately three hundred rectangular polystyrene planks arranged in jagged approximations of an icy landscape and ringed by the arctic chill of white fluorescent tubes. Perched inaccessibly in the middle were three stuffed seals, all white with pleading black eyes. While the ice floes and seals were fake, the chilling desperation was all too real.

Over the next four years General Idea coaxed profundity from its work that was previously absent. Instead of infusing forms like painting and sculpture with its own ersatz mythology, the group now stuffed them with human meaning like Greek soldiers filing into a wooden horse—a beautiful gift to be wheeled inside the museum, the gallery, the collector's home, where an unexpected assault could be launched—or, more to the point, like Mephisopheles first appearing to Faust, following him home disguised as a black poodle. General Idea continued producing this dizzying array of objects, installations, and interventions until Partz and Zontal died of AIDS in 1994.

General Idea's history was elegantly staged in the National Gallery of Canada's retrospective, curated by Adam Welch. It brought together some two hundred artworks, including many of the final installations of the 1990s. Even at that size, the fact that there were still significant bodies of work not fully represented is a testament to the scope of General Idea's output. The accompanying mammoth catalog-cum-artist book is an essential extension of the exhibition because of the outsize importance that language had for it as a material. This is also one reason video emerged as perhaps its most agile medium: video was able to intertwine language with images, suturing different source materials into a densely layered yet fluid, essay-like presentation.

It is rarely remarked that the members of General Idea, who were so deeply engaged with literature and theory, rank among the most incisive artist-writers of all time; collecting their scattered editorials, articles, scripts, catalog texts, and interviews into a single book would create an essential resource. In its absence, the six-volume facsimile reprint of FILE *Megazine* captures the subtle dance the group performed in constructing the boundaries of its project. The trouble with artists who write and speak as often and as well as General Idea, and who take the production of their own "framework" as the substance of the art itself, is that almost all subsequent critical and scholarly writing is doomed to reiterate their preordained narrative. This numbly locks the work into its own heavily circumscribed interpretation, in ways that mirror the seemingly meaningless repetitions of Indiana's LOVE as "AIDS."

One rare exception is Gregg Bordowitz's book-length essay *General Idea: Imagevirus* (2010), which has proved the most influential writing on the group. Bordowitz, an artist and writer deeply involved with ACT UP, reconsidered his initial repulsion from *Imagevirus* by situating it within General Idea's larger intellectual project. Bordowitz takes seriously the group's investment in avant-garde literature, charting the complexity of its engagement with Burroughs in particular. His essay is a tour de force of art criticism, in which his unusually attentive analysis of personal and historical complexities argues for General Idea's position as indispensable to queer art history and AIDS activism. For the past decade, engagement with General Idea has become increasingly confined by a celebration of its queerness, which risks blunting the sharper edges of the work's meaning.

This is all the more striking, considering that the artists, though ostentatiously faggy—beauty pageants, poodles, etc.—were rarely if ever discussed as gay until relatively recently. In an interview in 1991 they were asked, "Did you see or talk about your practice as a gay practice in the early years?" Bronson replied, "No, I don't think we did." Partz echoed, "No, never. I don't think that we ever disguised it, but I think that there was some encouragement from some people to do that, and we always resisted it." This is not to say that their work was not suffused with queerness in both form and content—in the artistic collaborations they created and the social milieu they helped produce—but rather is of a piece with the impossibility of fully grasping General Idea from a fixed position.

"**Ecce** Homo: The Drawings of General Idea," an exhibition at the Drawing Center in New York City, with a handsome publication modeled on George Grosz's famous book of the same name, offered a new perspective. Some 170 rarely seen drawings, all made by Zontal during group meetings between 1985 and his death in 1994, were displayed in masterful thematic groupings by the curator Claire Gilman. Given the collective's output, it's rare to see sustained work by one of them that seems to unfold with the speed and intimacy of thought itself. Drawings shift, polysemic, one into the next: circles and angles become poodles

frolicking; ornate faces, like Tibetan masks, morph into tripartite figures, genitals, landscapes. They touch on an immediacy and spirituality rarely accessed in the group's other, clearly communal projects, but here are channeled singularly by Zontal.

Heartbreakingly, the most powerful of those drawings include the very last series, where the "virus" becomes literalized as oblong bugs, representing the dark floaters that developed in his eyes with the progression of his AIDS-related illness. With its tight, jewellike presentation, "Ecce Homo" illustrated, in ways impossible in a larger retrospective, the sustained importance of fluidity and transformation to General Idea as a project.

This shape-shifting freedom was hard-fought and often achieved through the stacking up of contradictions, as this 1978 editorial in FILE argued:

> We wanted to point out the function of ambiguity in our work, the way in which ambiguity "flips the meanings in and out of focus" thus preventing the successful deciphering of the text (both visual and written) except on multiple levels. Curiously, many of you choose only to read one side to any story. Since we give a wide range of choices (and we are conscious of the politics of choice) we are never sure which side you, our readers, will take.

This has allowed General Idea to remain relevant when many other didactic political positions of its peers, vehemently articulated on one side or another, have been invalidated by the culture, rendered quaint by time. The opposite has happened to General Idea, which appears tailor-made for the deeply compromised hypocrisies of our present. Yesterday's "underground," with its reification of transgression symbolized in writings by Burroughs, has all but disappeared from the cultural landscape and been replaced by the microcultures of social media that, while seeming to mirror the interconnected enthusiasm of zine culture and mail art, are controlled by private corporations that own and mediate all this "self-expression" within increasingly narrow limits. Today the image and the self have been driven ever closer together and monetized for increasingly small returns.

So General Idea appears remarkably prescient, even while offering no solutions. In this sense the group prefigures a string of later collectives—Art Club 2000, Bernadette Corporation, and DIS—that proselytize corporate aesthetics in updated idioms. Though several generations younger, none of them has found an escape, modeling only an accelerated ambivalence that dissolves into the commercialized spheres of art, fashion, and media. The ascension of General Idea into "good" art-historical, museological, and market objects is accompanied by a destabilizing vertigo, trembling along fault lines that cut to its very core.