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General Idea. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario

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FIGURE 1 Self-Portrait with Objects, 1981–82. Montage, gelatin silver print, 35.6 × 27.7 cm., National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1985 (EX-85-142). © General Idea. Source: National Gallery of Canada.

General Idea. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario. June 3–November 20, 2022. Curated by Adam Welch. Catalogue edited by Adam Welch.

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In June 2022, the National Gallery of Canada staged a sweeping summer exhibition dedicated to the pop art–inspired trio General Idea, three queer Canadian artists who worked together for a quarter century beginning in 1969. Featuring over 200 works spanning the duration of the group’s time together, the chronologically arranged exhibition was organized by Adam Welch, the National Gallery’s associate curator of modern Canadian art.

The exhibition opens with a colourful room that situates viewers while introducing motifs that recur throughout the show: coats of arms, the repeated square AIDS icon, poodles, seals, and self-portraits of the trio (sometimes also depicted as poodles and seals). These images tease out notions of commerce and power, themes that repeat and expand throughout the show, while also interrogating the collective self. The self-portraits are situated on a visually dominant wallpaper, the word *AIDS* running beneath the highly stylized images. Wall text in the first room defends the word *queer*, acknowledging that the word “is continually in flux, means different things to different people, and is not embraced by all.”¹

After the introductory gallery, the self-titled exhibition continues chronologically, beginning with materials from the period when the group had had a looser membership and no name to act as an umbrella for itself. Early members of the collective included men and women of various sexual orientations, but

1 AA Bronson, the group’s sole surviving member, has used the term broadly for many years. In 2010, for instance, he edited the first volume of the collection *Queer Zines*, and he uses the term repeatedly to describe the group in the exhibition catalogue.

by 1973, General Idea had narrowed its membership to just three queer men – sardonic and media-savvy tricksters – who each used adopted names: Canadian-born AA Bronson (born Michael Tims) and Felix Partz (Ronald Gabe), as well as Jorge Zontal (Slobodan Seia-Levi), who was born in an Italian camp for Jewish refugees during the Second World War. These three produced work as General Idea until 1994, with no member taking individual credit for any part of the work.

The earliest works in the exhibition include performances and conceptual interventions – a surreal beauty pageant, a storefront – represented in the space through text and photographs. These early works eventually drew attention from a gallerist, who mistook the title of one piece (*General Idea*) for the name of the artists, thereby giving the collective its name. The second room is perhaps the richest in terms of sheer archival content; documentation of the performances and interventions are paired with background texts describing how they did or did not work. *The Belly Store*, for instance, was a boutique operated by Zontal for a month, during which only one item was for sale: a General Idea multiple entitled *George Saia's Belly Food*. Despite pricing the work at only \$10, Zontal failed to sell a single piece. This richness of detail, paired with extensive photographic documentation, demands more time of the viewer than other rooms in the exhibition and results in a somewhat jarring shift of pace after the brightly coloured room preceding it.

Unfortunately, the handwritten text and vitrines of photographs were challenging to study closely and a bit overwhelming, particularly in contrast to the more easily digestible work in the previous room. In this space, we also begin to see how print media and mail distribution are both central to understanding General Idea. Documentation is taken to whimsical extremes in one example, the self-explanatory *Orgasm Energy Chart* (1970), which required willing participants to track their pleasure for a month and mail findings back to the artists. Here, lines between an artwork and an archival record of that work blur.

Elsewhere in the space, we see the collective's continued engagement with these concepts of documentation and dissemination, through issues of *FILE Magazine*, a publication designed to look like *LIFE Magazine* and inspired by the mail-art movement of the late 1960s. Framed copies of each issue are displayed chronologically on the wall, and viewers are able to browse a six-volume paperback reprint published by JRP Editions in 2008. Over 17 years and 26 issues, beginning in 1972, *FILE Magazine* included work by General Idea and other artists, at least initially. The cover of the first issue featured performance



FIGURE 2 Installation view, *General Idea*, June 3–November 20, 2022, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © *General Idea*. Source: National Gallery of Canada.

artist Vincent Trasov dressed as his alter ego, Mr. Peanut – an appropriation of consumer culture covering a publication designed to look like a different commercial publication.² This cover in particular crystallizes many themes and media that are central to understanding the group: performance art, print media, and mail art used to satirize commercial culture. Again, the viewer here senses a certain malleability in the definitions of art and archival record. Amusingly, Trasov's Mr. Peanut character later mounted an unsuccessful 1974 campaign for mayor of Vancouver.

The adaptation of the *LIFE* logo is one example in the show of how General Idea's work appropriates pre-existing imagery, about which the artists seem, at best, ambivalent, if not outwardly hostile. Other examples in the exhibition engage more specifically with the art historical canon. The most recognizable of these works is the *Imagevirus* series, featuring a widely reproduced logo, created

2 Andy Warhol was an early subscriber.



FIGURE 3 FILE Magazine, vol. 3, no. 1 (*Glamour Issue*) Autumn 1975. Offset periodical, 35.5 × 28 cm., Art Metropole Fonds, Art Metropole Collection, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa. Gift of Jay A. Smith, Toronto, 1999. © General Idea. Source: General Idea Archives, Berlin, courtesy the artist.

in 1987, that shows the letters *A* and *I* atop the letters *D* and *S* – a response to the gay pop artist Robert Indiana’s 1973 screenprint/sculpture *LOVE*. *Magi© Bullet* (1992) references Andy Warhol’s shiny Mylar balloons, and *Magi© Carpet* (1992) draws from the fluorescent lighting sculptures of minimalist artist Dan Flavin. As discussed in accompanying wall text, late works from the group “infected” work by artists including Piet Mondrian and Canadian painter Tom Thomson, queering and seroconverting recognizable works from earlier generations; for example, *Pharmacology* (1994) borrows Thomson’s *Northern River* (1914–15) and floats anti-HIV pharmaceuticals just above the titular waters.

In the exhibition catalogue, Bronson thanks “Canadian guru” Marshall McLuhan, from whom he says “an entire generation of Canadian artists found their critical, political, media-savvy voices, and pulled themselves out of the dreary swamp of Canadian painting.”³ McLuhan’s focus on media transmission can be seen throughout many of the works on display, from the example of *FILE Magazine* above to General Idea’s appropriation of copyright symbols and Marlboro packaging and their later works questioning media narratives around HIV/AIDS.

General Idea moved from Toronto to New York in 1986, believing their careers had plateaued in Canada. The New York art world was reeling from the HIV/AIDS crisis, which had taken the lives of many artists and would only get worse through the mid-1990s. Partz was diagnosed with HIV in 1989, and Zontal, in 1990. Both died in 1994, ending General Idea as an entity. One of the most remarkable pieces engaging with this crisis is *Fin de siècle*, a room-sized piece in which the artists depicted themselves as a trio of Newfoundland seals. Foam panels create a makeshift Arctic diorama that prevent the viewer from getting too close to the seals, while fluorescent lighting gives the landscape a mint-green underglow. It is amusing and quirky and a respite from the visually busy galleries that precede it but, here, the artists are demanding to know why mainstream news media cared more about the plight of baby seals (a Greenpeace-backed *cause célèbre* in the 1980s) than the plight of humans dying from AIDS.

The move and the HIV/AIDS epidemic led to a dramatic change in the way General Idea operated. *FILE Magazine* stopped in 1989, and the group’s works became more minimal, more direct, and considerably larger. Room-sized installations and larger sculptural pieces dominate the second half of

3 Adam Welch, ed., *General Idea* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2022), 16.

the exhibit, which covers this later period. Visually arresting, these works are more memorable than some of the older conceptual art. *One Year of AZT* (1991) is composed of 1,825 oversized capsules, replicating the daunting, expensive five-pill-per-day regimen of HIV medication. Unlike the earlier works, in which paper-based pieces (*FILE*, the *Orgasm Energy Chart*) generated paper records, this piece might not naturally be thought of as archival material. Nevertheless, it serves as a visual record of a daunting regimen that thousands of people undertook annually in the late 1980s and well into the 1990s.

Zontal and Partz died just two years before the protease inhibitor saquinavir became readily available – a development that led to a drastic drop in HIV-related deaths among queer men in North America. Though it has killed more than 35 million people globally, HIV is now a chronic but not life-threatening condition for people with access to these medications. Exhibition text correctly notes that, in North America, a disproportionately high number of Black, Indigenous, and racialized people are currently infected with HIV.

In their work drawing attention to the AIDS crisis, General Idea again turned to print, though in this case, they needed something with a wider reach than a conceptual art periodical. The *Imagevirus* series, named after a quote from William S. Burroughs, was designed to infect New York much like the virus did. Posters appeared around the city and then spread to San Francisco, Toronto, and anonymously around the world, eventually confronting viewers in gallery windows in Hartford, Connecticut, as well as New York, New York.⁴ Lacking the blunt outrage and calls to action of ACT UP posters, General Idea's work felt more ambiguous, and it was not well-received by activists – something Bronson at least partially attributes to the fact that the members of General Idea seemed old and foreign⁵ to the New York artist-activists.

By 1989, the *AIDS* block was commissioned as a sculpture, much like Indiana's *LOVE* image had been; the *AIDS* sculpture was first shown in Hamburg in 1989, and any graffiti was welcomed as a sort of public dialogue. It later appeared in other cities, including Toronto and Ottawa. General Idea's sculpture, stickered and tagged with gold hearts and messages (e.g., "TRANS RIGHTS," "U CHANGED MAN") remained on display outside the gallery for the run of this retrospective. The presence of the sculpture outside the National Gallery set the

⁴ Welch, 281.

⁵ Welch, 40.

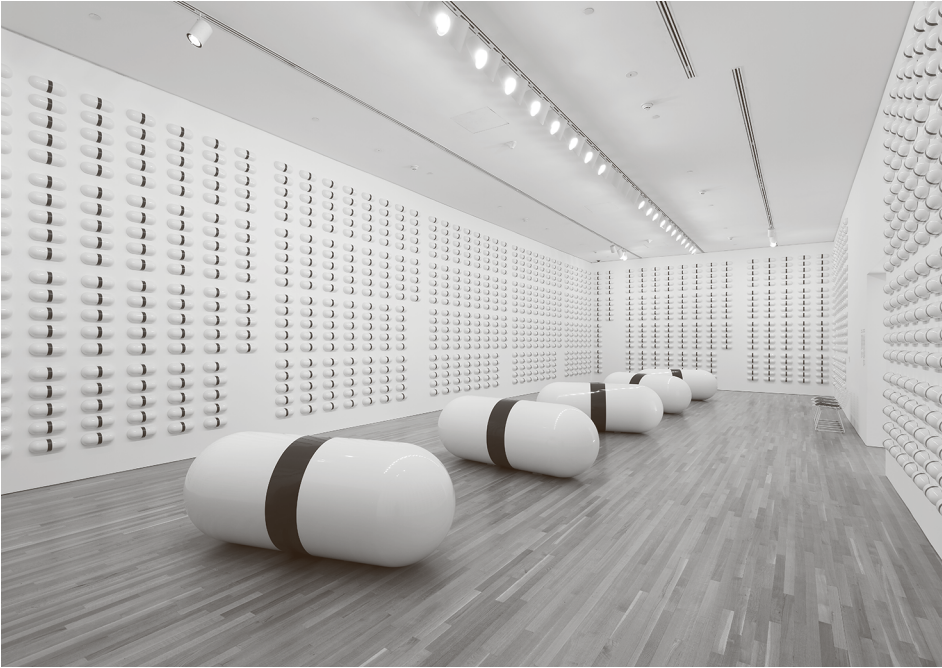


FIGURE 4 *One Year of AZT*, 1991. Vacuum-formed styrene, vinyl, 1,825 units of $12.7 \times 31.7 \times 6.3$ cm. each, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1995 (37688.1-1825); *One Day of AZT*, 1991. Fibreglass, five units of $85 \times 214 \times 85$ cm. each, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of Patsy and Jamie Anderson, Toronto, 2001 (41032.1-5). © General Idea. Source: National Gallery of Canada.

tone for viewers' connections with General Idea's works, reinforcing the idea of the virus even in parts of the exhibition that predate the AIDS crisis.

In addition to the artwork and documentation seen in the galleries, the National Gallery of Canada holds records relevant to General Idea in at least four different fonds and collections. These stem primarily from the collective's ventures into publishing and art book distribution but also demonstrate the porous nature of archival records. For instance, the National Gallery currently holds the General Idea Fonds, containing over 35,000 photographs, drawings, films, videos, ephemera, and rubber stamps, as well as 2,352 items related to *FILE Magazine*. This fonds has been on long-term loan to the gallery since the 1990s. *FILE Magazine* led General Idea to create Art Metropole, the Toronto

publisher and distributor of artists' books, which still operates today. Initially, Art Metropole also served as an archive of artists' books, though it ceased collecting several decades ago. The National Gallery now stewards the Art Metropole Collection, which contains items collected by the artist-run centre between 1974 and 1996; and the Fern Bayer Fonds, which includes work relevant to General Idea as Bayer was chief curator of the Government of Ontario Art Collection between 1977 and 1995.

The exhibition catalogue is an unwieldy, 756-page paperback featuring essays from the curators, interviews with Bronson, and a thorough visual timeline chronicling the dissemination of General Idea's work from the group's first meeting to the present.