

**General Idea, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, June 3 to
November 20, 2022, Curated by Adam Welch**

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Reviews

Recensions

General Idea

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
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Curated by Adam Welch

Christine Conley

Ascending the colonnade ramp at the National Gallery of Canada, three helium-filled blimps float into view, suspended within the soaring glass space of the great hall. The bright yellow and red buoyancy of *Pharma©opia* (1992), imprinted with the logo GĒNERAL IDĒA, is a fitting introduction to the most comprehensive retrospective of General Idea (GI) to date, as it presents a quarter-century of works shaped by replication, multiplicity, and dissemination, by the semiotics of advertising and by a tongue-in-cheek theatricality set in real and fictive architectural spaces. Specifically, the deflationary tendency of helium in *Pharma©opia* points to GI's overarching critique of capitalism and the precarity of big-Pharma solutions to the ravages of AIDS. But the work's visibility also alludes to the pervasiveness of AIDS in the art-historical narrative of General Idea being presented here, though the epidemic only came to suffuse their work in 1986 when the



Installation view, *General Idea*. June 3 to November 20, 2022, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
© General Idea Photo: NGC.

trio Jorge Zontal (1944–1994), Felix Partz (1945–1994), and AA Bronson (b. 1946) departed Toronto for New York City.

While the exhibition is organized chronologically, the first gallery presents an overview of GI's practice through key artworks. In lieu of the customary biography of the artist with historical timeline, a collage of three buff beach boys called *Portrait of General Idea* (1969) is paired with *The End of the (Western) World* (1993–94), a drawing of three cowboys on horseback silhouetted against the setting sun—a wryly humorous if poignant introduction to an art practice that deconstructed the myth of the artist-genius and played with linear

and fictive chronologies. The concerns of the 1970s are represented by *Evidence of Body Binding* (1971), a fluorescent light box installation presenting fetishistic fragments of a nude male body tightly trussed; a display of *FILE Magazine* (1972–1989), a parody of *LIFE* magazine distributed through Art Metropole, the artist-run centre founded by GI in 1974 to collect and disseminate mail art and artist's books; and three marvelous ziggurat-inspired *V.B Gowns* (1975), fashioned from Venetian blinds to disguise Miss General Idea Pageant contestants in the ever-elusive Miss General Idea Pavillion. Both the pageants and the Pavillion were a sustained, conceptual

presence in the artists' practice that involved actual and fictive performance events staged in galleries, theatres, or imaginary spaces.

Adjacent is the Pavillion's armoury. A semicircle of ten heraldic shields with poodles rampant sub in for the customary lions to represent the artists. They maintain their ferocity across the series (1985–90) despite signs of peril amid the escalating threat of AIDS, a vicious serpent and a swarm of pixelated forms mutating the poodle's silhouette. Five self-portraits shift from the satirical humour of the Toronto years—the poodle as pissing avatar in *P is for Poodle* (1983) or the nuclear family in *Baby Makes Three* (1984)—to the more somber mood of *Nightschool* (1989) or *Playing Doctor* (1991), where the artists monitor each other's hearts under a cloud of placebo capsules, and *Fin de siècle* (1994) where they appear as endearing, imperiled baby seals. The public sympathy roused by protests against the seal hunt was not extended to those testing positive for HIV, whose mortality rates in NYC alone far surpassed those of Americans in Vietnam. Both Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz died from complications of AIDS in 1994.

The signal work that assured the visibility of the group in New York is their reconfiguration of Robert Indiana's 1966 logo L-O-V-E as A-I-D-S, replicated across diverse media and public spaces in the aptly named project *Imagevirus* (1987–94). In addition to the painting *AIDS* (1987), the expansive main wall of the gallery that supports the portraits is "infected" by AIDS as wallpaper, where the pop art intensity of red,

blue and green provides a dramatic frame for viewing the corridor that proceeds through the white-cube spaces beyond.

Three aligned galleries document projects from 1969 to 1975. Arriving independently in Toronto, the artists became active in an art and performance scene inspired by counterculture idealism. Women friends were formative participants as well as title holders in the Miss General Idea Pageants (1968–1970): Mimi Paige, Granada Gazelle, and Miss Honey. They connected with an international network through collaborative mail art projects, especially Vancouverites Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov, who was featured as mayoral candidate Mr. Peanut on the inaugural cover of *FILE Magazine*. To read the urban-mapping projects displayed here as a queering of Situationist psychogeography is not merely speculative. The artists' interest in queerness and representation was operative from the get-go (if not overt) and they were avid readers, conversant, according to David Balzer's catalogue essay, with sources such as Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*; William Burroughs, who posited the scrambling of language as resistance to the "image virus" of capitalist media; Roland Barthes, whose writing on myth was purloined by GI to write about glamour; and Marshall McLuhan on media and more.

Mail art as archive provides traces of community—a phone-tree list includes artist Colin Campbell and writer/activist Gerald Hannon—but the arrangement of such ephemera on the wall above a deep ledge denies easy access, with items hung

well above and below eye level. Perhaps we are intended to contort ourselves like participants in the mail-art project *Manipulating the Self* (1970), who photographed themselves with an arm wrapped round their head to grasp their chin. The replication of these photos in *FILE* to frame the image of a woman contortionist is a hilarious reworking of the 1929 cover of *La Révolution Surréaliste* that upends gendered relations of visibility and desire, while legitimizing the Toronto publication as GI's comparable "organ of the party."

General Idea's work in the 1970s simultaneously subverted modernist aesthetics (coded male) and the realm of fashion (coded female). Contestants' submissions to the 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant are a study in contemporaneous notions of femininity constructed through a male gaze. No wonder the 1971 winner was Michael Morris, whose reconfiguration of the proffered dress as a mantle "captured glamour without falling into it." Morris's ensemble introduced the Hand of the Spirit (of Miss General Idea), which assumed emblematic status in GI performances documented in *FILE* and is featured on the side covers of the beautifully designed catalogue for this exhibition, almost an artist's book in itself. One of these images recreates *Miss General Idea Glove Pattern (Form Follows Fetish)*, whereby an architectural-style drawing with a hand inside the glamorous "glove" mimics the Vulcan salute from Star Trek, part of a Hebrew blessing, introduced by Leonard Nimoy as a sign of alterity.

The final iteration of the Pageant is staged directly ahead, accessed by

traversing the next gallery to a darkened space where a catastrophic fire has burned the fictional Pavillion down to its ziggurat-shaped base (1977). No worries, it's all on FILE. But getting there means navigating around the Pavillion's *Boutique* (1980), a kiosk in the form of a prone dollar sign stocked with crests from the *Armoury* and other multiples, but perpetually closed. With its test-pattern wallpaper, this gallery signals a shift to the machinations of media and capitalism while fixing the identity of GI as a male trio with female collaborators. *Colour Bar Lounge* (1979) is a photographic series of six tableaux suffused with queer desires depicting the consumption of fluids, ostensibly at the fictional Colour Bar Lounge. Two of these are crowd scenes familiar from the corresponding video. At either end of the series, prone male figures submit to a dominatrix figure and "castrated" (heelless) stilettos. At centre, a "golden shower" cocktail is adjacent to GI's Hitler Youth character "Billy," with his "Nazi milk" moustache. The video *Test Tube* features the philosophical ruminations of a woman artist—interrupted by ads for the colour bar lounge, plus the artists' interjections on the nuclear family and TV—who mixes revolutionary cocktails and embraces the eradication of Abstract Expressionism. Happily, given the duration and fractured narrative of 1970s and 80s video, the curator made this work and others available online. Consistent with the critique of capitalism are two series, made in 1987 in New York, one using the copyright sign and another using recognizable consumer logos without identifying

texts. Curiously, these works use macaroni as substrate: a coded reference to eighteenth century foppery, or a satirical take on the bourgeois aspirations of Yankee Doodle dandies?

The rejection of Abstract Expressionism in *Test Tube* prepares us for the artists' return to painting as critique. The three poodles being ritually flagellated in *The Unveiling of the Cornucopia* (1982) or painted in flagrante delicto in *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra* (1982) are indeed the artists' avatars but reveal a sexed subjectivity without expressing a privileged interiority. Similarly, the Ziggurat paintings that revived Felix Partz's art-school fascination with ancient non-western culture are neither geometric abstraction nor representational.

The psychic "elsewhere" intrinsic to GI's architectural and archeological projects was fundamental in negotiating gender in their work but, with the move to NYC, they went public. Strategies of replication and dissemination fundamental to their practice ironically found metaphorical equivalence in the AIDS epidemic. Here, the large-scale *AIDS Paintings* (1988), are shown against the *Imagevirus* wallpaper encountered earlier in the exhibition, seemingly infecting the bourgeois space of the gallery. In contrast to the lugubrious tonality of this mix is the ethereal light of *Fin de Siècle* (1990), where the sheer scale of the polystyrene ice floes with marooned baby seals brings home the phenomenological experience of isolation and abandonment. In the penultimate gallery, enormous white and blue capsules representing daily and annual

dosages of AZT, the first drug in the US to treat AIDS, are more daunting than hopeful.

The INFE©TED series in the final gallery returns to GI's self-proclaimed practice as parasitical, reproducing reproductions of works by artists of the modernist avant-garde and infecting them with the colour green, by now a kind of signature: Duchamp, Mondrian, and Rietveld. Other replicas of work by Fontana, Manzoni, and Beuys seem more deferential but none as much as the deep-sea mise-en-scène that pays tribute to Yves Klein, whose infamous use of women as paintbrushes to apply his branded colour—International Klein Blue, featured in the film *Mondo Cane* (1962)—was parodied by GI using fake poodles in *XXX (bleu)* (1984), not exhibited here.

Outside the gallery entrance, the steel sculpture *AIDS* (1989) is a prominent draw. Construction hoardings in the vicinity are papered over with multiple posters and, nearby, in a separate project, an electronic billboard installation *VideoVirus* (2021) by AA Bronson + General Idea transforms the Kipnes Lantern at the National Arts Centre into a kaleidoscope to engage new generations. While investment in the AIDS-related production of GI is warranted, including Bronson's deeply moving portrait of Felix Partz soon after his death, a closer look at the early 1970s would also have been welcome. Animating the archive to illuminate this particular historical conjunction of women and gay male artists could also engage contemporary audiences. Overall, an astutely curated and installed exhibition, *General Idea*

is supplemented by an intriguing catalogue and stimulating symposium that remains available online. Still, this does not exhaust our interest, leaving General Idea open to inquiry.

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Angela Vanhaelen

The Moving Statues of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam: Automata, Waxworks, Fountains, Labyrinths

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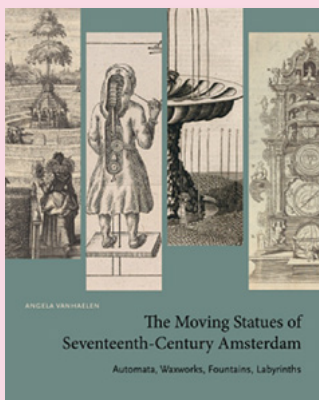
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Stephanie Dickey

In 1625, the engraver Balthasar Florisz van Berckenrode published a detailed map of the growing metropolis of Amsterdam. Comprising nine sheets, it offers an accurate bird's-eye view of the city's expanding ring of canals, providing a glimpse into enclosed courtyards hidden from the street. At the corner of the Prinsengracht and the Looiersgracht can be seen the layout of the Oude Doolhof, a public attraction that might be described in today's terms as a combination of beer garden, theme park, and proto-Madame Tussaud's. Opened around 1620, the Oude Doolhof was one of five such complexes developed in Amsterdam. While many of their features (fountains, gardens, sculptures in stone and wax, and automata) had long adorned noble estates,

this constellation of urban public sites, open to all for a modest fee, was unique in seventeenth-century Europe.

By the nineteenth century, the *doolhoven* had fallen into obscurity, ignored by all but folklorists who interpreted their contrived amusements as quaint popular entertain-



ment. In *The Moving Statues of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam*, Angela Vanhaelen recovers their significance for seventeenth-century social and intellectual life. Zooming in from Berckenrode's map, her analysis situates these pleasure gardens in the specific spatial and cultural milieu of Amsterdam, mercantile capital of the Dutch Republic, where "learned merchants" (the object of Caspar Barlaeus' famous lecture, *Mercator sapiens*, in 1632) were the dominant tastemakers and global commerce brought unprecedented access to foreign visitors, goods, and curiosities. From their splashing fountains to their stage plays enacted by statues that moved and spoke, the *doolhoven* in their heyday were modern marvels that offered

an experience of wonder to intellectuals and seasoned travelers as well as common folk.

Vanhaelen takes the Oude Doolhof as her central example—it was the largest and most famous of the five complexes, established in 1648. With its adjunct, the Nieuwe Doolhof, it was situated in the Jordaan district, then on the outskirts of the expanding city. (Amsterdam's most renowned artist, Rembrandt van Rijn, settled across the street on the Rozengracht in 1658, but whether he ever visited the *doolhof* is unknown.) Calling on a surprisingly rich array of illustrated city guides, travelers' accounts, and other sources, Vanhaelen structures the book according to a visitor's path through the Oude Doolhof, stopping along the way to plumb the social, religious, and philosophical implications of the experience. Chapters take us from the tavern to the garden, designed around an elaborate fountain dedicated to Bacchus and Ariadne. We then wind our way through a labyrinthine hedge maze ("doolhof" is Dutch for "maze") and enter the exhibition hall, where automata perform moralizing tales watched over by waxwork statues of political heroes past and present. Vanhaelen describes the mix of classical and biblical imagery, presented with humor for a broad audience, in terms such as "vernacular classicism" and "Christian paganism," inspired by the Ciceronian dictum that entertainment should teach, delight, and move its audience. (This principle was also central to Dutch art theory, a connection Vanhaelen could have explored further.)