

Being Framed by Irony: AIDS and the Art of General Idea

Luke Nicholson

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**ABSTRACT**

Being Framed by Irony: AIDS and the Art of General Idea

Luke Nicholson

This thesis investigates transformations that took place within the work of the Toronto-based art collaborative General Idea before and after it came to deal with the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s and it explores how these relate to its ongoing concern with irony. In General Idea's work of the 70s, irony appears in many playful varieties. Yet the collaborative's irony seemed to wane as its work dealt increasingly with AIDS or, at least, its character seemed to change: it appeared to become more wry, critical, and less exuberant. In *The AIDS Project* (after 1987) and other, later works, General Idea's visual language becomes sparer and develops a public or installation-based inquiry into ambiguities around originality and cultural transmission and dissemination that parallels the behaviour of the AIDS virus itself or aspects of its cultural contexts. But this thesis argues that these later series represent a continuation of many of the collaborative's earlier concerns and not at all their abandonment. Drawing upon close analysis of works throughout General Idea's *oeuvre*, as well a theoretical investigation of irony, "Being Framed by Irony: AIDS and the Art of General Idea" seeks to anatomize and explain these developments.

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Luke Nicholson, March, 2006.

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“Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone.”

- Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Lady Bracknell, Act 1)



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION, OR THE IRONY OF GENERAL IDEA

I am in the unenviable position of having to explain a joke. General Idea was a three-member, gay artists' collaborative, based in Toronto, that brought an unprecedented amount of genuinely funny work to the art world. Playing the role of art stars in a self-conscious and parodic fashion – what they would eventually come to call “artists in artist drag”<sup>1</sup> – they were nevertheless serious artists. General Idea sought to conquer this world with fingers crossed and have everything both ways and, most of the time, it succeeded. Humour was usually its strategy and irony always was. This irrepressible and puckish ‘firm’ would celebrate and mock and suck up to the international art world and draw it out, time and time again, to one unfair contest of wits after another, for a period of more than two decades. Like Shakespeare’s “shrewd and knavish sprite,” it could both torment and entertain its audience; and like his several wise fools, it could comment, cuttingly, from a privileged position at the margins. The art world has usually sought to be very serious – even earnest – about art, with the inevitable result that it has been sometimes hypocritical and often pretentious. As they were ostensibly just having fun, the members of General Idea could make art outside the limits of the artist’s normally assigned role.

With the advent of the AIDS crisis, however, the collaborative’s humour diminished, although its irony did not. The appearance of AIDS seemed like a terrible instance of

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<sup>1</sup>General Idea, *Shut the Fuck Up*, videorecording, dist: Art Metropole (Amsterdam: Arrow Video Studios, 1984).

synchronicity. The disease shared much with the concerns of its work: both related to issues of transmission and dissemination and both concerned borders and made shortcuts through great physical and cultural distances. General Idea dealt with this common ground head-on, addressing AIDS using its own approach and to its own ends, until the collaborative was itself destroyed by AIDS in 1994, when two of its members died. But even in its grimmest works a lively and playful irony is busy behind the scenes. If not immediately evident, it all the while structures its works thematically. Yet, in these later works, just as in the many that came before and were less cryptically ironic, the effect depends upon our choice not to investigate too far. It depends, in other words, on our responding to the works as we would respond to a joke. For this reason, the members of General Idea would likely advise me not to say anything more about it.<sup>2</sup> And so I must observe a final disclaimer: that its irony is an effect which has a fugitive character when it is approached too directly. In exploring and explaining the very part of General Idea's production that works by not being explored and explained, I am disturbing the audience's natural ignorance, upon which the effect of General's Idea's irony depends.

General Idea was formed in 1970<sup>3</sup> and its members, Jorge Zontal (1945-1994), Felix

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<sup>2</sup>See General Idea, *Shut The Fuck Up*. This video includes an exhortation to the arts media not to attempt to explain the jokes, ironies and vagaries of the collaborative's work when, it insists, there is "nothing to say."

<sup>3</sup>Not 1968 or 1969, as are often reported. Just two among many wilful obfuscations, these false founding dates were chosen to provide a plausible history to some of the collaborative's activities. See AA Bronson, interview by the author, 24 Oct. 2005, in Appendix, page 103.

Partz (1945-1994) and AA Bronson (born 1946),<sup>4</sup> constituted what Bronson would describe as “one organism, one group mind, one nervous system.”<sup>5</sup> They would live their lives together for the next twenty-five years. General Idea’s artistic work was always entirely collective and this collectivity was perhaps its major theme.<sup>6</sup>

General Idea was a . . . controlled experiment: a communal criticality, a gay ménage à trois grounded in a position of opposition to the dominant culture, while acting out the desire for success: “ambiguity without contradiction.” We pulled apart the elements of popular media and consumer culture, then put them together again: we were media moguls in a universe of our own making.<sup>7</sup>

The collaborative worked in many media and, while its projects always had a conceptual or performance dimension, one of General Idea’s most characteristic features was that its projects lacked a certain definition. It was left deliberately unclear where the boundaries of one project ended and where those of another began, or indeed where its art ended and where the artists’ own lives began. This indeterminacy, stemming, perhaps, from the collective nature of the collaborative, breaks down other boundaries: between the artists and the audience, as they would force their fans and critics to participate in their happenings, but also,

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<sup>4</sup>‘Jorge Zontal’ (i.e. ‘horizontal’) is a typically delicious pun. These are all assumed names but, as the artists themselves, *qua* General Idea, never acknowledged the names these replaced, it is inappropriate to credit General Idea’s work to the three individual artists: respectively, Slobodan (“George”) Saia-Levy, Ronald Gabe and Michael Tims. Rather, the assumed names assert an indissoluble bond with General Idea as a whole. It is interesting in this connection that AA Bronson has continued to use that name since the deaths of Zontal and Partz: it presents the author-of-works himself as but one fragment of a lost larger unity.

<sup>5</sup>AA Bronson, “Afterthought,” *Canadian Art* 16, no. 2 (1999): 88.

<sup>6</sup>Kathryn Rosenfeld, “Triple Self-Portrait (-2),” *New Art Examiner* 28, no.10 (2001): 81-104.

<sup>7</sup>AA Bronson, *Negative Thoughts* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001), 64.

more generally, between the 'figure' of their production and the 'ground' of its reception. General Idea arose in a context where, AA Bronson has said, "irony was not allowed in the art world."<sup>8</sup> While irony, tracing a lineage from Dada to Surrealism to Pop, has been something of a counter-tradition to the dominant modernist one throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, in the 1960s and early 70s in Canada it was often resisted as reactionary and American.<sup>9</sup> General Idea can be seen as an elaborate, twenty-five-year process of revenge upon this then-contemporary tendency. Irony pervades every stage of the collaborative's work and requires those who would banish it to participate in the process. But it is important to note why irony came to be so unacceptable for a time and what motives were therefore involved in General Idea's aggressive campaign on its behalf.

### Irony

Irony is frequently defined as an expression or situation where the literal meaning is the precise opposite of the actual or intended meaning;<sup>10</sup> but irony is, in truth, something incapable of full definition. If irony lacks a definition, it does at least have a history. Although it is seldom doubted that the practice of irony is older, perhaps as old as language itself, the word is found for the first time in Plato's *Republic*.<sup>11</sup> The term, in Greek, is *eironeia*, a neologism invented there; it is developed from the word *eiron*, which had meant 'dissembler' in the narrower sense of a malingerer or one who avoids his public military duty to the city-

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<sup>8</sup>Rosenfeld, 79.

<sup>9</sup>See discussion below: pages 8-9 and 16-18.

<sup>10</sup>*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) s.v. "Irony." (Hereafter *OED*.)

<sup>11</sup>J.A. Cuddon, ed., *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, third edition (London: Penguin Books, 1991) s.v. "Irony," 457.

state by feigning illness.<sup>12</sup> Later, especially in Greek and Roman New Comedy, the “*ieron*, who gave irony its (bad) name,”<sup>13</sup> was a disingenuously modest trickster who engaged in a deliberate ‘downplaying’ of his or her abilities and worth. This was distrusted as a bogus attempt to render a creature of lesser social status invulnerable from ‘just’ punishment by his or her betters. The avoidance of one’s ‘legitimate’ lower station, by means of a dishonest, exaggerated pretense to it, was seen as a deeply threatening stance in the ruling circles of Greek antiquity. But by Roman times the *ieron* had become a kind of established anti-hero in popular drama. Though still rigidly hierarchical, republican Rome was a society in which a much greater degree of social mobility was possible, ex-slaves from time to time becoming very rich and prominent citizens.<sup>14</sup> The talents of clever slaves were acknowledged while their disobedience and disloyalty were punished in order to restore social order. Irony was the device of the underdog.

However, from a more or less lower-class strategy, irony evolved into a more or less upwardly-mobile one between Antiquity and the Renaissance, when it was seen as a mark of sophistication and thus popular with those, like William Shakespeare, who sought to ingratiate themselves with the aristocracy. Developing, perhaps, from the courtly love

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 458.

<sup>13</sup>Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 50.

<sup>14</sup>Indeed the status of freedmen was rising so quickly at the end of the Republic that Augustus found it necessary to institute certain laws to restrict their numbers and, to some extent, their opportunities, in order to prevent unrest among the freeborn lower classes. See H.H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome, 133 B.C. to A.D. 68* (New York & London: Methuen, 1982), 232-233.

tradition, a taste for ambiguity had become a mark of aristocratic demeanor.<sup>15</sup> It also displayed a want of coarse simplicity, about which English culture – hitherto perceived as a European backwater – was particularly sensitive. As in Italy, a turn towards carefully studied realism in arts kept pace with a rather cynical ‘realism’ in public life and policy. Outright cynicism dominates the tone of writers such as Phillip Marlowe and Ben Jonson; but Shakespeare, and his Spanish contemporary Miguel de Cervantes, bring formal irony to such dizzying heights of artifice and conceit that they may safely put forward non-cynical judgments, while coming across as worldly and sophisticated.<sup>16</sup>

It was largely because of reactions to Shakespeare’s work in the wake of Romanticism that irony became so thoroughly theorized.<sup>17</sup> During the eighteenth century, which was an age

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<sup>15</sup>It is a debate in Medieval Studies circles as to whether that tone of ambiguity found in courtly romance may be regarded as an instance of irony. See Hutcheon, 145-146.

<sup>16</sup>Implicating the dramatic situation in the thematic structure of his works is a key feature of many of William Shakespeare’s plays. The self-consciousness of his characters *qua* characters is prominent throughout Shakespeare’s *oeuvre* and particularly acute in his *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, and *The Tempest*. In the Spanish-reading world, Cervantes’s similar approach has had as great an impact as Shakespeare’s in the Northern European tradition. A masterpiece of ironic narrative framing, Volume I of *Don Quixote* is often understood as an elaborate critique of reading. However, prior to the publication of Volume II, Cervantes was overtaken by events. In an age before any concept of copyright, a rival writer published a volume II to Cervantes’s book (then a major hit) before the author could finish his own sequel. Cervantes’s ingenious response was to publish a sequel in which Don Quixote and his sidekick Sancho Panza must continually defend themselves against the ‘libels’ spread through the dissemination of the false sequel. As in the first volume, the novel itself becomes an aspect of the story. Half of Quixote’s ‘madness’ stems from knowing he is a character in a fiction. “When he accepts conventional ‘reality,’ Don Quixote, like Hamlet, is condemned to death.” (Carlos Fuentes, Introduction, in *Don Quixote* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), xviii.)

<sup>17</sup> After Romanticism Shakespeare evolved from a great, but eccentric, Elizabethan author to something of a literary titan. It was Shakespeare’s combination of a radical, formal irony with an expansive and wild imagery and language – itself so prototypical of  
(continued...)

of great satire, irony emerged as a dominant mode.<sup>18</sup> For critics, of whom the most influential was probably Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), irony was more than a figure of speech or feature of stagecraft. It was “a way of seeing the world.”<sup>19</sup> “For Schlegel (and in his wake) the divide that characterizes [irony’s] traditional rhetorical definition becomes an allusive point of departure for rethinking the divided nature of discursivity and subjectivity both.”<sup>20</sup> It became increasingly difficult to distinguish between literary and literary-critical discussions of irony. Both became ironized: “The ongoing chain of irony must, to be genuinely ongoing and genuinely ironic, include itself as one of the links.... Irony ends, as Schlegel himself writes, as ‘irony of irony,’ a fate from which no (human) history can escape.”<sup>21</sup> Irony became a particular concern for authors, such as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, on the borderlands between philosophy and literature.<sup>22</sup> Irony’s radicalism had evolved from being a resistance strategy of the sly stereotype of the scheming underclass to being a radical interpretation of the world. This intellectualization entailed its reservation to a more rarefied audience. And so, as irony became a sophisticated reader’s delicacy, it started to lose its progressive “street credibility.” From the nineteenth century onwards, progressive and radical politics were to become more and more earnest and literal. Added to this was the stifling tone

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<sup>17</sup>(...continued)

Romanticism – that destined him to be the hero of Romantic and post-Romantic criticism. See Deborah White, “Irony and Clerisy,” *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* [text on-line] (Baltimore: University of Maryland, 2005, accessed 25 June 2005), 1-2; <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/irony/white/ironyintro.html>.

<sup>18</sup>Cuddon, 461. Prominent eighteenth-century satirists included Jonathan Swift and Voltaire.

<sup>19</sup>Hutcheon, 1.

<sup>20</sup>White, 1.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>22</sup>Cuddon, 461.

of Victorian moral seriousness. Irony passed out of artistic fashion.<sup>23</sup>

Twentieth-century criticism in the West understood irony to be an inherently “conservative force, used to shore up the foundations of the established order.”<sup>24</sup> The characteristic pose of rhetorical irony is to deliver an attack that precludes the possibility of defense or to effect a kind of surrender that makes the ironist invulnerable, in advance, to any assault.<sup>25</sup> Yet the perception that rhetorical irony is ‘conservative’ is proper only to a time when progressive or other radical politics were generally seen to be in the ascendancy.<sup>26</sup> Irony

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<sup>23</sup>Where irony does reemerge, in the work of Oscar Wilde for instance, it is, if morally radical, hardly politically progressive in any socialist sense.

<sup>24</sup>Hutcheon, 29.

<sup>25</sup>Up to this time, irony in the visual arts had been uncommon. Occasional instances turn up, especially in the still life and *vanitas* traditions, where, for example, the anamorphic skull in Hans Holbein the Younger’s *The French Ambassadors* (1533) is a clearly ironic device. Also, arguably, *trompe l’oeil* is implicitly ironic. Yet not until the work of Marcel Duchamp in the twentieth century does irony emerge as a central concern in the production of a visual artist.

<sup>26</sup>Exceptions to the earnestness and literality of progressive and radical art include examples in both literature and the visual arts. However, the most striking examples of these occur during the Weimar Republic and, particularly, during the rise and eventual triumph of the NSDAP. Bertolt Brecht’s plays present a powerful and heavy-handed irony, which tends towards outright sarcasm, in order to attack bourgeois complacency and the fascism to which it seemed inexorably to be drifting. In his famous *Threepenny Opera* (1928), for instance, a merchant-capitalist, Mr. Peachum, sells beggars the very pathetic clothing they use to beg for sustenance: “To combat the increasing callousness of Mankind, J. Peachum, a man of business, has opened a shop where the poorest of the poor can acquire an exterior that will touch the hardest of hearts,” the play announces. (See Bertolt Brecht, “The Threepenny Opera,” in *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays, Vol. 2*, ed. & trans. Ralph Manheim and John Willett (London: Methuen, 1979), 5.) Similar instances of irony appear in the visual arts at this time, especially in the work of John Heartfield, whose dadaist photo montages include *Adolf, The Superman: Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk* (1932) (fig.1), which portrays the would-be dictator as some kind of automaton or novel, coin-operated gizmo, and *As in the Middle Ages, So in the Third Reich* (1935) (fig.2), which also displays a marked homoerotic character. While these works clearly deploy irony towards progressive or radical ends, they do so in the Weimar climate of

(continued...)



is only, of itself, inherently contrarian and negative. Thus, it should not be surprising that Linda Hutcheon observes in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* that the critical turn in considering irony to be at least potentially progressive should come again at exactly that point when political neo-conservatism in the West was seen to be on the rise: the early 1980s.<sup>27</sup> But, at all times, politically committed critics have been uncomfortable about what Hutcheon describes as the “‘transideological’ nature of irony.” She writes, “it is almost as though, in ethical terms, irony were inscrutable.”<sup>28</sup> If irony may transcend any fixed linguistic or subjective frame it is hardly surprising that it should make such short work of attempts to fix its ideological meanings. Irony sides only with indeterminacy and so, for those determined to ‘nail down’ the political meanings of things, irony’s reserve is both threatening and maddening.

Politically speaking, the ironist is extremely hard to assail precisely because it is virtually impossible to fix her or his text convincingly. In the ironic discourse, every position undercuts itself, thus leaving the politically engaged writer in a position where her ironic discourse might just come to deconstruct her own politics.<sup>29</sup>

For Hutcheon, irony has two major characteristics. First, it is governed by ‘discursive communities,’ “the complex configuration of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and

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<sup>26</sup>(...continued)

ascendant reaction. They are thus, in the truest sense of the phrase, exceptions that prove the rule.

<sup>27</sup>Hutcheon, 29. The victory of neo-conservatism, seen in the combined faces of Thatcherism and Reaganism, was a blow from which the traditional Left has yet to recover.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 16, quoting Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London & New York: Methuen, 1985), 40.

communicative strategies.”<sup>30</sup> These communities are diverse and overlapping, and various ‘intended’ meanings can be directed to various communities. As such, irony is pervaded (always) by structures of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>31</sup> This accords with a standard tertiary definition of the word: “the use of language with one meaning for a privileged audience and another for those addressed or concerned.”<sup>32</sup>

Irony may be reactionary or it may be revolutionary but it must always be directed against someone: “irony always has a ‘target’; it sometimes also has what some want to call a ‘victim.’”<sup>33</sup> In a common, social sense of the term, irony can never be ‘democratic’. “In the economy of exchange that we call irony, there is always a power imbalance ... because irony is simultaneously disguise and communication.”<sup>34</sup> This bringing together of opposites highlights opposition itself, the boundary between one thing and another. It is related to the second of irony’s two salient features, according to Hutcheon, and the one which is, for my purposes, the most important. Hutcheon identifies what she calls “irony’s edge.” She writes: “Unlike metaphor or metonymy, irony has an edge; unlike incongruity or juxtaposition, irony can put people on edge; unlike paradox, irony is decidedly edgy.”<sup>35</sup> This edge, the feeling of being positioned in a threshold space of neither/nor, relates irony to what I will call the “liminality” of subjective consciousness. It is the basic – the *only* – human experience: being on the knife-edge of self and other, and of past and future.

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<sup>30</sup>Hutcheon, 91.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>32</sup>*OED*, s.v. “Irony.”

<sup>33</sup>Hutcheon, 15.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

### Subjectivity and General Idea's Identity Politics

Societies construct 'included' and 'excluded' identity positions. And so irony becomes a tool of self-assertion for marginalized identities. Not having been imaginatively assimilated, they risk little in asserting a booby-trapped or indeterminate identity position, undermining the larger structure. Hutcheon observes, for instance, the longstanding identification of irony with a "gay sensibility."<sup>36</sup> The need, at times, to disguise identity, or to feign a 'normal' persona, or else to exaggerate the performance of a stereotype to win tolerance, teaches people of various marginalized identities that they may be (and are) different things at different times. This experience has led Queer Theory to construct a very different account of subjectivity in the last two decades. Judith Butler, building on Michel Foucault's ideas while also incorporating psychoanalysis, sees identity as the effect of a repeated performed signification but also as existing within the instability inherent in such repetition.<sup>37</sup> She maintains that "gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>37</sup>Judith Butler, "From Parody to Politics," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990), 145. In his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault defines what he calls the "tactical polyvalence of discourses": a discourse produces in itself power but in the same action opens up avenues with which to oppose it. (See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction (Volume 1)*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990) 100-101.) An instance of this polyvalence is cultural appropriation. When a group is excluded by a discourse, as in a dress code for example, it can subvert its exclusion through mimicry, imitation with slight differences, becoming, as Homi Bhabha puts it, "almost the same but not quite." (Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," in *Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 89.)

<sup>38</sup>Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. H. Abelove et al. (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 313. Butler's contention, however, does not deal with the individual imitation (or mimic) but with the

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A repetition can never be sufficient if it requires continual re-assertion: “That there is a need for repetition at all is a sign that identity is not self-identical .... It requires to be instituted again and again, which is to say that it runs the risk of becoming *de*-instituted at every interval.”<sup>39</sup> Butler also admits that “[t]o claim that there is no performer prior to the performed, that the performance is performative, that the performance constitutes the appearance of a ‘subject’ as its effect is difficult to accept.”<sup>40</sup> However, if this is difficult to accept, it is not necessarily as radical as it seems – or at least not as novel. Butler’s view recalls that of Aristotle in his *Poetics*: that plot *is* character.<sup>41</sup> If this is a philosophical paradox, it is also a longstanding observation about performances.

Identity as it is worn, self-identity, is always expressed subjectively; and the subject is implicated in language and social structures. But the subject is not identical with the person. In the case of the person, the idea is that there is some core to which the name of the person, his or her relations, bank account, and criminal record – to name but a few possibilities – are all correctly attached. This preexisting position, which is partly defined for us before we are

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<sup>38</sup>(...continued)

character of whole system. Gender, rather than any particular parody of it, is an attempt to repeat ‘the normal’ *per se*.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.* The philosophical problem is considerable: agency is that one characteristic attributed to subjectivity that cannot be identified with the performance as it is the part upon which the instability of identity fully depends. In other words, agency is the potentiality of difference, even if it is the character of the performed identity to make a claim as to its coextensiveness with this potentiality of difference. The subject of agency is the source of the instability and makes the relationship of self-identity one of constant slippage.

<sup>41</sup>Aristotle, “On The Art of Poetry,” in *Aristotle, Horace, Longinus: Classical Literary Criticism* (London: Penguin, 1975), 43.

born, yet which we each come to inhabit in time, belongs to what Jacques Lacan terms “the symbolic order.”<sup>42</sup> The subject is the obverse of this structured position, and grounds it within this nexus of relationships. Outside of the first person, it does not exist. Only when we are signifying are “we” at all. The subject is not wholly of the symbolic order, but only our point of contact with it. But, as the old adage has it, “where there’s smoke there’s fire,” and so the subject is that which allows us consistently to assume the presence of its referent. Nonetheless, the presence of the subject is always framed by the immediacy of its not having been there an instant before and the certain prospect that it will not be there an instant after. Thus, temporally as well as structurally, the subject is inherently provisional.

Irony has been associated with the mystery of subjectivity even from the first.<sup>43</sup> It may not be surprising, therefore, that the work of the General Idea collaborative should be so riddled with ironic themes and structures. Subjectivity – and its ostensible, defining boundaries – are exactly what the members of the collaborative were directly encountering in every stage of their work, from its conception, to its creation, to its ultimate reception. They wrote: “Being a trio frees us from the tyranny of the individual genius.”<sup>44</sup> Singular

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<sup>42</sup>John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, *Lacan and Language: A Reader's Guide to Écrits* (New York: International Universities Press, 1982), 19.

<sup>43</sup>The concept of subjectivity begins – in disguise – where irony does: with Plato's *Republic*, where the philosopher proposes a tripartite model of the *psyche* (literally, the ‘soul,’ but also ‘mind’ or ‘spirit’). A conceptual antecedent, though a distant one, for the psychoanalytic model, Plato's model of the manifold psyche provides for the first time a notion of the “I” as being on edge, set between various possibilities but unable to realize any of them wholly. The subject is caught at the threshold moment, in a constant state of liminal tension. See *Republic* 414d-417b7.

<sup>44</sup>General Idea, “‘How Our Mascots Love to Humiliate Us’ ... Revelations From The Doghouse,” in *General Idea: 1968-1984* (Basel: Kunsthalle, 1984), 25.

subjectivity, the individual variety which all subjectivity is usually assumed to be, is precisely what they undermine through collective authorship. They explore and promote a subjectivity unbounded by the personal, that position referred to in social structures, but also the normative, ideological anchor of our society. General Idea is not a group of individuals with made-up names, but a new totality, a sum of more than its Partz.

Playing with conceptual 'figures' and their ideological grounds, General Idea's members' gay identities could 'stand out' against their artist identities: they brought a peculiarly queer irony into their work. Something about the collaborative was set up so as to not quite fit. At first this irony was acutely concerned with travesty, which has been both a dominant strategy in queer culture and also, perhaps, its dominant trope.<sup>45</sup> Queer travesty allows for subversion precisely because it adopts cultural modes normally hostile to queerness; it reserves those terms designed to oppress it for its own use as self-expression, and this has led to a long inclusion of otherwise 'unacceptable' content in queer culture.<sup>46</sup> But General Idea adapted its use of travesty in the direction of a more basic concept of irony in which the borders between all oppositions and among many identities are called into question. These borders are not broken in its work; rather, they are at once emphasized and undermined. In General Idea's video *Test Tube*, produced in 1979, Jorge Zontal announces: "We do not want to destroy television, we want to bend it until it loses shape."<sup>47</sup> This

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<sup>45</sup>Diedrich Diederichsen, "Glad Rag," trans. Philip Glahn, *Artforum* 40.8 (2002): 108.

<sup>46</sup>As in its own use of the term 'faggot,' queer culture appropriates the guises of its enemies, both to uncover them and, cathartically, to explore its own oppression.

<sup>47</sup>General Idea, *General Idea's Test Tube*, videorecording (Toronto: Art

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statement is emblematic of General Idea's overall strategy in engaging with pop culture: to employ it against its own norms, to use it in such a way that long-suppressed obverse meanings are revealed and may be celebrated. Like a figure of two faces that also makes a goblet, mutually cancelling meanings may (briefly) be simultaneously seen, as an amalgam of opposition and unity. Such an operation may lie at the root of queer travesty's challenge to normative identity; but General Idea's particular achievement was to see in this irony an inkling of what is happening around all defined concepts and positions. It used this insight to destabilize the worlds in which it moved and the borders between art and life, and between one time or place and another. However, this conceptually sophisticated, ironic framing retains the trace of its origin in a gutsy (and gut-level) refusal on the part of queers to be passively defined any longer. The emergence of General Idea is often said to be of the same cultural moment as New York's Stonewall riots of 1969.<sup>48</sup> Its irony would be a powerful tool to assert a marginal identity, but not, as is typical, by trying to de-marginalize it. Rather, it demonstrates that all identities are equally marginal in the first place.

The space that General Idea opened for itself was not principally within the mainstream of the art world at first, but within popular cultural formats. Itself appropriated from William S. Burroughs,<sup>49</sup> the name General Idea is at the same time a travesty of 'General

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<sup>47</sup>(...continued)

Metropole, 1979).

<sup>48</sup>Peter Gallo, "The Enduring Ephemera of General Idea," in *Art in America* March (2005): 81. See also Eugenio Filice, "Figurations of Ethics, Configurations of Power: Michel Foucault, Attila Richard Lukacs and the New Painting," unpublished PhD dissertation, McGill University (2002), xxxv.

<sup>49</sup>Diana Nemiroff, "AA Bronson," *Canada Council* [text on-line] (Ottawa: Canada (continued...))

Electric' or 'General Motors,' but, in its common abbreviation as 'G.I.,' it also refers to the uniform and military fetish so common throughout queer culture.<sup>50</sup> In that part of its production which played the part of its work, the thematic concerns were originally implicit and somewhat abstract. All the collaborative's work is also implicitly ironic: the work is not entirely distinct from General Idea, which is, in a sense, one continuous artistic enterprise; its artworks are thus also *art in art drag*. The collaborative's audience was not just supposed to be in the art galleries but was imagined to be more like that of a television star's public. General Idea was conscious of the largely make-believe character of this public but, by using both gallery-based and popular media, it cunningly used its own deficiencies in one domain to advance its aims in another. Its public was a series of "crowds." It declares: "There's the fashion crowd, the art crowd, the sociological media, architectural and cerebral Marxist crowds."<sup>51</sup> The mutual incompatibility of these crowds and the fact that none is what a true media mogul would view as exactly a 'prime demographic' is, of course, the self-deprecating point. Clever humour makes up for their lack of media viability; a mass media orientation makes up for their lack of high art viability or, at least, makes up for their early marginality.

General Idea's move towards popular cultural formats was both a protest and

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<sup>49</sup>(...continued)

Council, accessed 21 Sept. 2005); <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/prizes/ggvma/>.

<sup>50</sup>Ronald Gabe's original pseudonym was 'Private Partz,' which both emphasized the military connection and, figuratively, 'flashed' any arts reporter who might be inclined to publicize his name. This proved such a provocation that, for pragmatic reasons, it was changed to "Felix." See Fern Bayer, "The Search for the Spirit," in *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968 -1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 23.

<sup>51</sup>General Idea, "Test Tube," in *Canada Video* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 46.



provocation. Its use of pop forms annoyed some radicals while its abuse of corporate signs and the disregard it implied for their copyrights (as well as the sexual flagrancy of much of its art) affronted conservatives. General Idea's use of pop culture, indeed its whole way of presenting itself as a sort of art corporation, doing market research, employing advertising lingo, ostensibly 'selling' capitalist chic to the art world, bothered and sometimes enraged its left-wing critics.<sup>52</sup> Also, playing with the authoritarian disguises formerly prevalent in queer culture, whether glamorous and therefore capitalist or else military, was not at all what gay liberation was supposed to be about after Stonewall.<sup>53</sup> General Idea arose in a climate where, Bronson has claimed, art was to be entirely serious and irony was not acceptable.<sup>54</sup> Pop art, in particular, was American and therefore suspect.<sup>55</sup> It seemed intrinsically capitalist and

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<sup>52</sup>See General Idea, "'How Our Mascots Love to Humiliate Us' ...," 43.

<sup>53</sup>General Idea was in part a reaction against an emergent political activism which was either utopian or else overly earnest politically. "Art workers" were expected to toe a revolutionary line and revolutionary aims were the priority, subordinate to which were all other concerns, last of all queer sexual expression. Although the collaborative began in harmony with the much of the Left vanguard, it immediately started down a divergent path. General Idea chose to backdate its founding to 1968. This equated it with what everyone understood, in the wake of the Vietnam War protests, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy, the Prague Spring and, most of all, the May events in Paris, to be a very important year. In some ways it could be seen as the culmination of sixties ferment. (See Bronson, interview, 76.) After 1968 a new polarization between Left and Right occurred. (See A. Belden Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States* (New York: Autonomedia, 1988), 30-31.) The heterogeneity and open-mindedness of the 60s counterculture came to be seen as decadent or ideologically chaotic by a radicalized (but, it would turn out, constantly shrinking) Marxist hard core. While gay politics would eventually (largely) reject a revolutionary character as it began to win concessions from liberal democracies, a stern and humourless element (inclined to view signs of effeminacy as "self-hatred," for example) continued to dominate until the 80s. See Bronson, interview, 94.

<sup>54</sup>Rosenfeld, 79.

<sup>55</sup>See Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Towards a People's Art*  
(continued...)

certainly involved commodity fetishism. Meanwhile, glamour implied a certain visual delectation that had become anathema in a highly serious and increasingly intellectual art milieu.<sup>56</sup> But, “invested in pop and mass culture,” General Idea was “always humorous, light on its feet and ironic.”<sup>57</sup> This levity was intended to be thought out of place.

General Idea’s project was implicitly political but it was political in a way that would today be identified with Queer Theory and identity politics.<sup>58</sup> During the 1990s, many scholars and advocates for minority sexualities abandoned what was seen as a “lesbian and gay studies” model in favour of the reappropriated term “queer.” This break and the consequent establishment of “queer theory” involved a move away from liberal humanist assumptions about identity and society that were thought to pervade most lesbian and gay scholarship as well as mainstream feminism. In its stead, a model derived from the work of Michel Foucault and Lacanian psychoanalysis was developed by scholars such as Judith Butler. ‘Queer’, as a notion, includes gay and lesbian sexualities but does not privilege them over any other minority orientation in identity; it is implicitly a rejection of all normative sexuality and gender. But, more than this, ‘queer’ is understood not so much as an identity but as an action.

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<sup>55</sup>(...continued)

(Toronto: New Canada Press, 1974), 212. The hostile attitude of certain then-contemporary maoist art critics, such as Barry Lord, to all corporate-derived imagery is unmistakable. For an artist such as Joyce Wieland, it could be justified when used as a vehicle for Canadian nationalist and ‘anti-imperialist’ politics but not even then in the view of Lord, who still found works such as Wieland’s to be tainted by an “American” approach. See Johanne Sloan, “Joyce Wieland at The Border: Nationalism, the New Left, and the Question of Political Art in Canada,” in *The Journal of Canadian Art History* 26 (2005): 81.

<sup>56</sup>Filice, 5.

<sup>57</sup>Diederichsen, 104.

<sup>58</sup>Bronson, interview, 121.

‘Queering,’ is something that one does to a normative concept or institution. It operates in the realm of identification and therefore, far from being an application of a theory, ‘queering’ is logically prior as an activity and Queer Theory is merely the attempt of scholars to keep up.

G.I.’s queerness was not containable by a standard gay identity, which could be clearly identified and therefore, as it would have been, simply ignored. Rather, by queering identity – and, indeed, subjectivity itself – it destabilized a conceptual framework its audience expected to stand uncompromised. In a sense, all of General Idea was a special effect, achieved by reordering the terms in which art was expected to be received: instead of emphasizing the original and the present, its works were copied from others, multiply produced or even not actually ever made, anywhere, at all.<sup>59</sup> Instead of being really popular, on the other hand, its jests were clearly directed to a smallish circle of art-world insiders. Instead of being obscure, however, its works luridly hinted at clear and obvious meanings, but ones that could not be mentioned publicly.<sup>60</sup> It remained a joke whose punchline could never be fully explained. It was the Rubik’s Cube of conceptual art, irritatingly unsolvable yet simple and inviting.<sup>61</sup>

## AIDS

The irony of General Idea’s project is that it should encounter in AIDS a true counterpart. Proof, in a sense, of its contentions, AIDS was also, in the most radical way, a

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<sup>59</sup>For instance, see the discussion of the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* in Chapter 2.

<sup>60</sup>The arts media consistently avoided any mention of queer content. See Bronson, interview, 121.

<sup>61</sup>Bronson maintains that, before the advent of Queer Theory, its work was not conducive to theoretical interpretation. *Ibid.*

threat to its members, its work and its community. AIDS forcibly destroyed something of gay individual identity: it revealed people – bodies, faces, beauties – as betrayed and undone by their own biology in the prime of life. At the same time it forged a new gay communal identity in resistance to the plague. AIDS defined a generation of gay men and their friends as only war experiences have done in living memory. All the while it also disclosed the existence of an underlying community, a network through which AIDS traced a path of disease and death, of intermingling bodies and bloodstreams all over the world, unbounded by space and by time. People across the globe could be directly linked through the transmission of the virus, and HIV infection's highly variable course in different bodies removes the proximity of time normally correlated with proximity of infection in an epidemic. Proximity of infection could replace other ways of reckoning proximity and distance, from geographical and temporal to cultural and political ones. AIDS gave one a stigma that could not be erased and connected the 'closet case' and the hustler or the one-night stand as surely as it did long-time lovers, or the 'innocent' hemophiliac and the anonymous blood donor. AIDS revealed a world that was more interconnected than it had formerly been necessary to admit. This led at first to an upsurge of repressive attitudes towards homosexuals, sex workers, and drug users but more recently it has been forcing the acknowledgment of their intimate interconnection with society as a whole and, consequently, a recognition of our common humanity.

In confronting AIDS, General Idea's project necessarily lost much of its warmth and joy, but it rose to a level of conceptual sophistication and formal rigour – and indeed visual simplicity – that represents, really, the actualization of their larger project's latent potential. AIDS would kill Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz, and with them the collaborative life of General

Idea; but it would not kill the work of General Idea. On the contrary, AIDS would provide General Idea with an opportunity to achieve, for its work, and through it, a very distinct kind of immortality. The occasion for powerful statements about the value of life, the approaching certainty of two of their deaths also afforded General Idea the opportunity to appropriate death itself as an artistic medium: an opportunity which, given its work hitherto, this collaborative was in a uniquely advantageous position to exploit.

The key to the indeterminacy of irony is that each opposing meaning is equally viable. Like a figure and its ground they frame and define each other and join together in a larger, indeterminate totality. The following chapters will chart the trajectory of General Idea's use of this structure, from its earliest works, through the *AIDS Project*, to certain later manifestations that reveal its artistic and poetic importance, and, finally, to its weird and perfect culmination in AA Bronson's *Felix, June 5, 1994*. This last work is at once Bronson's first post-General Idea solo piece and, arguably, General Idea's last will and testament. It sets up a final, perfect indeterminacy that casts all its works – and indeed General Idea's whole career – as one larger work, evading definition. This last piece truly comes full circle in its exploitation of the media via which it is transmitted, to destabilize its context and therefore free itself to move without contexts. The irony of General Idea escapes time and place through this culmination of its concerns: General Idea finds its place precisely because it avoids it.

## CHAPTER 2: IRONY AND TRAVESTY, THE THREE STRATEGIES

The act of finding one's place in a world pervaded by media is about identifying with the right image at the right time. For the last several decades there has been a flow of mediated images and catch-phrases, small fragments of language with symbolic meanings that work like images, on so massive a scale as to create a world that is *surreal* in the original sense of the term.<sup>1</sup> General Idea uses signage in this mediated world to unsettle the normal finding of one's place. Within the domain of sexual identity it is the queer stereotype that lends verisimilitude to 'normal' sexual identities by serving as a distraction from the norms'

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<sup>1</sup>A plane of the imagination where “[c]hance, memory, desire coincidence ... meet in a new reality – a *sur*-reality, in the word [André Breton] borrowed from Apollinaire”(in reviewing the ballet *Parade* (1917) a ‘collaborative’ effort of Pablo Picasso, Erik Satie, Jean Cocteau and Leonid Massine).(See Robert Hughes, *The Shock of The New: Art and The Century of Change* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1991), 213.) Sustained by the simultaneous agreement of millions, a huge fiction overlies the ‘real’ world and, for many, has nearly replaced it. In the last two centuries, through the acceleration of mass media, private fantasies are publicized, mass-produced and mass-disseminated. The world of this now public fantasy is, in a sense, the world we truly inhabit, as subjective and thus symbolic beings. Our senses and imaginations have become effectively the same. As early as 1964, Marshall McLuhan wrote: “Synesthesia, or unified sense and imaginative life, had long seemed an unattainable dream to western poets, painters, and artists in general .... They were not prepared to have their dreams realized in everyday life by the esthetic action of radio and television. Yet these massive extensions of our central nervous systems have enveloped Western man in daily sessions of synesthesia.” (See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*, first edition (Toronto: McGraw Hill, 1964), 315.) We all construct meanings for ourselves out of the signs we find in this environment, but a cunning manipulation of these signs can build for us projectable identities that are sources of power within this mediated world. It is in this ‘surreality’, and from it, that the three artists of General Idea, who deliberately situate themselves in the tradition of McLuhan, established themselves. See General Idea, *General Idea's Reconstructing Futures*, exhibition catalogue and artists book (Toronto: Carmen Lamanna Gallery et al., 1978), n.p.

lack of authenticity.<sup>2</sup> The queer conceals the constructedness of gender. The curator Diana Nemiroff has written:

General Idea's accomplishments rest on their chameleon-like ability to inhabit the available cultural forms, whether this be the street or the museum, and to turn them to their own ends. Their street-savvy intelligence told them which way the art world's wind was blowing, and they never ceased to parody it mercilessly. As gay men and as Canadians, they were acutely conscious of not being at the centre of power, and they turned this "marginal" perspective to critical advantage throughout their career, addressing the structures of the art world, issues of identity and the blind spots of popular culture, in order to stretch and redefine each one.<sup>3</sup>

If something is constructed as 'outside,' there is, we presume, a real and authentic 'inside' within which it does not fit. This 'inside' is not found; rather, it is reified negatively through the constructed exclusion of the outsider. One use of irony, travesty, upsets the established situation by reversing – or even collapsing – positive and negative definitions within the symbolic system. By positively assuming, through parody, some position that does not "read" correctly, travesty reveals that the normal roles are themselves hollow constructions; because it stands outside the recognized system, travesty brings in an unwonted directness of experience, if only through shock value. This direct experience coopts the positive place, in advance, that the normal gender construct would have occupied *virtually* through the

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<sup>2</sup>Rosalyn Deutsche notes how, for Slavoj Žižek, the "Jew" has performed the same function within the fantasies of certain nationalisms. See Deutsche, "Agoraphobia," in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 1996), 278.

<sup>3</sup>Diana Nemiroff, "AA Bronson," *Canada Council* [text on-line] (Ottawa: Canada Council, accessed 21 Sept. 2005); <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/prizes/ggvma/>. It is, of course, the case that General Idea's marginalization, however deeply felt it may or may not have been, is more a pose than a real problem. It is no small irony that it is a former curator at the National Gallery of Canada who writes this about General Idea on the website of the Canada Council for AA Bronson as a Governor General's award winner.

exclusion of the queer. Likewise, in disrupting how one finds one's place, General Idea was making a way for 'three' to find 'three's place,' making a travesty of the construction of the individual genius.<sup>4</sup> Instead of a location in the mediated world, General Idea is present only in a communion and continuity. It is a way of being without being fixed.

General Idea consistently approaches travesty through a concern with the both concrete and conceptual interplay of figure and ground and, ultimately, with an investigation of how the very opposition of these two can be contested at their margin, at the framing edge. This approach is articulated by means of certain strategies. Altogether there are three that I will examine in this chapter. These appear, diminish and reappear at different times in the collaborative's career. But together they all reemerge – and actually combine – in the work dealing with the AIDS crisis. This chapter will therefore explore the strategies as they are found in separate projects prior to 1987, while the next will examine their fusion in the *AIDS Project* after that year. Because of the tendency of these strategies to diminish and then reappear and to emerge at different times and to different extents, it is not convenient to approach General Idea's work in a strictly chronological fashion. I will consider each of the three strategies in turn. They are, in order of discussion, the anagrammatic strategy, the strategy of indeterminacy and what I will call the bathetic strategy.

### **i)The Anagrammatic Strategy**

Much of General Idea's early work was disseminated through *FILE Magazine*(fig.3), which the collaborative founded in 1972, and its concerns, popular culture, glamour and queer

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<sup>4</sup>Peter Gallo, "The Enduring Ephemera of General Idea," *Art in America* (March, 2005): 81.



sexuality, were well suited to this magazine format, which itself was a travesty of *LIFE* (fig.4). The rearranging of the four letters of ‘life’ to read ‘file’ was a puckish interference with others’ work and production. And, in a move which would recur, it appropriated and made mischief with an established copyright. The move from ‘life’ to ‘file’ was also a tongue-in-cheek assertion of a superior military or even fascist discipline. “Life” connotes a measure of freedom and positive values generally. It also suggests a certain disorderliness. And, throughout North America, *LIFE* magazine disseminated ‘straight’ and mainstream American, ‘democratic,’ values. “File,” on the other hand, connotes authoritarianism in various ways. It suggests a dossier, a secret file perhaps. But it also carries the meaning of ‘file’ as in “rank and file,” a military column or, indeed, the ranks and files of rigid, totalitarian control, as in a fascist rally – imagery that would appear throughout General Idea’s work, as will be seen below. If *LIFE* reflected the ways and views of mainstream American society, *FILE* hinted at how the collaborative might reorganize them if it got its way. Literally an anagram of ‘LIFE,’ ‘FILE’ is, more generally, a rearrangement and subversion of the codes found in that publication and in mainstream society altogether.<sup>5</sup> The anagrammatic strategy is not just a

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<sup>5</sup>Rather than allow ‘FILE’ to remain the one, authoritative anagram of ‘LIFE,’ on the cover of the September 1973 issue, (a “Special Paris Edition”) the name read ‘IFEL’ (fig.5), an obvious nod in the direction of “Eiffel” but also a more scrambled anagram, hinting at the ‘puzzle’ of another language. ‘FILE’ remains, therefore, an unstable code, with the potential for many transformations. The anagram is thus not one coded word, but transformative coding generally. The magazine’s cover would not stay stable. 1976 was the bicentennial of the United States and New York City became a kind of gay Mecca that summer. (See Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People and The AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St.Martin’s Press, 1987), 3.) *FILE*’s May edition was designated as the “New York City Edition,” and the logo suitably morphed into one composed of the shiny metal studs in a black leather jacket – redolent of New York’s famous leather bar scene – but also, as a digital version, more subtly suggesting the magazine’s name in lights  
(continued...)

rearranging of letters, but of the priorities implicit in conceptions. A conceptual anagram removes from itself the hierarchy of meanings that allowed the original concept to inhabit an organized ideological system. Employing the anagrammatic strategy allowed General Idea to use the power inherent in established images in counter-conventional ways.

*FILE Magazine* was intended to be misrecognized and mistakenly purchased.<sup>6</sup> When misrecognized, it forced its 'victim,' tricked into being its audience, to acknowledge, however unwillingly, the construction of the norm that *LIFE* had come to represent. After all, because of the *LIFE*-like cover, the reader had been so certain of the magazine's identity as to pick it up without even reading the title. That flow of desire through the 'surreality' of the mediated world – and the satisfaction fleetingly obtained by the purchase of the normal (and normative) magazine – is disrupted when the object of displaced desire turns out to have been wrong.<sup>7</sup> This 'bait and switch' is a particularly puckish act and one calculated to trick

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<sup>5</sup>(...continued)

(fig.6). *FILE* had made it "big time" and hit Broadway. *FILE*'s profile expanded in New York. In fact, many New Yorkers "located somewhere between the Factory and CBGBs" who would later emerge in the New Wave made early appearances in the magazine. See Diedrich Diederichsen, "Glad Rag," trans. Philip Glahn, *Artforum* 40.8 (2002): 108. However, perhaps as a consequence of this, in 1976 *FILE* came to the attention of TimeLife and the corporation initiated proceedings against it for copyright infringement. But after some negative publicity in New York – and perhaps recognizing the smallness of the stakes – TimeLife relented and settled out of court, demanding only that the logo be changed (fig.7). See AA Bronson, interview by author, 24 Oct. 2005 in Appendix, page 120. Ironically, *LIFE* magazine soon changed its own logo, enlarging the letters so that it more closely resembled the new logo of *FILE*.

<sup>6</sup>General Idea, interviewed by Sandra Simpson, in *General Idea: Multiples*, catalogue raisonné: "Multiples and Prints 1967 – 1993" (Toronto: S.K. Simpson Gallery, 1993), n.p.

<sup>7</sup>*LIFE* reaches the apex of defining a rigidly gendered North American normality of identity with its cover of 7 April, 1952, featuring Marilyn Monroe, "the talk of Hollywood" (fig.8). The 'normal' male or female purchaser, in buying the magazine, is

(continued...)

the reader but deny any legitimate ground for complaint. The reader cannot escape the fact that he or she was careless in purchasing the magazine. General Idea began as a practical joke played on its immediate neighbours when the trio shared a house on Toronto's Gerrard Street. (The house had once been a store and had a large shop window. The three artists would set up fake window displays in ever-changing, pretend shops that always seemed to be closed, with a sign that consistently promised "back in five minutes.")<sup>8</sup> But while the collaborative's work always retained traces of this manipulative approach to its audience, *FILE* represents a key development in its tactics (or antics). Rather than merely deceiving the magazine's accidental purchasers, General Idea actually dupes this hapless reader; that is, it uses their readers' own immersion in the 'surreal' fantasy of the media-world to implicate them in their own deception, reminding them of their inattention and thereby drawing attention to the operations of this symbolic order.

*FILE* described itself as "an alternative to the alternative press."<sup>9</sup> The critic Diederich Diederichsen sees *FILE*'s early focus on travesty and glamour as prototypical of the New Wave of David Byrne and industrial music, and observes that "[a] favourite topic of the avant-gardist New Wave, totalitarianism and mass discipline (particularly as it was manifested in architecture and design that was ambivalently fascist ...) appears in a variety of mostly

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<sup>7</sup>(...continued)

acquiring either a substitute for the ideal object or a substitute for their ideal gender identity. This image of Monroe established her as the glamorous standard of ideal American womanhood, an exchange whereby both Monroe and *LIFE* consolidate their respective statuses. *FILE*'s queer irony hijacks *LIFE*'s(Norma)tivity.

<sup>8</sup>Bronson, interview, 103.

<sup>9</sup>Diederichsen, 104.

humorous forms” in *FILE magazine*.<sup>10</sup> New Wave was itself, in part, a more mainstream continuity of older queer forms, such as drag queening, and of a look and style derived from sadomasochism.<sup>11</sup> Interest in Nazism itself has had a longstanding presence in queer culture. It is found most frequently in the leather scene but also in early queer artwork and film.<sup>12</sup> Working from the gender norms of post-war pop culture, military drag and, in the leather scene, Nazi, skinhead and biker guises, queer travesty turns those forms around and makes them a vehicle for asserting gender or sexual differences.<sup>13</sup> Queer culture manipulates one taboo to help alleviate the effects of another; and it does so with a clear sense of entitlement to the use of this imagery. The more powerful shock of Nazi imagery distracts a mainstream audience’s attention from the queer content of queer imagery, which it would otherwise

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 107-108.

<sup>11</sup> General Idea’s work and publications in the 70s often look like music videos and glamour advertising of the 80s. Overall, being ahead of its time - both figuratively and literally - has been a hallmark of General Idea. (*Ibid.* 107-8.) Of this later mainstream imagery, one example would be the video for the Eurythmics’ “Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)” (1983) with its use cross-dressing, clear dominatrix and flagellation references and an overall mood of totalitarian, technocratic discipline and suggestions of Orwellian constant surveillance, even in sleep. The look of this video – and the sound of the single – would inform Michael Radford’s film of *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* the following year. This connection is not incidental: the Eurythmics were partly responsible for the film’s soundtrack. See Michael Radford, dir., *George Orwell’s Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, film, starring John Hurt and Richard Burton (Virgin Cinema Film Ltd. (U.K.), 1984).

<sup>12</sup>In Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising*, for instance (1964). This should in no way be understood as implying any sympathy with the aims of Nazism, but only of the adoption of some of its modes and outward forms in a sublimated act of resistance. Jorge Zontal’s father, a Sephardic Jew, had been an inmate at Auschwitz: it seems to me unreasonable to suppose that his son’s playful appropriation of Nazi imagery should be thought to be even ambiguously pro-Nazi. (See Fern Bayer, “The Search for The Spirit,” *The Search for The Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 23.) In fact, Jorge had been born in an Italian concentration camp. See Bronson, interview, 118.

<sup>13</sup> See Shaun Cole, *‘Don We Now Our Gay Apparel’: Gay Men’s Dress in The Twentieth Century* (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2000), 174.

refuse to acknowledge.<sup>14</sup> Nazi content, in our culture, is subject to the stronger taboo and so by wrapping queer messages around ironic Nazi ones, General Idea smuggles in the queer meanings, playing one taboo against another.

In *FILE*, after 1975 known as a *megazine*,<sup>15</sup> Nazism makes a characteristically funny appearance. On the Fall 1979 cover, above the caption “Billy wears a moustache at the Colour Bar Lounge,” is the image *Nazi Milk* (fig.9). A blonde boy is depicted wearing the narrow tie and leather sash of the uniform of a member of the Hitler Youth. He is ‘cute,’ seductive and harmless-looking and he has just had a sip from a huge glass of milk, leaving a small, square, white moustache on his upper lip. This situation invites the boy (or another) to lick off the moustache and, as the thick whiteness of the milk has another, seminal connotation, his huge glass of milk takes on an exaggerated phallic character. Peter Gallo notes that this image plays subversively with innocence and corruption. He writes:

For the *Colour Bar Lounge*'s debut at the 1979 Basel Art fair ... six lounge decor images [were published], including the famous *Nazi Milk* (1979), which features an altered photograph of a uniformed blond boy, a glass of milk in his hand, the residue of milk above his lip an explicitly Hitlerian trace. The dairy industry's more recent “Got Milk?” ad campaign, which shows healthy, smiley models with milk mustaches who extol the presumed health benefits of the beverage, acquire a certain uncanniness in light of General Idea's earlier image.<sup>16</sup>

Actually, this work was itself a direct response to the “Wear a Moustache” campaign by the Canadian Milk Marketing Board of 1975.<sup>17</sup> The phrase “Billy wears a moustache at the

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<sup>14</sup>Kathryn Rosenfeld, “Triple Self-Portrait (-2),” *New Art Examiner* 28, no.10 (2001): 81.

<sup>15</sup>Diederichsen, 104.

<sup>16</sup>Gallo, 82.

<sup>17</sup>Gray Grey, interviewed by Kelly Ryan, “Sounds Like Canada,” *CBC Radio I*,

(continued...)

Colour Bar Lounge” is a direct citation of it. Of course, by selecting a certain infamous moustache for Billy to wear, General Idea was hijacking this campaign as well as citing it. This image plays on a nexus of associations beyond its sexual connotations: milk as wholesome; milk as the drink of children, of innocents; Nazism as a slaughter of the innocents; Nazism as defining itself in terms of health and wholesomeness; milk as *white*. Innocence and corruption, gentleness and brutality, victim and victimizer, these contrasting themes are brought right up against each other and they define, on their borders, a radical indeterminacy.

This image had several incarnations but was always conceived as the centrepiece of a marketing campaign for a fictitious product called ‘Nazi Milk,’ which was to be served in the Colour Bar, an imaginary, dystopian drinking establishment explored in General Idea’s 1979 video *Test Tube*. The Bar was imagined as a laboratory where the customers are guinea pigs and are served drinks for which they might not wish to have the recipes. (“Golden Shower,” for example, named for a fringe but not uncommon S & M practice, is listed as the Bar’s most popular concoction. Its name strongly implies that there could be an unpleasant aftertaste if the general public were to fully understand what it was they were imbibing.) In the Colour Bar Lounge the Billy image would have been a poster advertisement. Nazi Milk

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<sup>17</sup>(...continued)

radio broadcast, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, aired 26 July 2005. It is interesting that General Idea used this particular image to challenge and tease their audience. In this interview, Grey reveals that when conducting market research in the mid-seventies, leading up to the milk marketing campaign, focus groups reported that wearing a milk moustache was widely perceived as a rebellious gesture, mocking and showing contempt for authority. In making an fascist, authoritarian icon out of a gesture of independence, General Idea were establishing an indeterminate expression of power dynamics. In the encounter with this image, the position of authority is up for grabs.

was to be the final product of this unethical beverage company. It is typical of General Idea to allow all meanings of powerful, controversial imagery to stand and be operative in its art. Here Nazi imagery stands, comically, for the exaggerated “fascism” of the ‘control freak’<sup>18</sup> but it keeps its real, potent connotations as well, tacitly suggesting Hitler’s killing program.<sup>19</sup> Work like this is not just edgy but potentially scandalous. It is highly volatile, as irony itself is, and evades all attempts to fix its meanings. The innocence and playfulness of the image both invites and confounds a censorious reaction: the image is harmless enough to be acceptable and to suggest that anyone disturbed by it would be overreacting, but risky enough that one can never be entirely comfortable with it.

The name “Nazi Milk” consists of two four-letter words that are mirror opposites in terms of their commonplace associations, exemplifying the ironic instability and implying in health poison and in poison sustenance. Its title reflects the dilemma the image poses. Words can have positive and negative ‘charges,’ in terms of their connotations, and here two words of extremely different charge are presented so as to be identified. ‘Nazi’ and ‘milk’ resist their proximity, and so the title, like the image, is highly volatile. The energy contained in their

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<sup>18</sup>Elsewhere, General Idea engage in elaborate presentations and make videos in which it trained and orchestrated its audience to react appropriately. (See below, 38) In the *Colour Bar Lounge*, it go so far as to design and then distribute a particular glass from which ‘Nazi Milk’ is to be drunk (fig. 10).

<sup>19</sup>The Colour Bar Lounge’s own name becomes a chilling possible reference to IG Farben. The word “*Farben*” means “colours” in German and the inversion of G.I. and “IG” looks suspicious. The infamous German concern, originally a dye manufacturer and once the largest chemical conglomerate in the world, became notorious for its supporting role during the Third Reich and as the developer and manufacturer of Zyklon-B, in particular. The company financed the Nazi regime but was seen as particularly odious for its participation in and indeed facilitation of the Holocaust. Unlike other key war industries (such as Porsche), IG Farben was split up after the World War II. Its divisions continue today, however, as the major firms Agfa, Bayer and BASF, among others.

enforced association corresponds to the energy contained in the powerful but indecipherable message of the poster: the two words become scrambled codes for each other, embodying the restless energy of the protean anagram captured for an instant in the move from *LIFE* to *FILE*.<sup>20</sup> *Nazi Milk* is not a literal but a conceptual anagram that finds in its travesty a sinister undertone: it hints at the arbitrariness of our moral investments. Innocence and guilt are both undermined. This subversive meaning is hidden behind the harmless mask of Billy. The milk moustache, signifying both the easy innocence of childhood and the immense guilt of Nazism in a beautifully tight condensation of the two associations, is just an ephemeral trace, due to be licked off at any moment. The arbitrariness of this sign – as distinct from its power – is indicated by the fact that a cropped Hitler moustache is impossible to obtain by drinking from a glass of milk.<sup>21</sup> Any such dark implications remain on the threshold of doubt. General Idea deploys the anagrammatic strategy so as to leave the audience to draw any scandalous inference. We are left to doubt whether we have we deciphered the image correctly. We must ask: are we misrecognizing the signs again? Are we in on the joke?

## ii) The Strategy of Indeterminacy

Among General Idea's very earliest works was *Carmen* (1969) (fig. 11).<sup>22</sup> In the series to which this work belongs the ziggurat motif, which would recur in its work until the eighties, is seen for the first time.<sup>23</sup> The ziggurat figures make *Carmen* appear – on a superficial level – like high modernist art. They are flat, geometrical shapes, arranged in a

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<sup>20</sup>As qualified as unstable by the further anagram '*IFEL*.'

<sup>21</sup>You can try this at home.

<sup>22</sup>Named for Carmen Lamanna, a Toronto art dealer with whom G.I. exhibited.

<sup>23</sup>Tim Guest, "From Ziggurats to Curlicues: A Few Principle Features in The Art of General Idea," in *General Idea: 1968-1984* (Basel: Kunsthalle, 1984), 18.



purely two-dimensional pictorial space; but this work does not “read” properly. *Carmen* is dripping with queer content. The “fluorescent” colour works against “the order of the Ziggurat system.”<sup>24</sup> Black and white are a classic combination in geometrical abstractionism, but fluorescent colours are not, and especially not hot pink. Pink is a blatant queer reference and there is even a subtle transvestitism suggested in the pattern: the stepped edges of the ziggurat shapes recall the cuts made by fabric scissors and thereby seem to introduce the subtlest suggestion of a dressmaker’s craft at work in the macho form of large-scale, minimalist painting.<sup>25</sup> Tim Guest writes that “[t]he ziggurat represents a basic conceptual formula, each zig-zag fits neatly and equally into the next in even mathematical order, like an easy puzzle.”<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, this work is out of place: each zig-zag edge is a frustrated diagonal. The content resists the framework that gives rise to it, just as the fluorescent colours stand out from the picture plane, floating somewhere in front of it, imperfectly assimilated.

Guest continues:

These paintings, simple as they are, operate on the borderline between the harmony of geometry and the discordance of the colour in the eye’s reception. They suggest a dialectical relation between continuity and chaos, and between order and disorder. And having been produced in 1968 they introduce these as basic elements in General Idea’s system of thought.<sup>27</sup>

The failure to successfully be either part of two mutually-enforcing oppositions while at the same time *almost* being both, is characteristic of queer irony, and introduces this concept even

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<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>In fact these ziggurats would soon develop in exactly this direction with the advent of General Idea’s ziggurat-inspired *VB Gown* (1975).

<sup>26</sup>Guest, 18. As to the 1968 date: General Idea would retroactively include works made prior to its founding as a formal collaborative in its *oeuvre*. See Bronson, interview, 103.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

into the geometrical vocabulary of General Idea. *Carmen* traced across itself a rational grid into which the ziggurat shapes, naturally triangles, have here been awkwardly forced. Thus, the ziggurat order resists itself. Each ziggurat is also an unsuccessful triangle, a shape whose failure to be a triangle defines the organizing grid even while its latent potential to be one undermines it.

Indeterminacy, visually, is an optical illusion. Contrasting colours of equivalent chroma create dizzying, vibrating and three-dimensional mirages. But, conceptually, indeterminacy – which is also sometimes called undecidability<sup>28</sup> – undermines binary or dialectical systems. Although Guest claims that these paintings suggest “a dialectical relation between continuity and chaos, and between order and disorder,” dialectics work according to the interaction of opposing meanings – not between meanings and meaninglessness, or between order and chaos. A dialectical system is of necessity a logical and thus an ordered one. General Idea sides with indeterminacy rather than with dialectics. In visual terms, dialectics could at best be understood to mean the play of different systems, modes or strategies of representation, in this case, perhaps, of colour and design. General Idea deploys a strategy of indeterminacy to interfere with the interplay of these features. Thus, in *Carmen*, design and colour are not in a dialectical relationship but evince irreconcilable differences.

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<sup>28</sup>According to Jacques Derrida, this undecidability is a property of what he calls ‘writing’ but may be found wherever there is a “free play” within any systems of communication. “Writing is the endless displacement of meaning which both governs language and places it for ever beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge.” (Christopher Norris, “Jacques Derrida: Language Against Itself” in *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), 29.) ‘Writing,’ however much it may resemble them, *must* therefore be incompatible with dialectics, as they are inherently teleological but the displacement of ‘writing’ is *endless*.

General Idea uses the strategy of indeterminacy, here, in a visual way and also in conceptual ways; later it will be used in ways that disorder normal, framing ideas about both time and space.

*FILE Magazine* served as the launch pad for the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* (1972-1984).<sup>29</sup> From this point forward, throughout the entire Miss General Idea enterprise, the collaborative would increasingly move in a manner derived from Marcel Duchamp against the integrity of the singular, individual artwork.<sup>30</sup> Miss General Idea was the *alter ego* of the collaborative, its plurality in a singular guise.<sup>31</sup> The concept of having a pageant for her annual personifications originated in 1970 with an exercise in which various of General Idea's friends and acquaintances were invited to submit entries for a beauty contest: the *1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*. Sixteen application kits were sent in a mail art project to members of General Idea's 'public'; of these, the collaborative received twelve entries and one rejection, but three would-be contestants did not even bother to respond.<sup>32</sup> The concept took root quickly, however, after a retrospective 'documentation' at Toronto's A Space Gallery, and the *1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* was held in the Art Gallery of Ontario. A certain dislocation as to time would enter with the second pageant and was to remain a hallmark of the entire Miss

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<sup>29</sup>General Idea consistently misspells 'pavilion' as 'pavillion.' The double 'l' indicates the French word 'pavillon' but G.I.'s spelling includes the second 'i.' It may be regarded as a fanciful choice expressing the affectation that pervades much of the collaborative's work. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) s.v. "pavilion." (Hereafter *OED*.)

<sup>30</sup>Gallo, 81.

<sup>31</sup>In fact she is directly compared with Marcel Duchamp's own female *alter ego*, Rose Sélavy. See, for example, Gallo, 81.

<sup>32</sup>Eugenio Filice, "Figurations of Ethics, Configurations of Power: Michel Foucault, Attila Richard Lukacs and the New Painting," unpublished PhD dissertation, McGill University (2002), 4.

General Idea enterprise. Granada Gazelle was on hand as *Miss General Idea 1969*.<sup>33</sup> There never had been such a contest. Later on, even a *Miss General Idea 1968* would emerge, although General Idea had itself only been organized in 1970.<sup>34</sup> A “Marcel Idea” (in a straightforward Duchampian reference) was declared to be *Miss General Idea 1971-83* to alleviate the need to hold any more pageants, and from this point onwards all the collaborative’s work would go into the development of a fantastic pavilion projected for 1984. This imaginary pavilion would be the centrepiece of the first phase of its work.

The *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* also brings to a point of fruition the indeterminacy that the collaborative had previously sown in respect to time. Its public was beginning to get used to the plans and rehearsals for the 1984 pageant and pavilion, but General Idea has always depended on being able to surprise or upset its public.<sup>35</sup> And so it changed course and projected that a future disaster had in some way already befallen the pavilion. Starting initially as a fire,<sup>36</sup> the disaster soon evolved into an earthquake and, eventually into some kind of Vesuvian cataclysm. The smoldering ‘footprint’ of the pavilion was first exhibited in 1977, when the calamity was imagined as a fire (fig. 12). The Silver Bar was one of the key areas of the pavilion, and its ruins were exhibited in Toronto in 1980, when rubble and fragments of other objects, all painted silver, were installed behind a building

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<sup>33</sup>General Idea, “‘How Our Mascots Love to Humiliate Us’ ... Revelations From The Doghouse,” in *General Idea: 1968-1984* (Basel: Kunsthalle, 1984), 27.

<sup>34</sup>Mimi Paige would be revealed as such in General Idea’s video “Hot Property,” filmed in 1979.

<sup>35</sup>Jean-Christophe Amman, “The Life and Work of Miss General Idea,” in *General Idea: 1968-1984* (Basel: Kunsthalle, 1984), 13.

<sup>36</sup>Guest, 18.

scheduled for demolition in a project called *Toronto's Fault* (fig. 13).<sup>37</sup> The name plays on the idea that the devastation had been caused by an earthquake, but also that it was some kind of supernatural punishment for the pavilion project's hubris and megalomania. In its imagined total control of the audience's behavior at the pavilion, General Idea were casting themselves as totalitarians. Video projects affiliated with the pavilion – such as *Blocking* (1974), *Going Thru The Motions* (1975) and *Towards an Audience Vocabulary* (1977) – are all attempts to achieve perfect obedience on the audience's part.<sup>38</sup> Nazism was in some ways built on an aesthetic sensibility that imagines itself in some post-future time in glorious ruins: it has an aesthetic of sublimated (though also historically realized) self-destruction.<sup>39</sup> General Idea fuses this *Götterdämmerung* with the futuristic hyper-totalitarianism of *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. The pavilion's destruction is imagined as a future holocaust, though a 'natural' one, that happens to gay victims. In retrospect, it is an eerie premonition. The collaborative was making

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<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>38</sup>Filice, 4-5.

<sup>39</sup>See Peter Cohen, dir., *The Architecture of Doom [Architektur des Untergangs]*, videocassette, POJ Film Produktion AB, 1990. Public edifices conceived and, though less frequently, built during the Third Reich were intentionally designed so as to decay into awesome ruins. From structures such as the gargantuan and fantastical domed hall intended for Berlin or a stadium for four hundred thousand spectators to be built at Nuremberg to public buildings of more reasonable dimensions, materials and construction techniques were carefully chosen so as to ensure the appropriate kind of eventual collapse. Albert Speer, Hitler's architect (and eventually the 'architect' of German war production) wrote: "The idea was that buildings of modern construction were poorly suited to form that "bridge to tradition" to future generations which Hitler was calling for.... My ["Theory of Ruin Value"] was intended to deal with this dilemma. By using special materials and by applying certain principles of statics, we should be able to build structures which even in a state of decay, after hundreds or (such were our reckonings) thousands of years would more or less resemble Roman models." (Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs by Albert Speer*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 56.)

artworks about the destruction of artworks it had yet to make, an appropriation of time itself as a formal property of the artwork.

Time would become more 'out of joint' as the project developed and by the early 80s, the destruction of the Pavillion was seen as the wholesale destruction of some ancient civilization. In a series of works, called 'archeological,' small fragments, usually displaying the poodle mascot General Idea was beginning to adopt, were exhibited in museum display cases (fig. 14). These archeological works recall the destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79CE.<sup>40</sup> Various new rooms are imagined to have been discovered in the (now ancient) ruins of the pavilion. One such room, suggestively called the Room with the Unknown Function, has a mural modeled on a famous example from the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii. In *The Unveiling of the Cornucopia: A Mural Fragment from the Room with the Unknown Function in The Villa dei Misteri of The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* (1982) (fig. 15), poodles, each with the lascivious "hand of the spirit,"<sup>41</sup> replace the female figures of the Pompeii mural (fig. 16). Other long-term cultural forces are revealed to be at work: even this 'ancient' fresco contains, in the background, the stepped ziggurat motif. A vast range of time is completely confused by these archeological projects: the ancient is in the future, but seen in ruins in the present.

The *Showcard Series* was a portable (and highly rearrange-able) method for envisaging

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<sup>40</sup>Bronson, interview, 115.

<sup>41</sup>The theme of the 1984 pageant was to be the "Spirit" of Miss General Idea and a logo had been developed for it. The *Hand of The Spirit* appeared on all plans and blueprints for the pavilion after 1975. The pointy-fingered cartoon hand always seems to be groping something lasciviously. Inserted into this scene based on the sadomasochistic initiation rite of a Pompeiian fertility cult, it looks particularly naughty.

the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. Each card superimposes a photograph or illustration onto a standard card form, which is filled out differently for each image. This standardized card itself displays a grid, rather like that of a table from a ledger or else like a graph, and it has a number of information boxes. Certain areas on each card are highlighted, including a large area for the image and a somewhat smaller text box. Both these areas have ziggurat-derived zig-zag patterns. In one example, (number) *I-083*, "*It's Time for Another Re-Write*" (1977) (fig. 17), the image and text describe the pavilion's disaster when it is imagined as a fire. In others, different aspects of the pavilion are seen. Several showcards explore the totalitarian control that is beginning to be asserted in this increasingly Orwellian pavilion. Showcard *I-112*, "*Giving The Audience a Hand*" even displays an image where the audience is giving the Hitler salute at a Nuremberg Rally (albeit with the swastikas erased). But in the first card in the series, number *I-001*, the collaborative explicitly links the multiple and repeating character of these images with the overall project of General Idea itself. Under the title-heading "*General Idea*," the trio explains itself in this showcard's text:

General Idea is basically this: a framing device within which we inhabit the role of the artist as we see the living legend. We can be expected to do what is expected within these bounds. We are aware of the limitations of this and refer to it as our Frame of Reference and act accordingly behind the lines. Projecting our roles gives us some perspective to start with so we can see clear to project our frames frame by frame.

The 'universal' frame of the grid suggests a method whereby each individual image can be quantifiably known but that it is *series* reveals that each image is itself insufficient. The sequence of framing, projected cinematically "frame by frame," implies a near-endless recess and the failure of each individual instance of framing.

The pavilion brought the strategy of indeterminacy, tentatively explored in the *Carmen* series of paintings and occasionally in *FILE*, to such a level that it could be identified with General Idea *per se*. Yet the point is that indeterminacy itself means that this identification can never be stable. In the video *General Idea's Hot Property* (1980) the collaborative explains its program for the 1984 pavilion by revealing that it discovered that, rather than building an integrated pavilion themselves, it could instead construct it in various museum contexts, symbiotically or even parasitically inhabiting "other people's architecture."<sup>42</sup> In the well-known "Glamour" issue of *FILE*, General Idea described its earlier strategy of inhabiting popular cultural forms: "We are obsessed with available form. We manoeuvre hungrily, conquering the uncontested territory of culture's forgotten shells: beauty pageants, pavillions, picture magazines, and other contemporary corpses. Like parasites we animate these dead bodies and speak in alien tongues."<sup>43</sup> The collaborative is like the hermit crab that has moved into a discarded Coca-Cola can. But later, in the architectural manifestations associated with the 1984 pavilion, the strategy does not just appropriate and subvert but actually defines a new dimension of cultural space. The *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* is not just opportunistically constructed within available, existing museum space: it is connected across the space between the installations of its diverse component rooms, exhibited separately, and across the intervening time as different exhibits happen over a number of years. A plan exists for how these component parts are to be assembled, but the audience and the collaborative fill in and thereby collapse the intervening time and space by visiting the various installations.

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<sup>42</sup>General Idea, *General Idea's Hot Property*, videorecording (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1980).

<sup>43</sup>General Idea, "Glamour," *FILE Magazine* 3.1 (1975): 32. See also Nemiroff.



A kind of circuit is established, almost like the Stations of the Cross, where the audience must pay homage to Miss General Idea in an elaborate pilgrimage to imaginatively construct her temple. The real spaces and distances of the world are thus imaginatively disestablished as the pavilion takes shape, and are reduced to an imaginary dimension within the complete pavilion; the ‘flip side’ of the imaginary pavilion’s decentralized architecture. Ultimately, only in destruction does the pavilion find a location – somewhere outside Kingston, Ontario. Yet, as it was never really assembled, and so the pavilion remains undestroyed. Its timeline and locale have become so confused that it never has to exist anywhere in order to exist eternally, everywhere.

Time and space are always only imagined. Numbers, abstract shapes, angles and vectors describe them in mathematics as ideas and concepts, equally artificial constructions, are defined by words in language and thought. Reordering these constructions, the collaborative found that it was possible to create an alternative ‘reality.’ By means of the strategy of indeterminacy the plan could be substituted, like a decoy, for the reality.

### **iii) The Bathetic Strategy**

‘Bathos’ is defined as an “unintentional lapse in mood from the sublime to the absurd or trivial” or “a commonplace or ridiculous feature offsetting an otherwise sublime situation.”<sup>44</sup> Throughout the history of art, works have paid homage to great predecessors by indicating or echoing them. They have sought by means of this both to locate themselves in an exalted tradition and enhance the authority of their models. Bathos is the opposite strategy whereby a work seeks to mock and belittle the great cultural achievements of the past in order

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<sup>44</sup>*OED* s.v. “Bathos.”

to insinuate itself. Although it had been a mainstay of satire and caricature, bathos was very uncommon in ‘fine’ visual arts before the last century.<sup>45</sup> The most obvious artist to employ bathos was certainly Marcel Duchamp; in *Fountain* (1917) he notoriously imported a urinal into the domain of fine art. But in 1919 Duchamp produced his *Assisted Ready-Made (L.H.O.O.Q.)* (fig. 18), a postcard reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* with, in the classic bathetic gesture, a moustache and beard penciled on the face, as well as the addition of the five letters of its title in a caption beneath the image. The result is a work that exists as much in the sound of the words “Elle a chaud au cul” (“She’s got a hot ass”), and the gesture of defacing the postcard, as in its objecthood. General Idea’s use of the bathetic strategy works so that the audience is either left in some doubt as to what they were really seeing or else unable to acknowledge some vulgar implication. While in no way unintentional, General Idea’s deployment of bathos is supposed to seem deniably inadvertent; the viewer is generally left to wonder whether it may only be his or her perversity that attributes rude or even offensive connotations to ostensibly innocent works of art.

While they were always somewhat naughty, General Idea’s poodles were not, at first, bathetic figures. G.I. has “aimed to prod the art world’s refusal to acknowledge the queer content and meaning of its works”<sup>46</sup> and in the print series *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*, for example (fig. 19), General Idea arranged, repeatedly, its poodle mascots and stand-ins in undeniably sexual poses. The identification of General Idea with these dogs had been preestablished. These poodles are “queer animal analogs,” according to Kathryn Rosenfeld

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<sup>45</sup>Arguably the Realist tradition and works by Edouard Manet, notably *Olympia* (1863), evince a bathetic undertone, for example.

<sup>46</sup>Rosenfeld, 81.

and she observes that they express the love and “creative and emotion symbiosis” among the three artists.<sup>47</sup> Rosenfeld writes: “The expressionless dogs seem to be saying, ‘do you get it yet? How about now? Now?’”<sup>48</sup> The mechanicalness of these poodles, however, and the serial variation of their positions in different prints, also implies a blasé, sex-for-sex-sake automatism.

Poodles were also used in other works, in ways increasingly vulgar. The urinary theme of the “Golden Shower” cocktail at the *Colour Bar Lounge* would return. Funny, in a truly juvenile way but funny none the less, is the title of *P is for Poodle* (1983) (fig. 20). This work presents the golden silhouette of a poodle. Once again equating ‘golden’ and urine, a circle inscribed around the figure reminds us – as does the golden frame – that, for dogs, urination is a demarcation of territory. The rude joke becomes just another ‘framing device,’ exploring the interplay of figure and ground. *Canus Major: The Origin of the Heavenly Waters* (1983), lovely just as a physical object (fig.21), is, though cryptically, even more vulgar in its title. While it sounds, at first, like the name of some dog constellation, the Latin word for dog is actually “*canis*,” with an “i.” The title is thus a Latinization of the slang term “can” for toilet. The work’s genuine prettiness, as a piece of painting and of framing, resonates ironically with this crude joke. The collaborative makes it difficult but not impossible for its audience to disavow its toilet humour, which becomes analogous to its queerness. The audience’s reception (or mis-reception) of General Idea’s work is always part of a larger ‘piece’ that mocks its art world public. Bathos enters when the ‘high’ world of art is made low through

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<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

an increasing use of toilet humour.

*Three Graces* (1982) (fig.22) links the archeological work with various periods of high art. Yet, in a move recalling Duchamp again, the art world is teased with various bathetic gestures. The tradition of the Three Graces is itself a mainstay of Western art and, importantly, it is associated with the very highest ideals of successive periods of Western civilization.<sup>49</sup> Here there are three poodles, similar to those in the Pompeii-like mural and each with the “hand of the spirit.” By substituting its members for the Graces, General Idea is identifying itself with art *per se*. The vessel being emptied on the left, however, is actually a cornucopia, a phallic symbol. The suggestion is both urinary and – not much more subtly – masturbatory, especially as it is being groped by that “hand of the spirit.”<sup>50</sup> On the right, the crescent moon cannot connote an untarnished virginity: two busy “hands of the spirit” are fondling it too conspicuously and too lustily. This moon is ‘moonin’ us. Not only can the flow from the cornucopia have a urinary meaning but, as its ground is a series of wooden planks, the surface of this work is itself a fence, suggesting either a squalid back-alley quickie or the collaborative “pissing on” the very artwork that it itself embodies while at the same time ‘marking its place.’ Works of art are referenced, from Antiquity to Botticelli, Raphael,

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<sup>49</sup>The three *Charites* (in Greek) and *Gratiae* (in Latin) were Aglaea, Euphrosyne and Thalia. Associated with the Muses, they were goddesses of creativity, arts, fecundity, and charm. Later the Roman Graces came to be identified with Faith, Hope and Charity in Christian iconography. However, in Renaissance manifestations such as Botticelli’s *Primavera* they can be understood both as symbolizing the revival of fertility with the coming of spring and the renewal of the classical arts in the Florentine Renaissance. See Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995) 154-155.

<sup>50</sup> The Graces were also associated with the fertility cults of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Thus, while their presence in General Idea’s work is parodic, the sexual flagrancy does actually recall their earliest role as patronesses of sexual productivity. The irony here is that General Idea takes the tradition *too* literally.

Rubens and, ultimately, Jasper Johns. The nine round figures atop the panels refer both to the central figure of Johns's famous *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955) (fig.23) and the nine movable casts themselves.<sup>51</sup> The urinary theme of these works may be crude but it is apt: General Idea was declaring its intention both to engage in a disingenuous "pissing contest" with art world's leaders and heroes while "taking the piss out of" the art world, by actually putting it in. And if this came across as shameless or even animalistic, what could have been more appropriate to the spirit of the 1980's?

*Shut The Fuck Up*, a video produced in 1984, does not at first sound promising as a step towards greater subtlety, but certain sophisticated ironies emerge with this work. The video centres on a presentation of General Idea's *XXX Blue*, (fig.24) performed in Geneva in 1984, in which each member of the trio painted a large 'X' on a giant canvas using, as a brush, one of three stuffed poodles made by a taxidermist, leaving the paint-soaked poodles and three giant 'X's. The video consists of several parts but the main one is a sequence of alternating statements by Felix Partz and AA Bronson, describing the project, before Jorge Zontal breaks in with an angry speech at the end. As elsewhere, in this video the 'talking heads' of the General Idea members are seen in front of the colour separation of the upper part of a television test pattern, derived from the identical approach in the earlier video *Test Tube* (1979). Zontal's concluding speech is an injunction warning the audience and, in

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<sup>51</sup>Connecting of its work through parody with that of other artists, including sometimes its own contemporaries, would now emerge as the main strategy of General Idea. General Idea's own referencing of Johns's piece becomes a usurpation of John's own ironic theme of displacement. See Max Kozloff, "Johns and Duchamp," in *Duchamp in Perspective: Writings on Duchamp by Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Clement Greenberg, John Cage, Octavio Paz & Others*, Joseph Masheck, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2002), 139-40. See also Hughes, 337-341.

particular the arts media, not to try to explain that which cannot be explained.<sup>52</sup> At one point Bronson states that the arts media, which do not understand their role in the joke, are “just another straight man,”<sup>53</sup> implying both their role as the stooge and as being excluded from the “discursive community” of queer irony. But apart from some knowing word-play like this, the exchange is a very literal exposition of the work’s thematic texture. Partz explains the multiple associations of the triple ‘X’s: ‘XXX’ stands for “poison,” for “kisses,” for “targets,” as a “signature” and as an “epitaph.”<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, however, he leaves out the obvious erotic suggestions both of ‘XXX’ and of ‘blue.’

The performance was a reenactment of Yves Klein’s “1958 *Anthropométries*, in which the French artist slathered his lovely female models with ‘International Klein Blue’ paint and, using them as “living brushes,’ publicly performed large-scale action paintings.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>52</sup>Handily explaining the effect of the work but (ironically) why no one should ever attempt to explain it, Zontal says: “Who can put the pieces together again? You can put the pieces together again. When you get the joke, you break up. *You* break up. Everything turns upside-down, inside-out....One set of relationships turns into another, the new, emergent meaning and the old, retiring meaning, engaged in a battle of wits ... on the borderline between content and context...The pieces of the puzzle just don’t add up, they just don’t add up. Are you listening? Are *you* listening? Do you get the picture? Do *you* get the picture? Do you know what to say? Do you know what to say when there is nothing to say? When there is nothing to say, shut the fuck up!” General Idea, *Shut the Fuck Up*.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>Gallo, 82. This work contains many parodic aspects but it belongs to a tradition of diverse engagements with Klein’s work on General Idea’s part. (see Chapter 3, page 84, note 19). The interest in Klein derived both from his artistic personality and the opportunities to respond to his use of International Klein Blue paint, a colour with especially mystical importance for the French-Czech artist. (See below.) An over-saturated ultramarine, this colour radiates like a blacklight. It is so powerful that in a painting like *Monochrome I* (1960) it can only be a window into an endless field of colour. The frame cannot contain the chromatic intensity and so it is completely undermined by it. The

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more than an epitaph, 'XXX' explicitly means "dead." A single 'X' can indicate a closed eye and so 'XXX' may also indicate a triple wink. The three taxidermed poodles are supposed to be dead as opposed to Klein's "living brushes."<sup>56</sup> The poodle, as an effete beast, may be a "queer animal analog" but these standing dead poodles (figs.25,26) also recall the blatant homosexual meaning of Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* (1955-9), a taxidermed goat stuffed through a sphincter-like tire (fig.27). General Idea juxtaposes a queer figure with the unacknowledged 'straight' subtext of Klein's naked models. Tim Guest writes:

Throughout all of their work we find a mixture of darkness and sentimentality, a kind of sweet fatalism tugging at the viewer incongruously beneath the hard surfaces and conceptual strategies, besides all of the hysterical antics and smart talk. The underlying feeling of General Idea's art is not dissimilar to Yves Klein's blue monochromes: a sensation of transience, of a poetic mortality, poignant, immaterial and exquisite.<sup>57</sup>

Not quite: General Idea does not suppress either side of the allusion. The materiality of the allusive element is as important as that to which it alludes. What General Idea is doing with the lurid, ostensibly dead dog carcasses is reminding the audience in the most brutal way of the *material* reality of Klein's "brushes." After all, the collaborative is repeating not so much the final painting as the public performance of its production. It reminds us that the naked girls frolicking on a canvas – itself so suggestive of a bed sheet – is also a display of erotica verging on soft pornography. Such displays tend to be called "immaterial and exquisite" when they have a heterosexual character. Female nudity for a male audience has always meant 'art'

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<sup>55</sup>(...continued)

monochrome work cannot be seen formally as a rectangular shape at all.

<sup>56</sup>In fact, though made by a taxidermist, they did not include any real animal parts. See Gallo, 82.

<sup>57</sup>Guest, 19.

and we oblige by unconsciously editing-out rival meanings in an artistic context. Klein's nude "brushes" have thus benefitted from a cultural norm that allows their display to belong to the tradition of the Three Graces and not to that of burlesque. General Idea is "outing" this norm. All the audience needs to do is substitute the title *XXX Blue* for that of Klein's piece and the message is devastatingly clear.

The use of a rich blue paint is particularly mischievous. International Klein Blue was a pigment invented by Yves Klein that the artist had actually patented. But here G.I. effects an extremely subtle substitution which is simply brilliant. The collaborative does not use International Klein Blue but rather Chroma Key Blue, another over-saturated ultramarine. But this uncopyrighted pigment was used for television and film special effects as the 'blue screen,' over which a background could be substituted.<sup>58</sup> It thus formally include the sign of the conceptual substitution that is supposed to take place. Its use of a Klein Blue substitute, ostensibly as an uncharacteristic respect for copyright, calls for the audience to mentally transpose Klein onto its work. But it also imports a pop cultural technological strategy into Klein's domain of 'high' art. It also calls, therefore, for his work's subversion with a queer meaning and involve the interpretation of its work as a constituent part of its special effect.

This appropriation and redirecting of Klein's work involves a characteristic denial of his work's independence, just as General Idea routinely subverts copyrights. But *XXX Blue* pays an artistic compliment to Klein, implying that his work is sufficiently important to be engaged with on its own aesthetic terms. The other target of "Shut The Fuck Up" does not fare so well. Before the section on *XXX Blue*, Felix and AA are presented, once again as

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<sup>58</sup>Bronson, interview, 112.



talking heads, discussing a British review of the New York art star Julian Schnabel. Schnabel's work was (and is) unevenly admired. The former *Time Magazine* art critic Robert Hughes, perhaps his least charitable critic, writes of him that "after the *cuisine minceur* of the seventies, [collectors] were looking for something hot and heavy .... [and] in 1980 the uncertainty of new-market taste was such that if someone stood up to assert loudly and repeatedly that he was a genius, there was a chance he would be believed."<sup>59</sup> In *Shut The Fuck Up* Schnabel's work is not discussed at all, in a deliberate omission to which Partz calls attention by invoking the then-famous phrase "Where's the beef?" The article quotes another hostile critic's assessment that Schnabel's meaty paintings are "beef on the hoof."<sup>60</sup> But Partz is perhaps also punning that Schnabel has nothing to complain about: the article did conclude that he is "the hottest artist on two continents."<sup>61</sup> While praising poodles over cattle for their "delicious desire to be groomed and preened," among other queer qualities (in contrast to the heterosexual machismo of Schnabel), Partz and Bronson nevertheless identify his work with their own. Whatever his artworks' merits, they assert, the fact that "he's big" proves he has understood that the art world wants "artists in artist drag."<sup>62</sup> Rather than appropriate Julian Schnabel's project, General Idea projects onto him its own. This is a cutting implication as General Idea's parody is a self-conscious artwork whereas Schnabel's career, if it is parody, would certainly be unconsciously so.<sup>63</sup> When an artist such as Julian Schnabel was cutting a

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<sup>59</sup>Robert Hughes, "Julian Schnabel," *Nothing If Not Critical: Selected Essays on Artists and Art* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 302.

<sup>60</sup>General Idea, *Shut The Fuck Up*.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup>The opening of *Shut The Fuck Up*, a section called "Death of a Mauve Bat," is  
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ruggedly animalistic path, General Idea, on the other hand, was advising the art world to embrace its inner poodle.

In the bathetic strategy, a partial merger appears to be taking place between the anagrammatic strategy and the strategy of indeterminacy. The inversion of meanings inherent in the first combines with the doubt and the implication of the audience, seen in the second. The concern with works of ‘high’ art returns and becomes central with the *AIDS Project*. General Idea would move to fuse its handlings of ‘high’ art and popular culture, and consolidate its accomplishments in each of the three strategies, while the flowing together of these strategic approaches would accelerate towards full union.

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<sup>63</sup>(...continued)

wholly lifted from an episode of the *Batman* television series. In it, the character the Joker – who could scarcely be more queer – wins the Gotham City Museum art contest with an entirely blank painting entitled *Death of A Mauve Bat*. When asked “where is the bat?” in a patronizing tone by one of several impatient judges, the Joker replies, in a tone of ironic humility, “The bat gentlemen is dead. It died in 1936, a very bad year for bats.” This painting is finally adjudged “symbolic of the emptiness of modern life” and the Joker is declared the winner. Throughout the competition various artists had been flinging gobs of paint at canvases, in one instance by means of a trained monkey. These hefty pictures, meant to be a satire of Abstract Expressionism, also seem all too close to the hearty Neoexpressionism of a Julian Schabel. The affected figure of the Joker, with his blank canvas, stands in *Shut The Fuck Up* as the champion of ironical Conceptualism at a time when the mainstream art world was moving from earnestness to unconscious self-parody. See General Idea, *Shut The Fuck Up*.

### CHAPTER 3: THE AIDS PROJECT

The *AIDS Project* (after 1987) (fig.28) appropriates Robert Indiana's famous painting *Love* (1966) (fig.29). The project involved replacing the four letters of 'love' with the four letters of AIDS, an intentional reference to General Idea's earlier rearrangement of 'LIFE' into 'FILE.'<sup>1</sup> Like Indiana's image, the AIDS logo, in its original blue, green and red, brought together high chroma complementary colours that would vibrate visually against each other.<sup>2</sup> In this project, figure and ground would eventually achieve a complete union. The three strategies investigated in G.I.'s preceding work become so mutually involved as to recombine into a single, unified strategy. General Idea had long understood its work to have a "viral logic" and this concept was taken as the model for its new project, the *imagevirus*.<sup>3</sup> However, this 'logic' had many manifestations and no one image with which it could be specifically identified. Instead, the *AIDS Project* distilled the various manifestations, of this concept into one simplified and easily recognized – or *mis*recognized – manifestation.<sup>4</sup> Today, alas, we

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<sup>1</sup>See AA Bronson, interview by Author, 24 Oct. 2005 in Appendix, page 106.

<sup>2</sup>Allan Schwartzman, *General Idea: The AIDS Project* (Toronto: The Gershon Iskowitz Foundation, 1989), 5.

<sup>3</sup>The term "image virus," like the name "General Idea" itself, was taken from William S. Burroughs. See Peggy Gale, catalogue essay, *Showcards: General Idea* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1994), n.p. See also Diana Nemiroff, "AA Bronson," *Canada Council* [text on-line] (Ottawa: Canada Council, accessed 21 Sept. 2005); <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/prizes/ggyvma/>.

<sup>4</sup>Allan Schwartzman relates a telling anecdote: "A close friend of AA's, Felix's, and Jorge's died after a long battle with AIDS. At the memorial service one of the speakers – a woman not familiar with the art world – pointed to one of the group's AIDS paintings and told all the people who had nursed the friend during his painful and

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know this now overly familiar idea, the establishment of an at once clearly defined yet simultaneously flexible identity strategy, as ‘branding.’

The *AIDS Project* was not intended to parody Indiana’s work so much as what happened to it. The original image became disseminated on a massive scale for 1967’s so-called “summer of love.” Indiana had never established copyright over the work and it was coopted to no end of popular cultural purposes by businesses small and large that took advantage of its uncopyrighted status. It thereby became an “icon of an era.”<sup>5</sup>

Robert Indiana’s *LOVE* painting ... is an example of an artist’s work that escaped copyright and entered the public realm, appearing as cocktail napkins, keychains, and other commercial paraphernalia. We might think of this as an image virus gone awry, a sort of image cancer. Similarly, General Idea’s *AIDS* logo (1987), a plagiarism ... of Indiana’s *LOVE*, was intended to escape copyright and travel freely through the mainstream of our culture’s advertising and communication systems. And so it has, as a series of posters, billboards, and electronic signs, on the street, on television, on the internet, and in periodicals....<sup>6</sup>

General Idea intended to lose control of this project, and so it continues today; the *AIDS* logo is familiar to many who do not know of its association with – or even of the existence of – this collaborative. General Idea – and now AA Bronson alone – never refused any use of it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>(...continued)

frightened struggle: ‘That’s what this is all about. Love.’ She realized the painting read AIDS. But to her it meant love.” Schwartzman, 15.

<sup>5</sup>Bronson, interview, 105.

<sup>6</sup>AA Bronson, “Copyright, Cash, and Crowd Control: Art and the Economy in the Work of General Idea,” in *General Idea: Editions 1967-1995* (Mississauga: Blackwood Gallery [University of Toronto at Mississauga], 2003), 27.

<sup>7</sup>Bronson, interview, 105.

General Idea was always committed to the public realm.<sup>8</sup> Allan Schwartzman writes that “[t]he real target of General Idea’s appropriations is not so much the idea of originality or authorship as it is the idea of ownership, which for a collaborative team represents a kind of threat.... This is most apparent with General Idea’s paintings of the copyright sign, an image that is itself uncopyrightable.”<sup>9</sup> This concern with infringement and ownership is one of the ways the *AIDS Project* works and accounts for the increasing use of the copyright symbol in some of its later manifestations and subsequent projects such as *PLA©EBO* (1991-3) and *infe©tions* (1994-5). But the main purpose of foregrounding appropriation was to mimic the behaviour of the HIV virus. Bronson states that one of the objectives of the *AIDS project* was to create something that would “run amok in the general culture.”<sup>10</sup> The logo was meant to travel, transform and proliferate, like HIV itself.<sup>11</sup> This requires, in the first place, that it be beyond ownership; but more importantly it must be simple yet endlessly variable and universally applicable.

Although, in its basic format, the *AIDS Project* was among the simplest of the collaborative’s works formally, it would recapitulate and recast a diverse array of themes, strategies and physical qualities from the *oeuvre* of General Idea. The three strategies I investigated in the last chapter come to cooperate so closely that they become indistinguishable, yet each raises the others to new a power of efficacy. As a cultural

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<sup>8</sup>Bronson, “Copyright, Cash, and Crowd Control,” 26.

<sup>9</sup>Schwartzman, 13.

<sup>10</sup>Kathryn Rosenfeld, “Triple Self-Portrait (-2),” *New Art Examiner* 28, no.10 (2001): 79.

<sup>11</sup>Schwartzman, 5,8.

intervention the *Project* is as terribly simple and as radical as the virus it mimics. The *AIDS Project* is the culmination of what came before and a matrix for what would come after. Its history, incarnations, as well as the all-important conceptual architecture that underlies them, will all be the subject of this chapter.

### History and Reception of the AIDS Project

The *AIDS Project* began in New York in 1987 and spread throughout the world the following year.<sup>12</sup> This work was displayed first as large paintings in a gallery setting and over the next three years would come to occupy a wide range of public spaces: it appeared on billboards, as posters on railroad platform kiosks in Germany and all over American and Canadian cities, as large public sculptures, and on buses and trams and in subway cars in Europe and North America (fig.30); it was also available in small personal formats, as cast metal multiples, as scarves, as stickers, and as backpack or jacket patches, and; it even appeared via electronic media, most successfully as an illuminated message in New York's Times Square.<sup>13</sup> But, most importantly of all, it appeared generically across its diverse media and, as such, represented the total triumph of image *over form*. It was firmly located in that 'surreal' world of the 'branded' commodity. Not interesting and never final in any one incarnation, it was always but a copy of some nonexistent original, a simulacrum to be sure, but also reminiscent of the relationship of any individual virus to its code, the design inherent in its genetic sequence. In other words, the image simply is the idea, but that idea includes its endless replication – and so its history can never be complete. These are just selected

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>13</sup>Pat Steir, "The Unspoken Word," *Artforum* (28 Dec. 1989): 127.

instances of a truly *general* idea.

The collaborative was invited to participate in *Art against AIDS*, a benefit sale held in New York in 1987 for the American Foundation for AIDS Research.<sup>14</sup> It produced a series of large paintings imitating Indiana's 1966 work. These invited comparisons to "the heroic presence of New York School paintings,"<sup>15</sup> while also recalling the Pop tradition. Indeed, they could be seen as the unpacking of the multiple silk-screened images of Andy Warhol, and the displacement of the replication outside of the frame. Their replication is one that has invaded the surrounding space.

From here the "image cancer" metastasized as G.I. developed first the poster project, in November 1987, and then a billboard project in 1988. These appeared in New York late in 1987 and, in short order, in San Francisco, Toronto, and Hartford, Connecticut; then they appeared in Tourcoing (France), Atlanta, and Berlin.<sup>16</sup> As a poster, the *AIDS Project* presented each AIDS logo, a single square poster, as one unit of an endlessly expandable series. As if with building blocks, a Warholesque multiple image could be assembled, partially dismantled, or continued indefinitely in any direction. Moreover, the posters, *qua* posters, occupy a totally undecidable interstice between the original and the copy. Adding to the three media of posters, larger format billboards, and paintings, the logo soon appeared as a transparency, at New York's *The New Museum* in 1988, and then on a magazine cover.<sup>17</sup>

Various rooms from the fictive *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* had been assembled

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<sup>14</sup>Schwartzman, 6-8.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 8

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 8. It was the *Ontario Dentist*.

as installations over the years. The appearance of the *AIDS Project* as a gallery piece in San Francisco in 1988 was entitled “The AIDS room from the Miss General Idea Pavillion” (fig.31).<sup>18</sup> AIDS logo posters were mounted to completely cover one wall, while other walls included copyright symbol paintings. General Idea coopted its own earlier premonition of disaster to re-present a now (once again) extant pavilion, undestroyed in the middle of the disaster to which, it turned out it had been referring: the AIDS crisis. The ‘nowhere’ and ‘no-when’ of the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* transforms into the ‘everywhere’ of the *AIDS Project*. The proliferating AIDS logo has been able to infect the collaborative’s earlier work and thus combines with it to spread not only, really, through space but also now, imaginatively, through time.

In another return to the gallery format in 1988, General Idea mounted large-scale paintings, at the Koury Wingate Gallery in New York (fig.32). Unlike previous manifestations of the *AIDS Project* this series abandoned the red, blue and green colour scheme and was comprised of twelve large paintings, each eight feet by eight, one for each possible combination of primary colours and their complements.<sup>19</sup> Proliferation now included the possibility of colour variation, that is, of mutation, and thus, as a set, these twelve paintings further developed the project’s concern with instability, dissemination and infiltration. A shifting colour scheme anticipated other forms that suggested or embodied movement: in 1998 the project appeared as postage stamps, manufactured in Switzerland, and on trams in Holland from 1988 to 1990. In 1989 it took the form of a sculpture publicly displayed in

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<sup>18</sup>Schwartzman, 33.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*,8.



Hamburg, West Germany; the sculpture was to collect graffiti and then be removed from its location and make a tour of European and North American museums.<sup>20</sup>

Adaptable as the *AIDS Project* proved to be, the collaborative sought to move beyond it. Allan Schwartzman writes (in 1989) that “General Idea intends to bring the project to a close, appropriately enough, with a series of black AIDS paintings that utilize the same color strategies and dimensions (five-foot square) as Ad Reinhardt’s black paintings.”<sup>21</sup> The *AIDS Project* would be brought full circle by having it re-infect the ‘high art’ tradition, whence it came. By ultimately closing with black on black, of course, it would also comment on death as the ultimate reunion, the end of all opposition, variation and complementarity. This would not quite happen, although the Ad Reinhardt-influenced paintings were made. Rather, although the collaborative did move on, the project also continued. As late as 1994 and even 1995 the *AIDS Project* was still appearing in the collaborative’s work. By the time of the *Infe©tions* exhibition (1995) (fig.33), the collaborative’s references, or rather, those aspects of culture that its theme infects, are all in the domain of ‘high art.’ In addition to Ad Reinhardt and Robert Indiana, it appropriated and ‘infected’ artworks by Gerrit Rietveld (fig.34) and Piet Mondrian, whose famous *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1942-3), saw its proper yellow replaced with the colour green (fig.35), hated by Mondrian’s and banished from his own paintings.<sup>22</sup> Green is, of course, the colour of sickness but it is also the one original *AIDS*

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<sup>20</sup>The first phases of this project were successful and the sculpture, with graffiti, was exhibited in European museums, but American museums insisted on cleaning off the graffiti before display, contrary to General Idea’s explicit instructions. See Bronson, interview, 105.

<sup>21</sup>Schwartzman, 8.

<sup>22</sup>Gerald Hannon, “General Idea,” *Canadian Art* 12 Fall (1995): 93.

*Project* colour (unlike primary red and blue) not used by Mondrian. However, while the *AIDS Project* would move back into the mainstream of modern art, it would become further disseminated within popular culture, as well. The *Imagevirus* poster project (1990), for instance, has it infecting a well known popular advertisement for Absolute Vodka. Even today, although General Idea has certainly stopped producing, the *AIDS Project* has arguably not stopped being produced. In addition to its ongoing use by outsiders, AA Bronson is making a large AIDS logo sculpture for the 2006 International AIDS Conference in Toronto.<sup>23</sup>

The *AIDS Project* was not popular with many gay artists working in AIDS activism. It was seen, first of all, as tasteless and politically retrograde.<sup>24</sup> General Idea were accused of “estheticization” and of making ‘elitist’ gallery pieces,<sup>25</sup> a ludicrous criticism under the circumstances: as it was at first developed for a benefit sale, all the works had to be saleable objects, for which painting appeared to be ideal.<sup>26</sup> It was also alleged that the AIDS logo cynically used Indiana’s *LOVE* to imply that the ‘free love’ spirit of the sixties led to AIDS.<sup>27</sup> Bronson interprets this as a cultural misunderstanding:

A lot of the American activists originally disliked the project and we were rather confused by that .... One was the issue of the waste of money: that we were doing all these posters but we didn’t have any didactic information, about using condoms or something like that. That was part of it. So we sort of got that. But still there seemed to be an underlying anger that we didn’t understand. At some point we figured out that when Americans look at the

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<sup>23</sup>Bronson, interview, 105.

<sup>24</sup>Robert Lee, “AIDS Art and Activism in Canada,” unpublished Masters thesis (Concordia University, 1995), 47.

<sup>25</sup>Schwartzman, 12.

<sup>26</sup>The original series of paintings did not, in fact, sell well. Schwartzman, 6.

<sup>27</sup>Lee, 47.

*LOVE* image, they interpret it as being about free sex; when Canadians and Europeans look it, they tend to think of it as being about universal love or so-called brotherly love. And so the interpretation of the *AIDS* emblem becomes totally altered by that.<sup>28</sup>

AIDS activists strongly wanted to avoid any suggestion that the behaviour of members of the gay community had led to the catastrophe and so such implications were, within their circles, politically incorrect. Of course, the *AIDS Project* does not necessarily specifically imply this; rather, the work is ambiguous and capable of being read in many different ways. General Idea “characterized the AIDS epidemic not with political exactness, as had been expected, but with artistic metaphor and emphatic ambiguity.”<sup>29</sup> The collaborative’s offense was to frame a work that did not prevent a cynical reading.

Most AIDS-related art during the late 80s and early 90s took the form either of memorials<sup>30</sup> or of explicitly activist art, such as that of artists associated with ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). Gran Fury’s well known “SILENCE = DEATH” logo appropriates and inverts the Pink Triangle that the SS required homosexual prisoners to wear in Nazi concentration and death camps.<sup>31</sup> This message, in contrast to General Idea’s work, is crystal clear: government inaction on AIDS is tantamount to genocide and inaction in demanding government action is tantamount to collaboration in genocide.

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<sup>28</sup>Bronson, interview, 106.

<sup>29</sup>Schwartzman, 5.

<sup>30</sup>The best known example of the memorial (which also contains a latent, poignant, activist message) is the AIDS quilt, composed of coffin sized tributes to many of the individual dead. It was publicly displayed on the Mall in Washington, D.C. in 1987 but is now so large that it is incapable of being displayed in any public context anywhere on Earth. See Lee, 30-31.

<sup>31</sup>Douglas Crimp, “AIDS Demo Graphics,” in *A Leap in The Dark: AIDS, Art and Contemporary Cultures* (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1992), 47.

One ironic example of the collaborative's work being misunderstood was Gran Fury's own response to the *AIDS Project*. Gran Fury appropriated the AIDS logo, this time substituting the word 'RIOT.' This piece was displayed in the same Berlin exhibition as some General Idea posters.<sup>32</sup> *RIOT* was read as a "pointed criticism" of the ostensibly apolitical, 'purely artistic' character of the *AIDS Project*.<sup>33</sup> But, in copying, adapting and then reissuing the piece and its concept, Gran Fury was actually involving itself, unwittingly, in the very proliferating and 'running amok' that General Idea had had in mind.<sup>34</sup> It actually joined and became complicit in the project it was criticizing. The *AIDS Project* has been so established, in advance, as to make its own appropriation impossible. Any attempt to hijack the project for subversion or parody has already adapted itself to and been absorbed by the project's own protean nature. The project absorbs and converts all assaults against itself. In this way it is truly – and eerily – like the virus it mimics.

### **Recombinant Strategies**

Recombination is a deadly property of the AIDS virus whereby the latter reincorporates into itself other genetic versions of itself: ones that may have become immune to certain pharmaceutical treatments. Where reinfection occurs the virus can quickly become a 'supervirus.' This powerful characteristic is reflected in the way the *AIDS Project*, as a unified strategy, recapitulates – and in this sense recombines – the three early ironic strategies outlined in Chapter 2.

This new, single strategy can replace and function as any or all of the original

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<sup>32</sup>Schwartzman, 12.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>Rosenfeld, 79.

strategies. The anagrammatic rearrangement of *'life'* into *'file'* and the flipping, inverse associations of 'Nazi' and 'milk' become combined in the move from 'LOVE' to 'AIDS.' As words are positively and negatively 'charged' (and this contrast is true of 'Nazi' and 'milk') it is no less so with 'LOVE' and 'AIDS.' As a "visual pun,"<sup>35</sup> the transformation from 'LOVE' to 'AIDS' sits somewhere between the literal anagram of *'LIFE'* to *'FILE'* and the conceptual anagram of 'Nazi' and 'Milk.' Like the former, it appears to be encoded, each new letter corresponding to an original one. Yet, like the latter, the opposed meanings now seem forcibly contained in a way that implies that a lot of latent energy is repressed in the anagram and that this motivates its restless proliferation as an image virus. The 'AIDS' meaning also seems wrong and may be unconsciously discounted and so, like *'FILE,'* it may be misread.<sup>36</sup> But it also, therefore, appears aberrant and so it contains the idea of mutation and thus the potential of endless future mutation.

In another continuity, an indeterminacy as to time and location is recapitulated with the *AIDS Project*. This is far more than a recurrence of this strategy; it instead represents a substantial enlargement upon it. The *AIDS Project* is a completely decentralized concept. Each logo is a cell and can be shifted anywhere within the overall matrix described by the totality of cells. Displayed as a poster, for instance, the logo may be stacked, reproducing a common strategy in poster displays for advertising (fig.36). Any poster may be moved to any location, blank spaces could appear, or other posters could be covered over by this unfixed and dynamic work. While the four letters of Indiana's work were stacked 'LO' over 'VE,'

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<sup>35</sup>Schwartzman, 5.

<sup>36</sup>Schwartzman, 15. See also Bronson, interview, 122.

the image was reproduced as a single figure. General Idea would replace these letters with the four letters of AIDS but the emergent AIDS logo would not only repeat Indiana's four-piece grid but be multiply reproduced, on posters, billboards or even as wallpaper, creating a possibly endless, and thus, implicitly, a universalizing grid. Displayed in discrete areas within a single visual field, as in its installation at the disused Westend train station in the *Vollbild* exhibition in Berlin (1988) (fig.37), it describes an ordering, spatial grid that functions like the projected lines in a perspectival study. One area can be imagined as fitting into the space of another and the intervening space is thus either imaginatively collapsed or else it is implied that the AIDS logo grid somehow underlies it. As a moving element, when installed on Amsterdam trams, for instance (1988-1990) (fig.38), the relativity of both space and time can be charted by means of the AIDS logo matrix. 'Real' space and 'real' time lose their accustomed fixity. As a stamp project (fig.39), the matrix is even more imaginatively made to undermine a normative spatial order. These stamps may break away from each other and travel in divergent directions, yet they also always retain their original relationship to each other, at least imaginatively, and thus may establish a contradictory way of reckoning the space through which they move. The *AIDS Project* represents the fulfillment of the dystopian nightmare of the late incarnations of *Miss General Idea Pavillion 1984* and prophesy its destruction. AIDS is everywhere and its totality is the only way that anywhere can be understood. The disease that was the most stigmatized becomes the model for reorienting ourselves in art and life. Indeterminacy achieves a bathetic inversion.

In all of its public display contexts, the *AIDS Project*, whether as a billboard or as a poster, was always multiply reproduced, like an Andy Warhol diptych. It was often displayed

in gallery contexts as wallpaper and by 1989 was actually being manufactured as such (fig.40).<sup>37</sup> It constitutes as much a ‘background’ as an artistic object. As wallpaper it could even be that *against which* other works of art might be displayed (see, for example, fig.41). General Idea destabilized the artwork and its context. Figure and ground are interchangeable and could be ‘swapped’ for each other with no loss of meaning. They become equated. Plastered over walls, painted on trains, exhibited on billboards the project becomes a ‘universal’ background against which the individual location stands out. New York or Berlin or Toronto are the ‘unique’ contexts in which a generic, standard artwork appears. A common, public ‘space’ – the AIDS-logo pattern – is common across these different places. The proliferation of AIDS but also the terrible proximity it reveals, even across great distances, is evoked. That imaginary public space over against the real space of the world is asserted through the universal pattern that makes of all places merely local inflections of a generalized vulnerability. The *AIDS Project* reveals the continuum connecting place to place and person to person against which all seeming-identity is, as a construct, artificial and will be washed away in that final vulnerability we all share.

In taking up and recombining past strategies and past meanings and then deploying them for different ends, General Idea’s work exhibits something akin to typology. Later developments are anticipated in earlier ones and longstanding echos of an idea can suddenly culminate in one manifestation.<sup>38</sup> But General Idea did more than assist this process. It

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<sup>37</sup>Schwartzman, 6.

<sup>38</sup>The “study of types of representation in iconography, particularly the study of the way in which figures and scenes from the Old Testament were thought to prefigure those found in the new.” Edward Lucie-Smith, ed., *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of Art*  
(continued...)

aggressively defined itself in terms of this typology. The collaborative's name is a pun on many things but perhaps, at the most basic, it is the idea of the *general*, genuinely accepted for once, without qualification for space or, either, for time. Identity has traditionally been attached to the individual, to the particular, and if there is a general identity it gains meaning, as in nationalisms, only in the individuals' communion with it. General Idea mocks the universal through a queer attitude but accepts the 'general', playing one meaning of the word against another: the "vague, indefinite" meaning now trumps the "almost or completely universal" meaning.<sup>39</sup> Individual identity is often understood as a deviation from a norm, but the individual is itself the norm of singularity. General Idea substitutes for any norm a general ambiguity and thereby establishes an ironic subject.

### The Liminal Subject

The subject is located – always – in a state of liminal tension. It is for this reason that subjectivity has long been associated with irony.<sup>40</sup> Two thresholds merge in the subject's

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<sup>38</sup>(...continued)

*Terms*, 2003 ed. (New York and London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), s.v. "Typology." It has been famously summed-up in the maxim, "In the Old Testament the New Testament is Concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed." However, typology is not exclusively Christian but was a widespread interpretive strategy among Hellenistic Jews at the time of the emergence of Christianity and has analogs with some Jewish interpretation of the Bible to this day. Moreover, as a cultural strategy it is seen in other, non-religious thought systems, the one commonality among them being the view that the truth of things is not knowable *in* (any particular) time but only *across* it, and thus that there is a real basis for a thing to be prefigured. See Northrop Frye, "Typology I," in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 78-81.

<sup>39</sup>*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) s.v. "General." (Hereafter *OED*.)

<sup>40</sup>As I noted earlier, Plato's account of the subject is liminal in that it is divided among three competing agencies and held in tension among them. See page 13, note 43.



experience of itself. The first is a constantly slipping boundary between self and world. Every attempt to signify the self and every attempt, therefore, to identify a world against which it is defined ends in failure. Implicated in this collapsing of separation is the other threshold, that of time. General Idea created in the *AIDS Project* a cultural form that is not subject to this dual contingency, but rather traces it and inscribes it within that cultural sphere of mediated experience and identity, the 'surreal.' The AIDS logo and its identification with its own matrix in the grid that it conjures up presents a model of figure and ground where the indeterminacy of the frame is also the content contained by it; its inversions of symbolic meanings and its foregrounding of undecidability affords a harmonious, if ever shifting model of identity. But its charting of space comes to include time. The *AIDS Project* is at once a complement to the liminal subject and a counterpart or model with which it can identify. This section outlines the theoretical architecture that explains this characteristic and reveals how one manifestation of the *AIDS Project* fully discloses it.

In "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," Jacques Lacan explains the function of a gestalt: "The total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as *Gestalt*, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in contrasting size."<sup>41</sup> A gestalt is a form "perceived as more than the sum of its parts."<sup>42</sup> That is, it is a form

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<sup>41</sup>Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of The I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 2.

<sup>42</sup>*OED*, s.v. "Gestalt."

constituent of an overarching unity. This, according to Lacan, the infant finds in a “mirror,” an exterior form with which it identifies, to overcome its own fragmentation according to various sense perceptions.<sup>43</sup> The human infant is remarkably incomplete as an organism and is only able to achieve mastery over itself by borrowing the perceived ontological integrity and self-sameness of the mirror-other. The infant thus acquires symbolic mastery over itself and is able to formulate the “I,” but this subject-identity becomes a place of alienation at the same time. While it thereby achieves mastery symbolically by being able to formulate the “I,” the subject-identity forever becomes a signification which, in the very act of being signified, bars any access to the desired, ‘real’ “I.”

The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image ... to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity. Thus, to break out of the circle of the *Innenwelt* into the *Umwelt* generates the inexhaustible quadrature of the ego’s verifications.<sup>44</sup>

‘Inexhaustible quadrature’ refers to the impossibility of squaring a circle: the ego, whose task it is to delineate what is external from the organism such that it may act effectively in its environment must constantly seek an assurance of its own existence; but that assurance is forever denied because it is constituted in alienation. The act of trying to signify “I” is akin to ‘fitting a square peg into a round hole,’ where the pressure of the mis-fit is the sensation of alienation.

The appearance of the *AIDS Project* as painting against the ground of its own copies

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<sup>43</sup>John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, *Lacan and Language: A Reader’s Guide to Écrits* (New York: International Universities Press, 1982), 38-39.

<sup>44</sup>Lacan, 4.

is thus an example of the gestalt. One instance of this occurred at the installation in Stampa Galerie in Frankfurt, West Germany in 1989 (fig.41). Here, a 'cell' is selected and exaggerated through enlargement to become the figure or 'mirror.' The AIDS logo inside the frame and the world of endless, matching AIDS logos that ground this figure are, in principle, interchangeable. The selection of one to be emphasized and thus framed seems to be entirely arbitrary, just as the selection of the 'mirror'-other, which can also be called the *imago*, is. Together this figure and its ground define an equivalence between the content of the figure and of the ground that contains it. In being in this way interchangeable the particular figure also participates in the larger matrix of the grid. The boundary of the frame, which can be linked to subjectivity itself, is a restless and desperate agency, dividing and distinguishing without permanent effect.

Lacan notes that the "I" has a tendency to picture itself in dreams as represented by a stadium or fortress.<sup>45</sup> It surrounds, but also is surrounded by and keeps out, an emptiness. The inner emptiness and the outer emptiness are not only alike but, according to Lacan, are to be identified with each other.<sup>46</sup> This castle 'flips' automatically from being a fortress for the ego to being one to which it lays siege. The "I" is not any 'thing' contained by the castle. Rather, it is nothing more than the act of containment itself, always an 'active frontier' and a place of tension. Before the 'mirror stage,' a child lacks integrity as a psychical unit and it experiences reality as a continuum of self and world; but after the formation of subjective

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<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

identity the newly-minted subject constantly seeks to define an artificial boundary.<sup>47</sup> Implicit in the very formation of the subject is this flipping between containment and exclusion. Together they define a one-dimensional *definition*, the liminal “I.” As the principle of definition in an unbounded world, the “I” is that to which all things are transcendent. “I” name, “I” signify and “I” designate – and “I” thereby keep all things in their proper place. But just as Jacques Derrida claims that all meaning is deferred in endless sequences of signification,<sup>48</sup> so the perceptual world consistently evades this subject’s grasp. The latter remains, unconcerned, in the unbounded continuum of its own being. The subject is thus forever implicated in sense-perceptions that destabilize its ostensible boundary between self and world.<sup>49</sup>

Kant’s view was that René Descartes, in framing his formula *Cogito ergo sum* (“I

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<sup>47</sup>John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, *Lacan and Language: A Reader’s Guide to Écrits* (New York: International Universities Press, 1982), 38-39.

<sup>48</sup>Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 8-9.

<sup>49</sup>In “Cogito: The Void Called Subject” Slavoj Žižek develops Lacan’s account of the subject in the direction of Immanuel Kant’s account of transcendental apperception. The perception of perceiving is such that each new perception of a perception introduces a further disparity between the perceiver and the perceived-perceiver, in a frustrating process of endless slippage. (Slavoj Žižek, “Cogito: The Void Called Subject,” *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 9-82.) Žižek argues that, for both, the slippery “I” is impossible to grasp. For Kant, the transcendental “I” is constantly slipping out of the linguistic frame that gives rise to it, whereas for Lacan it cannot be ‘caught’ because it is ‘barred,’ “an empty, nonsubstantial logical variable.” This is the subject of the *enunciation*,” the “I” as the subject of a statement such as ‘I believe...,’ ‘I want....,’ ‘I am...’ (Žižek 14). It stands in distinction to what he calls the subject of the *enunciated*, effectively the ideal ego, the image in the ‘mirror’. (Muller & Richardson 35-8.) The “I” may never be effectively signified, only *imagined*. (Žižek 14.)

think, therefore I am”),<sup>50</sup> mistakes the act of thought (*cogito*) for some substantial “I.”<sup>51</sup> Kant rewrites Descartes’s sentence to remove these unjustified assumptions: “Through this I or he or it (the thing) that thinks, nothing more is presented than a transcendental subject of thoughts.... This subject is cognized only through the thoughts that are it predicates, and apart from them we can never have the least concept of it.”<sup>52</sup> Presenting this argument in his essay “Cogito: The Void Called Subject,” Slavoj Žižek sums it up this way:

We can provide no possible answer to the question “How is the thing which thinks structured?” The paradox of self-consciousness is that *it is only possible against the background of its own impossibility*: I am conscious of myself only insofar as I am out of reach to myself qua the real kernel of my being (“I or he or it (the thing) which thinks”). I cannot acquire consciousness of myself in my capacity of the “Thing which thinks.”<sup>53</sup>

In every assertion, we summon our self-alienation automatically. Our finitude is no substance; it is but the finitude of the threshold, a liminal “I” whose position, slipping “at every

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<sup>50</sup>See René Descartes, “Discourse on Method,” in *Descartes: Discourse on Method and The Meditations*, trans. F.E. Sutcliffe (London: Penguin, 1982), 53. A profound sense of the present tense comes in with Descartes: ‘*cogitavi ergo eram*,’ “I thought therefore I was,” could not work in the same way at all. But the subjects’s future as well as its past is put into radical doubt: Descartes comes to ask “*I am, I exist*: this is certain; but for how long?” (Descartes, “Meditations on The First Philosophy,” *Descartes: Discourse on Method and The Meditations*, trans. F.E. Sutcliffe (London: Penguin, 1982) 105.) A mood of both imminence and immanence pervades Descartes’s writing but here the effect is somewhat literary and not truly philosophical. The definition of this liminal, linguistic subject would become more refined only through two later instances: In Lacanian psychoanalysis and in Immanuel Kant’s reformulation of the Cartesian *Cogito*.

<sup>51</sup>‘*Cogito*,’ in its Latin formulation, implies a first-person subject who becomes unnecessarily confused with the first person subject of ‘*sum*.’ Descartes appears to assume that they are to be identified with each other and thus he unduly reifies the subject by moving from ‘*cogito*’ to ‘*sum*,’ without doubting the self-sameness of these first-person subjects. He thereby takes for granted the existence of a *res cogitans* (a thinking thing) that is identical to both subjects. See Descartes, “Meditations,” 106-107.

<sup>52</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 385.

<sup>53</sup>Žižek, 15.

interval,”<sup>54</sup> remains an ungraspable subjectivity.

This slippery “I” is apparent always in the present moment. The operation of the Kantian and Lacanian subject takes place on a single threshold *between*, but one that constantly sees shifting worlds to either side, of self and other and of past and future. The act of identifying with a mirror-other overcomes fragmentation but also, in our alienation from it, sows the apprehended instability of the presently lived moment. The imago is not only satisfyingly framed but appears to us as reassuringly stable. Caught on the threshold, we cannot live up to this standard of stability.

### Circle in the Square

The indeterminacy of the *AIDS Project* undermines the *imaginary* satisfaction of the coherent, integral art object. In its place it offers us the experience of the commodified imago: a fleeting fantasy, always at a further remove, that we find in the ‘surreality’ of the mediated world. While it fails as a Lacanian mirror, for just this reason the *AIDS Project* part way overcomes the gap built into the structure of identity. This illusory squaring of the circle is no more illusory than the illusion of stable identity, however. In projecting the circle in the same symbolic space as the square, figuratively speaking, General Idea offers us the alternative of an identity constituted in indeterminacy rather than in alienation.

With the *Imagevirus* phase of the project (1989), the AIDS logo was reproduced in poster form as it appeared in the world (fig. 42). Photographed as it was installed in different

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<sup>54</sup>Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. H. Abelove et al. (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 315. Butler’s point, broadly, is that all identities are performed and that this performance is identical with the performer. Her account of this constant slippage in identity is broadly parallel with the one presented here.

locations, it becomes, as a second-hand cultural element, another commodity. The typeface of the “imagevirus.” label and its telltale period hijacks a very successful Absolut Vodka campaign. This campaign, however, was not one image but a seemingly never-ending variety of incarnations. The Absolut Vodka bottle, a highly distinctive shape, would appear in various guises, in once case, for example, as a Marilyn Monroe stand-in (fig.43). Thus in appropriating this advertising campaign, General Idea was making an appropriation similar to what it had done in exchanging *FILE* for *LIFE*. As with it, the collaborative’s objective was to substitute a decoy for the object of displaced desire. The instability inherent in the subjective situation is somewhat offset by the experiencer’s soothing immersion in a familiar pattern of disappointment. However, in this case G.I. was also appropriating an already protean, ever-proliferating campaign. Thus here, as with the *AIDS Project*’s imitation of Indiana’s *LOVE*’s cooption for various popular cultural artifacts, the appropriation was not only of the original but also of the idea of the adaptations of the original. The background of subjective instability is foregrounded by this substitution. General Idea makes the peripheral doubts of daily life the centre of its alternative *surreality*.

The *AIDS Project* reached a kind of zenith with its 1988 display in Times Square (fig.44). Here the image virus has all but dematerialized and it has invaded the mass-cultural body. The flashing, dazzling lights of Times Square resulted in the image’s complete instantiation among those glitzy messages and brand-name commodities from Coca-Cola to Minolta, to the passing, ticker-tape-like band of commodified news running around the old *New York Times* building at the south end of the Square. The spatial and temporal indeterminacy always present in this work gains from its diffusions within flashing lights: its

dematerialization and perfect camouflaging. AIDS had its “name in lights” on Broadway – it was and is shifting, profoundly present and yet ever-changing.

Benedict Anderson writes that the newspaper provides that common basis in time needed to ground and even establish any national body.<sup>55</sup> But, prior to it, in the city state, for example, the public palace, city hall or council hall would usually be located in the central square of a city and generally included a prominent clocktower. This ‘location’ of time within public space – that is, the public place, civic forum or square – has long defined and established the urban body politic. In the media-saturated twentieth century, Times Square has become the apotheosis of this phenomenon, where the public space intersects with the newspaper in defining the contemporary mass identity.<sup>56</sup> Standing in Times Square, one could look up to find AIDS in lights while the city – with all its energy, action, corruption and seeming danger, whirled around one below. Times Square is the centre of a ‘surreal’ world that it helps to imbed in the international imagination. In Times Square, the AIDS-logo could be imagined to be everywhere, a travesty of the truly international commodity.

The commodity is an object invested with the currency of identity. But General Idea presents, in *lieu* of the commodity, the sign of incompleteness and imperfection in the establishment of individual identities. The presence of that incompleteness and imperfection in place of the commodity is a metonymy: an encapsulating symbol of the system of

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<sup>55</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 34-35.

<sup>56</sup>Not really a square at all – like its lesser twin, Herald Square, also named for a newspaper – Times Square is the intersection of a midtown avenue with Broadway. But it has become truly prominent because it is also Broadway’s intersection with 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. In the 80s Times Square was not the banal, “sanitized urban space” it is today but a informational-capitalist extravaganza floating above a red light district. (Deutsche, 283.)



worldwide dissemination in the mediated, 'surreal' realm. Against the general background of the urban scene, epitomized by Times Square, the commodity that would be the always-changing crutch for identity is replaced by a further background behind the backgrounds. The urban environment is thus thrust out as a sort of a foreground. Figure and ground vibrate against each other.

The *AIDS Project* establishes an indeterminacy in the centre of the customary sign systems of this phenomenal world. The 'wallpaper' of the AIDS logo itself becomes a "groundless ground" against which a "substantial identity" would be built.<sup>57</sup> However, in place of that empty space, we find the proliferating "image virus." 'AIDS' has occupied and precluded the construction of identity that one normally expects to effect without difficulty through the dynamics of our interaction with the mediated world of signage. As it is, G.I. has left us with an experience of not fitting into our own symbolic space.

AIDS is a horrible disease, whomever it affects. But for the gay community, for which the pursuit of physical beauty had often become such an important aspect of its identity, the disfiguring effects of the disease were particularly cruel. In the age of AIDS the queer community felt displaced from itself, "beside itself" at the devastation which befell it not only bodily but also symbolically. It is this aspect of AIDS to which General Idea responded. In the age of the *AIDS Project* we have been made homeless within our own skins.

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<sup>57</sup>Deutsche, 274-275.

## CHAPTER 4: SITUATIONAL IRONIES AND THE 'REALITY' OF AIDS

By the third year of the *AIDS Project*, General Idea's concern with ambiguity had become either so formalized – or, as in the Times Square installation, so ethereal – that its work was failing to engage the emotional or censorious reflex in its audience upon which much of its impact has depended. In effect, General Idea's longstandingly aggressive stance towards its audience seemed to imply that that audience had now shrunk to the small community of artists and activists engaged in direct action during the AIDS crisis. While the *AIDS Project* reached the broadest audience of any of its work, it was becoming too successful at infiltrating the visual background of life. So clean was General Idea's work dealing with AIDS that it was genuinely in danger of “banalizing” the spread of the disease. *AIDS* was not merely something which spread and proliferated throughout the world. It was not reducible only to its “viral logic.” It was something that was killing people: people like themselves.

AIDS was real and to encounter it is to encounter something that can – and always used to – annihilate a person: it is to confront the overwhelming and often discounted power of biology. Lacanian psychoanalysis recognizes three orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real; for Lacan, the “Real” is the “order of brute fact.”<sup>1</sup> In *Welcome to The Desert of The Real*, Slavoj Žižek, who, unlike Lacan, explores this order in depth, writes: “The ultimate and defining moment of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed

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<sup>1</sup>John P. Muller and William J. Richardson. *Lacan and Language: A Reader's Guide to Écrits* (New York: International University Press, 1982), 88.

to everyday social reality – the Real in its extreme violence is the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality.”<sup>2</sup> Žižek is seeking to understand political violence and its ideological frameworks but the Real is no less encountered in environmental or biological calamities. The “desert of the Real,” as he understands it, is today inhabited by people with AIDS in those societies that are collapsing under its onslaught, and was previously inhabited largely by homosexual communities, no less devastated in later 80s and early 90s. The “Real Thing” turns out to be “the destructive Void;” but throughout the twentieth century we have been fascinated by penetrating it, according to Žižek.<sup>3</sup> This concluding chapter will examine General Idea’s relationship to the Real. This is a relationship that General Idea approached tentatively through its darker subjects, that it indicated, though avoided, in its hermeticism, and that was, at last, found only in the collaborative’s dissolution.

General Idea flirts constantly with dark meanings, but it renders them palatable to a broad audience by means of humour and ambiguity. Expressions of the collaborative’s dark side usually come clothed in the imagery of innocence. It gives us children, tame animals or bright, cheerful colours. General Idea uses a childlike innocence to force an audience to confront some of its sternest taboos. On the *FILE* cover of June 1984 (fig. 45), the collective had portrayed themselves in the triple-self-portrait *Baby Makes 3*. Three babies, their cheeks artificially rosied, are tucked in a single bed, one beside another, like triplets. But the title clearly also implies a traditional, nuclear family: on either side of the bed, Partz and Zontal look at once innocent and plausibly parental. (Zontal looks away, while Partz has the inquiring

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<sup>2</sup>Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to The Desert of The Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London & New York: Verso, 2002), 5-6.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

look with which some adults regard babies.) Bronson – in the middle – has a sly and suggestive look. In a reversal of the construction of the infant as the epitome of innocence, Bronson, presumably the baby here, is presented as the corruptor of his innocent parents. Either way, we have a *menage à trois – en famille*. And in a plain queering of the normative nuclear family, the child, that marker of normal, heterosexual family life, comes across like the snake in this Garden of Eden. General Idea would play again and again with connotations and inversions of innocence and sexual experience or guilt. An image like *Baby Makes 3* is an invitation to the audience but it is also a trap: it dares the audience to interpret it in the way it so suggestively suggests; but, at the same time, it retains what Richard Nixon once infamously termed ‘plausible deniability.’ By means of the ‘undecidable’ character of irony, this scene could be just as innocent or just as perverse as the viewer cares to imagine. As was the case with *Nazi Milk*, the onus is placed upon the viewer, who apparently remains responsible for any disquieting interpretation.

Five years later and two years into the *AIDS Project* a rather anomalous work appears. *Nightschool* (1989) (fig.46) is a throwback in approach and, somewhat, in tone to General Idea’s period of triple self-portraits like *Baby Makes 3*. The tone is also dark in a way that nothing else has been since the works associated with the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. According to Bronson, it expresses the collaborative’s dawning awareness that the epidemic could not leave the trio unscathed.<sup>4</sup> It became increasingly clear that one or two if not all of them would perish from AIDS. *Nightschool* engages General Idea’s dark side directly, if somewhat generically; the work is not about some clear theme that happens to be

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<sup>4</sup>See AA Bronson, interview by author, 24 Oct. 2005, in Appendix, 119n.

dark but is rather about darkness itself. Yet, like the earlier works into the tradition of which it fits, this triple self-portrait is certainly funny. It combines a dark look with a light tone and suggests many ambiguities. Even for these three, this is a very clever image. The three artists are presented as graduates in academic cap and gown. Their engagement with the demotic art form of the graduation photograph suggests, bitterly, that they have their 'whole lives ahead of them.' Yet this particular rite of passage is into some dark world dominated by mists and lightning and governed by the moon. The gothic lettering suggests both a horror movie and a diploma. Their pale complexions and darkened eye sockets suggest vampirism, and the phase of the moon (not yet full) suggests lycanthropy. In both cases the cause is infected blood: the AIDS virus equates the trio with the undead. Like Dracula, they are pariahs from the daylight and like werewolves their bodies will soon begin to change. As members of the 'undead,' in either case, they occupy an undecidable position between the living and the dead, a comment on the status of "AIDS victims" as modern-day lepers, and outcasts. But *Nightschool* is also amusingly informed by General Idea's long concern with sadomasochism. Here, however, it is somewhat more oblique. The black colour scheme with blue highlights is a hint, but the ritualization of the master and the initiate is the giveaway, even if here it is cheekily displaced onto an academic premise. (Jorge Zontal's bearded face rising above two clean-shaved "boys" repeats a common scene in the iconography of leather.) Are these dutiful students or very bad boys? We are left to wonder why they are in night school. This return to an earlier visual strategy does not imply a retreat from a controversial stance on AIDS, even if it does suggest a comforting nostalgic gesture. Far from it: the introduction of a transgression-and-punishment subtext violates *bona fide* taboos amongst AIDS activists and

activist artists. But, more generally, it signals a new engagement with their larger audience – an aggressive and more manipulative engagement.

General Idea's work as it enters the 1990s begins to return in a decisive fashion to large installation projects. Whereas the *AIDS Project* had always included a gallery-based aspect, it mixes this with direct disseminations in urban contexts and with multiple productions which, at least in their conception, did not privilege the gallery work in any way. Indeed, in its later phases the *AIDS Project*, when it did enter gallery spaces, could be seen in some ways as the infiltration of a viral concept from the street into the body of the art establishment.<sup>5</sup> The installations of the 1990s, however, were more obviously in the mainstream tradition of art. They were sleek and slick and they promised travel and important openings. Some non-installation elements in these projects were projected, and a few were developed; but the collaborative's focus was clearly on elaborate installations in Europe and North America. The shift in focus was owed to a practical consideration: both Jorge and Felix had been diagnosed with AIDS and they did not expect to be able to travel much longer.<sup>6</sup> It was important to make and display the large works while there was still time.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps inevitably, time became a major concern in these works; and through time, the situation of the viewer became ironically framed within the displays.

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<sup>5</sup>Or even later of art itself. See the discussion of the *Infe©tions* series in Chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup>Bronson, interview, 109.

<sup>7</sup>This imperative led to the putting off until the end of some late manifestations of the *AIDS Project*, such as the works that would make up the *Infe©tions* exhibitions. Bronson relates that “when Jorge and Felix got to a certain stage in being sick, in the last few months, there was no pleasure in [large installations] anymore because they couldn't travel or go see the installations .... [t]hat's when we reverted to working with more studio-like work. So then it's the *Infe©ted Mondrian* paintings....” See Bronson, interview, 109.

### *Fin de Siècle*

General Idea would be courting the fury of AIDS activists by even playing with the suggestion, as in *Nightschool*, that AIDS could be some kind of punishment for past bad behaviours. That charge would basically repeat the most cruel accusations of the conservative Right, including the infamous denunciation of people with AIDS made in 1987 by Jerry Falwell.<sup>8</sup> As with the *AIDS Project*, General Idea was not making any claim but bringing to a point of acuity an underlying social perception that survives by not being engaged. *Nightschool* makes explicit what was ironically implicit in the switching of 'AIDS' for 'LOVE' in the *AIDS Project*: that a culture of blame surrounds AIDS. But the collaborative's interest, as always, is with the value of ambiguity itself. The political climate in activist circles at the end of the 80s would not tolerate any ambiguity around 'blaming the victim': the reaction to any such strategy was predictably fierce. Perhaps such a move was a little 'rich' even for General Idea's 'blood' and so *Nightschool*, though far less hedged than the *AIDS Project*, is carefully coded. Blatant, however, would be its next project. Whereas *Nightschool* flirts with a powerful taboo, *Fin de Siècle* (1990) would suggest something merely politically incorrect: the artists represent the AIDS patient as victim.<sup>9</sup> This project's further engagement with the culture of blame used irony to a different end entirely and left no doubt, for once, as

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<sup>8</sup>Falwell announced: "AIDS is a lethal judgment of God on the sin of homosexuality and it is also the judgment of God on America for endorsing this vulgar, perverted, and reprobate lifestyle ... God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah primarily because of the sin of homosexuality. Today, He is again bringing judgment against this wicked practice through AIDS." Quoted by Peter Lewis Allen, "AIDS in the U.S.A.," in *Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 123.

<sup>9</sup>Bronson, interview, 110.

to where *they* stood.

General Idea returned to the imagery of innocence extremely effectively here. *Fin de Siècle* represents the trio, this time as “impossibly adorable seal pups adrift on the ice floes of the millennium.”<sup>10</sup> There are two major manifestation of this project. The first was as a poster image (fig.47) and the second an installation work (fig.48). Both set three baby harp seals in a landscape derived from Caspar David Friedrich’s 1824 painting *Polar Sea* (fig.49). The project originated, according to Bronson, as a dream Felix had, in which the three of them, as baby seals, were lost in an arctic ice-world.<sup>11</sup> Although they were aware that “at that moment it was politically incorrect to portray people with AIDS as victims,” they proceeded on the grounds that they did feel like victims and that the piece was therefore justifiable.<sup>12</sup> *Fin de Siècle* is no simple *cri de coeur*, however. It has several facets that connect their past work with then-current political themes and it achieves a new level of aggression in its manipulation of the audience.

As a poster, *Fin de Siècle* recalls the poster campaigns opposing the Labrador seal hunt.<sup>13</sup> This inflammatory issue was a major transatlantic controversy between 1977 and 1995,

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<sup>10</sup>Gary Michael Dault, “A Tribute to General Idea,” *Canadian Art* 11 Spring (1994): 80.

<sup>11</sup>Bronson, interview, 110.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>A well-known instance of these is the close-up picture of the baby seal that appears in the home of Michael Palin’s character Ken in the 1988 hit comedy *A Fish Called Wanda*. The animal-loving Ken is horrified when Kevin Kline’s Nietzsche-(mis)quoting character, posing as a gay ex-CIA assassin, throws a knife between the seal’s eyes to demonstrate his proficiency with such weapons. Kline’s Oscar-winning performance is a masterpiece that transcends its role as a parody exaggerating the stereotype of the ‘fascist’(cruel, ignorant yet blissfully self assured) American. See Charles Chrichton, dir., *A Fish Called Wanda* (MGM, 1988).



when the seal had become “the centerfold of pro- and anti- fur advocacy.”<sup>14</sup> Many people in Canada, anyway, will remember the intense controversy, with the European press, Greenpeace and eventually Brigitte Bardot all getting involved.<sup>15</sup> Outside of Canada, and for many within it, sympathy for the seals was a clear consensus. The baby seals embodied a childlike quality of absolute innocence, and thus their killers were characterized as barbaric and even, ironically, as inhuman.<sup>16</sup> General Idea’s seals also appear headed for disaster. The poster background, meanwhile, heightens their pathos. It was painted by an illustrator for General Idea as a deliberately maudlin, “populist” interpretation of the Friedrich original.<sup>17</sup> The cruelly jagged, icy environment makes the plight of the seals – helpless and clumsy – a dire one. The Friedrich painting’s alternative title, *The Wreck of The Hope*, refers to the loss of a ship in the high Arctic and so *Fin de Siècle* also hints at the much mythologized loss of Franklin’s expedition to find the Northwest Passage, which Northrop Frye calls “a great Canadian theme.”<sup>18</sup> Franklin’s fate seemed to confirm – until very recently – that there was no possibility of a Northwest Passage, and so the idea of the loss of hope – and the assertion

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<sup>14</sup>Chantal Nadeau, *Fur Nation: From the Beaver to Brigitte Bardot* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 181.

<sup>15</sup>Nadeau, 152-166. The issue has reemerged, Bardot in tow, in 2006.

<sup>16</sup>See Nadeau 159-166. Nadeau writes: “Images of watery-eyed bleeding baby seals – always presented as newborns – were in many ways [informed] by pro-life iconography of the fetus, a reminder of the cruelty involved in the disposal of a baby’s life.” (158.) The conflict was easily racialized, and Brigitte Bardot’s career as both a defender of ‘baby’ seals and mouthpiece for anti-Muslim xenophobia in France made her an easy target in the Canadian media. Fur could be seen as patriotic, anti-Colonial and even anti-racist, a statement of solidarity with aboriginal peoples. Meanwhile, targeting the market as well as the source, the “traffic of seal penises to the Asian aphrodisiac market” allowed Bardot to further descend into crude racist caricatures of “Asian men as impotent perverts” (162).

<sup>17</sup>Bronson, interview, 116.

<sup>18</sup>Northrop Frye, “Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*,” in *The Bush Garden: Essays on The Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1995), 228.

of impossibility – is a central concern of this installation.<sup>19</sup>

As a nation built in part on the fur trade, Canada *per se* became an issue in this work; the memory of Franklin and the then-contemporary fur controversy gave the issue broad historical scope. And there was a simple way these two issues collided: Bronson notes that “although the seals are listed in certain countries as an endangered species, Canada, which is the only country they actually live in, in fact has them listed as being overpopulated.”<sup>20</sup> This kind of Canadian exceptionalism, and what it suggests about being out of step, grounds the underlying question of extinction: Diana Nemiroff has noted that General Idea’s status both “as gay men and as Canadians” informs its sense of marginality.<sup>21</sup> A millennial anxiety, clearly indicated in its title, informs *Fin de Siècle*.<sup>22</sup> Animal rights but also survival, that perennial Canadian theme, are wrapped up in the mood: Canadian national survival, in the context of the death throws of the Meech Lake Accord, was very much a pressing topic in 1990.<sup>23</sup> So

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<sup>19</sup>Bronson, interview, 113.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>21</sup>Diana Nemiroff, “AA Bronson,” *Canada Council* [text on-line] (Ottawa: Canada Council, accessed 21 Sept. 2005); <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/prizes/ggvma/>.

<sup>22</sup>Elsewhere, perhaps most famously in Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, also from 1990, AIDS is used to diagnose of the malaise of the age. There is already a certain ‘postmodern’ banality to this sentiment, not quite clichéd but decidedly retro: “even the ‘Fin de Siècle’ – a turn of the century syndrome of a coddled culture characterized by a mixture of euphoria and fear – has existed before.” See Tilman Osterwold, “General Idea,” trans. Joy Fischer, in *Fin de Siècle: General Idea* (Stuttgart: Württembergischer Kunstverein [et al.], 1992), 14.

<sup>23</sup>By 23 June 1990, the deadline for ratifying the accord, the controversy over Meech Lake had become so polarized that both sides claimed that its ratification or lack of ratification, as the case may be, would inexorably lead to the breakup of Canada. See Andrew Cohen, *A Deal Undone: The Making and Breaking of the Meech Lake Accord* (Toronto & Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990), 159-277.

was environmentalism,<sup>24</sup> but, for the members of the collaborative, far more pressing was the question of whether they themselves would live to see the end of the century. Two of them would not.

The fate of the artists is equated with the fate of the seals. But in its gallery context, when *Fin de Siècle* becomes a sculpture, they are trapped in an uncrossable expanse of styrofoam ‘ice.’ The baby seals, all the more affecting for being stuffed toy animals and thus symbols of childhood innocence, are compelling. The “baby harp seals are doomed, helpless and perpetually in need of rescue .... General Idea have cast themselves as irresistibly cute victims that prod viewers ability to feel even as they allude to the serious subtext of a community in peril.”<sup>25</sup> But one move on the viewer’s part into the assemblage, and the installation would collapse like a house of cards.<sup>26</sup> The fragility of these victims is embodied in the fragility of the installation. That is, the very thing that calls so forcefully for an audience member to save them is the very thing that prevents her or him from doing so. The viewer is forced – programmed, actually – to stand idly by. *Fin de Siècle* is a savage comment on the AIDS crisis in the 80s. What General Idea has done in this instance is juxtapose the concern the world at large had for baby seals with the dominant attitude of indifference to people with AIDS. It coopted this concern for the three artists themselves by placing themselves as the seals ,who were seen as innocents, in lieu of gay men, who were widely seen, if not quite to

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<sup>24</sup>*Fin de Siècle* itself refers to an earlier Yves Klein-based work, *Blue Ruins*, (1980), which concerns, among other things, the indeterminate status of Styrofoam as an environmentally-friendly product. Styrofoam never bio-degrades yet is entirely recyclable. See Bronson, interview, 111-12.

<sup>25</sup>Kathryn Rosenfeld, “Triple Self-Portrait (-2),” *New Art Examiner* 28, no.10 (2001): 104.

<sup>26</sup>Bronson, interview, 110.

the extent Falwell imagines, as responsible for their own fate. The viewer might well be affronted by this implication, that he or she can feel sympathy for baby seals – worse yet, stuffed-animal facsimiles of baby seals – but not for human beings with AIDS.

With this installation, General Idea was striking a far more aggressive posture towards the audience than it had since the advent of the AIDS crisis. *Fin de Siècle* was all white – Styrofoam and ersatz seals – and it was deliberately over-lit so as to be “completely blinding.” It was assembled from three hundred sheets of extruded polystyrene and simply reeked in the gallery space.<sup>27</sup> A comment on the popular reaction to AIDS, it was also a comment of the toxicity of the means of treating the disease. Despite its initial cuteness, *Fin de Siècle* is an angry work. The installation version of this project conceives a new strategy in General Idea’s use of irony. It establishes a situational irony; that is, it implicates the viewer directly, saying “Now you see it my way,” even while it positions the artists’ stand-ins and the viewer as irredeemably separated across (and by) the gallery context.

### *PLA©EBO*

There is a return to aesthetic simplicity in a series of works featuring installations of pills. Starting in 1991, the first of these were the installations and affiliated projects called *PLA©EBO*. As AIDS medications became available, voluminous numbers of pills started to become a fact of life. Pills make sense as a subject that would attract the interest of General Idea. In the first place, they are multiple and are constantly traveling and being produced, consumed, and digested. They are units directly connecting daily life with social networks and power structures. They are corporate and they are popular. They are simple and yet,

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<sup>27</sup>Bronson, interview, 107.

chemically, they are incomprehensibly complex. More importantly, pills are related to the priestly authority of the medical establishment. Pills have power and panache. Yet, in the title of this project, General Idea implies that there is something bogus in this fetishization of medicinal technology: these pills are placebos. They are not expected to work. Like so much that becomes a fascination for General Idea, they are a special effect. “Placebo,” means a dummy pill, used in a control group for research, but also a pill or medicine “prescribed for psychological reasons but having no physiological effect.”<sup>28</sup> In Latin, as a first-person, passive verb form, the word means to ‘be pleased’ or ‘be placated’. However, it also has a suspicious secondary meaning, as the “opening ... of vespers [evening prayers] for the dead.”<sup>29</sup> Appearing in various multiple forms from lapel pins to pill holders and calendars the pill motif almost always employs the copyright symbol. “The installation *Magi*© *Bullet* (1992), for example, featured 1,500 helium-filled capsule-shaped Mylar balloons, which make reference to both Andy Warhol’s silvery pillows of 1966 and the anti-HIV drug AZT.”<sup>30</sup> This lack of originality was important in the conceptualization of the project and yet the use of the copyright symbol is both striking and novel. It had been used before – visually – in connection with the AIDS project, in the form of a painting; but its deployment in titles is at once elusive and allusive: it positions itself as indeterminate between the oppositions of originality and endless repetition but, especially, it destabilizes the identity of things.

The three installations known collectively as *PLA*©*EBO* ground indeterminacy, in the

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<sup>28</sup>*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1990 ed., s.v. “Placebo.”

<sup>29</sup>*Cassell’s Latin & English Dictionary*, D.P. Simpson, ed., 1987 ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), sv, “Placere.”

<sup>30</sup>Peter Gallo, “The Enduring Ephemera of General Idea,” *Art in America* (March 2005): 83.

only way possible, by occupying three locations. Separately exhibited as *Red Pill*, *Blue Pill* and *Green Pill*, these each included three large, coffin-size capsules, surrounded by smaller, wall-mounted pill reliefs, organized in columns of three half capsules each (figs. 50). *PLA©EBO* repeats the three original colours of the *AIDS Project*:<sup>31</sup> “In the... installations of cast fiberglass “pills,” identical components in six colour variations were arranged in groups of three through a sequence serializing all the permutations and combinations of the possible colour groupings.”<sup>32</sup> These three installations are but facets of a larger unity, but one unrepresentable in ‘normal’ space.

Like the *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, these exhibitions collectively define a new kind of imaginary space. Projected along the gallery wall, the repeated pill reliefs seem to encode digital information or perhaps transcribe Morse Code (fig.51). ‘Space’ is today understood to include the three (or four) dimensions in which we are used to operating but also to include any number of imaginary spaces which we may inhabit mentally through media. Long distance communications, television and now, through the internet, ‘cyberspace’, define a world of experience that transcends all physical space. *PLA©EBO* refers to these but also to other conceptions of a transcendental world. In their simplicity as much as in their multiplicity they define within the limited scope of this world the trace of a sublime beyond that may be likened to death or to God: the sign of ultimate mysteries that annihilate the

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<sup>31</sup>Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, “General Idea’s *PLA©EBO Series*,” Trans. Joy Fischer, catalogue essay, in *Fin de Siècle: General Idea*. Stuttgart: Württembergischer Kunstverein [et al.], 1992), 62.

<sup>32</sup>General Idea, interviewed by Sandra Simpson, in *General Idea: Multiples*, catalogue raisonné: “Multiples and Prints 1967 – 1993” (Toronto: S.K. Simpson Gallery, 1993), n.p.

individual subject.

This ‘heroic’ sublimity had long been the concern of Abstract Expressionists, such as Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman, and of the minimalists. Here General Idea operates in this tradition, but ironically: G.I. can be understood as the opposite of the minimalists, adding one ironic meaning on top of another *ad infinitum*.<sup>33</sup> Recalling the simplicity of these forebears, on the one hand, the pills are also far from abstractions. Their geometrical simplicity is incidental: they are perfectly frank representations of pills. Retaining a pop sensibility, of course, they at the same time embody a heavy message. As surrogates for coffins, the larger capsules suggest the deaths of the three artists; and we can hardly forget that these pills are medicine and, as placebos, medicine that will ultimately not work. *PLA©EBO* balances a number of opposite suggestions very skillfully. As capsules, and ones that evince a sleek ‘space-age’ look, they suggest voyages of discovery thus equating death with a passage to a new, utterly mysterious reality – Shakespeare’s “undiscovered country.” Exhibited in Barcelona has helium filled balloons, (fig.52) these pills also suggest a whimsical, colourful and even happy departure. But, in balancing all these suggestions, General Idea also emphasizes unknown and unknowable character of whatever is beyond.

*One Day of AZT and One Year of AZT* (1993) continues and develops the theme. Exhibited on two occasions, first in Stuttgart (fig.53), and then in Toronto, (fig.54), the two versions share similarities and exhibit differences. In Stuttgart, the work was displayed in a ten-sided room and each section of the wall had AZT pills arranged as if as a calendar.<sup>34</sup> In

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<sup>33</sup>Bronson, interview, 113.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 107-108.

Toronto they are arranged regularly again, as in *PLA@EBO*, as a grid. Here the effect is of absolute order. In both cases there are 1850 pills on the walls and five large capsules on the floor. These represent, respectively a twelve month dose and a twenty-four hour dose of the medicine. In one case there are too many pills to swallow and in the other case the pills are far too large to be swallowed. Bronson relates that the feeling of being overwhelmed by pills, on the one hand, and impression of having to count pills on the other, was common in the public reaction to both versions.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, one did not need to know about the AIDS connection to understand the theme. Bronson reports that many elderly people, in particular, responded to it because their own lives were so filled with various pharmaceuticals. In their simple white and blue appearance the look is both clinical and ‘high-tech’ in both incarnations.<sup>36</sup>

The pills’ simple white surface with a single blue band affords both installations the same clinical, ‘high-tech’ look. But in the symmetrical exhibit in Toronto the impression is hyper-modern or even futuristic – a science fiction aesthetic, like *2001: A Space Odyssey*—itself suggesting a future date two of the group’s members knew they were unlike to see. But the installation’s appearance is also derived from ancient monumental architecture, like the Avenue of the Rams at Karnak, emphasizing order and repetition, or the enormous funerary structures of the Antique world. The rigidity of the pills’ arrangement into ranks and files recalls the collaborative’s earlier totalitarian themes and the monumental, architectural feel recalls the delirious architectural fantasies of Albert Speer. But the apparently endless

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<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 107.



repetition of identical, rounded white shapes also suggest the great necropolises in Normandy and Flanders or Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. As the work of General Idea became more and more concerned with the AIDS crisis, its concerns moved away from the ephemeral, as if travesty and lightness were intolerable when life had to be clung to. The themes that emerge in the collective's later work are assertion of presence, repetition, an emphatic counting of the now, even while measuring one's vanishing lifetime in pills.

In both the *PLA©EBO* project and in *One Day of AZT and One Year of AZT* the shiny, highly-lit capsules have an impenetrable veneer that likens them to the hermeticism of monumental Minimalism. They emphasize and invert the frame in another way, as a surface. They speak of the mystery of what is absolute. One does not know if one's experimental drug is a placebo. One does not know if or for how much longer AZT will work. And one does not know what is beyond the threshold of death. The shiny veneer reminds us that they are capsules: are we to fill them as coffins or are they the gateway into another reality altogether? Perhaps their impenetrability suggests that there is nothing behind the veneer at all, not even emptiness. In this way their surface is just another 'blue screen,' just another place for another substitution. Perhaps these pills do nothing but reflect our own space, and thus figure and ground are again equated and again their mutually-defining opposition is subverted. *PLA©EBO* and *One Day of AZT, One Year of AZT* make a virtue of not answering these questions.

General Idea takes the theme it developed in its early work, honed and simplified in the *AIDS Project*, and endows it here with a tragic and universal poetic importance. These works combine the unknown of the beyond – their overwhelming theme – with a smooth,

tactile continuum in the present of the gallery experience. Undecidability enters into the work as an indeterminacy connecting the endless void of death and the unobtainable essence of ultimate truths, with the immediacy of the experienced moment in the smoothly controlled encounter in the gallery space. The situation of the viewer in the gallery is made ironic as we are linked not only with a suggested death but with all the others who visited these pill installations, the healthy as well as the sick. We are no different from them, as these works remind us. All our pills – our daily swallowings of the placebo of deferral – are numbered.

*Felix, June 5, 1994*

AIDS took the lives of Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz and, with them, the collective life of General Idea. Felix Partz died on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1994. A couple of hours after his death, Bronson took a remarkable photograph: *Felix, June 5, 1994* (1994-8). (fig. 55) The resulting image is shocking but it is also shocking as an artistic act, a last act and expressive of a collective trusteeship over their collective bodies.<sup>37</sup> However, this action is not *so* unusual: it is what we all do with the corpses of friends or relatives. In life there is a connection between the body and the person that includes the definition of one's own identity against the abject body,<sup>38</sup> but in death there is a need to construct a relationship between the corpse and the now nonexistent person. We ritually use a corpse at a funeral.

The photograph is a carefully composed, a post-mortem portrait. As a photograph, it is also an indexical death-mask,<sup>39</sup> although its scale is monumental. Partz is 'lying in state'

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<sup>37</sup>Bronson, interview, 114.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>39</sup>Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1981), 80-82.

“to receive visitors,”<sup>40</sup> as Bronson writes in “Afterthought,” the text that accompanies this image. The photograph shows Partz’s upper body, lying on a bed, apparently ‘looking’ towards the camera. (Partz’s eyes remain open because, owing to his extreme AIDS-related wasting, he no longer had eyelids).<sup>41</sup> The hands, of course, are skeletal, as is the look on a face no longer capable, it would seem, of expression: it has the automatic smile of a skull. The bed is covered with a multi-coloured, irregularly circular or oval-patterned fabric. Partz’s head is propped up on richly coloured pillows, purple, red, blue, and saffron. He lies amid spreads of fabrics, including a shirt with black and silver spiral-like patterns, which, on his withered body, looks like just another sheet. The shirt’s emptiness reminds us, physically, of his loss.

Echoes of artworks fill this picture and balance, somewhat, its disturbing directness: the skull-like face and Partz’s position, Bronson tells us, set amid some of his favourite objects (cigarettes, tape recorder, television remote control), recall the *vanitas* tradition and still life, with its conventional meditations on mortality.<sup>42</sup> With its patterns and composition, the picture also recalls paintings of Gustav Klimt, who would, sometimes, place skulls or faces at the margins of his paintings, themselves so rich with fabrics and patterns.<sup>43</sup> But even

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<sup>40</sup>Bronson, “Afterthought,” 88.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>Fern Bayer had arranged Felix with some of his favourite things around him and they become markers of identity. Bronson, interview, 113-14.

<sup>43</sup>Bronson maintains that the similarity is inadvertent. The work was exhibited first as a lacquer print on vinyl in Munich and this geographical and cultural proximity to Vienna accounts, in his view, for the first comparisons with Klimt, which have since become part of the standard reception of this work. See Bronson, interview, 116. Nevertheless, first-time viewers unaware of this established reading often recognize Klimt in this work immediately.

with these references to painting – indeed, in part, because of them– the piece is hard to look at. In its original display context in Munich, viewers were pressed up against the enormous picture in a space that was only about three meters deep, immersing them in the scene. The formalization and stylization of something so utterly private is uncomfortable when it is made luridly public.

The photograph also seems somehow like a ‘live’ image, and acquires a filmic or televisual character. This, in turn, relates it to General Idea’s earlier work with video and film. Felix is ‘on camera’ before his ‘public.’ We might wish to turn it off, like a t.v. screen, but the remote control is caught inside the picture where the viewer cannot reach it and where Partz, dead, cannot use it. The picture cannot be turned off, just as its subject, in the end, could never again close his eyes.

Julia Kristeva writes that the corpse is the “utmost of abjection.”<sup>44</sup> Two qualities of the dead body may occasion this: its otherness from the symbolically-constructed person – a horrible *materiality* – and an uncanniness in its having *arrived*. Death is an abstraction: all there is, in our experience, are dead bodies and people who used to be here but who no longer are. One knows of one’s death and the deaths of others, that they are due to arrive; but when they arrive the survivors are left not only with a lack (the absent person) but also with a strange new object.

Bronson’s work directly displays how AIDS reveals the abject body. In destroying the immune system, AIDS renders the person helpless before a kind of decomposition in life. Of

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<sup>44</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 6.

course, it also produces the dead body – it kills. These processes disclose the body's alienation from the 'person' whose body it is. In this work, filled with favourite objects and even presented according to longstanding interests of its subject (in mass media and self-representation), the thing the least like Felix Partz in this picture is, in fact, his corpse. His identity is constituted instead in the collection of objects placed around him like fetishes. Partz's devastated body is an unwelcome, even repelling, sight but the work remains compelling. It forces the viewer to look. In its colours it is lively and in the open eyes and skeletal smile it is terrifyingly inviting. The bony hands look as if they might reach out. Indeed the presence of the remote control and pack of cigarettes on either side of Partz's body suggest reaching, touching, grasping. We half expect that at any moment he might reach out for us. The beautiful fabrics, objects and woolen blanket also suggest tactility. The hyper-realism of this scene temporarily blinds the viewer to one fundamental formal fact of this piece: that it is a photograph; the objects it contains may not be touched. This work is a kind of *trompe l'oeuil* photograph, and, as such, it constitutes what could be called a *trompe l'identification*.

We are alienated from a scene that fascinates and compels us and thus reminds implicitly of loss. Bronson's loss is Felix and Jorge, dead just five months before.<sup>45</sup> Felix's own loss is obvious but, in addition to the total loss inherent in death, there is the earlier loss of the accustomed body, its progressive alienation as it becomes increasingly abject. "Bronson relates [that Felix had wanted to surround himself more and more with bright colours] as he

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<sup>45</sup>Rosenfeld, 104.

got closer and closer to death.”<sup>46</sup> Identity becomes located more in what is seen in the world as the body becomes increasingly abject. Susan Sontag notes that the progression towards being perceived as existing more in the spiritual world had been a primary aspect of the reception, and glamourization, of tuberculosis until the early twentieth century,<sup>47</sup> but, she writes, “AIDS, like cancer, does not allow romanticizing or sentimentalizing.”<sup>48</sup> Yet, although it is hardly glamourized, the presentation of Felix in this piece does involve the dissolution of his persona into the world around him. As his persona becomes more located in the world around him it can more easily be “breathed” into the outer world – and there preserved. It is a transformation not into spirit but into image.

Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject, the body’s fundamental otherness that is pushed away, is located within the Lacanian psychoanalytic model where it originates in the construction of the subject in language; indeed it is in order to do this that the child first identifies with a ‘mirror’ image: to acquire imaginative mastery over the fragmented body of early experience. Thereafter this spectral “I” is established as the self *in lieu* of its fully experienced nature – the part that has been pushed away becoming the abject.<sup>49</sup> Thus the abject is what one’s identity is built against, and, partly, in place of. Kristeva describes an encounter with the abject as:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might

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<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>Susan Sontag *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Doubleday, 1989) 26-35.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 111-112.

<sup>49</sup>Kristeva 2. See also: Julia Kristeva, “Revolution in Poetic Language,” trans. Margaret Waller, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 101.

have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.<sup>50</sup>

The abject character of the body is its otherness from the 'self,' apprehended when it is in pain, ill or in any other way being unduly biological, but it is only ever fully realized in the corpse. Yet this works differently in art than it does in life. Partz 'corpse' in this picture is not abject: it is not his corpse, after all, but merely an *image* of his corpse. One is affronted by the abject but at the same time free from it. The defences of the mirror-defined subject are aroused but not engaged. We do not 'abject' this piece but, rather, we are caught in a balance between pushing it away and being pulled towards it. It becomes akin to the mirror. The early subject, the child, gains at the mirror a borrowed subjective integrity, a wholeness – but loses his or her erstwhile self-sameness. Early incapacity is exchanged for alienation. This dilemma is resolved in death – of course – but temporarily resolved, too, in certain artworks.

*Felix, June 5, 1994* is a working-through and acceptance of the death of Partz – this is the function of the ritual of helping oneself to – of having and using – the dead person's body; but it also constitutes, for its viewer, a resolution, however provisional and incomplete, of the *imaginary* divide within the alienated subject. As Partz's persona becomes located in this picture outside of the body, so too the viewer's identification is not with the body but with what is around it. He or she directs his or her identification not towards the quasi-abject 'body' but with the attractive surroundings: fabrics, cigarettes, pillows. In this way the process of original abjection in the self-identification at the mirror is turned around in this

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<sup>50</sup>Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

piece: we do not identify with the photographic subject but with all that which is pushed away from its edges and which define it. It relieves our sense of alienation by forcing us to identify with what is exterior to the subject, while we simultaneously are able to see ourselves as the body as well. Thus this work is both a reminder of death and an assurance of life. Like that drawing of two faces that makes up a cup, *Felix, June 5, 1994* affords us a bifurcated identification – the only possible way to evade the trap of the mirror.

In “Afterthought,” Bronson writes of Felix: “I return you to General Idea’s world of mass media, there to function without me.”<sup>51</sup> Displayed amid furniture and cigarette advertisements, on a billboard in the *Dream Cities* installation in Munich in 1999 (fig. 56) it seems lost, in the flow of life, like ashes scattered on the wind. Bronson concludes:

These bodies are our houses. We live in them as temporary tenants for a few years, for this short lifetime . . . . We gather these houses to form towns and cities. By day we live in these dream cities as if they were permanent, . . . while at night we inhabit the continuous flux of the dream world without questioning its fluidity . . . . We need to remember the diseased, the disabled and, yes, even the dead walk among us. They are part of our community, our history, our continuity. They are our co-inhabitants in this “Dream City.”<sup>52</sup>

In leading the viewer to have a shifting identification, from the figure of Felix to the surroundings and back, Bronson creates another ‘vibrating’ construction, like the AIDS logo in its AIDS logo matrix. Our shifting attention from and towards the objects in the photograph, on one hand, and Felix’s corpse, on the other, likewise destabilize the categories of subject and context and of figure and ground. In the presentation of a corpse that seems at first that it might be alive, we are given an image that is between two categories normally

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<sup>51</sup>Bronson, “Afterthought,” 88.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*



rigidly held apart: life and death. In a sense, Felix is presented as ‘undead.’ “Afterthought” speaks of ghosts haunting our dream cities. The whole effect of this piece is uncanny. It points to that which we ‘abject’ at all costs in order to achieve our subjective identities: the terrible indeterminacy present in all symbolic constructions.

In *Felix, June 5, 1994* Bronson presents an ‘undead’ figure, stably located within an indeterminate position. This image of Felix is stabilized by our shifting identification: he is framed by irony itself and so it becomes a model, a ‘mirror’ with which we may, correspondingly, disidentify. Bronson writes that Felix Partz is arranged “to receive visitors.” Indeed, he seems to be regarding the viewers as he would such visitors. We are reminded of the crowd who would be there in the photograph. They would be located, larger than life, in *our* space, in the gallery or in the street; yet we do not see them. The “diseased, the disabled and ... the dead”<sup>53</sup> may walk among us but so do the lost, the remembered and the half-forgotten, our past selves, past friends, living or dead, our ideal selves, our banished, abject selves – all the by-products of every identification that has happened. Bronson summons them all into a strange congregation. It is a memorial service, in art, for them, the persistently absent (and also the uncannily present). They are our invisible neighbours in what Bronson calls the “dream city” and what most of us would call the ‘real world.’

### Conclusion

AA Bronson complains that people do not seem to realize that General Idea has stopped and that his own work is now independent.<sup>54</sup> General Idea advanced its irony to such

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<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup>Bronson, interview, 104.

a radical extent that it framed its entire project so that its boundaries without and divisions within were in constant flux and their locations were undecidable. *Felix, June 5, 1994* is Bronson's first independent work. The attribution, however exact, is also utterly arbitrary: the work records the dissolution of the collaborative even as it recapitulates and recasts many of its themes and strategies. Accepting indeterminacy implicitly involves accepting both interpretations. We cannot successfully revert to an unambiguous meaning at a later time and not be doubted.

Linda Hutcheon brings up the interesting case of Paul de Man. The author of a "notorious 'anti-semitic' article" during the Nazi occupation of France, de Man is defended by Fredric Jameson, who argues that it was "the ingenious effort at resistance of a young man altogether too smart for his own good."<sup>55</sup> That is, its exaggerated antisemitism was some kind of a secret key to understanding that it was 'really' a savage critique of the politics of collaboration. But the ironist must be prepared to pay a certain price for the benefit of indeterminacy. Jameson may be right but nothing can change the fact that de Man's article was meant to be – and was – 'misread' by most collaborating readers. The transideological character of irony abolishes innocence as well as guilt, even if de Man was "disastrously misunderstood and misread."<sup>56</sup> Ironic language cannot become retroactively *de-ironized* when the preferred political interpretation later becomes available again. Embracing irony in the first place means being forever open to both meanings.

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<sup>55</sup>See Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 16. See also Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 258.

<sup>56</sup>Hutcheon, 16.

Indeterminacy releases the ironist from all conventional constructions, yet it exacts as its price the ironist's exile from them. Misunderstanding cannot happen to ironic discourse, as ironic discourse privileges no one meaning, but operates within a realm that acknowledges many rival meanings.

At the beginning of *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Hutcheon declares that any discussion of postmodernism is "usually accompanied by a grand flourish of negativized rhetoric: we hear of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy and antitotalization." She adds: "What all these words literally do (precisely by their disavowing prefixes – *dis, de, in, anti*) is incorporate that which they aim to contest." They undermine what they deny yet in so doing they undermine the possibility of anything else. This is either what is wrong with postmodernism or what is very right with it. Hutcheon notes that thinkers who have studied postmodernism – she mentions Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Charles Newman – "leave us guessing as to what it is ... though never in doubt as to its undesirability."<sup>57</sup> Irony enjoys a "governing" role in postmodernism and so, if there are any clear political or ideological objectives that are to be sought without massive compromise, then postmodernism can be no good.<sup>58</sup>

Hutcheon writes that "[p]ostmodern culture ... has a contradictory relationship to what we usually label our dominant, liberal humanist culture [and] contests it within its own assumptions."<sup>59</sup> In particular, what it contests is that individual subject which is the axiom and

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<sup>57</sup>Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*

lynchpin of the entire humanist project. General Idea was identified as operating within postmodernism even before “the term was current.”<sup>60</sup> The collaborative certainly acted just as Hutcheon would have it do, and its entire career was a sustained campaign on behalf of irony against the idea of the normative “absolute subject.” But Slavoj Žižek warns us that “[o]ne of the most common ‘postmodern’ myths [asserts that] the era of modernity now reaching its end was allegedly marked by the all-devouring monster of the absolute, self-transparent Subject.”<sup>61</sup> Although Žižek successfully demonstrates that the subject of modernity was no less conflicted than any postmodern one, this does nothing to disprove the existence of the *myth*. This myth has been the foundation of the popular humanism upon which contemporary, liberal capitalism is based. Indeed, the capitalism of today’s ‘surreal’ mediated identity market works only because it is founded on this myth: the subject continually searches for a confirmation of its imaginary integrity in a commodified ‘mirror’ but finds only endless deferral. Like Aristophanes’s myth of the lover who endlessly seeks his other half, the contemporary subject floats through a synesthetic fantasy, grasping at phantoms.

Formerly, subjects sought transcendence from the conundrum posed by the myth of singular subjectivity through religious or political ideologies that promised either ecstasy in mass identity or communion with some total spiritual reality. This still happens, of course, but many in the West are caught instead in the endless lure of the identity market, vainly

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<sup>60</sup>Peggy Gale, catalogue essay, *Showcards: General Idea* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1994), n.p.

<sup>61</sup>Slavoj Žižek, “Sum: The Loop of Enjoyment,” in *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and The Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 169.

trying to buy their way out. But to mobilize the full range and anti-individual subjective possibilities, General Idea long used imagery of totalitarian control. Throughout its work a distinct interest in Nazism has been evident as well as in the ideal totalitarianism of George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. In the large installations of pills, the collaborative uses the an ecstatic religious symbolism, but one that is hidden behind the guises of its analogues within modernist art: the hermetic simplicity of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and the transcendental simplicity of monumental Minimalism.

Religion and totalitarianism both do what humanism cannot: they promise an encounter with the Real. Žižek notes, of Zen religion, that it involves "a total voiding of the Self, the acceptance that there is no 'inner truth' to be discovered." He links Zen and Orwell's ideal totalitarianism:

The ultimate result of global subjectivization is not that 'objective reality' disappears, but that our subjectivity itself disappears, turns into a trifling whim, while social reality continues its course. Here I am tempted to paraphrase the interrogator's famous answer to Winston Smith, who doubts the existence of Big Brother ('It is You who doesn't exist!'): the proper reply to postmodern doubts about the existence of the ideological big Other is that it is the subject itself who doesn't exist."<sup>62</sup>

What Žižek glosses over is that the other is only defined by the self, which he maintains does not exist to define it. Thus distinct, inflexible identity is what does not exist, and not just this or that particular identity, as serves some particular ideological agenda.

The encounter with Big Brother is merely symbolic of the encounter with any power that beggars the individual's capacity to cope. It could be God or it could be some nuclear explosion; it could be an earthquake or it could be AIDS. It is whatever reveals, in the abject

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<sup>62</sup>Žižek, *Welcome to The Desert of the Real*, 86.

helplessness of the individual, that the identity of that 'person' can be and therefore is annihilated. We are all unpersons before the Real. For General Idea this "Reality" was AIDS. The disease for them had two aspects: the first reflected its project but the second destroyed them. It is a final and potent irony that what the collaborative could not evade was so much like what it was. As G.I. would manipulate an audience, trapping it in some situational irony, so it too was trapped by this epidemic. It forced them to assert, in asserting its protean independence from normative identity, the correspondingly protean nature of that virus that destroyed them.

We negotiate our relations in each of the realms of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, by means of irony. Yet in most cases we disavow this strategy. We live on 'irony's edge' and, for this reason, we are used to it, switching from a mode of assertive self-identity to one that sows doubt throughout the whole project of identity. As each assertion is made, the fixity of that performed identity ebbs away even in the next interval. We can exhibit a humanist ideology one instant and a totalitarian one the next, and we are bound by no covenant to be consistent in our world views. The members of General Idea knew of and thus could deploy this extraordinary freedom, and they succeeded, as usual, in having it both ways: to be either a member of one collective or one of three individuals, however each saw fit. Having been so involved with this enterprise for so long, when the collective ended with the deaths of Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz, AA Bronson was left, at first, in the impossible position of not being able to have it either way. When being is framed by irony, it cannot be de-ironized, even when being partly – or even entirely – stops.

**APPENDIX:  
INTERVIEW WITH AA BRONSON**

The following is the text of an interview conducted between Luke Nicholson (LN) and AA Bronson (AAB) on 24 October, 2005 in New York City.

LN: My first question has to do with when General Idea starts because this is a contradiction in the various sources. The older sources usually say 1968; your website and later sources say 1969; and I noticed the book at Printed Matter<sup>1</sup> saying it started in 1967. I was wondering if you'd tell me the immediate circumstances of how General Idea started and why there is this discrepancy.

AAB: There are reasons for each of them. It began by us moving into a house together to share the rent. That's essentially how it began.

LN: The house on Gerrard?

AAB: Yeah, on Gerrard Street West. And that was in '69. I don't exactly remember when in '69 but at some point, probably in the Summer. Well, if you read those things you probably know the story of how it was a house that had been made into a storefront. It was just before Yorkville happened, when Yorkville became the hippie centre.... [Gerrard Street] had fallen on harder times and now this was back to being a house. So we moved into a house with a store window and we started raiding the garbage locally and setting up fake stores in our window. Some of them would only last a day and some of them would last a month and there was always this sign on our door that said "back in five minutes." So that's how we entertained ourselves because we were all unemployed. And as we began to develop our projects – because originally we were all working independently before we gradually merged – some of the projects used individual people's stuff from the immediately preceding period so there actually are things dating back to '67 that are germane to what happened after that. We don't actually declare them as General Idea works but in that editions catalogue there are works dating back to '67 because they're the predecessors of what immediately follows. We started the Miss General Idea project, which was in 1970, still living in that house. In order to have a beauty pageant we knew that we had to have former queens because there are always former queens that put the crown on the new queen and so on. So Mimi, who was Felix's girlfriend, and Granada, who lived across the

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Fischer, ed., *General Idea: Editions 1967-1994* (Mississauga: Blackwood Gallery [University of Toronto at Mississauga], 2003).

street, we immediately chose as our former queens, and that allowed us to backdate to '68. So that's how the '68 year came in. For years we said 1968 because we had this Miss General Idea '68 and Miss General Idea '69 and so we had to have started in '68. But it was fake.

LN: Is it part of that confusion of times that happens with '84, as well?

AAB: Well the other thing was that '68 was the year of the Paris riots and even in 1970 we recognized '68 as being a very important year. We liked to identify ourselves with that year.

LN: And there are those who link '69 as the founding date with Stonewall.

AAB: I don't think that we were even aware of Stonewall, whereas we were very much aware of the Paris riots, as especially I had come from that whole hippie underground newspaper circuit.

LN: There's uncertainty as to how exactly and when it starts but there also seems to be the same thing with the close of General Idea. You operate under the same name as you did as part of General Idea and also I'm thinking of the piece *Felix, June 5, 1994*...

AAB: Well, that's not a General Idea piece.

LN: Yes, but its moment is right at the end of General Idea, in a sense.

AAB: Yeah.

LN: It's the first piece when you're on your own. I'm wondering if you find that there is a fuzzy close in the same way as there is a fuzzy opening.

AAB: To me there isn't a fuzzy close but I know that there is to some people. I mean I think that some people are confused as to whether General Idea has actually ended yet or not and whether my work is still General Idea work. Starting about a month ago one of my dealers in Germany – suggested instead of calling it General Idea – calling it the estate of General Idea. Legally it's not an estate because I'm still alive; but in essence it's an estate. So from now on, on all the promotional material, it's going to say 'representing the estate of General Idea' to clear up that there is no new General Idea work being created.

LN: Projects – I'm thinking of the *AIDS Project* in this case – appear and proliferate in ways and continue to be used by people not necessarily knowing whose it is. In that sense it seems as if the project keeps continuing even if you're not, even if the people making it are not.



- AAB: Well that particular project was always intended to have its own life. We didn't consider ourselves to have copyright on it. People are always still asking my permission and I always say yes, no matter what it is. I want it to be without copyright.
- LN: And this seems to fit in , then, with what happened with Robert Indiana's image.
- AAB: He lost copyright. He would have wanted to have copyright but at the time he would have had to formally copyright it with the government.
- LN: To the best of your knowledge, did he just not do that or was it a choice not to do that?
- AAB: No, it wasn't a choice. He just never got around to it and it never occurred to him. Back then you wouldn't think of having to copyright every painting. But somehow that became an icon of an era and caught him by surprise. I'm trying to produce, right now, this enormous *AIDS* sculpture for Toronto in relation to the International AIDS Conference, which is next summer. So again it's not really a General Idea work exactly. It's hard to know. I mean we always intended it to go on and be reproduced ad infinitum in any possible way. But it's hard to know exactly what to call this. Is it a General Idea sculpture given that I'm doing it or is it not?
- LN: There are certain versions of the *AIDS* image that are sculptures and I know that you've done the multiples, which are smaller figures. Have there ever been other large pieces?
- AAB: There was a seven foot-high [sculpture]. Well, the sculpture itself was seven feet by seven feet by three and a half feet deep. It sits on a base and it was originally done for a shopping street in Hamburg and it was up for nine months and the idea was that it would collect graffiti – because we knew it would – and become a sort of public dialogue. So the city was instructed not to clean it, which they didn't. And then, after that, it came back to us and we included it in a travelling show that went through Europe and America. As soon as it got to America every single museum that showed it cleaned it despite very, very specific instructions not to – in writing, triple underlined. And every time they would deny knowledge of how it had come to be cleaned. It would get cleaned in the middle of the night. Nobody would know who had done it. So it's very interesting in terms of the North American museum's idea of what a sculpture is, because this was obviously a break with the usual idea of a monumental sculpture.
- LN: And with that project something that one notices is that sometimes it is alone, as you usually see Robert Indiana's piece, but then sometimes it's also repeated, as in the wallpaper and poster projects. What was informing your choice to do that? It seems, on the one hand, like a Warhol thing but also ... not, at the same time.

- AAB: We always thought of it as a virus. It was replicating, ad infinitum. And that is why we were always most interested in projects where it could get carried through different kinds of distribution systems, so posters in the subway.
- LN: Or in lights in Times Square?
- AAB: Yeah. Advertising media. We were particularly interested in the whole replication thing.
- LN: And the image itself is obviously an infiltration and conversion of the *LOVE* image. Later, of course – and I'm not sure to what extent you might have thought of this as a critical gesture – but there's the Gran Fury *RIOT* version of it, which is not only using your image but also using the idea of the use of the original image.
- AAB: That was done as a piece for a show where they knew there was going to be General Idea *AIDS* posters at the show, in the streets of Berlin, and they did that piece as a criticism of the *AIDS Project* because they felt it was not strong enough. They felt that there was no message and that there needed to be a message.
- LN: It always seems ironic to me that they were, in a sense, involving themselves in this proliferating project, even as they were criticizing it.
- AB: Also they changed their minds later on. It's funny. A lot of the American activists originally disliked the project and we were rather confused by that. We didn't really understand. We sort of understood. One was the issue of the waste of money: that we were doing all these posters but we didn't have any didactic information, about using condoms or something like that. That was part of it. So we sort of got that. But still there seemed to be an underlying anger that we didn't understand. At some point we figured out that when Americans look at the *LOVE* image, they interpret it as being about free sex; when Canadians and Europeans look it, they tend to think of it as being about universal love or so-called brotherly love. And so the interpretation of the *AIDS* emblem becomes totally altered by that. If you think that the original meant free sex, it becomes extremely cynical, like we're trying to say 'if you have sex, you'll get AIDS,' or something like that. That's how the American activists originally chose to interpret it.
- LN: Throughout General Idea's work motifs get invented and set aside and then reused in different ways. And then changing the content of a short word – in this case 'love' – seems similar to what you were doing with 'life' to 'file.' Is that a conscious repetition?
- AAB: Yes. I think it's the first project in which we took all the techniques we'd been developing over the years and then compressed them into one very compact project.

- LN: Another thing I would think of is the use of art images as opposed to popular culture formats. I'm thinking of a video like *Shut The Fuck Up*, where you're dealing with Yves Klein and not quite dealing with Julian Schnabel.
- AAB: That started in about '81/'82 because we realized all the museums were busy trying to do blockbusters. And we realized that at a certain point the museums entered the mainstream market and they were a part of mass media, which they hadn't been. In the 70s museums were not a part of mass culture but by the mid 80s they were.
- LN: There's also an interesting phenomenon with the *LOVE* image. It seems to work backwards from the usual process of pop art. It's an artwork that then becomes a pop icon, rather than the other way around.
- AAB: Right. And it had that whole history, of course. That was part of what we liked about it. It was part of consumer culture, which very few artworks are.
- LN: Something else is the regular, repeating pattern. That is a motif that you would use – for instance, the grid, which appears as the background for the *Showcards Series* but then also in the interlocking ziggurats in paintings like *Carmen*.
- AAB: Well, I think that comes out of pop art, in a way. I mean, we were definitely interested in serial imagery and repeated imagery. I obviously liked Warhol's Brillo box, a perfect example. We were very conscious of that.
- LN: Now, I suffer from never having seen them in life but I gather that in the ziggurat paintings these are fluorescent colours, really.
- AAB: No. There are more colours. So one is raw canvas. One is fluorescent. One is a designer housepaint from the period because it was a fad, having designer lines. Every line of paint had a handful of colours that were its designer colours. And then the other one is something like outdoor paint.
- LN: And the florescent was the yellow, or the pink?
- AAB: It was different in each painting. It was a whole series.
- LN: Because this seems to me, on the one hand, to talk to minimalism and monumental minimalism in painting but then there is the image of the ziggurat that doesn't work that way and colours like fluorescent yellow or pink are ... unusual there.
- AAB: Also it's on raw canvas so it's actually done consciously in the style of Stella. It uses all the techniques of Stella from that period. It's like a parody of Stella in a way, which most people did not pick up at the time. The same with the geometric, fucking poodle. They're like a parody of Stella. When you start looking at how it's

constructed you can see that. Because, for example, between the colours on the geometric poodles there's always a raw canvas, little space between. The colours never touch each other.

LN: I don't know a lot about Stella but you get a sense that he positions himself very much as this image of the macho, American, titan artist. Was that the sense you had at the time?

AAB: Yep.

LN: And it seems like yours is the queer response.

AAB: It's a sort of an ironic version, in a way.

LN: Was that there when you were talking about Schnabel, for example, in *Shut the Fuck Up?* He seems to locate himself in the same history of the 'heroic artist figure.'

AAB: Yeah. Already, by about 1970 or '71, we were talking about working in a group as being against the heroic image of the artist as this individual genius. And that was particularly strong in the immediately preceding period of American culture with the abstract expressionists – and the minimalists, as well, for that matter – but especially the abstract expressionists.

LN: And you were working as a group but also in collaboration with people not immediately of that group, in the General Idea pageants and the various Miss General Ideas...

AAB: Nobody really knew who was in the group for about eight years.

LN: The catalogue from the show at the AGO by Fern Bayer records a lot of these things, which are General Idea-esque. But I remember particularly *We Are Not Buddhists*. It's very funny. That's not attributed to General Idea or I don't think it was in the book.

AAB: It is. It is a General Idea piece. But it takes advantage of a visit by Eric Metcalfe from Vancouver and he actually – I think – drew the image. It was painted by him and that leopard spot motif is his. So it's hard, maybe. That's probably why Fern didn't attribute it directly. It was done for *FILE*. I think it was actually Felix who masterminded the whole thing. It's hard to know.

LN: Well, *FILE* itself plays a little bit with that stuff: what's General Idea? What's just stuff contained by it?

AAB: And there's always lots of lies in there, lots of fake stuff: parties that never happened,

stuff like that. People were always contacting us, saying “why didn’t you invite us to that party? I don’t understand: we’ve know you for so many years.” *Because it never happened!*

LN: Moving on from the *AIDS Project, Pla©ebo* and the various things related to it – with the capsules and so forth – they seem to retain certain aesthetic features from the *AIDS Project*: the simple colours but then also...

AAB: The repetition.

LN: Why a move into what seems to be primarily sculpture at that point?

AAB: Well that starts in ’91. There are a few flat pieces but not many. We had originally intended to do a series of paintings but we got so caught up in the sculptural stuff that we never bothered. Also, Felix and Jorge had both been diagnosed at that point so we were very conscious of not having much time left. So we focussed all our efforts on major installations for a period there, from ’91 to ’93. In there it seems like everything’s a major installation. There’s four installations of pills. There’s the *AZT* one and then the *Pla©ebo* ones. There are three different versions. There are the helium-filled balloons. There are three versions of that. And then there’s the blimps – these big blimps we did for Barcelona, which are three pills about fifteen feet long, helium-filled. Oddly enough, the exhibition – these three big pills were on the outside of the museum – the day it opened was also the opening day for a pharmaceutical conference in Barcelona, which was a lucky coincidence. So we got a good audience. But then, when Jorge and Felix got to a certain stage in being sick, in the last few months, there was no pleasure in that anymore because they couldn’t travel or go see the installations. We would always have them fabricated by the people and they wouldn’t get to see them anymore. So that’s when we reverted to working with more studio-like work. So then it’s the *Infe©ted Mondrian* paintings and much smaller scale, a lot of things based on Duchamp, very small pieces in the end. But the pills happened when we were, I think, conscious of trying to produce as many of the large-scale works while we could, when we were still alive.

LN: Aesthetically very different at that time, or near that time, is *Fin de Siècle*.

AAB: It’s not because it’s made of three hundred sheets of Styrofoam. So, again, there’s this repeating element. Only because of the way it’s constructed it’s not so evident. It’s not in neat rows or anything. It’s more the chaotic thing. And that’s sort of a unique piece. It exists all on its own. Felix had a dream one night, essentially.

LN: Oh really?

AAB: Yeah. He woke up one morning and told us this image in his head so we decided to try and construct it.

LN: Did you think of it in relation to controversies about the seal hunt and ...

AAB: That's what it was all based on, of course.

LN: The innocence of the baby seals versus the imaged 'just desserts' of 'AIDS victims' or something?

AAB: Yeah. It was also a self portrait, of sorts. It was very much like feeling like victims. And we were also aware at that moment that it was politically incorrect to portray people with AIDS as victims. But this was, like, came from the inside. This wasn't like an intellectual construct. It was how we felt. So we decided to go ahead and do it. But there were lots of contradictions, which also made it interesting for us. For example, although the seals are listed in certain countries as endangered species, Canada, which is the only country they actually live in, in fact has them listed as being overpopulated. And there is a similar contradiction with Styrofoam. On the one hand it's the most artificial substance and it's there for the rest of time, right? It does not biodegrade *at all*. And at the same time it's the only plastic that can be a hundred per cent recycled. So it has these two contradictory elements. Those sorts of ideas about the piece interested us, the built-in contradictions.

LN: Duchamp's works are often seen as being aggressive towards the audience. Did you have a feeling of repeating that? In *Fin de Siècle*, for instance, it seems that if you want to save the seals you can't because of the sheets of Styrofoam.

AAB: But you can't get in there! And you feel it. One step into the installation and the entire thing will fall apart. It's a very aggressive piece. There's so much white and it's so reflective and we always asked for it to be lit with fluorescent. It's an assault on the eyes. It's like completely blinding. And the smell of the Styrofoam is also quite aggressive. It completely fills a very large space, a nasty smell. So we thought of it as being very aggressive. I don't know whether we thought of that in terms of Duchamp but we thought of it as being extremely aggressive towards the viewer.

LN: And were there other pieces that were equally aggressive in the past do you think?

AAB: Well I think a lot of people experience the AZT pills that way. Part of it is just the volume of pills – over eighteen hundred pills on the wall and five big ones on the floor. They completely surround you – wall to wall pills, really. And it's also very white, enormously; and we also say to over-light it as much as possible, as much lighting as you've got, put it on! And so it's very glaring. It was interesting with the AZT piece. The first time we showed it, when it was in Stuttgart, in a circular rotunda – actually ten-sided but it felt circular – the people who really responded to it immediately were old people because their lives were so full of pharmaceuticals, so full of pills.

LN: Was there a sense of measurement in that?

AAB: Well, it's set up like a calendar, so yeah. It's like your life is being measured out, month by month, by the pills you take. It really becomes a, sort of, image of mortality. And old people felt that.

LN: That your '*pills* are numbered'?

AAB: They didn't even know it was AZT. They had no idea that it was about AIDS. They still somehow got the essential message.

LN: Well, given that a lot of General Idea's work uses irony, there would always be plays of double meanings and things like that, like the poodles, where people respond to it just on the level of the bright colours and...

AAB: We did those paintings at a point, 1984, which was a moment when nobody had written about us in terms of sexuality. There had been no mention of us being gay, nothing. There were a couple of small articles in the gay press but, for the most part, the gay press never wrote about us and the art press never got into sexuality. So we found ourselves doing things that were more and more aggressive, sexually. So we did the baby portrait of the three of us in bed together. That was '82, I think. By '84 we were doing these fucking threesomes. And it was so amazing. I think it was '85 or '86 before anybody talked about sexuality in relation to our work. Incredible!

LN: If you had taken an aggressive attitude at times towards the audience, [were you] doing that where you were dealing with other artists? It seems somewhat to be the case with Stella: is that the case generally? What's the attitude, say, to Yves Klein in doing *XXX Blue*?

AAB: He was a bit like Salvador Dali in that he knew how to manipulate the press and so on. except in the end the press took advantage of him. He was here in New York just before he died – in '61 – and he was on the Ed Sullivan show and he was in all the newspapers but they all made complete fun of him. He was a sort of clown. And that image has stuck ever since. In North American mass media the popular image of the artist refers to images that were first established by Klein. So there's a certain power in that, too, and that's what interested us. I mean the work is aggressive, in a way, a lot of it. But it challenges the audience to dare to take him seriously. I mean, are you being made a fool of or are you not, as a member of the audience? It's quite impressive.

LN: When listing in *Shut The Fuck Up* the things that 'XXX' stands for, one thing Felix doesn't mention is the erotic.

AAB: That's true. That's odd, really.

LN: It seems to me a striking thing to leave out.

AAB: It is a striking thing to leave out.

LN: Because it draws your attention to it immediately.

AAB: Yep.

LN: I was wondering if – with the models' smearing each other with blue paint – if there's an erotic element to Klein that is not usually acknowledged.

AAB: That's true.

LN: And blue itself, the colour...

AAB: 'Blue movies.' Yeah.

LN: I was just in the new MoMA. I had never seen a Klein piece in life before and the colour is absolutely striking. It looks like black light. It's hard to see it as just blue.

AAB: You know that it's his own recipe and everything?

LN: Did you get permission to use it?

AAB: Oh, we didn't use it. We used chroma key blue, which is used for television special effects, which is very similar in that it is really loaded with pigment. But we liked it because it was a television, mass media reference. Do you know what it is? it's the colour that is used for making special effects.

LN: Right: the background. That's really quite interesting.

AAB: The background which disappears is chroma key blue so we used that blue, which is a blue that first appeared in our video *Test Tube* in '79. That blue already appears but it is not identified as having anything to do with Klein until '85 when *Shut the Fuck Up* is sort of the companion video to *Test Tube*, in a way.

LN: One of the things that they both use is the television test pattern in the background. It looks like you're against a rainbow flag.

AAB: At that time the rainbow flag had nothing to do with it.

LN: No. I looked this up and it would have been almost impossible that it could have had.

AAB: It hadn't happened yet. It was just a coincidence. We were more interested in the fact



that at that time it was a test pattern of a colour television. So it was an electronically generated image. It's not a picture of something. It is actually electronic.

LN: That's interesting. In terms of *Test Tube*, the other thing about that, of course, is that you have the Colour Bar Lounge. Is that a tie-in with colours?

AAB: Well, we said "it's not a *gray* bar." So, in a way, we thought of it as a gay bar, a brightly coloured gay bar.

LN: One thing ties into another, which ties into another. There's a temptation to link them all up in one larger interpretation.

AAB: Well, I think there are a lot of ideas that are woven throughout. But to find one overriding pattern would be impossible. It's the complexity of the moment. We were always adding, we were never subtracting. We were the opposite of the minimalists. We were always adding another layer onto everything.

LN: Were you consciously using things you had done before in new ways just to indicate things you had done before?

AAB: Yeah, that was all very conscious: the recycling of images over and over again. So the piece that's called *The Armoury*, which is a series of forty paintings, we saw that as a sort of dictionary of General Idea images in a way, of images that keep cropping up year after year. Those are all isolated and depicted in the crests of *The Armoury*. *The Armoury* is the General Idea lexicon.

LN: You have the history – or the *un*history – of the 1984 pavilion but then there's the evolving disaster, which is implied is like Pompeii at one point but then it's a fire earlier on. Was it meant to be unstuck? Did you just get bored of one disaster and switch to another or was it meant to be a generic disaster?

AAB: I think it's just sort of generic. Do you know the story of why there was a disaster?

LN: Perhaps not.

AAB: We started building the pavilion around '72, I guess. Right after the '71 pageant we announced that we were working towards 1984 and that we would be doing this 1984 pavilion, which we always thought of as gallery installations in different places – decentralized architecture. And people kept on taking us very seriously. By '77 people were really expecting that we would be building a real building. We realized that we had to somehow destroy those expectations so that's when we decided that during the *Miss General Idea Pageant* of 1984, the building would burn down. So originally it was conceived as a fire and we did that installation in Kingston, the fake smoking ruins.

LN: At St. Lawrence College, right?

AAB: Well it was done during a little residency at St. Lawrence College but it was actually done on the site of the remains of an old factory. So it started with that but then the image of ruins is I think most iconic in the sense of Pompeii. And one of our primary dealers was in Naples. We were in Naples fairly frequently and we would go and look at Pompeii. I mean the actual Pompeii was our inspiration where we do all those Pompeii-like pieces.

LN: Not at all Knossos?

AAB: No. I think because we had the personal relationship to Pompeii.

LN: In the piece *Toronto's Fault*, the title suggests an earthquake in that case but it also suggests divine punishment.

AAB: Right. That's right.

LN: Is this part of it, as well? That there's some hubris about the project at a later phase when it gets bigger and bigger until...

AAB: Everything was getting bigger and bigger.

LN: Is this a Tower of Babel thing?

AAB: Definitely. And there's the other version, *Blue Ruins*, which was done in Middelburg. It's a bit more obscure. There's a piece which you actually need to know about because of *Fin de Siècle*. *Fin de Siècle* is referring back to *Blue Ruins* and *Blue Ruins* is one of the first Klein-based pieces we did. What it was that we wanted to do an architectural ruin in a contemporary public art space in Middelburg, in Holland. And we told them we wanted them to go around to demolition sites and to save any architectural elements that they could find: doors, walls, windows, whatever they could find. We wanted to do a sort of ruin for the pavilion, with real architectural elements. They said unfortunately that there is no such thing because in Holland everything is so totally recycled. There are no leftovers. Everything's reused. We didn't know what to do then. But then they came back to us and said they had found one thing: there was a television program in Holland, a popular television program, a comedy, which took place in ancient Greece, and all the architecture for the show was built out of Styrofoam. The show was stopping and the entire set of the show was available but it was all in Styrofoam. But we could have it if we wanted. So we said 'yes.' We got there and there were all these columns and architraves and all in white Styrofoam. And somehow we got the idea to paint them all using Klein Blue or, in fact, Chroma Key Blue. And we created this big explosion of architecture, in which the front of everything was painted blue. So there was a blue facade to it which,

obviously, on video could be made to vanish. Again, the repeating elements. There were only half a dozen elements so, basically, we had thirty or forty of each. It's really like the predecessor to *Fin de Siècle*.

LN: One thing I'm curious about is the relationship between your work and General Idea's work, particularly *Felix, June 5, 1994*. From Reading *Negative Thoughts* it appears that there was a time when you didn't do work, for a period after that.

AAB: About five years. And even after that I hardly did any.

LN: And this is a piece you did independently but it seemed to imply that you would not do work for some while. But it also deals with issues that had been General Idea issues, diffusion into media...

AAB: Yes and I still do that now. Those sorts of themes are still interesting for me. I'm still doing works that use advertising media and so forth. But that one was particularly General Idea-like with these big computer prints on vinyl. The medium it was made with was almost a signature of General Idea because we had made so many self-portraits in the same media. It's a direct reference back to General Idea's portraits.

LN: But in this case it's a singular portrait.

AAB: But it's a singular one.

LN: Was that arranged in advance?

AAB: No, not really. They both died at home and we arranged that in advance. We sort of planned their deaths. We got this big apartment. So as [Felix] got closer and closer to death he started wearing colours that were more alive, brighter and brighter colours. He got totally crazed with colour and pattern. And that's how he would sit in bed and receive people in his last two weeks. So then after he died we – Fern, actually – dressed him like that to receive people who wanted to come and sit with the body. We kept him at home for twenty-four hours. And I took that photo just as she had finished preparing the body. And I remember thinking I had to do something with this. I didn't know what.

LN: As an image, of course, it's striking. Among those who discuss it, two things usually come up. It's discussed in relation to the Benetton ad.

AAB: Well, the Benetton ad was a fake. The person in the photograph was not sick. And it's a very cynical gesture, in a way. Whereas [*Felix...*] is sort of the opposite. It really is the startling, the traumatic reality. It totally represents exactly how the moment felt.

LN: The other thing that it gets compared to is Klimt and when looking at it –especially

with the patterns – it's hard not to believe that's deliberate.

AAB: There was so much pattern in all our work, starting with the ziggurats. So when I took that portrait I was aware of the amount of pattern. It was Felix's choice of pattern for his bed. It's true that I took it from such an angle, in such a way at the foot of the bed that it all appeared to flatten out on the picture plane. The first time it was shown was in Munich and in was shown in a room – it was a very strange choice – it was a very small room. It was about twenty feet by eight feet. And so it was on the long wall and you entered by a door immediately facing it but you were standing, when you entered the room, eight feet from this fourteen foot long [piece]. So your field of vision was totally filled. Being Munich, as well, being that close to Vienna, everybody who came into the room thought Klimt. It was just immediate. Everybody talked about Klimt in relation to that piece but it hadn't been a conscious decision. But of course the theme of death too and the *fin de siècle* theme, of course, is totally Klimt-like.

LN: It also seems to have a still life dimension. One thing that General Idea doesn't tend to reference all that much is older art, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century or before that period...

AAB: There's one exception!

LN: Okay.

AAB: This.<sup>2</sup>

LN: Caspar David Friedrich.

AAB: This is a copy of the painting which we hired an illustrator to create for us. The seals are photographic and the background has been whited-out and this has been painted-in over the top. And it is a reproduction, a sort of populist reproduction of the Caspar David Friedrich. The popular name for the Caspar David Friedrich painting was "The Loss of Hope."<sup>3</sup> But that's probably [our] only conscious use of anything that's not modernist or postmodernist.

LN: Is there no intentional – or do you think even accidental – still life aspect with the Felix picture? Because there are the objects around him and, of course, the themes of life and death are really what still life is all about. Is this just coincidence?

AAB: Well, those are the things as he had them when he died and that was Fern, actually, because Fern dressed the body. And she said "Oh, he should have his things around

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<sup>2</sup>Caspar David Friedrich's *Polar Sea* (1824), used in *Fin de Siècle*.

<sup>3</sup>A corruption derived from its alternate title, *The Wreck of The Hope*.

him.” So it was a real personal decision on her part – the cigarettes. He always had to have his cigarettes! It wasn’t a decision in terms of making a picture. It was Fern’s decision in terms of laying out the body.

LN: On the other hand, what must, necessarily, be more deliberate is the displaying of the picture. As a transparency in a light box in museums...

AAB: No. It was not in a light box. It’s printed on vinyl.

LN: Really. I would have sworn it was in a light box at the National Gallery of Canada.

AAB: No it wasn’t.

LN: It’s incredibly brilliant.

AAB: Yeah. I’ve had a number of people say that to me, though – that they thought it was a light box. It’s interesting. They had it very perfectly lit at the National Gallery so it really shone. A lot of people assumed it was a light box.

LN: It also had a four- or five-inch metal border around it, which rather leaves you with that impression.

AAB: Yes.

LN: But it was also displayed as a billboard in Munich.

AAB: Yes. There were five of them on the street. And then the one in the gallery. And also, this technology, this printing on vinyl, is a billboard technology. It’s actually intended for really well-lit billboards.

LN: This seems like another way in which it falls into the tradition of the *AIDS Project*, there being multiple different settings. And in “Afterthought” you talk about returning him to the mass-media world and so on.

AAB: I don’t think I would have done that with just anybody. It had to be him. It would have been an intrusion for almost anybody else, but not for him.

LN: And it seems people have a reaction where they’re taken aback by it. There’s a moment of, almost, scandal – that you would presume to do that.

AAB: The other thing is that when you see the real thing there’s a funny double-take that happens when people see it for the first time, if they’ve never seen an illustration of it or anything. First of all they smile because the colour and pattern immediately delights people and then suddenly it clicks – what it really is. Then the smile vanishes.

It's an odd double moment.

LN: There was this project. Then there were five years where you did no work.

AAB: Well, with that piece: I took the photo in '94 but I didn't produce the piece until '99.

LN: So were you working on this piece over that sustained a period of time?

AAB: Well, I wasn't doing anything. I knew through that whole period that I wanted to do something but I didn't know what. And I didn't know how to make art because any idea I had seemed to be a General Idea idea and I didn't know how not to be General Idea after being in General Idea for twenty-five years. So I came to the point where I realized I had to start from the subject of their deaths and move onwards from there. It was the only way to do anything at all. It was the thing that marked the end of General Idea. So then I did a portrait of Felix and then a portrait of Jorge and then I did my own coffin as a portrait of that part of me that died with General Idea.

LN: And was the Jorge portrait a part of the *Negative Thoughts* exhibition that was in Chicago?

AAB: It was in that show. It's three, six-foot-high photographs that are printed in sepia on mylar that are very shadowy some how. In his case he had asked me to take those because he wanted to document that he looked as his father looked when he came out of Auschwitz....His father was one of the rare survivors from Auschwitz. And it's interesting because I don't have to say that, ever. People always get that. The sepia toning creates that historical photo [impression]. As soon as you think 'historical photo' with that [emaciated] look you think of Auschwitz or certainly of a concentration camp.

LN: And with this history in mind – this is going back a bit – there's a certain use of Nazi imagery.

AAB. *Nazi Milk*.

LN: *Nazi Milk*. It seemed to me it's more than using 'Nazi' in a popular cultural way. It seems to me it really does deal with the Holocaust. 'Poison' versus 'milk' and 'innocence,' in that way.

AAB: Un-huh. What a lot of people didn't realize because we never talked about it was the fact that Jorge was born in a concentration camp.

LN: Oh really?

AAB: And he and his mother escaped. This was in Italy. Not his father: basically, the women

and the children escaped. It was a low security camp that was for families. Originally it was for pregnant women and their husbands and then the women gave birth. Because Italians couldn't stand the idea of interfering with birth. Babies! Italians can't resist babies! So they had invented this low-security concentration camp for pregnant women and their husbands and then the babies ... appeared and they were to be shipped off to some other place. Before they got shipped off the women and children managed to escape. The husbands did not. The husbands stayed behind to fight off the soldiers or whatever and they were all put in Auschwitz. So there's a whole history of all of that that permeated General Idea.

LN: There also seem to be a concern not only with Nazism, particularly, but dystopian and dark themes generally – *Nightschool* for instance.<sup>4</sup> Also, there is the S&M theme that runs through many things. The pavilion has that Orwellian connotation. But all of this seems prototypical of New Wave at the same time, as well.

AAB: There was a lot of that. That's true. Probably like *Kraftwerk*, or something.

LN: Something else I was wondering about is G.I.'s relationship to politics and, especially, cultural politics in the '60s – irony and politics and how you weren't supposed to use irony then. All this “pops up” in relation to the Mister Peanut image on the cover of *FILE*.

AAB: Yeah, it's the cover of the first issue.

LN: There was this Barry Lord point of view in Canada at the time. Are you familiar with him?

AAB: Uh-huh.

LN: There was this sense that pop culture – or, at least, anything having to do with American culture – was, essentially, *verboten*. It was like you guys almost set out to torture these people that way.

AAB: Well Mister Peanut, I think, is actually a Canadian icon, if I remember correctly.

LN: There is a Mister Peanut from Planter's Peanuts, which I've seen here [in the U.S.A.]. But I don't know that he's therefore *not* Canadian.

AAB: Maybe he is American. There was a Planter's Peanuts factory in Toronto. But, anyway, that was Vincent Trasov, the artist from Vancouver who did all of that. So

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<sup>4</sup>Subsequently, Mr. Bronson mentions that *Nightschool* represents General Idea's dawning awareness that AIDS would claim at least some members of the collaborative.

our only involvement was to include him in *FILE* and so on...

LN: But you chose his picture to launch *FILE*.

AAB: To launch *FILE*; that's true. Well, part of the idea with *FILE* was that we wanted everything to be totally familiar but totally off at the same time. So that's why the *LIFE* look-alike. We wanted something at a normal newsstand that anybody would pick up, just because of familiarity. But then they would find that it was something not at all familiar. So, Mister Peanut, I think, was probably part of that – an image that is out of place. It's in the wrong decade even, somehow – but very, very familiar.

LN: You were actually sued by *LIFE*, weren't you?

AAB: Well they threatened to sue us. But they didn't in the end. We settled out of court. They wanted us to destroy all the back issues, pay them damages, never publish again, so on and so forth. But then the *Village Voice* [ran] a big article about it, lambasting TimeLife and also.... Who was the guy who was the TIME Magazine art critic at the time, a very well known critic?<sup>5</sup> Anyway, he was also interviewed in a paper called the *Soho Weekly* making fun of his own employer, TimeLife, for laying charges. And they had been so ridiculed that they dropped the charges on the condition that we change the logo.

LN: Were there any other interactions with corporations owning the symbols you used? General Idea calls to mind General Electric...

AAB: No. That was the only time we ever had any interaction with a corporate structure.

LN: But, pop-like, you certainly engaged with other corporate symbols and commodities – Luxon VB Blinds and so on...

AAB: It's sort of like Warhol's *Campbell Soup*, in a way. But it's also so different, in a way.

LN: In a Canadian context it takes on a slightly different character as there was a marked hostility to that sort of art.

AAB: Yes. That's true. Barry Lord hated us.

LN: I'm not surprised. To wrap things up, then, what are the ways that gay issues and gay consciousness have been a part of these politics? It seems in many cases you made it as difficult as possible for people to ignore that and yet they often have managed to.

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<sup>5</sup>In 1976 it would have been Robert Hughes. The article was: Gregory Battcock, "The Last Estate: FILE Magazine," *The Soho Weekly News* May 27 (1976): 22-23.



AAB: They *always* managed to, until the mid 80s. And even now ... it just depends who it is. Yeah. When the idea of Queer Theory arrived we were the perfect thing to write about. In a way that had to be invented for them to write about us. We were very conscious of it all along. We tried to push the envelope without coming out and doing our own theoretical positioning. We wanted to do it in the work itself.

LN: In terms of theory, there are these statements, which are very theoretically oriented, that get made in the course of works that you've done and in the videos. But they are, at the same time, sort of inscrutable. You were aware of explaining your work in a way that actually explains very little?

AAB: Well, that was the idea. We would often do something like come up with an explanation that was more directly what we meant and we would only leave the signifiers, in a way, and remove everything else so that there were these iconic words in some sort of relationship that seemed to make sense but, in a way, didn't because the whole underlying structure had been removed. That was something we did quite consciously. And then at other times we would take something. I don't know if you're familiar with the issue of *FILE* that has the geometric poodles. Do you know that one?

LN: I do.

AAB: It has just a short text as the introduction and in a way it seems like a manifesto. But all it is is that it has been taken out of context from a poodle grooming book. It's sort of pretentious language. It's such that it sounds in a way like a manifesto-like statement but it's just stolen straight out of a completely banal pet grooming book. And there are many cases of that in our texts where things are just lifted. It's sort of in the William Burroughs tradition of slicing things together. The obvious one that everybody knows about is the "Glamour" article where there are big chunks that are taken from [Roland Barthes] but there are also direct quotes from William Burroughs, Gertrude Stein and a raft of other people that are all sort of spliced together. There's quite a bit of Roland Barthes in there. It's very dense and it's impossible to make head or tail of it.

LN: Well, I think that's good for me. Is there anything else you want to say, a final statement?

AAB: I think the whole thing about irony is very important. There were ... gay artists who were critical of us because they felt that we weren't openly gay. They thought we were closeted. We kept saying: "Are you sure?" Beauty pageants! Come on!

LN: You were supposed, at a certain point, to wear jeans and a plaid shirt and say you were gay but if you showed up somewhere in a pink poodle costume, you were closeted!

AAB: That's right! Also in Toronto, of course, because *The Body Politic* came out of Toronto and it had a very particular gay aesthetic, very political and very...*not* ironic. No irony. It had no trace of irony, which is odd actually, because I always think of irony as being an extremely gay characteristic.

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## FIGURES



Fig.1 (Left) John Heartfield, *Adolf, The Superman: Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk*. 1932. Photomontage, dimensions unknown.<sup>1</sup>

Fig.2 (Right) John Heartfield, *As in The Middle Ages, So in the Third Reich*. 1935. Photomontage.

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<sup>1</sup>Henceforth, if dimensions (or media) are unstated, they are unknown.

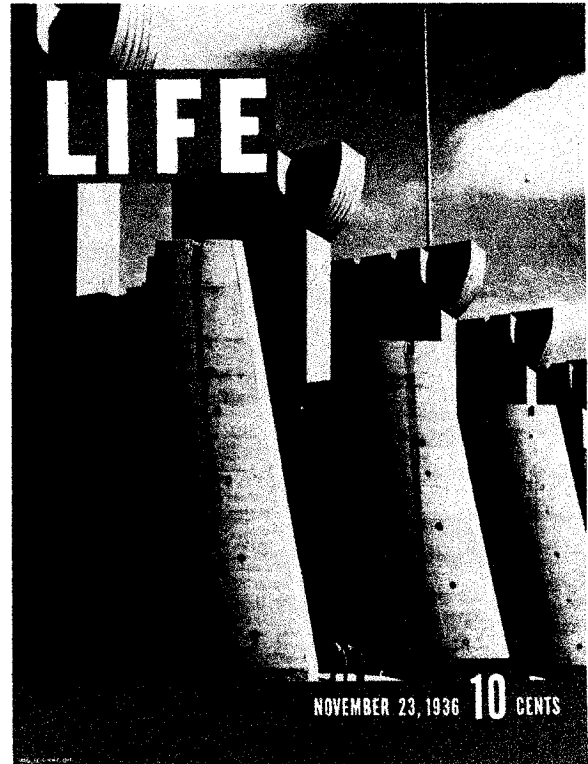


Fig.3 (above left) General Idea, *FILE Magazine* (cover) 2.1,2 May (1973).

Fig.4 (above right) *LIFE Magazine* (first classic cover) 23 Nov. (1936).

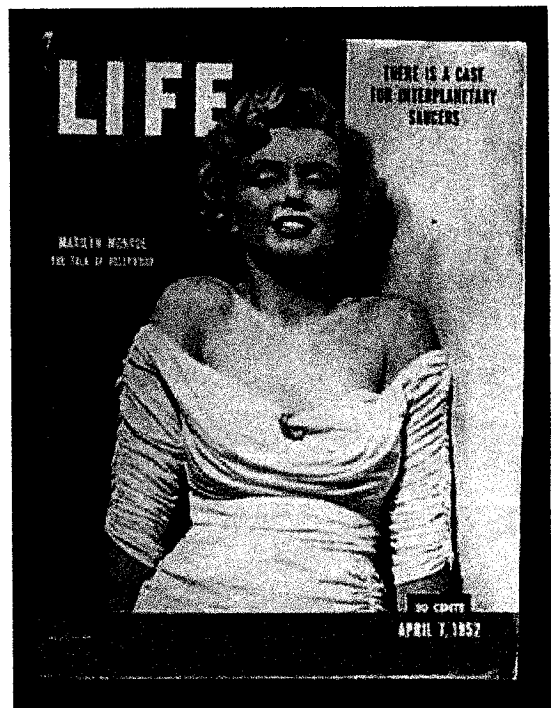
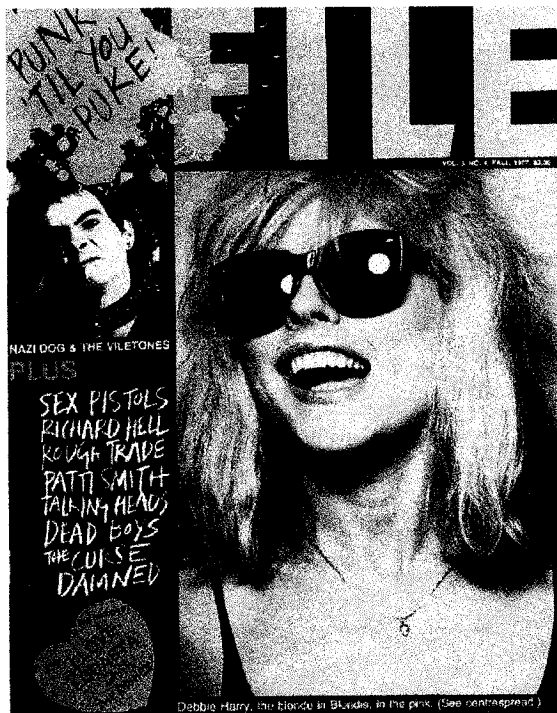
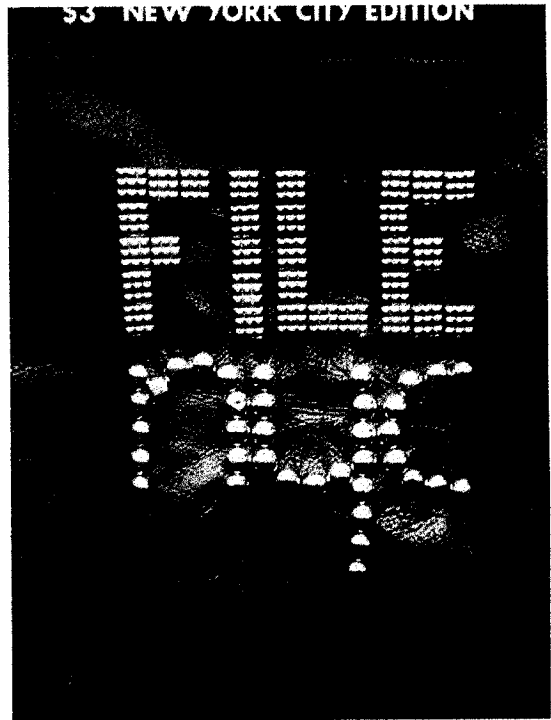
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Fig.5 (top left) General Idea, *FILE Magazine* (cover) 2.3 Sept. (1973).

Fig.6 (top right) General Idea, *FILE Magazine* (cover) 3.2 May (1976).

Fig.7 (bottom left) General Idea, *FILE Magazine* (cover) 3.4 Fall (1977).

Fig.8 (bottom left) *LIFE Magazine* (cover) 7 Apr. (1952).



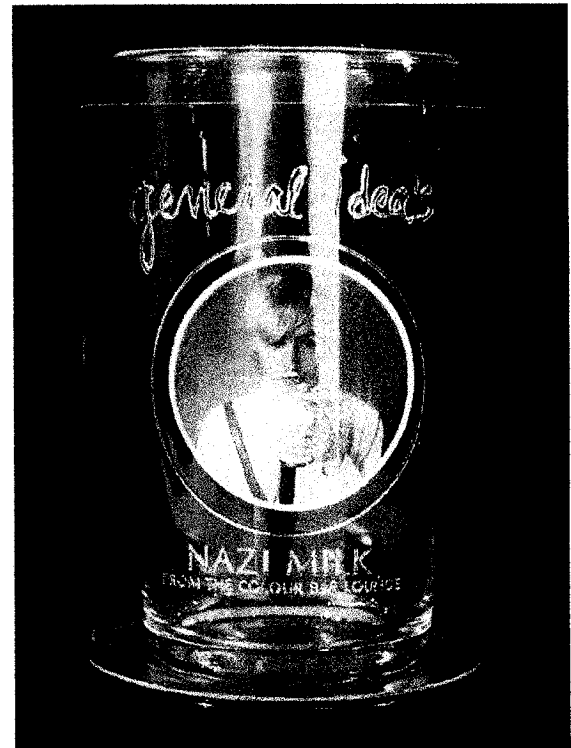
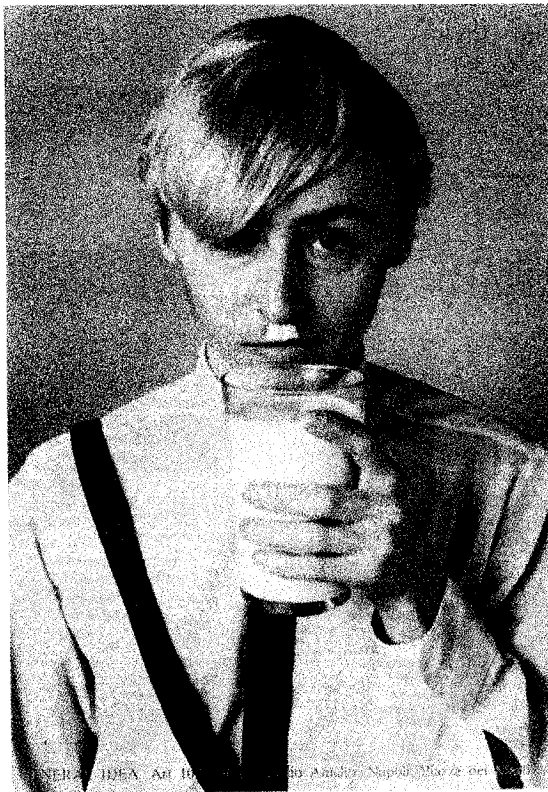


Fig.9 (above left) General Idea, *Nazi Milk*. 1979 (Poster edition), 65 x 45 cm.

Fig.10 (above right) General Idea, *Nazi Milk Glass*. 1980  
 Drinking glass with offset adhesive label in plastic box with gold hot-stamping,  
 15.3 x 10 cm (diameter of box).

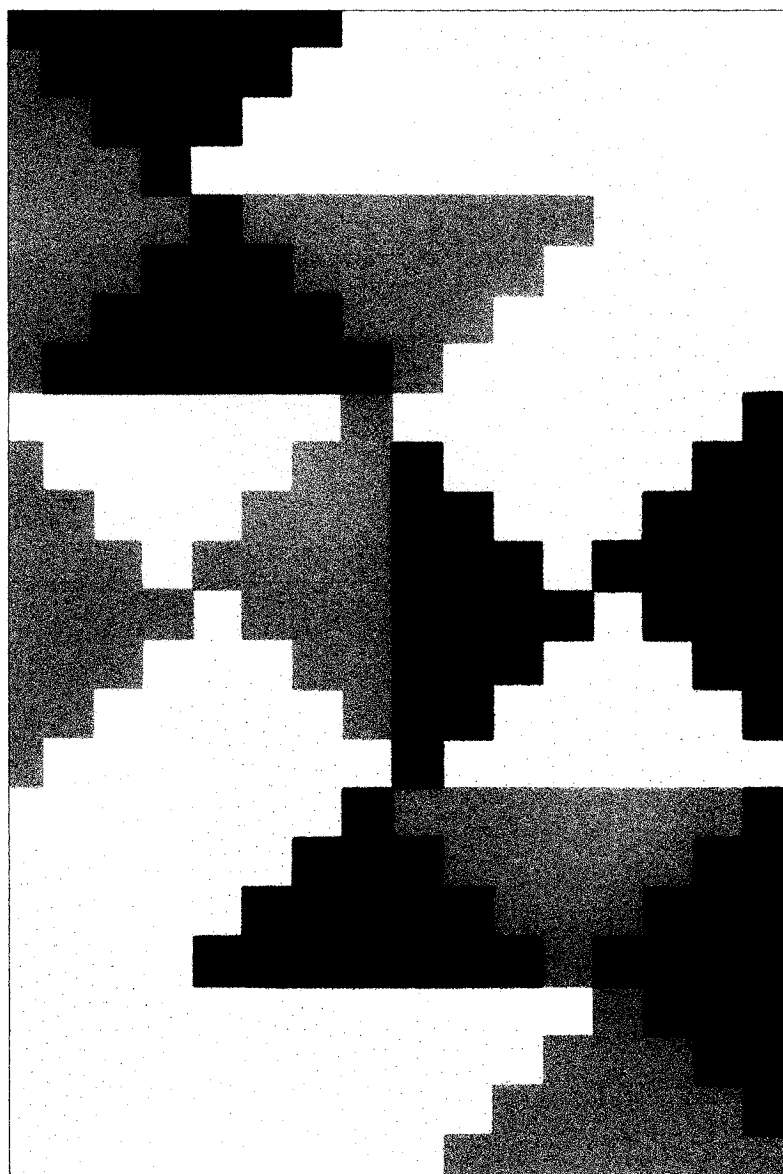


Fig.11 General Idea, *Carmen*. 1968-69.  
Fluorescent acrylic and latex paint on canvas, 381 x 192 cm.

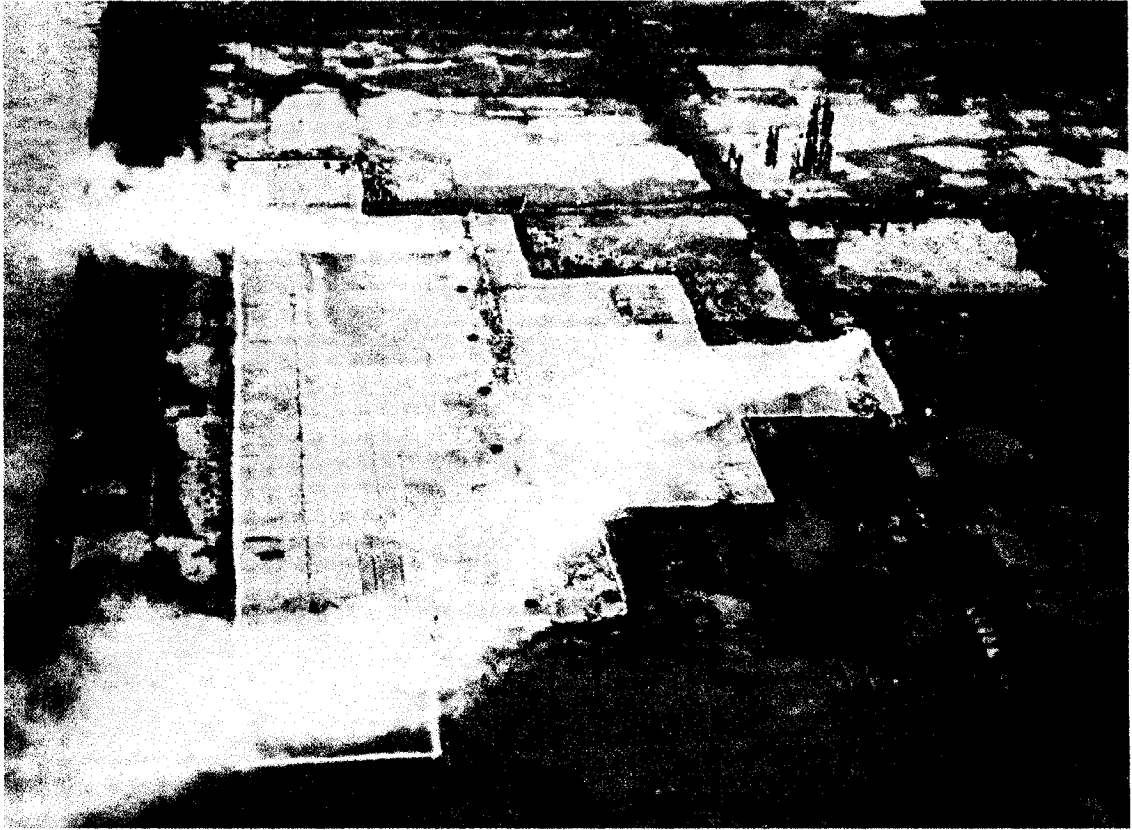


Fig.12 General Idea, *Ruins of The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. 1978.  
Installation view, Kingston, Ontario.



Fig. 13 General Idea, *Toronto's Fault*. 1980.  
Rubble and various objects painted silver, installation view.



Fig. 14 (left and right above) General Idea, *Assorted Poodle Fragments*. 1980.

Following Page:

Fig. 15 (top) General Idea, *The Unveiling of The Cornucopia: A Mural Fragment from the Room with The Unknown Function in The Villa Dei Misteri of The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. (Detail)1982.  
Acrylic on canvas.

Fig. 16 (bottom) *Dionysiac mystery frieze*. (detail)Villa of the Mysteries (Pompeii).  
c.60 - 50 BCE. Height: approx 64 ins.





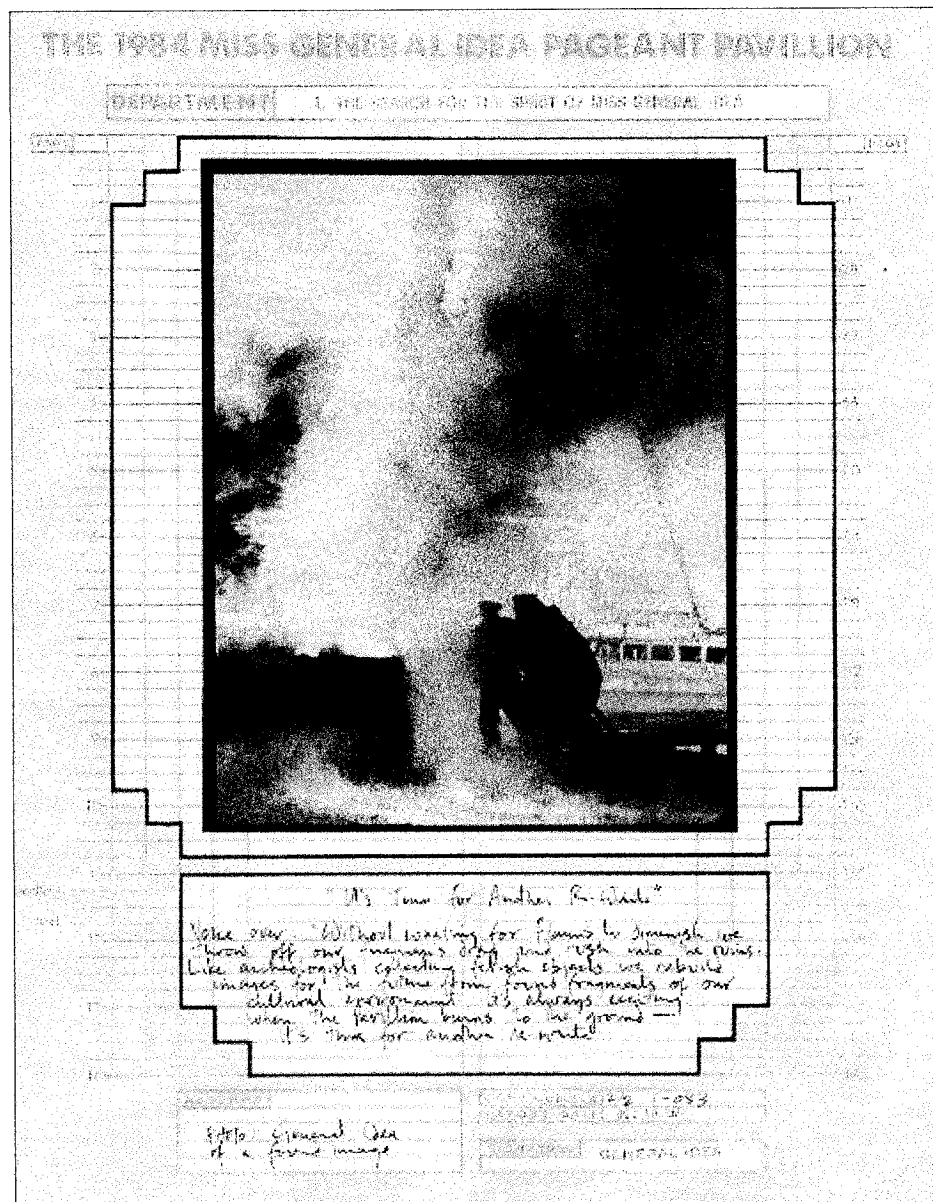


Fig.17 General Idea, *Showcard No.1-083, "It's Time for Another Re-Write."* 1977.



Fig.18 Marcel Duchamp, *Assisted Ready-Made (L.H.O.O.Q.)*. 1919.  
Postcard and crayon, 19 x 11 cm.

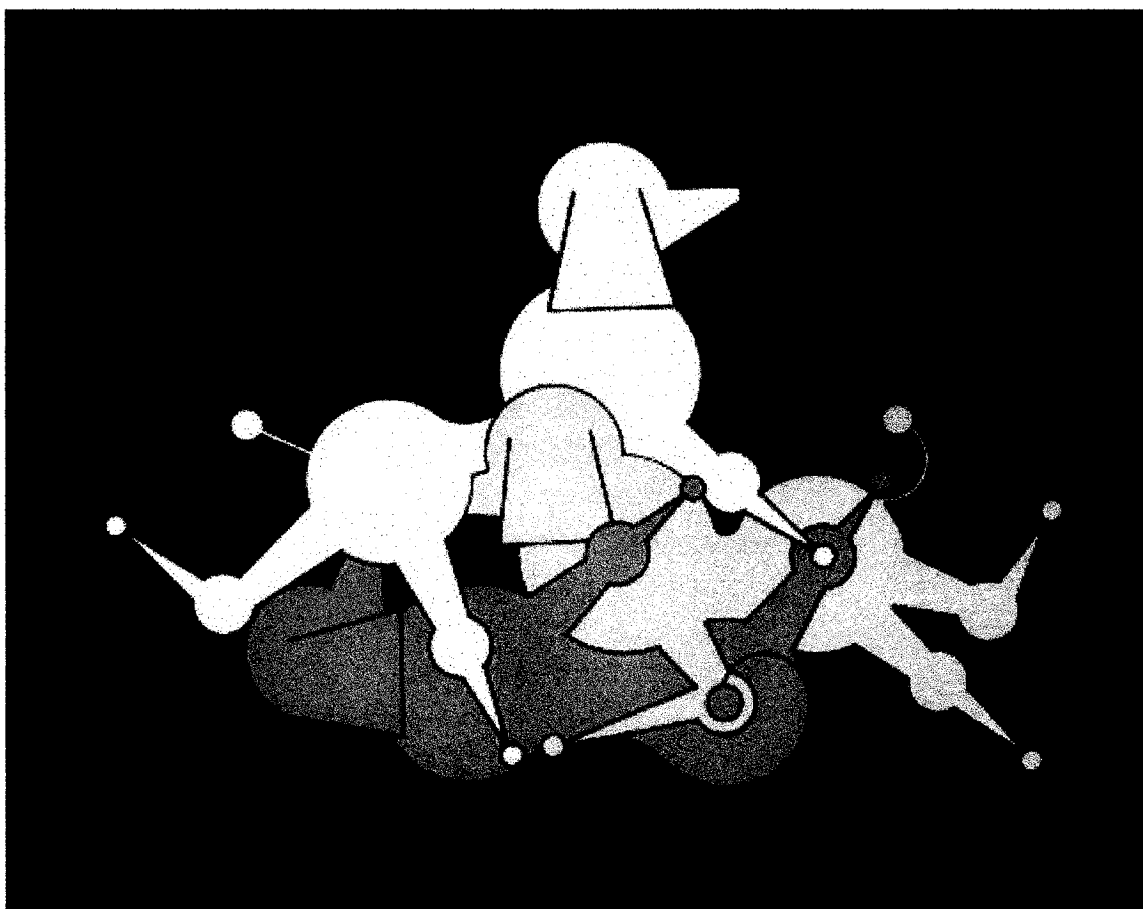


Fig.19 General Idea, *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra (Dog Eat Dog Eat Dog)*. (detail) 1983.  
Screenprint on paper, 43 x 56 cm.

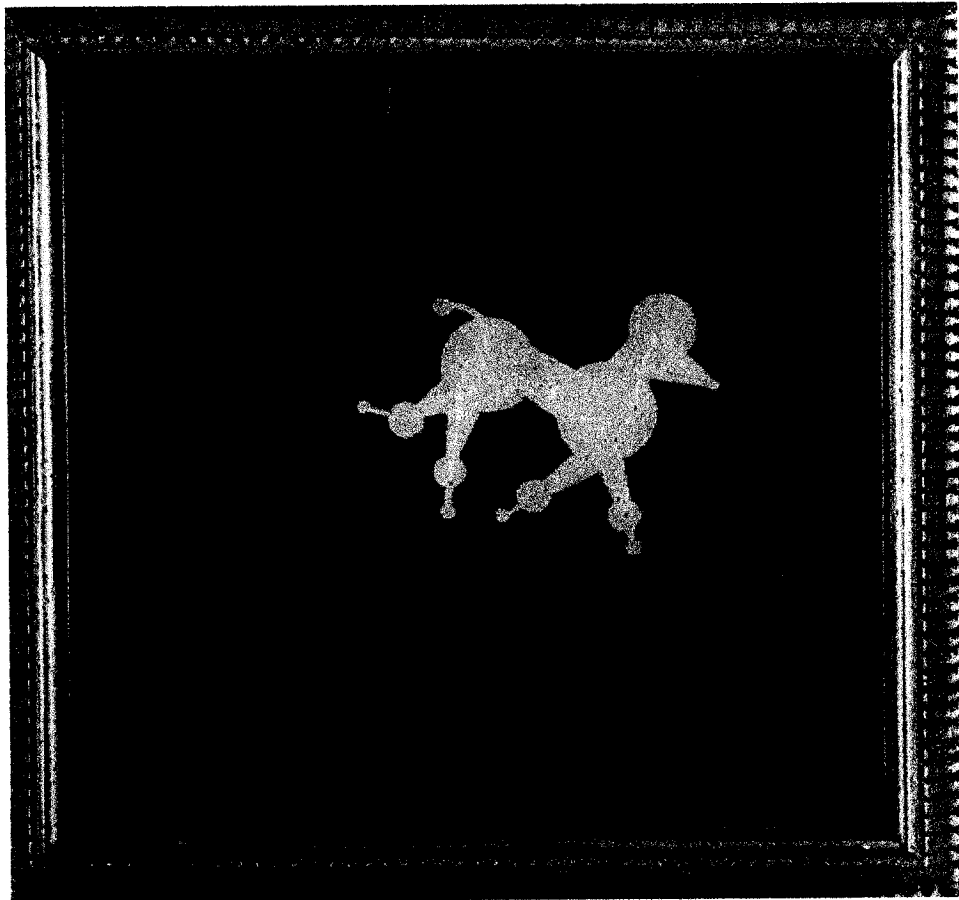


Fig.20 General Idea, *P is for Poodle*. 1983.  
Acrylic on velvet with gilt frame.



Fig.21 General Idea, *Canus Major: Origin of The Heavenly Waters*. 1983.  
Acrylic on panel with enamel on wood.



Fig.22 General Idea, *Three Graces*. 1982.  
Oil paint, 9 hardwood planks.

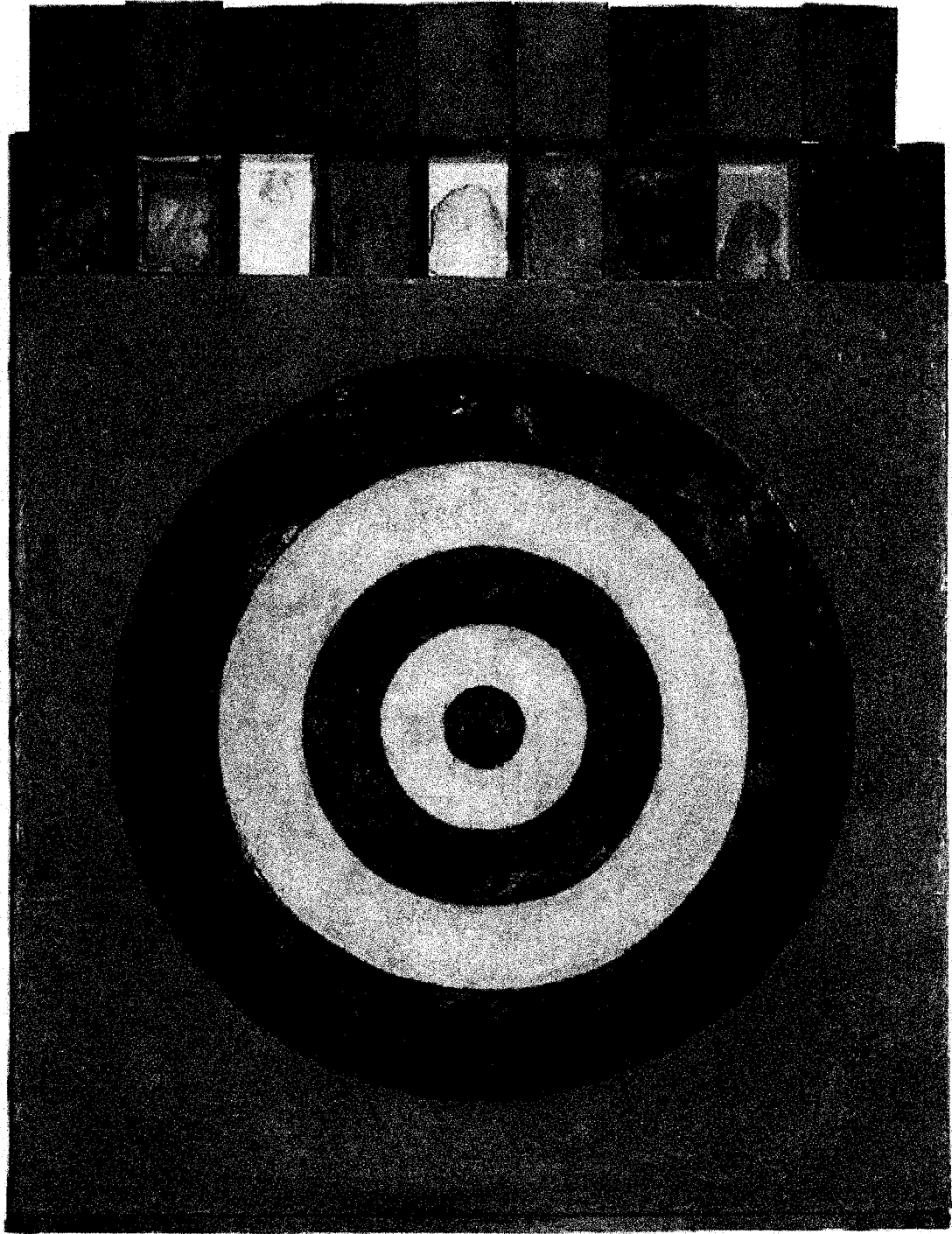


Fig.23 Jasper Johns, *Target with Plaster Casts*. 1966  
Encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, 51 x 44 ins.



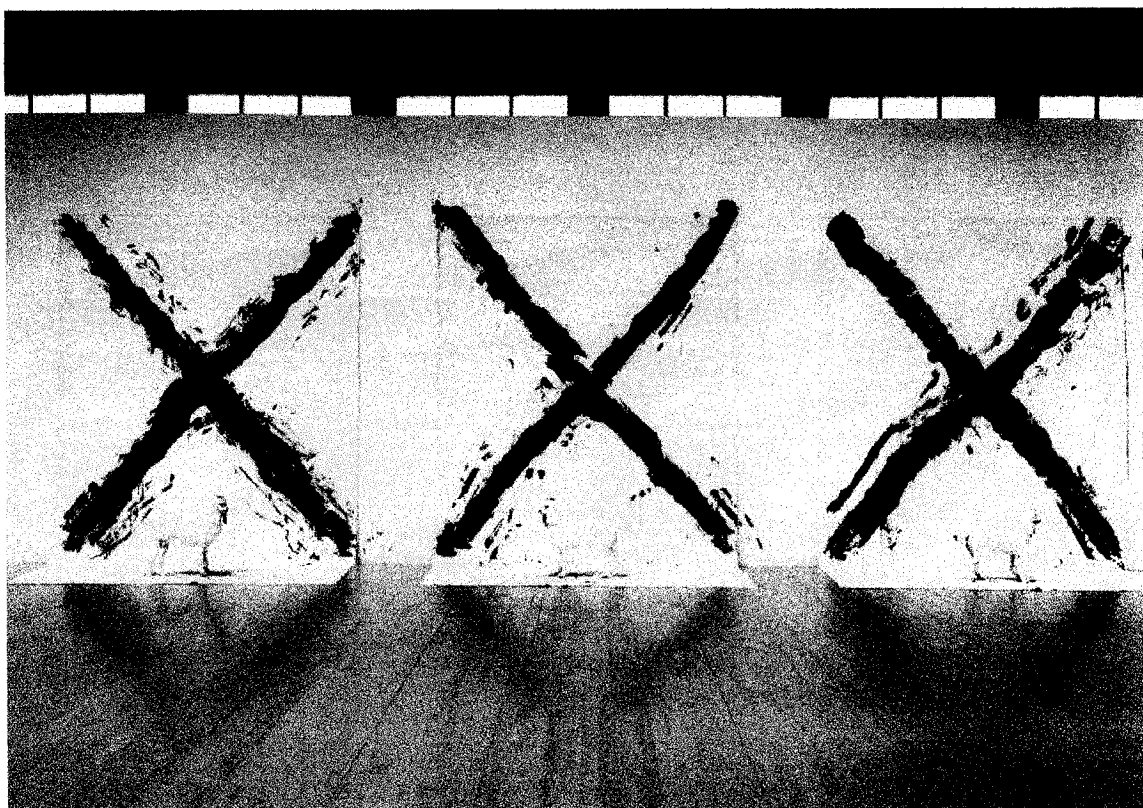


Fig.24 General Idea, *XXX Blue*. 1984.

Acrylic on canvas with artificial poodles, installation view, Kunsthalle (Basel).

Following Page (top, left and right):

Fig.25 (left)General Idea, *XXX Blue*. (detail) 1984.

Acrylic on canvas with artificial poodles, installation view, Kunsthalle (Basel).

Fig.26 (right)General Idea, *XXX Blue*. (detail) 1984.

Acrylic on canvas with artificial poodles, installation view, Kunsthalle (Basel).

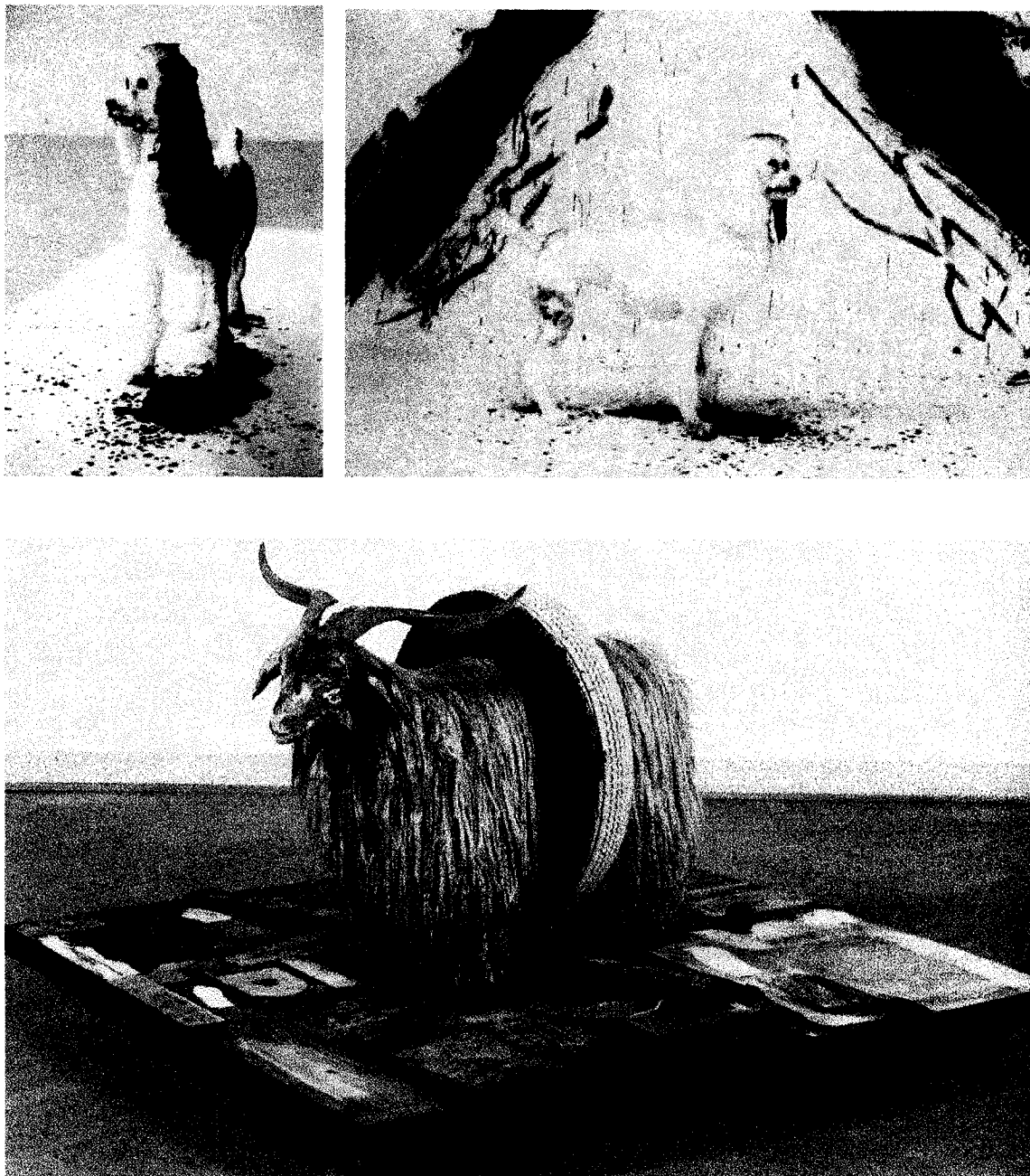


Fig.27 (above) Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram*. 1955-9.  
Freestanding combine, 42 x 64 x 64.5 ins.

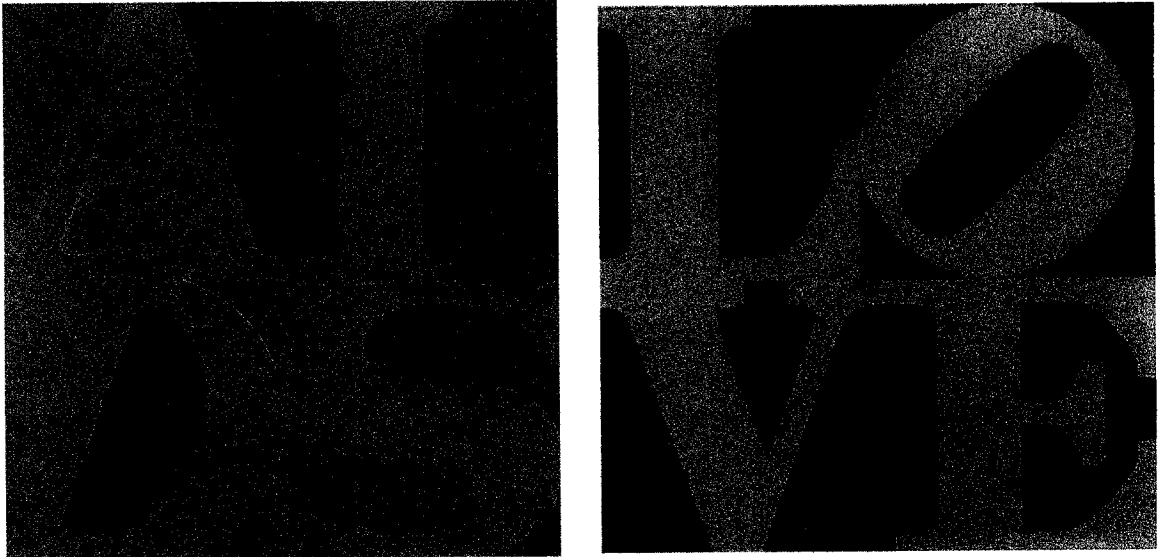


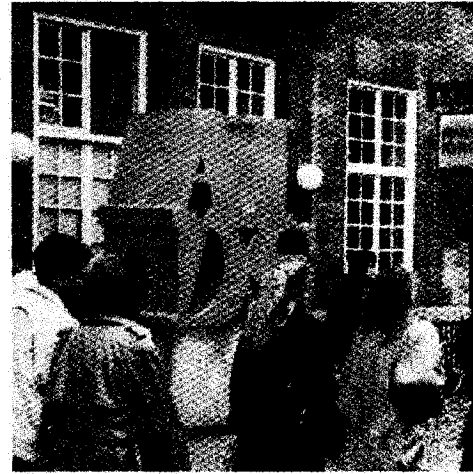
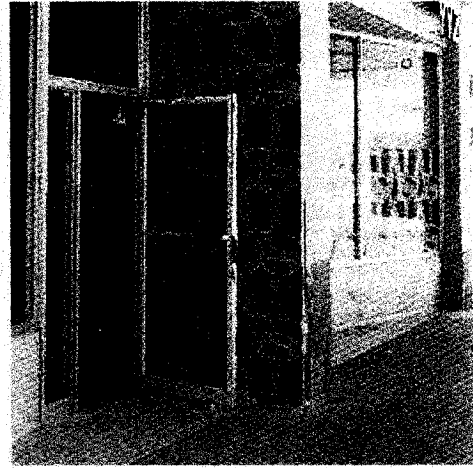
Fig.28 (left) General Idea, *AIDS*. 1987.

Fig.29 (right) Robert Indiana, *LOVE*. 1969.

Following Page:

Fig.30 General Idea, *AIDS Project*. 1987-1994. Installation view in various contexts.

Clockwise from top left: storefronts, Hartford, Connecticut, 1988; tilework, YYZ Gallery, Toronto, Ontario, 1988; public sculpture, Hamburg, West Germany, 1989; tram, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1988; posters, San Francisco, California, 1988; and posters, New York City, 1987.



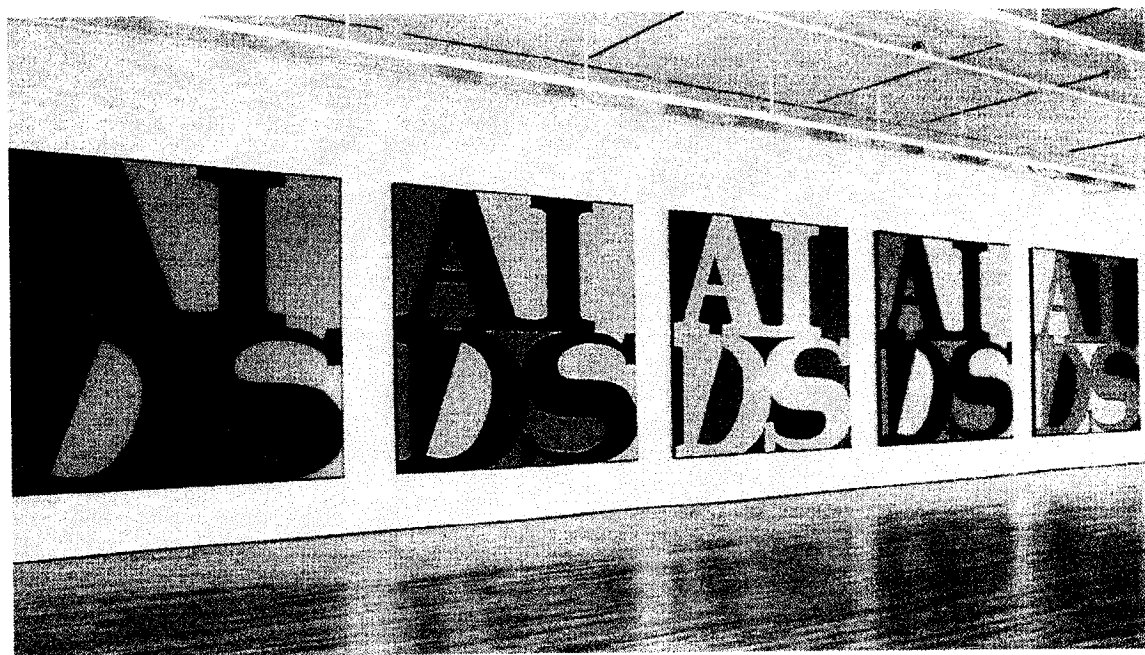
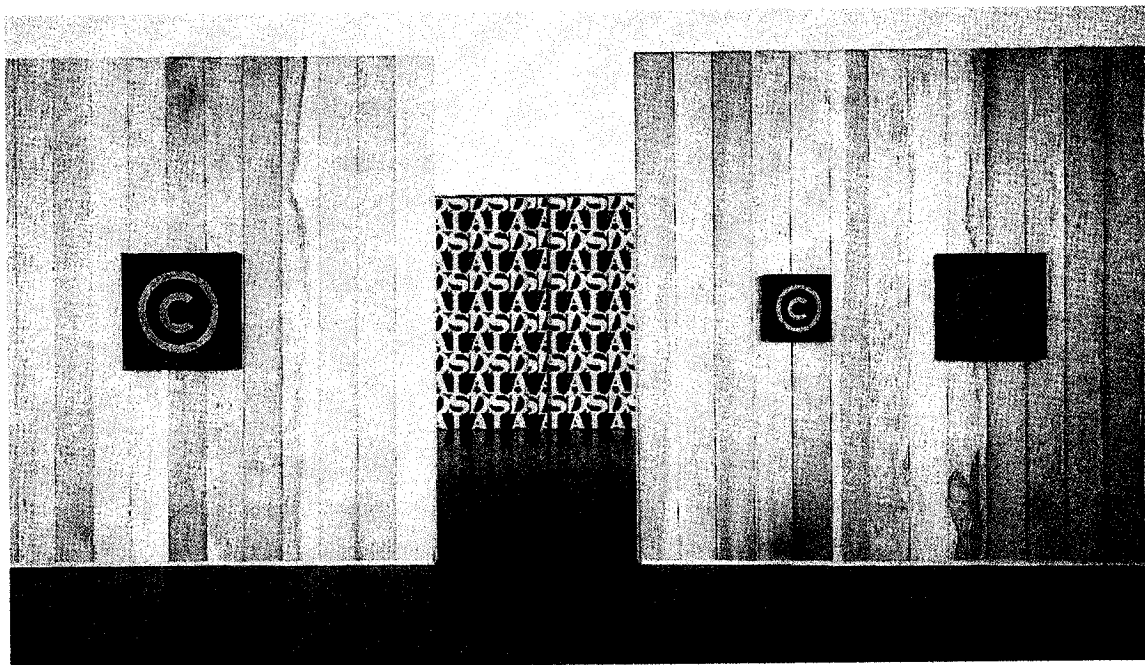


Fig.31 (top) General Idea, *The AIDS Room from The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. 1990. Installation view, Artspace, San Francisco, 1990.

Fig.32 (bottom) General Idea, *AIDS*. 1988. Installation view, Koury-Wingate Gallery.

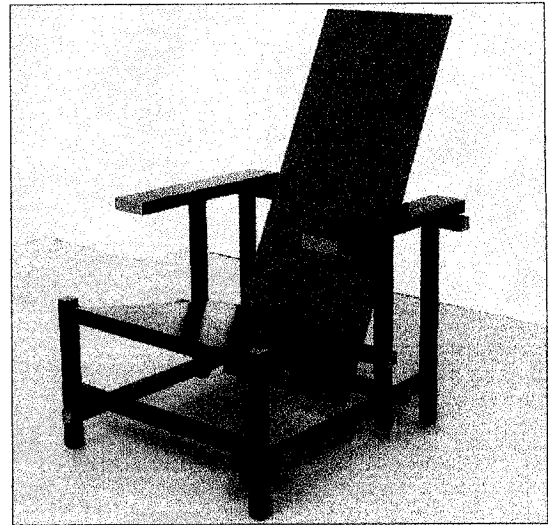
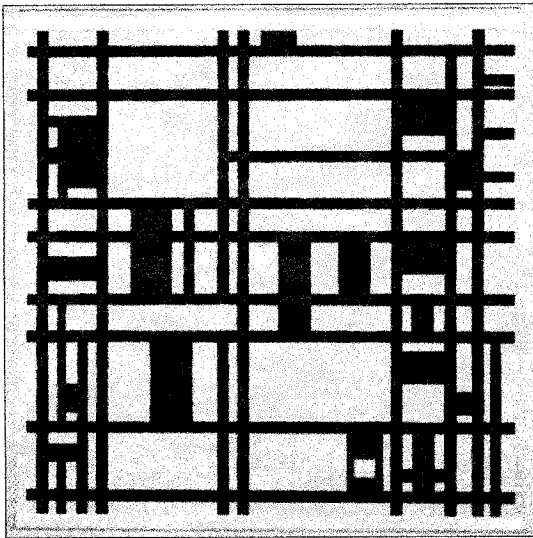
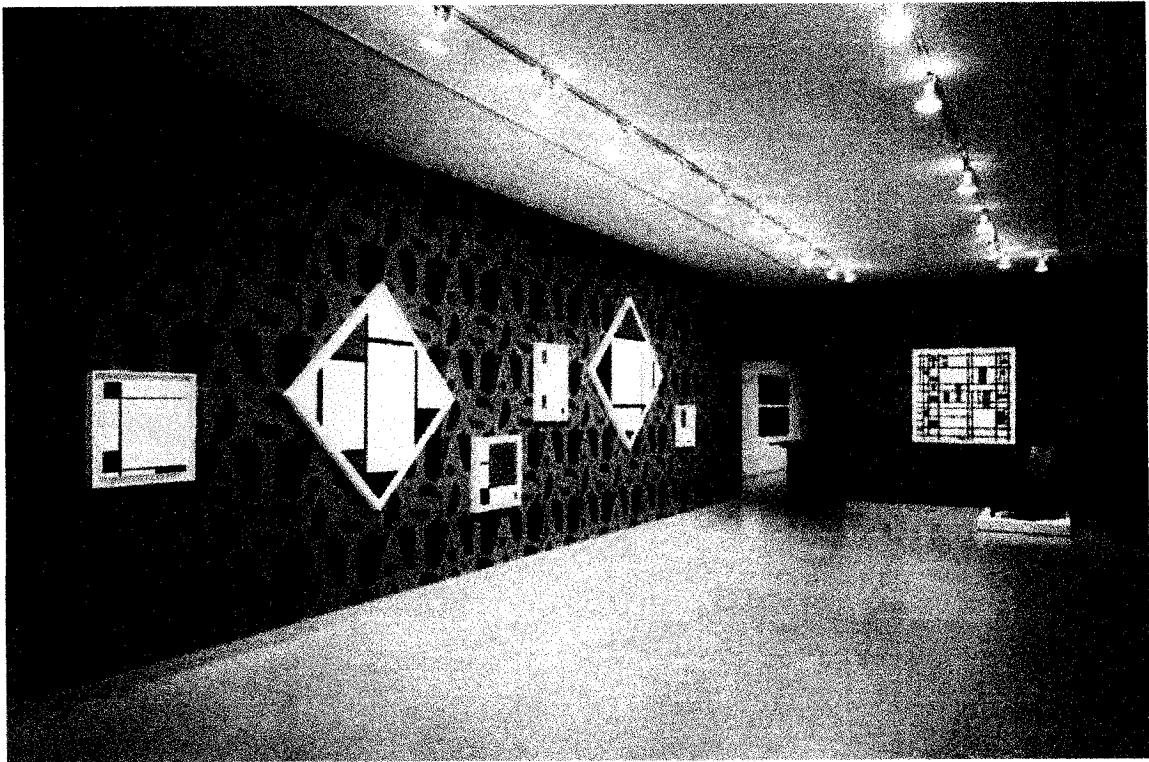


Fig.33 (top) General Idea, *Infe©tions* exhibition. 1994. Installation view.

Fig.34 (bottom left) General Idea, *Infe©ted Mondrian*. 1994. Oil on canvas.

Fig.35 (bottom right) General Idea, *Infe©ted Rietveld*. 1994. Oil on canvas.

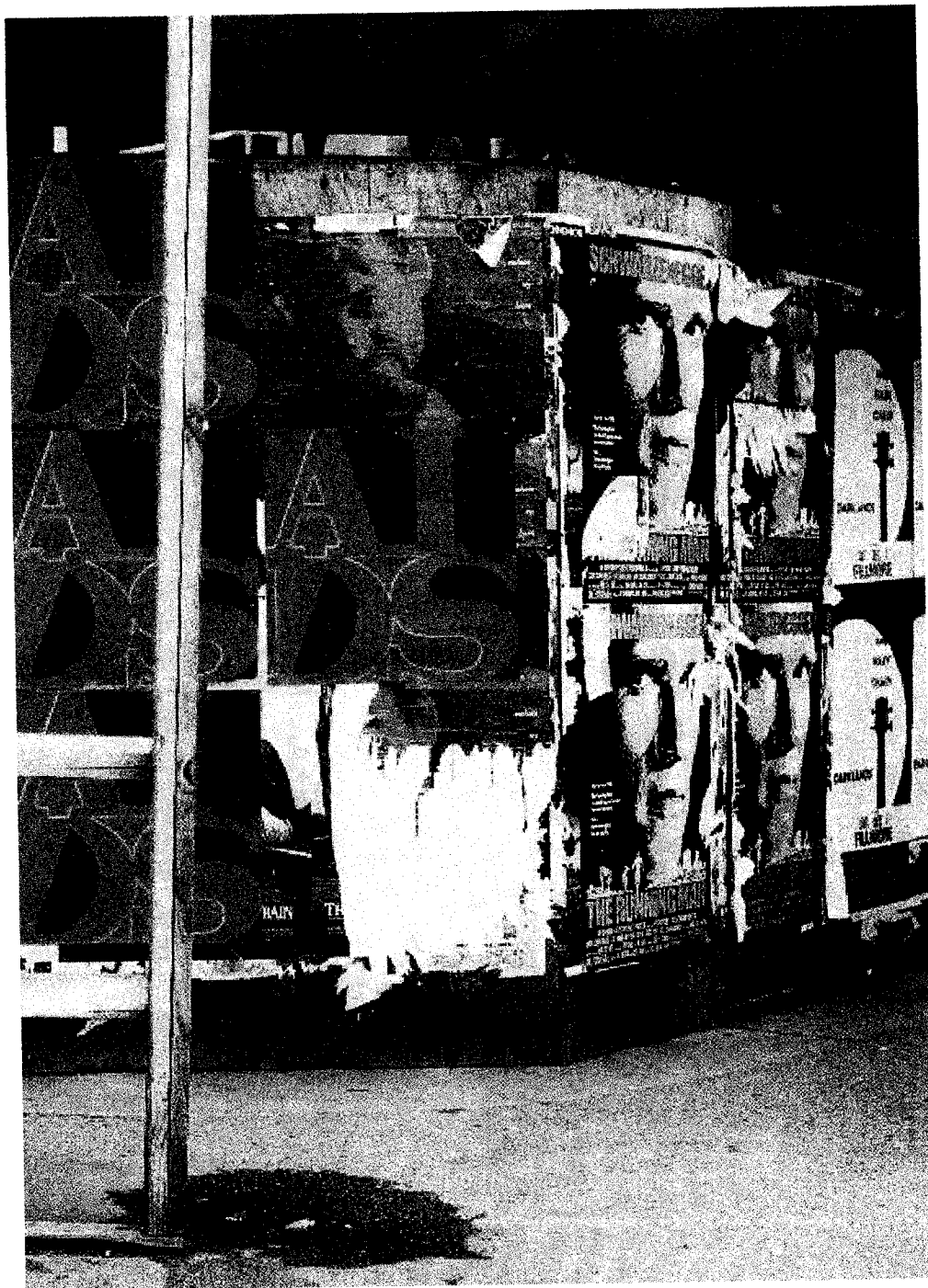


Fig.36 General Idea, *AIDS Project*. (Poster version)1987. Offset on paper.  
Installation view on construction hoarding (with other posters), New York City.

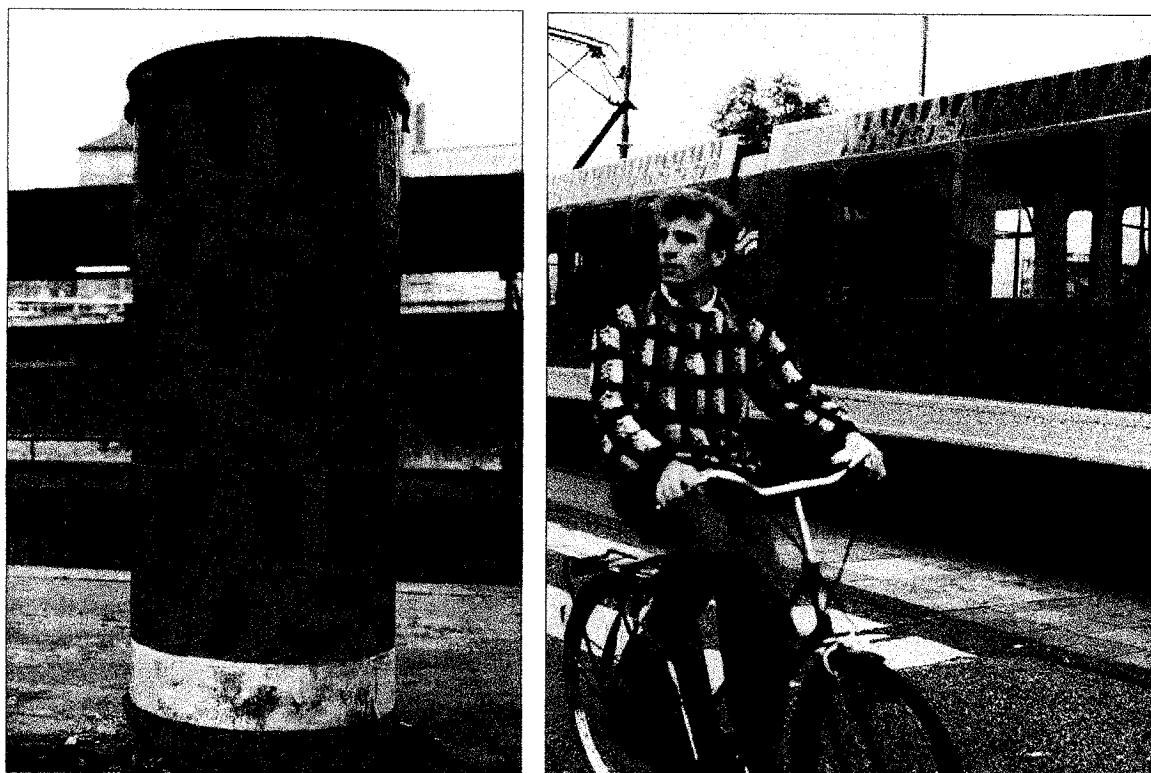


Fig.37 (left) General Idea, *AIDS Project*. (Poster version)1988.  
Offset on paper. Installation view, 'Vollbild' exhibition, Berlin, West Germany.

Fig.38 (right) General Idea, *AIDS Project*. 1990.  
Screenprint on adhesive vinyl. Installation view on tram, Amsterdam, Netherlands.



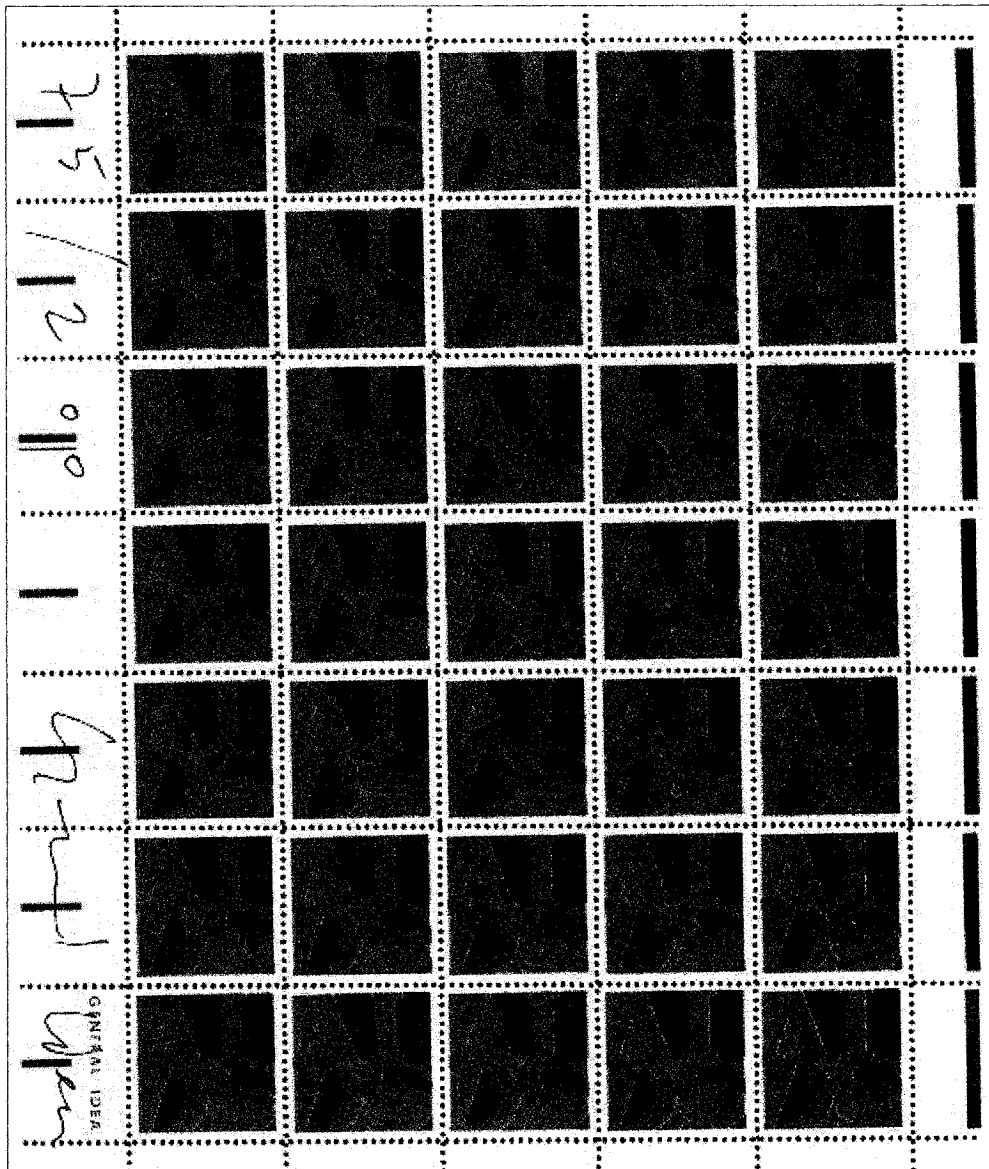
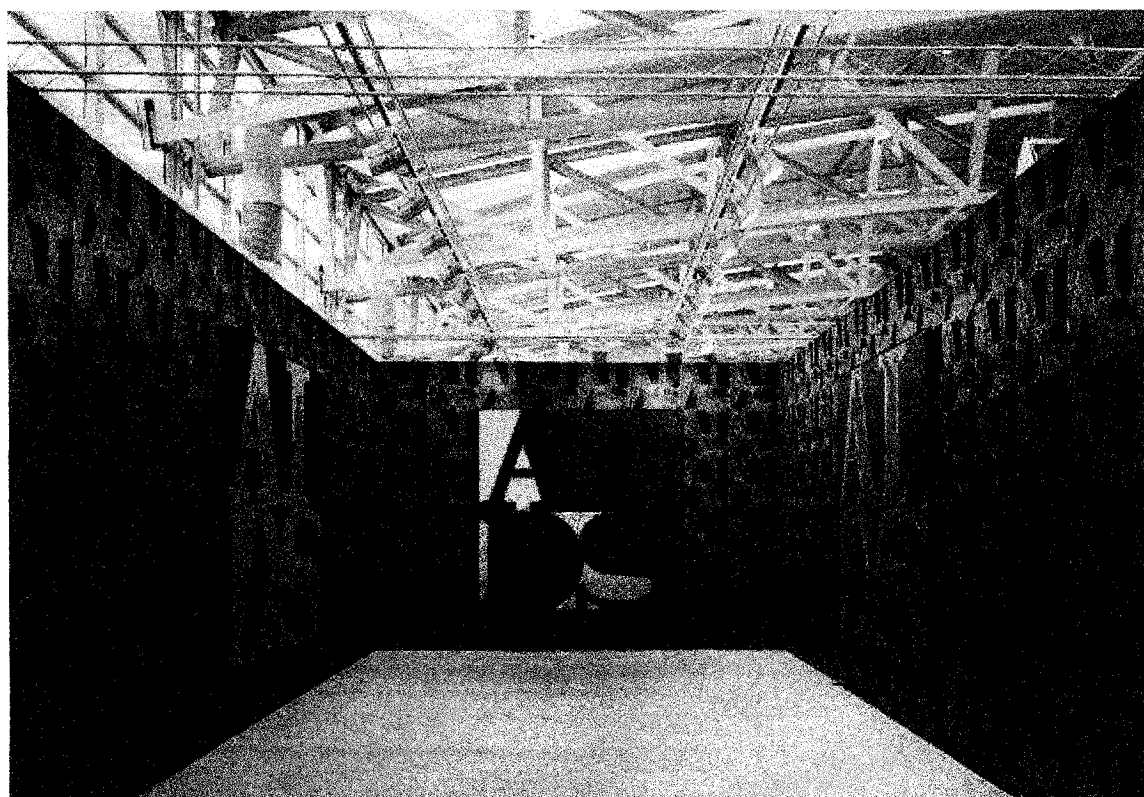


Fig.39 General Idea, *AIDS Stamps*. 1988.  
Offset on perforated paper. 25.5 x 21 cm.

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Fig.40 (top) General Idea, *AIDS Wallpaper*. 1990.  
Screenprint on wallpaper. Installation view, Barcelona. Each roll: 457 x 68.6cm.

Fig.41 (bottom) General Idea, *AIDS Wallpaper* with *AIDS* paintings. 1989.  
Installation view, Stampa Galerie, Frankfurt Art Fair, Frankfurt, West Germany.



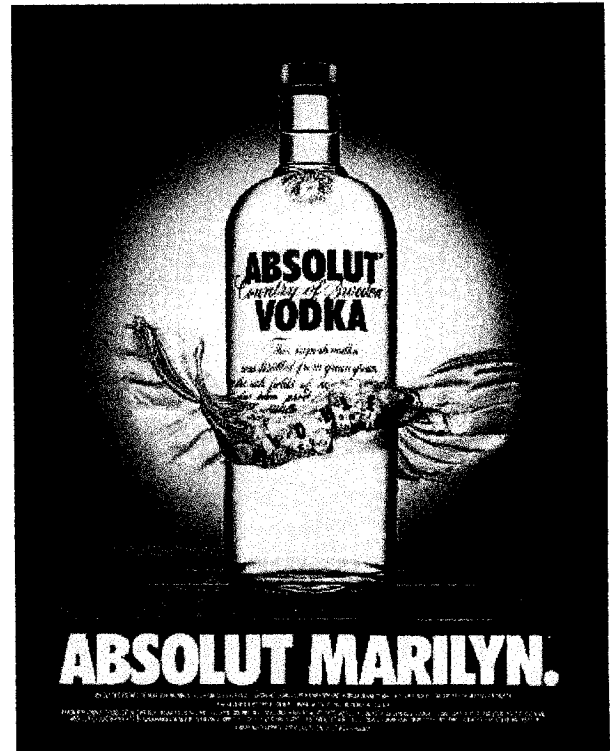
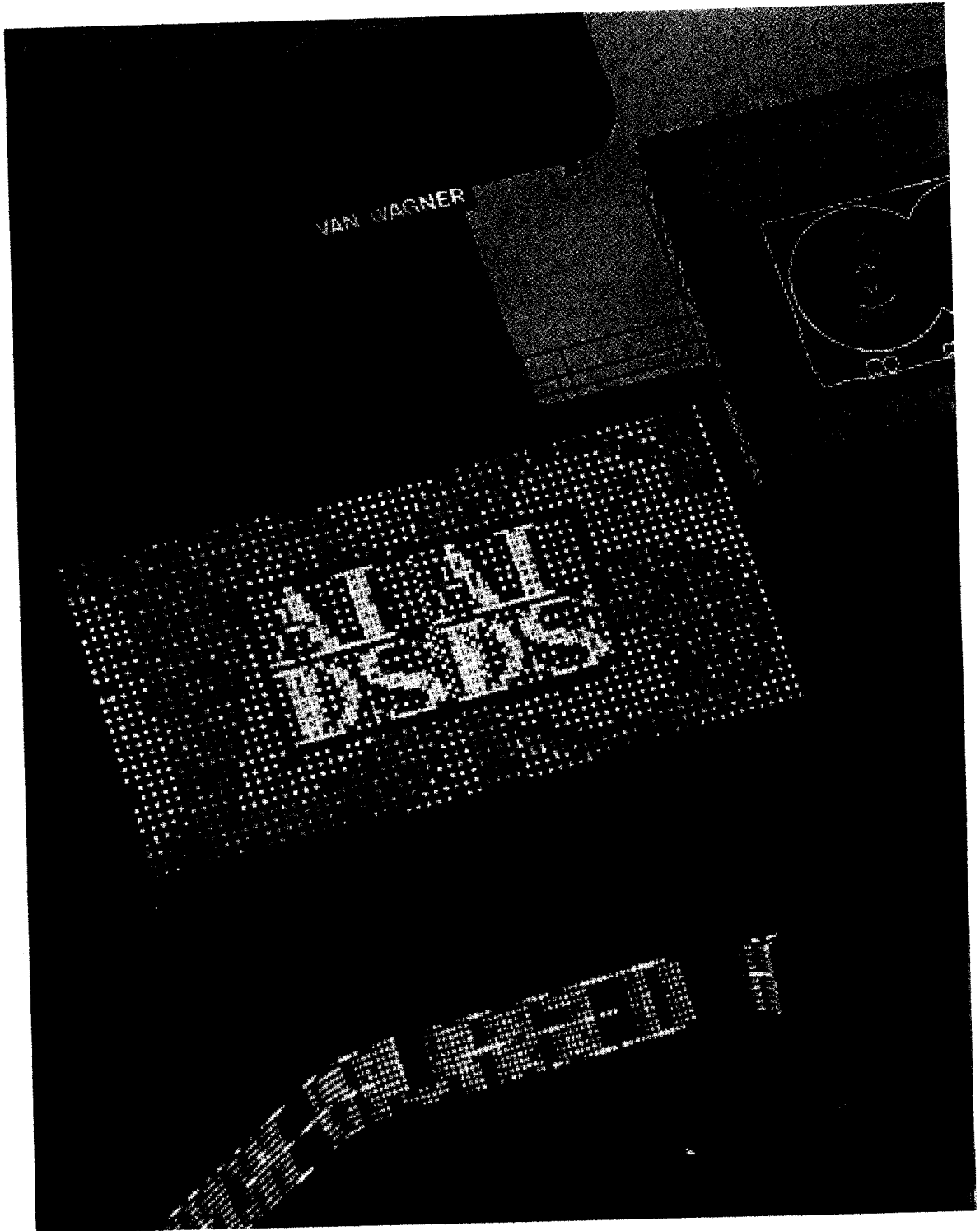


Fig.42 (left) General Idea, *Imagevirus (Posters)*. 1989  
Chromogenic print. 76 x 50.4 cm.

Fig.43 (right) V&S Group (Sweden), Absolute Vodka advertisement, magazine format.

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Fig.44 General Idea, *AIDS Project*. 1988.  
Electronically generated image. Installation view, Times Square, New York City.



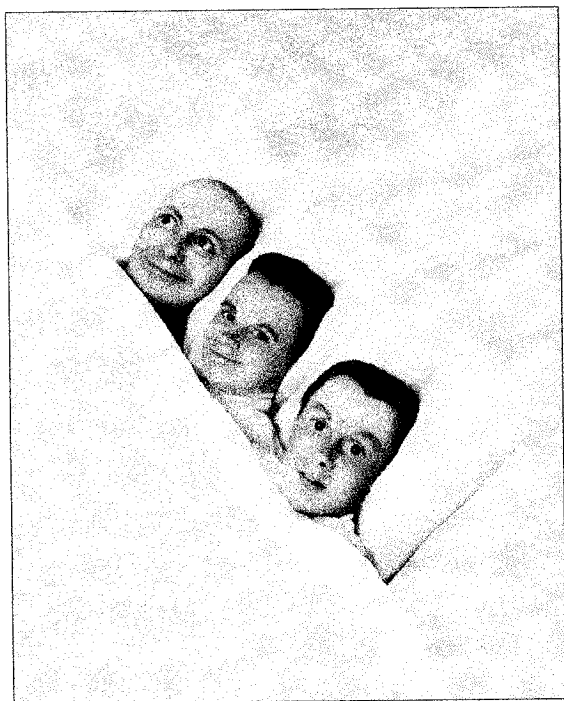


Fig.45 (left) General Idea, *Baby Makes 3*. 1984.  
Chromogenic Print (Ektachrome): 76.2 x 63.5cm.

Fig.46 (right) General Idea, *Nightschool*. 1989.  
Chromogenic Print (Ektachrome): 95.5 x 76.7 cm.

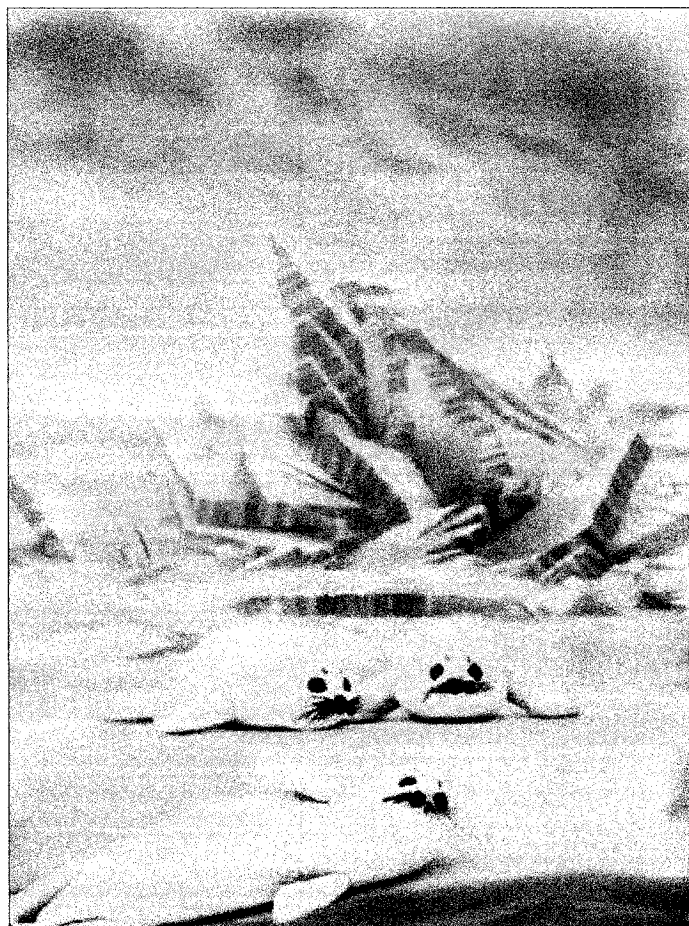


Fig.47 General Idea, *Fin de Siècle*. 1990 (Poster version, 1994).  
Chromogenic Print (Ektachrome). 79 x 55.7 cm.

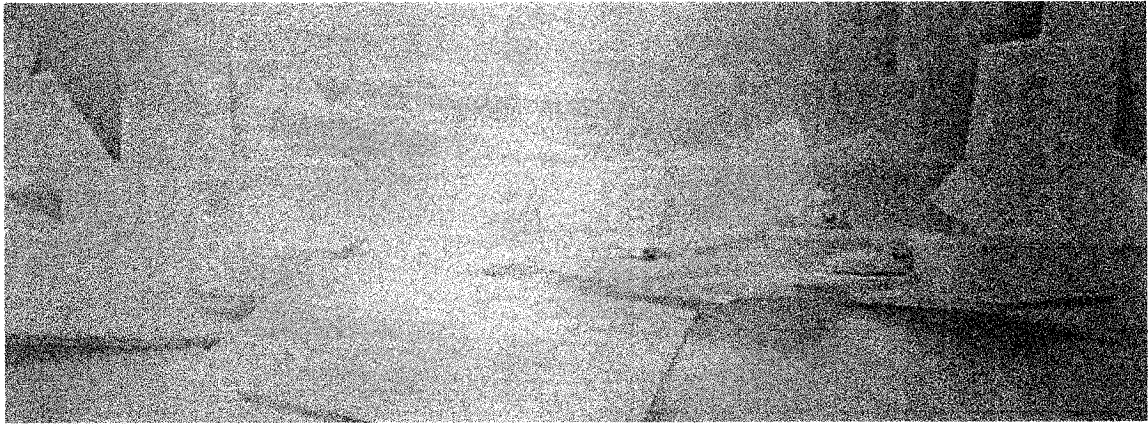


Fig.48 (top) General Idea, *Fin de Siècle*. 1990.  
300 sheets of extruded polystyrene (Styrofoam) and 3 artificial baby harp seals.  
Installation view, Powerplant Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.

Fig.49 (bottom) Caspar David Friedrich, *The Polar Sea (or The Loss of Hope)*  
Oil on canvas.

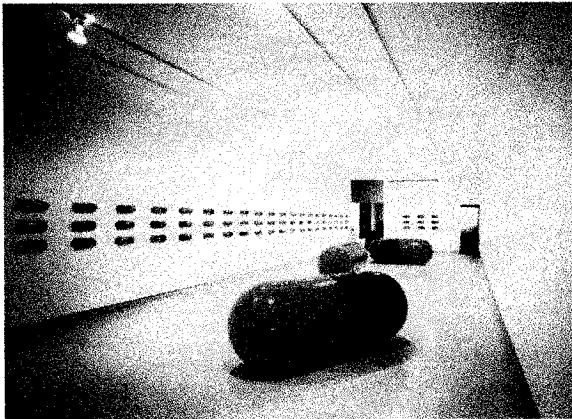
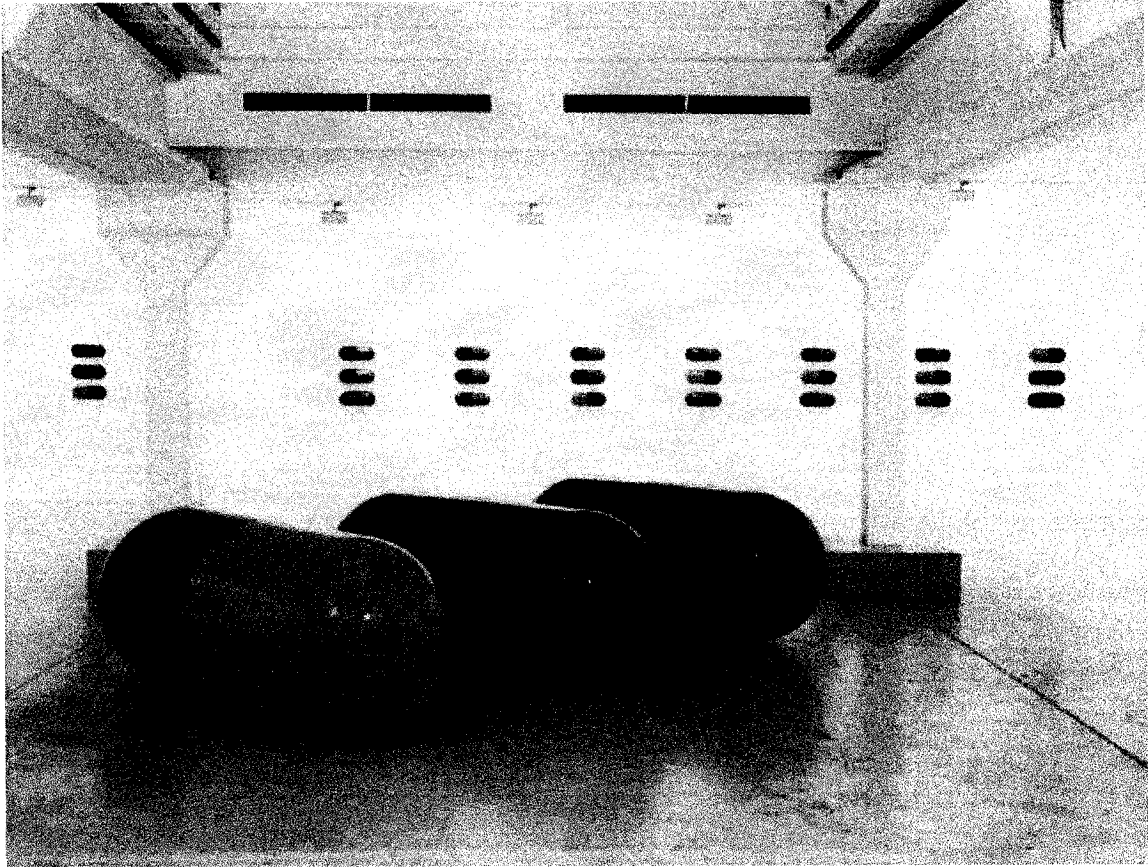


Fig.50 (top) General Idea, *PlaCébo (Blue Pill)*. 1992.

Fig.51 (bottom left) General Idea, *PlaCébo (Red Pill)*. 1992.

Fig.52 (bottom right) General Idea, *PlaCébo*. 1992. Installation view, Barcelona.



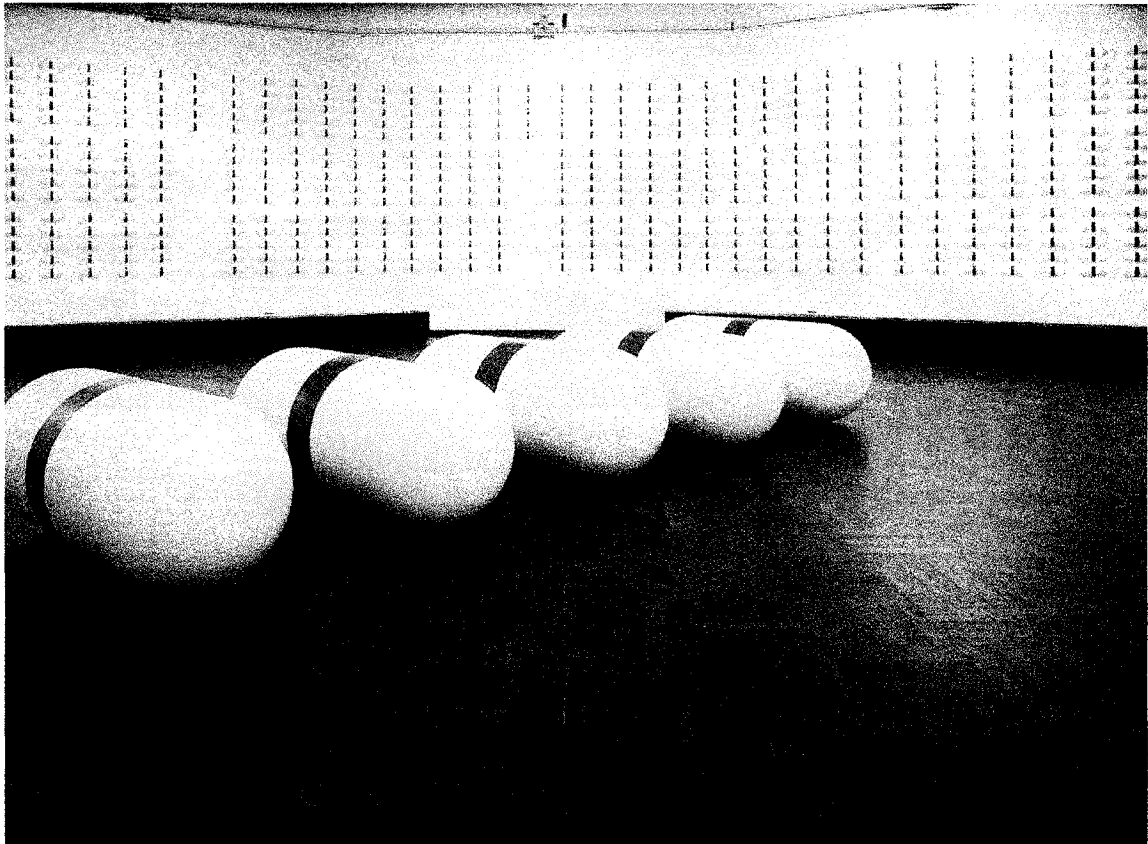


Fig.53 General Idea, *One Day of AZT, One Year of AZT*. 1993.  
1825 vacuum-formed styrene capsules, 12.7 x 31.7 x 6.3 cm, and 5 fibre glass capsules, 85 x 213 cm. Installation view, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, Germany.

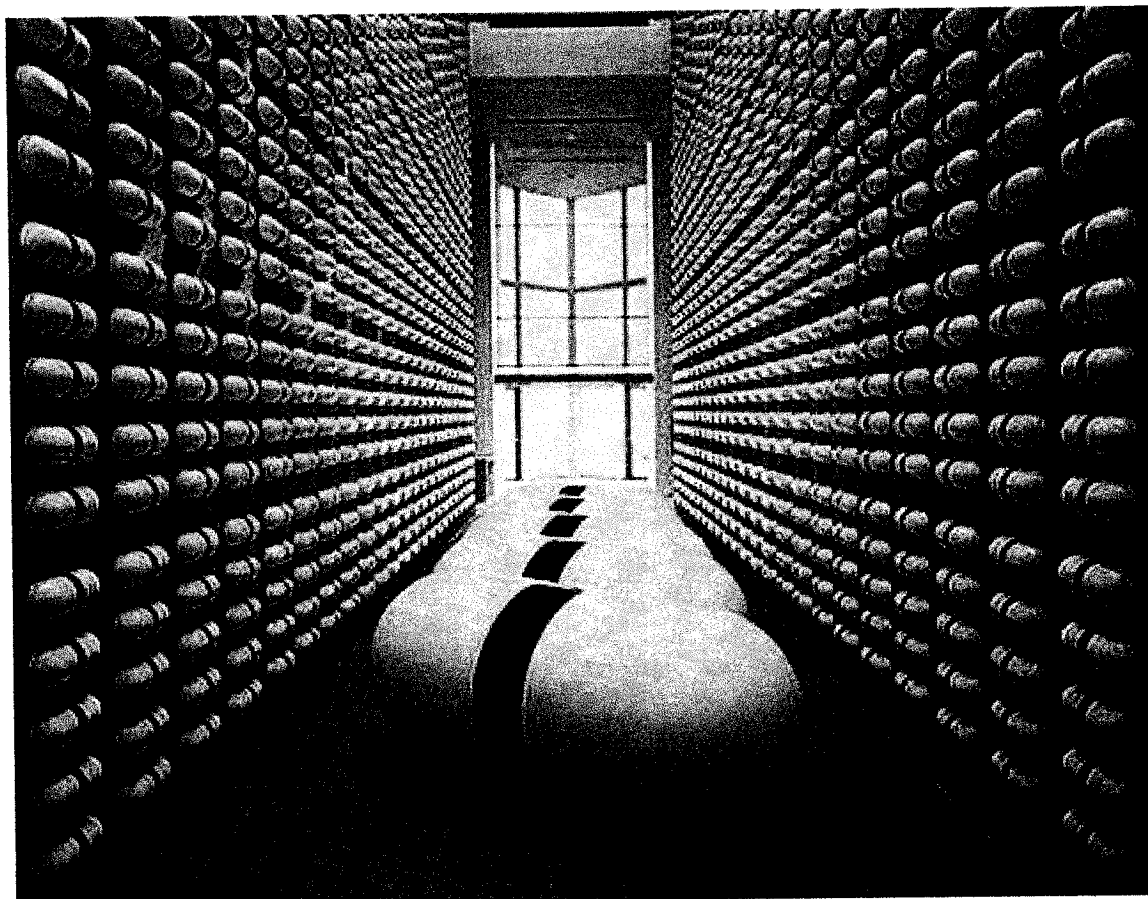


Fig.54 General Idea, *One Day of AZT, One Year of AZT*. 1993.  
1825 vacuum-formed styrene capsules, 12.7 x 31.7 x 6.3 cm, and 5 fibre glass capsules, 85 x 213 cm. Installation view, Power Plant Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.



Fig.55 (top) AA Bronson, *Felix, June 5, 1994*. 1994/1998.  
Lacquer on vinyl. 84 x 168 ins.

Fig.56 (bottom) AA Bronson, *Felix, June 5, 1994* (billboard installation). 1999.  
Installation view, Munich, Germany. Photo: Wilfried Petzi.