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Homage in Blue: General Idea's 'Shut the Fuck Up'

Julia G. Polyck-O'Neill Ms
Brock University, jp03uw@brocku.ca

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Homage in Blue: General Idea's *Shut the Fuck Up*

In art of the postmodern era, it can be difficult to discern ironic from sincere intention underlying the use of appropriation, as the viewer has come to expect ironized reiteration in the age of parody and satire. General Idea's renowned work of video art, *Shut the Fuck Up* (1985), can seem beguiling to the uninitiated; those who are unfamiliar with the discourse of their continuous dialogic engagement with the art canon and its inherent politics could easily perceive comedy where tragedy prevails, or fail to penetrate the cheerful surface of the group's carnivalesque and near-schizophrenic multifarious art practice.

Hinting at General Idea's artifice in his essay, "Bound To Please: The Archives from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion [sic]", AA Bronson analyzes the works comprising Art Metropole, including *FILE*, the magazine published by the art collective, of which he is the sole surviving member. Of *FILE*, he writes: "It became clear that it was a sort of simulacrum of the (art) world itself, and that important components would include participation in the mass media" (126); indeed, in describing this component of their artistic production, he could be describing General Idea's oeuvre as a whole.

The collective consisted of Bronson (born Michael Tims), Felix Partz (b. Ron Gabe), and Jorge Zontal (b. Slobodan Saia-Levi), and was formed in Toronto around 1968, during an era of cultural reassessment that meaningfully coincided with a period "when the stereotype of the artist as individual genius was forcefully put into question" (Tone). In "The Artist as a Work-In-Progress: General Idea and the Construction of Collective Identity", art historian Deborah Barkun ascertains that, from the beginning, the group cast an "ironic, critical gaze . . . on its subject: culture-at-large, its motivations, obsessions and modes of dissemination" (456).

There has been a long-standing conflict in the art world between the artist and the institution. The artist wishes to express individuality and work without limitations, while the institution necessitates a sense of conformity, driven by unromantic economic realities. This discord generates a tension that is frequently present in postmodern art, often characterized by self-reflexivity; this animosity is manifest both implicitly and explicitly, and functions to contrast dissimilar philosophies of production. General Idea was highly intrigued by these issues, and frequently explored (and exploded) them in their work. As gallery curator Kathy Nobel explains, “General Idea’s work was a performed deconstruction of what they described as ‘cultural imperialism’. They parodied and poked fun at systems of power, particularly those of the art world”. They created work that serves to critique the mechanisms inherent to the art institution, as well as subsequent issues concerning the negotiation of the institution by artists; their work co-opts found forms of popular and high culture to communicate an overt disdain for the discourse inhabited by the art world. Indeed, their work often parodically embodies these found cultural forms to generate perceptual awareness, while delineating and magnifying the function of sociopolitical systems within these modes.

1985’s *Shut the Fuck Up*, arguably one of General Idea’s best-known video works, addresses issues pertinent to both the institution and the artist, as well as the politics of reception within the greater art audience, subversively demonstrating contradictions that plague the reality of artistic production, especially within a mediatized setting. The work itself includes three parts, each formed of a video montage. There is interplay between found film and television components and short videos of members of General Idea directly addressing the camera (and their ‘audience’). Each of the components contributes to what ultimately serves as a narrative construct, although the narrative concept is mostly inferred, as a formal sense of diegesis is

notably absent. The work is reminiscent of scratch video, but the high production value contradicts this assumption: it was professionally produced at Arrow Video Studios in Amsterdam. The elements wherein the collective addresses their viewership feature a recognizable, and significant, backdrop: a television test pattern. The use of this test pattern recalls the discourse surrounding television as a mode of communication and draws attention to one of the groups' central and most frequently cited discursive interests: the theoretical work of Marshall McLuhan.

In his aforementioned essay, AA Bronson refers to several artists relevant to General Idea's creative practice; central to this expression of esteem is the notion of shared philosophical methodologies. Bronson includes N.E. Thing Company on his list of credits; he marks Iain and Ingrid Baxter's "disinterest in the art world, [and] their McLuhanesque approach to media and technology" as theoretical concerns common to both art collectives, and a main discursive element that inspired General Idea to engage in similar cultural unpacking (124). Their "McLuhanesque" approach is made evident by the incorporation of mass media in their work, which Bronson discusses as the "idea of 'infecting' the mass media with our own, rather more subversive ideas", a sentiment that gained momentum for the collective while working alongside multimedia artist Laurie Anderson (121).

McLuhan scholar Donald A. Fishman emphasizes how McLuhan's "role in the communication revolution is still ambiguous. Fishman notes that McLuhan alerted people to the diverse effects of media, and asked probing questions about how media transformations result in changes in the nature of society" (573); this ambiguity is mirrored by General Idea in their conceptual pursuits, and is central to their methodically constructed persona: as 'neutral' cultural mediators. In "The Medium is the Message", McLuhan argues that, "The ultimate conflict

between sight and sound, between written and oral kinds of perception and organization of existence is upon us . . . We can moderate the fierceness of this conflict by understanding the media that extend us and raise these wars within and without us” (16). He asserts: “The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he [sic] is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception” (18). In the examination of the appropriated content of *Shut the Fuck Up*, this theorization of the relationship of the artist to the media is particularly meaningful.

In “Part I: Death of a Mauve Bat”, the work’s most significant reference is to Yves Klein. The film sequence featuring of General Idea’s 1984 work *XXX (Blue)* makes direct allusion to Klein’s Anthropometries, the notorious paintings created with what he called “live paintbrushes”: nude female models smeared in blue paint who press themselves on paper or canvas to create an imprint (Restany 87-8). In *XXX (Blue)*, three large Xs are painted on as many large canvasses using stuffed white standard poodles dipped in blue paint; the paint is recognizably the same blue as was used in Klein’s works: International Klein Blue.

“Part II: Mondo Cane” features (what is presumably) found footage of dancers dressed as poodles performing a synchronized routine; the linear narrative of the dance sequence is visually interrupted by overlaid graphic imagery borrowed from the General Idea’s series, *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*, which references the pattern inherent to the entirety of the work, that of a ‘mosaic’ of spliced vignettes; this device also functions to recall McLuhan’s analysis of the medium of television itself, which he proclaimed “the ultimate exemplar of a cool medium. It required participation by the audience to follow the sequence of action. Its images were multisensory, and the interpretation of television programs was endlessly open. These images were discontinuous and nonlinear, giving television the features of a *mosaic*” (qtd in Fishman 571; italics added).

Most prominently, the name of this component of the video work refers to the 1962 film *Mondo Cane*, the Italian documentary film that features footage of the most famous performance of Klein's Anthropometries; the film that is attributed to the death of Klein himself, who had the first of a series of heart attacks during the film's screening at Cannes. "Part III- XXX Blue" opens with footage of General Idea's eponymous work, meaningfully juxtaposed to footage of *Mondo Cane*. The link between General Idea's parodic work and its exemplar is cemented.

The conclusion of *Shut the Fuck Up* is spent in what is ultimately an assemblage of video clips, edited to alternate between members of General Idea, each appealing to the camera individually. The vignettes are woven together to contribute to the dissemination of the intention inherent to the group's endeavour to reiterate, if validate, Klein's performance. Bronson and Partz alternately reveal that the actual performance of the creation of *XXX (Blue)* was enacted to the soundtrack of *Mondo Cane* earlier referenced in the video, "Models in Blue from the Yves Klein sequence". Again, the relation to Klein is underlined, although the reason for their pastiche remains ambiguous. The veritable performance of *XXX (Blue)* itself retains a calculated ambiguity; all that is provided is this verbal description and looped footage of the finished work. *Shut the Fuck Up* inhabits the recognizable conventions of video art: it alternates between "moments of disjunction and narrative absorption" (Wilder 9), evading the mechanisms of concrete plot structure, although there is a prevalent logic to their repetitious sequencing of vignettes. The work functions as an informative manifesto, not unlike the collective's other proclamations, shared in projects such as *FILE* magazine: they address their frustration with the inner-workings of the art world and reveal several potential meanings of some of their iconography. What ultimately lends power to this work, making it both unusually compelling and eloquent, is the pointed and fastidious portrayal of Yves Klein.

While General Idea can be characterized by their intentional and calculated ambiguity, the enigma that is Yves Klein is understood differently. Art critic Pierre Restany, renowned for his close professional association with Klein, explains:

During his lifetime Klein strove to give each of his manifestations a precise meaning, which he, as an accomplished master of ceremonies, revealed to the public. As a method, it was both spectacular and didactic, but one that translated very accurately the profound aspects of the phenomenology of the creative act within the perspectives of the monochrome adventure. Klein exhibited only because he always had something “more” to say. (42)

Restany describes Klein's ambition as unmitigated personal conviction, explaining that Klein felt, “He spoke the true language of the present world, and he meant to communicate this progressively revealed truth to others as fast as it was revealed to him” (8). He firmly upheld the idea that he was responsible for ‘sensitizing’ humanity; a desire to possess the whole world through the “control of sensitivity” (160). American artist Joseph Kosuth sees in him a “pioneer example” of the “advent of Conceptual art” (Restany 8), while art theorist Pepe Karmel contradicts this nomenclature, finding Klein's “classically modernist paintings of 1955-60” to be his utmost achievement (114). Deductively, Klein can be also interpreted as straddling the boundaries of classification, and, in a sense, may be characterized as ambiguous. Certainly, he was shrouded in mystery. Restany elucidates how, “In the course of his brief existence, few people really knew Yves Klein, and few saw as much of him as I did beyond the superficiality of appearances. And appearances were often against him” (8).

In light of Klein's unique practice, it is meaningful to consider how Bronson explains General Idea's affinity to Robert Smithson's article “Yucatan Mirror Displacements”, from the

September 1969 issue of *Artforum*, wherein Bronson discusses “the collision of the poetic, even mystical, and the conceptual in Smithson’s vision . . . and the fact that making art was placed in the service of a vision and not itself the primary activity” (131). This resounds dialogically with Klein’s practice of working in accordance “to the very rhythm of the progressive developments of his vision” (Restany 42). Perhaps, then, *General Idea* is drawing upon Klein as a source of inspiration, as a kindred spirit: a fellow artist who shares in a complex discursive methodology of self-mythologization. It is possible that this is a point of intersection worthy of consideration, although there are notable divergences between their creative practices.

According to Barkun, *General Idea*’s methodological process espouses the contemporaneous debates concerning authorship and subjectivity occurring in the cultural landscape at the time of their artistic production (455). Certainly, *General Idea*’s deliberate ambiguity echoes the sentiment expressed in Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author”, particularly in Barthes’ contestation of imposing limits on text and furnishing it with a “final signified”, which would “close the writing” (3325). The socio-politically engaged construction of *General Idea* overtly contests an instructive, ego-driven approach to the dissemination of their work in society. Barkun points to the notion that their “collective authorship” works to contest “the ‘myth’ of the Artist . . . discrediting the singular artist as the methodological mainstay of biographical interpretation” (455). Taking into account the question of authorship and authorial intention, Klein’s practice maintains an essentially different position; his work stems from an impulse to explicitly delineate the specifics of his objective, and to generate a comparably determined response. Simply put, Klein wanted to remain in control of all aspects of his work (Restany 42); he wanted to maintain his position as “the Author-God” (Barthes 1324).

This point of contrast, relating to the authorial role and of interest to the exploration of Klein's central role in *Shut the Fuck Up*, is visible in the performances referenced and revisited in the video work. Klein's original performance of the Anthropometries, as reiterated in the excerpt from *Mondo Cane*, places Klein in an authoritative position. He points to the symphony he has provided, in a gesture of mock-conducting, and appears to instruct the musicians, as he does with the models, demonstrating complete authorial control. Meanwhile, the performance of *XXX (Blue)* is merely inferred: it is verbally recounted, and the finished 'product' exists as a monument to its prior execution. The authorial role is decidedly obscured, both by a lack of video evidence, and because the performance is presented in significant relation to its predecessor, as an homage. The International Klein Blue paint, used in both performances, radiates with imbued semiotic significance. Indeed, it is the function of semiotics in Klein's performance that ultimately reveals the logic inherent to General Idea's reification of the discourse he embodied.

In *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, performance theorist Keir Elam discusses "the semiotization of the object", and posits, "The very fact of [an object's] appearance on stage suppresses the practical function of phenomena in favour of a symbolic or signifying role", thus permitting the object "dramatic representation" and withholding the utilitarian function that normally defines this same object (8). The same object, or 'sign-vehicle', participates in an inevitable "sign dialectic" of denotation and connotation (11), which Elam explains as the object's acquisition of "secondary meanings for the audience, relating it to the social, moral and ideological values operative in the community of which the performers and spectators are a part" (10). The notion of a "sign dialectic" is especially intriguing when examined alongside theatre professor Marvin Carlson's interpretation of Charles Peirce's semiotics, a theory "built upon

triads, one of the most fundamental of which is *sign-object-interpretant*"; the third term bringing attention to the reception of the sign, or "the manner in which [it] is understood" (19).

In Klein's performance, he is imposing "the symbolic or signifying role" of "live paintbrush" on the nude female models he has hired; however, as much as the audience of the actual physical performance may have ascertained the "dramatic representation" of his "live paintbrushes" at the time, the dialectic inherent to his 'objects' inevitably fails to resonate ideologically with the broader audience of the art world. It can be surmised that the artist's complex theoretical elucidations about "the vital energy" of the flesh, and the "health that makes us live, unconscious and at the same time responsible for our essential participation in the universe" (Restany 90), are not immediately recalled (nor provided) upon ascertaining the 'by-product' of the work: the Anthropometry paintings themselves, which have been criticized as "abstract centerfolds" (Karmel 114). It is also ultimately detrimental to the performance's reception that the work is predominantly viewed as an element of *Mondo Cane*, which in turn, uses Klein's work as a "sign-vehicle" of its own, ostensibly redefining Klein's 'intention' to suit the narrative requirements of their documentary. (Considering this semiotic shift, it is unsurprising that Klein endured so visceral a reaction during the film's screening; the extreme degree of variance between his objective and what was presented to cinematic audiences remains absurd.) The directors of *Mondo Cane* superimpose new parameters for the triadic relation on the work, thereby initiating a divergent understanding and reception of the sign, and of the performance as a whole.

General Idea is addressing the ideological complexities encompassing the myth and actuality of Klein's life and work in choosing to situate him as the thematic feature of *Shut the Fuck Up*. Indeed, the angry and instructive proclamations of the artists, which bracket the video,

serve to reframe Klein as a victim of the art institution, and potentially a victim of the cultural discourse foregrounded by the institution, positing that his philosophical pursuits are to be reinterpreted as legitimate, and his logic to be reconsidered rather than cast as the psychological byproduct of inflated ego his detractors so freely editorialize. He serves as an example of the artist who fails to fit neatly into fashionable parlance, and must be discursively reconfigured in order to do so. This notion functions as a thematic thread throughout the video. Partz bemoans the expected role of artists as “romantic” figures, oblivious to their own commodification. Later in the work, the symbolic meaning of poodles, a recurrent camp motif adopted by the collective, is explained as being interconnected to their “eagerness for affection and affectation” and their “delicious desire to be groomed and preened for public appearances”. In Zontal’s provocative final monologue, he declares:

When you get the joke, you break up . . . everything turns upside-down, inside-out . . .

One set of relationships turns into another; the new emergent meaning, the old retiring meaning, engage in a battle of wits on the borderline between content and context . . .

The pieces of the puzzle don’t add up . . . Are you listening? Do you get the picture? . . .

Do you know what to say when there is nothing to say? When there’s nothing to say: shut the fuck up.

This final assertion speaks to a number of issues. It is foremost an exposition and critique of the machinations of the art institution; there is also a sub-textual suggestion of the ideas expressed in McLuhan’s opening passage in “The Medium is the Message”: “The personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from a new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves” (7). While characteristically enigmatic, McLuhan’s statement can be internalized as a reminder to remain cognizant of the

self-serving intentions of the media in a mediatized culture. In adopting the format of video art, General Idea translate their skepticism in such a way that their message significantly both embodies and implicates the very media and institution they critique. What initially reads as a parody of an art world antihero is indeed an homage, and a call to arms.

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