

# THE ARTIST AS A WORK-IN-PROGRESS: GENERAL IDEA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

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## ABSTRACT

In its twenty-five years of activity (1969–1994), the art collective General Idea developed a complex artistic mythology and identity that permitted it to produce a substantial corpus of work while confronting challenges provoked by evolving social relationships and, eventually, HIV/AIDS. The group maintained a cohesive partnership, a ‘collaborative body’ that subsumed individual members’ identities within a collective whole. This paper analyses the conceptual projects and artists’ statements of the group’s first decade, many of which belong to the domain of Correspondence and Mail Art. It argues that these textual and performative artworks strategically constructed an elaborate collective identity. They equally functioned as a vehicle through which to develop methods and strategies of collaborative practice, reflecting debates about authorship such as those theorized contemporaneously by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault.

*Keywords:* General Idea; collaboration; authorship; collectivity; Correspondence Art; Conceptual Art; Mail Art; manifesto; performance; gender; sexuality

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IN 1969, CANADIAN ARTISTS AA Bronson (b. Michael Tims), Jorge Zontal (b. Slobodan Saia-Levi) and Felix Partz (b. Ron Gabe) formed a multimedia art collective named General Idea (**Figure 1**).<sup>1</sup> General Idea’s formation was less deliberate than organic, a process evoked by the biological metaphors the group later used to characterize its collaboration, and the concepts and dissemination of its work. General Idea’s prolific career, complex identity and remarkable longevity, cut short only by the AIDS-related deaths of Zontal and Partz, provide a compelling opportunity to theorize the social dynamics of collaboration and authorship; indeed, to examine the very definition of the ‘artist’. The group’s collective identity challenged the conventional discourse of art history as a trajectory of ‘exceptional individuals’. Its up-ending of this concept depended, in part, on its similar subversion of the genre of artists’ writings, on which readers and viewers typically rely to provide insight into artists’ intentions and thought processes, and to guide meaning and interpretation. Instead, General Idea’s texts – Correspondence Art projects, magazine editorials and features, artists’



**Figure 1:** Rodney Werden, untitled (portrait of General Idea), black and white photograph, 1974.

statements, fictive biographies and manifestos – prove central to the group’s aim of self-consciously revealing conventional understandings of artistic personality as mythic.

Here I refer to General Idea (1969–94) as a singular artist to emphasize the degree to which the group developed a collaborative identity that eclipsed those of its individual members. General Idea’s sustained and successful collective identity reveals the degree to which members of the visual arts community, alongside literary and cultural critics, engaged with and interrogated the vexed terrain of authorial subjectivity. Its early epistolary projects and editorials, read as manifestos, demonstrate that the group’s writings produced and cemented artistic identity while simultaneously problematizing the authenticity of artists’ statements. The identity-play intrinsic to Correspondence and Mail Art, a branch of the Conceptual Art movement, was fundamental to the formation of the group’s elaborate collective identity and is crucial to understanding its extended collaboration. Specifically, General Idea utilized writing to ‘audition’ a trio of creative and gendered identities: the masculinized ‘General’; the feminized yet anatomically and sexually indeterminate ‘Miss General Idea’; and ‘Spirit of Miss General Idea’, culminating in the collective’s emergence as a mature meta-artist, or what I refer to as a ‘collaborative body’, that subsumed the individual identities of its members.

General Idea's quest for a new artistic subjectivity directly coincided with debates about authorship waged by literary and cultural critics. In 'The Death of the Author' (1968), Roland Barthes rejected the reliance on authorial intent and biography that dominated literary criticism.<sup>2</sup> For Barthes, the author-centric approach foreclosed opportunities for reader-focused interactions with the text and negated the reader's role in simultaneously reading and producing the text. Instead, he argued for an alternative focus that privileged the reader's performative act of enunciation over the author's instance of composition, thus imparting to the text a perpetual presentness and a diversity of potential encounters.<sup>3</sup> By dispensing with the author's ultimate authority, Barthes gave prominence to the reader as the site where numerous 'traces' implicit in the text are assembled.<sup>4</sup>

Michel Foucault countered by posing the question 'What is an Author?' (1969), and complicated Barthes's analysis by suggesting that the 'author', the author's name and the 'work' are complex constructions in need of interrogation and definition.<sup>5</sup> Foucault replaced the category of 'author' with 'author-function', a culturally constructed entity that incorporates distinctions among the identity of the writer, the author and the text's narrative voices, and recognizes the author's ideological formation. The author-function fragments the author, allowing for multiple subjects and selves. Foucault noted the example of the novel narrated in the first person, in which the reader does not confuse the writer's identity with the first-person pronoun or present indicative. Instead, the author-function reflects a 'second self' whose similarity to the author is never fixed and who undergoes considerable alteration in the course of a single book. It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the 'author-function' arises out of their scission – in the division and distance between the two.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Foucault attributed a 'plurality of egos' to 'all discourses that support th[e] author-function'.<sup>7</sup> For Foucault, acknowledging the author's varied presences does not limit interpretive possibilities. Rather, it presents opportunities to examine how, where and why the author-function asserts itself in the text.<sup>8</sup>

General Idea actively engaged with these debates and theorized the dynamics of authorship, in this case collective authorship, by 'auditioning' successive identities.<sup>9</sup> By virtue of its insistence on collective authorship, the group succeeded in 'overthrow[ing] the myth' of the Artist and discrediting the singular artist as the methodological mainstay of biographical interpretation.<sup>10</sup> Yet, while General Idea sought to challenge the supremacy of the artist myth, it did so, in part, to assert an alternative collective identity, not to unequivocally dismiss the subject from the field of analysis. The group interrogated conventional understandings of the artist to clear a space in which to function as a complex, collaborative, artistic body. Though Foucault does not address multiple authorship, a liberal interpretation of the author-function presents an opportunity for both multiple authorship and the continued relevance of the subject. Because the author-function allows for a 'plurality of egos', its interstices might accommodate alternative conceptions of the artist. However, despite their mutual

concern with redefining authorship, General Idea's composite body and artistic production exceeded the scope of Foucault's project. If General Idea is understood as a collective theorist and practitioner, its exploration of alternative forms of identity and subjectivity made a productive contribution to the ongoing debates on these topics.

General Idea's early history, which laid the foundation for extended collaboration, issued challenges to conventional understandings of artistic personality and production, and subsequently sexuality and committed partnership. A targeted survey of the group's first decade reveals the ways that its composite body evolved through the progressive assumption of increasingly intricate alternative personas, and provides a glimpse of the ironic, critical gaze that the group trained on its subject: culture-at-large, its motivations, obsessions and modes of dissemination. Through a series of identifications with, and separations from, variously conceived personas or projects – the General, Miss General Idea and the Spirit of Miss General Idea – the group devised its own mythology by systematically conceiving, dismantling and reconstructing the 'body' of the artist. The evolution of these personas, which I chart here, documents the collective's self-realization. In this metamorphosis, each successive character brings the collective closer to assuming collaborative authorship: the General's authority commands, and the Spirit of Miss General Idea – along with the periodic assistance of the gracious embodiment Miss General Idea – inspires, until General Idea wrests authority from these fictive personas, possesses it, and emerges as a fully realized collaborative author.

The paths of three like-minded experimental consumers and producers of visual culture, Tims, Gabe and Saia-Levi, initially converged at the heart of Toronto's fertile and communal counterculture, populated by artists, architects, actors, filmmakers, interior designers and drag queens.<sup>11</sup> The urban milieu bustled with creative energy and activity, contributing to countless informal collaborations.<sup>12</sup> In June 1970, the prospect of public exhibition compelled the group to arrive at a name broad enough to encapsulate diverse works; that is, to communicate to prospective viewers the 'general idea'.<sup>13</sup> Initially, the name 'General Idea' described a loosely associated, rotating membership of 'cultural refugees', with Tims, Gabe and Saia-Levi at its core. They publicly articulated this association by asserting a theatrical presence: attending functions as a group, flanked by an entourage, their arrivals had the aura of 'events'. In a sense, the group ambivalently positioned itself in relation to the communal subculture of the 1960s by adopting an urban or 'glam' identity and aesthetic, which it retrospectively labelled a 'glamorous commune'.<sup>14</sup> In these early years, General Idea deliberately obscured the individual identities of its participants, an approach that encouraged a fluid and mobile membership. This anonymity promoted myriad collaborative permutations, allowing individuals to freely participate or abstain to varying degrees.

General Idea's embrace of mutable identity was, in part, related to the burgeoning international Correspondence Art movement, a branch of Conceptual

Art that the group actively pursued.<sup>15</sup> Correspondence artists exchanged personalized and frequently singular images and letters, or additive, collaborative, 'chain-letter' projects through postal channels, frequently assuming alter egos, using pen names and fabricating biographies. Within General Idea's practice, such adaptability gave rise to a fictional, military personage known as 'the General', the 'antagonistic commander' who issued orders to his obedient 'followers'.<sup>16</sup> The General's aggressive and demanding temperament reflects anti-military sentiment fuelled by the influence of American conscientious objectors in Canada.<sup>17</sup> The character was fashioned around the contents of a steamer trunk that Bronson purchased at a Salvation Army outlet.<sup>18</sup> The trunk, which had belonged to Captain R. E. A. Morton, contained memorabilia from a 1931–32 European tour, including clippings, theatre and military programmes, racing stubs, military tattoo catalogues, and a mysterious cigarette case on which appeared a handwritten exchange, 'I would *love* to kiss you!', attributed to the General, followed by 'I wish you would' in a woman's handwriting.<sup>19</sup> General Idea wove an elaborate tale around the collection and documented the General's adventures in *The General's Scrapbook*, which became a source of inspiration for other projects. The related correspondence, referred to as *Dear Victor/Dear General* (1971–72), was primarily exchanged between General Idea and the poet Victor Coleman and indicates the extent to which Correspondence Art constituted a form of decentralized collaboration.<sup>20</sup>

Although most of the project is lost, the existing correspondence partially reveals the General's elusive character.<sup>21</sup> The sole 'Dear General' letter maintains ambiguity regarding the constitution of the recipient(s). Although the salutation reads 'Dear General', the letter is addressed to General Idea and pertains to the sender's desire to investigate the origins and activities of 'your organization'. This leaves unclear whether the letter addresses the group or a military figure by the rank and name of General Idea. With one exception, the remaining letters, beginning with the address 'Dear Victor' or 'to whom it may concern', further obscure and fragment the implicated personas. For example, the General signed a letter that begins 'we of General Idea', suggesting a conflation of the persona and the group. A further missive proposes a distinction between Morton and the General, but concludes by asserting that the General 'parodies' 'his own (and Morton's) sketchy identity', suggesting a complex understanding of authorship that recalls Barthes and Foucault. While General Idea distinguishes between the General and Morton, and attributes the self-conscious act of parody to the General with respect to both himself and Morton, the noun 'identity' remains singular. Thus General Idea, Morton and the General of this correspondence assume multiple forms, at once distinct and unified.

The self-conscious aspect of this flexibility is evident in the letters that allude to the possibilities of alter egos, deliberately concealed identities, and fictive personas. One such letter identifies the General as,

a mysterious man with a variety of disguises and pseudonyms. (The members of the following claim that the General was in fact ALL THESE PEOPLE during the course of his life and in fact used no pseudonyms.) Such names as Neil Morton, Mr. Allerton, Mr. Worth, and Morris figure largely in the tangled trails [...]. Nevertheless it is easily seen that the General was a complex man who took care to live a variety of lives and in the most elusive pattern.<sup>22</sup>

In this instance, the General constitutes an enigmatic figure who operated under the guise of alternative names or appearances, or who existed as an amalgamation of disparate people. Elsewhere, another letter casts doubt upon the General's existence, speculating whether:

the General did exist as one Major R. E. A. Morton, or whether, in fact, he were merely the creation of his own fancy, fully documented and of course carefully collected from fragments of his own and others' pasts. Indeed, documentation is of a primarily sketchy, if bulky, nature [...] with no definitive indication of the single personality of the General and the Major Morton. Certainly the whimsy involved in the name General Idea would suggest an alter ego, but whether this was indeed invented by the major, or WHETHER IN FACT THE MAJOR WAS INVENTED BY THE GENERAL is a hypothesis which none have been able to unravel. Certain schools indicate that they doubt the existence of the General at all, and suggest that such an existence was entirely the invention of the followers (or disciples) of the General who appeared some 10 years after his supposed death. There is a relevance to such a view, although the light this would throw on the motives of the group might appear frightening to some.<sup>23</sup>

Here, General Idea offers additional rationales for the General's complex character. The General may indeed have been Major Morton. However, he may also have assembled an identity by appropriating traits and experiences of others and collaging them with his own.<sup>24</sup> Alternatively, General Idea may have been an alter ego of either the General or the Major, depending on the irresolvable dilemma of which persona contrived the other. Further, the General may have existed only as a conceit of his 'followers', who contrived the General, his history, personality and biography, from the outset. Hence, the followers are similarly revealed as a contrivance. This disclosure exposes the artist as a purveyor of deception, and positions the audience either as gullible or as a willing participant in the deception. As the *Dear Victor/Dear General* project is, in fact, the collaborative product of artists, one might assume the latter stance, inflected by a parody of the passive, credulous viewer. In any case, the entire correspondence questions the tenor of the artist's 'motives', thereby disrupting conventional assumptions about artistic sensitivity and honesty.

Though an early project, *Dear Victor/Dear General* represents an exploration of various means of identity-construction that emerge as crucial to General Idea's self-definition. By installing the General as 'commander', the group articulated a desire for a more stable identity than its fluctuating membership allowed. Yet the creation of the General did not indicate a wish for a singular leader to emerge from within General Idea's ranks. Rather, it signalled an early attempt

to formulate an identity and project it onto a fictive entity. While the character of the General was short-lived, his emergence is crucial because he represents the development of a conceptual persona. His 'followers', the artists themselves, displaced their growing need for a more structured identity onto their invented leader. His gruff demeanor may have symbolically and cautiously voiced this need. By imbuing the General with an antagonistic manner and military stature, the group's organization could be modified with limited personal risk; after all, they were only 'following orders'.<sup>25</sup> The General did not, however, issue instructions to reconfigure the group, nor was there a conscious motivation on the part of Tims, Gabe and Saia-Levy to formalize a tripartite unit. Instead, as their collaborative aims and activities crystallized, the larger group gradually dispersed, leaving the General, his legacy and the name 'General Idea' to the trio. As this identity took root, the need for the General faded.

In addition to formalizing General Idea's membership, Tims, Gabe and Saia-Levy each adopted personal pseudonyms. Like the group's evolution, this was a progressive process, driven as much by the whimsy of peers as by practices of the Correspondence Art network, in which participants frequently assumed numerous pen names. Saia-Levy was the first to acquire a pseudonym, derived from his Venezuelan nickname 'Jorge'. A Jamaican record entitled 'I Just Want to be Horizontal' was the source of the surname 'Zontal', resulting in the name Jorge Zontal, a word play and a jest referring to Saia-Levy's reputation as a late riser.<sup>26</sup> Tims acquired his pseudonym after co-authoring a series of pornographic novels under the nom-de-plume 'A. T. Bronson', which friends mistakenly recalled as AA Bronson.<sup>27</sup> Gabe, long dissatisfied with individual practice, had previously envisioned collaborative efforts and conceived names that left ambiguous the particularities of participants.<sup>28</sup> After his initial association with the General Idea household, Gabe took the pseudonym 'Felix Partz', occasionally recorded as Felicks Partz or the militarized version, Private Partz.<sup>29</sup> While the name's exact origin is difficult to trace, it relies on sexual innuendo, i.e. the 'licking' of 'private parts'. The name Felix, of Latin origin, translates as 'the lucky one' or 'the fortunate one', rendering the name's connotation, 'lucky parts' or 'fortunate parts'. The military rank of private is likely a reference to the figure of the General.<sup>30</sup> Over time, the three artists, united under the rubric General Idea, began to identify themselves by pseudonyms rather than their given names.

The semiotic act of self-identifying reflects General Idea's concerns about authorship, while the corporate resonance of 'General Idea', with its allusions to multinational corporations such as General Motors, General Electric and General Dynamics, conveyed the ironic and critical attitude that would become the group's hallmark.<sup>31</sup> 'General', in the corporate business sense, implies the conglomeration of diversified goods. 'General Idea', then, enfolds the diverse ideas of autonomous persons under a unified rubric. In turn, the intersection between the art collective and the corporation has multiple implications. First, it evokes a corporate nature, suggesting multiple individuals united in a single



body, as in the Latin root, *corpus*. Legally, the corporation is defined as a body sanctioned to act as an individual, created by regulation, contract or legislation, and granted rights accordingly. Indeed, General Idea is a corporation, albeit self-sanctioned, a deliberately constructed artificial body that unifies disparate elements in order to author collaborative rather than individual works. By selecting a name with corporate resonance, General Idea alludes to mass production and distribution methods that suggest postmodern strategies of appropriation and dissemination, which the group liberally employed in its own work. By incorporating, General Idea authors and authorizes its own identity, critiquing the degree to which the institutional art world operates as a business entity, a hierarchical bureaucracy with greater regard for consumers than producers.

Defining its membership and brand name did not resolve the group's identity issues. In some respects, it created a need for additional and previously unanticipated clarification. General Idea's former 'revolving door' membership and deliberate anonymity generated confusion regarding its personnel and base of operation, and led to a misattribution of works to outside artists.<sup>32</sup> To counter these misconceptions, General Idea embarked on an 'advertising campaign' to introduce the collective and its collaborative approach to the arts community.<sup>33</sup> In the promotional arena, the group insisted on being photographed and interviewed as a unit: transcribed interviews recorded respondents only as 'General Idea', leaving deliberately ambiguous the personal identity of the individual speaking.

Although General Idea assumed a collective identity early in its collaboration, conventions and prejudices of the institutional art world tested the group's commitment to communal effort. Initially, the arts community was reluctant to engage the collective because of the sense that "groups never stay together".<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, accounts often gave prominence to one member of the group, rather than the group as a whole.<sup>35</sup> The art system's seeming inability to conceive of General Idea as a holistic entity testifies to the continued dominance of the exceptional individual in the annals of history of art. Outsiders' insistent identification of General Idea as an assembly of distinct individuals rather than a collective led to resentment within the newly established group.<sup>36</sup> Because this threatened the collective's constancy, the artists learned to anticipate and negotiate these issues. Eventually, the group's solidifying identity neutralized the threat of such art world biases and incorporated them into its critical programme. As the frequency of such press waned, General Idea achieved recognition as a partnership.

To this end, *FILE Magazine* (1972–89), General Idea's self-published appropriation of the culturally iconic *LIFE Magazine*, emerged as a significant tool for communication and self-promotion.<sup>37</sup> *FILE* originated as a vital international networking tool for artists, curators and critics involved in Correspondence Art, what *FILE* contributor and Fluxus artist Robert Filliou referred to as the 'Eternal Network'.<sup>38</sup> As scholar of Correspondence Art John Held, Jr.



maintains, *FILE* surfaced as the ‘central clearing house for the emerging international network of postal-based artists’.<sup>39</sup> *FILE* rapidly became a forum for General Idea’s extensive conceptual projects, including identity-construction. In the style popularized by *LIFE*, General Idea revealed itself through photomontages and found-image collages picturing ‘the collective’ at work, as in a portrait depicting the group as architects of the Miss General Idea Pavillion (**Figure 1**). Each theme-based issue included a collaboratively authored editorial, written in the tenor of a manifesto, allying itself with an artistic tradition previously employed by artist associations, such as the Dadaists, Surrealists, Futurists and Constructivists, for whom making art held political or aesthetically radical significance. In so doing, the group defined itself as transgressive and historically grounded. The ‘Glamour’ editorial, which appeared in the 1975 ‘Glamour Issue’, best illustrates General Idea’s process of identity-construction, and functioned as a tale of origin and a ‘Warholian performative’.<sup>40</sup> The following passage captures the spirit of the fourteen-page pictorial and manifesto:

This is the story of General Idea and the story of what we wanted.

We wanted to be famous; we wanted to be glamorous; we wanted to be rich. That is to say, we wanted to be artists, and we knew that if we were famous, if we were glamorous, we could say, we are artists, and we would be.

We never felt we had to produce great art to be great artists. We knew great art did not bring glamour or fame. We knew we had to keep a foot in the door of art and we were conscious of the importance of berets and paint brushes. We made public appearances in painters’ smocks. We knew that if we were famous, if we were glamorous, we could say, we are artists, and we would be. We did and we are. We are famous, glamorous artists. This is the story of Glamour and the part it has played in our art.<sup>41</sup>

The Glamour editorial lays bare General Idea’s deliberate construction and promotion of its own mythology: the collective emerges as simultaneous subject and object of its own creation. As such, the group recognized the ‘artist’ as historically, socially and culturally constructed, and employed hyperbolic performance to expose the vacuity of the ‘artist’s image’.<sup>42</sup> The exaggerated vehicle of the manifesto epitomizes Barthes’s characterization of myth as ‘speech justified in excess’. The group’s familiarity with Barthes’s concepts becomes apparent as the Glamour manifesto continues:

What is artificiality? We knew in order to be artists and to be glamorous artists we had to be artificial and we were. We knew in order to be ratified we had to affect a false nature, disguising ourselves ineffectually as natural objects: businessmen, beauty queens, even artists themselves. The image of the artist is easiest to inhabit. Because of its historic richness, its ready but empty mythology (berets, paint brushes, palettes, in a word FORM without content) the shell which was art was simple to invade. We made art our home and assuming appearances strengthened by available myth, occupied art’s territory. Thus we became glamorous, made art, made ourselves over in the image of art.<sup>43</sup>

Here, references to tactical ‘artificiality’ and ‘false nature’ evoke Barthes’s claim that myth furnishes the illusion of the natural by dispensing with culturally

imposed contradictions.<sup>44</sup> Mythologized, the artist, General Idea, requires no further explanation; it merely exists as a 'statement of fact'.<sup>45</sup>

The group confronted the idea of reception more literally in the *Miss General Idea* cycle (1970–1980), which developed from *What Happened* (1970), a multi-media performance or 'costume epic' that culminated in the crowning of 'Miss General Idea 1970'.<sup>46</sup> *What Happened* sensitized the group to the richness of awards ceremonies and beauty pageants as ready-made cultural clichés subject to critique. Accordingly, they launched *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, a multi-media, conceptual piece that began as a Correspondence Art project. Sixteen contest 'finalists' received a copy of the official *Entry Kit*, instructing them to complete and return the materials along with eight photographs of themselves or a 'stand-in' modelling the enclosed *Miss General Idea Gown*.<sup>47</sup> General Idea enlarged the completed entries and showcased them as part of the 'Grand Awards Ceremony' of *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* in the Walker Court of the Art Gallery of Ontario.<sup>48</sup> The group orchestrated the event as a flamboyant media spectacle, inviting art consultant Dorothy Cameron and David Silcox, Dean of Fine Arts at York University and former visual arts officer of The Canada Council, as well as actor Danny Freedman, a participant in early General Idea activities, to act as the *Pageant's* esteemed judges.<sup>49</sup> Following an elaborate, multi-media ceremony, the judges proclaimed Marcel Dot (a.k.a. artist Michael Morris) Miss General Idea 1971, based on his ability to 'capture "Glamour" without falling into it'.<sup>50</sup>

Initially, the group anticipated similar annual pageants. However, the effort involved in producing such a spectacle precluded organizing related performances with such regularity. Instead, General Idea designated 1984, a year replete with literary and cultural resonance, as the date for the next Miss General Idea Pageant. Significantly, this project occasioned the collective's commitment to long-term collaboration. Though General Idea had been working together for over two years, the decision to remain cohesive until the project's presumptive deadline represented a thirteen-year pledge, which Partz retrospectively characterized as 'like a marriage ceremony'.<sup>51</sup> While the choice of 1984 was predicated on Orwellian connotations rather than any projected conclusion of the project, it nevertheless represented a defining moment in General Idea's personal, professional and conceptual relationship. With this commitment, the group formally endorsed its integrative working method and thought process. By concentrating on 1984, the project maintained a sense of evolution, in which the 'next art object' became the focal point. As Partz later explained, 'it wasn't the painting you just finished, it was the one you were about to start,' thus prolonging a 'sense of anticipation'.<sup>52</sup> In subsequent years, the group devoted itself to the *Search for the Spirit of Miss General Idea*, a series of multi-media projects, all relating to the future pageant. General Idea staged interactive performances, such as *Towards an Audience Vocabulary*, which 'rehearsed' the audience for the 1984 extravaganza. The collective also embarked upon the design of *The Miss*

*General Idea Pavillion*, the site of the future event, including a solicitation in *FILE* for designs of the Pavillion's grand 'Staircase of Honor'.<sup>53</sup>

Although space prevents me from addressing in detail the role of gender and sexuality in General Idea's deconstruction of the mythology of the artist, it is worth highlighting their reliance on a (typically feminine) 'muse' in the form of the Spirit of Miss General Idea. The group distinguished between the two entities, Miss General Idea, the art object, and the Spirit of Miss General Idea, the muse, the former acting as a material manifestation of the latter. By appealing to a muse, the group reclaimed the notion of inspiration, generally rejected by Conceptual artists because of its link to the notion of artistic genius. Collaboration, in particular, challenges inspiration because it privileges group interaction and exchange of ideas.<sup>54</sup> Yet, by claiming the Spirit as its motivational source, the group acknowledged a recognizable, if diffuse, site of creativity, deflecting any residual discomfort about its plural membership. In Louise Dompierre's 1991 interview, General Idea casually surmised that Miss General Idea 'probably assassinated the General'; 'he died', disappeared, or went to an undisclosed location, 'but all of a sudden [Miss General Idea] was running the battleship'.<sup>55</sup> Here, one fictive persona supersedes another, each one driving the mutable concept of the artist. If the character of the General symbolized the early collective's subconscious desire for increased structure and formality, the turn to the Spirit of Miss General Idea signified the mature collective's self-assurance and embrace of unmitigated and boundless creative freedom. For, unlike the General, who issued orders, the Spirit of Miss General Idea enabled experimentation.

In 1977, General Idea 'razed' the theoretical Pavillion in *Reconstructing Futures*, a carefully orchestrated outdoor performance in Kingston, Ontario that incorporated pyrotechnics, fire trucks and hovering news helicopters.<sup>56</sup> The performance culminated with General Idea's harrowing escape from the burning Pavillion. The destruction of the Pavillion represented an abrupt cessation of pageant-related activity. Hence, the group's narrow escape symbolized its liberation from the prelude to the projected 1984 event. While the pageant's dimension may have reached creative stasis, the collective successfully evaded 'bodily' harm. It survived intact and exited the burning wreckage as a unit. In a self-portrait, the soot-covered group flees the flames and billowing smoke still clinging to one another for support. This unified front signifies General Idea's commitment to collaboration beyond the scope of the 1984 project. Despite the Pavillion's smoldering foundation, General Idea's foundation remained solid and intact. The Pavillion's annihilation signalled a transitional event, through which the group's inspiration turned from Miss General Idea to the Spirit of Miss General Idea; from the theoretically embodied to the wholly disembodied. Although the possibilities of the Pageant, Pavillion and 1984 personification had vanished, the Spirit of Miss General Idea retained the role of muse.

If this turn represents three receptive consciousnesses coalescing into a composite body, the group's evolving anatomical rhetoric emphasized the extent to

which its interpersonal relations and working methods promoted a complex corporeal fusion. 'Three Heads are Better', a 1978 *FILE* editorial, recounts:

Our three sets of eyes perform a single point of view. Other lines of vision are tolerated around the conference table but when out in public solidarity is essential. Once the 'compromise' has been hammered out, others will come more easily [. . .].

The three of us are each other's right hand men. But we aren't taking any chances. If one of us was lost on the job it would throw off the balance. We know that three's a crowd and a basic social unit and we'd hate to be reduced to a couple.<sup>57</sup>

Here three pairs of eyes perform in unison a sensory and perceptual act. However, this operation is neither spontaneous nor seamless; it involves consensus, 'hammered out' in the conference room, studio or living space. Once determined, mutual decisions 'come more easily' and six eyes merge as interdependent vision. Further, General Idea extols the virtues of living and working in a triadic relationship. Each artist acts as the 'right hand' for his compatriots. Sexual nuance aside, each individual is invaluable to the other two, so much so that the loss of one would irreparably upset the balance. Despite cultural convictions favouring the singular artist hero and the monogamous heterosexual pair, General Idea achieves completeness as a trio.

During its crucial first decade, General Idea transitioned from artists who collaborated to a singular collaborative body by experimenting with authorial voices and identities in a variety of literary forms, thus fuelling reconsiderations of how the 'artist' is configured. Through the appropriation of genres as diverse as the manifesto, the autobiography, the editorial and the letter, the group exposed the vehicle of the artist statement as a fiction and the cultural concept of the artist as a performance. As Barthes argued, the most effective strategy for neutralizing myth is to 'mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology'.<sup>58</sup> In the broadest sense, General Idea destabilized the popularly accepted and historically perpetuated myth of the artist as a lone, singular, heroic genius. By parodying the romantic stereotype of the 'artist', General Idea drained it of content, making it available for reinterpretation. Devoid of meaning, it becomes an empty vessel, free to be colonized by content. By highlighting the artist myth as a construction of artists' statements, General Idea shows it to be without substance and inserts in its place a highly mediated yet considerably more fluid artistic identity.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> General Idea regularly predated its formation to 1968. For Fern Bayer, this allowed General Idea to assign an earlier date to the 'Miss General Idea Pageant' and associated projects. See Fern Bayer, 'The Search for the Spirit', in *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea, 1968–1975*, ed. by Fern Bayer and Christina Ritchie (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), pp. 10–12. Moreover, this addition of a calendar year exemplifies the group's proclivity for undermining the perceived authenticity of artist autobiography, as well as retroactively affiliating it with the international, political climate of 1968 and related artistic activity.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image – Music – Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), pp. 142–48.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 113–38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> For information on General Idea's early literary influences, see AA Bronson, 'Myth as Parasite, Image as Virus: General Idea's Bookshelf, 1967–1975', in *The Search for the Spirit*, ed. Bayer and Ritchie, pp. 17–20. See also General Idea, interview by Louise Dompierre, 26 July 1991, transcript, General Idea Collection, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa, Canada, pp. 12–14. Dompierre's interview was conducted as preparation for a catalogue essay. See Louise Dompierre, 'Towards the "Fin de Siècle"', in *Fin de Siècle*, ed. by General Idea (Stuttgart: Württembergischer Kunstverein, 1992), pp. 53–62.

<sup>10</sup> In the final line of his essay, Barthes writes of the necessity to 'overthrow the myth' of the author. See Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 148.

<sup>11</sup> Tims/Bronson had previously met both Gabe/Partz and Saia-Levi/Zontal, though only briefly. See Fern Bayer, 'Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects, 1968–1975', in *The Search for the Spirit*, ed. Bayer and Ritchie, pp. 25–26.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Bayer, 'Uncovering', pp. 39–41; Dompierre, 'Towards the "Fin de Siècle"', p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Bronson quoted in Bayer, 'The Search for the Spirit', p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Bayer, 'Uncovering', pp. 49–54. Correspondence Art may also be referred to as Mail Art, Postal Art, Post Art, Art-mail and Postcard Art, to name a few. See John Held, Jr., 'Networking: The Origin of Terminology', in *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, ed. by Chuck Welch (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995), pp. 117–23 (p. 20).

<sup>16</sup> These dates are inferred from Bayer's research and the dates of a project entitled *Dear Victor/Dear General* (1971–1972). See Bayer, 'Uncovering', p. 54. See also General Idea, *Dear Victor/Dear General*, General Idea Collection, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa, Canada.

<sup>17</sup> Bayer, 'Uncovering', p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> Dompierre, 'Towards the "Fin de Siècle"', p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* See also Bayer, 'Uncovering', pp. 52–54, and General Idea, *Dear Victor/Dear General*.

<sup>20</sup> Another letter in the *Dear Victor/Dear General* series is signed 'ART SIGNS'. The file also includes a 'Dear Sam' letter to landscape architect, artist and curator Sam Carter, suggesting that he was also involved in this project. See General Idea, *Dear Victor/Dear General*.

<sup>21</sup> As the name suggests, Conceptual Art privileged art's conceptual labour, challenging the physicality of Abstract Expressionism. Thus values traditionally associated with works of art, such as the use of precious materials or the reverence for the 'completed' art object, held less significance. Instead, some Conceptual artists generated theoretical or ephemeral projects or documentation of existing or theoretical works. For this reason, projects' loss or displacement was common or deliberate. In the case of Correspondence Art specifically, the unpredictability of international postal processing and distribution likely led to further opportunities for loss.

<sup>22</sup> General Idea, *Dear Victor/Dear General*.

<sup>23</sup> General Idea, *Dear Victor/Dear General*.

<sup>24</sup> In this assessment, the process of 'conceptual collaging' or 'identity collaging' appropriates the process and appearance of much Mail and Correspondence Art, which is often characterized by a 'cut-and-paste' collaged aesthetic.

<sup>25</sup> During the General's tenure, General Idea fabricated and used a rubber stamp reading 'We're only following orders.' Bronson stated that, 'for a while [...] when people asked why we did things, we could just say that [the] General told us to.' See Dompierre, 'Towards the "Fin de Siècle"', p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> For example, Zontal also corresponded under the pen name 'Lana Banal'. See Dompierre, 'Towards the "Fin de Siècle"', pp. 2–3.

<sup>27</sup> Bayer, 'Uncovering', p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> These imagined projects remained theoretical, never actually coming to fruition. See Dompierre, 'Towards the "Fin de Siècle"', pp. 14–15.

<sup>29</sup> Bayer, 'Uncovering', p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Bronson adds that Gabe had 'this idea that Felix was an international name. Partz has some kind of sexual connotation, I'm not really sure what it is.' Quoted in Nik Sheehan, 'The Infectious Glamour of General Idea', *Xtra!*, 277 (1995), 28.

<sup>31</sup> See Bayer, 'The Search for the Spirit', p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> See Dompierre, 'Towards the "Fin de Siècle"', p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 4–5.

<sup>35</sup> Partz likened this to media coverage of rock bands that often favour the lead vocalist. See Dompierre, 'Towards the "Fin de Siècle"', p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 4–5.

<sup>37</sup> In 1976, the Time-Life Corporation ordered General Idea to cease and desist the publication of *FILE* and award monetary damages for 'profiting from the use of their copyrighted logo and front-page layout'. For details of the lawsuit, see Noë Goldwasser, 'Time-Life Files a Suit', *The Village Voice* (15 March 1976).

<sup>38</sup> John Held, Jr., 'Networking: The Origin of Terminology', in *Eternal Network*, ed. Welch, pp. 20–1. Filliou's elaboration on, and adaptation of, the 'Eternal Network' concept derived from a concept he established with fellow Fluxus artist George Brecht in 1965.

<sup>39</sup> Artist Ed Varney corroborated this view. See Ed Varney, 'The View from Canadada, 1968–1972', in *Eternal Network*, ed. Welch, pp. 41–45 (p. 44). In the first five years of publication, when General Idea's investment in Correspondence Art was at its peak, *FILE* included directories of artists active in Mail Art exchange. The magazine also published artists' requests for found imagery, generated by Image Bank, a Vancouver-based image archive established by artists Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov. See Chuck Welch, 'Corresponding Worlds: Debate and Dialogue', in *Eternal Network*, ed. Welch, pp. 187–96. See also Anna Banana, 'Vile History', in *ibid.*, pp. 46–53 (pp. 47–48).

<sup>40</sup> Peggy Phelan argues that Warhol's performative neutrality intended to highlight the degree to which the 'iterative, collective constative speech act' was linked to an American commodification of

'[an] individual artist's performances' while overlooking more pervasive aspects of collective performativity. See Peggy Phelan, 'Performances of Death in America', in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, ed. by Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 208–19 (p. 216). Staniszewski quoted in Robert Collison, 'Party of Three', *Saturday Night* (September 1995), p. 90. General Idea cited Warhol's influence. See Dompierre, 'Towards the "Fin de Siècle"', p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> General Idea, 'Glamour', *FILE Magazine*, 1 (1975), 21. Christina Ritchie argues that 'Warhol's Factory scene, with its emphasis on glamour, sexual role-playing and mimicry of media and commercial strategies, has a powerful impact on the methods and strategies that General Idea would eventually develop. The much-quoted 'Glamour' text from *FILE* could be viewed as a parodic incantation of all the features of the Factory that they desired for themselves.' See Christina Ritchie, 'Allusions, Omissions, Cover-ups: The Early Days', in *The Search for the Spirit*, ed. Bayer and Ritchie, pp. 13–16 (p. 15).

<sup>42</sup> Judith Butler cites a similar strategy when discussing gender performativity and drag, which invoke exaggerated gestures in order to blend mimicry and political protest. See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 230–36.

<sup>43</sup> General Idea, 'Glamour', p. 32.

<sup>44</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), p. 143.

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

<sup>46</sup> *What Happened* was based on Gertrude Stein's first play. For details of the performance, see Bayer, 'The Search for the Spirit', p. 46. For Partz's description of the event, see Dompierre, 'Towards the "Fin de Siècle"', pp. 13–14.

<sup>47</sup> For the contents of the entry kits, see the Projects Series, notations, General Idea Collection, Art Metropole Collection, Library and Archives, National Gallery of Canada.

<sup>48</sup> Prior to the 'Grand Awards Ceremony', the submissions were displayed as part of *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant Documentation* at A Space gallery in Toronto. See the Projects Series, General Idea Collection. Bronson has referred to the Pageant as the 'first real General Idea project', and Partz, likewise, considers all previous projects 'rehearsals' for the Pageant. See Dompierre, 'Towards the "Fin de Siècle"', p. 19.

<sup>49</sup> Bayer, 'Uncovering', p. 65.

<sup>50</sup> For a detailed account of the performance, see Bayer, 'Uncovering', pp. 65–75.

<sup>51</sup> Dompierre, 'Towards the "Fin de Siècle"', p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>53</sup> This took the form of a Correspondence Art project, for which General Idea received few proposals. One submission was instrumental in General Idea's final design for the staircase, however. See Bayer, 'Uncovering', pp. 94–95, 110. Although Miss General Idea 1984 would eventually ascend the staircase, the project nevertheless invokes Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*.

<sup>54</sup> Dompierre, 'Towards the "Fin de Siècle"', p. 20.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

<sup>56</sup> Bayer, 'Uncovering', p. 114.

<sup>57</sup> General Idea, 'Three Heads are Better', *FILE Magazine*, 1 (1978), p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *Mythologies*, trans. Lavers, p. 135.