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Tiina Itkonen, *Siku 2*, 2007, pigment print, 40 x 60 cm, edition of 7. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Taik Persons, Berlin

See more of Tiina Itkonen's Arctic landscapes beginning on page 36.

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The Eye of the (Be)holder: Collaboration, Reciprocity, and Performance in AA Bronson's Parting (Self-)Portrait of General Idea

Deborah Barkun

In 1969, Canadian artists Felix Partz (b. Ron Gabe), Jorge Zontal (b. Slobodan Saia-Levi), and AA Bronson (b. Michael Tims) formed General Idea (1969–94), a multimedia art collective with roots in the Conceptual Art movement (Figure 1). General Idea's formation was less deliberate than organic, a process evoked by the biological metaphors the group later used to characterize the nature of its collaboration, its conceptual underpinnings, and the dissemination of its work. In its first two decades, General Idea's explorations in writing, Correspondence Art, performance, installation, and publication—including the influential *FILE Magazine*, a parody of the iconic *LIFE Magazine* (Figure 2)—were dominated by an extensive conceptual narrative beholden to the group's fictional muse, Miss General Idea, and her inspirational Spirit. In a series of multimedia works, including *The Miss General Idea Pageant*, *The Miss General Idea Pavillion* (Miss General Idea's theoretical home), and the *Pavillion's* ultimate destruction and excavation, the group deftly and playfully parodied and critiqued the art world and mass media (Figures 3–5). The advent of AIDS led to General Idea's internationally realized *AIDS Project* (Figures 6–8), an appropriation of Robert Indiana's *LOVE*. General Idea's re-inscription of the icon into public space “infected” diverse media and modes of dissemination to eventually become a self-generating dynamic force. Through these expansive projects, General Idea devised and cemented a complex collective identity that sustained the group until the deaths of Zontal and Partz from AIDS-related causes in 1994. Bronson, who remained HIV-negative, currently lives and works in Berlin. General Idea's twenty-five-year professional- and life-partnership challenged conventional understandings of artistic personality and production, as well as prevailing attitudes about sexuality and committed partnership.¹



Figure 1. Rodney Werden, *Portrait of General Idea*, 1974, gelatin silver print, 39.8 x 50.2 cm. From *Portrait* series. © Rodney Werden. Courtesy of the artist and Rhonda Abrams

Infused with a sense of levity and play, General Idea's early works reveal the degree to which members of the visual arts community, alongside literary and cultural critics, rigorously engaged with and interrogated the vexed terrain of authorial subjectivity during the 1980s and 1990s. I have elsewhere theorized social dynamics of General Idea's collaboration and authorship to argue for an understanding of the group as a singular artist, as opposed to a collection of individuals.² Here, I expand this analysis to examine the effects of General Idea's collective identity on the production of three late works—*Jorge*, February 3, 1994; *AA Bronson*, August 22, 2000; and *Felix*, June 5, 1994 (Figures

9–11)—which uneasily occupy borderlines between portraiture and self-portraiture, photography and performance, and life and death. In these haunting images, the actors—Zontal, Partz, and Bronson—rely on the camera to mediate these shifting states and the resulting photographs to convey a desired narrative. To effectively demonstrate photography’s crucial role in this process, I begin with a discussion of General Idea’s collective identity and the intrusion that HIV/AIDS posed to its coherence. From this foundation, I argue that, in the staging of these final photographs, the camera serves as a prosthetic eye that sees even when the actors cannot, thereby facilitating a fleeting unity through reciprocal dynamics of vision and sightlessness, resulting in a moving, yet ultimately futile, attempt to preserve collaboration beyond its mortal limits.

General Idea explored the terrain of identity construction and promotion through a career-long practice of self-portraiture. Images such as *P is for Poodle*, *Baby Makes 3*, and *Playing Doctor* (Figures 12–14) portray the artist as a composite figure and confront viewers with self-consciously constructed and performed identities. *Playing Doctor* depicts General Idea in medical guise. The identical white lab coats visually fuse with one another, suggesting a single body with three heads. Initially, it appears as though the group listens to one another’s heartbeats through red, blue, and green stethoscopes. The stethoscopes link the group, forming a closed circuit, in which the plastic tubing suggests the inter-connective vessels of a single organism monitoring a collective heartbeat. The inclusion of only three hands extends the illusion of a unique being with three heads and three arms. The title’s implication of sexual experimentation—“playing doctor”—further this notion by suggesting the capacity to self-satisfy. Despite the intensity of physical and collective commitment that the image evokes, pharmaceuticals hovering above signal the physical and experiential distinctions that HIV/AIDS introduced into the group, finally fragmenting it beyond mortal intention and control.

Collectively, General Idea confronted the myriad challenges wrought by the virus and its opportunistic infections. As Zontal and Partz struggled against the tangible effects of HIV on the physical body, Bronson assumed a pivotal role that progressively integrated caretaker, business manager, and mourner. Zontal and Partz worked tirelessly until the end of their lives and openly discussed their impending deaths and the impact this would ultimately have on the futures of General Idea and Bronson. Securing its estate necessitated the separation of the personal



Above: Figure 2. General Idea, FILE Magazine, “Glamour Issue”: 3:3 (Autumn 1975), Art Official Inc., Toronto. © General Idea

Below: Figure 3. General Idea, Master of Ceremonies AA Bronson Introduces the Three Finalists: Margaret Coleman, Tina Miller, and Marcel Dot, The Miss General Idea Pageant, 1971, silver gelatin print. © General Idea



Figure 4. *General Idea*, Ruins from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion, 1977. site-specific installation and performance, rubble, chalk, and other elements, approx. 91.4 x 39.01 meters, installation view, Kingston, Canada. © General Idea

and professional, as well as the acknowledgement of intrinsic boundaries that it had worked so arduously to complicate. The group agreed that the majority of its work was to be housed in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, and everything related to General Idea's artistic career would remain under Bronson's control.³ Originally, General Idea concluded that all artistic activity would cease with the death of the first member. However, as that moment drew closer, the group modified this position, deciding that General Idea would continue to function until both Zontal and Partz died: until there was no longer a "group." Eventually, this view, too, softened, and it was decided that Bronson could work indefinitely under the General Idea rubric, if he so desired. However, in accordance with General Idea's collaborative philosophy, such a possibility was ultimately unthinkable to Bronson.⁴

In General Idea's lexicon, vocabulary for the individual member did not exist, making issues of identity and loss especially fraught as HIV/AIDS effected ever-greater differentiation within the group. The physical and conceptual waning of General Idea is documented in the photographs *Jorge, February 3, 1994* (Figure 9), part of a triptych by the same name, *Felix, June 5, 1994* (Figure 11), and *AA Bronson, August 22, 2000* (Figure 10), which are catalogued as discrete works and credited to Bronson. Nevertheless, I read these works as a suite that constitutes a distinct effort to perpetuate General Idea's collaboration, even in the face of mortal finitude. These portraits are not the work of an intact collective. They represent discrete collaborations between Bronson and Zontal, Partz, and artist Arne Svenson, respectively. Accordingly, the typical triadic formation of General Idea's earlier self-portraits gives way to altered composi-

tions that represent the group's changing configuration. As in conventional portraiture, each photograph in this series isolates a single figure within an environment. Yet, General Idea's composite identity problematizes the straightforward categorization of the images as portraits of individuals. Rather, each image portrays one-third of the artist. Regardless of who is pictured, the images in this series are as much marked by absence as by presence: absence emerges as a Barthesian *punctum*, that is, a photographic detail that "pricks" or moves the viewer. By presenting, visually or conceptually, subjects who exist in the liminal spaces between singular and plural identities, life and death, sighted and sightless, these photographs depict the physical and collaborative decline of the artist called General Idea.

Bronson produced the sequence of photographs, entitled *Jorge, February 3, 1994*, at Zontal's behest, in the week before his death (Figure 9). In the sepia images, the nostalgic tone of which evokes time past, Zontal stands in the living room of General Idea's Toronto penthouse, flanked by windows. In his emaciated state, his limbs are nearly equal in circumference to the spindle of the lamp against which he steadies himself. To one side, his vacant wheelchair sits expectantly, while a catheter dangles from his chest. Despite his medical augmentation and frail appearance, Zontal's stance is remarkably casual and dignified. The informality with which he rests his arm on his hip and the determined tilt of his head detract from the uneasy alignment of his lower body. Foremost, it is Zontal's concentrated gaze that affords a sense of intense focus and conceals the fact of his blindness.

In order to attain a convincing illusion of sightedness, Zontal asked Bronson to "act as his mirror," to appropriately direct his gaze and the angle and aperture of his eyes so that he might "look 'normal.'" "Should my eyes be like this?" [Jorge] asked. 'A little more open,' [Bronson] replied, 'No, not quite that much.'⁵ In essence, Bronson is asked to "see" for his partner. Not only did Zontal require Bronson to guide his posture and movement in a way that provided for his physical safety, he also expected him to act as his aesthetic lens in order to produce a passable likeness. Presumably, it was paramount to Zontal that the resulting images disguise his blindness: that they endow his eyes with the illusion of vision. As his state of undress attests, he was not averse to showing physical vulnerability. Yet, his unwillingness to exhibit blindness suggests a privileging of vision and the visual, as befits a visual artist. By participating in the staging and production of this photograph, Bronson symbolically empowers Zontal through an act of associative vision. At the



Figure 5. *General Idea, Three Graces* (Mural Fragment from the Villa Dei Misteri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion), 1982, latex enamel on wood, 279.5 x 249 cm. Collection Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund. © General Idea

same time, in the instant Bronson takes the picture, the camera's shutter closes, temporarily rendering him "blind." Thus, as Bronson bestows Zontal with symbolic sight, he deprives himself of vision. In so doing, Bronson approximates a reciprocal act: he performs blindness as Zontal performs sight. The collaborative nature of this exchange, and indeed Bronson's presence, is recorded in the distant mirror, which reflects the flash of light marking the instant that both men are technically sightless. Four months after Zontal's death, Bronson made a postmortem photographic portrait of Partz, entitled *Felix, June 5, 1994*, within hours of his death (Figure 11). Like the carefully choreographed images of Zontal, the tableau betrays attentive composition intended to highlight Partz's vibrant personality. The optically mesmerizing field of vivid color, pattern, and ornament, suggestive of Gustav Klimt's paintings of the Vienna Secession, initially deflects from the severity of the image. Propped against a bank of pillows and surrounded by his cigarettes, tape recorder, and television remote control, Partz appears to meet the camera's gaze with his own, paradoxically emotive and remote. Yet, his gaunt face and tense grin betray, suddenly and graphically, his condition. Since Partz's extreme weight loss made the



closure of his eyes impossible following his death, he appears to stare, blankly and disturbingly, into space.⁶ Here, the intense visual spectacle simultaneously emphasizes and compensates for Partz's unseeing eyes. The black and white labyrinthine rings of Partz's shirt and the circular-print of the sheets, like hundreds of unblinking eyes, reinforce the deathly stillness of his gaze.

Here too, Bronson's photographic act serves both a symbolic and a symbiotic purpose. The spark in Partz's lifeless eyes reveals not a look of recognition, as one might initially suppose, but inertly reflects only the flash of Bronson's camera. Bronson's trace marks the photograph in much the same way as the flash in the mirror in his portrait of Zontal.

Likewise, as Bronson depresses the shutter release, its closure simulates the blinking of an eyelid, symbolically closing Partz's eyes. Again, at this instant, Bronson deprives himself of vision, momentarily appropriating Partz's sightlessness as a means of sharing in his partner's bodily experience. While Bronson's previous act of photography led to the symbolic extension of his own visual acuity to the blind Zontal, in this case, he uses the camera as a prosthetic eye to extend to Partz the facility to close his lifeless eyes, that is, to rest in peace. Bronson's eyes, the lens, and the shutter become surrogates for the sightless eyes of Zontal and



Partz. Photography becomes the means by which Bronson optically empowers his partners while simultaneously depriving himself of sight in a futile attempt to sustain their collaborative unity.⁷

In the final work in the series, Bronson remains committed to preserving General Idea's conceptual unity, but his representational approach has changed. *AA Bronson, August 22, 2000*, depicts the artist prone, nude, and passive, his eyes shut (Figure 10). Lying against a black background and diffusely illuminated, Bronson's figure casts no shadow that might locate him in a rational space. Instead, the artist floats in darkness, emerging as a presence engulfed by stillness. This illusion of expansive space abruptly ends, however. Bronson has enclosed his image in a horizontal, black, coffin-like box. By creating this encased self-portrait with closed eyes, Bronson identifies with Zontal and Partz, joining them in sightlessness, and in performing his own symbolic death. Having spent years surrounded by illness, death, and grief, and suffering from self-described "survivor's guilt," it is understandable that Bronson would embody his own mortality.⁸ It is significant that he does so through collaborative effort. In this work, Bronson relinquishes the camera to artist Arne Svenson. By transforming himself from photographer into photographic object, Bronson surrenders control of the image-making process to Svenson, as Zontal and Partz had submitted to him years before. Thus, Bronson deprives



Left to right:

Figure 6. General Idea, AIDS, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 183 x 183 cm. Private collection. © General Idea. Courtesy of BFAS Blondeau Fine Art Services, Geneva

Figure 7. General Idea, AIDS (A Project of the Public Art Fund Inc.), 1989, offset on card, 560 x 533 cm. Edition of 4,900, of which 200 are signed and numbered. © General Idea, Published by the Public Art Fund Inc., New York. Poster edition installed in every second car in the New York City subway system.

Figure 8. General Idea, AIDS (Project for Seattle Arts Commission [a.k.a. Image Virus: AIDS Logo]), 1991, intervention, poster, screen print on adhesive-backed vinyl, 61 x 223.5 cm, installed on the advertising panels of 34 metro buses of Seattle, King County Metro Transit, 1–28 August 1991; commissioned for the public art project In Public: Seattle 1991 of the Seattle Arts Commission, Seattle. © General Idea

himself of both physiological and mechanical vision, thereby performing death, in a final gesture of collectivity with Zontal and Partz, and marking the demise of General Idea.

Each of these three images—*Jorge, February 3, 1994*; *Felix, June 5, 1994*; and *AA Bronson, August 22, 2000*—is an arresting portrayal of physical or psychic trauma. When exhibited together, the works have been read as meditations on love, loss, and recovery.⁹ Indeed, each image confronts a distinct facet of mortality. More compelling, the series as a whole perpetuates General Idea's theme of bodily integrity by invoking shared vision as a metaphor for embodied unity. Procedurally, the staging and making of the photographs involved willful or implicit forms of mutual trust and exchange to produce images that conceptually extend Bronson's eyesight to Zontal and Partz in an attempt to perpetuate General Idea's collaborative unity. The reflections of Bronson's flash in the photographs of Zontal and Partz visually mark this effort. The reflected flash signifies the two faces not pictured, yet conceptually present. The endeavors to visually bind the group as in earlier self-portraits, such as *P is for Poodle*, *Baby Makes 3*, and *Playing Doctor*, while venerable, fall short. By depicting photographic subjects who are variously sightless, the photographs reveal the degree to which this unity is inevitably compromised. Bronson's presence behind the camera when photographing Zontal and Partz in *Jorge, February*

3, 1994, and *Felix, June 5, 1994*, evinces the physical, experiential, and mechanical distance that illness engendered. The resulting images feature single figures haunted by absence. As the photographer and image producer, Bronson defies simple categorization. He is simultaneously witness, documentarian, and survivor: his figurative body fractured and his literal body whole. In this series, photography becomes the means by which Bronson shares his visual acuity with his partners and reciprocally experiences their sightlessness, thereby prolonging the existence of General Idea's incorporated body. Here, the vision photography affords becomes a metaphor for mental perception. Considered together, Bronson's practice represents a futile attempt to recuperate and maintain General Idea's collaboration, even in the face of acute loss.

Moreover, as a type of differentiated and mediated vision, photography complicates the encounter between the viewer and the viewed or the sighted and the sightless, by the introduction of a mechanical "eye." Bronson's parting photographs serve as both testaments to a person's one-time presence and as objects about and for contemplation. In Barthes's terms, the photograph captures the absence of the object while simultaneously recording its existence and presence in a particular place: the "photographic referent" serves as evidence of an object's "That-has-been[ness]." In its conversion of the subject to object, the photograph produces



Figure 9. AA Bronson, Jorge, February 3, 1994, 1994/printed 2000, sepia on Mylar, edition of 3. One of three parts, 61 x 223.5 cm each. © AA Bronson

a “micro-version of death,” with which the photographer struggles to attain a lifelike representation. Even when documenting corpses, Barthes argues, photography produces “the living image of a dead thing” by asserting its presence. The photograph’s “immobility” thus results in the “perverse confusion between... the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive.”¹⁰ Bronson’s portrait of the deceased Partz, then, animates him, in the sense that the resulting image testifies that the “corpse is alive, as corpse.” In different ways, each portrait in this series obscures ready distinctions between the “Real” and the “Live” or the living and the dead. However, because General Idea’s composite identity made no allowance for the individual, regardless of the person pictured, the images in this series are marked by absence in ways that exceed Barthes’s formulation. They portray one-third of an artist: absence as *punctum*.¹¹

If in this series, the camera, as prosthetic eye, bestows sight, the vision photography affords becomes a metaphor for insight. While Bronson’s enactment of his own death serves to perpetuate General Idea’s collaboration, it also allows him to embark upon the transition from incorporated to autonomous body. Bill Arning, curator of *Mirror Mirror*, Bronson’s 2002 solo exhibition, has read *AA Bronson, August 22, 2000*, as an image of “entombment,” implying interment or burial, an interpretation that resonates with work’s formal characteristics and the artist’s immediate context. Yet, the conceptual intricacies of General Idea’s work necessitate a more extensive consideration of *AA Bronson, August 22, 2000*. Rather than an entombment, I suggest that the encased portrait represents an intermediate state, in which a self-imposed sightlessness allows Bronson to productively mourn the deaths of Zontal, Partz, and General Idea, by symbolically experiencing his own death. This sensory renunciation inaugurates a period of intense meditation, during which he virtually re-experiences and ruminates on General Idea’s life and loss. His figurative seclusion symbolizes his literal isolation from General Idea’s composite body and from the experiences of illness, sightlessness, and death that Zontal and Partz shared.

The six-year period between Bronson’s portraits of Zontal and Partz, and *AA Bronson, August 22, 2000* constituted an “intermediate region,” the Freudian interlude “between illness and real life through which the transition from one to the other is made.”¹² During this time, convinced of his own imminent death, Bronson processed his anguish over Zontal’s and Partz’s deaths by repeatedly intuiting his own.¹³ In “Remembering, Repeating, and

Working-Through,” Freud theorizes that the subject exhibits a “compulsion to repeat” as a means of uncovering repressed trauma. By asserting this in a “definite field,” such as the production of a self-portrait, the subject begins to integrate the buried memory. Here, the date “August, 22, 2000” refers both to the date that Bronson and Svenson made the photograph and to the date on which Bronson psychically emerged from his six-year symbolic sequestration. As opposed to the obscurity associated with entombment, Bronson portrays a self that is exposed, visible, and vulnerable. Although the box is nearly two feet deep, Bronson’s image hovers just within its shallow lip, beneath a sheet of Plexiglas. It is an image of intense contemplation, an image of denying oneself access to the world, while remaining insistently visible to it. By displaying his vulnerability to others, Bronson reveals it to himself, thereby permitting himself to acclimate to his intense grief and abandonment. Paradoxically, within the sensory void of *AA Bronson, August 22, 2000*, Bronson is able to “see clearly,” that is, to begin processing a shifting identity, no longer defined by Zontal, Partz, or General Idea. By performatively joining Zontal and Partz in death, Bronson affects the demise of the collective and symbolically frees his autonomous body from General Idea’s collaborative bond.

Unlike the portraits of Zontal and Partz, which are displayed vertically on the wall, Bronson situates his own image low to the ground, forcing the viewer’s focus downward. Standing at the foot of the box, one is presented with his or her horizontal reflection in the glass, as if in a darkened mirror. As this likeness merges with Bronson’s, the viewer is invited to consider his or her own mortality or isolation. At the same time, this act of seeing one’s reflection fleetingly fused with Bronson’s transforms the viewer into an unanticipated collaborator. Whereas Svenson’s photographic collaboration assumes control through the possession of the camera, the viewer’s surveillance empowers Bronson through associative vision and reflection. The surface of the Plexiglas mirrors the viewer’s likeness, as well as his or her meditation on Bronson’s state and mortality, more generally. Here, “reflection” operates both literally and figuratively, encouraging a collaborative experience. Bronson’s performance of death and its photographic fixity serve as a curious *memento mori*, which stimulates the viewer’s contemplation of mortality, despite its indefinite relationship to, or “perverse confusion” between, life and death.

For Bronson, the chronology traced in his parting portraits and registered in their titles conveys a narrative of memory, experience,



Figure 10. *AA Bronson, AA Bronson, August 22, 2000, 2000*, ebonized wood, Plexiglas, and silver gelatin print, 201.93 x 71.12 x 49.53 cm. Installation view at Wien Secession, Vienna, Austria. Installation photograph: Margherita Spiluttini. © AA Bronson

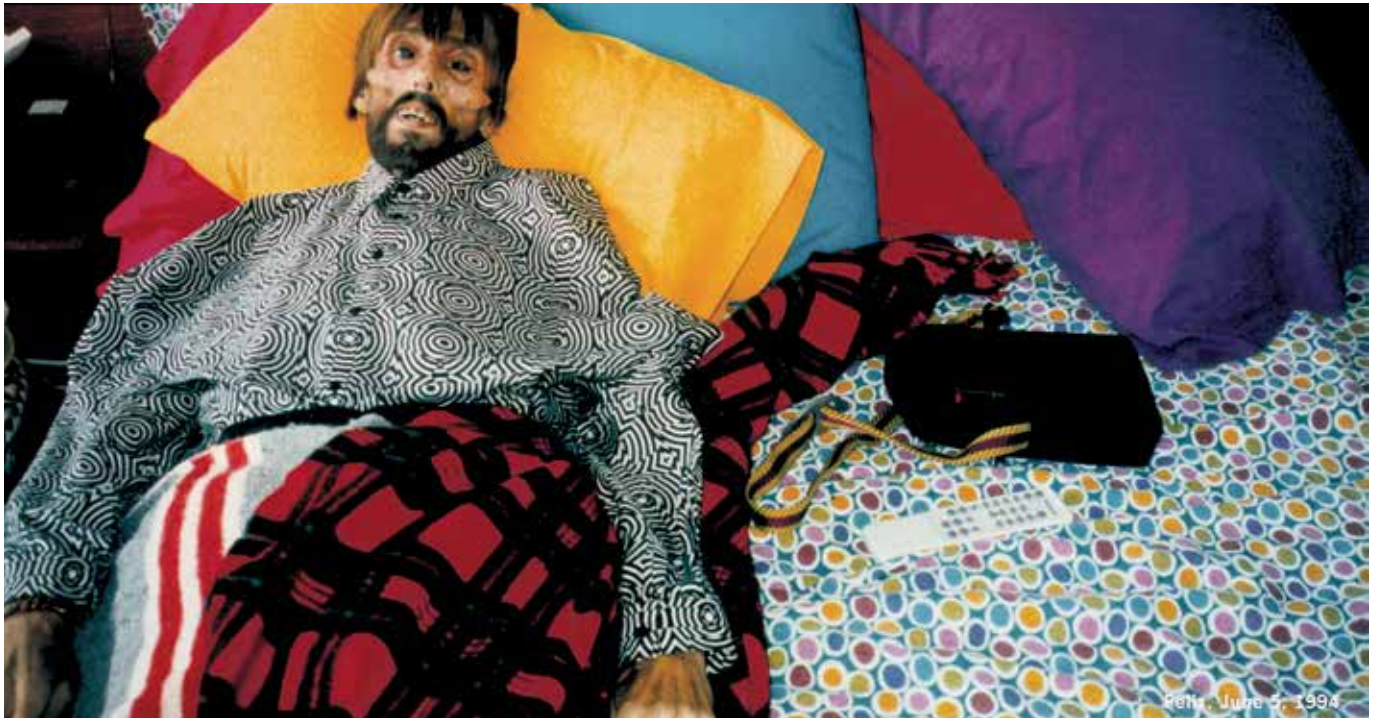


Figure 11. AA Bronson, Felix, June 5, 1994, 1994/printed 1999, lacquer on vinyl, 304.8 x 609.6 cm. © AA Bronson

and reflection. The titles for the works in this series are deceptively straightforward. The chronicling of a name and date serves a documentary function, locating the depicted individual in a particular time and place, the Barthesian “that-has-been.” However, Bronson’s seemingly dispassionate labeling reproduces the predominant method for recording deaths on monuments and memorials. In this respect, then, the titles reflect Bronson’s acceptance of the deaths of Zontal, Partz, and General Idea. Each work represents a discrete aspect of death and progresses from the dying Zontal, to the recently departed Partz, to the ritualistic enactment of Bronson’s death. The titles follow this chronology and mark General Idea’s gradual demise, over a period of six years. By using each man’s personal name, Bronson acknowledges three distinct identities and reveals his successful separation from General Idea’s composite identity. At the same time, however, these are not given or legal names that might typically appear on grave markers or death certificates. Rather, they are chosen names that mark each man’s self-affirmed mature identity, which departs from the identity their birth names confer. In this way, the trio of portraits serves a similar function to the conventional monument or death certificate; they invoke names and dates to declare the literal or figurative

cessation of a life. The group’s insistence on being photographed only together gives way to the public exhibition of related portraits of three lone figures. Unlike its interconnected life, General Idea divides into its constitutive parts in death.

Surmounting General Idea’s group identity required Bronson to establish an individual identity. Of this endeavor, he writes, “Since Jorge and Felix died, I have been struggling to find the limits of my own body as an independent organism, as being outside of General Idea.... I have found myself, much like a stroke victim, learning against the limits of my nervous system, how to function without my extended body (no longer three heads, twelve limbs), how to create possibilities from my reduced physicality.”¹⁴ The public exhibition of these photographs serves as a further opportunity for separation and resolution, beyond that realized through their production. Because Zontal played an active role in the staging of his portrait, the photographic exchange remained in keeping with General Idea’s dominant mode of artistic practice. The factors surrounding Partz’s portrait made such a dialogue impossible. For this reason, Bronson used the occasion of the portrait’s exhibition to attain additional closure with Partz. Along with the photograph,

Bronson included a message that read, "Dear Felix, by the act of exhibiting this image... I declare that we are no longer of one mind, one body. I return you to General Idea's world of mass media, there to function without me."¹⁵ With this declaration, both Bronson and Partz are variously liberated from General Idea's corporeal legacy. Bronson frees himself to resume life as an autonomous being. At the same time, he releases Partz's image to exist as just that, a chemically induced photosensitive trace, free of any lingering personhood with which Bronson may have imbued his representation. By formally sharing these works with a mass audience, Bronson dissolves the bonds that anchored him to General Idea and, secondarily, to his final collaborations with Zontal and Partz.

For Bronson, photography made possible the exploration of his specialized position in General Idea's complex personal and artistic dynamics, and the extension of General Idea's collaboration beyond its mortal life, when such a fiction was imperative for his survival. The camera served numerous functions: a mediating device that enabled Bronson to initially disavow the deaths of Zontal, Partz, and General Idea; a prosthetic eye that symbolically conveyed sight to Zontal and Partz and rendered Bronson literally, if momentarily, sightless, allowing him to perpetuate General Idea's collaboration; and, lastly, endowed him with the insight necessary to construct an individual identity. As he began to process the suffering he had witnessed and the losses he had endured, photography made possible an intermediate stage during which he visualized an independent existence and enabled him to divest from the collective body that had defined his personal and creative life for more than two decades.

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Above: Figure 12. General Idea, P is for Poodle, 1983/printed 1989, lacquer on vinyl, 200 x 160 cm. © General Idea

Below: Figure 13. General Idea, Baby Makes 3, 1984/printed 1989, chromogenic print, 76.2 x 63.5 cm. © General Idea, Collection fonds national d'art contemporain (CNAP), ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Paris-La Défense

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1. I refer to *General Idea* as a single artist—with singular, rather than plural, pronouns—to emphasize the degree to which the group developed a collaborative identity that eclipsed its individual members. For a more extensive engagement with this argument, see Deborah Barkun, “A ‘Personal’ Pandemic: *General Idea*’s Collaborative Body as a Response to HIV/AIDS,” *Historical Society of Western Art Journal* (Seoul, South Korea: Sae-ro-moon-hwa, 2011), 239–72.

2. For more on *General Idea*’s approach to building a collective identity, see Deborah Barkun, “The Artist as a Work-in-Progress: *General Idea* and the Construction of Collective Identity,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 453–67.

3. See Veronica Cusack, “Nothing Sacred,” *Toronto Life* (1997): 87, and Gary Indiana, “From LOVE to AIDS: The Death & Life of *General Idea*,” *The Village Voice* (December 3, 1995): 31–34.

4. Indiana, “From LOVE to AIDS,” 33.

5. AA Bronson, *Mirror Mirror* (Cambridge: MIT List Visual Art Center, 2002), 54.

6. *Ibid.*, 46.

7. While profoundly disconcerting, *Felix*, June 5, 1994, belongs to a lengthy tradition of post-mortem portraiture. Cultural anthropologist Jay Ruby traces the history of post-mortem portraiture in the United States in his study *Secure the Shadow*. See Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

8. Bronson describes his post-*General Idea* emotional state in several poignant articles and interviews. For the most insightful, see Robert Collison, “Party of Three,” *Saturday Night* (September 1995): 85.

9. See Bill Arning, “AA Bronson’s *Mirror Mirror*,” *Mirror Mirror* (Cambridge: MIT List Visual Art Center, 2002).

10. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1981), 14–15, 77–79, 115.

11. It should be noted that, for Barthes, an image’s *punctum* is a subjective quality. In other words, it varies from one viewer to the next. Therefore, no conflict exists in locating more than one *punctum* in the same image.

12. Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,” *The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique, and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press), 154.

13. AA Bronson, *Negative Thoughts* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001), 50.

14. Bronson, *Mirror Mirror*, 46.

15. *Ibid.*



Figure 14. *General Idea*, *Playing Doctor*, 1992, chromogenic print, 76.2 x 55.3 cm. Self-published, edition of 12 plus 3 APs and 1 H/C, signed and numbered. © *General Idea*, Collection *General Idea*, Toronto/New York