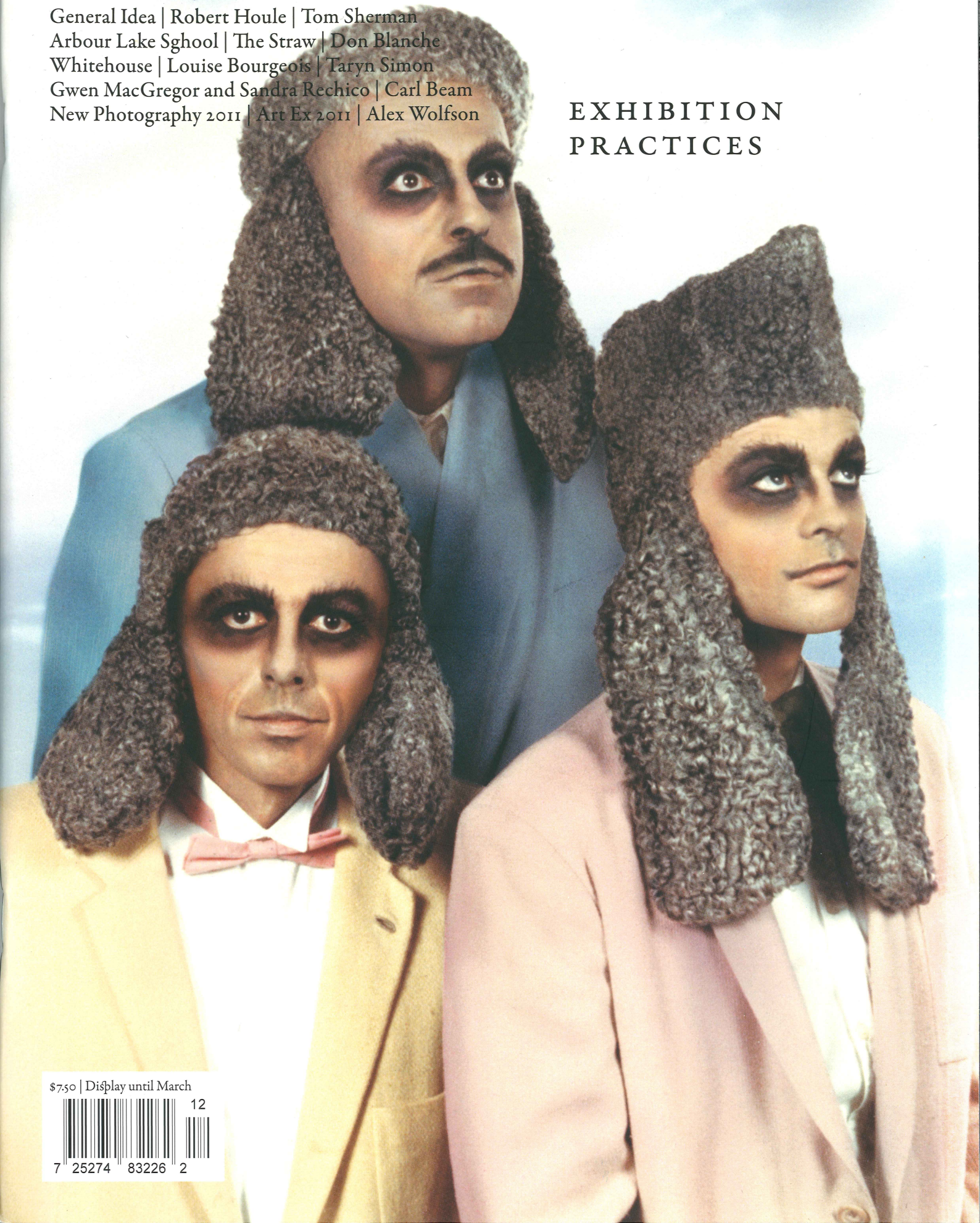


# cmagazine **112**

*International Contemporary Art  
Winter 2011*

General Idea | Robert Houle | Tom Sherman  
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## SOME LIKE IT HAUTE

Haute Culture: General Idea,  
a Retrospective, 1969–1994,  
at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

July 30, 2011 – January 1, 2012

by Philip Monk



Curating a retrospective of General Idea is a daunting task. Twenty-five years of a collective—which makes seventy-five man-years—is potentially a lot of work. It's not only the amount of work, it's the complexity of General Idea's vision—let's call it a system. How does a curator make sense of it all? Especially when the artists' practices and products were so diverse? For artists who structured their work through a retrospective futurity, chronological sequence makes no sense. Hence, the retrospective *look back*—and the continuities it presupposes—is problematic. Maybe it is best to mirror their system somehow in the installation. But how might this be made evident when the mirror itself was part of the performative, constitutive illusionism of General Idea's work? Can the artists' underlying system ever be made visible when the mirror was a collage of seamless similarities but also a disruptive cut? A problem indeed!

A "retrospective," however, is what we are given at the Art Gallery of Ontario. We shall have to investigate to what degree the curator avoids this marketing device of institutional art history to which the art gallery is subject and, at the same time, to what degree he reveals the artists' program, which is more complex than its institutional containment.

Let me say right away that I think General Idea has produced a brilliant body of work. Equally, I think that French guest curator Frédéric Bonnet has used the spaces of the AGO brilliantly; the exhibition is beautiful. This was not the case in Paris where the exhibition premiered at ARC/Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris earlier this year, and where the galleries seemed to conspire against the work. In Paris, the work looked its age; at the AGO, it is revitalized. (The exhibition has been augmented substantially for Toronto.)<sup>1</sup> The contemporary galleries at the AGO are equally challenging, but Bonnet has used this to his advantage in interpreting General Idea's career. Still, the AGO installation visualizes an earlier curatorial decision: to treat the artists' work thematically rather than chronologically. Hence, there are five themes to this immense exhibition: "the artist, glamour and the creative process;" "mass culture;" "architects/archaeologists;" "sex and reality;" and "AIDS." Fair enough, they adequately cover the territory. Yet, to proceed thematically is only to serve the purposes of continuity by other means. You might not expect so on the surface... or on plan. Yet it is the exhibition plan where the installation is masterful.

Consider the plan, then, which is the

bird's eye view we don't usually have of an exhibition. This view is necessary given that we are dealing here with an interlocking structure—let's call it architectural. Bonnet's skill is apparent in the deft manner he has constructed the exhibition, using the AGO galleries "as is," with nary a false wall (one only, I was able to determine). On both floors of the exhibition, two large thematic galleries symmetrically flank an inner core of smaller rooms, which serve various functions. And that core is then riven by a series of rooms of AZT and AIDS works. The latter signal their exceptional status, while also revealing an overall installation strategy, because it soon becomes apparent that the AIDS works are not given a thematic precinct or pavillion of their own but are actually spread throughout the exhibition, sometimes in rooms of their own or on odd, abutting wallpapered walls. You have to admit that the AIDS installations are stunning—General Idea at their best: design-oriented, installation-based, with a complex intertext referring to other iconic artists (for instance, the AGO's own 1988–90 AIDS installation of Indiana-derived paintings hung on wallpaper *à la* Warhol, or the 1994 *Infe©ted Mondrian* paintings and *Infe©ted Rietveld* chair installation set against a huge wall of red, green and blue AIDS wallpaper). This principle of *dispersion* operates, one might speculate, almost as a spatial analogy of an invading and replicating virus, the virus of course being a concept borrowed from William Burroughs that was so generative of General Idea's early and then late work. (At one go, both the AGO and *haute*

*culture* are thus invaded.) Likewise, group portraits of the artists, posing as doctors, academics, poodles, and, by analogy, baby seals, are similarly spread throughout the exhibition.

General Idea saw the architecture of their *Pavillion* as decentralized—that is, as occupying various media (including principally language, the *Pavillion* being erected in a speech act) and inhabiting (i.e., infecting) other institutions on an ad hoc basis, as at the AGO. Here, three stages of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* from the late 60s to the mid-80s are gathered together in one gallery under the "architects/archaeologists" theme. The ziggurat motif that repeats throughout can be seen as a model for the exhibition's layout: a guiding pattern for an interlocking arrangement of dispersed elements that compose a whole. (Another model is the jigsaw inscription of the *Hoarding*.) The fractal nature of this design, where the whole is replicated in each part (virally, that is), unites the dispersed elements into one overall program—let's call it mythic.

Myth was the unifying principle of General Idea's early work, and the *Pavillion* was a mythic structure. Therefore it is problematic when the *whole* is considered thematically to be a *part*, equivalent to other themes in the exhibition. This particular room amalgamates three stages of the *Pavillion* into one continuous architectural construction, disavowing what divides them: destruction. In 1977, the *Pavillion* burned down. Picking up the pieces later in the 1980s as archaeologists does not revive the system through its fragments; the fragment is not a fractal. There is a major difference between the *Pavillion* as an architectural construct and as an archaeological heap: even if rooms continued to be added to what was already ruined (for example, *Colour Bar Lounge* and *The Boutique*), the overall framework of the system no longer existed. The poodle fragments thus responded not to any pre-existent system but to external demands exerted by the market in its 1980s "re-materialization of the art object," as a *FILE* editorial expressed it. General Idea not only "destroyed" the *Pavillion*, during 1977–78 they made a conscious decision to deny the very system it articulated—albeit this act might be recognized only by close readers of their project. Nonetheless, destruction is a lacuna within the exhibition, which this architectural continuity glosses over (even though the 1982 video *Cornucopia* addresses it

General Idea, *Fin de siècle*, 1994, chromogenic print (Ektachrome), 79cm x 55.7cm, edition of 12 plus 3 A/Ps  
PHOTO COURTESY OF AA BRONSON,  
NEW YORK/TORONTO



Installation view from Haute Culture: General Idea, A Retrospective, 1969-1994, at the Art Gallery of Ontario, with AIDS, 1987 (silkscreen wallpaper), and AIDS, 1988 (acrylic on canvas). PHOTO: DEAN TOMLINSON; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF GENERAL IDEA; © ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO





Installation view from Haute Culture: General Idea, A Retrospective, 1969-1994, at the Art Gallery of Ontario, with (foreground to background), *Infe@ted Rietveld*, 1994, *Infe@ted Mondrian*, 1994 (five paintings), and *AIDS*, 1987. PHOTO: DEAN TOMLINSON; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF GENERAL IDEA; © ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

with the pseudo-archaeological authority of an Erich von Däniken television special in which the narrator states, “ruins are created as quickly as rooms are built”). The important 1977 installation *Reconstructing Futures*, which displays the principle ruins of the *Pavillion*’s destruction, is absent. All the same, we always have to be aware that destruction was integral to General Idea’s work from the start. And reversibility was essential to its mythic system; indeed, reversibility ensured it was a formal system.

Roland Barthes, such an influence on General Idea at times, wrote that the “repetition of the concept through different forms is precious to the mythologist: it allows him to decipher the myth.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps he was speaking here to the viewer trying to make sense of General



Idea’s vast production, but he was speaking for the artists when he wrote that, “it is by the regular return of the units and of the association of units that the work appears constructed, i.e., endowed with meaning.”<sup>3</sup> The structure of myth thus appears all at once, even though its content is elaborated over time. Such was the case with General Idea’s *constructed* system: it was articulated over time—through diverse material practices and various image-text relations—by means of repetition, accumulation, and, sometimes, contradiction. One would think that a *retrospective* should have been able to make this system apparent in its *own* construction of meaning, a meaning manifest in this collection of art works. But maybe it’s not the curator’s fault. In work all about presentation, as General Idea’s was, the system itself perhaps cannot be shown.

Yet, the nature of General Idea’s project somehow should be articulated, and appropriately at the beginning of its exhibition. Here, however, instead of being ushered into their fictionalizing complex, we are thrown pell-mell into a mini-retrospective of works from 1971 to 1989, which encircle the exhibition’s first room, dealing with “the artist, glamour and the creative process.” Without the larger picture, it’s hard to know what other viewers thought was going on; initially, I too was confused!

In spite of the exhibition’s strategies of dispersion, and in spite of the architectural fragmentation of its plan, continuity sneaks in through the thematic back door. As a strategy, discontinuity makes sense for holding together such an eclectic body of work, art that by its nature is heterogeneous. (“We began to realize as we began to realize in fragments,” reads one of General Idea’s early texts.) Problematically, however, discontinuity cannot deal with ruptures within the works’ development because of the retrospective character of any thematic presentation where everything links smoothly together, as seen here with the architectural project of the *Pavillion*. So the internal and external crises that deviated General Idea’s twenty-five years of work are papered over. Similarly, the retrospective approach tends to read continuity backwards. Take the many triadic self-portraits: *three* was not always the ruling number within their enterprise. Until 1975, their whole system, and the *Pavillion* too, was engendered by the mythmaking collage cut-up: a mirror interruption where *one* became *two*, and instituted the borderline (event) on which the *Pavillion* stood. The borderline concept engendered the

system as well as its crises. (This is just one more retrospective “cover-up” that cannot be revealed by this exhibition’s methodology, despite the presentation’s otherwise success.) But perhaps this is a problem specific to the complexity of General Idea’s enterprise, which in part was articulated through their publication *FILE Magazine*. (In the exhibition, an understanding of their system would require the close reading of the 103 *Showcards* on display.)

In any General Idea exhibition, the static, emblematic status of their artworks conspires against a “system of signs in motion.” How can one bring the concept of cut-up collage to an exhibition that is already fragmented? Not only an agent of change-up, cut-up was multivalency itself. Cut-up, as in “cut up or shut up”—the slogan of the correspondence movement in which General Idea originated—was also the language of laughter. Break open the vitrines to release the *FILES* for all to read. “Cut word lines, shift linguals, storm the Reality Studio,” as *FILE* relayed William Burroughs’ subversive message. Turn up the volume. Let loose Jorge’s stuttering mock rage from another of General Idea’s brilliant and savage videos, *Shut the Fuck Up* (1985). Let laughter ring through the exhibition. x

→ Philip Monk is Director of the Art Gallery of York University. His book *Glamour is Theft: A User’s Guide to General Idea 1969–1978, written as if in the 1970s and by Roland Barthes, is forthcoming.*

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Disclosure: For thirty years, I have had an ambivalent *critical* relation to General Idea (see “Editorials,” *Parachute* 33 [Winter 1983], reprinted in my *Struggles with the Image*) but a positive *curatorial* association: I installed their 1985 retrospective at the AGO and formed the basis of their collection of 447 works there; in 2009, I curated *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* at the Art Gallery of York University, which precisely recreated two of General Idea’s exhibitions at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, from 1975 (*Going thru the Notions*) and 1977 (*Reconstructing Futures*).
- 2 Roland Barthes, “Myth Today,” in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 120.
- 3 Roland Barthes, “The Structuralist Activity,” in *Critical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 217.

Installation view from Haute Culture: General Idea, A Retrospective, 1969–1994, at the Art Gallery of Ontario  
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