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Philip Monk

Battle Stances

General Idea, CEAC, and the Struggle for Ideological Dominance in Toronto, 1976–78

Everyone knows the story of CEAC, of how it crashed and burned. It's been told thoroughly before, significantly by Dot Tuer in her monumental, archival research article, "The CEAC Was Banned in Canada," published in *C Magazine* in 1986. It's the story of how an ambitious, tightly controlled, and guarded artist-run centre amassed its own building, declared a radical political program, and advocated kneecapping, Red Brigade style, before it lost its council funding and closed down in 1978. Not only during its brief history was the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC) a rival of A Space, the latter billing itself as Canada's oldest and most important artist-run space, "it was cast in opposition to A Space," Tuer suggests.¹

In telling the story, or, rather, in setting it up, Tuer casts another opposition—that between CEAC and General Idea—by opening her article with two contrasting epigraphs drawn from two rival publications, the house organs of General Idea and CEAC: *FILE* and *Strike*, respectively. The first she presents is General Idea's famous *Glamour* manifesto of 1975, in which they wrote: *We wanted to be famous, glamorous and rich. That is to say we wanted to be artists and we knew that if we were famous and glamorous we could say we were 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 and 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.*

And the second is Amerigo Marras's not-so-well-known 1978 article "On Organization": *What perpetuates the reactionary mystification of the role of the artist is the "world of scarcity" and the "incapacity to survive" in a capitalist society. The artist defends the privilege and the entrenchment he/she holds in a capitalist society. Also symptomatic, even and not less so among the vanguard, alternative*

*and co-op artist's groups, is the sense of hopelessness for social change, as these same groups mimic those repressive methods of economical capitalization adopted by the art world.*²

One might argue that perhaps this set-up was too easy, judging General Idea against CEAC, given that General Idea already ironically set itself up in its reactionary mystification of the role of the artist. However, I am not here to advocate for General Idea (having a few years earlier delivered a lecture and published an article arguing for the capitalist basis of General Idea's mystifying system of *Glamour*).³ Nevertheless, in Tuer's article General Idea's empty shell of history becomes the empty rhetorical figure against which the fullness of CEAC's forgotten revolutionary materialist practice was contrasted.

"Miss General Idea hangs around the left stage area for much of the action," Tuer wrote of CEAC's cast of characters,⁴ as if General Idea's muse sought inspiration there for the artists' plagiarist, intellectual parasitism. But what if General Idea and CEAC were in secret communication, especially through their respective publications? And what if this communication naturally was one of rivalry? Let's extend Tuer's epigraphic opposition between the two to see whether we can productively trace their communication through this period when both *FILE* and *Art Communication Edition (ACE)*, later to become *Strike*, were publishing. Doing so would enable us to read certain editorials and articles as critiques of the other's practice. It would cast CEAC and General Idea's competitive relationship in a whole new light. Moreover, it would, to a degree, reveal a struggle for the assertion of a particular practice. Let's, for the moment, call this practice political—in effect, theirs was a struggle for the ideological domination of the Toronto art community.

It was more than just a battle of words. We can trace parallels through much of their activities. Both originating in commune-like situations, each instituted major multifaceted artist-run organizations. The Kensington Arts Association began in 1973 and became CEAC when it moved to Toronto's warehouse district, soon to become the centre of the art scene, in 1976; Art Metropole started on Yonge Street in 1974 and moved a

couple blocks away from CEAC in 1978. Both conducted campaigns in Europe and New York to publicize themselves. And, significantly, both published magazines.

But in the end it was the words that mattered. This record is found in the magazines that each group individually published. Eventually self-serving, both publications originally fulfilled other functions. For instance, modelled on *LIFE* magazine, *FILE* (1972–89) was the house organ of the short-lived correspondence movement before it became a vehicle mainly for General Idea's own mythological production and promotion of international fellow travellers (e.g., the *mondo arte*). *Art Communication Edition* published for about a year (from late 1976) when it changed its name to *Strike* and produced three issues in 1978 before expiring. Publishing nearly monthly, it began really as a newsletter for CEAC activities but soon became a broadsheet in which the war of words, with General Idea sometimes as target, eventually escalated. While a target, General Idea was never named specifically; nonetheless, a close reader of both magazines would recognize the code words indicating a critique of the collective's practice.

Mimic Magazines

The opening communication between CEAC and General Idea took place just before *ACE* started publishing, through the auspices of a third artist-produced newspaper, *Only Paper Today* (*OPT*), which A Space published as a journal of experimental art and literary writing that served the Toronto art community.⁵ *OPT* published an interview with Amerigo Marras by Robert Handforth, the ostensible purpose of which was to inform readers about the opening of CEAC's new space and, indeed, remarkably, the ownership of a whole building, which CEAC purchased in September 1976, in addition to articulating the artistic program and direction of this elusive organization.⁶ Handforth was then one of the directors of A Space, soon to resign in September 1977. As he was already an Art Metropole employee, perhaps he was seen to be fully in General Idea's camp, so in conveying information about

CEAC to *OPT*'s readers, Marras thus obliquely spoke, through his interlocutor, to General Idea. When asked whether CEAC was just another name for the Kensington Arts Association, Marras replied: "Well you see, the K.A.A. is still alive and well. But the K.A.A. is now behind the props—the frame of reference." This was a noteworthy description because, with its props and frames of reference, it exactly repeated the language of General Idea's fictitious *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, which included props and plans that had been unveiled by General Idea in its Carmen Lamanna Gallery exhibition *Going thru the Notions* in fall 1975, still fresh in memory. Handforth continued, "So now it's K.A.A. operating as CEAC," and Marras replied, "Yeah. CEAC is the public front. We wanted it to be descriptive." As in the case of General Idea's *Pavillion*, Marras projected CEAC as the rhetorical—you could say, performative—front for a collective activity, but one not so visibly focused on an artwork as in the case of General Idea. If this front was "descriptive," did Marras then mean—here adopting the language of General Idea—that he considered it to be mythological, too? For "description" was the classifying term used by General Idea for the mythological universe of correspondence art: *I am not concerned with breaking myths, nor with making myths, but with the structural implications implicit in mythology's view of the universe. In myth it is clear that everything must be accounted for. Unlike science, myth starts with a vision and fills in the blanks. It structures a cosmology through description, not analysis.*⁷

Myth was a disjunctive, even destructive, model allied to the cut-and-paste of collage that led to a synthesis—to new myths of alternate lifestyles: *In this article seeing art as a system of signs in motion as an archive and indicator and stabilizer of culture as a means of creating fetish objects as residence for the field of imagery defining a culture, seeing all this and more in many ways we have become aware of the necessity of developing methods of generating realizing stabilizing alternate myths alternate lifestyles.*⁸

From 1973 to 1976, when these two statements were written, there was already a different world, so Marras's "accounting for" could now be considered not to be based on Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology (as in the case of General Idea), but as proceeding from another, all-inclusive, "mythic" model: Marxism. (With the beginning of publication of *The FOX* in New York in 1975, Marxism became the art world's au courant discourse.) Not for him any synthesis; Marras simply preferred disjunction. Refusing to answer Handforth's question about "artistic policies," he said instead: "Usually what we try to do is build up contradictions—without ambiguity."⁹ With this turn of phrase, Marras turned CEAC in opposition to General Idea, for General Idea was for ambiguity without contradiction, evident in the title of one of its 1975 *Pavillion* blueprints, *Luxon Louvre (Ambiguity without Contradiction)*. Marras's clever, chiasmatic inversion contradicted General Idea's enterprise at its core by attacking its fundamental principle of ambiguity. He would always fundamentally oppose contradiction to ambiguity.

What would the antithesis of ambiguity and contradiction be? It would pose a system of meaning to a system of conflict, of fluctuating interpretation to an explicit provocation that was non-stop.¹⁰ It was not that General Idea saw itself beyond conflict. General Idea considered Glamour a "battleground," but the artists also thought of it as beyond Marxism. With the insouciance of a fashion-magazine caption, General Idea wrote: "Glamour replaces Marxism as the single revolutionary statement of the twentieth century."¹¹ Marras himself would rather forestall that replacement. He would prefer Marxism tout court, a Marxism unadorned, or at least adorned with nothing but rhetoric.

Yet he was not ready to quit his dialogue with General Idea and set the journals in strict opposition on divergent paths. It appears that Marras saw *ACE* as a means of a continuing critique of General Idea. For instance, the second issue of *ACE*, from early 1977, carried the article "Four Leading Questions as Principles of Revolutionary Practice." Simply stated, it was a radicalized answer to *General Idea's Framing Devices*, the artists'

five-point agenda or master plan first promulgated in 1975, but it assumed the same format. To the question "What is Art & Communication?," the answer responded: *It is interface impact conducive within social forms as frames, structures, behaviour. Art as materialist practice and communication as dialectics in juxtaposition along contextual layerings produce revolutionary effects. Art & Communication is basically this: dialectical materialism practiced as ideology.*¹²

Compare this to General Idea: *THE FRAME OF REFERENCE is basically this: a framing device within which we inhabit the role of the general public, the audience, the media. Mirrors mirroring mirrors expanding and contracting to the focal point of view and including the lines of perspective bisecting the successive frames to the vanishing point. The general public, the audience, the media playing the part of the sounding board, the comprehensive framework outlining whatever meets their eye.*¹³

Despite their obscurity, the manifesto-like character of both pronouncements implied, theoretically at least, an incitement to action. The measure of success for both was not just an "effect" determined by vocabulary but also the practice's (pretended) effectiveness in the public realm. Yet, we have to consider whether the closed frameworks of "mirrors mirroring mirrors" or "juxtaposition along contextual layerings" were not just self-serving rhetorical devices that had no practical effect outside their art context. However, these statements were themselves performative: they were means of their own enacting. They were their own effect, so to speak. They were an analysis of their own intentions as much as they were an analysis in extension, outside themselves. In the end it would be a matter of how CEAC and General Idea negotiated their specialized rhetoric in relation to a purported public realm. Effectiveness would be a matter of survival.

In its July 1977 editorial, CEAC strategically chose its enemy and thereby specified a role for *ACE*: "Art Communication Edition proposes for itself the role of being the 'antithesis to dominant ideologies', rather than the role of being alternative to the hegemony of commercially motivated journals."¹⁴ An interesting distinction: Why discriminate between dominant ideologies and

a specific form of transmission, even if it was the type one operated through? One wonders whether the “antithetical” versus the “alternative” was the new formula of the previous antithesis of “contradiction” and “ambiguity.” For, once again, the article was a veiled attack on General Idea, who was not mentioned by name but obviously was the representative—though a common art and political term—of the “alternative” (see above). Only halfway through the article, at the mention of *People* magazine, one of those commercially motivated journals, do we realize that it was not only the Time Life publication being analyzed but also General Idea’s newly formatted *FILE*. Or at least we were made to understand that *FILE* basically operated in the same manner as *People*: “How does ‘people’ magazine communicate to us? It teaches a ‘popular’ language” that reflects its audience as stereotypes of its own repression.¹⁵ Marras’s critique was topical. In the recent spring 1977 issue of *FILE*, General Idea revealed the Time Life lawsuit against the artists for *FILE*’s simulation of *LIFE*. General Idea had eventually complied by changing the look of the cover but surreptitiously got the last laugh by making that issue into a “SPECIAL PEOPLE ISSUE”: “*FILE* was entering the no-no-nostalgia age in preparation for 1984 and in keeping abreast of the *TIME*s was becoming increasingly concerned with *PEOPLE*.”¹⁶

Marras thought the joke rather was on General Idea, still playing its game of mimicry by inhabiting various popular-culture formats: that is, merely playing a “role of being alternative to the hegemony of commercially motivated journals.” *FILE*, of course, was a vehicle for simulation of mainstream *LIFE* magazine. *We maneuver hungrily, conquering the uncontested territory of culture’s forgotten shells—beauty pageants, pavillions, picture magazines, and other contemporary corpses. Like parasites we animate these dead bodies and speak in alien tongues*, General Idea wrote in its 1975 Glamour manifesto.¹⁷ Two years later, in an *ACE* 6 article articulating the accompanying editorial, Marras responded: *We know that mimicry is only the immature and most immediate response. We respond with safe patterns that are recognizable as the parody of the dominant “culture”. The mimicry is only falling into the same view of history (of heroes). The correct*

*pattern is, instead, being antithetical to the dominant culture; to completely break away from the main direction is to deny classifying oneself as alternative. We reject the process of absorption. We reject the process of parodying.*¹⁸

That is, Marras rejected General Idea, rejecting its artistic practice of simulation (parody) and inhabitation of roles (absorption). To be antithetical was *not* to be alternative. One was either for contradiction or for alternative. There was no other choice. Marras concludes: *This argument brings in an important issue in the so-called alternative circles. We do not stand as alternative but as antithetical to dominant ideologies. To be antithetical is to reject any “coming back” syndromes so pedantically proposed in reaction to revolutionary activisms.* Presumably “‘coming back’ syndromes” referred to General Idea’s retro camp sensibility. Retro was the wrong camp. To be revolutionary meant first being factional. CEAC’s factional enemy in the Toronto art community obviously was General Idea.

The Punk Effect

Yet, a new antithetical faction surfaced in the Toronto art community that briefly united the two groups—for, however, rather than against. For the one thing General Idea and CEAC temporarily could agree on, when it broke in Toronto in summer 1977, was punk. Significantly, CEAC helped spawn it by playing host to the Crash ‘n’ Burn punk club in the basement of their Duncan Street building. General Idea, too, had a role to play promoting it by devoting a whole issue of *FILE* that fall to “Punk ‘til you Puke!”—creating an international roster of punk bands with Canadian groups following in the rear. Yet, by all accounts Toronto was one of the main centres, along with London and New York, and it was kicked off in that basement by a couple of groups that respectively became CEAC’s and General Idea’s house bands: the Diodes and the Dishes.

General Idea knew a good incendiary performance when it saw one, so under the influence of punk, it “burnt down” its *Pavillion* soon after. The fuse was lit in the “Punk ‘til You Puke!” issue,

where the editorial concluded: “The sentimentalism of late sixties early seventies essentially surrealistic aesthetic has been replaced by a certain pragmatic anarchy which is now the theme of this issue.”¹⁹ In an article from that same issue, “Pogo Dancing in the British Aisles,” the ever-astute AA Bronson aligned his paean to punk to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s description of desiring machines from their recently translated *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Bronson saw the desiring punk machine as anti-capitalist and “an anarchist motion by definition”²⁰—but he equally recognized punk for its subversive fashion sense.

Already in July, CEAC had sent a letter from the frontline trenches, ambivalently titled “Spanking Punk”: “The latest rebellious form for Toronto’s youth scene is the rave of *crash ‘n burn* punk rock groups.”²¹ Yet *the punk rock scene in Toronto is considerably different from that in Britain, where the youth are the victims of working class conditions. The Canadians, instead, exist on the edge of a capitalist surplus, having grown up in homogeneous suburban settings*, the anonymous author observes with a dismissive sneer. Nonetheless, revolutionary potential, the author concluded, existed beyond the “frustrated consumerism” of “broken beer glasses and make-up applied with razor blades.”

CEAC would use the hard edge of punk to deliver its own hard-line message. *ACE* 8 (October 1977)—the complementary issue to *FILE*’s “Punk ‘til You Puke!”—actually was a 45 rpm record, with CEAC slogans (“you people are the police”) interspersed between the Diodes’ raucous short-burst instrumentals. As always, the two magazine issues were assembled within spitting distance of each other, but they soon began to deviate from one another on the subject of punk, antithetically so. The editorial to *ACE* 9 (November 1977) reads: *In the western capitalist countries the Fall has cooled the steam produced by the 1977 summer of rock. Punks, mannerists, opportunists, nouveaux riche, promoters, fashion burnt, and all the other idiots fallen into the image of anarchy as dictated by the vogue punk, rush towards the cliché of fashion like flies to a mound of shit. The fashion, the image, the shit has been widely explored and exploited by the*

*mass media. Even the usual “avant garde” magazines [read: FILE magazine] have covered the news while putting themselves into the picture.*²²

As if answering in advance to the pragmatic anarchy of General Idea’s showcard “Fascism and anarchy join forces to make a work of art,” exhibited at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery that December, or anticipating *FILE*’s “\$UCCE\$\$ Issue” of March 1981, the editorial goes on: *Capitalization has taken place as the time to cash in arrived. At last, the idea of anarchy makes money and the economical statement that punk rock might have made in the beginnings is forgotten.*²³

The editorial coyly, yet strangely, concludes: “And we are ready to place the right device in the right place. Does any one understand what we mean?”

For those who did not understand, perhaps not exactly comprehending the turn from punk anarchy to revolutionary politics, CEAC placed that device and exploded a bomb in the second issue of the newly renamed *Strike* (May 1978): *We are opposed to the dominant tendency of playing idiots, as in the case of “punks” or the sustainers of the commodity system. . . . In the manner of the [Red] Brigades, we support leg shooting/knee capping to accelerate the demise of the old system.*²⁴ In a turn to world-historical revolutionary politics, *Strike*’s editorial board could not resist one last localizing dig here at General Idea. Who were these players, either punks or (art) supporters of the commodity system, but those who self-identified with “the creampuff innocence of idiots”? General Idea, that is.²⁵

What Is Effective Art?

By the evidence of print, the rivalry between CEAC and General Idea seems one-sided. We do not find the same linguistic obsession with a rival in the language used in *FILE*. Was this then a case of mimetic rivalry on CEAC’s part? That is, was it more mimesis than antithesis? Or was *ACE* actually a serious critique of General Idea, unnamed though the artists were? This is part of a larger question: Was antithesis merely a rhetorical device on CEAC’s part or was it actually effective?

The pogo dancer is a simple extension of tweeters and woofers. He amplifies the sound psychologically and visually. These vertical pistons simply vibrate on his mind. Amplification drives a vertical wedge between mind and body — the wedge of repeated movement.

The pogo dancer doesn't create sound, he doesn't hear sound, he is part of the pumping machine composed of musicians, equipment, dancers, all enclosed in a shell of sound.

When the action is hot, the fans behind the soundboard, the psychological emotional sexual amplifying system that drives the audio back through the performers and into the system. The result is a simple feedback loop. Like Tinguely's machines, the punk machine is self-destructive, smashing equipment, slashing skin, decaying the punk milieu with broken beer bottles and safety pins. The dancers 'strangle' each other without breaking stride. Spitting at the band completes the electric circuit, becoming the highest compliment.

Desire is anti-capitalist. Present economies of production and distribution do not allow for an economy of desire. Nevertheless, 'the bureaucrat strokes his files.'

But as capitalism's complex resonance amplifies strange new need, its mushrooming electronic communications gadgetry creates hiding spots in tangled circuitry for perverted modern lovers:

First Class TV PROGRAM...
GAY AWARDS...
ENJOY PHONE JOY
John Tele...
Set!!
Petticoat Punishment

Two men, two telephones and certain electronic circuitry (established for entirely different reasons) combine to form a simple desiring machine. The gay connection is particular here, because gay eroticism is group eroticism (as distinct from group sex).

So, too, the punk machine: 200 fans in a closed environment pump and strain in pogo rhythms. The pogo is an essential component of the punk machine (audio equipment, audience desiring machine, spitting provides the electrical connection that bypasses the contained sexuality of the family to power this group desire).

This is an anti-christ motion by definition: decision-making is not a reflection of hierarchical control of groups or masses (Capitalism/Pascien) nor of theoretical Marxist equalities. In anarchy desire is restored to its central orchestrating role.

The patterns of desire are networks riddling the logics and the hierarchies of our capitalist/socialist superstructure. As the superstructure weakens, these patterns become apparent. With its lack of confidence in Britain, for example, the unemployed working-class youth become vacant territory. A working-class desiring machine, like a vampire, takes form through their bodies. Punk rock is the visible, readable, codable and decodable desiring machine from which a new

politics, a new economics must be erected. The strength of capitalism in Britain is dependent on its ability to recognize and utilize (manipulate) this existing desiring system. The strength of punk is dependent on its ability to generate new economies of production and distribution corresponding to the pattern of desire it has revealed. Hence the self-produced record, the fanzine.

Punk is anti-family. God Save the Queen (Mother). These prodigal sons and daughters do not want to go home. The tyranny of the family is not incorporated into this intensely pragmatic game structure. Sentimentalism — the swamp in which capitalism breeds its docile subjects — is replaced by the magnetic/electric attraction/repulsion of active and passive, the slave and the conqueror.

Like S & M punk involves the body in a complete and brilliant desiring machine. Punks act out of necessity rather than fantasy. The mode of dress is characterized by the use of parts of the body in a complex of motifs or emblems (unlike high fashion, which deals with the decorated body, i.e. applied arts). The use of rips and zippers to isolate parts of the body, the manipulation of bruises, cuts, white flesh, ragged hair combined with leather, safety pins, loose ties, stiletto heels, pointed toes and exposed seams forms a language rather than a picture. In fact, words themselves join in that ragged grammar: not sentences, or even ideas, but emblematic tattoos beat out on the drums of punk bands... 'NO FUTURE'.

The safety pin is a double image, and dualities are the key to punk. The safety pin pierces and mends, is at once domestic and savage, destructive and constructive. To a lesser or greater degree, all the punk emblems display this obsession with the domestic and the savage, the active and the passive. It is clear that chains may bind, but they are also weapons. Black leather may suggest bondage, but also declares the aggressive anarchy of motorcycle gangs. Bruises and cuts are at once wounds and battlewounds. Even the baggy suit jacket and loose tie suggests a capitalist authoritarianism on its day off... or is that skinny tie a hangman's noose?

Fanzines are the paperwork of this semiotic punk-machine. Like inter-office memos these quick-kopy gossip-sheets become tomorrow's toilet paper, like toilet paper completely contemporary, completely disposable. Hundreds of fanzines in small editions going everywhere interlace to recreate the web of desire... and alter it too, amplify it, provide the taste to hook you on the habit. Image is virus. Fanzines describe the motion of the aesthetic, making visible the virus making progress through the world.

* * *

Postscript:

In conclusion, a reservation: the working-class structure of British punk bands is not only a reflection of working class reaction to inexcusable living standards, government policies and economic conditions in Britain, it is also, in true British style, a closed club. In reaction to class structure the punk scene has recreated the safety system it set out to upset. If you don't speak a working class lingo you're an outsider, an intruder, you're coming on airs. Hence the ex-Biba's set haven't a chance, thank God, but neither have I.

AA Bronson

That is, how seriously do we take a statement of theirs such as this: "We want to simply eliminate the dominant culture 'tout court'"?²⁶

In the process, did CEAC want as well to eliminate General Idea tout court? In an *ACE 7* (August 1977) article by Marras titled "VENOM," under the heading "Introduction of poison into the system of the victim," we read: *The relationship (distance) between individuals/groups determines the conflict/agreement between them. Each set of individuals tends to include/exclude the other as a process of elimination-dissent. Others call it generation gap, cold war, class struggle, or simply asphyxiation.*²⁷ In this internecine counterplotting we recall that poisoning was also a primary counterstrategy of Glamorous General Idea in its viral inhabitation of media. Indeed, mimesis itself was a subtle, invasive form of venom (what Marras had earlier rejected as "absorption").²⁸ It is more than a little revealing that the next heading to Marras's article is "malignant virulence." Had General Idea all along infected CEAC, especially virulent Marras in his "conflict/agreement" with this rival group? The theory of mimetic rivalry is that one kills what one copies.

Yet, CEAC believed being antithetical was effective, especially in the move from the art system, where it considered consumerist General Idea to malingering, to the social realm of politics per se, where CEAC itself wanted to operate. So the editorial board explained in the inaugural issue of *Strike: Are we supposed to explain the switch from Art Communication Edition to STRIKE? We want to come out closer to the de-training programme, opposed to service systems. We want to effectively move on and merge with the social stance that we foster. We know that within consumerist tactics, the antithetical position, as explained in issue 6 of Art Communication Edition, is an effective strategy.*²⁹

"Effective" was the word, as when later in that issue the collective continued to explain: *During the last couple months the discussions have been centered around the meaning of counter-information, counter-productivity, terrorism, the possible actions that create effective change, to a practice of scrutinizing texts and pinning down its obscurantist ideological incorrectness.*³⁰ In these discussions, CEAC may have passed beyond General Idea and

its "obscurantist ideological incorrectness," but General Idea, at the same moment, was talking about "effectiveness," too—as in "What do you mean by 'effective' art?"

Such was the lead question to General Idea's "Punk 'til you Puke!" editorial—of all places. The answer was a little less effective... or was it? "Obviously art that has effect. Obviously art that affects an audience. Obviously being effective requires an audience. Obviously art that has an effect is art that has an audience."³¹ This exercise in circular reasoning did not really answer the questions: But what of the effect? What was the effect? However, more than asking the question, General Idea was making art about it as well. Not that it was necessarily making *effective* art, because who, for instance, was its intended audience; but it was *posing* the answer—performing it, that is. So it is the artwork *Press Conference* from March 1977—with its faux media set-up—rather than the "Punk" editorial that we must look to for an answer to this pertinent question.

The faux *Press Conference* (conducted at Western Front, Vancouver, in front of an art audience with the purpose of making this tape) was called to address "effective art." It seemingly cynically concluded with the statement: "It isn't art unless it sells." But "selling" meant being "culturally operational," a situation where the artwork sold itself and its context, and where the objective was to "get the public to act on the basis of your work." Art was "not merely a medium for personal expression but potentially also a powerful cultural tool" and an "effective generator of cultural information that warrants consumer acceptance." As to the method of effectiveness, "the best way is to test an idea first in a controlled situation like the art scene, look at your feedback, and then continue from then on." "Content must be allowed to maneuver its way into the people's cultural needs or context."³²

A press conference is a vehicle of dissemination, but General Idea framed it as a *format* within which to enact its so-called analysis of effectiveness. (The performance assumed not just the format of a press conference but also the language of a marketing sales pitch, as if culture was business and art its product.) Nonetheless, format and

audience were contained within the artificiality of the set-up: performing to camera with a participating audience. For all the language of audience of its "Punk" editorial, the artists chose to remain within the cultural framework of the art system, using it as a "control group" to test their "product," the effectiveness of which did not exceed the art frame. The artists never intended to. General Idea's statements were a framework for discussion; they were not meant to be taken literally as some, in light of their own idea of political effectiveness, proceeded to do.³³

But what of CEAC and its *Strike* editorial statement "We want to effectively move on and merge with the social stance that we foster"? How effectively did they manage their crossover from art world to public domain? In his article in that issue, "On Organization," Marras admitted right away: "I am approaching the toleration limit to any further internalization of the notion of 'art' and/or of 'art as something else.'"³⁴ Presumably, effectiveness was to be found outside the art system, not, as in the case of General Idea, internal to it. "On Organization" had a solid Marxist title, in the lineage, for instance, of Mao Zedong's "On Practice" or "On Contradiction," but it said nothing on the organization of workers or the masses, let alone the art community, whose attempts at collectivity, through the artist-run system of parallel galleries or artists union (Canadian Artists' Representation), Marras (intolerantly) dismissed. Instead, artists in Canada and New York were accused of being careerist petite-bourgeois supporters of the class system. Art essentially was a "cover-up" for maintaining the class system; even its discourse was suspect: "When we discuss 'art', we are actually using the discourse as a pretext for established relationships in a class structure."³⁵

CEAC, however, never could abstain from a discussion of art, although exempting itself presumably from the stigma of maintaining class relations for doing so. Immediately, in the controversial second issue of *Strike* (May 1978), it inserted a four-page broadsheet, "Dissidence in the 1978 Venice Biennale," that complained of the National Gallery of Canada's selection of artists for the national pavilion in Venice and provided an analysis of the "socio-political function of art and

art institutions" and of how "the legitimating [and ameliorating] function of art serves the interests of power" as an "ideological tool" of capitalism.³⁶

In this "Joint Statement by the Central Strike Committee," analysis began to diverge somewhat from that found, for instance, in Marras's "On Organization." Past practices, too, came in for self-criticism: "such as the idealist conceptions of Alternative Perceptions, Deviant Behaviour, Punks, etc." But in any intended crossover, merging with the social stance it wanted to foster, the Central Strike Committee wavered on the line. "Dissidence in the 1978 Venice Biennale" was long on art analysis, short on class analysis. In their defense, the authors admit: "so long as we remain even vaguely connected to an art context, a thorough critique of art practice is necessary." Yet, they are clear that art is part of the problem and not the solution: *We do not rule out the possibility of a truly radical function for art, but in the present socio-political contexts it seems that a radical function for art can only exist as a negative one. Only criticism is possible and not a positive practice, or at least criticism must be an integral part of any model of practice.*

The committee states: *Our general purpose is to communicate not posture; avant-garde mystification must be countered by de-mystification. Therefore we wish to be as clear as possible so that response is to our ideas and not to their appearance; not as recent modernists who now use politics as yet another gambit.* (Here the committee implicates but does not name both mystifying artists such as General Idea as well as those in on the "political" gambit, such as the artists around *The FOX* magazine in New York and Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge particularly in the Toronto context.³⁷) In that "art must question its own sociology, its place in the relation of production," these relations were best seen not as strictly determined by an economic base (as the relations of production), as you might expect, but rather recognized to be ideological: being the pervasive forms or representations through which men live their imaginary relationship to reality.³⁸ Here, Louis Althusser's particular inflection of the notion of ideology was essential to its discussion since art—CEAC following Althusser—is conceded to be "superstructural and not materially based."³⁹ (CEAC's analysis of the relation of art to the Canadian state

DISSIDENCE IN THE 1978 VENICE BIENNALE

(Joint Statement by the Central Strike Committee: Amerigo Marras, Roy Pelletier, Bob Reid, Bruce Eves, Lily Chiro, and Paul McLellan)

Intentions

Dissent

As artists working in Canada we protest the National Art Gallery selection of Ron Martin and Henry Saxe for the Canadian participation in the '78 Venice Biennale. It must be understood that this selection does not represent unanimous approval in Canada but has been made in the face of dissent, and is both irrelevant and an embarrassment to artists working here. We reject the NAG's choice as yet more official art foisted upon people.

Specific Issue/ Heirs of the Guillotine

The NAG selection of worn formalist trivia is completely inappropriate to the VB which has had an ongoing concern with art in relation to politics, however superficially the VB has interpreted this theme. The NAG's choice indicates either its deliberate avoidance of controversy or its ineptitude as the supposed leading art institution in Canada unaware of the socio-political context as the contemporary issues of advanced art, and even of some art institutions in less apathetic parts of the world. (Despite the fact that this year's formal theme at the VB is the wholly ambiguous "Art to Nature: Nature to Art", the NAG should know better.)

On the other hand the VB on closer inspection proves itself to be little better, if more pertinent, than the NAG. As a tool of the Italian Socialist Party it seeks to discredit a radical critique of capitalism by the liberal strategy of assimilation, and manoeuvres like its unbalanced show of "dissent" art which, despite assurances of being constructive criticism within the ranks of Marxism, show the VB for what it really is - capitalist propaganda.

General Issue/ On the Road to Versailles

But our purpose goes beyond a simple criticism of Martin and Saxe, the NAG, the VB, and Eastern dissident art. When we take into account the social and political context of this specific issue, we find that our criticism must be extended to more generally include the socio-political function of art and art institutions of which our four principles are only examples. We discover that art has both a legitimating and an ameliorating function manifested as two accordingly distinct forms of art and sometimes as two elements within the same art.

Under the two presently dominant systems in the world, these legitimating and ameliorating functions take on the following respective forms: established and avant-garde art in advanced capitalism of the West, official and dissident art in authoritarian communism of the East. In both the East and the West the legitimating function of art serves the interests of power, and although the ameliorating function of art is often characterized as refractory, because it operates under the same dominant ideology it too usually ends up serving those same interests, which is why it is reformist rather than radical. Under authoritarian communism official art clearly serves the state and dissident art appears quite distinct from it. It is evidence of the greater hegemonic control of advanced capitalism that the legitimating function of art is not acknowledged - established art is not so easily recognized as a tool of the dominant ideology. Neither is the ameliorating function of art often recognized, or if it is it is restricted to formal innovation within the bounds of art and so easily co-exists with the legitimating function of art as two elements of the same art, e.g. formalist avant-garde - the avant-garde eventually becomes established art. More obviously recalcitrant art still under the weight of the dominant ideology directs its protests against universal orders instead of real powers, or if politically directed remains a token rebellion within the confines of the art context and serves as a guide to the survival of capitalism. Finally, capitalism uses the ameliorating function of art expressed in the East as dissident art to justify itself against not just authoritarian communism but socialism as a

general cause and all its possible forms.

In short, both the East and the West art serves the dominant ideology even when non-conforming, legitimating and ameliorating functions of art are just two sides of the same coin. We do not rule out the possibility of a truly radical function for art, but in the present socio-political contexts it seems that a radical function for art can only exist as a negative one. Only criticism is possible and not a positive practice, or at least criticism must be an integral part of any model of practice.

Approach/ Knee Capping and Other Games

We and others have made similar statements in the past but because we do not wish to work from the self-serving interests of the avant-garde, we take up these issues because of what we believe and not as yet another innovation or style. We are committed to what we say and will repeat as well as develop these ideas as long as circumstances deem it necessary to no matter how many times it has been done before. Our general purpose is to communicate not posture; avant-garde mystification must be countered by de-mystification. Therefore we wish to be as clear as possible so that response is to our ideas and not to their appearance; not as recent modernists who now use politics as yet another art gambit. Also, similar statements made in the past have not been comprehensive, but this is required if we are going to appeal to more people than just the few who are already part of the dialogue. This statement is just the beginning of a comprehensive work toward which the general principles that come out of this critique can go. There is not the time or the space for a thorough enumeration of all possible ways that art and art institutions function as ideological tools of capitalism or authoritarian communism, so we limit ourselves to those aspects that apply to our particular purposes here. Only with such a comprehensive work can we clear the ground for action beyond the confines of art. But so long as we remain even vaguely connected to an art context, a thorough critique of art practice is necessary, in fact, it may be argued

that a finally comprehensive work is never possible and that a transition from art to activism is not a simple and immediate thing because we carry the baggage of our ideological background - all the more reason for statements such as this one.

Our concern as artists working in the West is with art under advanced capitalism. Therefore we limit our discussion to legitimating and ameliorating functions of art as they exist under the social and political context here and only consider their forms in the East in so far as they are involved with our situation, i.e. dissident art used by capitalism for its self-justification.

Polemics

"Old Tactics"

The questions raised by the NAG selection of Martin and Saxe concern, in regards to Martin and Saxe, not only their appropriateness for the VB, but also the validity of their work at all and of most Canadian art as well as the international formalism they represent. Looking at the NAG, doubts are raised not only about its poor choice in this particular case, but also the NAG's performance in general and its function as a Canadian art institution and all art institutions in the international art support system. Most important, however, is the more general concern raised, by their example, of the socio-political function of art and art institutions to be dealt with at the level of theory.

Martin and Saxe/ Be-labouring Trivia

For the last several years the VB has been concerned with art and general issues of both a controversial and political nature in their socio-economic setting. The way the VB has handled these concerns and its ultimate purpose is

contradictorily belies this superstructural independence, however.) Recourse to theory was necessary, but theory alone was not enough: "Our oppositions must be made clear against concrete examples and lead towards active transformation."

Yet in a statement of over ten thousand words, few concrete examples of active transformation are offered, other than the brief mention of "proper preoccupations" for art such as an "oppressed native population or the structure of wage labour" or the belief "in the need to broaden the scope of the battle from the shop floor to everyday life." Art remained the framework of discussion. The committee admits that *the complete rejection of art is not the point and transition to activism is not automatic. Both strategies are effected by the need to account for pervasive ideology. When this is done we see that art may serve as one of its battle grounds and that it reveals the ideological function of all art and the class embeddedness of all artists which must be dealt with. Our only valid purpose can be the transformation to real democracy and conscious participation of all which entails the overthrow of capitalism.*

They conclude: *Towards this goal de-mystification is an important action for art—the dispersal of imaginary relations which have intervened and disarmed the material struggle.*

In their desire "to communicate not posture," the committee was "as clear as possible" that, while art still had a role to play in the dispersal of imaginary, ideological relations (the dispelling of which was the critical function of *Strike*), the ultimate aim was to re-arm the material struggle in the overthrow of capitalism. Everything about *Strike* began to point to the journal as that vehicle. Take the May 1978 *Strike*: from its cover image of Aldo Moro's bullet-ridden bodyguards' corpses; to the Brigade Rosse red star predominant on its back cover, indeed underscoring many of its pages as a red stamp of approval; to its translation of the theatre-of-the-absurd court transcripts "Red Brigades on Trial"; to the printing of the Red Brigade slogans "carry out the strike against the imperialist state of the trans-national" and "build the unity of the revolutionary movement"; to the publishing of Mao's "Combat Liberalism" directly beneath the issue's editorial.⁴⁰ By the image projected both graphically and verbally, it would

seem that the *Strike* editorial committee wanted to "move on and merge" with the Brigade Rosse. (Remember, they said, "We want to effectively move on and merge with the social stance that we foster.") Unless all this was *posturing*, it was the armed framework within which to read the short and to the point, indeed striking, editorial that was to be so explosive:

We are opposed to the dominant tendency of playing idiots, as in the case of "punks" or the sustainers of the commodity system. The questioning through polemics of the cultural, economical and political hegemony should be fought on all fronts.

To still maintain tolerance towards the servants of the State is to preserve the status quo of Liberalism. In the manner of the Brigades, we support leg shooting/knee capping to accelerate the demise of the old system. Despite what the "new philosophers" tell us about the end of ideology, the war is before and beneath us. Waged and unwaged sector of the population is increasing its demands for "less work." On the way to surpass Liberalism we should prepare the barricades.⁴¹

The editorial was not so much an argument as strung together slogans, with the odd political demand thrown in—for "less work."⁴² But what an effect it had! The reaction was swift. Even before the issue had been delivered from the printer, it was leaked to the tabloid the *Toronto Sun*, to predictable result: "Our taxes aid 'blood-thirsty' radical paper," the headline read. Then followed the predictable outcome to this funding scandal: questions on the floors of the provincial and federal legislatures and quick revocation of every level of arts council funding. Without ongoing funding, CEAC lost its building and suspended operations, but not without publishing one final issue of *Strike* a few months later.⁴³

This final issue of *Strike* was dedicated to human rights but it served as a vindication of CEAC's position under the hands of a repressive regime: the Canadian government and its puppet arts councils. "Foremost, what we wish to make clear is that what happened to *Strike* and CEAC is a definite case of censorship, in fact, political repression."⁴⁴

The aim of the earlier offending *Strike* issue, which supposedly became the cause of the clampdown on CEAC's activities, was to show that "liberal democracies are essentially repressive

regimes." The authors of "Snuff," the article that made this claim in the final issue, thought that *Strike's radical analysis coupled with provocation proved to be very successful as a means of creating debate on the issues of our analysis within a wider audience, and as a social experiment to prod liberal democracies to reveal their true nature as concluded in our analysis.* This analysis "was coupled with a provocative visual and verbal imagery." The problem, the writers claimed, was that the government concentrated only on the imagery, not its analysis, which was the greater part of their work and, besides, the imagery was no more violent than other examples found in art and entertainment. Why the censorship and repression? *Why? Partly because our imagery was drawn from reality, but primarily because it was coupled with a radical analysis of liberal democracies, and it was that analysis that the media and the government, the pillars of liberal democracies, feared.*

Was it a case of censorship? No. The second issue of *Strike* was freely circulated, as was the final October issue. Was CEAC suppressed...or banned, as it later claimed when it advertised, "As the futurists were in fascist Italy, as the Bauhaus was in Nazi Germany, as the constructivists were in the Soviet Union, the CEAC was banned in Canada"?⁴⁵ No. It could continue its activities—both artistic and political—only without government funding. As Marras had earlier written in "On Organization": "When I refer to Canada, I refer to it as a concrete reality: the economical base that allows my work to happen but not my revolt (since I should be able to revolt without its economical support)."⁴⁶ Was this still the case? Indeed, was it ever the case that CEAC's revolt was not paid for by its funding?

CEAC allowed that it was surprised by the scandal: "We did not anticipate the extremity of their reaction," it said of the governments' and councils' responses.⁴⁷ In reaction, did CEAC reveal its true nature, its "true face"? ("If only words and images caused the reaction that they did, then little is needed as a lever of provocation to force liberal democracies to show their true face.") CEAC's "true face" was revealed in its face-to-face with the "true face" of the government. Indeed, nothing seemed to exist outside this

relationship between the two. When push came to shove, it seems that CEAC's *effectiveness* only existed in relationship to the government. Initially, CEAC stated, "Our intention, working from the insular art context, was to provoke debate and elicit reaction from outside the art world." In the end, it acknowledged, "We have actually achieved illiciting [*sic*] a response from outside of art and from the most powerful sectors of society." You have to admit that CEAC was successful. It was effective. Its success was its failure, however.

Through its success and failure, CEAC defined itself solely in relation to the state: "As far as the government was concerned, it was very easy for them to put an end to our activities, for they had only to cut off our funding." As a result, "now pushed as [they were] to this brink at which all [their] alternatives ha[d] been deliberately cut off," the writers came to the conclusion: "Now not only is it clear that there are no legitimate means to effective change, but *Strike* has been denied any means of legitimate change if such a possibility has ever existed."⁴⁸ To a degree they were right when they said that they were being punished for their political views.⁴⁹ Yes, its funding was stopped, but it was naive of CEAC to expect that it wouldn't be and disingenuous to argue that suspension of funding was censorship and repression and, moreover, that there were no alternatives available to it once this funding was cut off. Isn't it a bit strange to realize that, for all its radicalism, CEAC eventually defined itself *solely* in terms of its government funding? Moreover, that it reconciled itself to this dependent condition. Only in Canada could this happen, you might say!

It did not take the government's provocation, though, to change CEAC's relation to the state. It already pre-existed. Just as "Snuff" was to disavow the ideological leeway most contemporary Marxist philosophers then gave to the work of art, so too CEAC misconstrued its analysis of the state. Seeing it akin to a crude economic determinism, CEAC made the state determinant in the last instance, at least in terms of Canada's art funding. The irony is that the writers of "Dissidence in the Venice Biennale" rejected economic determinism in the last instance for the superstructural play of art but maintained it for the state, all in the same

article! CEAC overemphasized the power of the state and its determinant role: *In Canada, the state supports art almost exclusively, e.g. by grants, and arbitrates its quality, e.g. by selection for festivals such as V[enice] B[iennale]. By this method the state reflects its own position and reinforces art's position as a universal abstraction above the material, special interests, the ideological. Art then functions as the ideological tool of the dominant class through the state in the same way that the state itself is an ideological tool of the dominant class.*⁵⁰

The authors flattered themselves that it was their radical analysis that brought down the establishment's wrath and not simply their provocative advocacy of kneecapping. "Ten little words," an artist lamented in a letter to the Ontario Arts Council: "Can we now say that these ten words which caused so much controversy are enough grounds to stop the funding of such a crucial centre?"⁵¹ The effect seemed disproportionate to the cause. Ten little words. But what an effect they had. What was CEAC's justification of its advocacy of kneecapping? The authors were insistent that what CEAC published were *only* words and images. "The suppression of what were only pictures and words was quick and severe."⁵² But it wasn't words and imagery, it was the specific phrase: "In the manner of the Brigades, we support leg shooting/knee capping to accelerate the demise of the old system."⁵³ The authors disavowed responsibility for this statement. In fact, the authors of "Snuff" obfuscated the phrase, never repeating it or addressing it specifically—"though we made some strong statements," they admitted in the article. Instead, they subsumed it under the general category of "imagery," as if its words had no semantic meaning.⁵⁴ Its meaning instead was drawn from reality, an objective condition over which the authors had no responsibility, having merely reported it: "a powerful imagery whose impact depended on the urgency of the reality it was derived from."⁵⁵

When asked by a reporter whether he supported kneecapping, Marras replied: "Well, we are saying that it should be taken as a metaphorical point to realize that the problem is in recognizing real issues."⁵⁶ Well, if kneecapping was metaphor and the rest of *Strike* was only words and images, what do we make of the "radical analysis" they

were coupled to? Was it only words and images, too? Metaphors and not incitement to action? An imaginary world with no effectiveness? In the end it seems that *Strike*'s rhetoric was the means by which CEAC lived its *imaginary* relationship to revolutionary politics.

CEAC's demise left the field to General Idea. Was General Idea effective? It survived. Survival is effective. Survival of the species, of the genus, of the general idea. *FILE*'s spring 1981 "\$UCCE\$\$ Issue" was "proof" of General Idea's success. To survive, though, meant being adaptable, but also elusive or evasive as they had stated earlier in 1975:

The triple strategy of Glamour is simple but evasive:

1. *Concealment, i.e., separation, postured innocence.*
2. *Hardening of the Target, i.e., closure of the object, a seeming immobility, a brilliance.*
3. *Mobility of the Target, i.e., the superficial image hides an APPARENT emptiness (changing one's mind, shifting stance, "feminine" logic).*⁵⁷

There would be no "effective immobilization" of General Idea's activities by the government, even if "like customs agents on the borders of acceptance, we smuggle transgression back into the picture, mixing doubles out of the ingredients of prohibition."⁵⁸ General Idea had always made itself into a moving target. CEAC made itself into a static target: of the media, of politicians. Could it get mobile again, by learning anew, perhaps? Could it take lessons from an old foe? Its final word on the role of art suggested so: *The only valid purposes for art in a pre-revolutionary situation are: as a front which, by its potential for ambiguity, is an easy means of obtaining government and corporate funds to put toward the revolutionary cause; or as a direct tool for explicit communication and provocation in the class struggle.*⁵⁹

There would be no more "contradictions without ambiguity," it seemed, for CEAC. Rather, the proposed aim was a contradictory "ambiguity" and "explicitness." The issue, perhaps a contradiction given CEAC's immediate circumstance, was keeping the knowledge of one from the other, the funding from the provocation. From whom did CEAC learn to dissemble? From General Idea, perhaps? Or was it dissembling all along?⁶⁰

About the Author

Philip Monk is a curator, writer, and currently director of the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto. He is the author of *And While I Have Been Living Here Perfectly Still: The Saskia Olde Wolbers Files*, *Double-Cross: The Hollywood Films of Douglas Gordon*, *Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins: Project for a New American Century*, *Spirit Hunter: The Haunting of American Culture by Myths of Violence/Speculations on Jeremy Blake's Winchester Trilogy*, *Stan Douglas: Discordant Absences*, and *Disassembling the Archive: Fiona Tan*, among other publications.

Notes begin on page 151.

Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters & Sciences 1949–1951, commonly referred to as the Massey Commission. This formative report by order of Canada's Clerk of the Privy Council, perhaps indirectly influencing the decisions of exurb-bound Canadians in the '70s, laid the groundwork for many federal cultural institutions and agencies, including the Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission, the Canada Council, the National Gallery, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, universities, and more. In the chapter "The Forces of Geography," the Massey Commission articulates how the sparse population was both a universal feature of Canadian identity and a source of persistent insecurity: *But this young nation, struggling to be itself, must shape its course with an eye to three conditions so familiar that their significance can too easily be ignored. Canada has a small and scattered population in a vast area; this population is clustered along the rim of another country many times more populous and of far greater economic strength; a majority of Canadians share their mother tongue with that neighbour, which leads to peculiarly close and intimate relations.* ("Chapter II: The Forces of Geography," *Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences, 1949–1951* (archived), Library and Archives Canada, <http://fillip.ca/6jy3>). Lowry and others at the event (Parenthesis) Ideas Café, hosted by Donald Brackett and Emily Carr University on March 10, 2014, reflected on the persistent racism inherent in this notion of an empty geography—a mythology in which the First Nations inhabitants had vanished or were vanquished, so as to make available a country rich with natural resources ready for industrial as well as cultural exploitation.

36. "2001 Community Profiles: Hamiota, Manitoba," Statistics Canada.

37. "Hey We're Moving into Town: The Forces of Push and Pull," Saskatchewan Council for Archives and Archivists, 2006, <http://fillip.ca/2xrh>.

38. Saunders, *Arrival City*, 23.

39. The settlement worker reported that remittances accounted for about a third of Guatemala's GDP. Kennon Pearre documents it at closer to one quarter. Kennon Pearre, "Central America's Economic Diaspora," Center for Strategic and International Studies,

February 24, 2011, <http://fillip.ca/u731>.

40. Niels Van Tomme, "Where Do We Migrate To?," in *Where Do We Migrate To?*, exhibition catalogue (Baltimore: Centre for Art, Design and Visual Culture, 2011), 16.

41. Svetlana Boym, "Immigrant Arts, Diasporic Intimacy, and Alternative Solidarity," in *Where Do We Migrate To*, 26–27.

42. Kraus, *Kelly Lake Store*, 28–34.

43. Kraus, *Video Green*, 74–77.

44. Michael de Courcy, "Statement: Background / Vancouver," Michael de Courcy's personal website, 2012, <http://fillip.ca/ek0n>.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Kraus, *Where Art Belongs*, 10.

47. *Ibid.*, 32.

48. Kraus, *Kelly Lake Store*, 38.

49. Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 133–34.

Pages 14–27

Philip Monk
Battle Stances

1. Dot Tuer, "The CEAC Was Banned in Canada," *C Magazine*, no. 11 (1986), 28. In his 1978 article, AA Bronson called A Space "Canada's oldest, largest and most influential" artist-run gallery. "Imagine A Space as Karen Ann Quinlan....," *Centerfold*, September 1978, 104.

2. General Idea, "Glamour," in the "Glamour Issue," *FILE 3*, no. 1 (Autumn 1975), 21; Amerigo Marras, "On Organization," *Strike 2*, no. 1 (January 1978), 5.

3. "Sentences on Art" was presented at the Rivoli, Toronto, November 22, 1982, and published as "Editorials: General Idea and the Myth of Appropriation," *Parachute*, Winter 1983, 12–23. Reprinted in Philip Monk, *Struggles with the Image: Essays in Art Criticism* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1988), 131–82.

4. Tuer, "The CEAC Was Banned in Canada," 25.

5. *Only Paper Today* was published by A Space under the editorship of poet Victor Coleman from 1973 until fall 1978, when a schism, caused by a "takeover" of A Space, led Coleman to publish it under the auspices of the Eternal Network. It continued publishing until 1980.

6. Amerigo Marras, interview by Robert Handforth, "Amerigo Marras Talks about CEAC," *Only Paper Today 4*, no. 2

(November/December 1976), 2.

7. AA Bronson, "Pablum for the Pablum Eaters," in *Video by Artists*, ed. Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1976), 197. This is a revised reprint of the anonymous *FILE* article of the same name from 1973.

8. General Idea, "Pablum for the Pablum Eaters," *FILE 2*, nos. 1 and 2 (May 1973), 20. Note the title of the article "The Lumpen and the Lumpen-Eaters," published in *Art Communication Edition*, no. 3 (February 1977).

9. Marras, "Amerigo Marras Talks about CEAC," 2.

10. "A resonance which is ambiguity flips the image in and out of context. Layers of accumulated meaning snap in and out of focus." "Glamour: Image Lobotomy," in the "Glamour Issue," *FILE 3*, no. 1 (Autumn 1975). For Glamour as a system of meaning in General Idea's work, see Philip Monk, *Glamour Is Theft: A User's Guide to General Idea* (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 2013).

11. General Idea, "Battleground," in the "Glamour Issue," *FILE 3*, no. 1 (Autumn 1975), 31.

12. "Four Leading Questions as Principles of Revolutionary Practice." Dated 1976, it was published in *Art Communication Edition*, no. 2 (January 1977), 5.

13. "General Idea's Framing Devices" was published in *FILE 4*, no. 1 (Summer 1978), 12–13, but was part of the 1975 performance and video *Going thru the Motions*. Also consider the quotation by Marras: "The quantitative approach I proposed indicated the possibility of going from one system to another by using contextual outlines or structures that formed multiple reference systems or empty frames" (Amerigo Marras, "Notes and Statements of Activity. Toronto, 1977," *La Mabelle*, 1977, 31). And cf.: "Itself being a context out of content back into context, that is ideological praxis back into social praxis or vice versa" ("Four Leading Questions as Principles of Revolutionary Practice," *Art Communication Edition*, no. 2 [January 1975], 5). For General Idea, ambiguity was the flipping of one context into another or of context into content and vice versa. It was the principle of their parasitic inhabitation.

14. "Editorial," *Art Communication Edition*, no. 6 (July 1977), 2.

15. Amerigo Marras, "on being anti-theatrical," *Art Communication Edition*, no. 6 (July 1977), 3–4.

16. General Idea, "Editorial," in the "Special People Issue," *FILE 3*, no. 3

(Spring 1977), 17.
17. General Idea, "Artificiality," in the "Glamour Issue," *FILE* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1975), 32.
18. Marras, "on being antithetical," 4.
19. General Idea, "Editorial," *FILE* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1977), 11. See Monk, *Glamour Is Theft*, 111–13 and 224; and "Crises (and Coping) in the Work of General Idea," *Fillip*, no. 16 (Spring 2012), 106–12. Available online at <http://fillip.ca/xmco>.
20. "Desire is anti-capitalist." AA Bronson, "Pogo Dancing in the British Aisles," *FILE* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1977), 20. Another Deleuze-Guattari source might have been "Balance Sheet-Program for Desiring-Machines," in the "Anti-Oedipus" issue, *Semiotext(e)* 2, no. 3 (1977), 117–35. At least Hermann Neutics suggested so in "Is This a Photo Book," *Only Paper Today* 5, no. 4 (May 1978), 13: "A.A. Bronson drew largely on that article in his great intro to the 'new wave rock' issue of *File*."
21. "Spanking Punk," *Art Communication Edition*, no. 6 (July 1977), 24. Actually, bands started playing earlier that year in CEAC's basement. Also see Amerigo Marras, "report from Canada, part 1: the punk scene" (unpublished manuscript), CEAC Fonds, York University.
22. "If Anarchy Succeeds Everyone Will Follow," *Art Communication Edition*, no. 9 (November 1977), 3.
23. The text to the "Fascism and anarchy join forces to make a work of art" *Showcard* 1-084 reads: *Voice over: "The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion was the first concrete manifestation of that uneasy union we now take for granted, the first project where fascism and anarchy could join forces to create a work of art—and they did."* The text also was published in *General Idea's Reconstructing Futures* (1977).
24. "Playing Idiots, Plain Hideous," *Strike* 2, no. 2 (May 1978), 3.
25. "We moved in on history and occupied images, emptying them of meaning, reducing them to shells. We filled these shells with Glamour, the creampuff innocence of idiots, the naughty silence of sharkfins slicing oily waters" ("Stolen Lingo," in "Glamour"). In the slippages that accompany the identifications of mimicry, the editorial stated, "We continue to speak in an alien tongue," unconsciously adapting General Idea's terminology: "Like parasites we animate these dead bodies [culture's forgotten shells] and

speak in alien tongues." ("Artificiality," in "Glamour").
26. Marras, "on being antithetical," 4.
27. Amerigo Marras, "VENOM," *Art Communication Edition*, no. 7 (July 1978), 4.
28. See the 1975 *FILE* "Glamour Issue": Miss General Idea is more akin to poison, that other natural enemy to culture. Like poison Miss General Idea, objet d'art, posed on stiletto heels and bound in the latest fantasy, represents a violent intrusion into the heart of culture: the Canada Council, for example, or beauty pageants (essentially one and the same). Or: *With this gesture [a manipulation of the self] we husk Nature, voiding the shell that Culture, that great Amazon, single-breasted but divided, might shoot the poisoned arrow of meaning into its empty shell* ("Glamour," in the "Glamour Issue," *FILE* 3, no. 1 [Autumn 1975]). Marras's methodology could be called cannibalistic. He would "absorb" a colleague's more fully articulated program of thought then proceed to kill off this individual in print with a stab in the back in ACE. Marras's treatment of Hervé Fischer of the Paris Collectif d'Art Sociologique is a case in point.
29. *Strike* 2, no. 1 (January 1978), 2. Italics mine.
30. "Polemics," *Strike* 2, no. 1 (January 1978), 29. Italics mine.
31. General Idea, "Editorial," *FILE* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1979), 11.
32. General Idea, *Press Conference*, performance video, Western Front, Vancouver, 1977.
33. In his review of General Idea's 1979 exhibition *Consenting Adults*, Clive Robertson decided to apply *Press Conference's* criteria of effective art to the work of that exhibition. See Clive Robertson, "Consenting Adults: General Idea at Carmen Lamanna Gallery," *Centerfold*, April/May 1979, 195. In a letter to the editor, General Idea responded that it considered "Press Conference, our videotape of 1977, ... more concerned with the language of power than with 'effective art'" ("Letters," *Centerfold*, June/July 1979, 219). As General Idea reveals in this letter, the language of *Press Conference* was based on an advertisement in the American business magazine *Fortune* placed by an advertising company to tout the benefits of advertising to industry.
That the term "effective" continued to lead debates is indicated by the following selection of texts from *Centerfold: Politics and therefore culture, to*

be effective have to do more than simply (and simplistically) nominate their context. In its social practice, as well as in its production, it has to align itself with the social forces that seek its overthrow (Karl Beveridge, "The Last Conceptual Artist," *Centerfold*, February/March 1979, 127).
The political effectiveness of artworks is not a new problem, rather it's one that has been, over the years, over-discussed.... In a larger sense you can't make art effective without the right context, and the context depends on history (Tim Guest, "Politics Performances Provide...." *Centerfold*, February/March 1979, 105).
If you are an artist, how ineffectual is your art? Honestly, does your art produce the intended or expected result? (Tom Sherman, "Editorial," *Centerfold*, April/May 1979, 148).
34. Marras, "On Organization," 5. Also in "Notes and Statements of Activity. Toronto, 1977," 34.
35. Marras, "On Organization," 5.
36. "Dissidence in the 1978 Venice Biennale," *Strike* 2, no. 2 (May 1978), was issued as a "Joint Statement" by the Central Strike Committee, which consisted of Amerigo Marras, Roy Pelletier, Bob Reid, Bruce Eves, Lily Chiro, and Paul McLellan. You might ask yourself what this small clique was central to, having mimicked the language of a centralized party apparatus, but without any cadres or supporters, be they workers or artists.
37. Debates about the political function or politicizing of art in New York centered around *The FOX*, a publication issued by Art & Language in three issues between 1975 and 1976 when a schism ended it. For a period summary, see Nancy Marmar, "Art & Politics '77," *Art in America*, July/August 1977, 64–66. Reviews of the subsequent schism publications, *Red Herring* and *Art Language*, October 1976, otherwise known as FOX 4, were published in *Art Communication Edition*, no. 5 (May 1977). Condé and Beveridge's controversial exhibition *It's Still Privileged Art* took place at the Art Gallery of Ontario January 24–February 29, 1976. For a review, see Walter Klepac, "Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge: ... It's Still Privileged Art," *artscanada*, April/May 1976, 67. CEAC participated in these debates with a contextual art conference in Toronto in November 1976. See the report "Contextual Art," *Art Communication Edition*, no. 2 (January

1975), 4. This was followed by seminars in Paris (Ecole Sociologique Interrogative) and Warsaw and Kazimierz (Contextual Seminars) as part of CEAC's European tour in May 1977. See documents in *Art Communication Edition*, no. 6 (July 1977), 9–14.
38. *A developed theory of ideology is important for our discussion of art because art is superstructural and not materially based, therefore art exists within the domain of ideology and an understanding of ideology becomes central to our critique of art* ("Dissidence in the 1978 Venice Biennale").
39. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus," in *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1971), 121–73. An NLB edition of Althusser's *For Marx*, with its essay "Contradiction and Overdetermination," had just been released in 1977; his *Reading Capital* was already available.
40. One cannot but be struck by the discordant juxtaposition of the large image of the Red Brigade red star emblem on the back cover of the second issue of *Strike* and a full-page advertisement for the Bologna Art Fair (Arte Fiera: International Fair of Contemporary Art) on its reverse side. Such advertisements commonly are given in exchange for display tables at these commercial fairs. It demonstrates CEAC's desire to participate in a limited way within the art system at its most capitalistic.
41. "Playing Idiots, Plain Hideous," 3.
42. "Waged and unwaged sector of the population is increasing its demands for 'less work.'" This is one of the rare mentions of what would align CEAC to Italian autonomia and other leftist movements advocating the abolition of work or its refusal. It was always thrown in as one more item in a list but was never really addressed substantially. For instance: "The directing group is allied to the revolutionary cause that intends to create cultural polemics, debates, confrontations and the pursuit of collective education for a new community eliminating labour" (*Strike* 2, no. 2 [May 1978], 5). However, in a note to "Snuff," the authors explained what they meant by "eliminating labour" through a short series of quotations from Marx. The series is quoted from the publication *Zerowork*, a short-lived American journal that published two issues in 1975 and 1977.
43. CEAC managed a European tour

during the controversy, with a visit to the Bologna Art Fair. Other activities subsequent to the loss of funding were the publication of the third issue of *Strike* and the creation of a one-hour broadcast for Close Radio, Los Angeles.
44. "Snuff," *Strike* 2, no. 2 (May 1978), 13–14. Who was the writer of this text? Was it the same Strike Central Committee that had penned "Dissidence in the 1978 Venice Biennale"? I don't believe all the members of that committee wrote the first text, because it maintains somewhat of a stylistic whole. Presumably Amerigo Marras, having been listed first, was one of the authors. But the quality of the writing there, and in "Snuff," changed considerably toward a more fluid reading that suggests one or two others besides Marras contributed significantly, writers for whom English was their first language. (Marras's first language was Italian.) The addition of new members to the CEAC collective perhaps accounts for the "correction" of Marras's position in "On Organization" by statements in "Dissidence in the 1978 Venice Biennale."
45. Advertisement placed in Ontario Association of Art Galleries, *Magazine*, Winter 1978/79, 10.
46. Marras, "On Organization," 6.
47. Quotations in this paragraph and next: "Snuff," 13–15.
48. CEAC defined its activities and effectiveness only in relation to its funding: if funding was cut, there would be no activities, no possibility of effectiveness. It was a strange logic to say, "*Strike* has been denied any means of legitimate change" if denied funding. We can only conclude, as the writers here conclude, that CEAC's politics could only be institutionally supported through government funding.
49. *Through Strike's social experiment of radical analysis and provocation, the powers of liberal democracies were forced to contradict their own principles, revealing them to be the illusions of a false ideology. Through direct censorship our liberal democracy contradicted itself when it acted against individuals for their political beliefs through an economic sanction that intended their effective immobilization. It contradicted itself when a cultural body suppressed individuals for their political beliefs, while the political establishment suppressed their cultural expression. It contradicted itself when a cultural body which is supposed to be autonomous*

from political interests, is dictated to by the political establishment. It contradicted itself when it based such repressive actions on distortion, or used such distortion as a form of indirect censorship ("Snuff," 15).
50. "Dissidence in the 1978 Venice Biennale."
51. Gerard Pas, undated letter to Arthur Gelber, vice-chairman of the Ontario Arts Council, CEAC Fonds, York University, as referred to in Tuer, "The CEAC Was Banned in Canada," 37.
52. "Snuff," 15.
53. In its "Statement to the Press," the Strike Collective (Amerigo Marras, Suber Corley, Bruce Eves, Paul McLellan, Roy Pelletier, Bob Reid) stated: *What position do we take in relation to the BR [Red Brigades]? We present their accusations of the ruling order in an extract of their court proceedings published in our paper. We share their anger and we agree that it is the power sector that must be on trial. We do not believe that terrorism makes any sense in the context here and we question the theoretical basis of any vanguard group that intends to lead or speak for the people, as little better than the farce of representation that exists in the present power structures of the state. We have published this material on the BR to rectify the repressed and distorted coverage they have received by all media* (quoted in Tuer, "The CEAC Was Banned in Canada," 35–36).
54. *Our tools were not guns but: radical analysis at the level of general theory; criticism at the level of specific polemics; and the use of a strong visual and verbal imagery drawn from reality, as a means of bringing about a confrontation with a factuality many ignore, and as an aide in provoking debate* ("Snuff," 13).
55. *Ibid.*
56. A broadcast by CEAC, June 1978, Close Radio, Los Angeles. Available online at <http://fillip.ca/vr35>.
57. "Glamour," in the "Glamour Issue," *FILE* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1975), 31. Having been left the field with CEAC's demise did not mean that General Idea had won the battle. It was confronted on another front by the battle for A Space that was raging at the same time, which it won. But by the early 1980s, General Idea felt that the tide in Toronto had turned against it in terms of opposition within the art community.
58. General Idea, "Editorial," *FILE* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1979), 17.
59. "Snuff," 15.

60. In "Outline of a Proposal," a 1978 letter in support of an application to the "Artists with Their Work" program administered by the Art Gallery of Ontario, Marras wrote: *In the context of the new Canadian generation of artists and cultural operators, I am participating to [sic] the process of cultural dissembling. Such a process of dissembling is carried out around pressing contemporary issues* (Amerigo Marras, "Outline of a Proposal," 1978, CEAC Fonds, York University).

Pages 28–37

Zanna Gilbert
The Human Letter

1. In an interview with the author (February 2010), Bruscky recounted that he spent the evening drinking with Rehfeldt, finally passing out, thereby failing to make it back to the West before the curfew. The artist reports that he was chastised by the GDR police and let go without punishment.

2. Two recent initiatives have developed different approaches to this issue: Meeting Margins, a project undertaken by the University of Essex and the London-based Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAIN), focuses on ideas of transnational exchange, whereas the Red Conceptualismos del Sur (Southern Conceptualismos Network) has concentrated on the fine detail of specific local histories while at the same time trying to foster links between Latin American researchers and artists and revive the political potential of conceptual practices in the present moment.

3. TrAIN defines "transnationalism" in the following statement: *In an increasingly complex period of globalisation, established certainties about the nature of culture, tradition and authenticity are being constantly questioned. The movement of peoples and artefacts is breaking down borders and producing new identities outside and beyond those of the nation state. It is no longer easy to define the nature of the local and the international, and many cultural interactions now operate on the level of the transnational.* "About," TrAIN, accessed December 10, 2014, <http://fillip.ca/u1fx>.

4. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minnesota: University of

Minnesota Press, 1996). Appadurai defines "locality" as "a variable quality constituted by a sense of social immediacy, technologies of interaction, and the relativity of contexts, with the maintenance of its materiality or place-ness requiring ongoing work." Arjun Appadurai, "The Production of Locality," in *Counterworks: Managing the Diversity of Knowledge*, ed. R. Fardon (London: Routledge, 1995), 204.

5. *In Fluxus there has never been any attempt to agree on aims or methods; individuals with something unnameable in common have simply naturally coalesced to publish and perform their work. Perhaps this common something is a feeling that the bounds of art are much wider than they have conventionally seemed, or that art and certain long-established bounds are no longer very useful. At any rate, individuals in Europe, the US, and Japan have discovered each other's work and found it nourishing (or something) and have grown objects and events which are original, and often uncategorizable, in a strange new way.* George Brecht, "Something about Fluxus," *Fluxus Newspaper*, no. 4 (June 1964).

6. Estera Milman, ed., "Fluxus: A Conceptual Country," special issue, *Visible Language* 26, nos. 1 and 2 (Winter/Spring 1992).

7. Magdalena Moskalewicz (December 16, 2013), comment on "Poema Colectivo Revolución & the International Mail Art Network," *Post: Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art around the Globe*, December 12, 2013, <http://fillip.ca/9625>. She further comments: *the term "revolution" was at the time completely appropriated by the communist revolution, and to many did not mean anything else than a hollow ideological cover for the totalitarian measures pursued by the supposedly democratic-socialist government. To a Polish artist active in the early 1980s, who had probably spent most of his adult life in the USSR-dependent People's Republic of Poland, the very idea of making art on the topic of revolution must have sounded ridiculously outrageous. There, art about revolution denoted the props and decorations produced for all the farcical anniversary galas regularly held at offices and schools, and official state-organized street manifestations, that all citizens were forced to participate in, where the slogans of the communist revolution were continuously repeated, but devoid*

of meaning. Other than, in fact, being the signifiers of oppression. This was the appropriated and bureaucratized "revolution" that the majority of the Polish art world wanted to keep away from since the break from the socialist realism in the mid-1950s.

8. Anne Thurmann-Jajes, "Playing with the System: Artistic Strategies in the GDR from 1970 to 1990," in *Subversive Practices: Art under the Conditions of Political Repression/60s–80s/South America–Europe*, ed. Iris Dressler et al. (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 512.

9. Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 268.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 269.

12. Cordelia Marten reports that most of Rehfeldt's letters were intercepted, opened, photographed, documented and saved in the folders of the so called "post-control-files." In the GDR, more than 90,000 private letters were read secretly every day. After German Re-Union, many Mail-Artists took the opportunity to inspect their Stasi files. They noticed that many addresses on foreign letters had been ripped off the envelopes and were preserved while the rest of it was destroyed. Thus, the Stasi's postal system can be accused of demolishing art works deliberately. Cordelia Marten, "Conceptual Art in East Germany: Robert Rehfeldt and His Network of Artists," *Vivid [Radical] Memory*, September 2007, <http://fillip.ca/dhmf>, 9.

13. *In other cases, the Stasi not only faked envelopes by means of purpose-made postal and rubber stamps, but wrote letters to play people off against each other. For instance, Leonardo Duch received a letter from Robert Rehfeldt with an attached flag of the GDR, which caused Duch lots of trouble with the Brazilian military police. When Duch asked Rehfeldt not to put any propaganda material in his letters anymore, it emerged that he never put the flag inside the envelope.* *Ibid.*, 10.

14. Robert Rehfeldt, *ARTWORKER ACTUAL NEWS* (1977).

15. *Ibid.*

16. Robert Rehfeldt, *ART IN CONTACT* (1978).

17. Piotrowski notes: *Eugen Blume observed that the East German STASI studied communiqués sent out by Robert Rehfeldt, with great scrupulousness and seriousness. Rehfeldt, playing with*