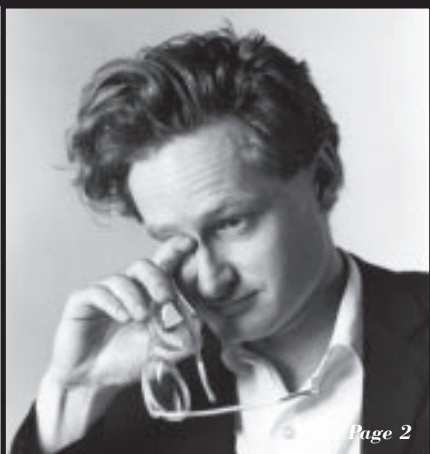


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AGYU FALL NEWSLETTER 2009

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# HELLO, out there

ART GALLERY OF YORK UNIVERSITY PRESENTS

## THE 1984 MISS GENERAL IDEA PAVILLION

AN AGYU FOUNDERS PRESENTATION 15 SEPTEMBER – 6 DECEMBER 2009



Image: *The Hoarding of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, 1975, exhibited in *Going Thru the Notions* at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery, October 18 – November 6, 1975. Photo: Henk Visser, courtesy Carmen Lamanna Estate.

## THE HOARDING

**N**ow that we're defining the limits of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion with the *Hoarding*, we're really looking forward to clearing the site ...

Plans have been finalized to the extent that we've decided to leave some decisions for the future. So we've left some gaps in the development on purpose. For example: the missing pieces in the *Hoarding* have been included so the general public can add their personal vision of the project while they see through what we're trying to do. This section of *Hoarding* that we've erected is about all we'll ever need, as it's portable, and can be mobilized to encompass the far-flung site of the Pavillion...

We never refer to the sites of the Pavillion. Only the site. It's a singular site with multiple points of view. The fact that there are

several locales where activity takes place only expands the centre. Our centre is defined by the circumference and the *Hoarding* is a sort of tool that allows us to expand the centre to any of its installations...

Just as the *Hoarding* defines the limits of the site and the project in general, we've also attempted to utilize the media to the same end. We've expended just as much energy erecting the *Hoarding* in the media as we have on erecting it on real estate. It has to be real before they'll report it, but it isn't really real until they do. Basically we just want people to know that General Idea is on the job and that the Pavillion is going up and it doesn't matter

if they find this out by passing the *Hoarding* in the street or seeing it on the title page...

With the *Hoarding* appearing in magazines and on TV and what-have-you, we also feel that the limits of the site have been expanded to include these vehicles. They become part of the centre. It is entirely possible that the site of the Miss General Idea Pavillion could include your TV or surface on your coffee table. If this, for instance, was ever published, we would see it as just another extension of the site-lines. The Pavillion is a very parasitic structure.

From "Interview with Foreman Lamanna,"  
*FILE Magazine*, Summer 1978

ART GALLERY OF YORK UNIVERSITY PRESENTS **THE 1984 MISS GENERAL IDEA PAVILLION**  
AN AGYU FOUNDERS PRESENTATION 15 SEPTEMBER – 6 DECEMBER 2009

**ELF!**

**“OH MY GOD, YOU FOUND OUT MY SHAMEFUL SECRET ...”**

## CRITIC RECANTS ON GENERAL IDEA

**D**irector Philip Monk thinks he can rewrite history with the AGYU's new exhibition *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. But our investigative reporters have found a smoking gun in his past writings. In 1982, Monk—then an art critic—delivered a lecture on General Idea at the Rivoli in front of the Toronto art community *tout ensemble* and subsequently published an over-the-top 20,000-word article on them in *Parachute* magazine (1983). It seems he was not always their supporter!

### THE BACK-STORY

Listen to these lines penned by Mr. Monk in the glory days of the Queen Street art community General Idea did so much to found: “General Idea’s resort to ambiguity, the multiplicity of meanings, and an expanding system of verbal puns and paradoxes, all referenced to current theories of interpretation or textual reading and their own self-referencing system, reflect the form of capitalism they wish to criticize. In the end, do they accommodate us too readily to that reality without the means to show us what is real about it? Is this strategy of inhabitation then a critique of capitalism or a *ruse* of capitalism?” Those were heady days, indeed!

We tracked down an embarrassed Mr. Monk in his office at the AGYU where he came clean on his past. “Oh my god, you found out my shameful secret ... You have to understand, I was young. I was a critic! And I thought, with Thatcher’s and Reagan’s neo-conservative retrenchment, that we had to take General Idea at their word in their flirtation with capitalism, especially when one of their *Showcards* read: ‘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.’ Now that that period is long over, we can look back and see what General Idea really accomplished and contributed to Canadian art and Toronto culture. Because it is huge.”



Famous Canadian art critic changes his mind on General Idea, says he didn’t know they were being ironical. DUH!  
Photo: Philip Monk by Jorge Zontal (1982)

**“WE NEVER FELT WE HAD TO PRODUCE GREAT ART TO BE GREAT ARTISTS.”**

### QUEERING THE ART COMMUNITY

It’s true. Toronto’s legendary artistic trio has had a large impact on the international art community, especially with younger artists interested in the collaborative nature of General Idea’s enterprise, their corporate identity, the range of their practices and diversity of media, their infiltrative methodology, as well as in the role of their publication *FILE Magazine* which they founded in 1972 and which was modelled on the format of *LIFE* magazine, likewise their founding of Art Metropole as an archive of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* (and that continues to today), etc. Certainly, their tutelage of younger generations of Toronto artists, where there is a dynamic queer art community, is immeasurable.

Perhaps they were always too good at what they did, which some took as *self-promotion-as-artwork*. Perhaps they were too open and too disguised at the same time: it was all on the surface. “What is artificiality? We knew in order to be artists and to be glamorous artists we had to be artificial and we were. We knew in order to be artificial we had to affect a false nature, disguising ourselves ineffectually as natural objects: businessmen, beauty queens, even artists themselves.” As they themselves wrote, providing their own pre-emptive analysis and always producing

the best copy, “What some find disturbing about General Idea is our resort to false nature, this imperative artificiality, this hunger for fake innocence, the constant posturing, our superabundance of significant forms and gestures. We hide our motivation behind ‘natural’ appearances.... We are obsessed with available form. 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.” It was too camp for some people. Not serious enough for others.

### PERFORMATIVE FICTION—THEY SAID IT, THEY DID IT.

At *ELF!*, we agree, in fact, to take General Idea at their word but now in another sense precisely as a *fiction*—a *performative* fiction. So let’s accept GI at their word when in 1975 they famously said, “This is the story of General Idea and the story of what we wanted. 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

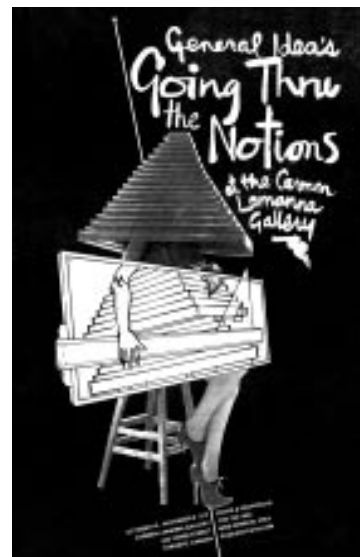
great art did not bring glamour and fame. We knew we had to keep a foot in the door of art and we were conscious of the importance of berets and paint brushes. We made public appearances in painters’ smocks. We knew that if we were famous and glamorous we could say we were artists and we would be. We did and we are. We are famous, glamorous artists.”

They said it, they did it! We now know that their strategy was less ironical than it was performative. GI said, “We knew that in order to be glamorous we had to become plagiarists, intellectual parasites. We moved in on history and occupied images, emptying them of meaning, reducing them to shells.” But this move was accompanied by an enunciative act, which is language based, that effectuates the work. The format (i.e., “beauty pageants, pavillions, picture magazines”) and the inhabitation (GI’s recontextualizing act of their narrative fiction) come together in a new image-text relationship. Both the *Showcards* and *FILE* itself effectively play this role. General Idea’s 1975 exhibition *Going Thru the Notions* is an archive of these “notions” through which *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* ideally is constructed (or reconstructed now in 2009). *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*, like *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant*, is an inhabited shell—an ever expanding format that incorporates the ongoing transformations of GI’s content and concerns, structured as the Pavillion’s individual rooms.

### GENERAL IDEA AND ME!

From all reports, it seems now that Mr. Monk has enlisted in the service of General Idea. What accounts for his change of heart ... and mind? “Well, I’ve always been involved with General

Idea as a curator, creating the collection of their work at the Art Gallery of Ontario, after all,” says Mr. Monk. “What’s different now, aside from rightfully acknowledging GI’s importance, is the recognition of the institutional affinities between General Idea and the AGYU: the AGYU is the perfect host to house *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*. The AGYU is a performative fiction, too. At the AGYU, we use all our institutional products—marketing, newsletters, press releases—as oblique interpretations of the art we are exhibiting, mimicking artists’ strategy in the process, such as here *FILE Magazine*, and fabricating an overarching narrative that differs from the artists but that communicates in their spirit. In preparing the marketing for this exhibition we realized that a model was right in front of us all along, before us as our very own Canadian history. General Idea pioneered these strategies. We’ve been infected by the spirit of Miss General Idea!”



It seems that we’re all children of General Idea. As for Mr. Monk, we reserve our judgement on his return to the fold until we read his book on General Idea. He told us, “In a text that influenced both GI’s work and my critique of it, Roland Barthes wrote, ‘no denunciation without an appropriate method of detailed analysis.’ I applied that ethos to my earlier critique of General Idea. I now, however, want to continue an analysis without

the added value judgement of the past.” *We’ll see*. We’d like to know whether Mr. Monk’s forthcoming book will deal with how General Idea and *FILE Magazine* contributed to the development of a transnational Canadian art movement in the early 1970s; with how *FILE* metamorphosed, after the demise of correspondence art, Image Bank, and the Eternal Network, into *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* itself; with how GI’s fictive performative strategies helped bring an art community into existence in Toronto; with whether he is agile enough to invent a meta-commentary that can operate behind the inventive metacommentary that is GI’s work itself, or adept enough to deal with their writing as a unique contribution to the tradition of the American literary avant-garde;

indeed, whether *he* has a performative fiction up *his* sleeve.

Does anyone smell *un hommage à* General Idea? *Get down Philip Monk!*

(All quotations by General Idea are from *FILE Magazine*, Autumn 1975—Glamour issue.)

**“SOMEONE HAS TO TELL THEM HOW LONG THEIR TRAIN’S BEEN GONE.”**

### FROM OUR ARCHIVES

**“It is their love affair with suffocating self-definition and their dallying with atmospheres of vague fetid evil that is getting more arteriosclerotic and uninhabitable all the time. It’s a vein nobody can profitably mine any more. Someone has to tell them how long their train’s been gone.”**

—Gary Michael Dault, “3 trendy young men market themselves,” *The Toronto Star*, November 3, 1975. (Review of General Idea’s *Going Thru the Notions* exhibition at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery)





Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal and AA Bronson at the drafting board ponder the construction of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion. Photo: Rodney Werden, courtesy General Idea

## FORM FOLLOWS FICTION

Why the need to rebuild the Pavillion so many years after it burned down? Musing on this question in the past, General Idea said, "Back in the Seventies, a lot of people used to ask us if we actually intended to construct the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion, and the architect in us always answered 'yes'. We always intended that the Pavillion would occupy as much space on real estate as it did in the media... Sometimes it seemed the only way we could get a fragment of the Pavillion built was to build it where we could, which was often in our studios or in galleries and museums. But that soon turned out to be a breakthrough for us, to realize that our Pavillion, like some sort of cultural parasite, could be erected in other people's architecture... The Pavillion

may well have burned down. The Pavillion may have been reconstructed from salvaged blueprints and rescued fragments. It may have been restored rather than started from scratch. With its foundation firmly rooted in the not-so-distant present, the erection of the Pavillion has penetrated both past and future. Burning the candle at both ends made General Idea realize their borderline careers as architects and archaeologists. Sandwiched somewhere inbetween stands the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion" (1977).

And why the *precise* recreations of these two exhibitions at the Art Gallery of York University? Reached for comment, AGYU Assistant Director/Curator Emelie Chhangur quickly retorted in the spirit of altered temporalities: "General Idea brought out the architect in us, too. We're out there, re-building the future from found fragments of our Canadian cultural history, two exhibitions at a time." Right on! Money well spent! *Get down AGYU!*

# LAVISH PAVILLION TO BE REBUILT WITH PUBLIC FUNDS CRITICS CRY FRAUD AT THIS ART FOLLY

**T**ORONTO, CANADA—Thirty-two years after a disastrous fire destroyed *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* in 1977, the Art Gallery of York University has set itself the heroic task of reconstructing the Pavillion along the lines of its original plans. The AGYU has combined resources with archaeologists, architects, and the museums and collections that house its remnants to bring together material for public view as the first stage of restoring the Pavillion to the shell of its past glory.

"THE 1984 MISS GENERAL IDEA PAVILLION is basically this: a framing device for accommodation. A terminal in which to rest the case of open and closed frameworks. A superstructure of containment formats like walls framing the theatre of operations. Architecture playing the part of the Master of Ceremonies directing all eyes to this stage to perform the single point of view." (General Idea)

The construction and destruction of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* is documented at the AGYU by the recreation of two key exhibitions by Canada's legendary artistic trio. General Idea's *Going Thru the Notions* and *Reconstructing Futures* were first exhibited at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in 1975 and 1977 respectively. Contributing to the exhibition through loans are the Art Gallery of Ontario, the National Gallery of Canada, the Carmen Lamanna Estate, and General Idea.



Installation of *Going Thru the Notions* at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery, October 18 – November 6, 1975  
Photo: Henk Visser



Installation of *Reconstructing Futures* at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery, December 10, 1977 – January 6, 1978  
Photo: courtesy General Idea



Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal and AA Bronson escape from the burning Pavillion.  
Photo: courtesy General Idea

General Idea (1969 – 1994) are AA Bronson, Felix Partz (d. 1994), and Jorge Zontal (d. 1994). Special thanks to Miss All-Things General Idea, Fern Bayer.

## GET DOWN TORONTO

Given the AGYU's university context, we're treating these exhibition recreations as a research opportunity in order to learn from our exercise in reconstructing futures. Keep in touch through futures issues of *ELF!* to read about our upcoming General Idea lecture series or visit the AGYU website: [www.yorku.ca/agyu](http://www.yorku.ca/agyu).



**VOICE  
OVER**

"Without waiting for flames to diminish we throw off our fireman's drag and rush into the ruins. Like archeologists collecting fetish objects we rebuild images for The Future from found fragments of our cultural environment. It's always exciting when The Pavillion burns to the ground – It's time for another re-write."  
– General Idea, December 10, 1977