What GENERAL IDEA taught us about Canadian art history

BY **PHILIP MONK**

Fun with Mythmaking

Everybody knows the *story*:

"This is the story of General Idea and the story of what we wanted." You know, in the 1975 "Glamour" issue of *FILE Megazine*, when General Idea famously proclaimed, "We wanted to be famous, glamourous and rich. That is to say we wanted to be artists and we knew that if we were famous and glamourous we could say we were artists and we would be." But not everyone knows the *history* AA Bronson dreamt of when, in 1983 in *Museums by Artists*, he wrote, "Someone sometime must write a really good history of Canadian art in the Sixties and Seventies."

That's because this history has yet to be written—or has it? Maybe it has taken shape otherwise—in myth perhaps, a category that General Idea liked to counterpoise to history. Myth is an unlikely legitimator and *FILE Megazine*—implicated as it is in General Idea's practice—is an unlikely vehicle for this history's dissemination. Yet in both General Idea's story and *our* history, *FILE* has played a crucial role, this in spite of everyone thinking that the magazine was merely General Idea's self-serving promotional vehicle.

This is the story of General Idea. And me! And everybody. Or, at least, this is the story of everybody in the Canadian art scene. *Canadian*, let's be up front about this right away.

Let's look at General Idea's own foundational statement more closely. "This is the story of General Idea," they said. That is, this is the *story* they told. It was the methodology of their work, its means of fictional

General Idea (from left: Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal and AA Bronson) in 1973 with plans for **The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion**
PHOTO RODNEY WERDEN

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fabrication. Or, this is the story *they* told *themselves*. In other words, they didn't rely on others to tell it. At the same time, this is the story they told *themselves*, that is, *to* themselves, for lack of a sustaining history in the void of Canadian culture. Saying so was a *fiction* to allow them to go on making art in a place where there was no scene.

There is a closer congruence between General Idea's "story" and our own historical predicament than we might think. And *FILE* played a mediating role in changing it.

So let's read *FILE* again from cover to cover, the complete series handily reprinted in 2008, in order to see from the very start the editors' (that is, General Idea's) stated intentions. The editorial in the first issue, published in April 1972, concludes: "FILE is precisely this: the extension and documentation of available space, the authentication and reinforcement of available myths lying within the context of Canadian art today." A month later, the second issue states: "We began as a mirror of sorts, a transcanada organ of communication within the art scene, a way of looking at the scene and oneself within it…We are a node on the correspondence network, and FILE is evidence of correspondence that passes through General Idea Headquarters; friends, visitors, mail, gossip."

Here were *FILE*'s initial functions as an artists' publication: disseminator of Image Bank Request Lists (a means for correspondence artists to collect their signature fetish images through the mail in order to then recirculate their obsessive compulsions) and mirror, of sorts, of a particular art scene (a clique, one might at first complain). Myth was the unlikely binding agent of these two functions. If General Idea was "concerned with the web of fact and fiction that binds and releases mythologies," *FILE Megazine* was also the fictional vehicle masquerading as a factual magazine for its enactment.

Disseminating the phenomenon of mail art, *FILE* also described and analyzed it, in the process introducing AA Bronson as one of our finest and most prescient critics. Of course, the analysis partook of the phenomenon itself. The 1973 article "Pablum for the Pablum Eaters," for instance, was its own image bank, clipped from magazines of golden showers and "the future seen in retrospect" (that is, depictions of futurity imagined by the past, particularly images from the streamlined postwar period found in *Fortune* magazine)—all mimicking the picture/extended-caption format of *LIFE* magazine. Text re-mythified myth rather than demystifying it. What is myth? It is an "image bank of compulsions." Archives (and archives are a lasting legacy of General Idea: *FILE* and General Idea's work in general are essentially archival in function, not to mention the actual archive they founded as part of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*: Art Metropole) were built up to "generate and stabilize an ongoing body of imagery as myth." As General Idea wrote a couple of years later, "We moved in on history and occupied images, emptying them of meaning, reducing them to shells"—an operation we now call inhabitation or appropriation. Artists "deactivated" latent cultural myths and incorporated them into their own larger mythological structures, which were ongoing narratives. Description thus created a universe. In scavenging reworked artifacts of their mass cultural inheritance, artists wrote their own histories and in the process rewrote the histories of this inheritance.

Generating alternative myths as well as alternative lifestyles, General Idea and other artists looked for exotic or *démodé* cultural formats to inhabit and mutate: "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." But just as they discarded the contents of a given myth while stealing its form, so too they transformed the rituals of culture's forgotten shells—or formats—in new performances by their pseudonymous artistic personae (Dr. Brute and Mr. Peanut, to name a couple). *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* brought together the principles of correspondence art (by which contestants were solicited and made their applications) and the ritual enactments of performance (scripted according to the conventions of television).

What applied to artworks, or to artists and their performance personae, applied moreover to the "correspondence" of friends and visitors as well as mail that passed through GI Headquarters and reappeared in *FILE* in a fictionalized form of gossip. Here, too, the same mythic principles of fabrication applied: real personalities were fictionalized; events were concocted to assume the form of popular rituals, such as popularity contests; and the two were combined in a narrative influenced by the writing of the American literary avant-garde, from Gertrude Stein to William Burroughs. Myth and scene came together in a picture-magazine format that imitated *LIFE*.

FILE was not a parody of *LIFE*, as is commonly thought, but an homage to its principles, to its "methods and manners": an homage to one's own scene. In Toronto or Vancouver, that is, not New York, London or Paris. General Idea saw *LIFE* as an "image bank primer extraordinaire…the first and instant précis of lifestyle…the first and necessary authentication, the initial glamourization, of lifestyle and the common man"—everything that *FILE* was to be for artists' subcultures, their various "lingo groupings" or "sexual coteries" finally seeing themselves reflected in its pages.

So let's now return to General Idea's "story"—if we have ever strayed from it, that is, having been incorporated into its mythology from the start. The story begun above concludes (having performed its function in the process): "We knew that if we were famous and glamourous we could say we were artists and we would be. We did and we are. We are famous, glamourous artists." The saying was the doing. That is, the saying was the *making* of them: they *were* famous, glamorous artists. Such a language operation—doing by saying alone—is called a *performative* utterance.

General Idea took the declarative status of art and the current language-image relationship of conceptual art and modified the association to one of a *cultural* image and *performative* text. *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* was "erected" by means of this verbo-visual operation. *Saying* was the making of both General Idea and their works.

What do these strategies mean for us almost 40 years later? Is this General Idea's story alone, or that of all of us? Indeed, have the art practices of General Idea subliminally become the methodologies of our art

history? Are they means of enacting our very own history, one that is perpetually in arrears?

We face the same problems in writing our history today as Canadian artists did in creating their own scene in the 1960s and 1970s. "Twenty years ago," AA Bronson wrote in 1987,

> *as artists we had to construct not only our art but the fabric of an art scene. We had to start our own institutions, open our own galleries, publish our own magazines and develop our own networks. Since there was no market, we had to develop our own* raison d'être. *The result of this activity was not only the accumulated activity itself, but also an institutional network of artist-run centres from sea to sea. In fact, the entire face of contemporary Canadian art has been, no, not altered, but created as a result of this activity.*

What collective Canadian art history has followed to match artists' creative communal activity? Do we need first to create a mythology in order finally to begin one? How would myth answer to the discipline of art history, as opposed to the activity of artists?

The subliminal informational *network* of myth, with its equivalencies and correspondences, opposed the cause-and-effect ordering of the *hierarchies* of history, and the subcategory of art history. To apply the language of *FILE*'s first editorial to historians (rather than artists), the "lone concerns" of art historians are out of sync with the "co-operative existence" of artists, as demonstrated originally by *FILE* in its binding and releasing of mythologies, accomplished through the merging of fact and fiction. Other means are necessary to write the scene: namely, the strategies employed by that scene, and not the outside objectifications of academic discourse. If the historian continues to be "lone" in her activity, at least this activity can be exposed and theatricalized on the public stage of her writing. Face it, it is the self-theatricalizing, fictionalizing, performative line of Canadian art, not the formalistic or conceptualistic art made academically out of the history of art, that has made a lasting impression on our history (at least Toronto's) as it is and *should* be. *Should* be—as it is yet to be written. Performative fictions are means to enact these histories. If General Idea pioneered these strategies by creating the basis of *our* collective mythology, it is our role now to implement them, in writing motivated by their example. In the spirit of General Idea's altered temporalities of "reconstructing futures," this writing need be both speculative and retrospective at the same time.

So I challenge Canadian art historians: write me a really good history. A story that people want to read, that makes them feel part of a scene. A great Canadian story. Our story. ■

FILE, issue #1, featuring Mr. Peanut (a.k.a. Vincent Trasov) April 15, 1972 COLLECTION MORRIS/TRASOV ARCHIVE, MORRIS AND HELEN BELKIN ART GALLERY, UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA COVER PHOTO DAVID HLYNSKY