

INSIDERS & OUTSIDERS

CH. 3

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ON NOSTALGIA & THE AVANT-GARDE

Philip Monk

I had the pleasure of meeting curator, critic and writer Philip Monk during The Copycat Academy (see Ch. 1) this past June in Toronto where he was giving a series of lectures on General Idea, the Canadian art collective formed by Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal and AA Bronson who worked together from roughly 1967 to 1994. The weeklong academy, produced in partnership with the Luminato Festival, had taken up the collective as their subject and Monk's lectures became, as he describes, "the touchstone to General Idea" throughout the week. Each lecture was thirty minutes long, took place at noon each day from Monday to Friday, and while they had originally been billed as encyclopedic entries on General Idea, became mini performances in their own right. Taking material from his 2012 book, *Glamour is Theft: A User's Guide to General Idea*, each day Monk stood behind a podium, mimicking different aspects of the group's work in an attempt to convey both the visual and verbal systems General Idea used to critique popular culture and mass media. Of the lectures-as performance pieces, Monk told me a week after the academy via email, "Even though General Idea were visual artists and they produced art works, theirs was a verbal system. What 'appeared' within it was only staged through elaborate *description* and their work was enacted through verbal utterances." »

Untitled (Immaterial Poverty), Ink/Enamel on Canvas, 2013; Above: Untitled (Teen Vitality), Enamel/Collage/Plexi on Canvas, 2013 (detail 1)





"The media has replaced all other institutions," says [Fran] Lebowitz. Public image is paramount. Producers and publicists limit creators in positing imaginary publics, wanting "comps" for everything. In the entertainment industry, this results in prepackaged stories and types, copies of copies. Lana Del Rey is Marilyn meets Marylou, samo samo. STILL: Even though Lana's lyrics are laughably simple (you make me crazy / you make wild / just like a baby / spin me round like a child), and her look entirely revealed, a playful audience can write interpretation after interpretation

Monk's own "verbal utterances," which looked to deconstruct concepts such as death, glamour, perversion, plagiarism and collectivity, were at times frustratingly hard to follow, although served to magnify the density of General Idea's fabricated systems used for critique and subversion of cultural norms. Living in Toronto, General Idea is ever-present and has become part of the lexicon of popular culture they once sought to parasitically inhabit, appropriate and cannibalize. But unlike say, Warhol, whose system of ready-mades, commercial printing techniques and views on fame and celebrity are easily understood (and therefore continually referenced ad nauseam), General Idea's complex visual and verbal languages beg to be uncovered further. One system in particular that General Idea employed was that of inhabitation and articulation, which Monk theorizes as "insider vs. outsider" systems of cultural production. I asked Monk to explain this theory further for ISSUE28 and to offer, through an analysis of General Idea and his own work as a curator, thoughts on our current landscape of mass participation, nostalgia, and consequently, where this leaves the artist today.

During your lectures at The Copycat Academy you mentioned that General Idea didn't use the words parody or pastiche in their artistic practice. I found this so interesting as these are words that are very much used today and part of our system of cultural production...

Someone else at The Copycat Academy asked me why I didn't use the word "parody" in describing General Idea's work in my lectures. Well, I was engaged in what I would call a philological exercise, which is to consider what the system of their work means in terms of its own time when it was produced (now historical) and through its own language. I only used the language or terms General Idea themselves used.

We have to think of General Idea as a closed system. Developing their ideas in the late 60s and early 70s and ending in 1994. It's important we look at the group through the language that they used and work within that. They used language in a very specific way; they were very interested in fascination and nostalgia. Parody didn't quite work within their system. Parody implies critique, and while General Idea did critique our systems of culture, they were much more interested in seduction, nostalgia and recovery. Parody implies irony and dismissal, standing outside a system in order to reveal how it works, General Idea loved what they were doing and it was a fascination rather than a dismissal.

Yes, you seemed instead to use the words seduction, recovery, nostalgia and fascination throughout the week...

Yes and of course, General Idea were arch, ironical, and camp in their work, but they never would state this, only display it. It's curious that the word "camp" only appears once in any of their writing or their magazine *FILE*. They preferred to use the code word "nostalgia" for "camp" for strategic reasons. Of course, their work was a critique of sorts: of Glamour, the commodity, and the art system. But at the same time, they wanted to play with the fetish character of Glamour, for instance, and its fascination because their system was double edged: it was a system in motion. They elevated something degraded (a drag queen Miss General Idea) in order to degrade something elevated (culture's notion of Glamour embodied in the beauty contest). Nostalgia is not about dismissal but loving fascination. We only camp what we appreciate in some way, even if we are being "ironical" about it. This is what General Idea were doing.

You mentioned "insider vs. outsider" systems during the week and its relationship to cultural production; can you explain this concept further?

It was a very different era when General Idea was producing art; one of the major differences was that communities were quite closed off. For instance, with the queer community, there was a coded language that people in-the-know created and used among themselves. This is just not possible today when everything is public. Culture is now something that everyone can participate in, comment on and ridicule. I think this results in a flattening out of culture; language is reduced to its most common denominators, which does not allow for any nuances or subtleties. We're looking at the passing of culture from inside to outside. An insider system requires an articulation of a specific language. An outsider system is about looking in, viewing and commenting on culture—this is generally where parody, copy and mimicry are found. For General Idea, working within the closed system of our collective past, they wouldn't need parody. »





'In the current era of hyperlinked documentation, tweets, instagrams and reblogs, an order is brought to culture that stagnates its opportunity for innovation. If the modes of delivering culture become enforced with rigid structures, nothing will feel fresh, even if it is. The monotony of navigating Facebook, emails and Wikipedia has diminished the chance of niche discovery in the public data stream.'

- Analog Preservation Network (APN)

Where do you see this “insider vs. outsider” system being articulated today?

It's hard to imagine that we can have an avant-garde or underground anymore when the terms of culture are shared immediately in the widespread system of the Internet. The “underground” is an incubator of new forms of understanding, new languages, and new approaches to sensation. It takes time to articulate these, to invent new languages—even though in time they rise up to be collectively embraced. If everything is shared immediately, it can only be through a common language that already exists, which is usage in its most mundane, debased form. There is no room for exotic understanding here that can transform us in different ways. If they are the only platforms within which we interact, we have to realize that the Internet and social media have collapsed the possibility of difference between the underground and mainstream. The former is composed of outsiders who invent new languages; the latter consists of insiders who merely comment ironically on a culture we already share. As an enterprise, General Idea was inaugurated at a time when it was still possible to be an “outsider” inventing languages yet participating in culture through a critique of its images.

Yet some would argue that this current widespread participation, in which we all have become insiders, leads to new forms of authorship and selfhood...

More than the question of authorship, for me the interesting issue is that of archives. The Internet has forced us all to become archivists. But since through social media we all seem to share what is familiar and similar, these are archives of the Same rather than Difference. What is potentially interesting about archives is their classification of difference: archives can bring together images or things that don't seem at first to belong together. This is part of their power to fascinate. (General Idea's work was one giant archive that archived images of our culture in the process.) What is equally interesting is the question of what *unsettles* the archive by unsettling its classification system, a question of what cannot be housed there. Is it possible to unsettle the archive of the computer screen? A too-shared culture may not be able to ask this question or even recognize it.

Where does this leave the artist/writer/creator today?

This new archival recognition frees the artist or writer to look at the richness of historical culture archivally, to invent new archives from the resources of knowledge systems artists, writers, scientists, and historians have created in the past. The aim is to reawaken the past by making its knowledge systems exotic, not just for nostalgia's sake, but for our own intellectual fascination.

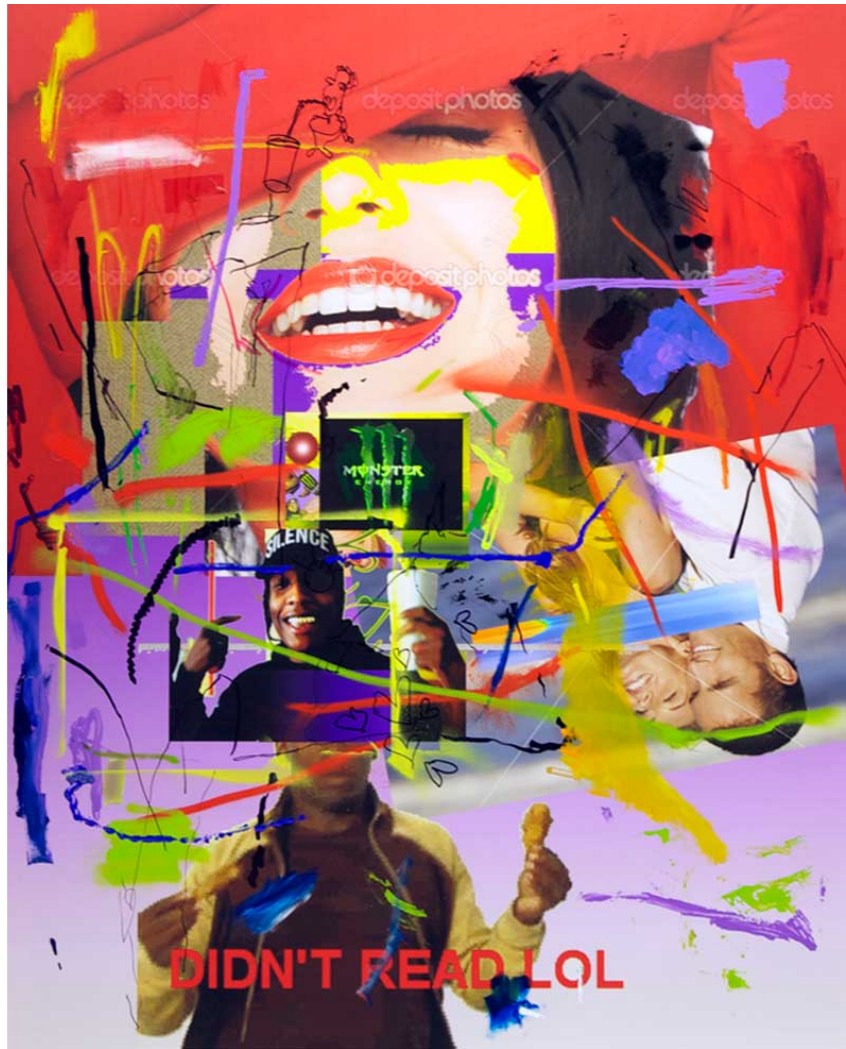
As a curator, where do you see the avant-garde existing today?

I think about artists who are working within closed communities, working with people vs. working within the art system—this is where we can begin to critique culture. Within this new system of hyper-connectivity and superficiality, I find myself retreating into the past. I'm currently fascinated by 19th century scholarship, the idea of an encyclopedia of knowledge. We have become a culture of ‘the image’ and as time goes on the ability to read feels as though it might become obsolete. I'm retreating from the viscosity of our culture into producing writing, investigating its capacities. I don't think all is lost though, there are still revivals. I'm living at the end of a generation that loved print. It now moves into cult. Everything returns, just in a different way.

How do we approach revival—this consumption of the past—within our current cultural landscape of ‘the image’ in thoughtful and meaningful ways that go beyond surface-level revivals and homage?

Revivals are ways of re-circulating culture, where something is retained and something lost in the process. They are a necessary part of our relationship to the past. We have to constantly balance an understanding of a past culture in its *own* terms and in terms of what still interests *us*. Most cases of revival only deal with the latter, with a culture's more superficial aspects, but revivals are also means of discovering the fascinating things we have (arrogantly) forgotten. To do this, though, we need to get beyond the computer screen and engage with material artefacts, whether these are objects or images, just as we need a more direct interaction with language itself and not communication. »



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Is there a downside to a culture made up of revivals?

Yes and no. I think early twentieth-century modernism made us think that nineteenth-century revivalism in art and architecture was bad for not more directly embracing and articulating what was (technologically) new in its time. I think we should look at the nineteenth-century and its constant stylistic revivals instead as productive signs of intellectual fantasies and romantic identifications, as symbols of an intense production of knowledge. Culture as a whole was expressing itself. We need to look at what is meaningful in revivals. Following General Idea, we need to discover what is *meaningful* within nostalgia—how, through addressing old images; nostalgia can become an articulated system of meaning in itself. §

By Aliyah Shamsher

Philip Monk a curator and writer, currently living and working in Toronto, ON. Monk is the Director of the Art Gallery of York University and has served as a curator at both the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Power Plant. His book, Glamour Is Theft: A User's Guide to General Idea is available now.

Untitled (Minimally Processed), Ink/Enamel on Canvas, 2013; Above: Untitled (Teen Vitality), Enamel/Collage/Plexi on Canvas, 2013 (detail 2)