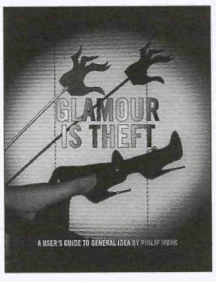
of low-intensity aesthetic categories. Always cognizant of the continuum and complexity of aesthetic experiences, she writes with an awareness of the range of possible effects, both across categories and within them. Considering the saturation of these types of mixed or minor aesthetics in all aspects of everyday life, Ngai has done much to open up a dialogue around weak evaluations that we would do well to explore further.

—Amy Gaizauskas

1 Donald Kuspit, "Sol LeWitt: The Look of Thought," in *Art in America* 63 (1975): 45–49.



Glamour Is Theft:
A User's Guide to General Idea
by Philip Monk
Art Gallery of York University Press, 2013

Someone ought to write a history of the work of Toronto curator Philip Monk—an intellectual history tracing the evolution of his ideas. I imagine that such an account would necessarily feature a key moment in 1998 when Monk presented two interrelated exhibitions at the Power Plant: *American Playhouse: The Theatre of Self-Presentation* and *Picturing the Toronto Art Community: The Queen Street Years*.

The first exhibition explored the performance of "self" in the work of US artists made during the 1960s and '90s: the creation of superstars in underground films like Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963) and Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests* (1963–66); the subcultural hall-of-mirrors of Warhol's Silver Factory, captured in the photographs of Billy Name and Dennis Hopper; Garry Winogrand's documentation of events (press conferences, demonstrations, rallies and museum receptions) ritually performed in order to be documented in the media; and Richard Prince's and Cindy Sherman's fascination with clichés and mass-media stereotypes.

Simultaneously presented alongside the first exhibition as a kind of mirror image—or more precisely, as a mirror placed before another mirror—*Picturing the Toronto Art Community* presented work by Toronto artists produced in the 1970s and 80s. Such work theatricalized the self in relation to an indistinguishably real and fictional arts community, or "scene." Colin Campbell's *Bad Girls* (1980) told the story of its fictional protagonist, Robin (played by Campbell), and her rise to stardom on the stage of the Cabana Room, a bar operated by Ms. Susan (played by Susan Britton, its real-life co-founder). Self-referentially, the serial video was shown at the Cabana Room during weekly screenings; Peter MacCallum's photographs of the Spadina Hotel and the Cameron House (with its THIS IS PARADISE mural painted by Tom Dean) captured two of the favourite watering holes and meeting places where such mirror plays took place. General Idea's performance *Towards an Audience Vocabulary* (1978) abutted a "real" audience that watched a "fictional" audience composed of local art-world luminaries, as it rehearses standard audience reactions, such as applauding, giving a standing ovation, laughing, booing, being bored—the vocabulary of cultural participation in the society of spectacle. *You Don't Own Me* (1978), a feminist performance by The Clichettes (Janice Hladki, Elizabeth Chitty, Johanna Householder and Louise Garfield, lip-synching Leslie Gore's pop hit), was presented in the context of a festival that dealt with the intersection between performance and television.

The parallels are as clear as day. In what we can call an act of ventriloquism, the two exhibitions rendered the peculiar dynamic between theatrical selves and artificial communities where—to borrow a phrase from General Idea—"form follows fiction." This line of thinking is further developed, and reaches a kind of apogee, in Philip Monk's newest book, *Glamour is Theft: A User's Guide to General Idea*.

A major intellectual accomplishment, the book is premised on the intuition that General Idea did not simply produce artworks in the way that many artists do, but that all of their activities created a vast mythic system. Decoding this system, as it was elaborated in their artworks and in their own writings published in the pages of *FILE Megazine*, is Monk's ambition for this book.

Glamour is Theft focuses on the period from 1969 to 1978, but Monk is quick to point out that his book is not a history of General Idea's early years. The reason behind this explanation is simply that history cannot account for myth. Including a quotation from anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in the preface, the book itself assumes "the dual nature of mythological thought, which coincides with its object [myth] by forming a homologous image of it but never succeeds in blending with it." As he explores General Idea's mythic system, Monk himself must mimic mythic writing.

The book draws on the literature (William S. Burroughs), semiotic theory (Roland Barthes) and artist writings (Robert Smithson) published more or less at the same time that General Idea was producing their early works. It is an absolute pleasure to read. Indeed, as the text progresses, and as General Idea's terms of operation become more fully articulated, Monk seems to delight in the way these lexical terms begin to roll off his tongue. The Spirit (of Miss General Idea) begins, as it were, *to speak through him*.

This poetic dimension coexists with a high level of analytic rigour. In less capable hands, a key concept such as "glamour" might have been defined as simply another term in a list of attributes denoting artistic success (for example, as in General Idea's well-known statement of intention, "We wanted to be famous, glamorous and rich"). Monk rightly recognizes that glamour is not merely another attribute sought by General Idea; rather, glamour is a principle that structured their entire mythic system. Glamour fulfills this structuring role—not by means of the stability of its meaning, but by its multiplicity of uses. Monk rigorously traces the different uses of glamour: in General Idea's *Pageants*, it served as an ironic inversion of the art world; in their *Showcards*, it was the architecture that consolidated convergent sightlines in a publicity machine that was identical with the erection of General Idea's *Pavillion*; in the "Glamour Issue" of *FILE*, it functioned as the storyline of the elevation of General Idea itself. These distinctions are important. They help Monk to situate the concept of glamour as central to the evolution of General Idea's artistic project, but also to highlight its key function as a principle of indecidability: "As the centerpiece of the system, "Glamour" [was] a term that cannot be pinned down.... It was a mythic concept that could accommodate ambiguity. Indeed, it *was* changing one's mind, shifting stances, applying "feminine" logic, strategically."

In this sense, glamour functions much like the term "formless" in Georges Bataille's "Critical Dictionary" published in *Documents*, the magazine he directed from 1929–30:

> A dictionary would begin as of the moment when it no longer provided the meanings of words but their tasks. In this way *formless* is not only an adjective having such and such a meaning, but a term serving to declassify, requiring in general that every thing should have a form.[1]

Formless is a principle of de-categorization that serves to dissolve readymade distinctions between opposing terms: high and low; form and content; fact and fiction. General Idea might have called it a "borderline case." This connection to Bataille intriguingly connects Monk's thought experiment in *Glamour is Theft* to Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss' own *Formless: A User's Guide*. The point of this observation is not to speculate on the precursors that would have served as inspiration for Monk's project (the readymade distinction between the US precursor and its Canadian derivative is perhaps the most tired categorization of all) but, rather, it serves to illustrate the exercise in intertextuality that this book brilliantly exemplifies.

Glamour is Theft is impeccably researched. Alongside Fern Bayer and Christina Ritchie's catalogue *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968–1975*, Monk's book is poised to serve as an essential reference for anyone interested in the pioneering early work of General Idea. Knowing Philip Monk's output for the past several years, this is all to be expected. Less obviously, however, this book provides an ideal case study—a *model*—of a curator's sustained engagement with the work of artists in this place we call Toronto, a city where, it might be argued, a prevailing sense of disregard has left its artists with little option but to flirt with manipulating their own mirror images, in the service of reflecting and projecting the "real" formlessness of our own communities.

—Luis Jacob

1 Georges Bataille, et al., *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, trans. Iain White (Atlas Press, London, 1995).