

Floorplan:

Is Toronto Burning?

1977 | 1978 | 1979

***Three Years in the Making
(and Unmaking) of the
Toronto Art Scene***

curated by Philip Monk
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agYU

The late 1970s was a key period when the Toronto art scene was in formation and destruction—downtown, that is. In 1977, Toronto thought itself the country's most important art centre, but history has shown that the nascent downtown art community, not the established uptown scene of commercial galleries, was where it was happening. Conflicts within the newly instituted artist-run system were coming to the fore with a “coup” at A Space (September 1978) and, with its advocacy of Red Brigade-style knee-capping, the Center for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC) self-destructing and losing its funding (May 1978). In part, these conditions set the context for some of the arguments of the period and the politicized nature of its art. It was a political period. Beyond the art politics, art itself was politicized in its contents and context.

Art's political dimension was continually polemically posed—or postured—by artists in these years. Beyond politics, posturing, in fact, was a constant presence as the community invented itself. With no dominant art form and the influence of New York in decline during the period, there were no models and anything was possible: even the invention of the idea of an art community as a fictional creation. It was also a period rich in invention of new forms of art. Punk, semiotics, and fashion were equally influential, not to mention transgressive sexuality. It was the beginning of the photo-blowup allied to the deconstructed languages of advertising. Video and performance aligned in simulations of television production as the “underground” mimicked the models of the mainstream for its own satiric, critical purposes.

Room 1

The first room sets up the context in works, by Susan Britton and Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, that pre-figure some of the (political) oppositions of the period. The mid-1970s was highly politicized in the Anglo-American artworld: Condé-Beveridge brought their political “factionalism” from New York and Britton hers from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. As the terrain was shifting rapidly and allegiances were being formed and broken, approaches were either serious and didactic—witness Condé-Beveridge’s work inflected by the propagandist images of the Chinese Cultural Revolution—or ambiguously ironical and critical, as in Britton’s video. Condé-Beveridge’s work was some of the earliest political art in Toronto and *Art is Political* was shown in their controversial 1976 Art Gallery of Ontario exhibition, *It’s Still Privileged Art* (see artists’ pamphlet in reading room). Meanwhile, General Idea’s *Press Conference* (1977) asked the question, in a period when artists were using new technologies in the attempt to address wider audiences, “what is effective art?” Having appropriated the format of the press conference, the artists, as an intervention into current debates, supplied scripted serio-ironical statements on the role of art. As in Britton’s video where we are left with the question, what does she stand for (for or against the bourgeois conception of art? for or against political art?), we wonder what General Idea is advocating in this fictionalizing call to the press (but also to other artists) for an art that is “culturally operational,” based as it was on the reworking “of an advertisement for an advertising agency in *Fortune* magazine.”

1. General Idea, *Press Conference*, 1977. Video, 6:53.
2. Susan Britton, *Why I Hate Communism* No. 1, 1976. Video, 2:49.
Courtesy Vtape.
3. Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, *Art is Political*, 1975. Silver gelatin prints, series of 9, each 16 x 20 inches.

Room 2

The artist-run Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC) opened in its new location September 1976 in a building on Duncan Street, which it actually owned. CEAC rivaled A Space for the quantity, diversity, interdisciplinarity, and experimentalism of its program. It also used the resources and profile of the institution to promote its political program, which was quickly radicalized. But while A Space, in different forms that display its periodic factionalism, continues to today, CEAC lost its funding and disbanded in summer 1978 after it advocated, in its tabloid *Strike*, Red Brigade-style knee-capping. (A complete run of *Strike* and its predecessor *Art Communication Edition* is available in the reading room.) Summer 1977 was when punk broke in Toronto and it happened at the Crash 'n' Burn in the basement of CEAC. Ross McLaren's film *Crash 'n' Burn* captures some of its short-lived activity when Toronto was one of the main centres of punk. (McLaren also started up The Funnel experimental film theatre there.) So do the photographs of Isobel Harry, who also documented *Fashion Burn*, a performance as unconventional fashion show, that took place there. Independent dance (at its height then) was an integrated part of the art scene, and Missing Associates (Peter Dudar and Lily Eng) passed between 15 Dance Lab, A Space, and CEAC. Their performances at the latter and for CEAC's European tours are shown here.

- 4a. Missing Associates (Peter Dudar & Lily Eng)
Crash Points 3, footage 1976–1977; edited 2011.
Lily Eng, Solo Improvisation Documenta 6, 1977.
Penetrated M + F, footage 1977; edited 2014.
- 4b. Missing Associates (Peter Dudar & Lily Eng)
Missing in Action issues no 1 & 2, 1978 and 1979. Offset tabloids.
Courtesy Philip Monk.
5. Isobel Harry, photographs of Crash 'n' Burn; Fashion Burn (CEAC),
originals 1977; reprinted 2014. Silver gelatin prints, series of 14,
each 8 x 10 inches.
6. Ross McLaren, *Crash 'n' Burn*, 1977. 16mm film transferred to DVD,
28:00.
7. Archival material on CEAC. Courtesy Clara Thomas Archives and
Special Collections, York University and Philip Monk. Crash 'n'
Burn photographs by by Bill Piton.

Room 3

While conceptual art devolved into Marxist political theory in the mid-1970s, photo-conceptualism in Toronto from 1977 on, in the work of David Buchan and General Idea, deconstructed the language of fashion through the new strategy of the photo blowup. With their association of image and text, these photographs were staged artificiality and produced within the same apparatus as fashion, but fashion itself was only a vehicle for other discourses coded within the semiotic construction of their images: codes both of gender construction and gay sensibility, the latter making an early appearance in Toronto art. Critique equally could be effected through video, too. The implicit feminism of Britton's *Why I Hate Communism No. 1* comes to the fore as another critique in her *And a Woman*, with its title reminiscent of foreign film (and with its out of sync "dubbing"), and its content subtle and seductive images of the media construction of female gender. Analogously in the video 'Say', Rodney Werden makes visible the power relationships that come from out of frame, though audible here, in a constraining "dialogue" of single words between the artist and speaking "subject." As in both General Idea's and Buchan's work here, a whole other subtext is taking place.

8a. General Idea

General Idea's Hot Property, 1977. Screenprint, 33.5 x 43.5 inches.
The Dishes Hot Property!, 1978; *Hot Property: The Dishes*, 1978. 45-rpm audio disc, record sleeve; printed metal pin, 7 x 7 inches; 2 inch diameter.
S/HE: The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant No. 102, 1977. Offset pamphlet, 5 x 8 inches.
FILE: Special People Issue 3:3 (Spring 1977); *Punk 'til You Puke! Issue 3:4* (Fall 1977)

8b. General Idea

S/HE, 1977 (originals destroyed; exhibition archival reprint 2014). C prints, series of 10, each 24 x 31 inches.

9. David Buchan, *Modern Fashions Suite: Attenuation Please; Dissidents with a Difference; Contemporary Fibres; Men Like You Like Semantic T-Shirts; Cam-o-flage Brand Underwear*, 1977. Silver gelatin prints, 46 x 60 inches. Collection University of Lethbridge Art Gallery.
10. Susan Britton, *And a Woman*, 1978. Video, 5:46. Courtesy Vtape.
11. Rodney Werden, 'Say', 1978. Video, 3:40. Courtesy Vtape.

Rooms 4/5

Colin Campbell's videos *Modern Love* (1978) and *Bad Girls* (1979–1980) display something unique about the Toronto art community of this period: the casting of members of the art community in one's productions, which can be taken themselves as fictionalized allegories of the creation of an art community. This strategy-by-necessity recurs in the exhibition in David Buchan's *Roots* and takes another form in Condé-Beveridge's *Maybe Wendy's Right*. In *Modern Love*, Buchan stars along with a cross-dressing Colin Campbell, and Susan Britton and Rodney Werden appear in transgendered roles. Naïve Robin (Campbell) takes up with entertainer La Monte (Buchan) to disastrous result. *Bad Girls* was shown weekly on a serial basis (as it was taped) at the Cabana Room in the Spadina Hotel, a club run by Susan Britton and Robin Wall, which opened summer 1979 and became one of the art community's hang outs. In *Bad Girls*, Britton herself plays the role of Ms. Susan, manager of the trendy downtown new wave music club (called the Cabana Room) where hapless Robin, appearing once again, who is from the suburb of Thornhill, seeks entry because she read about it in *The Globe and Mail* and where, initially repulsed, she soon becomes its star attraction. (This is partly the story of the Queen Street art community at this period as it drew members from Toronto's suburbs and across Canada.)

12. Colin Campbell, *Modern Love*, 1978. Video 90:00. Courtesy Vtape.
13. Colin Campbell, *Bad Girls*, 1979–1980. Video 60:00. Courtesy Vtape.

Room 6

Tele-Performance was held in September 1978, in conjunction with the Fifth Network Cinquième Réseau video conference in Toronto. Several evenings of the *Tele-Performance* event brought together the genres of performance and video in hybrid productions, staged live with recorded elements in a television studio environment in front of an audience. (In the late 1970s, many video artists sought a convergence with television, while others critiqued this desire, but it was all part of General Idea's challenge of "effective art," specifically a desire to reach a broader public through cable and broadcast television.) The three works exhibited here by David Buchan, Elizabeth Chitty, and Clive Robertson explore the conjunction and contradictions in different ways. (*Tele-Performance* also included artists from this exhibition, General Idea and Tom Sherman.) David Buchan parodies the variety show format with his louche performer alter ego La Monte Del Monte, backed up by the real band The Dishes, singing a number of lip-synched pop hits. Note also the performance by the Clichettes, which includes Elizabeth Chitty. Elizabeth Chitty's *Demo Model* is exactly that: a demonstration of varieties of communication (an inventory of codes, semiotic analysis), with and through diverse technological devices as well as the performer's body being both transmitter and receiver; its fragmented "narrative" carried by these various codes. In another media montage, *Explaining Pictures to Dead Air*, Clive Robertson (who was also the publisher and editor of the artists' newsmagazine *Centerfold*) critiques the idea of artist's television in part through imagining and enacting the scenario of legendary German artist Joseph Beuys hired to read network news.

At first Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge's political activism confined itself to radicalizing art's context but eventually adapted itself to serving the labour movement, a transition shown here. A work like *Carmen Lamanna* (1977), criticizing their then commercial dealer Lamanna, hung in their 1977 exhibition in his gallery. Their 1979 exhibition there, *Maybe Wendy's Right*, abandoned self-reflexive critique for narrative models to elaborate a story of political consciousness raising. Acting on the belief that the personal is political, the artists inserted themselves and their children into the narrative as the photographic subjects.

14. David Buchan, *La Monte Del Monte's Fruit Cocktails*, 1978. Video, 30:00. Courtesy David Buchan Fonds, National Gallery of Canada.
15. Elizabeth Chitty, *Demo Model*, 1978. Video, 21:19.
16. Clive Robertson, *Explaining Pictures to Dead Air*, 1978. Video, 21:14.
- 17a. Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, *Carmen Lamanna*, 1977. Photostat and collage, series of 2; each 20 x 30 inches.
- 17b. Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, *Maybe Wendy's Right*, 1979. C prints, series of 19; each 13 x 8.5 inches.

Room 7

David Buchan's *Roots* (1979) shares with *Maybe Wendy's Right* its fictional, photographic construction of sociality: in Condé-Beveridge's case political struggle in union solidarity; in Buchan's case an allegory of sorts of the art community. *Roots* (its title an ironic nod to Alex Hailey television epic) depicts La Monte Del Monte's extended family, a small town white trash hodge-podge acted by friends and members of the art community. (See the reading room in-house publication for individual biographies.)

The art community in this period was interdisciplinary but it was also unique for the role that artist-run magazines played in publishing experimental writing, much of which was theoretical in nature and which promulgated in written form issues that artists were pursuing in other media. Trained as a sculptor and also a video artist, Tom Sherman explored writing from photographs and writing exhibited in galleries or other public situations, as well as exploiting the experimental possibilities offered by publishing in artists' magazines. Understanding media through writing, Sherman offered as well some of the most trenchant criticism—nonetheless delivered with his “fictional” voice—of artists' embrace of new media. If Sherman was wary of artists' use of new technologies, especially the rush to broadcast television, Judith Doyle was positive in exploring the subversive effects of artists' use of new lo-fi technologies, such as facsimile, transmitted through the telephone line (real time tele-text rather than tele-performance). In these early, marginal explorations of networked individuals siphoning off the “surplus value” of transmission, unregulated technological flows aligned with libidinal flows. (See the reading room in-house publication for Sherman and Doyle's texts.)

18. David Buchan, *Roots*, 1979. C prints, series of 19, each 12 x 15 inches.
Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Purchase 1995.
- 19a. Tom Sherman, *Envisioner*, 1978 Video, 3:00. Courtesy Vtape.
- 19b. Tom Sherman, selected texts, courtesy Philip Monk.
20. Judith Doyle, selected texts and Rumour publications, 1979.
Courtesy Judith Doyle and Philip Monk [note: “Judith Doyle, *Anorexia*” unpublished text by Philip Monk.].

Room 8

After the faux crisis of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* burning down in 1977, General Idea temporarily abandoned their overall governing system and took up other issues, such as transgression, censorship, power, and sexuality, which were in part derived from Deleuze and Guattari's book *Anti-Oedipus* and Foucault's writing translated in the late 1970s. Made for Dutch television, *Test Tube* (1979) perhaps give the "solution" to "effectiveness" broached in *Press Conference*, in its relation to "social responsibility" now through transgressive "trendiness," all offered up in General Idea's line of cocktails served in their cultural laboratory of the Colour Bar Lounge.

In December 1977, the Toronto police raided the offices of the gay liberation publication *The Body Politic* and subsequently charged the collective under obscenity laws. This was one of the events that politically galvanized the art community in its ongoing anti-censorship battles during the 1980s but specifically here in support as well of queer rights. General Idea and Clive Robertson, among other Toronto artists, performed at The Body Politic Benefit in January 1979.

21a. General Idea, *Nazi Milk*, 1979. C print, 21 x 30 inches.

21b. General Idea, *FILE: Special Transgressions Issue 4:2* (Fall 1979)

21c. General Idea, *Test Tube*, 1979. Video, 28:12. Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix.

21d. General Idea,
excerpt from "An Anatomy of Censorship," in *Performance by Artists*, (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1979).

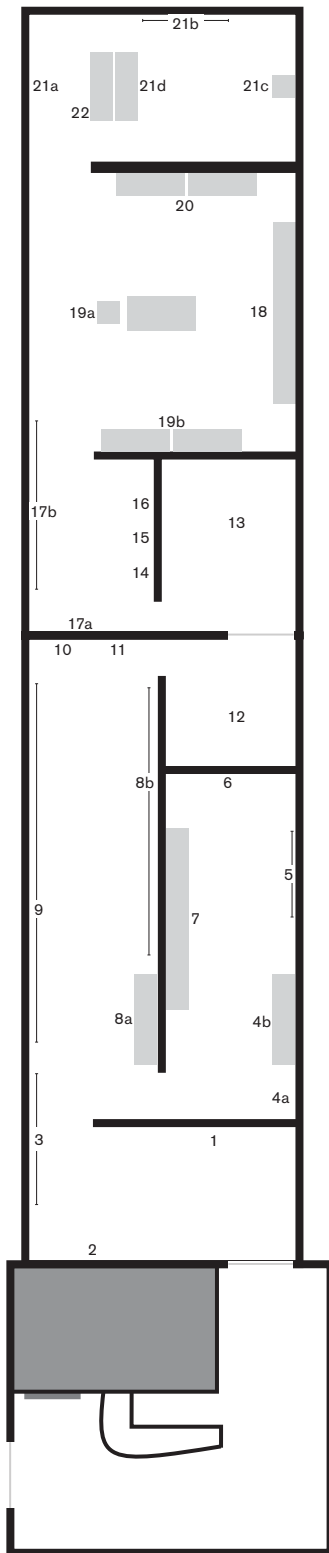
"Editorial," in *FILE: Special Transgressions Issue 4:2* (Fall 1979).

The President, *Only Paper Today* 6:3 (Spring 1979).

22. The Body Politic archival material. Courtesy of Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives [contact sheets by Robin Collyer].

Vitrines [exterior colonnade]

General Idea pays homage to the summer of punk in their “Punk ’til You Puke” issue of *FILE* magazine 3:4 (Fall 1977), pages of which are reproduced here.





<http://theAGYUisOutThere.org/everywhere>