

**General Idea: Performing Artifice and Circularity Through *The 1984 Miss*
General Idea Pageant and the *Imagevirus* Project**

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General Idea was an art collective consisting of AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal based out of Toronto and eventually New York from 1967-94. The group was one of the first to explore conceptual art practices prioritizing collaboration and collective effort. Their artworks are varied in execution, ranging from performance art pieces to photography to sculpture and public art. Throughout the career of the group, the work evolved from theater to print magazines and mail art that would more readily reach broader audiences. T General Idea began exhibiting their projects in museums and gallery spaces in Canada and Europe, which often culminated in a collection of objects connecting to a group lore or orchestrated narrative.

Their work frequently pushed the boundaries of the museum and gallery system, aiming to reach a broader public through mass reproduction and unconventional art objects. Their practice represents a certain vein of modernism and conceptual explorations that moved past the framework of the art world. However, it is important to note that General Idea never outright rejected the framework of the museum; rather, they used it to appropriate, self mythologize, and legitimize their efforts. AA Bronson writes: “We knew that we had no entree through the front door of museums and galleries into the world of glamour that seduced us and we chose instead the viral method. Utilizing the distribution and communication forms of mass media and specifically of the cultural world, we could infect the mainstream with our mutations.”¹ Without the museum system, the group would not have been able to become one of the leading art groups pioneering ideas of conceptualism and legitimizing it within the gallery space.

General Idea’s vast oeuvre and varied material approaches illustrate a desire to develop a highly individualized group lore, using recognizable imagery to build a lexicon of cultural communication. The group at once uses these tactics to illustrate their objectives while at the same time critiquing the systems they employ. This is a thread which runs through much of General Idea’s work: that it can at once be the object of criticism and critique it at the same moment.

To understand both the evolution of the group, their desires, and the concepts behind their work, I will consider two works which will act as a sort of bookend for their career as a collective: *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* and the *Imagevirus* project. Though these works are starkly different in terms of visual elements, interaction with audience, and historical context,

¹ AA Bronson, "Myth as Parasite/Image as Virus: General Idea's Bookshelf 1967-75," in *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975*, ed. Fern Bayer and Christina Ritchie (Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 1997), 18.

they illustrate the common theme of virality, subversion, and artifice which runs through General Idea's body of work. Within the catalog of their work, General Idea achieves a sense of circularity. In order to understand the connection between *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* and the *Imagevirus* project within the scope of General Idea's projects, I will analyze them through ideas of tautology, virality and artifice, as well as understanding the self-referential nature of their work and the importance of narrative.

The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant

The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant existed in the General Idea reality as an aspirational, but never fully realized, event. Rather than building work centered on physical manifestation, the group created a lush narrative that was built through various live events, documentation, and even physical ruins of the imagined *Pavillion*. General Idea was able to build a lore through which they could critique certain aspects of the cultural economy via playful, even campy, means. The event, as indicated by the title of the pageant, is set to take place in 1984. The implication of this year is dystopian, referencing George Orwell's book of the same name. Though the rehearsals for and artifacts surrounding the pageant never outright address this association, the choice of the year is significant especially when considering that the event never actually occurs, in 1984 or later years. Thus, they further mythologize the year 1984 in cultural reference. If a pageant in 1984 never happens, then what was the preparation, documentation, and rehearsing even for? I argue that *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* is less about the pageant itself and instead acts as a framework for other works to exist in one cohesive space. General Idea describes Miss General Idea 1984 as such:

“Miss General Idea 1984 is basically this: an idea framing device for arresting attention without throwing away the key. Hints of flesh and bone content are framed by Beauty's-Only-Skin-Deep context. We are surfacing the surface of our own desires defined by the intersection of differing points of view. Elevated she reigns; idealized she contains; artfully she maintains; dominantly she sustains our interest.”²

² General Idea, *Miss General Idea 1984*, 18 October 1975, serigraph print and ink on card

The *Pageant* becomes a framing device to explore larger ideas of desire, attention, and fame. Miss General Idea herself becomes an elevated, mythological character that encapsulates much of what General Idea strove for in terms of glamor and recognition.

When General Idea first introduces the pageant, it is 1970, one year after Stonewall and during the gay rights movement. By operating from this frame of reference, General Idea has clear ties to facets of the queer community which they bring to the forefront through art spaces. The idea of pageantry invokes associations with drag and club culture. The interest in appropriating aspects of culture (whether it be queer or otherwise) to subvert or interrogate social problems is an integral element of General Idea's work. In this way, General Idea is utilizing elements of camp throughout their performances and the conceptual idea of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant*. Susan Sontag describes camp as such: "All camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice. Camp sees everything in quotation marks... To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater."³

To understand General Idea and their performances in this context, consider the idea of a pageant in terms of performance. A normal pageant would require the audience to be aware of the structure, levels of performativity, and general relationship between real and unreal in order to perceive the event. When this is recontextualized as a pageant within a larger performance, as in the case of *What Happened* (1970), the structure is disintegrated and it shifts from genuine to campy spectacle. In this way, General Idea is employing the applications of camp to shift the audience's perception of what should and shouldn't be taken seriously. This is further emphasized by the audience rehearsals which take place in various performances. By rehearsing an audience for a future event (of which they will most likely not be in attendance) within the pageant framework emphasizes the inherent cultural expectations of attending such an event while at once dismantling them.

A key facet of the realization of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* is the pavilion and its corresponding rooms, buildings, and ruins. Though this structure did not exist anywhere in its entirety, General Idea generated multiple blueprints, objects of artifact, ruins, and installation pieces which were indicated in their titles as being associated with the pavilion. In her essay

³ Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp" in *In Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007.

Future Perfect: The Museum in General Idea and General Idea in the Museum, Diana Nemiroff asserts that these objects, specifically the *Information Booths from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* (1980), are examples of General Idea's "strategies of inhabitation" or instances in which they situate the pavilion as museum.⁴ Thus, the *Pavillion* acts as a framing device for subsequent works, just as a museum is a vehicle to house artworks or provide a framework of meaning.

The 1981 piece *Toronto's Fault: The First Tremors (Ruins of the Silver Bar Lounge from The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion)* (Fig. 1) is a site-specific installation in 1981 which is, in essence, rubble from a disastrous destruction of an element of the *Pavillion*. Even outside the context of the *Pageant*, this work is a compelling example of environmental or object-focused conceptual art. It consists of large chunks of a building, ladders, and other objects buried beneath mounds of dirt. It evokes feelings of disaster, destruction, and societal collapse— all ideas which are in line with the dystopian nature of the year 1984 but not so much with the associations of a pageant and the surrounding material. By employing the framing device of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant Pavillion*, *The First Tremors* is recontextualized from an environmental, site-specific work to a part of a larger structure. It becomes a sort of memorial for a previous structure. This is only complicated by the fact that General Idea continues to produce works for and related to the *Pavillion* long after the creation of its ruins, moving towards a non-linear understanding of both the event and its objects.

It is also with this work that the *Pavillion* begins to incorporate other cultural strategies beyond the structure of a pageant. For example, in 1982 and 1983 General Idea created "Mural Fragments" from the *Pavillion* which consisted of canvas and paper scraps painted with images of three poodles engaged in various sex acts. Here, General Idea employs the idea of an artifact or object, indicative of something ancient or aged, to present subversive subject matter. And again, these messages are possible through the framework of the *Pageant* and the *Pavillion*. These works would have been functional if displayed without the association of the *Pavillion*, though within this context, meaning is prescribed. The works present imagery of the poodle, which is used throughout General Idea's body of work, to continue mythologizing the *Pageant* and the group itself.

⁴ Diana Nemiroff. "Future Perfect: The Museum in General Idea and General Idea in the Museum." In GENERAL IDEA, 332-37. N.p.: ARTBOOK D A P, 2022.



Figure 1: General Idea, *Toronto's Fault: The First Tremors (Ruins of the Silver Bar Lounge from The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant Pavillion, 1981*

General Idea also uses the framework of a pageant to question the artwork-audience relationship. Kirsten Olds analyzes this audience feedback loop and its connection to General Idea's work in her 2020 essay "Towards an Audience Vocabulary: General Idea's Re-Routing of the Audience Feedback Loop." Olds argues that General Ideas "audience rehearsal" performances (*Blocking* (1974), *Hot Property!* (1977), *Fleshed Out* (1977), *Towards an Audience Vocabulary* (1978), and *Going thru the Motions* (1985)) use specific feedback systems in order to interrogate the audience-art relationship and performance art itself. This points to larger attention being given by General Idea to social codes and behavior. In 1970, the group performed *What Happened* at the international Festival of Underground Theatre in Toronto. The performance piece consisted of multiple acts, in which General Idea incorporated audience rehearsals, displays of ordinary tasks by the group members, a pageant, and a screening of Gertrude Stein's play of the same name.

During the performance, the group introduced the pageant with the final act, *The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant*. What ensued was an affair complete with the reveal of previous winners, a talent section, and judges. The group introduced the previous years winners despite no event having taken place. The entire ordeal was a campy reimagining of a beauty pageant: four out of five contestants were dressed as bears, the talent portion included the eventual winner Miss Honey performing her skills on the telex machine, and the section concluded with a screening twenty minutes of Gertrude Stein's play *What Happened*. Olds argues that General Idea's *What Happened* is integral to their performance pieces in that it introduces their interest in framing devices, audience-performer relationships, and feedback loops. The introduction of the *Miss General Idea Pageant* within the context of this performance is significant because it establishes it as a performative, narrative tactic, rather than an actual, realized event.

I argue that during *What Happened*, General Idea also introduces other key elements of their practice which are integral to later works. They establish a sense of play and humor in their work, not through linguistic modes but by legitimizing and taking seriously the silly, mundane, and nonsensical. With this focus, General Idea is able to access elements of relatable culture while still participating in a high art ecosystem; their work straddles the ridiculous and the serious. This is first introduced during *What Happened*, throughout which the plot focuses on various unconnected occurrences. During one portion, actors demonstrate mundane tasks, while during another, an entire pageant is carried out. By staging a performance of five parts sprawling over multiple days, the group expands the definition of narrative and what constitutes a performance worth watching. This subversion points to an interest in artifice and attempting to disrupt or confuse understood narratives.

In *Going thru the Motions*, General Idea frames the performance as an audience rehearsal for the eventual 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant. During portions of the performance, audience members were instructed to clap, sleep, or perform other reactions as directed by Bronson. Throughout the intermissions, images taken by General Idea and audience members during the performance, as well as video footage, was displayed. The performance threatens the systems which make performances considered performance- by removing the framework of an audience-performer relationship, and the separation between performance and not performance, General Idea questions what can be considered real or contrived by the audience. When considering the documentation of the event, including recorded tapes of the entire event to be

screened later, the entire nature of consumption of a theater or performance art piece is complicated. Thus, General Idea created performance which layered levels of reality and artifice. This emphasis on fiction, both in terms of audience and the event itself, establishes what Olds designates as two feedback strategies: metanarration and metafiction. Metanarration refers to the content of the performer's actions or speech, and metafiction points out the artificiality of the story itself. But when these aspects are dependent on one another to exist, a paradox of consuming and performing emerges. These strategies create a circular system in which the artifice of the performance is at once acknowledged and employed.

The rehearsal of the audience disrupts accepted social conditions and resituates the role of the audience within the performance context. The expectation of an audience is that they are bystanders to the plot of whatever performance is being watched. By framing the audience themselves as performers and coaching or rehearsing them for an eventual performance, General Idea creates a layered narrative in which the audience is at once participating in multiple roles, both responsible for and witnessing the performance. In *Going thru the Motions*, the audience is being recorded as a studio audience, shifting their role back and forth between normal audience members to coached “studio audience” members as directed by Bronson. As Olds explains, “Thus, in many ways the active role of the audience members in making sense of the performance and responding accordingly has been co-opted by General Idea in service of the performance and the sense of fluidity of subject positions has been restricted.”⁵

The audience has a clear role or part to play as observer and consumer. Even within other forms of performance art, these roles are solidified by the artist acting as the art object to be consumed by the audience. As much as other pieces complicate ideas of performance through dissolution of plot, organization, or narrative, most still adhere to the structure of audience-performer relationships in which the audience is permitted to watch a happening or occurrence. General Idea complicates this relationship by placing expectations on their audiences which are confusing and disruptive. The power of the audience as spectators, and members of the production in which they are not responsible for outcomes, is irrelevant in the face of instructions to act and perform as such. However, when considering that the audience is expected to behave

⁵ Kirsten Fleur Olds, "Towards an Audience Vocabulary: General Idea's Re-Routing of the Audience Feedback Loop." *Liminalities* 16, no. 1 (2020): 7

as audiences, though within the direction of Bronson and General Idea, the dynamic is further complicated.

General Idea presents an alternative to the narrative of performance art as spectacle or necessarily more authentic than theater or other performance. Olds explores this departure through analysis of Martha Wilson's 1997 essay *Performance Art: (Some) Theory and (Some) Selected Practice at the End of This Century*. She argues that Wilson's ideas regarding artifice and performance are turned on their heads by General Idea, thus complicating the entire idea of performance art by pointing out that we perform our identities in some way, always.⁶ This emphasis on performed identities points to larger issues in culture and society that General Idea seeks to point out through their work. To describe theater as inherently guided by a sense of artifice, and thus performance art as void of this deception or suspension of disbelief, leaves General Idea in a sort of middle ground wherein their work adheres to some principles of theater and some of performance art but is categorically neither.

The Imagevirus Project

In 1987, General Idea began their *Imagevirus* project with a painting created in support of the Foundation for AIDS Research.⁷ The initial piece appropriated Robert Indiana's *LOVE* design which stacked the letters on top of one another in bold colors and was already a widely circulated, well known image. General Idea replaced LOVE with AIDS, effectively copying Indiana's work without infringing on any copyright or legal complications. The aesthetic of this image is significant in its ability to be recognized and replicated. The AIDS logo is easy to copy, is digestible by a wide range of audiences, and quickly communicates messages without complicated imagery or text. By appropriating an already known work, General Idea overwhelmed the recognition of such an image with its replacement, saturating the cultural understanding of both LOVE and AIDS.

This complicated relationship between language and understanding is inherent to much of the conceptual art movement, and is an idea that artists have grappled with through exploration

⁶ Kirsten Fleur Olds, "Towards an Audience Vocabulary: General Idea's Re-Routing of the Audience Feedback Loop," 10

⁷ De Wachter, Ellen Mara. "AA Bronson + General Idea: Creativity as Viral Transmission." Frieze. Last modified October 30, 2018. <https://www.frieze.com/article/aa-bronson-general-idea-creativity-viral-transmission>.

of semiotics and language in their works. However, General Idea and the *Imagevirus* project were notably separated from public art works of a similar nature, though they utilized some of the same strategies of message dispersal through clothing, items, and installations in public spaces.⁸ What is difficult to discern about the *Imagevirus* project is that the message is not necessarily clear on an aesthetic or formal level, aligning it with principles of conceptualism in which the idea is paramount. To understand the impact and importance of the project in terms of public reception to it, the historical context is essential.

The work was circulated in the midst of the AIDS crisis in New York City, in which the queer community there was fighting to gain recognition, funding, and relief as thousands died of the disease.⁹ At this point, General Idea was circulating works in Toronto and Europe, but was largely unknown in the United States and New York. With the *Imagevirus* project, the group asserted themselves within the art scene and the larger queer rights activist circles, partnering with groups like ACT UP and Gran Fury. The AIDS logo was distributed through different channels of public life- on the subway, in museums, on t-shirts. General Idea wallpapered galleries with it, lending to a sense of virality and infection that almost lends a physicality to the spread of AIDS through populations. During the 80's, the AIDS epidemic was intensely moralized and seeped in judgment. It was seen as a "gay disease," and disproportionately affected those who engaged in sex work, drug use, were homosexual, or a part of other marginalized groups. Thus, the ignorance from the government and the idea that AIDS was a disease affecting only these groups allowed the virus to spread rapidly and without intervention.

The *Imagevirus* project ultimately spread globally; the image wallpapered galleries, covered trams in Amsterdam and Seattle (Fig 2), replaced ad space on the New York subway, was translated into a massive, physical sculpture in Germany, and was replicated over and over by different brands, companies, and organizations. General Idea was intentional about allowing virtually anyone and everyone to use the image wherever they wanted, creating a piece which approaches a sense of virality before the modern understanding of the term was contextualized by the internet.

⁸ Decter, Joshua. "Infect the Public Domain with an Imagevirus: General Idea's AIDS Project." *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 15 (2007): 96–105. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20711645>.

⁹ "A Timeline of HIV and AIDS." HIV.gov. Accessed March 10, 2024.

<https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline#year-1983>.

Gregg Bordowitz explores this concept of virality, as well as the significance of the artistic format of the project, in his 2010 book *Imagevirus* in which he explores the project and its wide reaching implications. As a person living with an HIV diagnosis, Bordowitz's connection to the project is personal and the impact of the AIDS image is deeply tied to his identity. Bordowitz describes a format in the context of General Idea's work as "a model for a kind of experience."¹⁰ Thus, the *Imagevirus* project seeks to explore whether AIDS- as an idea, a disease, a cultural experience- could be reduced to a format. Bordowitz writes: "AIDS is a social phenomenon and as such repeatedly enters into the field of representation, always as something else recombined, with new meanings... AIDS is always more than an image- it is an appearance, a visitation, a demonic possession with all the sensual qualities... that accompany intense encounters and limit experiences."¹¹ General Idea takes the image of the word AIDS and reduces it to a format in order to achieve a sense of virality not possible with other representations.

What does it mean to replace LOVE with AIDS? AA Bronson explores this question in an interview with Joshua Decter: "A lot of people have criticized us for the fact that the AIDS posters are not didactic, that there is no message on them. People seem to project their own agendas onto the image and assume that the meaning of the work is correspondent to what makes them uncomfortable. One possible interpretation, a rather negative one, is that love leads to AIDS; another interpretation, this one more positive, is that AIDS brings out love in the community."¹² In other words, the *Imagevirus* project provided a blank slate onto which viewers could project their own beliefs or identities. With *Imagevirus*, is General Idea equating AIDS with LOVE or contrasting them? Do they somehow become equal or parallel, or antitheses of each other when contextualized within this image? For General Idea, these questions are the work. In their own way, the group was generating images in line with activism without being outright inflammatory. While they may have been criticized for not being political *enough* or even offensive in the creation of *Imagevirus*, General Idea was effective in creating a piece that speaks more universally, and in a way that offends no one and everyone simultaneously.

¹⁰ Gregg Bordowitz, *General Idea: Imagevirus*. (London: Afterall, 2010). 20

¹¹ Gregg Bordowitz, *General Idea: Imagevirus*. (London: Afterall, 2010). 22

¹² Joshua Decter, "Infect the Public Domain with an Imagevirus: General Idea's AIDS Project." *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 15 (2007): 98-99



Figure 2: Public intervention in the Amsterdam public transit system using the AIDS poster (screenprint on adhesive-backed vinyl: 62.1 x 62.9 cm, unknown number used, from an unknown edition size, unsigned and unnumbered), published by Museum Fodor, Amsterdam.

General Idea forces AIDS into the public attention without outright discussing, addressing, or showing it. Is it enough to force the public to simply see the word AIDS, in highly aestheticized terms as well, in order to raise support and recognition for the issue? We can discuss the significance of the lack of representational image by contrasting the *Imagevirus* project with another work by General Idea member AA Bronson.

Bronson is the only surviving member of General Idea; Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal both died of AIDS-related causes in 1994. This tragedy seeps into the significance of the *Imagevirus* project and other works by Bronson. On June 5, 1994, Bronson photographed Partz just hours

after he died.¹³ He lies emaciated, his eyes staring vacantly into the camera. He is surrounded by vibrant fabrics and clothes, and sentimental objects like his tape recorder and favorite cigarettes. He is well dressed and appears almost posed in this image. The photo is a striking example of the sensitivity with which Bronson handles the death of his friend and partner in General Idea. The violence and tragedy of AIDS is inherent in this image, but it is also joyful; Partz's life is celebrated in vibrant colors and objects and his personality is emphasized. Nonetheless, the juxtaposition of life and death and of violence and peace, creates an image that can only be described as haunting. Bronson printed it on billboard-level scale and it now resides in the Whitney Museum in New York, a testament to the scale and intensity of Partz's experience with AIDS and Bronson's experience as well.

Considering that Bronson and by extension General Idea was interested in depicting AIDS in more visceral and representational forms, the impact of the *Imagevirus* project becomes all the more relevant. I argue that the presence and urgency of the AIDS epidemic is equally present in both *Imagevirus* and *Felix Partz, June 5, 1994*, though the means through which the message is communicated is different. The photograph of Felix Partz is a literal depiction of the devastation of the illness. To photograph a corpse is, to a certain extent, to violate, as the lines of consent and autonomy are blurred. However, Bronson and Partz allowed audiences into this intimate and devastating moment to further express the true horror of the epidemic. The *Imagevirus* project explores ideas of virality and infection as well, though through repetition, obsession, and saturation of an image into the cultural consciousness. If *Felix Partz, June 5, 1994* had been spread in the same way that the *Imagevirus* project was, General Idea would have had a markedly different impact on the public consciousness regarding AIDS, one that is much more violent, disturbing, and confrontational. Bronson could have chosen to do this in 1994. The choice to instead spread an image that is relatively non-threatening (when considering its formal qualities; the actual AIDS virus would have created associations that audiences may have found threatening) speaks to a level of cultural understanding and awareness of widespread, viral acceptance of an image.

¹³ "Singular Visions: AA Bronson, 'Felix Partz, June 5, 1994,' 1994 and 1999." Video. YouTube. Posted by Whitney Museum of American Art, May 6, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-ZUuSIShuY&t=151s>.

Conclusion

When considering these two large scale projects, *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* and *Imagevirus*, it is clear that General Idea had a vast array of interests and mediums through which they sought to critique culture and shape the art world into something new. Though these two projects are completely different in terms of medium and artist engagement, the continuities are clear when considering the idea of tautology and circularity. Additionally, it is difficult to find continuity between two projects which essentially bookend General Idea's career: *What Happened* was one of the first projects undertaken by the group and *Imagevirus* continued until the death of Partz and Zontal in 1994. I argue that these projects represent the avenues of focus that General Idea explored and provide key examples of how they employ devices of conceptualism in innovative, and rarely used since, methods.

This self-reflexivity, framed by the conceptual structure of tautology, can be described as a work which refers to its existence within a meaning system, acknowledges and questions it, and provides an avenue through which the audience or artist may examine the "nature of the human's asserted world of significance."¹⁴ It is a system of circularity, in which the work is constantly referring back to itself. Consider this in the case of *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* and the associated audience rehearsal performances. As previously discussed, the performances allowed a situation in which a circular loop could form, rendering the audience reliant on the performance and vice versa. By rehearsing the audience, a factor of performance which is normally structured, sound, and unchanging, General Idea refers back to the artifice of it being a performance at all and the audience as willing participants and performers of their own identities, as audience and beyond. Further, this circularity and self-reflexivity is present in the *Imagevirus* project as well. By using an already recognizable image and appropriating it, General Idea is employing and referencing an existing lexicon of cultural understanding. Thus, the work is aware of itself as a new image and as artifice, which is recognized (and perhaps criticized or celebrated) by its audiences which consume it. To look at *Imagevirus* in a more literal sense, the project names the disease, literally referencing it, while doing nothing to actually represent it other than through linguistic means. This opens up questions of semiotics and avenues of

¹⁴ Charles Russel, "Toward Tautology: The Nouveau Roman and Conceptual Art." *MLN* 91, no. 5 (1976): 1044–60. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2907114>.

language-based conceptual art, which General Idea didn't necessarily participate in but accessed in some ways in this project. They infected the public consciousness with AIDS, in a sense, as the disease was spreading literally, but through symbolic means.

To further understand *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* and the *Imagevirus* project in relation to one another, let us consider one more work by General Idea, their 1985 video piece *Shut The Fuck Up*. This work is an example of General Idea using appropriation and virality while also expressing their own goals and views in relation to the art world.

The video begins with Zontal, Partz, and Bronson speaking directly to the camera, with intensity about the nature of the art world, television, and their ideas regarding it. The next section, Part 1: Death of A Mauve Bat, displays clips taken directly from television in which a campy version of the Joker wins an art competition with a blank canvas, arguing its validity as a depiction of the death of a mauve bat and a representation of the "emptiness of modern life." The video then cuts to Zontal speaking once again to the camera, angrily, snippets about art, culture, and the bourgeois. It's not clear what sentiments he necessarily agrees with but his conviction is consistent through each phrase. The phrases have a Truism-like quality, feeling at once inflammatory but insincere at times. This section ends with Zontal exclaiming, "SHUT THE FUCK UP." Throughout the video, clips of a poodle figure rotating in front of a blue X play. Part 2: Modo Cane consists of a performance in which dancers dressed as poodles perform an elaborate display over a musical score complete with dogs barking. Images of three poodles, one yellow, one red, and one orange, arranged in sexually suggestive positions, float across the screen throughout the dance. Part 2 ends with banter between Partz and Bronson reading *The Sunday Times*, evolving into them discussing poodles while dressed as them. Part 3: XXX Blue, features clips of Yves Klein performing a piece in which models cover themselves with blue paint, allowing Klein to "paint" with them. The clip is sensual, emphasizing the beauty of the models, and portraying Klein as artist-as-genius. The video then cuts back to General Idea describing their own project, *XXX Blue*, in which they used three taxidermy poodles to paint three large blue X's on canvas. The video ends with Zontal again speaking to the camera before the poodle once again rotates in front of *XXX Blue*.

Shut The Fuck Up, like all of General Idea's work, is layered and entrenched in their own group lore and history. Like *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* and *What Happened*, General Idea is appropriating work of other performers (Yves Klein and Gertrude Stein) to build their own

layered metanarrative. And like the *Imagevirus* project, they are utilizing the work of other more visible artists to subvert or recontextualize meaning. *Shut The Fuck Up* is an important contextual element of understanding the group's work and their interest in disrupting established systems. In the same way that *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant* provided a framework for reconfiguring audience relationships, the *Imagevirus* project created a framework for infecting images into the public consciousness. The playfulness and campy imagery present in *Shut The Fuck Up* ties into the general imagery that the group employs, both in the works surrounding the *Pageant* and *Imagevirus*. In the final section of *Shut The Fuck Up*, Partz and Bronson spit phrases to the camera: "The audience: the cognoscenti, the elite, the collectors. The media: just another element in the joke. The media: just another straight man, just another one liner, just another set up, just another chicken crossing the road, just another loose thread in stitches, just another punchline stretching a point, just another humpty dumpty."¹⁵ It is somewhat nonsensical, though this epitomizes General Idea's work and these two pieces in particular. The group's effort is to constantly question the relationship the art world perpetuates between spectator and creator, the systems that allow them to create work, while still existing with the system. It's a paradox, it's a constant loop; their self referentiality creates a body of work which is only fully understood when each piece is examined in relation to the others.

¹⁵ "General Idea - Shut The Fuck Up - Part III." Video. YouTube. Posted by TELEVISION FOR GHOSTS, September 1, 2008. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fTRHkDsMnk>.

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