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Form Follows Fiction: A Reconstruction of a Reconstruction – Jon Davies

‘The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion’, Art Gallery of York University, Toronto

15 September – 6 December 2009

It has become a truism that the collective General Idea has taken its place among the most influential of Canadian artists. What keeps GI’s practice relevant and fascinating is that it is so difficult to fully grasp: eschewing the crafting of mere art objects – though they also did that – GI created a complex, multi-faceted and self-reflexive media cosmology out of words, images, events, and products, contributing greatly to the invention and fabrication of a Toronto and Canadian art scene in the process. The vast array of material that the group produced and disseminated self-consciously spun a mythology of drama and gossip about members AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal and their self-fashioned status as glamorous artists. GI has spawned an industry in the last decade or so, for example with ‘The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968–1975 ’ exhibition curated by Fern

Bayer for the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1997; ‘General Idea: Editions 1967–1995’, the touring survey of the artists’ editions and multiples – which traveled to almost 20 venues between 2003 and 2007 – curated by Barbara Fischer, and the 2008 re-publication by JRP-Ringier of the entire print run (1972–1989) of their seminal lifestyle magazine (or rather “megazine,” *FILE* (a take-off on *LIFE*, they even stole their American foil’s iconic logo). No doubt partly due to the archival and promotional labours of surviving member AA Bronson, GI is almost inescapable: the canonized, or rather deified, queer saints of Canadian conceptual art. GI’s current mythic status represents the fulfillment of the goals of the trio’s multi-decade project, but what more could possibly be said about them?

Curator Philip Monk of the Art Gallery of York University has an intimate familiarity with GI’s work and their local, national and international contexts thanks to his decades spent as a critic and curator in Toronto, spanning back to the early days of what could be identified as an art scene here. His strategy in mounting a GI show at the end of the first decade of the 21st century was to reproduce as exactly as possible two key exhibitions in the artists’ oeuvre from the late 1970s, which he himself had attended but which many in 2009 did not see first-hand (thanks to not having been born yet, for example). Through this act of archival re-staging – which plays out against the backdrop of a surge of interest in historical re-enactments in the contemporary art world over the past few years – Monk seeks to bring into the present-day white cube of his gallery not only the work of GI but of the art community that it represented. Bringing the downtown of the 70s uptown (to distant North York no less) presents a considerable risk because no level of historical accuracy and attention to detail can airlift an entire living and breathing artistic subculture into a different era.

In hindsight these two exhibitions, both originally mounted at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery, seem to embody the broader GI project in a nascent form. They invented a narrative framework describing the elaborate fabrication and spectacular destruction of a fictional piece of architecture. I am referring, of course, to the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion of the title, which is represented here both in its carefully executed planning stages and in its violent disintegration, a before and an after without the actual material existence of the Pavillion standing in between. As a photo caption in the exhibition reads, the “best of all sites was essentially out-of-sight, in the airwaves, invisible.” The non-existent Pavillion becomes a metaphor for that invisible structure that was most in control of our lives in the late 70s – the airwaves. GI invented free-floating, ephemeral identities and institutions for themselves in a queer mimicking of the mass media and its ability to disseminate the most horrific and the most splendid fantasies at once, from the Vietnam War to the swoop of Farrah’s feathered hair. They called it the “architecture of the subliminal.”

In the field of architecture, far more buildings are planned than ever come to fruition, remaining as ideas and models – speculative fictions – rather than becoming realized constructions. Conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner’s maxim “The Work Need Not Be

Built” could be aptly applied to many influential architectural projects that never saw physical completion. The 1984-seat, ziggurat-shaped Pavillion was to be the stage for the fourth Miss General Idea Pageant (there had been three previous pageants, going back to 1968), to take place in 1984. (Why 1984, you might ask? Because it’s a conveniently clichéd shorthand for the subjugation of the masses to the gaze of Big Brother.)

The Pavillion *is* represented here through architecture, but in fragments. For example, there is the hoarding to mask the Pavillion’s construction, which is designed in a jigsaw puzzle pattern to draw the curious attention of passersby. Pieces of the jigsaw are missing, foreshadowing that this project is always to be “in process” – never a product – and leaving those who walk by to imagine and give form to the future building it conceals. There are also the “massing models” that play double duty as high-fashion gowns, crafted from Venetian blinds in pyramidal shapes. (The exterior shell of the building was to be built of mirrored Venetian blinds, which would create a kind of liminal fantasy space between inside and outside – “both sides of the story” – their dazzling reflections compared by the artists to the horizontal scan lines of video.) These architectural evening dresses allowed GI to reflect on the experience of “being an object”: “walking, talking, living, breathing ideas with legs,” with the shoes acting as pedestals, *naturellement*.

These are some of the elements choreographed in the first exhibition, ‘Going Thru the Notions,’ originally mounted from 18 October – 6 November 1975, which is also characterized by the presence of scores of “showcards.” These are paper forms used for magazine layouts that each carry a single image – many found, others original, with all sources credited – and a long-form prose caption written by the artists. These showcards span the walls of the space punctuated every so often by maquettes, posters and prints, and each originates from a different sector of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion project:

1. The Search for the Spirit of Miss General Idea
2. The Miss General Idea Pageant
3. Miss General Idea 1984
4. The Miss General Idea Pavillion
5. Frame of Reference

Collectively, they form an overwhelming discursive archive of all the ideas behind the initiative, from “Proposals” for architectural features of the space – such as the “Dr. Brute Colonnade” that features men tied to leopard-print columns – to eroticized descriptions of the construction workers supposedly working on the site, to depictions of the motifs and symbols of the pageant, such as the “Miss General Idea Wig,” shoes, vehicle, and the mysterious “Hand of the Spirit.” The most useful section for helping to decipher this complex representational system was the “Index,” which included five maxims, each starting with the phrase: “_____ is basically this: a framing device...” These showcards and the other material on view take us step by step through what the Pavillion will be and what the Miss General Idea Pageant represented. The Pavillion – like the

Pageant – was literally a construct, a performance, and, as GI say, a “framing device” for drawing attention to the vicissitudes of visibility, publicity, glamour, and value via an antiquated cultural form. ‘Going Thru the Notions’ is ultimately a kind of database for thinking through how we are transformed by the mass media from individuals into images. But this makes it sound pedantic and nobly good-for-you, which it never, ever is.

This is because what characterizes the majority of GI’s projects across a wide range of forms is their witty signature vocabulary, which uses irony in the service of a playful mimicry of the tropes of the mass media – they seemed to collude, but with a queer difference: a campily askew perspective on the world. In their half-hour self-documenting video *Pilot* – made for TVO in 1977, and now on view in the back resource room of Monk’s exhibition – they characterize their top three products as “Beauty Pageants,” “*FILE* Magazine,” and “TV Specials.” Thinking of GI’s oeuvre as so much about *media* – especially their work with *FILE* – I could not help but experience the exhibition as akin to being inside a magazine. Monk argues that the principles and strategies of *FILE* Magazine actually became the Pavillion; that is certainly the impression one gets from the very graphic design of these exhibitions’ *mise-en-scènes*.

The second exhibition on view, ‘Reconstructing Futures,’ originally mounted from 10 December 1977 – 6 January 1978, goes even further in creating an architecture from discourse, but here the walls are formed solely by images, not by language. The scenography is composed of large-scale photos of “Composition” – shots of schematic drawings and the Pavillion’s ostensible construction – and “Decomposition” – scenes of disaster, explosion and the building’s supposed collapse. A neon-lit “Iron Curtain” at the back of this chamber veils a large photo of the three soot-blackened and exhausted GI artists escaping from the fire that destroyed the Pavillion. The exhibition also features some appropriately tacky furniture and design elements: “The Marbells and the Seats of Power,” for example, are the remnants of a kind of prep room where performers ostensibly once rehearsed their public appearances in the now-destroyed Pavillion. There is also the “Soundtrack for a Fountain,” which sounded suspiciously like a man urinating. The overall effect in this environment is less of a building’s collapse than of the ruins of radicalism in the face of the ascendant Yuppie, as the furniture and design elements on view could be straight out of a nouveau riche Manhattan apartment of the dawning Reagan era.

Thankfully, I attended the opening reception of the exhibition, and it was just like one of *FILE*’s gossip columns: AA Bronson and a few of the Miss General Ideas were there, as were Vera Frenkel, John Bentley Mays, Ann Dean, Andrew J. Paterson, and other Toronto art world royalty. Many of these venerable guests acted – intentionally or not – as living archives and pedagogues to the scads of twenty- and thirty-somethings also in attendance: trans-generational dialogue was in the air. Returning to the exhibition after the opening, without this dynamic social and performative element, the installations seemed more like crypts. This static, slightly morbid quality – intensified by the sterile, windowless gallery

space – was further accentuated by the fact that the exhibitions are both so discursive – accumulations detailing something that’s not there; they were haunted by ghosts. (I should take this opportunity to point out that Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal both died of AIDS in 1994.) The Pavillion was a monumental yet intangible embodiment of GI – its home, if you will – one performative fiction to contain another. The Canadian art world that General Idea fabulated and mythologized into existence has long since become codified: the messy primordial ooze of the 60s and 70s now walks boldly upright with protocol and professionalism. A reconstruction of a reconstruction, Monk’s exhibition is in the end a mock-sombre memorial not only to a gone-but-never-was Pavillion but to the “Spirit”: the very possibility of inventing oneself from thin air as an artist and as a (Canadian) art community that GI represented.







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Bottom 3 Images
The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion

15 September – 6 December 2009
Courtesy of Art Gallery of York University
Image credit: Michael Maranda

General Idea
Going Thru the Notions
Installation at Carmen Lamanna Gallery
October 18 – November 6, 1975

Top 2 Images
The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion
15 September – 6 December 2009
Courtesy of Art Gallery of York University
Image credit: Michael Maranda

General Idea
Reconstructing Futures
Installation at Carmen Lamanna Gallery
December 10, 1977 – January 6, 1978

Jon Davies is a writer and curator based in Toronto. His writing has appeared in C Magazine, Canadian Art, GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, Animation Journal, Cinema Scope, Xtra! and many other publications. He has also contributed to books on filmmaker Todd Haynes and on artists Daniel Barrow, Candice Breitz, Luis Jacob, and Ryan Trecartin. He has curated numerous screenings for the artists' film and video exhibitor Pleasure Dome, and for various venues in Toronto from Gallery TPW and Vtape to the Images Festival and Inside Out, as well as internationally. He most recently curated the traveling retrospective 'People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell' for the Oakville Galleries, Ontario, and wrote a book on Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey's 1970 film Trash for the new Arsenal Pulp Press (Vancouver) series Queer Film Classics, to be published in November 2009. He is the Assistant Curator of Public Programs at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery.

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