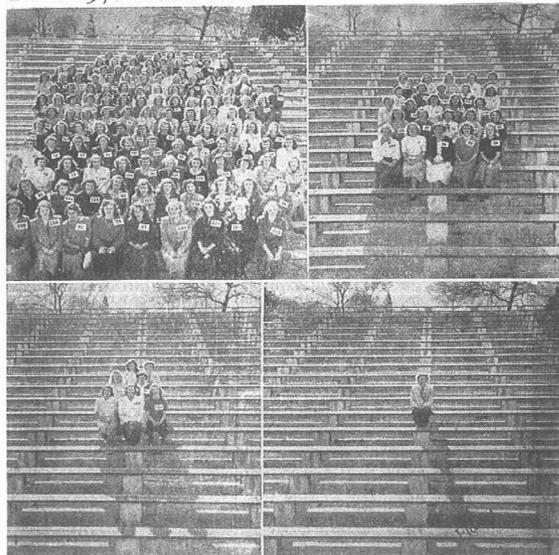


Communities Between Culture-by-Mouth and Culture-by-Media

Luis Jacob

THE 1971 MISS GENERAL IDEA PAGEANT



Documentation on display at A Space, 85 St. Nicholas Street, September 24-30.

*The Grand Awards Ceremony will be held at the Art Gallery of Ontario,
Friday, October first at 8:00 p.m.*



General Idea, poster for the 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant

Historical continuity is the Achilles heel of Toronto artmaking. More precisely, the absence in this city of a sense of historical continuity renders the act of making art into a poignant but self-defeating gesture.

When was the last time you found a piece of writing dealing with the relationship between a current production in this city and what has gone on before it? When was the last time you were able to attend a retrospective exhibition on the work of a Toronto artist? If we agree that artistic production is a communicative practice—an exercise in which the meaning of community becomes an issue—then a lack of historical context amounts to something like a lack of language, which is to say that artistic production would somehow have to exist without publicness. Exhibition would follow exhibition, artist would follow artist, decade would follow decade—and quickly each of these would sink into our collective amnesia, into the black hole of cultural disregard. One must ask what this situation would mean for artists. How would a person—especially a young one—envision being an artist in the face of this radical atomization without a public, without a language, and without a future? Making art is defeated in advance if artists are unable to create, or even to imagine, their own ideal audience and the world for which their work is created.

I am not complaining, mind you!

This lack of historical continuity has fundamentally shaped who I am and what I do as an artist, curator, writer and teacher. I honestly cannot imagine working in a different context. And of course, recent initiatives—Barbara Fischer’s touring exhibition, “General Idea Editions, 1968–1995,”¹ Jon Davies’ retrospective of the work of Colin Campbell,² and Philip Monk’s ongoing series of re-staged Toronto exhibitions beginning with his FASTWÜRMS show³—suggest that the situation I have been describing might well be in the process of transformation.

Nevertheless, in the absence of history, people turn to myth. In the absence of history, we begin to gossip, to enact what Robert Filliou called a “whispered art history.”⁴

So, to add to the whispers...

More than 20 years ago, AA Bronson (from the artist group General Idea) curated an exhibition at The Power Plant, called “From Sea to Shining Sea: Artist-Initiated Activity in Canada, 1939–1987.”⁵ The exhibition and accompanying publication functioned as a kind of manifesto about what artistic culture can mean here, in Canada. He posited that a series of independent initiatives begun in the late 1930s had culminated in the 1970s into a coast-to-coast network of self-organized galleries and publications. This web of associations had created a viable culture that stood in sharp contrast to the staid museums and commercial galleries that dominated the Canadian art world. Bronson’s vision of culture, as presented in “From Sea to Shining Sea,” was essentially a “network” one—that is, culture appeared to be based less on individual figures or institutions than on what arises when one connects the dots between these individualities. He wrote in his catalogue text:

As an artist writing about museums by artists, about my own history, which is a history beginning in 1968, a Canadian story with elaborately Canadian characters dreaming the Canadian dream of one community, that is a network of communities, sea to sea...⁶

What is striking in Bronson's description is its tentative tone, its characterization of the cultural network as a kind of dream of community. He continues that Canadian artists find themselves, "wanting a Canadian art scene just like in New York, or London, or Paris in the 30s." And yet, Canadian artists are "typically unable to picture the reality of a Canadian art scene except as a dream projected upon the national landscape as a sea-to-shining-sea connective tissue..."⁷

For Bronson, "the Canadian dream of one community, that is a network of communities," appears here as something lacking, as an absence—and therefore, as something to desire, and to project upon the landscape around us. He continues to describe this community:

... a dream community connected by and reflected by the media; that is, authenticated by its own reflection in the media; as such a Canadian artist desiring to see not necessarily himself, but the picture of his art scene pictured on TV; and knowing the impossibility of an art scene without real museums (the Art Gallery of Ontario was not a real museum for us), without real magazines (and artscanada was not a real art magazine for us), without real artists (no, Harold Town was not a real artist for us, and we forgot that we ourselves were real artists, because we had not seen ourselves in the media—real artists, like Frank Stella, appeared in Artforum magazine)...⁸

Here, it is worth wondering what Bronson means when he writes about "the media." The tendency today is to make "media" synonymous with new mass-communication technologies like television, video, and the Internet; and, certainly Bronson points us in this direction when he describes the myth of the "Canadian artist desiring to see... the picture of his art scene pictured on TV." Undeniably, the artists of Bronson's generation, especially those connected with the Intermedia scene in Vancouver in the late 1960s,⁹ were informed by Marshall McLuhan's theories of the effects of new media upon consciousness, culture, and social formations.

When Bronson refers to media, however, he is pointing to something broader than simply "new media." Media is rather anything that "stands between" as a mediating channel conducive to a network culture. For Bronson, "The media is a means of fabricating a tissue."¹⁰

This insight—the notion that media is whatever stands between, a means of fabricating a tissue—emerged from Bronson's involvement with the underground-newspaper scene in Winnipeg in the 1960s, his work in the small-press and small-theatre scenes in Toronto, as well as his interaction with the Vancouver scene of the early 1970s.¹¹ In particular, I would like to consider the Vancouver scene's fascinating merging-together of MacLuhan's media theory with the Fluxus ideas of Robert Filliou and George Brecht.

Filliou's idea of the "Eternal Network" has come to refer to the international network of artists who for many decades now continue to produce and exchange artistic activity using the postal system. Mail art, or correspondence art, creates an Eternal Network to the extent that these artists utilize an already existing channel of communication—the mail—as a readymade conduit for "fabricating a tissue." Estera Milman describes it in this way:

The primary defining characteristic of all correspondence art networks is that they are communication "cultures." In their pure transitive state (outside the museum, gallery, and alternative space system) correspondence works are overtly transactional; they serve as a means by which community is established and through which members of the culture interact.¹²

memorandum

to *Dana Atchley*
from *Marcel Dot*

Jan. 1, 1971.

when you are away send post cards to

**NOTHING
BY MOUTH**

*Image Bank, 4454 west 2nd.
Vancouver 8 B.C.*

Michael Morris's "Nothing by Mouth" (1971) was produced as a contribution to Dana Atchley's correspondence project "Space Atlas." In Morris's words:

Dana invited people that he knew around his network to send him a hundred self-made pages. He assembled all these things, packaged it, and sent a copy out to people [who had participated]: a hundred copies for a hundred people. It was all sent out, and everybody saw what each other was doing.... Our Image Bank pages were perforated postcards on a page—postcards that could be used. They were invitations to send original postcards for our Image Bank Postcard Show, which was in 1971.... Those pages were building "Image Bank."¹³

This is an exemplary instance of how the Network *works*, of the connect-the-dots impulse that Milman described as the Network's "overtly transactional" methodology. Dana Atchley's original invitation resulted in the creation and submission of a hundred artistic responses, which he then collected together and sent back to the artists who had replied. Each of these replies, in principle, could act as yet more invitations to further participation, creating a decentered network of creative activity.

What is interesting to me about this work is Morris's idea of mediation. "Nothing by Mouth," as the postcard says, suggests that the Network method entails a move away from the immediacy of "the mouth"—the proximity and intimacy of mouth-to-mouth communication and the immanent relationality it engenders. This move away from immediacy is simultaneously a move towards the mediatedness of "the media." This media could involve the new media of On Kawara's telegrams, or N.E. Thing Co.'s faxes, for example, but it could equally utilize the old-media of the postal system.

When AA Bronson writes about the "dream of one community, that is a network of communities," he is indicating to us the (always tentative) possibility of a community created by mediation, rather than by immediacy. The defining quality of McLuhan's "global village" is precisely that it is *not a village*.

For an artist, however, mediation presents an intractable dilemma. For an artist who works in a community that is a network of communities, and a village that cannot possibly be a village because it is global, the question of "here" becomes tricky terrain indeed. I might well correspond with artists as far away as Santiago, Berlin, and Shanghai, and read *Artforum* with the avidity of a celebrity hound. I might feel totally up-to-date with art world developments in the biennial circuit and have done the Grand Tour in 2007. But how do I relate to the people next to me right here in this place we call Toronto? The question of place, of "here," is precisely the question of audience, and peership—of the "oral" being-together of proximity and immediacy. What is the relationship between "culture by mouth" and "culture by media"?

General Idea's answer to this question is typically ambivalent and perhaps defeatist and is coloured by the poignancy that profoundly belongs to irony. In their performance "Towards an Audience Vocabulary" (1978), General Idea "rehearsed" their local audience in appropriate audience responses characteristic of a "real" audience. Fern Bayer describes the performance:

General Idea used the "television-style studio format" in which 36 local Toronto celebrities were placed on stage in the Concert Hall of the Masonic Temple, performing the various

audience responses: wearing The Censor Sunglasses, “laughing,” “gasping,” “booing,” “sleeping,” “clapping,” and “standing ovations.” It left the real audience confused about their own role, and conscious of that fact. Eventually, at the end, the real audience gave their standing ovation to the performers’ own standing ovation.¹⁴

General Idea can dream the audience, but it does so only on condition that it dreams of an “inorganic” audience—that is, an audience that emerges, not spontaneously, not naturally from its own culture, but artificially, theatrically, out of its own *lack* of artistic culture.

The audience is made to undergo a mediatization of itself. An artifice is introduced so that it “stands between” the audience, splitting it into two: a factual audience—that is, the people who attended the performance—and a performing audience. When the “performing” audience reflects the “factual” audience, it does so not to reveal the audience as it is, *but as it is not*. In order to construct a vocabulary, the factual audience is rehearsed into what it is being dreamed of becoming—a “real” audience.

According to Fluxus artist Ken Friedman:

When Robert Filliou developed his concept of “The Eternal Network,” he was thinking of the human condition rather than art. Filliou held that the purpose of art was to make life more important than art. That was the central idea of the Eternal Network... [But] any discussion of the Eternal Network, of correspondence art, must be a discussion of art to some degree. It is worth investigating the differences and key issues. The Eternal Network posited interesting oppositions to prevailing art-world ideology. The art-world placed great stress on individual performance, on the notion of the master, on creating masterworks or masterpieces. The Eternal Network placed its stress on dialogue, even on the multilog, the process of group research and the community of discourse.¹⁵

For Friedman, if “art” is the realm of individuality and mastery, of creativity embodied in objects—masterpieces—the network is the place for dialogue, for what that wonderful concept, the “multilog,” suggests, and for what creativity embodied in process: “the process of group research and the community of discourse.”

The intriguing thing is that these two realms—artwork and network—are not separate from, or external to, one another, but rather each exists in a dialectical relationship with the other.

Art, with all its inherited baggage about mastery and individuality, is, perhaps for that very reason, a signal place where we ask the question of what hovers above “art,” as the connective tissue of transactional activity, and the eternal community of discourse and networked exchange. And the network, with all its desire for a radically horizontal and dynamic immanence without leaders or followers, must, perhaps unwillingly yet no less necessarily, return to “art” as its reified and abstracted, yet gleaming, or shining towards the future, place of rest.

The network’s energies—its fluxes, its flows, its sea-to-sea activities in a state of pure transitiveness—come to sleep in the realm of art and assume an inert objectivity that flirts with mimicking death. Art is the “kitsch” form of these energies, their degraded and emptied form. And yet, precisely “as art,” as abstract readymades, they can make themselves

available in the future to re-activation, can melt into stream-like transactionality once again. Even as kitsch, as “high art” in other words, works of art are the artifice, the theatricality—“the media” pure and simple—where creative energies are split into those that live and those that are embalmed, into those that flow and those that do not. Art functions like a kind of weathervane that orients us to what is dead or dormant and what still lives. This orientation is possibly an inverted one, where it is not obvious that high is better than low, or that the group is worse than the select.

In crucial ways, the aesthetics of General Idea emerged from a network ethos, and, even until the end of their 25-year-long career, in their work they continued to pay homage to “the process of group research and the community of discourse,” the networked community that they had early encountered in Toronto, as well as in Winnipeg and Vancouver. And yet, even in these early years, General Idea was especially attuned to the dialectical play between the stresses of art—the struggle for recognition, for professional opportunities, for canonization into a history not whispered—and the stresses of network, the effort of collectivity, of transactional creation, of literally “creating languages out of thin air.”

The contradictions between artwork and network, between the community of the mouth and the community of the medium, is the ground from which General Idea’s production emerged; the ways in which they negotiated these demonic relationships instruct us about the genius of this artist whose three heads *are* better than one, as well as the limits, or horizons, of their practice.

Perhaps for spiritual reasons—because they foresaw the pitfalls within the network logic, its risk of becoming a closed system, a circle, a system whose values apply only within itself—and perhaps for not-so-spiritual reasons—because, as they claimed provocatively, they wanted to be famous and glamorous and rich—General Idea recognized the “artistic” necessity of hierarchic forms of legitimacy while remaining at some deep level committed to the network promise of a horizontal, stream-like (today we would say “rhizomatic”) transactionality.

The Queen selected from among the beauties, the Swan that stands apart from the pigeons, the one who was deemed best able to personify “The Spirit of Miss General Idea 1971,” was Michael Morris, Marcel Idea, who was declared, ambivalently, to have “captur[ed] Glamour without falling into it.”¹⁶

This ambivalence is reiterated in the profoundly impossible notion of “museums by artists.”¹⁷ When AA Bronson describes himself “as an artist writing about museums by artists, about my own history,”¹⁸ he is trying to imagine an impossible figure who would be historian and artist, archivist and artist, curator and artist, at one and the same time.

For General Idea, this figure is exactly what the artist has always been called to become in this place we call Canada, at least since as far back as the 1930s.¹⁹ If it wasn’t for the effort of artists across the country, there would be no archives at all, no history writing at all, no galleries, no art magazines, no production facilities, and no museums. In the end, General Idea expresses a deep pessimism in the ability of the artistic public, and even of artists’ own self-organized communities, to perform the thankless task of a whispered art history and fill the void of cultural disregard with their own golden emissions.

The artist is a figure that embodies the impossibly necessary and necessarily impossible idea that the energies of networked culture could survive intact in the form of the work of

art, the idea that the creativity born of pure transitivity and anonymous flux could be preserved in the who's-who genealogies of an artistic canon with all its inclusions and exclusions, and finally, that these energies—necessarily Eternal, and so, without time—could be reconciled with a history *not* whispered.

For museums-by-artists to exist, art must imitate life. Art must mirror life not in order to represent it, but rather to split it in two, one an inverted image of the other. For an “artistic” history to exist, the “time of our life” must become the “emit of our file.” For artists to be artists, we must remain poised uneasily between publicness and publicity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Organized by Barbara Fischer, "General Idea Editions 1968-1995" opened at the Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, on January 15, 2003. In the following years, the exhibition toured across Canada, the United States, Switzerland, Germany, and Spain.
- 2 Organized by Jon Davies, "People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell" opened at Oakville Galleries, on December 6, 2008.
- 3 Organized by Philip Monk, "DONKY@NINJA@WITCH" opened at the Art Gallery of York University, on September 26, 2007. The exhibition brought together new works by FASTWÜRMS along with the re-staging of several key FASTWÜRMS storefront exhibitions on Queen Street West at Andrew Harwood's Zsa Zsa space, and at Paul Petro Contemporary Art: "Swag & Shag" (1995), "Unisex: House of Bangs" (1999), "Blood & Swash, Denim Pox" (2002), "Pirate Head, Gusset Nation" (2004), and "Blood Clock" (2005). This re-staging of Toronto exhibitions was followed in September 2009 with re-stagings of General Idea's "Going Thru the Notions" and "Reconstructing Futures," which were first exhibited at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in 1975 and 1977, respectively.
- 4 In 1994, Robert Filliou produced an artist-book titled *Whispered Art History. L'Histoire chuchotée de l'Art*.
- 5 The exhibition "From Sea to Shining Sea: Artist-Initiated Activity in Canada, 1939-1987" was held at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, from June 26 to August 19, 1987.
- 6 AA Bronson et al., ed., "From Sea to Shining Sea: Artist-Initiated Activity in Canada, 1939-1987" (Toronto: The Power Plant, 1987).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 "Jorge [Zontal, from General Idea] spent some time with Intermedia in its heyday in 1968, doing performance and film." AA Bronson, from email correspondence with author, January 28, 2009.
- 10 AA Bronson, "From Sea to Shining Sea."
- 11 "I was involved with the commune/underground newspaper scene in Winnipeg in the mid-60s. (I was a co-editor of the Loving Couch Press). The underground papers formed the original alternative cultural networking apparatus, and were linked up not only across Canada but across North America and Europe.... General Idea grew initially out of the cultural activity at Rochdale College in 1968: the Coach House Press and Theatre Passe Muraille. Both groups espoused collaborative activities. I worked at Coach House as an intern, designed books, and even produced GI ephemera. At Passe Muraille, I designed displays, sets, and posters. The three of us originally met through Theatre Passe Muraille." email correspondence with author, January 28, 2009.
- 12 Estera Milman: "Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts: Subjugated Knowledges and the Balance of Power." <http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/atca/subjugated/cover.htm>
- 13 Michael Morris quoted in "Golden Streams: Artists' Collaboration and Exchange in the 1970s" edited by Luis Jacob (Mississauga: Blackwood Gallery, 2002) p.14.
- 14 Fern Bayer's research notes from General Idea catalogue raisonnée.
- 15 Ken Friedman, "Foreword: The Eternal Network" in "Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology" edited by Chuck Welsh (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995) p. xv.
- 16 As quoted in "Uncovering the Roots of General Idea: A Documentation and Description of Early Projects 1968-1975" in *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997) p.74.
- 17 "Museums by Artists" was the title of an anthology co-edited by AA Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983).
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 The first chronological entry in "From Sea to Shining Sea" is the founding of the Contemporary

Arts Society in Montréal by artists John Lyman and Paul-Émile Borduas, on February 15, 1939. Subsequent entries include: Françoise Sullivan performing “Danse dans la neige” in St-Hillaire in 1948; the first “happening” in Toronto in December 1958, performed by Dennis Burton, Gordon Rayner and Graham Coughtry; artist Garry Neill Kennedy’s arrival in Halifax as president of the Nova Scotia College of Art in 1967; the touring exhibition “Art and Correspondence from the Western Front,” organized by Glenn Lewis in 1979. The last chronological entry is the exhibition “Canadian Holography in Kingston” in March 1986.