PAUL O'NEILL AND AA BRONSON

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PAUL: Maybe we could start by tracing the beginning of the history of General Idea?

AA: General Idea happened by accident. It was the late '60s in Toronto and our friend Mimi (who was Felix Partz's girlfriend) found this old house, 78 Gerrard Street West, and convinced us to move in together to save rent. There were about eight of us and we were all more or less straight out of school. We moved in to the house, which at one point had been turned into a shop. It was the late '60s, the pop era, there were flowers painted on the street, and now the street had more or less died down and the action had moved to some other part of town. We moved into this rather forlorn house, which had a store window punched into the living room; we were all unemployed, mostly artists, and we were a little bored. We began rummaging through the garbage of the various neighboring businesses, and we began to assemble fake stores in our store window. We did window displays essentially. We didn't think of it as art at the time, we were just entertaining ourselves. Sometimes the displays got out of hand. We would have to give up our living room to them; we did immense displays that took up the entire ground floor. There was usually a little sign on the door that said "Back in five minutes." It was really Felix, Jorge Zontal, and I who involved ourselves in these projects, the three of us, and I think that's how we developed our collaborative venture. Our activity together became, in a way, a critique of consumerism because the material consisted of the dregs of consumerism and the venue had the outer aspect of a store. It didn't really occur to us to think of it as a gallery. We just thought of it as a store. I think today in a similar situation, in the East Village, somebody inhabiting a store would be more likely to open up a gallery there. However, we started doing these… [*Doorbell rings*.] It's funny, I have told this story so many times, and when you tell it many times it starts to narrow down to a particular narrative. But as I am telling it this time I am thinking of all the loose ends that tend to get lost, they

AA Bronson (right) and Mark Krayenhoff (left)
Printed Matter, 10th Avenue, New York, NY, 2005
Photo: Paul O'Neill.

are sort of illuminated today in particular ways, but I won't get into too many of them.

Felix was trained as a painter; Jorge and I were trained as architects. Jorge had also studied acting and had experience as a filmmaker—he actually made his money working as a cinematographer. At the time we first met, I was working for a theater, doing graphics and some stage design and so on. We started to do performances, one-night performances, happening-like sort of things, usually in a theater context because we knew a lot of theater people. We would involve friends and so on, but there were always the three of us in the center.

We were only in that house for a year and an amazing amount happened in that year. Toward the end of that year we began to do something that could be called exhibitions, right in the storefront. For example, we purchased the entire contents of a women's dress shop that had been closed since 1948, everything, the mannequins, and the entire inventory. We recreated the store in our storefront,

with everything actually for sale, and we called it Betty's. That was probably one of the first projects that we really thought of as an artwork as opposed to just entertaining ourselves. We got the front page, a full-page article, in what was then called the "Women's Section" in the national newspaper, but as a fashion article. You know this was the very early 1970s; it was before the whole idea of retro and before used clothing had any cultural position, really before any of that had actually happened. It was on the cutting edge of that wave of interest in recycling clothing and culture. Anyway, that's how we began, and we very quickly got a sort of reputation around Toronto. We traveled everywhere in a big gang, and although it was the tail end of the hippie era, we were always more on the glamour side of things, and we quickly became a fixture around Toronto.

PAUL: You were called General Idea at this stage?

AA: We called ourselves General Idea for the first time in June 1970. We were invited to be in our first real art exhibition, a group show of Conceptual art at the Nightingale Art Gallery, which later became A Space. There were a few Americans in the show like Vito Acconci and Denis Oppenheim and then mostly Toronto artists. Actually the project we developed for that exhibition was called "General Idea" and somehow the name glommed onto us; it stuck from then on.

In our first few years together we had a big interest in collaboration and in pulling other people into all our various projects as collaborators. Some of these projects took the form of something more akin to group exhibitions, but self-organized, not organized through a gallery. Others were more innovative, and took other forms. In 1972, *FILE Megazine* really came out of that sort of activity. We had this idea of doing some sort of magazine, that bypassed the normal art press. Rather than creating value for art by recognizing it in the magazine, *FILE* was more about artists themselves, creating some sort of mythology as much as anything. We published *FILE* until 1989 and it went through various shifts over the years. Toward the end it became much more institutionalized, in the sense that it was more like we were commissioning artist's projects for the magazine. This was a more conventional but also, frankly, more manageable approach, because in the beginning *FILE* was so freeform and so collaborative that it really took over our lives completely.

PAUL: The origins of *FILE Megazine* came out of your interest and participation in a mail-art community, but also an interest in consumer-culture appropriation?

AA: Yes, we were quite involved in the beginnings of mail art, and would begin every day around a big table, talking, drinking coffee, and opening the mail, which was substantial. We received mail from all over North America, Europe, Eastern Europe, South America, Japan, Australia, and occasionally even India. Mail came from Gilbert & George, Joseph Beuys, Warhol's Factory, Ray Johnson, various Fluxus artists, and so on. At a certain point we realized that we were building an enormous backlog of material, and, in an effort to share it with other artists, we began *FILE*, which we saw as a kind of link between artists, much like mail art itself. We designed *FILE* to look like *LIFE* because we wanted it to act as a kind of parasite within the magazine distribution system. We knew that if it looked familiar, people would pick it up, and they did. We thought of it as a kind of virus within the communication systems, a concept that William Burroughs had written about in the early '60s. (He once told me that he considered Kodak's signature yellow to be a kind of virus.)

PAUL: What were the terms of discourse that General Idea used at the time to configure what they were doing? Would you have thought of yourselves as an artists' group, a collective, or a self-organization?

AA: We thought of ourselves as an artists' group and it's interesting because now almost anybody who writes about us calls us an artists' collective. We never thought of ourselves as a collective, because we really modeled ourselves on the idea of a rock band. We wanted to be the Rolling Stones of the art world or something like that. We thought of ourselves in really pragmatic terms as a group. I think if any of us had played instruments we would have formed a proper group, and I think that's an interesting model, you know, the model of a rock band; it's a model that's not really used in the art world. So we didn't think of ourselves as a collective.

On the other hand we all came out of a sort of '60s era, particularly me. I came from an "alternative" background: with a group of other people I had founded a commune, an underground newspaper, a free school, and so on. So in particular I had a very developed philosophy that involved horizontal structure, inclusion and consensus, that sort of thing, and that became the foundation of General Idea. We always made decisions by consensus: if anybody was unsure about something, we would just not do it. That meant that we always had a lot of ideas that were, as we used to say, on the shelf, ideas that remained undeveloped. We would pick them up sometimes two years later, five years later, ten years later, when every-

thing had changed or we had some other perspective on what the idea was, and we would pick it up and continue, or knit the idea into some other project we were doing. Everything was very free-form, but very idealistic at the same time.

Because we were so ironic, in Canada we were seen as not being really serious. Also, people would tell us that you can't be a group and be an artist, artists don't work in groups. But when we went to Europe—we had our first show in Europe in '76—we were very quickly picked up and written about in political terms, Marxist terms, because we operated as a group, because we operated by consensus, because of the critical intent inherent in the work, and I think to a certain extent because of the sexual aspect: that we were, if not clearly gay, at least sexually ambiguous. Well, we were taken very seriously especially in Switzerland, Austria and Italy, which were the first three countries that really embraced us, and then Holland. And that allowed us to see ourselves through a critical discourse other than the one that we had developed as our own private language. That was really interesting to us, and also that meant that people back in North America read some of that and got some idea about us other than the one they had before. So our careers shifted quite dramatically once we started to show in Europe.

PAUL: Was this critical discourse something that you took on board and introduced as part of your practice?

AA: I don't think so, I mean our earliest influences were the International Situationists, and we were also influenced a lot by literary sources, oddly enough, and in particular William Burroughs. The idea, for example, of an "image virus," of an image being able to travel in culture like a virus, is taken directly from Burroughs' writings from the late '50s and early '60s. I would say Burroughs, the International Situationists, Marshall McLuhan, Gertrude Stein and Claude Levi-Strauss were our chief influences at the time. In particular, we were very interested in anthropological writing and trying to apply it to our relationship with each other, and to our specific culture, trying to imagine ourselves as not actually embedded in the culture but as anthropologists in North America. So all the work that we did that referred to culture, like the early issues of *FILE* looking like *LIFE* and so on, all of that was part of this idea of ourselves as cultural anthropologists.

PAUL: Anthropology suggests the idea of studying things that already exist in the social world and has political currency within the curatorial field, particularly in relation to postcolonial museological discourses and ideas of collecting cultural knowledge. Would you have thought of it in those terms? Is there a connection between anthropology, curating, and General Idea?

AA: Absolutely. We called ourselves cultural anthropologists. We really did have a global worldview, I think, and looked upon the common curatorial model as a kind of primitive ritualized activity.

An aspect of being in Toronto in the late '60s and early '70s was that there was no real art world; the art world didn't have anything to offer us. The museums all looked totally boring to us. The few art galleries there were, seemed on the whole pretty uninteresting. The generation of artists that were older than us seemed totally boring to us and we just had no interest in the art world. The audience that we developed was culled from other audiences, from a new music audience, a rock'n'roll audience, a small press writing audience, and the trendy design crowd. We pulled in those audiences and made them our audience. We didn't really have any interest in a traditional art-world way of doing things, so the anthropological view that we embraced was very clear to us. It also meant that we didn't care about exhibiting in a gallery or not. We published a text, I think in '75, in *FILE*, in which we talked about the gallery as a sort of showroom, like when you have a car you like to go and drive around in it right on the streets, but it's also nice now and then to put it in the showroom and have it on display. But obviously the primary activity for a car is to be driven on the streets and you drive it around. That was our approach to making art: the gallery context was OK but it wasn't the be-all and end-all of what we did. I am not sure whether I have answered your question or not.

PAUL: Obviously another aspect of what differentiates, in traditional terms, the location of the production of art, the position of the artist and curator, is the involvement of others. This is one reason why many artist collectives or collaborative groups are discussed about in curatorial terms, merely by the fact that there is more than one person producing the work. Is that something that General Idea would have discussed? As an artist's group, you are working with each other's ideas, which is a form of curatorial practice?

AA: That's very true. The interesting thing about working over such a long period of time—25 years—was that in the process of constant conversation. We would meet over morning coffee and there were always three hours

of talk, that is how the day started. And as those ideas circulated between us and as the ideas built up, a sort of group language started to evolve. And then as we built that up even further, after about seven years of collaboration, it became a group mind. It is like people who have been married for years and start to finish each other's sentences and know each other's thoughts. Something very different starts to happen. It reaches a totally different level. In the beginning, for the first few years and even once the group language emerged, there was definitely a curatorial aspect. Partly because we were very aware of our audience and of the kind of venues that we might be able to get access to, and because we didn't have access to normal venues we were discussing the sort of issues that a curatorial team might discuss. In fact I think that's true—maybe even toward the end as well—but we were operating much more as a single unit after the first seven or eight years.

PAUL: Did you organize exhibitions with other artists or other artists' groups?

AA: First of all, *FILE Megazine* was a bit like that. Every issue was like an exhibition and then after publishing that for two years (beginning in 1972), artists started sending us stuff. And it was in an era when a lot of artists were publishing ephemera and books and all of that, and we started to build up a collection, boxes and boxes of stuff. So when we founded Art Metropole in '74, there was a two-pronged intention. One idea was to set up a formal archive of this material, and the other was to access the distribution system that we had set up with *FILE* to other artists, by selling their products. In that sense, both the collection and the archive, on one hand, and the shop on the other hand, both operated as loose, exhibition-like venues. And then at a certain point we started actually presenting exhibitions at Art Metropole.

The other thing was that we—or, more often, I—would get invited to make proposals to curate exhibitions in other places. So I curated a series of exhibitions in Toronto in the mid-'70s for an early artist-run gallery called A Space; notably an exhibition of multiples by Joseph Beuys. A Space is still there today, one of many. Later I did an exhibition about artist-generated activity in Canada since the post-war period for the Power Plant: it was an exhibition in which I invited artists and collaboratives to produce works, which could operate together in what I thought of as a sort of landscape in the gallery. Together the works together became a landscape that was descriptive of a period in Canada's cultural history. The funny thing about me being the curator, of course,

was that Jorge, Felix, and I would discuss those exhibitions at our morning meetings at General Idea. In fact, for me to attach my name to them was sort of weird; they were to a large extent—even though I was the one who would be the front man and do the administrative work—projects that came out of the group as a whole.

PAUL: Is that something General Idea would have discussed as a problematic condition?

AA: Well, we did discuss it, and Jorge and Felix were quite eager to not have their names on it because they didn't want to deal with the hassle from any of the administration [*laughs*] and they had no desire to be formally involved at all. Similar things would happen at Art Metropole. For example we did an exhibition and a book called *Museums by Artists* in '83 and that was specifically Jorge's idea. He came up with the concept and put it on the table at a board meeting we had at Art Metropole. The staff picked it up and it got developed. Peggy Gale produced the exhibition and she and I produced the book together, but Felix and Jorge were very intimately involved with shaping the content. It's sort of weird actually, because they never wanted any acknowledgement for that. They specifically did not want acknowledgement for that. In their minds it would just lead them into bureaucratic nightmares, meetings and what have you that they didn't want. The exhibitions and projects always came out of our conversations. [*Phone rings, answers, break in conversation*].

PAUL: Could you tell me something about the thinking behind setting up Art Metropole in 1974 and why you felt it was necessary to do so? Did General Idea always think of it as an artwork?

AA: I guess our idea about art was that art was something that could piggyback on all sorts of different distribution systems—media distribution systems—and travel into the world. We weren't particularly interested in what seemed like a kind of confined model of art being shown in galleries, having its value enhanced by reviews and museum shows and all that sort of stuff, and then being sold to a very limited, mostly wealthy, audience. We were much more interested in an art that could be much more fluid in the way it traveled through the world. So when we did *FILE Megazine*, for example, and then designed it to be reminiscent of *LIFE* magazine, part of the idea was that if there could be a certain familiarity to the format, it could travel through the existing distribution systems for magazines, newsstands in particular. That was the reason

that we wanted to make it look familiar. You know, they might find something totally bizarre inside, but we wanted it to be available to anybody to pick up. So Art Metropole was a sort of extension of that idea. We got really interested in the idea of multiples; ephemera and artists' books; and video for that matter: reproducible media and artists' use of reproducible media, and trying to provide a sort of sophisticated knowledge of how that material could be sent out into the world and how it could travel.

PAUL: Was there a necessity to situate what General Idea was doing in a wider context by using Art Metropole as a platform for distribution?

AA: To tell you the truth, we didn't really think of it like that. We really thought of it as a General Idea piece, that was the funny thing. Art Metropole and the archive were like our shop and our archive in our museum: our museum being the larger world. When we started to have exhibitions in galleries we always conceptualized them within our own project, to co-opt the physical gallery that we were exhibiting in as one on of the rooms in our (semi-fictional) museum. Our museum, which we called "The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion," could have rooms in different cities, and it had its own gallery shop, its own archive, and so on and so forth. We always wanted our world to be much larger than everybody else's—it was more like that. We didn't really think of it as a platform. Funny, we could have obviously, but it wasn't how we thought of it.

PAUL: Was the project, "From Sea to Shining Sea," which was at the Power Plant in Toronto in '87, a historical project that tried to situate General Idea in a paradigmatic history of artist-led initiatives in Canada?

AA: I guess it did that, but I can't say that that was our primary objective. We realized in the mid-'80s that artists younger than ourselves were just not aware of the history of that sort of activity. By that time, the activity in the '60s, for example, was largely forgotten. There was some amazing activity in the '60s in Canada, especially in Vancouver, that, although we were not part of it, we didn't want to be lost. I was invited by the Power Plant to propose an exhibition and what I really wanted to do and what the three of us had wanted to do for some time was to publish this book, this sort of history, and so the exhibition became the excuse to do the history. The book included everything from very historical information from the postwar period up to contemporary work by people exhibiting new work that they had made espe-

cially for the exhibition. It was a total range from the historical to the current, put into an historical context. We were very, very conscious of the debt that we owed in particular to a group called Intermedia from Vancouver, which started in '67 and lasted about three years, and also to people like Marshall McLuhan. One can trace a whole sort of media perspective within Canadian culture, largely from being immediately next to the U.S, but not part of it, and having this sort of observer's view of what is a totally media culture. We, as Canadians, always had our critical view of media culture and that resulted in people like Marshall McLuhan. And that sort of viewpoint spawned a whole way of producing art, the sort of art that came out of Vancouver, for example, in the early '60s and after.

PAUL: You mentioned the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition and that it was the germination of the idea?

AA: Yes, that was more the primary product than the exhibition. It was not a catalogue so much as a book.

PAUL: Was the historical narrative told in a linear way?

AA: The book consisted of a series of regional histories in essay form, followed by a chronology of events for the entire country. I divided the country into five loose geographical regions and invited one person from each of those areas to assemble the research for their area, and each of those people wrote an essay about that part of Canada and its regional history. Then we wrote little blurbs about each event that we came across, including the dates, the people involved, and what had happened; and, illustrated them with photos. Those were assembled in chronological order, starting with 1948. I think the earliest is from '48. And that to me is the more interesting part, just to see that flow of history, just to see the months and the years roll by and what happened, just flipping through the book and seeing how that activity enlarged and transformed.

PAUL: You were clearly very keen to locate what you were doing in relation to Canada, but were you looking to other models of group activity outside of Canada?

AA: From a very early time, when we first started, we almost immediately began to correspond with Gilbert and George; a group called Ecart in Geneva, which was more or less led primarily by John Armleder; Maurizio Nanucci in Florence and his Zona Group and their archives; and Ulysses Carrion in Amsterdam who had

a little bookstore called Other Books and So. Also, a group in Vancouver called Image Bank; and Ray Johnson here in New York, who somehow felt like a group even though he was only one person. [*Laughs.*] And all of these people were very interested in exchange. And we had quite a bit of correspondence with Warhol, too, with his Factory and all that. It was probably less primary, but more or less because we were so entranced by him and he was very generous in communicating back with us. At any rate we were certainly linked to all these groups and there was a certain language that we all shared, a certain way of thinking about ourselves and what we were doing.

PAUL: How would you describe this common language?

AA: We were all very interested in distributable media and we were all interested in an art that could travel in a much more free-form way, without so much of a relationship to money, but more in a relationship to interest and dialogue—an art economy, we could call it.

PAUL: How important was Fluxus to GI?

AA: We were in communication with some of the Fluxus people as individuals: Joseph Beuys and George Maciunas and Ken Freedman from California, and, of course, Robert Filliou and Ben Vautier. Beuys was one of the first subscribers to *FILE Megazine*, along with Warhol, the two of them, which is sort of nice because we were big fans of Beuys already by the late '60s, and we were really interested in his whole concept of the unlimited multiple, you know *The Intuition Box*. There was a little British magazine that started in '69 and lasted until '71 or so, and they published *The Intuition Box* as an unlimited edition. It is very interesting because I can't think of any unlimited multiple before *The Intuition Box*; I think it is the first one. We kept trying to order it from this magazine, but they kept running out of them and we never got one. [*Laughs.*]

PAUL: You also mentioned the Internationale Situationists earlier—how familiar were you with their early writings?

AA: In the '60s there was a cartoon strip that the International Situationists produced and franchised to underground papers, and I was familiar with them through the underground paper that I was one of the editors of, pre-General Idea, and so most of my knowledge of them was through the cartoon strip and not through the other writings. *The Society of the Spectacle* became available

in English around 1970 and somehow that appeared in our hands from a little press in Chicago and that fit into our whole universe perfectly. It became a primary document for us as soon as we had it.

PAUL: In the US at least, Seth Siegelaub is often represented as having begun the practice of of independent curating in the late '60s, but artists were already curating from within their own practice, and using interventionalist and mediating strategies as part of their remit. To separate out the role of the artist and the curator historically can be problematic—is that something you would agree with?

AA: Interestingly, one of Siegelaub's first projects was at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver in 1969, where Ian Baxter—of the N.E. Thing Company, and one of the founders of Intermedia—was teaching. Collaboration had already been hot and trendy for several years at this point in Vancouver, beginning with the Festival of the Arts in the early '60s and leading to the founding of Intermedia in 1967. And the artists of Intermedia had already begun to curate exhibitions and events, notably the three annual exhibitions they produced at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1967, 1968, and 1969. Another example is the Tripps festival in Vancouver, in which all the films of Andy Warhol made to date were presented simultaneously in an indoor hockey stadium (only *Chelsea Girls* had sound). All of these projects grew out of the model of the Festival of the Arts, which was essentially a festival of performance, and I would argue that the very idea of independent curating emerges from the crossover between the visual and performing arts at this time in that place.

On another note, we could look at early publishing collaborations, which were essentially curatorial projects. Armleder and the Ecart group in Geneva were publishing collaborative projects by 1969; Nanucci in Florence also generated print-based projects with many artist contributors in which there was some sort of vision. He really came out of a scene of concrete poetry and moved into visual arts, but so did Lawrence Weiner for that matter and so did Carl Andre. Both Armleder and Nanucci ran little empires; though in a way empire is not the right word at all. John's practice was based on having tea, actually, so that it was like one ongoing open-house with tea served continuously in this little space that he opened that as a sort of bookstore, only half the time he never knew the price of anything. It was very, very flaky. They had one of those little hand-operated mimeograph presses, and they would produce these collaborative printed projects.

PAUL: Would you have described what Ecart or even what you were doing as "artist-curating" at the time or how would it have been discussed?

AA: We would have seen them as artist's projects and even today John Armleder still has a little stand at the Basel art fair every June, which is called Ecart. Its his little gallery and he shows whomever he wants in it and sometimes it's a group show and sometimes it's a solo show—it's like the memory of what he was doing then. John's teaching practice is also quite interesting, in that he is constantly getting his students to do projects in which they collaborate to make some sort of artist's activity visible; in other words, a curatorial project. For example, one year he brought his entire class to New York in June and they set up some sort of cheap printing press in the American Fine Arts gallery and invited artists to come by and print anything they wanted. The students worked with the artists to produce all this material that went back out into the world again.

PAUL: There seems to be a greater connectivity for you and for General Idea with Northern Europe, rather than somewhere like London or New York even?

AA: We never really had any real connection with London except for individuals: Gilbert and George, Genesis P-Orridge and for some reason Allen Jones and Richard Hamilton. Those were our contacts.

PAUL: Did you show in London at the time?

AA: We showed at Canada House in 1977. [*He laughs*] It was sort of funny because the people I have just mentioned were the people who came to the opening. We had met Allen Jones because he had had a show in Toronto and Richard Hamilton we met because he had had a show in Toronto. Gilbert and George and Genesis P-Orridge we hadn't met in person before and we all went dancing together; Gilbert and George took us dancing. It was a very peculiar group of people dancing together. [*He laughs*] It got very wild as you can imagine, you know Gilbert and George got drunker and drunker until they were flinging people around the room, knocking over tables. It was very funny. It was a very peculiar evening.

PAUL: How did GI's practice develop in the mid-'80s? And when you moved to New York you began the "AIDS Project," based on Robert Indiana's *LOVE* logo, what were the origins of this on-going project?

AA: In the '80s we developed the whole idea of the multiple much further and this became—beginning in 1979— a major project for us, our own low-cost multiples, forgetting about Art Metropole for the moment. We developed the idea of "the Boutique-as-artwork," which we had first played with in our storefront in 1969. "The Boutiques" were sort of our gallery shops, which we could put into our museum. "The Boutiques" were always a big problem because, when we had a museum show, the museums never wanted to sell anything out of them: in those days you weren't supposed to sell anything in the galleries. The gallery was the pristine, pure white cube where no money changed hands. The other thing was that the museum shops hated to have the competition of our little boutique.

In 1985 we had our first show in the US, at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, which was amazing because at that point we had been showing all over Europe for the previous nine years. It was a good way to start. Immediately after that show, we were approached by a gallery called International With Monument in the East Village, the trendy gallery of the moment, and Jeff Koons and people like that were showing there at the time. We decided to move to New York. Our practice in terms of exhibiting and selling was totally based in Europe at that time. We had sort of used up Canada; we had done everything we could in Canada. It's a small country really in terms of audience or museums, especially back then. We realized that all Europeans went through New York, and that if we were in New York we could see all the European curators and the gallerists who passed through all the time. So we made this decision to move to New York in '86. I remember Lawrence Weiner telling me at the time, "You realize this isn't going to change your practice, it's still going to be based entirely in Europe, and you are not going to get any action here," and that was fairly true. Although we did do some exhibitions and projects and so on, and there is a history now of GI in the USA.

In '87, a friend of ours who worked at the Canadian Consulate here in New York died of AIDS. We were involved in his care up to the last moments, and, perhaps as a result of this we turned very quickly toward work related to AIDS. For the next seven years, from 1987 through 1994—when Felix and Jorge died—all of our attention went to the issue of AIDS. We pulled in all the knowledge we had about how to produce products that could run through various systems—advertising systems or whatever—and how to work with billboards, placards on buses, how to do projects that might take place in a subway car, or how to do something that could appear on television. We focused all that experience with media on

PAUL: In an interview with Mike Kelley in 2003 I remember you saying that it was Sherrie Levine who said "Well, now you can't do anything else for the next two years," after you made your first AIDS painting in 1986?

AA: Yes, she did. We had always worked in a multi-faceted and complex narrative sort of way, and so this idea took us by surprise at first. But we realized that she was right. And that is what we did for the next several years, in fact more than two years in the end. (I am still sending out permissions for various organizations to use the AIDS logo today!).

PAUL: From the outside looking in, that whole period in relation to the issue of AIDS in New York seems to be very insulated, and there was a kind of community of people dedicated to the issue in New York, people like Gran Fury, Act Up, etc., were you part of that?

AA: You know, oddly enough, we weren't part of it. They hated us and they had a big chip on their shoulders about us. Frankly, I never really understood what it was about. I think part of it was that we were infringing on their territory. We weren't Americans, our work didn't appear to be angry, and that seemed to be a big drawback. Also, we weren't didactic: that wasn't our approach, to be didactic. We wanted visibility for a disease that was being hushed. We took the logo, dealt with it like an advertising campaign, and sent it out like a virus into the world. We just made it multiply as much as we could in the world. And we would always get criticisms, like "How can you spend all that money on posters and not put any information about safe sex on them?" That sort of thing.

PAUL: So you weren't marching in the streets?

AA: No, we weren't part of that and we wouldn't have been welcome as part of that.

PAUL: Would you have had much exchange with people like Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Group Material?

AA: I was a friend of Felix's. He was fine. Actually, when Group Material did projects relating to AIDS, they would always include us. I have to say Group Material was the exception there. You know Felix was very sympathetic; we had a good relation there. Part of that probably came from meeting him in sex clubs.

PAUL: *Felix, June 5, 1994* (1995/2000) was your first stand-alone work as a solo artist after Felix and Jorge died. Did you always think of this photograph you took of Felix as becoming a work?

AA: Yes, I did. I can still remember taking the photograph, vividly. The hair on the nape of my neck was standing on end, and I knew that I would have to do something with this image, which was then emblazoned on my retina. I needed to send it out into the world. In the end, it took form as a billboard in the city of Munich, where Felix's emaciated visage also called forth memories of the concentration camps.

PAUL: You mentioned the book, *Museums by Artists*— can you tell me more about that project?

AA: Actually, it is a book that is totally related to what you are doing. It's a book that presents artist's projects related to the concept of a museum. On the smallest level it might be Robert Filliou's concept of his hat as a museum or the *Museum of Eagles* by [Marcel] Broodthaers. It was sort of along that line. There were Buren's writings from the late '70s, about and in relation to the museum. So it took that complete spectrum, from the artist's theoretical approach to looking at the museum, through to the very playful small-scale thing like a museum in a hat. I have an essay in it, which is specifically about Canadian artist-run centers and that history. I wanted to locate that history within a much broader discourse of artists' interest in the concept of the museum. That book was the foundation of "The Museum as Muse" exhibition, curated by Kynaston McShine at MoMA, which I was so pissed off they didn't acknowledge. *Museums by Artists* was a direct source and if you look at one book and the other, you can see all the crossover stuff. It was published in '83, and it seemed that no one would buy it when it was first published. I started keeping a graph of sales, because the number of copies that were sold each year began to double. We sold like five the first year and it took about ten years to sell about 1000 copies [*laughs*].

PAUL: Have you ever thought of republishing?

AA: We have talked about it at Art Metropole, but the problem is that it takes so much money to republish something and it takes away money from a new project, especially in the Canadian context, where there is so little money for publishing.

PAUL: Last year you became Director of Printed Matter in New York, and more recently you were involved in setting up the new space on 10th Avenue, what are your

"General Idea: Selected Retrospective"
Curated by Paul O'Neill and Grant Watson, Project Gallery, Dublin, 2006
Photo: Paul O'Neill.

ambitions for the space and how will your experience with Art Metropole impact upon it as an organization?

AA: **Printed Matter is now thirty years old. Artists' books began as a particular strategy, as a means of making art that could be distributed throughout the world in a low-cost format. It was a democratic form. I find that younger artists are developing a much broader spectrum of approaches to this same idea, and I would like to help Printed Matter become more responsive to what artists are doing, rather than being stuck with a model that is no longer current. I see Printed Matter as a place where people can gather, exchange information, try things out, not just as the kind of art bookshop that it had become.**

PAUL: How do you think curatorial practice has developed since the late '80s, particularly in relation to the "artist-

curator" model? During this time there has been a greater visibility for curators?

AA: **There are two things that I have noticed from this period. One is the emergence of the curator as the star—in many cases to the detriment of the artist, where the artist becomes the illustration for the curator, which I always find intensely annoying. I remember Les Levine published an article in the *Village Voice* in the '80s, which was critical of group exhibitions, and at a certain point he established a policy of not being in group shows anymore. The other thing that I actually like very much are the projects by Hans-Ulrich Obrist, which to me demonstrate a more open and fluid approach. He asked us to be involved in a project around the time that Felix and Jorge were basically on their deathbeds, and I only sent half the information. He wanted a text and an illustration for this book of unreal-**

ized projects [*Unbuilt Roads*]. Our project had only ever been a concept and there wasn't any illustration to give, but he kept saying, well just draw something, just draw something. He didn't want to have a blank page. Anyway, I do think his projects are brilliantly conceived.

PAUL: Why do you think that this is a more productive curatorial model?

AA: Well, I guess it is returning to the model that I am more familiar with, this model of a container within which an artist can create something. And the container is of a type that creates dispersion into the world, whether it is his billboards or posters or whatever. They are very much based on stuff that people like us did long ago and about institutionalizing that process. I don't feel that institutionalizing them has lessened these projects.

PAUL: There is a similarity to the kind of language used by Hans-Ulrich and artists associated with the avant-garde exhibition design in the '20s and '30s, such as Dada, or Kiesler, Dorner, and Duchamp with the Surrealists and their use of terms such as transformativity, fluidity, and flux.

AA: I think it comes out of that tradition, and also what we do comes in a way from the Surrealist tradition, where they treated the gallery as an environment rather than a white cube. The gallery becomes part of the experience of the art. Also, another related idea is Dadaists, the Surrealists, and especially the Russian Constructivists' use of books, as well as, I guess, the Futurists' use of the political pamphlet.

PAUL: Do you see a historical lineage between these movements and General Idea?

AA: Yes, I have always thought of us as part of that lineage.

PAUL: General Idea has become more visible in the last few years—why do you think there has been such a resurgent and insurgent interest in the work of GI? Is this the moment when the legacy of GI is being historicized or mythologized?

AA: Historicized, I hope. Mythologized too, I think! Since I am still living, it has taken ten years for people to realize that General Idea is gone, that only the estate of General Idea remains. What I notice is a tremendous interest in the early work of General Idea, from the '70s, whereas previously we seemed to have been branded "AIDS

artists," especially in America. You know, General Idea always had a significant audience of students and young artists, and interestingly that has not changed. I think the particular strategies we used in our early days holds a great interest for young artists today.

PAUL: You have just returned from Munich and Dublin, where two quite different retrospective exhibitions of GI are being held at the Kunstverein and Project Gallery, respectively, how do you feel about such a looking-back activity as having been there first time around and now working as a solo artist?

AA: I have always found these retrospective exhibitions exceedingly painful, especially if they included video. I found it especially difficult to see and hear Felix, Jorge, and myself, in the video *Test Tube* (1979) for example, or *Shut the Fuck Up* (1985.) But this time around everything seemed to change. I found the installation process in Munich completely engaging, and my own viewpoint, I think, had turned from that of the artist to that of an intimately involved observer, discovering again so many delightful moments that I had forgotten. The work still seemed so fresh after so many years. And in Dublin I was struck by how the work can be given new life when it is seen through the eyes of intelligent and empathic curators. This was the first exhibition in which I did not have a large hand in the choice of works and display, and it was a very gratifying experience indeed. ▦

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