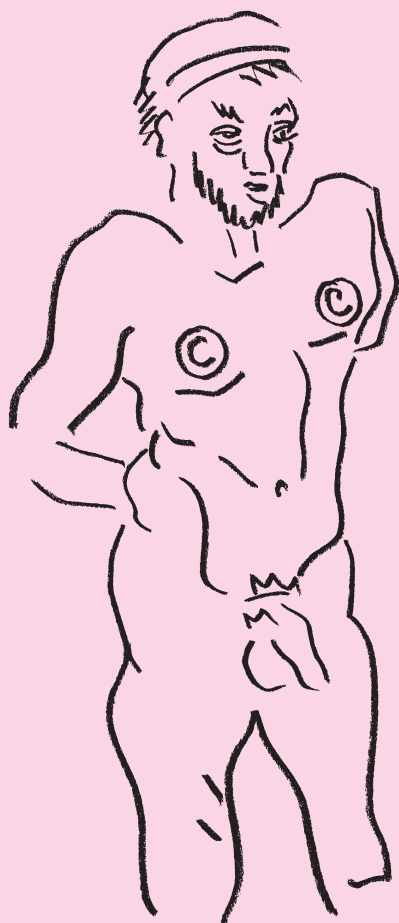


NECESSARY FICTIONS: THE DRAWINGS OF GENERAL IDEA

CLAIRE GILMAN



Founded in Toronto in 1969 by AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal, General Idea is recognized today as a key participant in the Conceptual art scene of the 1970s and 1980s. From their early staged beauty pageants, boutiques, and talk shows, to their later material output in the form of postcards, prints, posters, magazines, and wallpaper, they enthusiastically embraced popular commercial forms creating witty send-ups of both aesthetic and consumer culture. What then do we make of the fact that, from the very beginning until their disbanding in 1994 following the deaths of Felix and Jorge from AIDS, they were drawing—daily, incessantly, over and over again?

Or, to be accurate, Jorge was drawing, applying pen and ink to paper in the daily meetings during which General Idea would brainstorm ideas for current and future projects. But the fact that Jorge produced drawings during these meetings means that General Idea produced drawings because, as the group has steadfastly maintained, anything created by one member is attributable to all. Indeed, authorship was a collective enterprise for General Idea, and the very notion of selfhood something flexible and uncontained. By the same token, in being inextricably bound to the dialogic setting in which it was generated, the intimate drawn gesture herein incorporates a certain internal distance, thus finding its place alongside the serial, reproducible forms that have come to define the group.

If these drawings lend the group's ephemeral, serial production a kind of material gravitas, it is not because they are any more or less "true" than anything else that the group produced during its 25-year existence. Rather, it is because, in their claim to intimacy, they simultaneously complicate and help us understand what truth consisted in for General Idea. Jorge was always making drawings, but they assumed a greater regularity in 1985, continuing through the last meetings in 1993, the years The Drawing Center and MAMCO exhibitions take as their focus. Notably, 1985 was the year the group made the decision to leave Canada for New York, and it was a time when their early *joie-de-vivre* was tempered by the pervasive presence of AIDS. In AA's words, it was a period "during which we had to face and somehow incorporate the illness and death of most of our friends as well as Jorge and Felix themselves." The exhibition title *Ecce Homo* deliberately references a 1923 publication by German artist George Grosz (1893–1959) chosen, according to AA, because "the Anti-Semitism in Grosz's narrative is mirrored by the homophobia in ours." AA continues, "The title *Ecce Homo* in our case refers to General Idea, self-deprecatingly, as homos. It is a kind of self-portrait as the rejected part of society. In North America we represented that part of society left to die in a pandemic which conveniently ignored the white moneyed straight folk."¹

This pain and gravity are immediately felt in the drawings, whether in an early series of silhouetted figures shot through with holes; a trio of drawings in which drawn scars and real bandages define skeletal heads; the trembling, melting visages that populate so many of the images over the years; or the latest drawings, from Jorge's last months, when he was going blind, in which he represented the black floaters in his eyes as cockroaches. Moreover, imagery is supplemented in key instances by suggestive text. "Oh No," "Daily Political Will," "Onward," and "Care," the drawings intone; culminating, in a text-drawing from 1991, in a fully articulated plea: "I'm down on my luck, lost my job, now I'm trying to survive. Please help." Still, as AA acknowledges, there is plenty of levity. Light, "fluffy" moments leaven the grief and pain as figures familiar from General Idea's lexicon—high-heels, male and female body parts, heraldic symbols, floating lips, and prancing poodles—join the fray.

Considering the drawings as a whole, I would argue that it is not in their subject matter primarily that their felt urgency lies. Rather, it is in their "format," a term General Idea used to describe the various media they employed over the years to put forward their content. It is a format that, like all of General Idea's work, is predicated on repetition, with repetition understood as a third term that exists somewhere between the auratic "original," and the idea of the copy. According to French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, to repeat is not to create an exact copy or to undo singularity in favor of equivalence. Instead, "repetition as a conduct, and as a point of view concerns non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularities" that reject the very notion of a "perfect" model or essential rendition or meaning. Taken in this sense, "repetition is a transgression."² It introduces "disequilibrium"—following "an element of one instance with *another* element of a following instance"³—in a process that embraces movement and instability. It proposes "a more profound and artistic reality,"⁴ one that is theatrical in nature in that it acknowledges an unbridgeable gap between inside and outside, between the fiction of essential meaning and the constructs that permit sense in the first place.

It is in this sense that Gregg Bordowitz has discussed the group's notorious IMAGEVIRUS project which took Robert Indiana's ubiquitous LOVE logo as its point of departure, substituting Indiana's logo for the acronym AIDS. Launched in the mid-1980s, this gesture was misunderstood in its day as making light of the disease at a time when an overtly activist stance was considered the only appropriate one. However,

as Bordowitz asserts, in submitting the word AIDS to a kind of explosive repetition—broadcasting it on the sides of buses, wheat-pasting posters across city blocks, and disseminating it in postcards, prints, and paintings—they adopted the virus' own logic against itself. In repeating the word over and over to the point of absurdity, they revealed its very meaninglessness, as well as the insufficiency of any effort to try and encapsulate the disease, however urgent the desire to do so. "The direct experience of AIDS exceeds representation," maintains Bordowitz. "AIDS is always more than an image . . . It is mourning-sadness-tears-shaking-sobbing bodies."⁵

It is this same "mourning-sadness-tears-shaking-sobbing" that emanates from the quivering, dancing amoebas and grinning ghosts; the melting faces become genitals and genitals become faces; the fiery Tantric masks and ravenous high-heeled shoes; the exploding cockroaches, mutating DNA strands, and frolicking poodles that populate General Idea's drawings. The drawings number in the hundreds, but the motifs are limited even as they mutate and migrate between series and over the course of years. They are transgressive in Deleuze's sense, manifesting an expressive insistence that acknowledges its own inexhaustibility and insufficiency even as it seems to want to staunch the flow in a fruitless effort to "get it right." As the group clarified in the spring 1987 edition of *File* magazine entitled "The Journal of the New Mortality," "In the current situation we are all struggling to develop a visual language which can cope with the demands of the moment."⁶ In their propulsive urgency, the drawings register this attempt, offering a visceral, material incarnation of General Idea's longstanding familiarity with the concomitant necessity and inadequacy of signs. General Idea spoke about themselves as posturers, and about images as empty vehicles for meaning, sites of occupation to be invested with and divested of content again and again. They realized these claims on the slick pages of magazines, in posters, and in prints, and, in these drawings, in a new, tangible form. The drawings are less objects in this sense than gestures, what General Idea refers to in the famous "Glamour" issue of *File* from 1975 as the "configuration of movement and desire . . . locked into a single sign. That sign is repeated endlessly, become thick with accumulated meaning."⁷

Proceeding from shoe to shoe and mask to mask, here executed in acid green and there in dull orange, overlaid in this instance with grids and cross-hatching, and in that with stars, splatters, and swirls, we feel these drawings in their "thickness" even if we cannot exactly comprehend their meaning. The drawings are unified not only by repeating motifs and techniques, but by their consistent size (roughly A4 paper) and extreme frontality. More often than not, they depict single entities—frequently mask-like visages ranging from human-animal hybrids, to voracious deities alive with squiggles and swirls set against white or vividly colored grounds—but even those images featuring multiple motifs are mask-like in their flatness and attention to surface and patterning. At turns hairy, feathery, slick or coarse, defined by impenetrably dense patterning or slippery contours, the repeating figures appear as if armored against penetration. Orifices are abundant but they are generally inaccessible whether barred by cross-hatching, protected by lapping flames, or physically sealed. The drawings are on the one hand dizzyingly full—this is particularly true of the later drawings where cockroaches spawn and multiply amid dots and splatters of color—and, on the other, hauntingly vacant consisting of mere stains or barely-there outlines, even within a single series. Lest we get too caught up in any one particular rendition, another follows, giving the lie to its predecessor. In their mutability and insistent flow, they are an intimate manifestation of the theatrical nature of existence, exposing representation's inadequacy while acknowledging its urgency.

This must have been especially the case for Jorge in his last days. It is as though in drawing voraciously he could extend

his individual life through the collective. AA observed, looking back on General Idea some 20 years later, “When Jorge, Felix, and I began working together as General Idea in 1969, we were already aware of two opposing forces in our communal life: the desire to produce art and the desire to survive.”⁸ General Idea’s drawings make clear that these two things are not in fact opposing, but rather inseparable. They are a powerful testament to the will to keep going and to art’s role in this effort, despite or because of the knowledge that the results, however necessary, are ultimately a fiction.

* * *

Working on this exhibition and book has been a deeply rewarding experience.

I am above all profoundly grateful to AA Bronson for opening his archive to us and for generously trusting us with this intensely moving, rarely-seen body of work. Thank you AA for being so open and for sharing your insights and memories.

My gratitude extends in equal measure to Lionel Bovier, my collaborator on this project. It has been wonderful getting to know you through this process, and sharing thoughts and ideas. Thank you for making this a thoroughly enjoyable experience. Similarly, I am grateful to Alex Kitnick, Assistant Professor of Art History and Visual Culture at Bard College, for the lively discussions about all things General Idea.

I must also acknowledge Sholem Krishtalka from AA Bronson’s studio, and the team at Mitchell-Innes & Nash for offering their support and expertise every step of the way. Thank you Kevin Choe, Jamie Park, Hooper Turner, and especially Courtney Willis Blair. Special thanks to Lucy Mitchell-Innes for always picking up her phone when I had a question and making sure she found the answer.

At The Drawing Center, the entire staff deserves my appreciation. Thank you especially Isabella Kapur, Curatorial Associate; Kate Robinson, Registrar; and Olga Tetkowsky, Deputy Director, for navigating the complexities of working with not only one, but two institutions, and making the whole project run seamlessly. Thanks also to our indefatigable Executive Director Laura Hoptman for her unflagging support.

Finally, I would like to thank The Drawing Center’s Board of Directors as well as the funders whose support was fundamental to the creation of this exhibition and the accompanying publication.

—Claire Gilman

- 1 AA Bronson, email correspondence with the author, February 23, 2022.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, Columbia University Press, New York 1994, p. 1–3.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 5 Gregg Bordowitz, *General Idea: Imagevirus*, Afterall Books, London 2010, p. 22.
- 6 General Idea, “The Journal of the New Mortality,” *File*, no. 27 (Spring, 1987), p. 8.
- 7 General Idea in “Glamour Issue,” *File*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Autumn, 1975), n. p.
- 8 Bronson, “Copyright, Cash, and Crowd Control: Art and Economy in the Work of General Idea,” in *General Idea: A Retrospective 1969–1994*, JRP|Ringier, Zurich 2011, p. 120.

A CONVERSATION WITH AA BRONSON, CLAIRE GILMAN AND LIONEL BOVIER

Lionel Bovier

Among the 250 drawings selected for the exhibitions at The Drawing Center in New York and MAMCO in Geneva, there are amoebas, cockroaches, poodles, but also high heels, faces, Tantric-inspired motifs, etc. How do you explain this diversity—and the fact that some motifs seem to morph into others—in relation to the practice of General Idea?

AA Bronson

I think that's a good question, but I'm not sure I have an answer. You've described succinctly the nature of the drawings. That's their primary nature: this handful of motifs that get mixed and combined, in different kinds of ways. And then they morph into each other and become other things, or half one thing and half another.

Lionel Bovier

I'm particularly intrigued by the origin of the Tantric and Tibetan-inspired figures—could you tell us more about how you came to those?

AA Bronson

Some motifs appear quite early, going back to the mid-1970s. But I think I could partially explain the Tibetan-Tantric images by what was going on in our lives in the early 1980s.

Jorge and I went to Dharamshala in 1983 to photograph the Dalai Lama for Louwrien Wijer's book of interviews. He was ten days late—which we had been warned is not as late as in Western time. The Dalai Lama's sister and the monks went to enormous lengths to take care of us while we were waiting. They scheduled something different each day: we attended a long-life puja for the Dalai Lama, we visited the school for the young monks, saw the new library, had dinner with the Tibetan State Oracle, and then they decided that we should take an advanced teaching, the Yamantaka, sometimes characterized as the "artists' practice." It was taught by Ling Rinpoche, one of the old Lamas who had escaped with the Dalai Lama from Tibet in 1959. The nun who was our primary guide took us to register for the teaching, but the person running the office said, "They can't take that teaching: this is only for advanced practitioners. Absolutely not possible." But our nun was undeterred. "Here's a prayer flag, just hold onto it for a moment," she said. She ran away to see the senior tutor of the Dalai Lama and soon came back with his judgment: "You must take these teachings, that is why you are here, but you won't understand them at first. As the years go by, the practice will open to you." This moment was particularly precious because the teacher, Ling Rinpoche, was the living incarnation of the Yamantaka. He was very old, had not given the teaching for thirteen years and would probably never give it again (in fact he died the following year). For three full days we sat cross-legged in a small building with our teacher and a crowd of enormous Tibetan monks, who would vibrate the little building with their throat chanting. There was a simultaneous English translation for Louwrien, Jorge, and me and there must have been a few other Westerners too. Ultimately, we were given a visualization and text to memorize in a simple form, a medium form, and a complex form. We committed to sitting and visualizing the Yamantaka six times each morning and six times each evening, whichever form we preferred. The simple form could be repeated six times in about three minutes, whereas the most complex form took an hour.

The Yamantaka practice is “secret,” that is Tantric. It involves visualizing the internal structure of one’s body, the vajra body, with subtle winds passing up and down through channels in the body. Within the meditation, substances transform into other substances, there is a complex symphony of shapes, colors, and smells. I hope other practitioners will excuse this simplistic description. The Yamantaka is known as the artist’s Tantra, and it became, in a way, a basis for making art, for drawing. These later drawings emerge from that experience.

The following year Jorge went to Italy for a one-month teaching called the Six (Seven?) Yogas of Naropa, with Lama Yeshe, another of the old lamas who had escaped from Tibet. He was the reincarnation of a famous mother superior, and famously always had a cloud of little dogs around his feet, much like the ballgowns Jorge later drew on the figure of Christ on the Cross.

The Tibetans hoped in that one month to teach these Western students of the Dharma the first yoga, how to generate heat within the body, to be able to sit in a cave and meditate through the winter. And so they practiced generating heat within the belly for one month. Lama Yeshe died soon after. And a few years later this particular yoga appears in the flow of Jorge’s drawings: androgynous beings with penises and vulvas spout fire from their bellies, a very unpopular image with collectors! Masks too, lots of masks, the many faces of the Yamantaka!

Claire Gilman

The flow of the drawings parallels the way the three of you worked in other projects, right? That idea of the multiple, of doing something over and over again, parallels the way Jorge approached drawing.

AA Bronson

Yes. In our early film from 1969, *God is My Gigolo*, directed by Jorge, you see the way that it floats and reforms (it’s very difficult to follow); there’s already this way of working implicit in that film. And since we were all in the film as well, we were introduced to this method of working quite early on. It’s not that there are any drawings in the film—there aren’t—but this kind of loose evocative way of assembling materials and actions is already present.

Lionel Bovier

Did the Tibetan teachings open for you later?

AA Bronson

Yes, absolutely. Both of us kept to the practice. I mean, they make it very simple by having the easy, the medium, and the hard version!

Claire Gilman

And do you still do it, today?

AA Bronson

No, the practice stopped when Jorge and Felix died, as if of its own volition. But I still feel I carry it within me. I can call it up in a second and I can do it. But I don’t have a daily practice. Very bad!

Lionel Bovier

Would you say there’s a relation between this meditative technique and the almost diaristic production of drawings of this period?

AA Bronson

Jorge had been drawing all his life, since he was a little boy, just drawing, drawing, drawing—drawing all the time. Once General Idea started, Felix and I tried to channel him into a kind of “productive way” of drawing. We would sit every morning at meetings to discuss General Idea’s ideas and productions and Jorge drew. We wanted to have the possibility of

using these drawings for projects or exhibitions. But he would draw over the phone book and anything he could find—magazines, notepads, old invoices, etc. Once we decided to move to New York, that's when the drawings really became precisely formulated. That must be around 1984, I guess, although we did not finally move to our house on West 12th Street until 1986. But yes, the drawings are a kind of diaristic meditation.

Claire Gilman

I think the earliest ones in the show are from 1985 and they are slightly smaller than the standard size that seems to predominate from 1986 on.

AA Bronson

So that means that he bought those drawing books in New York. Suddenly, he was always using the same sketch book. He also standardized his art supplies: he had a set of inks that he had used for coloring photographs since the 1970s and he added a larger set of colored inks, water colors, and gouaches for the drawings. We'd fought with him for years about this and, without us saying anything, he was doing it from then on ...

Claire Gilman

But the images that he was drawing didn't necessarily have to do with what you were discussing in that particular meeting, no?

AA Bronson

Not in a direct way. I mean, if we were discussing something to do with poodles, there'd probably be a poodle in the drawing, but it's not always or necessarily that direct.

Lionel Bovier

Were there exhibitions of *General Idea* centered on the drawings?

AA Bronson

We made an exhibition of drawings at A Space in Toronto in 1982, and at the Grita Insam Galerie in Vienna the following year. Later we decided that we would try including a few of the drawings in each of our shows: we had a show at Mai 36 Galerie in 1989, where we included six of the drawings. I think everybody was mystified why they were there ...

Jan Debbaut bought a group of six super-sized drawings entitled *The Dresses of Miss General idea* for the SMAK museum in Ghent. When Jorge died, in 1994, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam presented an exhibition of 50 of his drawings for International AIDS Day. Sherrie Levine made another selection of drawings—50 again, I'm not sure why. She approached galleries in New York about doing an exhibition of them: they all refused. Later, in 2002, the National Gallery of Canada exhibited 50 again, for a Day Without Art.

Claire Gilman

How does this drawing practice relate to the different works produced by *General Idea* through the years?

AA Bronson

When we began planning this exhibition, I assumed the discussion would be largely about the relation to AIDS, since these later drawings coincide with the period in which our AIDS work predominated. What a surprise to be talking about Tantra!

Of course, there are all sorts of connections one can draw, but it never quite adds up to anything. The drawings are intimately related to our practice, but they also question it, they kind of open a big question mark, like, "What is the relationship with the other works?" And then, finally, they also document the process of dying.

In the *General Idea* catalog from the recent Ottawa retrospective, we included a group of the drawings within the biographical appendix: Jorge's drawings are interspersed

through the exhibition lists, bibliographies, and so on, through the history of General Idea.

Lionel Bovier

Because General Idea's methodology was like a fiction within which everything that you did became part of the work somehow, is there a difference between the drawings and a performance, a text, or a photograph?

AA Bronson

Well, the difference is that all those other manifestations—may I call them that?—marked decisions that we made as a group. But Jorge was a kind of medium: the drawings flowed through him and onto the page in response to our group "meetings," to the life and the art we were making, and ultimately in response to death, as it came to take both Jorge and Felix away, and then General Idea too.

Lionel Bovier

There's a real diversity of treatment in the drawings: you could feel that Jorge spent a lot of time on some and would be very quick on others. This feature makes it complicated to put them together in a way. But I think that's also the quality of this particular corpus: when you flip through the book, you have this feeling that it doesn't matter somehow if it took a day or five minutes to achieve a drawing.

AA Bronson

It's true: there are some where much work was done and others with very few strokes, just very minimal interventions. I remember that when Jorge was drawing, sometimes he would put one stroke too many: then he would have to go back and do it all over again because he'd done too much. Of course, the cockroaches were designed to be very minimal by nature. They corresponded to the black floaters that filled his eyes towards the end, until he eventually went blind.

Claire Gilman

Did you save all of these or did he decide in the moment to save one and not another?

AA Bronson

We saved all of them, but six months before Jorge died, he put a "GI" in the corner of the drawings he deemed a work as opposed to a study. So, there's actually hundreds and hundreds of them with no GI in the corner!

Lionel Bovier

I guess the dating became a bit indeterminate because of this process?

AA Bronson

Yes, he dated them all at once, in late 1993. It's very obvious that there are often two very similar drawings that are dated three years apart and at first that doesn't seem realistic. At the time I wondered if I should be pointing this out to him, but I thought it wasn't that important. What remains is the sense of sequence he wanted to give to this particular body of works. But in fact, he sometimes would take out a drawing, put it underneath a piece of paper, trace it, and then he'd start all over again on the same motif. Usually, the way it developed would be different from the model, it would go off in some other directions, but Jorge quite liked to copy his own drawings, often several years later.

Lionel Bovier

Like as if there were no original or as if the origin didn't matter.

AA Bronson

Exactly.