

The Word Made Flesh: On John Bentley Mays's "Miracles of Emanuel Jaques"

Jon Davies

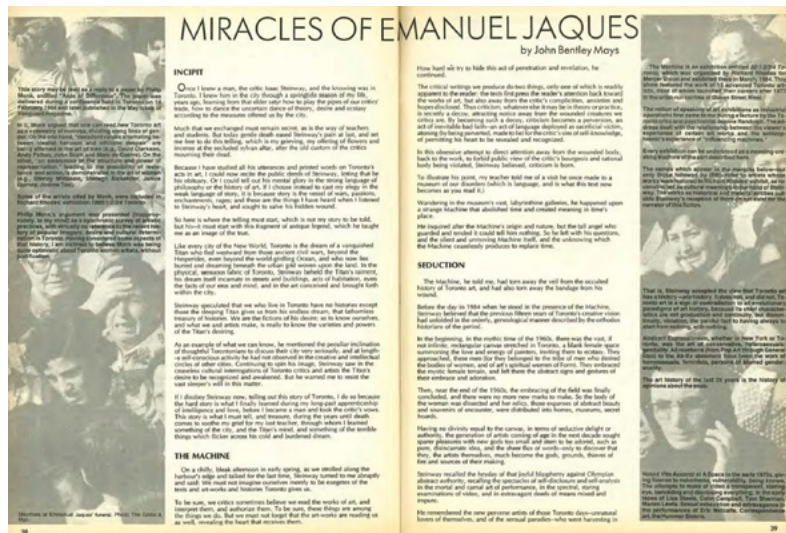
Cet article analyse « *Miracles of Emanuel Jaques* », un essai percutant de feu le critique d'art John Bentley Mays publié dans *C Magazine* en 1984. Jaques est le jeune Canadien d'origine portugaise dont le viol brutal et le meurtre en 1977 ont conduit, d'une part, au « nettoyage » du quartier des spectacles pour adultes de Yonge Street à Toronto et, d'autre part, à une réaction hostile envers la communauté homosexuelle de la ville. L'histoire de Jaques est certes au cœur de l'histoire et de la mythologie de Toronto, reste que Mays a fait un grand pas en avant en se servant de la destruction du garçon et de ses effets pour discuter des changements survenus dans la production artistique locale au cours des sept années qui se sont écoulées après l'événement. Bien que le collectif General Idea soit à peine mentionné dans l'essai de Mays, on peut dire qu'il le hante. En outre, le collectif – et d'autres artistes torontois – vivait et travaillait sur Yonge Street à cette époque, ce qui me permet d'examiner l'étroite imbrication des sous-cultures artistiques et sexuelles dans la ville lors de cette panique morale historique.

Jon Davies is a recent graduate of the PhD program in Art History at Stanford University where he wrote a dissertation titled "The Fountain: Art, Sex and Queer Pedagogy in San Francisco, 1945–1995."
— jon.andrew.davies@gmail.com

This article originated in my initial *misreading* of a striking essay by the late Toronto art critic John Bentley Mays, titled "Miracles of Emanuel Jaques," which appeared in the second issue of *C Magazine* in the summer of 1984. Jaques was the Portuguese-Canadian boy whose brutal rape and murder in the summer of 1977 led to the "cleaning up" of the Yonge Street adult entertainment district and a vitriolic backlash against Toronto's gay community. His story is central to the history and mythology of the city, certainly, but it was quite a leap for Mays to use the boy's destruction and its effects to analyze changes in the artistic production taking place in Toronto over the intervening seven years since the crime. Rereading this strange text now, during another moral panic around sexuality, complete with claims of LGBTQ people "grooming" children, feels both uncanny and urgent. Radiating out from Mays's essay, I trace a constellation of figures, sites, and artworks that illuminate the shifting aesthetic, political, sexual, and social landscape—and stakes—of Toronto in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Philip Monk argues that the local art scene of this time engaged in a heightened performativity and self-mythologizing, making and unmaking itself as it was churned by both internal political conflicts and external forces ranging from the ascendance of irony and punk to the advent of a new moral panic.¹ While the artist's group General Idea (AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal) is barely mentioned in Mays's essay, the trio haunt it, having sparked a crisis of faith in its author, as we will see.

Known for his flamboyant writing, Mays's erudition ranged from Classical art and philosophy to Medieval literature to the latest postmodern texts. His "Miracles" essay is an intertextual hall of mirrors | **fig. 1** |. It is formally divided into a narrative—a piece of ficto-criticism, a popular genre at the time—and a sidebar with contextual notes and mentions of specific artists. Mays frames the essay as a reply to a lecture by Monk that was published in *Vanguard* magazine earlier that year, entitled "Axes of Difference." In it, Monk proposed a gendered divide in Toronto art production, with the male artists under discussion displaying "decadent values alternating between idealist heroism and nihilistic despair" and women artists' work conveying "an awareness of the structure and power of representation."² For Mays, Monk's argument was overly "synchronic" and it omitted "the recent history of popular imagery [and] desire in Toronto."³ Another intertext is

Figure 1. First spread of John Bentley Mays, "Miracles of Emanuel Jaques," as published in *C Magazine* 2 (1984), 38–39 (Toronto: C The Visual Arts Foundation, 1984).



Richard Rhodes's exhibition of local artists 80/1/2/3/4 **TORONTO: Content and Context**, on view at artist-run centre Mercer Union in March 1984. (Rhodes was also the editor of *C* at this time.) Rhodes billed the show vaguely as "an existential catalogue, a record of fifteen imaginations presenting us with a sense of what it is like to be alive now."⁴ Mays refers to Rhodes's show as "the Machine," but he proposes that "every exhibition can be understood as a meaning-creating Machine." To him, such machines create meaning at the price of abolishing time or, to be more specific, historical consciousness (39).

Storytelling is the weapon—antiquated but still potent—that Mays wields against the excesses of postmodern theory, then arriving on North American shores from France in translation, and taken up by artists like General Idea as well as by numerous academics, critics, and curators. One reader of theory in Mays's essay is the fictional character "Isaac Steinway," whom Mays describes as an elder critic who taught him "how to dance of theory, desire, and ecstasy according to the measures offered us by the city" (38). Mays treats Steinway like a ventriloquist's dummy; he seems to be a caricature of critic Philip Monk, a decade his junior, but he is more accurately an alter-ego that Mays uses here to reckon with Monk's ideas and tastes. (Mischievously, the essay is framed as a eulogy not for Jaques, but for Steinway, though he will actually resurface a few years later in Mays's review of documenta 8 in Kassel.⁵) And even though Mays takes up various theorists and their methodologies in the piece, he contends that theory is a fiction of continuity "borrowed from elsewhere," and therefore a lie (41).

This heady description of his beloved adopted home of Toronto is quintessential Mays:

Like every city of the New World, Toronto is the dream of a vanquished Titan who fled westward from those ancient civil wars, beyond the Hesperides, even beyond the world-girdling Ocean, and who now lies buried and dreaming beneath the urban grid woven upon the land. In the physical, sensuous fabric of Toronto,

1. See Philip Monk, *Is Toronto Burning? Three Years in the Making (and Unmaking) of the Toronto Art Scene* (London: Black Dog, 2016).

2. Philip Monk, "Axes of Difference," *Vanguard* 13, no. 4 (1984), 12, 14. The article sparked several letters in response, published in issue 13, no. 7.

3. John Bentley Mays, "Miracles of Emanuel Jaques," *C Magazine* no. 2 (1984), 38.

4. "80/1/2/3/4 **TORONTO: Content and Context**," Mercer Union, March 6–31, 1984, <https://www.mercerunion.org/exhibitions/801234-toronto-content-and-context/>

5. John Bentley Mays, "Kassel 1987: So Much to See and Do," *C Magazine* 14 (1987), 17–22.

Steinway beheld the Titan's raiment, his dream itself incarnate in streets and buildings, acts of habitation, even the facts of our eros and mind, and in the art conceived and brought forth within the city.

Steinway speculated that we who live in Toronto have no histories except those the sleeping Titan gives us from his endless dream, that fathomless treasury of histories. We are the fictions of his desire; so to know ourselves, and what we and artists make, is really to know the varieties and powers of the Titan's desiring (38).

The historiography articulated here is arguably a gloss on General Idea's 1975 model of self-invention, dreaming an art scene out of the thin air: "We wanted to be famous, glamorous, and rich. That is to say we wanted to be artists and we knew that if we were famous and glamorous we could say we were artists and we would be.... We did and we are. We are famous, glamorous artists."⁶ This approach, in which personas and pseudonyms are key, spread virus-like through the city and especially its queer scenes, reverberating into the present. Mays was turned on to art when he realized that it "could be about ideas,"⁷ and he was especially excited by the "joyful blasphemy" (39) taking place around the artist-run A Space gallery in the 1970s in the form of mail art and artists' magazines, performance, and inter-media. Writing in 1984, however, Mays mourns the passing of those glory years: while once artists' use of "parody, perversity, and appropriation" had "ripp[ed] away the veil from established power's absurdity," now artists had "sadly, stopped resisting power's presumptions to total, inevitable reality." Starting in the late 1970s, there was a widespread return to order, or "re-materialization of the art object,"⁸ and artists like those in Rhodes's exhibition took up painting, sculpture, and "art's traditional stuff" once more, becoming beholden to mass culture and its "deforming all desire" (40). The crux of the essay is this passage: "He [Steinway] often said that people in Toronto preferred sexuality to sex—the safe pleasure of performing alienated linguistic codes (expressed in codified lifestyles, routinized sexual performances, stereotyped social behaviour), instead of the proliferating pleasures revealed by the body's contradictory, continually surprising desires" (41). My initial misreading was to see General Idea's practice, where desire and power are mediated by gossip and queer identities constructed in dialogue with mass culture, as epitomizing this bastardization. However, the more I uncovered their intertwined history with Mays, the more complex the story became.

This part of the sidebar is the only mention of General Idea in "Miracles," placing them and their *FILE* magazine alongside Rodney Werden, their compatriot and the author of an extraordinary body of video art examining non-normative sexual practices | fig. 2 |.⁹ The illustration, *The Dr. Brute Colonnade*, is a clue to General Idea's role in the text: if columns hold up an edifice, General Idea do the same here; they are the architecture of Mays's vision of Toronto art. Another potential reference to General Idea in the text is the figure Mays describes as the opposite of the Machine, what he calls "the Corporation." If the Machine is Culture, the Corporation is the driving force of Nature, drowning the meanings we create into a "devastating

6. General Idea, "Glamour," *FILE* 3, no. 1 (1975), 21.

7. Gerald Hannon, "John Prickly Mays," *Toronto Life* (December 1989), 107.

8. General Idea, "Editorial: The Re-materialization of the Art Object," *FILE* 5, no. 2 (1981), 17.

9. Werden's work is distributed by Vtape. See, especially, *Pauli Schell* (1975), *May I, Can I* (1978), *Say* (1978), *Baby Dolls* (1978), "I'll Bet You Ain't Seen Noth'n Like This Before..." (1980), and *Money Talks Bullshit Walks* (1986).

General Idea, FILE Magazine; Rodney Werden.

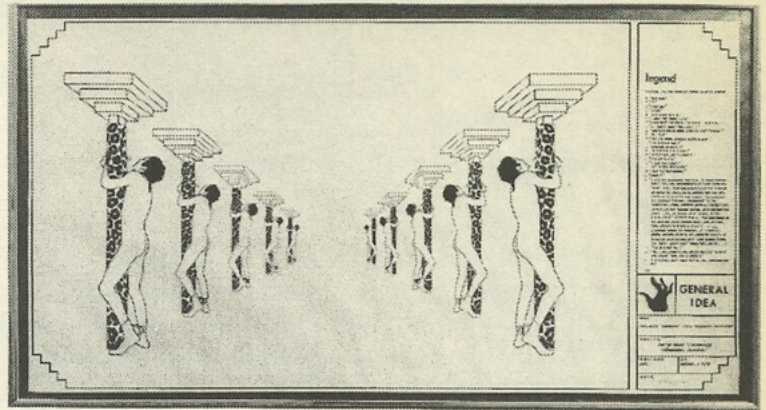


Figure 2. Detail of John Bentley Mays, "Miracles of Emanuel Jaques," in *FILE Magazine* 2 (1984), 40 (Toronto: C the Visual Arts Foundation, 1984).

General Idea. *The Dr. Brute Colonnade*, 1975, acetate print with hand painting mounted on craft paper, 23¾ x 45 in. Photo: courtesy Carmen Lamanna Gallery.



Figure 3. Toronto Police handout photo of Emanuel Jaques.

temporal flow" (42). A devout Anglican, Mays's worldview was eschatological and dizzyingly baroque. He later explained, "At its most urgent the avant-garde idea is a shaking of the foundations, a radical criticism that is wholly negative against the world. And I think that we can name that as Christ. [It] is an attempt to preserve within secular culture a lost spiritual vision of the god who annihilates in joy."¹⁰ For Mays, The Corporation viscerally manifested in Toronto in the summer of 1977, when "three young men" became "executors" of the Titan's dream. Elsewhere, Mays refers to General Idea as a "corporation," but here he is referring to Saul Betesh, Robert Wayne Kribs, and Josef Woods, the men who raped and murdered Emanuel Jaques, "initiat[ing] a joint act to annihilate meaning and fill the vacuum with time, power, and language" (43).

Mays spends the entire second half of his essay on the Jaques murder and its aftermath, approaching it with Marxist and semiotic analyses. While I think Mays's provocations are fuelled by a moral seriousness, we owe it to Jaques to narrate his last hours afresh. Emanuel Jaques was a twelve-year-old boy who had recently emigrated from the Azores to Shuter Street in Toronto's east end | fig. 3 |. To help support his family, the boy regularly shined shoes on the corner of Yonge and Dundas Streets downtown with his older brother and a friend. Around 5:30pm on July 28, 1977, Betesh offered to pay Jaques \$35 to help carry photographic equipment and took him for hamburgers. Betesh then brought the boy to an apartment at 245 Yonge Street above the Charlie's Angels X-rated cinema. There he and the two other men took photographs of Jaques, restrained and sexually assaulted him over several hours, and eventually tried injecting him with sedatives, strangled him,

10. Hannon, "John Prickly Mays," 115.

and finally drowned him in a sink so that he could never tell anyone what had happened. They then crudely wrapped up his body and hid it on the roof. The murder was frenziedly covered by the local press. In early 1978, the men were found guilty and sentenced to long prison terms. As Mays puts it, “Every action in [the men’s] mechanistic scenario followed the structures of language [... creating] nothing except itself, as a fiction of language.” The fascistic imposition of one’s will on another therefore becomes a form of writing. Their “production” involved “the progressive elimination of [...] the individual bourgeois body as embodiment of social value and repository of meaning—and its replacement with a linguistic, sociological entity, definable purely as an object of power” (43). Turning to Michel Foucault, Mays explains that prior to the crime, Toronto “had understood itself to be a zone of expanding permission, social experiment, and mercy upon [subversive] sexualities.” Mays continues, “I could only see these apparent permissions, these encouragements to express one’s desires and declare one’s sexuality, as merely another tactic of the city, organizing all of us into healthy, efficient images of itself.” This “illusion of freedom” liberated artists to “speak of themselves, and their bodies” (45). Intriguingly, some were doing so in the heart of Yonge Street, where Jaques was killed.

The so-called “Sin Strip” ran for several blocks of Yonge south of Gerrard and north of Shuter Street | fig. 4 |. It started to be taken over by adult businesses, including strip clubs, massage or “body rub” parlours, sex shops, adult bookstores, and X-rated cinemas around 1969. By 1972, the Strip had gone from a titillating novelty—one that made “Toronto the good” feel as grown-up as New York, with its notorious 42nd Street district—to a much-maligned blight on the urban landscape that politicians were lobbied to remedy, without much success. You can see the Strip in all its glory ca. 1975–76 in two short films from that time by Janis Cole and Holly Dale: *Cream Soda*, focused on the inner workings of the French Connection body rub parlour that Dale had once managed; and *Minimum Charge No Cover*, a paean to their motley crew of queer, trans, and/or sex worker friends who hustled the street. The Strip provided a libidinal visual spectacle for staid Toronto, with each storefront’s flashing signs aggressively coming on to locals and tourists alike.

With Jaques’s murder, years of pent-up desire to “clean up” Yonge Street could finally get results. It was the object of a moral panic whipped up most vociferously by the *Toronto Sun*—who, alongside evangelical Christians, had been agitating to clean up the strip for years—which found a ready audience in a traumatized Portuguese immigrant community that had long felt ignored and powerless in this wealthy WASP city. On August 4, fifteen thousand people demonstrated at City Hall, calling for the extermination of “sex criminals” and for a return of capital punishment to execute Jaques’s killers. The murder intensified a wider backlash over civil rights for gays and lesbians: the provincial government was considering adding sexual orientation protections to the Human Rights Code, while Anita Bryant visited Toronto to proselytize that homosexuals were out to seduce children with

their gay “death-styles.” While the strip was primarily a heterosexual adult entertainment district, advertising the crime as a “homosexual orgy slaying”¹¹ ensured that not only the excessive sexuality of the Strip but also the city’s gay community would be held collectively responsible. Gay activist Gerald Hannon recalled, “The general myth was that gays were always trying to seduce and harm children [...] The Jaques murder was the ugly stereotype come true.” His comrade Ed Jackson adds, “There was a sense that Yonge Street itself had made the bad thing happen.”¹² Mays describes Yonge Street in his “Miracles” essay as an “anus [...] mystically poisoning the sex of the city, making sex ambiguous, unproductive, flamboyant, and infinitely dangerous” (45). Drastic actions had to be taken against it. Indeed, the sex industry was largely driven out of the strip through nuisance inspections, warrantless raids, and mass arrests. Within three months of the murder, ninety percent of the sex businesses were closed. It was a strike against the Sexual Revolution and a warning shot to gays to know their place, but the charade did not bring the God-loving people back to Yonge Street. As Mays narrates this moment, “Once again, sex became discourse, the flesh became word.” The Jaques case became “an instrument of cultural simplification” for those “baffled and repelled by the new, polymorphous structure of meaning emerging in Toronto.” The “miracles of Emanuel Jaques” of his title refers to the words of a Portuguese broadcaster who declared, in pieties dripping with a uniquely Catholic sadomasochism, that the boy’s “sacrifice accomplished the miracle of uniting the Portuguese community” (46). The “miracles” continued: after the shuttering of Yonge Street’s sex trade, the gay community was hounded, pornography banned, and soon artists came under attack as well. Monk writes, “The police [...] began to view the art scene in the same light as the degenerate drifters of the sleazy Yonge Street strip” and “its images were contagious.”¹³

Ultimately, Mays provocatively concludes,

... Jaques’s death in that ghastly mystery play of language, power, and desire was not an event in past history only. It was also a rite replayed again and again in the production of art, as artists, the first artists to have come of age after the myth’s genesis, continually performed in their work the transformations of the boy’s last hours (47).

11. Steven Maynard, “1969 and All That: Age, Consent, and the Myth of Queer Decriminalization in Canada,” *Radical History Review: The Abusable Past*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/1969-and-all-that-age-consent-and-the-myth-of-queer-decriminalization-in-canada/>.

12. Quoted in Simon Lewsen, “How a child’s death led to the rebirth of Yonge Street,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/how-a-childs-murder-led-to-the-rebirth-of-torontos-yongestreet/article35769399/>.

13. Monk, *Is Toronto Burning?*, 209.

In comparing recent local artists’ production to “the transformations of the boy’s last hours,” he positions them not in the role of perpetrators, however, but rather as “seduced child[ren], deluded by the allures of glamour and freedom, lured by the contrived drives and discourses of advanced capitalist society” themselves. Their work—as seen by Steinway in the Machine—allegorizes a sense of victimhood that portends art’s final impotence in the face of power. He continues:

And he saw these ruined selves being penetrated by the languages of the state and authority, even as they called out for language to save them; violated by self-interrogation, which they paradoxically, falsely believed would save them from final reduction to nothing at all (47).

Of course, as a writer himself, Mays too is implicated: his own appropriation of a real boy as a rhetorical tool for cultural analysis is its own act of transforming “flesh” into “word.”

Remarkably, the site of the murder, Charlie’s Angels, was located only two doors down from the Art Metropole building at 241 Yonge Street, the third floor of which General Idea inhabited from 1974 until 1976 | **figs. 5–6** |. Video artists Colin Campbell and Lisa Steele moved into the fourth floor in 1977. A massage parlour, Mr. Arnold’s, had been on the third floor, as well, and Steele recalls that the back studio they rented had likely been used for porn shoots. (For artists and sex businesses alike, the upper floors were cheaper to rent.) AA Bronson informed me that Campbell was woken up by Jaques’s body being removed by the police from the adjacent roof early in the morning of August 1, and Steele recounted that Campbell was stopped by suspicious officers when he was coming out of the building with his young son Neil one day. As a researcher of the sexual and social dynamics of artists’ lives and work, I see traces of Yonge Street in General Idea’s art: in the self-representation of their first Yonge Street address (#87) above the Mi-House restaurant in their 1971 installation *Light On*; in Bronson’s co-authoring of a 1968 porn novel called *Lena*; or in Isobel Harry’s 1975 photos of Jorge Zontal posing as a construction worker on Yonge Street outside Art Metropole | **fig. 7** |.¹⁴ While the Strip is not a prominent backdrop nor subject in General Idea’s work—nor in Campbell’s, Steele’s, or Werden’s—I am certain its atmosphere and energies fed into their practices. For example, General Idea’s fascination with the libidinal, with consumerism and commercialism, with the worlds of fashion and retail display, with the titillation of tabloids, all of this *feels* like Yonge Street to me, the bustling carnival outside seeping into their oeuvre.

So how is General Idea present yet latent in Mays’s provocative essay? We have to go back a decade to 1974, when Mays wrote his longest piece on the trio for *Open Letter* magazine. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss and on Susan Sontag’s call for an erotics rather than hermeneutics of art, Mays differentiates a primary level of experience based in perception—“the sensible world in sensible terms”—and a secondary level of abstract concepts and meaning-making. He explains, “it seems to me that g.i. goes right along the chromatic surfaces of the objects & artifacts, calls it all back again & again as a ritual investigation—as sensuous memory, like remembrance of a dance or embrace—making love to things.”¹⁵ He approvingly likens their *FILE* magazine to pornography and tabloids as documents of “emotional affect, call[ing] to mind the moment when stimulus explodes into feeling.”¹⁶ General Idea are like the street’s dazzlingly lit facades: “up front, in the way the electric signs on yonge street or broadway are up front, doing what they do: making desire visible, letting you know what you want before you ask, letting them know they can get it *here*.”¹⁷ He sees General Idea’s erotics as a “successor” to hermeneutics.¹⁸ This is crucial: for Mays, who suffered from crippling depression, art had to gesture towards a future for it to have value. Beginning in 1971, General Idea’s cosmology was aimed at the year 1984

14. Thank you to Luis Jacob for pointing me to the Harry photographs reproduced in his *Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto* (London: Black Dog and the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, 2020), 64–65.

15. John Bentley Mays, “General Idea,” *Open Letter* 8 (1974), 8–9.

16. Mays, “General Idea,” 16.

17. Mays, “General Idea,” 21.

18. Mays, “General Idea,” 10.

through the fabulation of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion, which Mays later called their “framing device for its thinking about the future.”¹⁹ Its 1977 “destruction” represented the “revenge of Nature against the unnaturalness of Culture.”²⁰ General Idea evacuated art from “the libraries,” their pavilion was instead “a complex of relationships, dreams, sensuous episodes, myths, gossip, etc., all held in the collective mind of the eternal network [...] a vision of the world to come.”²¹ According to Monk, Mays had asked to join General Idea around this time; rebuffed, he had to settle for being their number one fan instead.

A strong part of General Idea’s appeal for Mays was that they modelled how the self could be constructed from images and other cultural detritus rather than from mere genetics, “by moving the décor of your own choosing [...] clothes, make-up, sexual styles, manners of speech.”²² Mays was haunted by a fraught relationship with his father, John B. Mays Sr., a Louisiana Klansman who had been murdered when the younger Mays was a child. He later explained that General Idea were key to him in the 1970s partly because they were “furious [...] disinherited sons [who] fight back with style,”²³ that for him “to become interested in art at all was a form of patricide.” Returning to the *Open Letter* article, he admires General Idea for creating “new myths of paternity and new folktales of fraternity; rumour and gossip.”²⁴ He concludes, “The windows of General Idea open toward the future. The mirrors of General Idea catch glimpses of the future and reflect them into the eye of the eternal network. But General Idea is not the future. The future is beyond words.”²⁵ In this text, which Monk sees as Mays’s audition to join General Idea, he sounds like a disciple joining a new church—so what happened between them over the following decade?

With the turn away from 1970s ephemerality and experimentation and towards painting and sculpture in the 1980s, Mays hoped art would discover its “greatest subjects—history, myth, belief and the varieties of spiritual, sensual, and psychological experience.”²⁶ Instead it looked like postmodern pastiche, bloodless and theoretical, signs rather than substance. In this climate, General Idea fell out of fashion in Toronto. Mays had looked to General Idea to show him the future; instead, with the destruction of the 1984 Pavilion, their work seemed to run backwards, turning in on itself. A few months after the “Miracles” essay, Mays wrote an article for the November 1984 issue of *Vanguard* entitled “Must We Burn General Idea?,” after de Beauvoir’s “Must We Burn Sade?” In it, Mays argues that, while General Idea initially occupied a unique critical position vis-à-vis the art world, as the context changed, with artists giving themselves over wholeheartedly to the market and to power, their influence became less acute. While he accuses General Idea of coasting in recent years, he ultimately measures them a success based on the overall quality, longevity, and thematic vitality of their output. Considering their examination of the world entire through the microcosm of the art world, he compares General Idea’s practice to the allegorical modern novel, the same form Mays aspired to in his own writing. Mays then claims that General Idea are not only novelists but critics (like

19. John Bentley Mays, “GI makes honeymoon detour,” *The Globe and Mail*, December 23, 1980. The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion was a fictive venue for the Miss General Idea pageant they had conceived as a metaphor for the art world. While fictive, it did exist through designs, models, gossip, texts, photographs, and other “evidence.”

20. John Bentley Mays, “Must We Burn General Idea?,” *Vanguard* 13, no. 9 (1984), 13.

21. Mays, “General Idea,” 9.

22. Mays, “General Idea,” 21.

23. Hannon, “John Prickly Mays,” 107.

24. Mays, “General Idea,” 10.

25. Mays, “General Idea,” 36.

26. John Bentley Mays, “A not-so-fond farewell to modernism,” *The Globe and Mail*, January 1, 1983.



Figure 4. Rio Theatre just south of Yonge and Gerrard, mid-1970s. Photo: citatus on flickr.com.



Figure 5. Police guard the doorway leading to a body rub parlour in a building on Yonge Street in downtown Toronto, on August 1, 1977, after the body of Emanuel Jaques was found on the roof of the building. Photo: The Canadian Press/Alex Kalnins. Courtesy of Canadian Press Images.



Figure 6. Art Metropole Building,
ca. 2005. Photo: Bob Krawczyk.
Courtesy the TOBuilt database,
Architectural Conservancy Ontario.



Figure 7. Isobel Harry, Jorge
Zontal (General Idea) poses
as a construction worker on
site outside the General Idea
studio, Yonge Street, Toronto,
1975/2016. Silver gelatin print.
Courtesy the artist.



Figure 8. General Idea, *Baby Makes 3*, 1984/1989. Chromogenic print (ektachrome), 75.9 x 63.1 cm. Courtesy the Estate of General Idea and Deichtorhallen Hamburg / Sammlung Falckenberg © General Idea

himself), explaining that the homosexual is a specific type of critic, both insider and outsider at once:

Every homosexual may not be an artist. But every artist, General Idea insists, is like a homosexual: permitted by bourgeois urban culture, but never allowed to forget the most significant cultural fact in his personal identity: his status as unnecessary, irrelevant, marginal, a mere fashion within a society wholly given to fashion, and determined not to admit it.²⁷

In the 1980s, General Idea depicted this figure as a poodle, an avatar for themselves as primped and “groomed” gay artists ready to please their masters: “We are the poodle, banal and effete.”²⁸ Trading Yonge Street for tony Rosedale, it is an infantilized, innocuous figure rather than the killer pedophiles that the Sun had billed gays to be. Mays loved General Idea’s poodles but saw them as “as strong a vision of cultural complicity with the powers-that-be as Orwell ever thought of.”²⁹

Three Charlie’s Angels, three convicted murderers, three members of General Idea. Mays even compared them to the Holy Trinity. Threesomes disrupt the couple form that is central to the nuclear family: *Baby Makes 3*, also from 1984 [fig. 8]. The title is misleading because they are all babies, there is no way of knowing who came first, and there are no parents. When Felix and Jorge died, AA was left—does that make him the baby? (He is the youngest.) This child remains in a state of polymorphous perversity with no mama and papa to interfere with their rules, never growing up. Lee Edelman writes in his *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* that all politics, left or right, venerate the figure of the future child such that we are coerced to protect it. Edelman calls this “the fascism of the baby’s face.”³⁰ He sees the queer death drive, with its anti-reproductive force, as a strike against the totalitarianism of the “innocent child.” One of the “Miracles of Emanuel Jaques” is the transformation of a flesh-and-blood child into a symbol potent enough to purge an entire city of its sins, namely Toronto’s flirtation with sexual liberalism. Punk was ascendant in the late 1970s too, and local band the Curse—featured in *FILE*’s “Punk ‘Til you Puke!” issue from fall 1977—destroyed the myth of the innocent child, outraging the public by releasing “Shoeshine Boy,” a crude single directing its venom at Jaques’s exploitation by the mass media.

A sizable aftershock came when the gay liberation newspaper *The Body Politic* published Gerald Hannon’s article “Men loving boys loving men” in their December 1977–January 1978 issue, a candid account of intergenerational sexual relationships between men and boys that the collective had held back for six months due to the Jaques furor. The delay did not defuse controversy, especially as justice had not yet been served in the courtroom, but the collective prefaced the article with an editorial explaining that “the ‘climate’ will never be ‘right’” to open up a frank discussion of childhood and intergenerational sexuality.³¹ The uproar exceeded their worst predictions, however, and the newspaper’s offices were raided in late December 1977 and Hannon, Jackson, and Ken Popert charged in January 1978 with “using the mails to transmit indecent, immoral, or scurrilous materials.” At trial, the

27. Mays, “Must We Burn General Idea?,” 14.

28. General Idea, “How Our Mascots Love to Humiliate Us,” in *General Idea: 1968–1984* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1984), 23.

29. John Bentley Mays, “At least, that’s the General Idea: The poodle as Canada’s emblem,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 15, 1983.

30. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 75.

31. The Body Politic Collective, “The Year: Children,” preface to Gerald Hannon, “Men loving boys loving men,” *The Body Politic* 39 (1977–78), 29.

Crown argued that the sympathetic portrayal of pedophiles could be construed as counselling readers to commit crimes, as if their desires were contagious. Considering the enormously fraught timing of the article, it is quite remarkable that the Toronto art community came to their defense, understanding that an attack on the gay press demanded an urgent response, both as an act of solidarity and to protect their own freedoms. Toronto art magazine *Centerfold* dedicated a cover story to reporting on the trial (by Robin Collyer and Clive Robertson) and to critically dissecting the television and newspaper coverage of it (by Robertson and Steele) in their February–March 1979 issue (coincidentally, UNESCO declared 1979 the Year of the Child). The move was prophetic, as the 1980s would be marked by Ontario media artists’ war with Mary Brown of the provincial Censor Board over whether the government should be allowed to suppress or otherwise exercise “prior restraint” over film and video works by artists, as they did with commercially released movies. In the same issue of *Centerfold*, Vera Frenkel and Tim Guest wrote positive reviews of the performances staged at a benefit rally for *The Body Politic*’s defense fund at the University of Toronto on January 3, 1979, by General Idea, Steele, Robertson, Randy & Berneche, Marien Lewis (with Andy Paterson), and The Clichettes.³² Tom Sherman followed up with a perceptive editorial in the April–May issue, which announced the initial not-guilty verdict (the Crown then appealed). He writes that the trial exposed government efforts to correct

any imaginable societal deviance. As artists, we have been quick to point out these recent judicial activities, as we fear the possibility of similar morality trials leading to the direct legal restriction of our creative work. More importantly, we realise that these public trials influence insensibly our very processes of thought.³³

For Bronson, it was vital for artists to hold “the right to exhibit (and not only exhibit but investigate and develop) ‘perverse’ behavior.”³⁴

I will conclude by looking at a solo exhibition by General Idea that developed out of their “An Anatomy of Censorship” performance at the *Body Politic* rally and took place just a few weeks afterwards, from January 27 to February 15, 1979. It was titled *Consenting Adults*—and we can perhaps think of the “consenting adult” as the opposite figure to the “innocent child”—at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery, which was also located on Yonge Street, at #840—so quite a bit further north than the Strip | fig. 9 |. Drawing on Foucault, one lesson of *Consenting Adults* is that disciplinary forces never eliminate but rather proliferate the perversion they seek to repress, as Mays well understood. The grid of twelve video stills, *Proposed Surveillance for the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion* (all works 1979), does not provide an overview of the pavilion but instead focuses on fragments, including fetishistic details of the human body, as if the surveillance camera were driven more by prurient intent than by the prevention of transgression. In *General Idea’s Dominant Dream*, the three members are figured fast asleep in triangular photographs at the bottom; we follow lines along the wall to their collective dream: Miss General Idea. Here, even the content of dreams is visible, as if by X-ray vision, to public view. In *A Geometry of Censorship*, three men are each framed

32. See Robin Collyer and Clive Robertson, “The Body Politic Trial”; Vera Frenkel, “Performance at the Benefit”; Tim Guest, “Politic Performances Provide...”; Lisa Steele, “In the Evening News” and “In the Newspapers,” *Centerfold* 3, no. 3 (1979), 92–114.

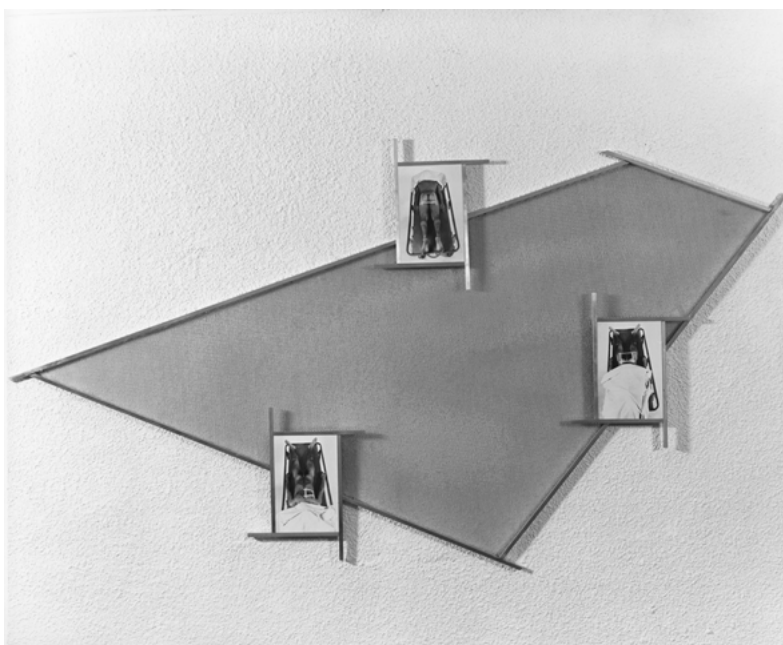
33. Tom Sherman, “Editorial,” *Centerfold* 3, no. 4 (1979), 148. Also see Robin Collyer, “The Judgement,” 152–53 and Clive Robertson, “Consenting Adults: General Idea at Carmen Lamanna Gallery,” 193–96.

34. AA Bronson, “Automatons/Automorons,” in *Performance by Artists*, ed. AA Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1979), 295.

Figure 9. General Idea, installation view of the exhibition *Consenting Adults*, Carmen Lamanna Gallery, January 27–February 15, 1979. Photograph courtesy the Carmen Lamanna Estate.



Figure 10. General Idea, *Autopsy*, 1979. Three black-and-white photographs mounted on Masonite with metal mesh and aluminum construction. As seen in the exhibition *Consenting Adults*, Carmen Lamanna Gallery, January 27–February 15, 1979. Photograph courtesy the Carmen Lamanna Estate.



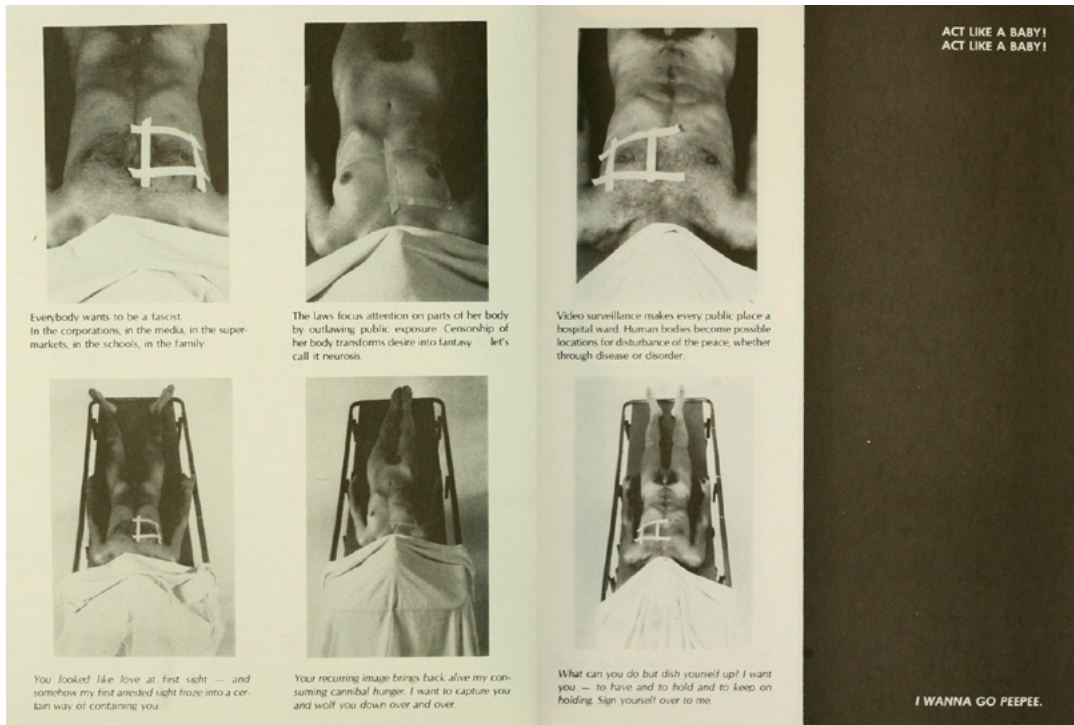


Figure 12. General Idea, excerpt from *An Anatomy of Censorship*, 1979, as published in AA Bronson and Peggy Gale, eds., *Performance by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1979), 88–89. Courtesy the artist.

within geometric shapes—a circle, a square, a triangle—that cut off parts of their heads and below their knees. Their penises have been cut out—castrated—so that we see the stainless-steel apparatus behind them, with the holes cut in the three different shapes. The three suppressed penises have been transposed—sublimated—nearby into a trio of “showcards,” where they accompany texts drawing on psychoanalysis: *The Graduated Cock / Slice of Life / Father Knows Best*. In *Autopsy*, three photographs occupy three sides of an aluminum trapezoid | fig. 10 |. They depict a male body on a gurney, shot from above in a void-like space. A rectangle of tape frames different parts of the corpse’s body—genitals, buttocks, a pectoral—while a white sheet obscures his head and face. *An Anatomy of Censorship*, which General Idea describes as an “elaboration” of *Autopsy*, was directly based on their performance at the rally | fig. 11 |.³⁵ In it, we see similar images but of both the man’s body and a woman’s body with similar parts framed for our visual analysis. Each of the nine showcards juxtaposes a “gurney pose” with a closeup that zooms into the framed body part, and each of these diptychs is accompanied by a text, which they had read out loud at the performance over the projected slides. A slightly different version was later published in the Art Metropole anthology *Performance by Artists* | fig. 12 |.³⁶ (Note the Freudian baby talk that is included here, as if uttered by the infants in *Baby Makes 3*.) For General Idea, it was essential that these objects were offered for sale, thereby thematizing a marketplace that profits from sexuality while simultaneously scolding buyers and sellers for having the desires capitalism itself created: “that

they successfully isolated and utilized the language of ‘being available for purchase’ was initially our first concern.”³⁷ It was therefore extremely apt that the exhibition took place on Yonge Street soon after the Strip’s cleanup.

By the time 1984 arrived, the Pavilion had burned down and a new threat was massing: the AIDS pandemic. Instead of the Miss General Idea Pavilion opening, that fateful year saw the founding of the AIDS Committee of Toronto. Soon the homosexual would return to his abject status as a threat to the fictive “general public.” If the Jaques murder was a rupture of the “real” into the fantasy of the sexual marketplace, AIDS too shook postmodern theories of total simulation. When first Zontal and then Partz died of AIDS in 1994, Mays wrote very moving obituaries for *The Globe and Mail* reiterating his love for General Idea.³⁸ He awkwardly wrestled with what to make of AIDS—the temptation to turn it into symbol strong: he writes of AIDS’s “sinister reconnection of impulsive sex and likely damnation,” for example.³⁹ General Idea’s powerful response to AIDS in their late work—which continued under Bronson’s name after he was left alone—was arguably forged in the crucible of the moral panics they witnessed around Jaques’s murder and *The Body Politic* trial just a few years earlier. ¶

Thank you to Philip Monk and Erin Silver for allowing me to present this paper at the General Idea Symposium, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, June 4, 2022, and at “Queer Episodes in Canadian Art,” Universities Art Association of Canada Conference, Toronto, October 29, 2022.

35. General Idea, “Letter: What do you consider effective art?,” *Centerfold* 219.

36. See General Idea, “An Anatomy of Censorship,” in Bronson and Gale, *Performance by Artists*, 87–93.

37. General Idea, “Letter,” 220.

38. See John Bentley Mays, “General Idea’s brilliant trinity diminished by Zontal’s death,” *The Globe and Mail*, February 5, 1994, and “A high loss of poetry, wisdom,” *The Globe and Mail*, June 11, 1994.

39. John Bentley Mays, “End of an era for Canadian art’s big Idea,” *The Globe and Mail*, June 24, 1995.