DRAFT - DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR

Good to Glam: General Idea, Rough Trade and the Adorning of Toronto for "Haute Culture[1]"

Kathryn Franklin, York University

Fashion, Art and Urban Alchemy

ASAP 5 – Art and the City, Detroit, Oct. 3-6, 2013

Aleister Crowley once said Toronto makes a Scottish fishing village on a Sunday morning look like an opium dream. Toronto, even as late as 1965, had hardly been regarded as an exciting cosmopolitan city. Toronto often dubbed, "Toronto the Good," - at once an endearment and a slight - could be counted upon for its sober character and dull demeanour. Of course big city issues such as crime, unemployment, homelessness, drugs, and prostitution existed in Toronto but it was in no way associated with intrigue and glamour as that of New York City, Chicago or even Montreal. At this time, Toronto was commonly understood as a deeply puritanical place.

The aesthetic landscape in Toronto, as it was in artistic centres all over the Western world, was shaken from its comfortable foundation in the 60s when the neo-Dada movement, with New York city's Marcel Duchamps at the helm, began antagonizing and reinvigorating the art scene. Many artists in Toronto were ready to embrace a new technique that wasn't associated with the Group of Seven old guard. Graham Coughtry, a Toronto based artist, joked, "Every damn tree in the country has been painted." Even as conservatives loudly failed to understand such new developments, the undeniable draw of the avant-garde was electrifying Toronto's expanding ranks of rebellious artists, attracting some surprising new enthusiasts.

---

[1] Refers to the General Idea retrospective at the AGO (2011-2012): www.ago.net/haute-culture-general-idea

While there was no real art hub in Canada in the 1960s, Toronto (in semi-partnership with London, Ontario) represented a key site for the exhibition and production of progressive art. Toronto the good was suddenly becoming Toronto the cool. Toronto, by the late Sixties began to burst with art collectives and street theatre groups influenced by the psychedelia of student revolutions, fluorescent posters, underground newspapers and Marshall McLuhan. While the dominant conversation of the counterculture was filled with gender roles, civil rights and the medium is the message - the latter courtesy of the recently established Culture and technology centre at the University of Toronto set in motion by the aforementioned McLuhan, the art collective, General Idea along with their friends and colleagues in the Toronto based glam band, Rough Trade, aimed to interrogate these new concepts and methods of mass media and popular culture through their provocative performances. This paper proposes that General Idea and Rough Trade were instrumental in overhauling Toronto's artistic and aesthetic landscape in the 1970s by instilling a sense of glamour into the city mediated through the lenses of fashion, art, and music. Their obsession with the relationship between image and reality – an obsession which made up much of their respective artistic output - challenged prevailing notions of sexuality, gender and media reality.

In a recent interview in the New York Times, A.A Bronson, the only surviving member of the art trio General Idea articulated his definition of Glamour in the 1970s, "The early 70s were like a continuation of the '60s, especially in North America and it was definitely an antiglamour aesthetic. Warhol and his factory were considered kind of gauche. David Bowie was the first one to make glamour O.K. again. Our whole emphasis on glamour was a provocation. To be glamorous in Toronto was politically incorrect and kind of ridiculous. We were always accused

of being dilettantes and in a way it was provoking those same people to continue accusing us." General Idea, the collective made up of Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal formed in 1968 - well, that is, according to General Idea lore. The date itself is actually debatable as their archives reveal that their collaboration only goes back until 1969. Nevertheless, this fabrication only highlights the group's ethos of improvised mythology and deliberate image making. Taking their name from other such generals as General Motors and General Electric, they chose to highlight the inherent irony of the idea of collaborative corporate enterprise.

The group formed out of a collective desire for an art scene that would accommodate and reflect a reconfiguration of the concept of art itself. At its core the work of General Idea is about art and how it is delivered. They wanted to know how artistic information is transmitted through a culture. To help them resolve this mystery they created their tool of artist as mythmaker. Bronson explained, "The environment in North America is dominated by the mass media, so . . . there's no sense of reality . . . Our retaliation is to create our own construct which twists, stretches, and deconstructs the media around us." They carefully constructed a mythology of glamour as a way of seeing nature through culture, and they chose to accept the artistic information derived from it. They positioned themselves on what they called the contradictory principle of the 'borderline' between nature and culture. As General Idea often noted: "it was like gripping the two horns of the modern dilemma, culture in one hand and nature in the other and forcing them through the narrow eye of our affliction which is glamour."

General Idea's vision was to expose artificiality in their work by making themselves over in the image of what others perceive art and glamour to be. As if anticipating Baudrillard's theories of simulacra and hyperreality, General Idea proposed an entire society based on the

assumptions of glamour and spectacle - it was from these ideas that the collective began what they called the "search for the spirit of Miss General Idea." In 1970 the first Miss General Idea pageant was performed. This was General Idea's first performance for video, which used stock components of beauty pageants such as contestants, judges and talent contests and took place in the lobby of Toronto's St. Lawrence Centre. This pageant was the first of many pageants that occurred in the '70s, including the hypothetical 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant which included plans for a pavilion that could fit exactly 1,984 audience members. This futuristic pageant was indeed the apotheosis of their Orwellian convictions concerning mass media and culture in the age of spectacle. That the pageant and the pavilion never came to fruition only served to underscore their theories about the transitory nature of art in a media laden society.

Bronson further explains "the pageant was a metaphor for our society and specifically for the art world, in which talent competitions, winners and losers, prizes and celebrity all take part. But finally it was an event designed for televison, in which the audience became performer, the mythical pageant moments were assembled into a collage of meta mythical intent, and the art world system was stripped of pretense and bathed in irony." One such pageant took place at the prestigious Art Gallery of Ontario - or what General Idea saw as representative of the public art institution, featuring contestants along a runway dressed in venetian blind-like structures which consisted of three triangles of metal piles on top of one another like fifties lampshades. Titled “V.B Gowns” they acted as architectural models for The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion. Rough Trade who were friends and often collaborators with the art trio wrote two songs for the occasion. One was called, “I Like It, but Is It Art?” a tongue-in-cheek critique of the art world

with lyrics such as “Sylvia Plath getting gassed, Warhol getting shot by Solanis, I like it, I like it, I like it, but is it art?”

Their other song, “Beauty Queen” was an ode to every kind of queen that lead singer Carole Pope could think of, singing, “You’re not a drag queen or a dinge queen or a rice queen or a dairy queen. . .” Both General Idea and Rough Trade deliberately introduced high camp style in their art to infuse a sense of frivolity and fun in the city while at the same time encouraging their audience to explore the implications of their art. What was happening to the city during this period could easily be summed up by the vocalist for the Toronto punk band Fifth Column, “The 70s Toronto punk scene was so pure because it was a mix of really wild glam street trash mixed with egghead art school intellectualism.”

Rough Trade, a Toronto born band created from the masterminds of Carole Pope and Kevan Staples, emerged from the stagnant art scene of the late Sixties and Seventies in Toronto to break new musical ground. According to Pope, what they were doing was more than music; it was an upheaval in art, fashion, and lifestyle: “Rough Trade, love it or hate it, was responsible for blowing the scene wide open. We were involved in not just music, but themes for each performance. We became slaves of fashion. We were so repulsed by the slovenly look of most bands that we resolved to bring some semblance of theatre into our act.” Frustrated with this stale scene, Pope and Staples committed themselves to effectively reintegrating performance and glam to the city once more. While Staples and Pope were equally invested in Rough Trade - they remained the original members over their 15 year career, there is no doubt, however, that Carole Pope remains the face of the Rough Trade brand. The name of the band itself came from Pope’s fascination with gay male iconography. In her autobiography, *Anti Diva* Pope explains, “The

first time I heard the term Rough Trade I knew it was the perfect name for our band. After I'd shown Kevan a photo of a stud wearing a leather motorcycle jacket and nothing else, he agreed with me." The first Rough Trade poster had the slogan "repulsive yet fascinating"as if daring the city to see them perform.

Throughout the 1960s, when it came to sexuality, the more hip centres in Toronto, Gerrard Village and then later Yorkville, moved between the poles of liberation and exploitation. From 1964 to 1966, as the ethos of free love pervaded the scene, the shifting between those two poles became increasingly blurred. There was a complicated and uncomfortable power dynamic. The counterculture movement was highly male oriented. Myrna Wood, one of the "founding mothers" (as she referred to herself) of the Toronto (and Canadian) women's liberation movement, recalled those years with a sense of frustration, "Hippie-type people were even more misogynistic than politicals, which is saying quite a lot . . . The more people got into that kind of lifestyle the more they tried to copy what they saw as either American, or black: Hip culture . . . [It's about] women being denigrated to prove that you're a hip male." By her definition, to be hip in Toronto during this period was to transcend Canadian, white, suburban identity.

Rough Trade, were clearly working against this blueprint. While Toronto in the 1970s saw a rise in the punk scene with bands such as The Dishes, The Diodes, and Teenage Head, for the most part, with a few exceptions, these bands were primarily made up of young white men with aggressively chauvinistic stage presences. Carole Pope not only had the distinction of being one of the first female faces of the newly emerging punk and glam scene in Toronto - a fact which also distanced themselves from what was happening across the border in the American music scene, but also Pope's songs about same sex female desire was an unapologetic

celebration of her homosexuality as well as, like the group's name emphasizes, a subversion and revolt against the norm.

Conversely, while much of General Idea's oeuvre depicted a fair amount of sexuality, the actual sexuality of General Idea - the trio all being gay men - had not become apparent in a public way: the artistic press never referred to their homosexuality and in turn the collective tried to make it more explicit. In an interview with General Idea they emphasize their indifference, rather than their distance or proximity toward "gay art" and "homosexual artists" during the 1970s. They claimed "We did not find it interesting at all, no more and no less interesting than defining yourself as a Canadian artist which was worse than being gay." No doubt there was deliberate self consciousness concerning their own sexuality using their art as a medium to display prominent themes of homosexuality - while subtle, such as the pervasive triangle which plays a prominent role in their work from the VB dresses to the more obvious piece "Playing the Triangle."

For Carole Pope, however, she writes that she "wasn't your typical non-threatening girl singer. My voice and sexual androgyny were powerful." Pope draped herself in ciré, that is to say polyester, jumpsuits, as "as an excuse to show a lot of skin," she explains, as well as black bondage suits and fetish heels. Her hair permed in the fashion of theatrical excess gives way to the notion that she is indeed larger than life and her trash glam aesthetic acts as a challenge to the predominant male hetero rock hegemony. Dressed in outlandish outfits and over the top make up, Pope's aesthetic went beyond gender. She was the performance. According to Pope both she and Staples "had morphed into queens of androgyny. We were a combination of punk, bondage and glam."

This period in time saw the rise of the Glam Rocker which Canada boasted rather few performers. Jim Curtis proposes that the turn toward theatricalism in rock music performances of the 1970s indicated that rock was competing with television by offering in live settings experiences that could not be obtained from recordings or television. For Rough Trade, the performance was the message of Rough Trade. Carol Pope's over the top glam aesthetic was incongruous with other glam artists. For all glam rock's play with unconventional gender performances, virtually all glam rock performers and producers were male. In these respects, glam rock was entirely in line with the conventions of rock music as a traditionally male-dominated cultural form. Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie describe the situation clearly in an essay originally published in 1978:

> Any analysis of the sexuality of rock music must begin with the brute social fact that in terms of control and production, rock is a male form. The music business is male-run; popular musicians, writers, creators, technicians, engineers and producers are mostly men . . . The problems facing a woman seeking to enter the rock world as a participant are clear. A girl is supposed to be an individual listener; she is not encouraged to develop the skills and knowledge to become a performer.

Pope, on the other hand, subverted this notion and exposed the inherent hypocrisies of glam and punk rock in her outrageous performances and sexually overt lyrics. "High School Confidential" arguably Rough Trade's most famous song, is the story of a teenager who has a crush on a sexy young high school girl. The song became a number one hit in Canada. The song was originally commissioned by Rough Trade for a controversial film called *Cruising* about a serial killer who

preyed on gay men. It was meant to be sung by Mink DeVille, one of the original house bands at New York's CBGBs, however the producers decided not to use it. "High School Confidential" therefore plays upon its ambiguity in terms of gender and so challenges the heterosexual ideology which informs the depiction of sexuality in almost all of glam music. It's not immediately clear whether the teenager is speaking from a male perspective or whether it is referencing Pope's lesbianism. Moreover, the title is cleverly coded as a double entendre meant for those who understand the song's implicit meaning.

Pope states that she and Staples: "ended up pushing musical and sexual envelopes. We morphed androgyny, humour and various musical genres into one twisted freakish phenomena. We became a myth, a cult, something for people to cling to: an echo of a blip in time that encompassed the late seventies and the eighties, we thought we were invincible." "High School Confidential" was featured on their 1980 album, *Avoid Freud*, according to Pope the title was her comment about "the fucked sexual mores that afflicted most of Western society." Naturally, with their tongues firmly planted in their cheeks, their second album was titled, *For Those Who Think Young*.

*Avoid Freud'*s album cover, designed by General Idea, showed both Carol Pope and Kevan Staples dressed in Theirry Mugler suits with massive shoulder pads, bronze fleshed and completely air brushed with make up, resembling beautiful iconic and fashionable beings - perpetuating the myth of the rock star as well as the artist. On the front of the album cover features Pope holding a martini glass and on the back Staples holding a tuning fork. This was the beginning of a theme in which Pope was always on the front of the album covers and Staples on the back. On one level, this could be read as a playful subversion on the old adage about how

behind every successful man is a woman. Staples, on these album covers, is literally the man behind the woman. On another level, these album covers contradict Frith's suggestion that the basic problem for the female rock performer was "not whether rock stars are sexist, but whether women could enter their discourse, appropriate their music, without having to become 'one of the boys.'" Pope and Staples effectively shifted the discourse by creating music that spoke to the scene they were a part of - which was primarily made up of students from the Ontario College of Art. It was never a question whether Carol Pope was one of the boys, but rather how can the rest of us be like Carole Pope.

The album featured another hit called "Fashion Victim" with the constant refrain, "I'm a victim of fashion, fashion and accessories" this was a satirical song about how people perceive the world of fashion and the people involved in it, at one point in the song Pope laments, "If I take off my clothes, My carefully contrived image goes, I'm so afraid to show the real me." While Carole Pope's and Kevan Staples' images were ostensibly carefully contrived their emphasis on style was more of a call to arms for others to engage with its local fashion scene. It's hardly a surprise that their third album was called *Shaking the Foundations.* Pope was constantly wearing clothes by Toronto designers Marilyn Kiewiet and Sandy Stagg who owned the hip vintage store Amelia Earhart in addition to designs by international design enfant terribles Vivian Westwood and Claude Montana. Although despite the light hearted nature of the song there is a moment where Pope sings, "You hate my avant-garde friends, They understand and appreciate me, We're all victims of fashion and accessories" as if acknowledging her position as queer glam star might not resonate well with the affluent WASPish Rosedale crowd in Toronto.

In another General Idea designed album, *Weapons*, Pope, on the front, of course, and Staples, on the back, appear half-naked in the midst of a grid pattern design of naked body parts. Both men and women are used in this shoot to create what Pope described as an erotic wall of flesh. Pope, therefore, is not so much becoming "one of the boys" as much as she is creating an entirely new discourse within this emerging glam aesthetic. One where she and Staples are in the centre and the rest are in effect, bit players. *Weapons* features a song called "Paisley Generation" which appears to be an ode to the sixties, however the leitmotif of The Doors' "Light My Fire" alongside many references to hippie anthems culminating in the final chords of The Beatles' "A Day in the Life" suggests that it's time for the boys who dominated the radio and stage of the previous generation to step aside and make room for a new generation of provacateurs.

Indeed, General Idea were instrumental in helping Rough Trade create a brand for themselves. Carole Pope explains in her autobiography that she and Staples were drawn into the General Idea circle, as a precursor to the Queen Street scene that would emerge in the 1980s. They became part of a growing clique that showed up at each other's exhibitions, gigs and mock executions. Pope gushes, "At that time Toronto was alive with creativity and no one seemed to feel threatened by anyone else. In those days the arts community operated on a much smaller scale, and the scenes were so closely connected and interlocked that they energized each other." The collaboration between Rough Trade and General Idea would eventually change the way the city experienced fashion and glamour.

The year 1975 is characterized by General Idea's famous article/manifesto "Glamour," published in their File Megazine - a magazine created by General Idea as a parody of Life Magazine. Created in 1971 File Megazine was conceived as a medium allowing artists to operate

outside the normal art systems of galleries and museums. The Glamour issue comprised their treatise and definition of glamour in the modern city:, “We knew that in order to be Glamorous we had to become plagiarists, intellectual parasites. We moved in on a history and occupied images, emptying them, reducing them to shells. We filled these shells with glamour, the cream-puff innocence of idiots, the naughty silence of shark fins slicing the waters.” The Glamour article was written at a time when, within the art scene, it was poor form to talk about glamour - as AA Bronson recounted earlier in his interview with the New York Times. Glamour was the last subject that anybody would mention along with money and fame. Once again according to Bronson, “in the early 70s that was the last thing in the world young artists would want. It would have meant the end of their careers probably, if they were demonstrably any of those things. Although secretly, of course, they wanted all three.” General Idea, therefore, let the secret out all over their pages by using their friends and co-collaborators in their magazine spread as a sort of demonic society pages. It was a place where Carole Pope could show off her wild outfits and promote future gigs and providing a forum for artists across the country and eventually the international art scene.

By the mid 1980s, however, General Idea had moved to New York and Rough Trade had put out its final full length original release. Pope went on to work on a solo career and had a much publicized affair with Dusty Springfield. General Idea, while in New York, continued working with simulacrum and spectacle culminating in their famous AIDS logo which continues to broadcast on posters, billboards and the internet. Based on Robert Indiana’s LOVE painting General Idea wanted a logo that would infect as many people as possible much like the disease that infected two of its members, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal.

In 2000, Carole Pope came out with her autobiography *Anti Diva* which chronicles her "stinkin' childhood" and then her move to Toronto's Yorkville scene where earlier incarnations of Rough Trade, under different names such as O (after *The Story of O*) and The Bullwhip Brothers had their beginnings. Ending with her current life in LA. Within her autobiography Pope reflects upon her role and contribution to the Canadian music scene. In her critique of the late 1990s phenomenon Lilith Fair, from which she and many other rock divas were excluded, she understands that her reputation may have prevented her involvement. She asserts, "If it wasn't for me there wouldn't be any blatantly sexual chick singers in Canada, but fine, I can live with that," then she quickly adds, "no, my ego isn't that big; it's just that I think I made a somewhat warped contribution to music in Canada by throwing the love that dare not speak its name in people's uncomprehending faces." What Pope does not include in her autobiography however is that while she makes a case for her importance in the cultural fabric of the country, her dominion over much of the glam and punk scene in Toronto in the late 70s wasn't embraced by everyone. Steven Leckie from The Viletones, a hard core Toronto punk band, wrote a manifesto against the current group of Toronto musicians that he regarded as antiquated, according to Leckie, "I was looking to accomplish a couple of things with that. One was to sort of raise the cultural stakes a bit, and to serve notice to Rough Trade and Goddo, because they ruled, those two especially."

Pope's steadfast devotion to her carefully crafted self stylized nature may have precluded this event - as she may have not wanted to admit that there may have been a point where she was considered stale - since she and Staples, along with General Idea were the ones at the forefront of this aesthetic revolution in fashion, music and art. By the mid 80s, glam as a musical and style movement was certainly no longer in vogue, yet its fundamental celebration of ambiguous

gender and sexual identity challenged ideologies of authenticity making room for new wave artists to continue its revolution. General Idea and Rough Trade were certainly the forerunners of this subcultural scene in Canada. Their flare for fashion, art and pageantry helped in turning Toronto from good to glam.

A selective list of works cited

Auslander, Philip. *Performing Glam Rock: Gender Theatricality in Popular Music.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006. Print.

Bayer, Fern and Christina Ritchie. *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968-1975.* Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997. Print.

Frith, Simon, and Angela McRobbie "Rock and Sexuality." *In Record: Rock, Pop, & the Written Word.* Ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin. London: Routledge, 1990. 371-89. Print.

Henderson, Stuart. *Making the Scene: Yorkville and Hip Toronto in the 1960s.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. Print.

Pope, Carole. *Anti Diva*. Toronto: Random House, 2000. Print.

Worth, Liz. *Treat Me Like Dirt: An Oral History of Punk in Toronto and Beyond, 1977-1981.* Toronto: ECW Press, 2011. Print.