Towards an Audience Vocabulary: General Idea’s Re-Routing of the Audience Feedback Loop

Kirsten Fleur Olds

In three performances from the mid 1970s, the Canadian trio General Idea explores the nature of what constitutes an audience and interrogates the basis of performance art. These performances are dry-runs, or rehearsals for a beauty pageant planned for 1984. Yet rather than the performers on stage, it is the audience who is being rehearsed, as they are instructed to perform stock reactions on cue. These performances, generally referred to as General Idea’s “audience rehearsals,” have yet to be fully examined, especially in light of the ways in which they foreground the fluidity of subject positions of the audience and performers. I draw on anthropological constructs and ideas about feedback systems to demonstrate how General Idea initiates a productive re-framing of the performer-audience relationship.

In several performances from the mid 1970s, the Canadian trio General Idea explores the concept of the audience as a feedback loop. These performances are dry-runs, or rehearsals for a long-awaited beauty pageant planned for the year 1984, which the group dubbed the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant. One of these rehearsals occurred on September 18, 1975, at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto; it was titled, appropriately so, Going thru the Motions. A video of the performance, which was edited and screened the following year at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, shows the performers blocking out their scenes and contains interviews with the artists at the event. Yet despite its putative raison d’être, to rehearse the pageant, most of the performance was devoted to a rehearsal of the audience in attendance. They were instructed to applaud, gasp, laugh, and execute other stock reactions on cue, developing what General Idea called an “audience

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ISSN: 1557-2935 <http://liminalities.net/16-1/feedback.pdf>
vocabulary,” or a set of gestures that the eventual audience at the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant would supply.⁵ In short, the attendees were schooled in how to be “good” audience members, to respond in appropriate and uniform ways to stimuli in the eventual performance. General Idea took audiences through similar paces in four other performances, with their first audience rehearsal, titled Blocking, occurring in 1974 at the Western Front in Vancouver, and then the subsequent events Hot Property! at the Winnipeg Art Gallery and Fleshed Out at Kingston, Ontario, both in 1977, and Towards an Audience Vocabulary the following year at the Masonic Hall in Toronto.

These performances, generally referred to as General Idea’s “audience rehearsals,” have yet to be fully examined, especially in light of the ways in which they foreground the fluidity of subject positions. In one moment, the audience’s role is that of viewers of a performance; in another, they become directed actors in the production. In what follows, I consider how General Idea explores the nature of what constitutes an audience and how the group interrogates the very basis of performance art; in so doing I draw on anthropological constructs and ideas about feedback systems to demonstrate how General Idea initiates a productive re-framing of the performer-audience relationship. The group does so by creating a parallel, artificial version of a natural self-regulating system set up by stimulus and response through continuous feedback. They make that system visible as a system by revealing framing devices, a reflexive tactic they use repeatedly. Framing using a wide array of metacommunication techniques, as Richard Bauman has asserted, is crucial to establishing an action as a performance, and thus establishing the performers as performers and the audience as the audience.⁶ In their audience rehearsals, General Idea brings in and out of focus the constitutive elements of performance – the set-up, preparation, scripting, cuing, and blocking in advance of show; the performers and audience; the on-stage actions and responses to them; and even the recording and subsequent screening of a taped event. While there are some differences in the performances – in Hot Property!, for example, viewers are instructed to react to the cue of fire in the Pavillion – my interest here

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¹ This essay was supported by a fellowship at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, in 2006, and I thank Fern Bayer for all her work in cataloguing and organizing the fonds, and Cyndie Campbell, Head of the Archives, for all her help. Special thanks go to AA Bronson for providing inspiration as well as images, to the editor and anonymous reviewer of Liminalities, and to Angela Ho, Diana Bullen Presciutti, and Heather Vinson for their feedback on this essay. The videos, scripts, and project documents mentioned or quoted in this essay are located in the General Idea fonds, on loan to the National Gallery of Canada. They can be identified in the Finding Aid, compiled by Fern Bayer. All transcriptions from the videos are my own.

is in what broadly unites them as a body of work. In all of the “audience rehearsals,” I argue, General Idea deploys feedback loops to draw attention to the social codes that govern both performance and seemingly spontaneous behavior.

Documenting Frames of Reference

Throughout the 1970s, the three members of General Idea – A.A. Bronson (né Michael Tims, b. 1946), Felix Partz (né Ronald Gabe, 1945–1994), and Jorge Zontal (né Slobodan Saia-Levi, 1944–1994) – created work within the conceptual frame of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant and its attendant 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant Pavilion. The Miss General Idea Pageant title provided a fictional narrative within which to insert performances, videos, installations, and mailed projects, and allowed the group to explore what they considered defining aspects of culture: artists, art institutions, the media, consumers, and the artistic process itself. They began investigating these concerns in some of their earliest forays into performance, where they developed their practice of framing one performance within another and of laying bare the process of making the performance. In 1970 they introduced the concept of Miss General Idea, as part of their multi-media event What Happened. Both What Happened and its concluding act, a performance of The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant, occurred during the international Festival of Underground Theatre held at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts and the Global Village Theatre in Toronto from August 19 to September 6.

The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant inaugurates the group’s recurrent pageant theme that would become integral to the audience rehearsal performances in the mid 1970s. The 1970 affair was held in the Town Hall lobby at the St. Lawrence Centre, and focused on unveiling the standard moments and tropes of beauty pageants and awards ceremonies: previous winners (hastily declared for years 1968 and 1969), contestants, a talent competition, judges, and the announcement of the winner. The contestants were Miss Honey (Honey Novick), outfitted in a pink gown and fox stole, and five others costumed as bears: Rachel Bear, Belinda Bear, Danny Bear, Betty Bear, and Mimi Bear. Highlighting the talent competition as a stock element of beauty pageants, General Idea’s version featured the bears displaying their song-and-dance prowess and Miss Honey showcasing her facility with the telex machine. Eventually Miss Honey was declared the winner by the three judges, a Mr. Arnold, Ronald Terrill (from the St. Lawrence Centre), and the supposedly reigning queen, Granada Gazelle, who had been declared Miss General Idea 1969 to further the mythology of the event. Following her crowning, Miss Honey turned on a monitor on the stage, which played a performance of Gertrude Stein’s play What Happened for twenty minutes. According to the artists, the audience booed and hissed this development. The insertion of a performance of Stein’s What Happened within the pageant, which itself is within General Idea’s What Happened, signals the group’s early interest in meta-narratives and framing devices.
What Happened also establishes General Idea’s exploration of the role of the audience vis a vis the performers, a theme that becomes the focus of the eventual “audience rehearsal” performances. The inspiration, Stein’s 1913 What Happened, a Play, was an early example of the writer’s “theatre of the absolute,” an approach which eschewed conventional diegesis in favor of an embrace of the present moment. General Idea also rejected narrative development in their five-act performance What Happened, choosing to focus on mundane events such as “Geodesic Kite and Folding Event,” “Trousers Demonstration Event,” and the “Laundry Event,” in which performers demonstrated the various tasks. In a faux review of the performance, written under the pseudonym Eleanor Glass, General Idea member A.A. Bronson observes how in What Happened, “the performers became invisible and the audience became its own focus.” Members of the audience participated in video interviews and captured their own daily activities in photographs that were then displayed as part of the performance. The audience-sourced photographs contributed to an emphasis in What Happened on recording and re-playing the parts of the event during its run. The performers used video and tape recorders, sketch books, and Polaroid cameras to document their activities, and the documentation was exhibited during the intermissions between acts. Thus, What Happened reveals how early in their career General Idea established several key facets of their approach to performance: the importance of documentation and process, layered constructions and meta-framing, and audience engagement.

Indeed, documentation and process play a central role in General Idea’s performances. They add an additional frame to the work, in that packaging it for video re-scripts the performance and inserts it within a different register. The resulting video can be re-played repeatedly at later dates, rendering the emphasis on “presence” and the momentary as a belatedness. While the group recorded The 1970 Miss General Idea Pageant, their first performance for video, the tapes were not usable. Edited videos survive for three “audience rehearsal” performances, Blocking (1974), Going thru the Motions (1975), and Hot Property! (1977), and thus the videos allow us access to these events after the fact and are one of the sources I draw on in my analysis of these performances. It must be noted, of course, that the videos provide an edited and selective record – they present the performances as General Idea wished them to be seen, rather than as how an audience member might have responded during the performance. General Idea also produced photographs, scripts, interviews, and sometimes props, and, like the videos, these documents shape our appraisal today of the works; the amassed records focus our attention on General Idea’s role as the scripters and shapers of the event, and they highlight the audience fulfilling duties that General Idea proscribed for them.

All this documentation is not simply a fortuitous happenstance – the members of General Idea took care in amassing (and, I suspect, culling) their personal archive. The records in their fonds provide another “frame” through which to view
and construct their practice. The survival of these documents both helps and hinders our task as historians, because the records allow us to reconstruct events with great detail, but they also inscribe General Idea as a, perhaps the, dominant voice in appraising their own work. They always seem to be assuming the guise of director and/or master of ceremonies, slipping potential interlocutors into the role of the audience. This directing at a remove asserts the group’s agency and that of the work in actively making meaning and retaining the interpretive upper hand, and it underscores the circular, reflexive nature of their work.

Metanarration and Metafiction

In each of the “audience rehearsal” performances, General Idea deploys feedback strategies to re-frame the performer-audience relationship. Two strategies are metanarration, commentary on the act or content of the narrator’s speech, and metafiction, reflection on the artificiality of the story itself. Both metanarration and metafiction are closely related self-referential devices, pointing back to the speaker or the story/performance as a fiction, and General Idea employs them in overlapping ways. In *Going thru the Motions* (fig. 1), for example, the group’s choice of that title and their use of director’s cues in the performance signal the performance as a rehearsal – they are “going through the motions” of putting on a pageant, one that will not be realized for nine years (and which is, in fact, perpetually deferred and never actually realized); the title establishes the work itself as rote. The inclusion of metanarration makes audience members more aware of the performance’s status as a walk-through or dress rehearsal. Throughout the event the Director-cum-Master of Ceremonies, A.A. Bronson, explains in advance each scene (for example, “The second scene we’re going to record is the entrance of the Spirit of Miss General Idea…”) and ends the taping by calling out “cut,” moves that underscore the event as a trial run rather than a polished, live performance. The use of metanarration and metafiction establish the audience rehearsals as a performance-within-a-performance shell, heightening the mediation through which the spectators engage with the performance.
In re-framing the live pageant as a run-through, General Idea’s metanarration also displaces the audience from its usual role. Even though promotional materials bill _Going thru the Motions_ as a “rehearsal of the audience,” it is not clear exactly what that means and most likely the audience expected to participate as viewers attending to events being performed, rather than as performers themselves. In potentially upending the audience’s expectations, they court one of the dangers of audience participation, as outlined by Richard Schechner: “The audience comes to see a play and has a right to have that expectation fulfilled. There
can be no mixture of ‘dramatic’ and ‘participatory’ structures without confusion.⁵ While Schechner directs his caution towards theatrical performances that integrate audience participation, and presumably the Toronto crowd for *Going thru the Motions* would not have expected a conventional dramatic play to be staged by General Idea, the group itself nonetheless acknowledges this intended switcheroo. They note in the script that “although the audience do not yet know it, they are a studio audience, and their entrance is being recorded on video tape.” Throughout the event, the audience members shuttle back and forth between roles as conventional viewers of a theatrical production and roles as extras in the “studio audience,” where their responses are prompted by Bronson. The script reveals that at least half or more of the “performance” consists of this rehearsal of the audience.

Thus, in its role in the audience rehearsals, the audience moves beyond a position of what one might call interactivity or even participation, and into something closer to being full-fledged actor-extras of the scenes. They perform for the director, for the actors of the pageant rehearsal (some of whom are stand-ins for the supposed eventual performers), for one another in the audience, for themselves, for the video cameras, and thus for us, later audiences, and as such are viewers and performers at the same time. In this respect, they almost seem to literalize anthropological concepts of the audience as “co-authors” of a text or performance, such as those by Alessandro Duranti and Rainer Polak. In those accounts, however, it is the act of interpretation by the audience members, in linking the performance to their own frames of reference and thus re-contextualizing it, that places the audience in a meaning-making, “authorial” role. For General Idea, it is not the hermeneutic cycle that enacts the shift from audience to performance, but the group’s active scripting of the audience and use of metanarrational and metafictional devices. The audience is instructed when to sleep, clap silently (with one hand), react with shock, or stand in ovation. Thus, in many ways the active role of audience members in making sense of the performance and responding accordingly has been co-opted by General Idea in service of the performance and the sense of fluidity of subject positions has been restricted.

**Audience-Performer Roles**

What are we to make of the nature of these audiences and their agency, if any? Are they still the audience for the performance? Are they actors for *Going thru the Motions* the performance but the audience for the pageant-within-a-performance that is The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant? Anthropologists such as Erving Goffman, Karin Barber, and Rainer Polak have considered the circumstances that bring an audience into being, that make someone or a group of people an audience. These circumstances depend on there being a performance, as “what creates an

audience is the listeners’ orientation towards the speaker” and sharing a common focus of attention. As Karin Barber contends, “performances constitute audiences and vice versa.” Erving Goffman, writing about social interactions, explains the connected and dynamic relationship between audience and performer; the latter comes into being through the complementary actions of “role others,” who become the audience within any given system of interaction. To use Goffman’s vocabulary here, the extras are the “role others” to General Idea’s pageant performers, and their existence and position as an audience validates the pageant rehearsal as a performance.

As a performance, even a rehearsal of one, Going thru the Motions follows a familiar theatrical structure, consisting of one act divided into scenes and entr’actes. Initially it appears that the rehearsal for the 1984 pageant occurs during the scenes, and the audience is clued into the process and rehearsed during entr’actes; this structure would suggest a logical framing and organization, with the rehearsal taking place in between acts and the actual action unfolding during the act. Yet blurring the seeming clear-cut division between the audience members’ active roles in the entr’actes and their passive viewing during the scenes are the instructions that they will be performing their audience vocabulary not just during the entr’actes, but also during the pageant rehearsal scenes. For example, in Going thru the Motions, during the first entr’acte Bronson instructs the “extras” to stand and sit as The Spirit of Miss General Idea 1984 enters and passes, to create a “wave effect”; they are expected to repeat their rehearsed behavior during the appearance of The Spirit in scene 2. So the entr’actes serve as rehearsals-within-a-rehearsal for the scenes of the pageant-within-a-performance that is Going thru the Motions. This is all very meta!

If the audience-performer roles are fluid, as Barber and Goffman suggest, and the “extras’” status as audience is largely dependent on sharing a common focus of attention, General Idea both invokes and refutes that very status. They do by dividing the attention of their audience in two ways; they ask the audience to switch between responding to the performance rehearsal and assuming roles as extras, and they also block out their vision. The $5 ticket for Going thru the Motions granted entry to the performance and, by folding the ticket as directed, creates a pair of "censor sunglasses," horizontal black bands with pinholes for lenses (fig. 2). During entr’acte 2 Bronson instructed the audience to wear these glasses for scene 3. In donning the glasses, the audience members’ vision was compromised;

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5 Barber, 555.
the primary locus of their role as audience members – viewing – was that which was censored. Putting on the glasses also gave the audience members an active role in working with a “prop,” shifting temporarily their engagement with the action to a task not reliant on their own observation of the performance.

Of course, individuals in the audience might not always have responded “appropriately”; perhaps one rolled his eyes to his neighbour, or another failed to wear her censor sunglasses. This circumstance is confirmed in one moment of Going thru the Motions, when viewers disregard Bronson’s cues; he describes a point in the actual pageant when the audience would “want to applaud” but asks the present audience not to, for “technical reasons...since we will want to dub in sound afterwards.” Instead he appeals to the viewers to “applaud soundlessly to Marcel’s closing speech...it’s the sound of one hand clapping, and it’s not difficult, you all can do it.” Bronson demonstrates the motion, and, in the video, the camera switches to a shot of the crowd, where no one complies. People seem bemused and even uncomfortable. This portion of the video differs from the script for Going thru the Motions, where the notes for scene 3 explain that the “audience wave and clap noiselessly” following Marcel’s farewell speech. What this part reveals is that
even with General Idea’s careful scripting, the audience members retain some agency in their own performance. Although the photographs and video footage selected by General Idea mostly demonstrate people complying with the cues, this moment of non-compliance indicates that they did so willingly. At least outwardly the audience members seemed to embrace the direction from Bronson and their structured roles. Moreover, the group acknowledges in a script for an unrealized project, “Target Audience,” that the “real reactions and rehearsed reactions were blended together … and this injected a certain ambiguity into the audience role.” The recognition that reactions could be combined makes it even more difficult to parse the video, as audience footage could be inserted from different times during the performance (or even from other performances, as we shall see).

**Performing Feedback**

Because General Idea undertook several “audience rehearsal” performances, they also created interactions across two sets of performances a year apart. The inter-scene interludes mentioned above entail a shift not just in audience-performer relationships but also in time, from the projected 1984 Pageant of the rehearsed scenes to the present-day time of the audience preparing for that very pageant. Adding taped footage from a prior audience rehearsal that played as the current audience entered and exited contributes another time-layer. This insertion – the playing of tape of the previous year’s audience – further muddles the audience’s role, as they then are performing not only for the present audience, but for a future audience that will see their footage. Yet the present-day preparations script the future performance, operating on both a sense of delayed anticipation and futurity and the concomitant feeling that everything is always, already scripted and existing in the only seemingly contradictory state of a perpetually deferred past experience.

If General Idea’s performance here is considered not just as a social interaction, not just as anthropological performance, but as performance art, then this acknowledgment of performance-time opens up questions about the nature of performance art vis a vis theatre. In contrast to theatre, Martha Wilson observed in 1997, “performance artists remind their audiences: *There is no artifice here: this is happening now, in ‘real time.’*” General Idea turns both of these declarations on their heads: the group dramatizes the artifice of the pageant, for sure – the stock moments, such as opening the winner’s envelope with bated breath, the inane competition portions, and banal interviews with contestants – but they also assert the audience as acting according to equally scripted social conventions, already trained as we are to clap politely at the end of a scene, to laugh when we’re supposed to (even when the joke isn’t that funny). Their performance is *all* artifice.

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7 Martha Wilson, “Performance Art: (Some) Theory and (Selected) Practice at the End of This Century,” *Art Journal* (Winter 1997): 2 (Emphasis from the original).
trafficking in the social codes we act by, those that both describe our past actions and predict future ones. In their very “meta” way, they expose the fallacy of the proposition that performance art ever presents an unmediated experience for the viewer, unveiling the fact that we are always performing ourselves in some unacknowledged way.

Wilson also points to another defining characteristic of performance art: that the body is performance art’s “irreducible medium.” General Idea’s audience rehearsals, in particular, take this proposition to one of its logical end points – they take the bodies of their audience members as the performer’s body, reifying the feedback process of give-and-take between performer and audience. Bronson, as emcee, directs the bodies of the audience to act without thinking – their bodies become conduits in a circuit of feedback that establish the performance as performance. We see in other performance-based practices in this period similar metanarration techniques as to what General Idea employs. For example, Dan Graham describes his body positions and the responses of the audience in *Performer, Audience, Mirror* from 1975, “activating the various feedback cycles taking place within himself as performer, between the performer and audience, and among audience members.”8 Graham uses video as an integral aspect of this loop – video, due to the medium’s capacity for real-time feedback, acts as a mirror, duplicating the actual mirror in the performance space.9

General Idea delays and refracts this aspect of metanarration as mirror. Even though the audience is videotaped, the tape serves not as feedback for the audience as they are recorded in real time, but is re-routed for a future audience rehearsal. Thus, the audience at *Going thru the Motions* was shown footage from the audience entering and exiting the *Blocking* performance the previous year; their own taped footage was in turn used in the opening scenes of the trio’s video *Pilot* the following year (1977). The mirroring of the audience’s own actions by those of another, previous audience underscores the sameness of their reactions, how automatic their responses are, even with a change in location, different group of audience-participants, and after the passage of time. This notion of feedback confronts the hopeful ideals about the role of feedback in “information society” that were circulating in the early and mid 1970s, particularly in video circles. For some, including video artist and author Michael Shamberg, this meant that feedback formed an integral component of democracy, one waning in the 1970s, where feedback had been minimized so as to reduce the sense of collective agency and participatory action. Feedback in this usage conveyed a desire to speak back, to participate, and to enact change.

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In their series of audience rehearsals, General Idea reveals the limit-case of this tempered utopian belief in feedback, exposing perhaps its use in what Gilles Deleuze calls our “control society.”10 In disciplinary societies, Michel Foucault theorizes, institutions such as schools, prisons, factories, even the family, exerted control over the body through physical enclosure; in contrast, in control societies, people are not bound temporally or physically by institutions in the same way, but are confined through the limitless flows of data and capital that structure constant, decentralized communication. General Idea invokes images of social conformity, such as when the audience of Going thru the Motions dons their censor glasses all at once, recalling pictures of 1950s cinema-goers sporting 3D spectacles in programmed uniformity that resembled the unsettling images (reproduced in General Idea’s Showcard series) of a sea of regimented Nazis. These two forms of conformity underscore an epoch-making shift between the disciplinary society of the military regime and the control society of limitless capital, digital codes, and internalized mechanisms governing social behavior. Thus feedback, far from being a potent resistance strategy, mimicked the language of control society, and General Idea demonstrates this through the scripted cues for the audience (and performers).

In later audience rehearsals, this scripted feedback loop is complicated by another constituency: the “real” audience, watching both the stage performers and the audience-performers (the “extras”). In the 1978 performance, Towards an Audience Vocabulary, General Idea strips away the pageant rehearsal frame that structured the performances Going thru the Motions and Blocking; the entire performance consisted of rehearsing the audience. Part of a video festival, the event was envisioned as a “television-style studio format,” wherein a pre-cast audience of some 32 extras were brought to the stage in front of a live audience and directed in performing stock reactions on cue: these are described on the shooting script as “5 vocab: boos, laugh, groan, gasp, scream; 3 applauses; 2 movements and 2 eye movements” (figs. 3–5). The directors guiding the stage audience’s reactions turned their backs to the “real” audience so that they could face their “extras,” the stage audience. The stage audience, who were selected in advance but were seemingly drawn from the “real” audience by an announcement on the P.A. system (not unlike Bob Barker’s “Come on, down” call to join The Price is Right!), were thus by virtue of the mise-en-scène placed in the role of “authentic” audience members reacting to the performance, leaving the “real” audience with no role to perform. This set-up divided the “real” audience’s focus between the emcee and the audience being rehearsed, a circumstance that compromised the very nature of their role as audience, which Barber and Goffman define as having a shared focus of attention.

What roles do the “real” audience members assume when their reactions have been prefigured by the other audience? As General Idea member Jorge Zontal notes, “All they could do was lip sync,” or act bored, and even that reaction had already been rehearsed by the stage audience! One journalist from the Regina Leader-Post explained of the rehearsal, “well, I got bored. I just find it incredible that anyone would want to produce the same thing twice, let alone 10 times.”\(^1\) Another writer and curator interviewing General Idea about the event noted that some audience members were restless, and others experienced “the indifference to the ‘real’ audience as something of an insult.”\(^2\) From boredom to offense, the “real” audience reacted negatively to the upstaging of their roles as audience members. Performing the roles of audience as they had been socially conditioned would mean that the real audience members were applauding and laughing on cue just as the extras were – their behaviors would be revealed as forms of mimicry. Thus, their agency as audience members was co-opted by a predetermined set of codes of behavior made visible by the stage audience.

![Image](image.jpg)

Fig. 3: General Idea, Towards an Audience Vocabulary, 1978. Performance documentation. Image courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes and Nash, New York.

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In activating the “extra” audience and deactivating the “real” audience – the terms used by the group to describe the performance – General Idea draws attention to the ways in which expected formats of mass media, in this case the television studio show and televised beauty pageant, condition certain responses. Taken out of context, those formats can produce anxiety, alienation, or boredom in viewers, who often prefer watching a familiar stand-by and performing an expected role. General Idea’s audience-within-an-audience staging transforms more established story-within-a-story or play-within-a-play metafiction constructions, highlighting the activation and deactivation of the audience as a “target” group. The selection of the television “studio” audience as a small subset that becomes a performer of the show suggests the consumer strategies afforded television, as it literally delivers consumers to advertisers, as Richard Serra and Carlotta Fay Schoolman famously revealed in the 1973 video, *Television Delivers People*. General Idea understood that contemporary audiences were consumers, and they acknowledged in the document “Target Audience” their efforts “to visualize an audience that represented today’s spiraling cultural market – an audience well-versed in cultural inversions.” For General Idea, the audience as a target market became another mass media form to expose and inhabit, akin to the trio’s seizing the beauty pageant as an available format.

The “bored” critic from the Regina Leader-Post understood this aspect of General Idea’s performance strategy when she observed, “as social commentary on some aspects of events that are covered by the media, General Idea does make its point. Any TV series that succeeds with the first show goes on the same way forever.” Yet her focus is on the product – on the performance as performance, on its “commentary” on the reheated nature of television series, rather than on her own viewing behaviours. It seems she may have missed the general idea here, that her critical response has already been conditioned by the group’s performance (and, thus, by our social roles and expectations of them).

Yet maybe there are openings in General Idea’s seemingly closed feedback loop, some greater fluidity, or at least the potential for feedback to function disruptively as noise in the system. The group notes, perhaps apocryphally, that in one part of *Towards an Audience Vocabulary*, the real audience began “hoot[ing], applaud[ing] and stom[ping] … [their] feet…creat[ing] a role for themselves since their usual role had been removed.”13 If we are to believe this account, the audience responded as a spontaneous mob, of sorts, breaking out from their prescribed role and seizing a modicum of control over their own reactions. Another observer, Philip Marchand, who was the literary and film critic for *The Toronto Star*, refers to the social and even political potential created by General Idea’s audience-performer inversions, when he asks his readers to “…Try to imagine a world where all of this – image-making and image-living, the tensions of combining within

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13 Danzker and General Idea, 14.
yourself subject and object, the awareness of interface – all this is more important than the Future of Canada or the pollution index or your own individual emotions.” Thus if we go through the motions through Marchand’s eyes, General Idea’s interrogation of the fluidity of audience-performance subject positions holds the possibility for a ripple effect, changing the way we view ourselves as we perform our responses to daily life.