

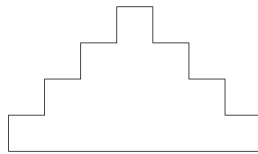
GENERAL IDEA

Ziggurat

January 24 – March 29

The Ziggurat shape holds a pivotal place in General Idea's practice, functioning as a central and recurring motif within their artistic vocabulary. This symbol, either explicitly or subtly, appears across the collective's diverse works—including paintings, drawings, performances, photographs, sculptures, prints, videos, and costumes. Originating as an ancient Mesopotamian architectural form, the Ziggurat, with its stepped design ascending toward a temple, traditionally represents a connection between humans and the divine. General Idea recontextualizes this emblem of power and theism, using the Ziggurat form as a conceptual framework to explore issues related to branding, architecture, and spatial politics. Through this appropriation, the collective engages critically with the dynamics of authority, belief systems, and their intersection with cultural and artistic practices.

General Idea's Ziggurat paintings (1968 and 1986) are assembled so that four materials—oil paint, decorator house paint, fluorescent acrylic paint, and raw canvas, each a different color—never touch one another. The ziggurat series, conceived in the late sixties, appropriates the methods of New York Color Field Painting, especially Frank Stella. The original drawings of 1968 use the ziggurat form to generate rectangles of different proportions and then allow them to escape the rectangle to generate technically more demanding shaped forms. The various rectangles were painted in 1968, but the squares and shaped forms were not produced until 1986, when General Idea completed the project with six squares and six shaped forms. All of these retain the original formula of four repeating materials corresponding with four colors. The resulting paintings were notable for their physicality, with a depth of four inches matching the height of the Ziggurat steps depicted, lending them a pronounced object-like quality.



During their first two decades, General Idea used the Ziggurat typology repeatedly in constructing The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion, and all the various components within—from the costumes of contestants to furniture and floorplans. But it is the drawings and paintings of 1968 that first describe both the grammar and the vocabulary of General Idea's appropriationist strategy. This motif reached its conceptual zenith in The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion, a fictional structure said to have hosted The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant. Supposedly the Pavillion burned down in 1984, leaving only the Ziggurat-shaped foundation of its full-scale floor plan, which represented the audience seating area.

It was Felix Partz who first introduced the Ziggurat motif in a series of paintings from 1968–69, predating the formal establishment of General Idea as a collective. After returning from a trip to North Africa, he brought with him the Ziggurat, a pattern that seemed to have taken root in his mind—whether influenced by the tiered structures of Mesopotamia and Egypt or the intricate designs of tribal carpets remains uncertain. In 1986, the group revisited the Ziggurat motif, completing unfinished sketches from Partz's earlier series.

After their move to New York in 1986, General Idea rethought their approach to making art. Their use of appropriation expands, for example with the AIDS paintings based on Robert Indiana's LOVE; followed by various projects that use the iconic forms and colors of Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, and Ad Reinhardt. The final works pass through the dark times of black-on-black to white-on-white and then explode in a final spiritual glory of fluorescent pink, Klein blue, and metallic gold. Felix and Jorge of General Idea both died in 1994; their exhibition at Mai 36 in June 1994 acted as a table of contents to the group's final themes.

Founded in Toronto in 1969 by AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal, General Idea gained international recognition for exploring themes such as the myth of the artist, the influence of mass media, the interplay between body and identity, gender and sexual representation, and notably, HIV/AIDS activism during a period when discussing the disease was highly stigmatized. Key figures in the conceptual art scenes of the 1970s and 1980s, the group approached their work with a balance of humor and critical insight.

Their works are in the collections of renowned institutions worldwide, such as the MoMA and the Whitney in New York, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC, the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the Tate in London, and the MAMCO in Geneva. In 2022–2024, a comprehensive retrospective of General Idea traveled from the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, to the Gropius Bau, Berlin.