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Chapter 2  

Towards an Audience Vocabulary  
Marc Estrin, Augusto Boal, and General Idea

In an unpublished manifesto titled “Target Audience,” the Canadian artistic trio known as General Idea described the swift transformation of a hypothetical audience, from passive observers to animated participants. Jorge Zontal, Felix Partz, and AA Bronson, the three artists comprising General Idea, envisioned the following rapid choreography:

[The audience] started with ordered applause that soon filled the space and then rose en masse to a more militant stance. Electricity sparked the air in evidence of short circuiting. The volume continued to rise. The audience collectively took things into their own hands. They crossed the well-defined and defended footlight borderline. They occupied and claimed the vacuum between stage and seats. They became the performers while remaining their own captive audience . . . on one hand, and on the other their new status was echoed in their colliding palms.¹

At first glance, this fantasy of spectatorial passion, of an audience ecstatically merging into the theatrical scene, appears to echo the Living Theatre’s contagious ethos, or Artaud’s. So irresistibly compelling are the gestures onstage, the emotions they incite, that spectators cannot help but join in. And yet: a closer look reveals subtle but significant differences in General Idea’s vision for a contagiously mobilized audience. These distinctions illuminate the viral mode of performance that they, and the other artists described in this chapter, began creating in the early 1970s, in the wake of pathbreaking 1960s works like Paradise Now and also in distinction from them. Where the Living Theatre’s work frequently envisioned the total fusion of playing space and audience area, General Idea employed the language of military invasion to reinforce awareness of this “borderline,” even as their imagined spectators transgressed it. Spectators, here, are “militant,” then “captive”; the stage is territory to be “occupied” and “defended.” The powerful impulses passing
between and among spectators are compared to the rapid transmission of electric current. Here is a world of technological circulation, a world where performing is an infiltrative action and every audience member a potential guerrilla fighter.

Perhaps most significantly, General Idea’s imagined spectators do not reiterate the gestures of performers. In fact, actors barely register in this description at all. Instead, the riotous audience aggressively repeats the gestures that spectators habitually make, from “ordered applause” to “colliding palms.” This audience spreads and circulates performance as an audience.

The imagined performance thus contains not contagious acting but contagious spectating. “From this vantage point,” wrote General Idea of their spectators, “they are no longer acting in mere response to stimuli of situation or action. They were creating their own parts and the performance would last as long as they desired.”

If the Living Theatre envisioned passing revolutionary gestures from performers to audience members through affect and emotion, a new series of contagious performance works, created in the 1970s, aimed to keep the virus but alter the relationship between stage gesture and audience response. These artists, and these new contagious dramaturgies, explored the choreography of viral transmission among spectators, rendering performers secondary in significance or absent altogether. Marc Estrin, an American theatemaker, conjured “infiltrative” scenarios, pieces that were both performance fictions and real protests, to register dissent over the Vietnam War and an array of
other social and economic issues. The Brazilian playwright-director Augusto Boal created invisible theater—performances staged in public settings and not overtly marked as fictional—as a means of drawing spectators into direct confrontation with economic inequality and other social injustices. Meanwhile, General Idea led its audiences in carefully rehearsed physical choreographies, as part of a series of “rehearsals” leading up to a much-anticipated, perpetually deferred performance. All three were deeply invested in testing the circulation of action and emotion, both in performance and in performance’s afterlife, and all constructed theatrical models that moved performative gestures off the stage and into the bodies of their spectators. Politically, these artists employed viral dramaturgies not in the service of large-scale revolution, but rather, to fuel molecular-level social change, provoking radical action one subversive gesture at a time.

This chapter deliberately places the work of three disparate artists and artistic groups in conversation. These performance-makers did not create their work in dialogue with one another, and their practices have not been examined alongside one another before. Yet the affinities among the three can be revelatory, illuminating the significance of viral thinking in each of these artists’ works, as well as the implications of ideas about circulation and transmission permeating performance cultures of the early 1970s. Then, too, their apparent differences often conceal subtle parallels. General Idea’s overt engagement with media technologies and popular culture helps to unearth similar, often overlooked impulses within the work of an artist like Boal. And Estrin’s explicit dedication to employing performance as a means of effecting social change allows for the recognition of a subtler politics embedded within the playfully satirical performances of General Idea.

All three of the artists or groups under investigation here share the inheritances of radical 1960s performance and claim a common point of inspiration in the mode of contagious theater exemplified by the Living Theatre and explored in the last chapter. Both Boal and Estrin were deeply influenced by their viewings of *Paradise Now*, and General Idea more broadly by what the group understood as the eventual failures of radical performance in the wake of the utopian protest actions of 1968. All three were in deep sympathy with the Living Theatre’s revolutionary work, while forging distinctly different models of transmission and circulation in their own practices. No longer would mass, overwhelming presence serve as a source of contagion. No longer would art confront life with the roar of revolutionary rage. Instead, performance would make playful use of absence and visual sleight-of-hand, would lurk in the peripheral vision of unsuspecting spectators, and would blend indistinguishably into everyday existence. At the same time—even as they created viral dramaturgies distinct from those of the Living Theatre and Artaud before them—these artists, like their predecessors, engaged with questions of affective contagion, individual agency, and emotional control.
The contagious dramaturgies explored in this chapter took up dialogue—implicitly or overtly—with the emerging fields of communications and media studies, which had been recently founded by scholars such as Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis. Works like Innis’s _The Bias of Communication_ (1951) and particularly McLuhan’s _Understanding Media_ (1964) provide an important backdrop to the theatrical practices I describe here, both in the cases of artists who were explicitly engaged with media form and format, like General Idea, and also in instances where such engagement was subtler, as in the work of an artist like Boal. Viral dramaturgies not only investigated the possibilities offered by screens, recording devices, and communications networks, but also reflected these scholars’ broader insights about the relationships among meaning, material form, and political power. McLuhan, for instance, proposed that, while societies governed by print media (as with the Western world, he argued, since Gutenberg) had liked to imagine themselves primarily visual and linear in both thought formation and cultural circulations, the new “electric age” would be governed by nonlinear and nonvisual circulations of thought, extending beyond rationality and consciousness. Though they did not necessarily endorse such cultural dichotomies—instead frequently finding links between linear and nonlinear transmission—these “electric” modes were, in many cases, precisely the kinds of circulation to which the artists described in this chapter aspired.

For artists like General Idea, such revelations were foundational, and much of the trio’s early performance work involved the systematic testing of McLuhan’s concepts. But my argument here is that questions of material circulation and transmission just as importantly underlie the dramaturgies of Augusto Boal and Marc Estrin (and by extension, other politically interventionist performance artists whose work does not make obvious use of media channels). From Boal’s use of recording technology to amplify an “invisible” performance to Estrin’s insistence that his infiltrations should reverberate in news headlines, these architects of live intervention repeatedly invoked media culture in their theatrical works. McLuhan’s text offers a reminder that media can be a much wider category than it is often given credit for. Not only does he devote sections of his study to expected media and information technologies such as radio, television, and telegraph; there are also chapters describing less likely candidates for inclusion: housing, clocks, money, clothing, and numbers. Media, here, includes any system for circulating ideas, affect, or action; it need not take the form of a printed page or a glowing screen.

McLuhan also takes up Elias Canetti’s ideas about communicability (discussed in my introduction), viewing live transmission as an essential part of a complex media ecology. In a section of _Understanding Media_ devoted to “numbers,” McLuhan finds direct inspiration in Canetti’s _Crowds and Power_ (published just two years before _Understanding Media_) and declares: “Just as writing is an extension and separation of our most neutral and objective
sense, the sense of sight, number is an extension and separation of our most intimate and interrelating activity, our sense of touch.”

McLuhan links the concepts of crowd, number, touch, and communicability, asserting that such forces should be considered technologies in their own right:

The mysterious need of crowds to grow and to reach out, equally characteristic of large accumulations of wealth, can be understood if money and numbers are, indeed, technologies that extend the power of touch and the grasp of the hand.

Virus, Zach Blas observed in 2012, is a form of “becoming-number”; McLuhan and Canetti, half a century earlier, had already imagined what “becoming-number” might mean, drawing on the connections among media, technology, and the circulation of affect within a gathered crowd.

These hypotheses about affective communicability—even if not direct inspirations for Augusto Boal—provide context for his approach to theatrical transmission, particularly within the viral form of invisible theater. Boal did not seek the transmission of affect among crowds of live spectators, but he did aspire to the continuous extension of what McLuhan called the “power of touch.” For Boal, mainstream media and mass communications were futile in provoking members of the public to rethink their assumptions about social and economic injustices. “Big rallies are for people who are already convinced,” he wrote. “The other way, like doing invisible theatre, reaches very few people. But it modifies people’s opinions. That man whose opinion was changed goes home and talks to his family, and he goes to a bar and talks to his friends.”

Mass communications, to Boal, were ineffectual compared to the communicative power of a single personal conversation. “Becoming-number” was achieved one audience member at a time.

McLuhan, fascinatingly, includes avant-garde art alongside his discussion of mainstream media channels, endowing its formal innovations with predictive power: “in experimental art,” he wrote, “men are given the exact specifications of coming violence to their own psyches from their own counter-irritants or technology.”

Avant-garde forms of representation, he suggests, reflect back to us the modes of communication that lie largely invisible beneath the surface of our daily interactions. Such a project describes precisely Marc Estrin’s approach to communicating with his public, particularly through his strategic manual ReCreation, which offers instructions for inserting minute reminders of injustice into daily life.

Beyond an engagement with media studies, two theatrical strategies—both likewise linked to these artists’ ideas about circulation and dissemination—recur importantly in the works discussed in this chapter. The first is invisibility, and the second is the overt framing of performances as rehearsals rather than as finished pieces. While only Boal created a form explicitly titled “invisible theater,” Estrin’s infiltrative scenarios and General Idea’s use of
the present-but-absent figure of Miss General Idea also attempted to inspire audiences to action through performances that weren’t complete, visible, or even perceptible onstage (or in which no stage was employed in the first place). In this chapter, I contend that it is not only the overwhelmingly present—as with Artaud and the Living Theatre—but also the ostensibly absent that can spread with viral abandon. In the cases of the artists examined here, it is invisibility rather than hyper-visibility that fuels contagious performance.

Theatrical invisibility has been theorized before, in ways that offer useful counterpoints to my project. In his study *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, and Performance*, Andrew Sofer argues that offstage characters and unseen but important spaces and forces constitute the “dark matter” of the theater, pressing urgently against the visible world onstage. His examples, though, are fundamentally different from mine, since he considers primarily dramatic texts with fictional worlds, which Estrin, Boal, and General Idea explicitly avoid. Closer to viral invisibility is the mode of performance proposed by Laura Levin in her 2014 *Performing Ground*, which examines artistic works that attempt to blend into their environments: embedded performances, camouflaged installations, pieces whose power comes from their unannounced presence in the wider landscape. Such a mode bears similarities with the viral performance strategies practiced by all three of the artists and groups in this chapter.

But while Levin’s discussion of “embedded” performances emphasizes the relationships between performers and their surroundings, viral performance’s aim is, rather, to employ invisibility as a means of triggering interactions between performers and spectators. Viral performance may blend into the background, but only as a means of expanding more thoroughly into its audience’s gathered consciousness, and ultimately, their performing bodies. The artists in this chapter necessitate the conceptualization of a third kind of invisible performance, the kind in which there is no onstage fiction subject to encroachment by unseen forces, and where blending into the background is only the first step. For Boal, “invisible” performance does not expand the bounds of a fictional world, but instead brings the performance fiction as close as possible to a spontaneous real-world event. For Estrin, “infiltrative” scenarios are intended to inspire double-takes, and then active intervention. And for General Idea, deferring and then preemptively canceling the 1984 Miss General Idea pageant was a means of replacing stage fictions with theatrical absences and placing emphasis on the spectacular performances of their spectators.

These artists frequently withhold not only performance fictions, but also any final, finished version of the performance at all: absence is temporal as well as visual. They emphasize process, transmission, and circulation rather than climax or resolution, and as a result, they frequently imagine their pieces as “rehearsals” for a final performance that might never take place. For Boal, each performance that drew “spect-actors” into active participation
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in debating socioeconomic questions or resolving injustices was a “rehearsal of revolution.” Marc Estrin wrote scenarios for ongoing theatrical “infiltrations” that might extend for years with no narrative resolution or curtain call in sight. For General Idea, the entire performance series staged between 1974 and 1978, including pieces such as Blocking, Towards an Audience Vocabulary, Hot Property, and Going Thru the Motions, were designed as “rehearsals of the audience” for the mythic 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant, which never came to pass.

Conceiving of these performances as rehearsals in which spectators could perfect their participation allowed the artists to, imaginatively, keep their stage images in continual circulation, without placing them inside the temporal boundaries of a conventional performance. This approach toward time arises in many of the viral dramaturgies analyzed in this book, from the Living Theatre, instructing its spectators to continue the revolution after their performances ended, to Suzan-Lori Parks’s yearlong cycle 365 Days/365 Plays. Estrin, Boal, and General Idea thus provide a point of departure for considering such dramaturgies of expanded performance time, replacing bounded dramatic structures with continuous, mutating transmissions and circulations.

Getting beyond Audience: Marc Estrin’s Infiltrative Acts

“Art has become a contained mental thing and it has a very detrimental effect on the way we look at the world,” Julian Beck wrote in his memoir The Life of the Theatre. “Therefore, yes, it’s no longer a matter of being an artist, it’s a matter of infiltrating into being, into the world, into the people.” If Paradise Now rebelled against all boundaries—stage fictions, scripted texts, physical theaters, legal injunctions, and historical narratives—Marc Estrin took a complementary approach: infiltrating rather than overwhelming, creating performances intended to subtly permeate everyday life rather than raucously overtake it. Estrin studied directing at UCLA in the early 1960s, where, like Beck and Malina, he became enamored of Artaud’s writings. Moving to Washington, D.C., in 1965, Estrin and a collaborator, technical director Dennis Livingston, established the American Playground Theater, which would take inspiration from the Living Theatre and would be dedicated to mixing performance with social and political critique.

Estrin’s affinity for the Living Theatre began when he saw the company’s 1961 production of The Apple, a second theatricalist venture from the writer Jack Gelber, whose play The Connection had been a formal breakthrough for the company in 1959. During intermission at The Apple, Estrin encountered an actor from the company in the bathroom, and after beginning a conversation with him, realized that the performer was still in character—even offstage, even without the promise of spectators to watch him and
acknowledge his work. This revelation, Estrin recalled during an interview, vividly demonstrated to him that the border between theatrical fictions and offstage reality could be viewed as porous and unstable, available for experimentation and renegotiation.\(^\text{13}\)

When Estrin founded the American Playground Theater and began making infiltrative performances, he hoped that the new company’s experiments would succeed in breaking down the barrier between actors and audience, which he believed hindered the real-world efficacy of most of the political theater he saw. He recalled that

> the infiltrative theater was a direct assault on the idea of “audience” itself. There was something very protective [about being “audience”]—you put on your Teflon coating by buying your ticket, and it seemed like a high level of bullshit to me, given the exigencies of the political time that we were in. The idea was, how do you get beyond “audience”?\(^\text{14}\)

“Getting beyond audience” ultimately served as a central element of Estrin’s dramaturgy. Like the Living Theatre, Estrin attempted to recruit bystanders for his audiences, then to turn them into revolutionary actors. But Estrin went further than the Living Theatre had in seeking spectators from daily life: his audiences were composed largely of unsuspecting passersby, impromptu spectators who had not intended to see a performance and who sometimes never realized they were watching one.

Though Estrin cites Artaud, Beck, and Malina as primary influences, his work also emerged alongside a spectrum of artists who shared strategies and approaches—particularly the international Fluxus and Happenings movements, which provide instructive comparisons with Estrin’s work. Artists affiliated and associated with Fluxus had been making transmedial performances, merging everyday life with artistic form, since the early 1960s. Fluxus performances, especially American ones, frequently made use of public space and engaged audience members in scenarios that, structurally, Estrin’s infiltrative theater resembled. In a retrospective essay on the form, for instance, Dick Higgins recalls a performance by Fluxus artist Ben Patterson, which “took place in New York’s Times Square, on the edge of a red-light district. He stood on street corners, waiting until the lights turned green, and then simply followed the light to the next corner. Several young women— they appeared to be prostitutes—watched him do this for a while, and then they joined in.”\(^\text{15}\) Like Fluxus, the performances loosely labeled Happenings merged the materials and experiences of everyday life, seeking to effect subtle shifts in spectators’ and participants’ perception. In some cases, too, Happenings were likewise invisible, as in, for instance, Allan Kaprow’s Self-Service, a “piece without spectators” performed in Boston, New York, and Los Angeles in 1967. Kaprow instructed participants to select from among a range
of activities that melded the everyday with the surreal: leaving a banquet along the side of a highway, handing out flowers to passersby with “pleasant faces.” One task—Kaprow suggests tucking transistor radios playing rock music among the food on grocery store shelves—is structurally akin to one of Estrin’s scripts for social change, which suggested supporting the 1965 Delano grape-growers’ strike by placing photos of Mexican children’s faces among the bunches of grapes on the supermarket shelf.

Yet the distinction between Kaprow’s and Estrin’s chosen props also reveals how “infiltrative theater” differed from Happenings and Fluxus, and suggests the reasons I’ve chosen to foreground Estrin’s work in this chapter. Happenings and Fluxus were deeply engaged with the politics of everyday life, but infiltrative theater was protest art, political intervention, a series of attempts to elicit specific actions from spectators, oriented toward specific policy objectives. Estrin sought to infiltrate everyday life rather than to merge with it, imagining performers as sources of spreadable images and gestures that would alter the political landscape.

The American Playground Theater’s scenarios for infiltrative theater are available primarily in a book called ReCreation, an out-of-print manual edited by Estrin and published in 1971, which comprises instructions for promoting social change, texts for subversive performance, revolutionary poetry, and recipes for socially progressive art. Some of these documents are, as Estrin has described them, “detritus” rescued from trashcans and bulletin boards: protest letters to local Selective Service offices, practical suggestions for establishing food co-ops and underground newspapers, flyers of every kind, mimeographed and pasted together to construct a clamorous scrap-book of blueprints for radical change.

Alongside these curated texts, Estrin published his own scripts for various kinds of theatrical infiltrations: spectacles erupting out of mundane situations, confrontations in streets and classrooms and public parks, all intended to mobilize audience members unaware that they were viewing a work of art. Estrin’s infiltrative performances—even, and especially, his solely hypothetical ones (to be discussed shortly)—constitute an important model for politically radical, personally infectious live performance, emanating from Estrin’s foundational ambition to create a complete commingling of the real world and the theater. In his introductory note to ReCreation, Estrin declared that there should be “no limit to the number of people directly involved in THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE WORLD WHICH IS THEATER.”

For Estrin, conceiving of the world as theater, and of theater as a means of directly affecting the world, demanded the creation of a performance mode in which staged scenarios could not be readily distinguished from spontaneously occurring events.

Estrin frequently referred to his creations as scenarios for “guerrilla theater,” a term that was under debate in this era, and whose implications are profoundly meaningful for parsing infiltrative theater’s viral implications.
The phrase “guerrilla theatre” entered American artistic conversation in a 1966 TDR essay, titled “Guerrilla Theatre,” by R. G. Davis of the San Francisco Mime Troupe (Davis credited his collaborator Peter Berg with coining the phrase). Drawing on the Mime Troupe’s own work, Davis offered a succinct set of guidelines for using low-budget, politically direct performance to raise consciousness and inspire audiences to action. But, although Davis quoted Che Guevara at the beginning of his essay (“The guerrilla fighter needs full help from the people of the area”), he did not suggest that actors should disappear into the landscape that surrounded them, or that staged performances would be more effective if they gave the impression of being spontaneous events. To the contrary, Davis’s guerrilla theater relied on the appeal of colorful, easily understood scenarios, drawing on street performance traditions such as the commedia dell’arte. Davis’s “guerrilla theatre” attempted to emulate guerrilla fighters’ ethos of close connection to local communities, and their scrappy, flexible survival strategies. In a 1970 article about the form, Richard Schechner echoed Davis’s formulations, noting that “it is called ‘guerrilla’ because some of its structures have been adapted from guerrilla warfare—simplicity of tactics, mobility, small bands, pressure at the point of greatest weakness, surprise.”

But Estrin saw the connection between guerrilla warfare and guerrilla theater from a different angle, one that significantly alters the relationship between an audience member and a performer. In an introduction to his “Four Guerrilla Theatre Pieces,” published in TDR, Estrin rejected any performance mode that called itself guerrilla but remained recognizable as art:

> The term guerrilla theater is beginning to be thrown around quite loosely ... I suggest restricting its use to that form of theater which, like the Viet Cong, does not identify itself as such. Theater which does not present itself as “performance.” Theater which IS a reshaping of reality.

Unmarked performances, for Estrin, would inspire action because their stakes appeared to be those of real events.

In a written scenario representative of this vision—a durational piece in which politics reshapes artistic representation—Estrin proposed that a painter set up an easel near some prominent national landmark (he suggests staging the piece in Lafayette Park, opposite the White House). Day by day, the artist should establish himself as a congenial local fixture, chatting with police and passersby while sketching a blandly realistic portrait of the monument at hand—until, inexorably and incrementally, the painting mutates from an innocuous image into, Estrin writes,

> a scene appropriate to the subject matter. On the White House balcony babies are napalmed, from the roof ICBMs emerge. Fragmentation
bombs are exploded on the lawn maiming the (black) visitors. A grotesque Nixon and Laird oversee the operations.\textsuperscript{22}

Out of an unassuming work of art, true horrors were to burst forth—the painting’s mutation from apparent truth into shocking “reality” doubling the infiltrators’ permeation of everyday America to reveal underlying social truths.

If this scenario had been performed (and Estrin says that, to his knowledge, it never was),\textsuperscript{23} “The Painter” was not to conclude with the metamorphosis of the painting, but was intended to mutate again, turning into a public scandal over the controversial work of art. Estrin envisioned that once the painting’s subject matter became dark and confrontational, local police, who might previously have welcomed an unassuming artistic presence, would turn on the painter and perhaps even evict him from the area. Local newspapers would then run stories and print images of the offending work of art on their front pages, and the artist himself would give interviews everywhere he could, employing the mainstream media as a conduit for subversive messages.

Such a suggestion underscores the inextricable link, for Estrin, between infiltrative scenarios and their afterlives in spectators’ consciousness and in the media ecology. The painting’s mediated public is as significant, and much larger, than its live audience. To design a performance intended to provoke disruption, scandal, and notoriety is to imagine the newspaper headlines as an integral element of the piece, no less than it would be if Estrin had worked in the age of the viral video and scaled his performances to fit the white frame of the YouTube page. And Estrin’s plan for circulating his message didn’t stop with media coverage. Finally—and perhaps most significantly—Estrin wrote, “Money from the sale of the now-famous painting is donated to the Movement.”\textsuperscript{24} “The Painter” thus, in a series of three steps, was intended to infiltrate everyday reality and then alter it. Most importantly, such notoriety, or so Estrin hoped, would increase the painting’s monetary value, attracting a high price that could subsequently be used for revolutionary purposes. The performance’s message, initially confined by the painting’s frame, could be converted into the ever-circulating commodities of headlines and cash.

Some of Estrin’s infiltrative scenarios attempted to even more thoroughly inhabit everyday circumstances, escaping detection as artistic work completely. Estrin counts among his most successful interventions into everyday life an “invisible” performance in San Francisco’s City Lights Bookstore. Founded in the 1950s by the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the bookstore had long been a gathering place for countercultural communities, some members of which felt that books should never be sold for a profit, and therefore that it was only fair to “rip off” bookstores and seize communal knowledge for free. Accordingly, Estrin observed, a few countercultural activists began
stealing from not only mass chain establishments, but also independent stores like City Lights. “This seemed like a typical example of Movement bullshit—brothers undoing each other in the name of ‘liberation’ or conflicting ideologies,” wrote Estrin in an unpublished document describing the piece, “so we decided to explore our own and the customers’ attitudes toward ripping off City Lights.” The performance consisted of seven “beats,” beginning when a participant unobtrusively stashed a book in his pocket, to the outrage of several witnesses. Customers observed the confrontation, unaware that they had become spectators to a planned performance. Estrin took the part of a defender for City Lights, demanding to know why the “thief” didn’t shoplift from corporate chain stores instead. The piece, performed on multiple occasions, concluded with a showdown at the store’s front desk, its results dependent on the whims of whoever stood behind the cash register on any given day.

Spectators, Estrin believed, could not be relied upon to join in collective action if that action were advertised in advance; provocations could be more contagious if they were unexpected, their ontology unclear. When Estrin published four scenarios for infiltrative theater in TDR in 1969, he included, besides “The Painter” and a quirky plan for flying “Viet Cong” kites in a public park, two blueprints for radicalizing classrooms and conventions, which offer useful illustrations of the fraught relationships between contagious dramaturgies and live audiences. In “A Piece for Conventions,” which Estrin performed with a group of collaborators, he described a strategy for forcing sluggish, inertia-bound institutions to confront pressing political problems. Estrin and his collaborators “infiltrated” an annual convention of college newspaper editors, hoping to provoke the timid group into addressing the Vietnam War.

“Before the conference began,” Estrin recalled, “we hung giant white screens from the balconies of the ballroom.” These large drapes dangled there, innocuously—like the bland painting in the park—until, during a debate over whether to address the Vietnam War as a group, the leadership of the convention decided to shut down discussion and pass a motion to “table the question.” Estrin and his collaborators were outraged, and their outrage provided the impetus they were seeking. He recalled:

Table Vietnam!! At that point, we cut the lights and began a barrage of six simultaneous atrocity films and tracks: battle scenes, LBJ, Rusk, napalm, a homecoming parade, dead children projected on the hanging screens . . . After three minutes, the lights were switched on, the films cut off, and a voice boomed over the great loudspeaker system of the grand ballroom. It was our “police voice” announcing that the films just shown were contraband North Vietnamese films, shown without State Department approval, and were being confiscated. The meeting was declared illegal and was ordered adjourned.
This subterfuge worked. The assembled newspaper editors, believing they had just watched an impromptu screening of illegally acquired propaganda films, were suddenly cast in the roles of countercultural rebels. And once cast, their reluctance to discuss “politics” evaporated, and they were inspired to play the parts they’d been given. Estrin and his collaborators convinced the members of the convention to disband into small discussion groups, all of which began actively debating the question of how student newspapers should respond to the Vietnam War.

The performance’s fictional elements remained concealed until they’d been rendered irrelevant, the invisible actions of Estrin and his collaborators prompting highly visible responses from their spectators. “The way the films were stopped, the nature of the sound, the previous emotionalism all created a credibility which might not have prevailed in a more rational context,” he wrote. In other words, despite Estrin’s avowed allegiance to a mode of performance that so completely permeated the real world that there was no difference between spectator and actor, some of the most successful “infiltrations” relied precisely on that difference. Here again, as in “The Painter,” Estrin’s live performative infiltration was the first step in a larger infiltration of the media ecology. While such a move might constitute a familiar performance strategy in the age of hidden cameras and the Yes Men, for Estrin to conceive such a mode of infiltration in a pre-internet age testifies to a longer history of viral media, and a wider range of viral media forms, than is frequently assumed to exist.

This performance strategy also recalls the ontological and ethical debates faced by Estrin’s influences, the Living Theatre and Artaud. Estrin’s dramas of invisibility (and Boal’s, as I will discuss shortly) relied on stirring up the same emotions of surprise, outrage, and frustration that key sections of Paradise Now inspired, and on the intensity of emotion that Artaud envisioned as a means of propelling charged ideas from the stage into the audience. For Estrin, as for the Living Theatre, the prospect of shifting action from performers to spectators relied on the changeable nature of the boundary between the two. While the Living Theatre hoped to spread revolution through overwhelming emotional presence, Estrin hoped to spread subversive change through his strategic employment of absence. And, like the Living Theatre before him, Estrin faced accusations of emotional manipulation. In his case, the charge was that his infiltrative scenarios, by withholding their status as performance, were coercive and condescending to their audience members, that the very elements Estrin imagined could make these pieces infectious were also what made them unjust.

This critique was expressed particularly clearly in a letter to the editor of TDR, by a reader named Martin Trueblood who objected to Estrin’s “manipulative techniques.” Trueblood argued that Estrin was undermining political theater’s mandate to enlighten rather than deceive, by infiltrating rather than demonstrating and by favoring surreptitious fictions over straightforward
advocacy. Estrin responded by drawing comparisons between his own manipulations and those of the corporate and government agencies he intended to unsettle. “Not all manipulation is necessarily evil,” he wrote, adding,

“Manipulation by Madison Ave., manipulation by the press, yes. But the manipulation in the Classroom Piece? We are dealing here, I think, with a different sort of thing . . . The critical question: does the “audience” emerge from the experience with more options or less? Have the degrees of freedom been increased or decreased? The guideline I have formulated for myself is: if people emerge with more options, more freedom, go ahead and do it. If people emerge with fewer, watch out—it’s fascism.”

The emotional manipulation of spectators—even the emotional confrontation of spectators—was acceptable to Estrin because it could provoke the audience response he was seeking. Like _Paradise Now_, Estrin’s “Convention Piece” sought to transmute audience frustration into audience enlightenment, to avoid direct conversation and rational exchange in favor of the more contagious theatrical elements of surprise and outrage.

Some of Estrin’s most fully “infiltrative” ideas were never performed, and yet offer provocative models for an invisible viral dramaturgy. Such is the case with “A New Family Moves In,” another scenario directly inspired by the Living Theatre, in this case _Paradise Now_, which, Estrin, recalled, “was a real breakthrough paradigm” in its staging of spectatorship and participation. After attending a performance of the Living Theatre’s revolutionary extravaganza, Estrin did precisely what the company hoped their spectators would. He conceived a “restaging” of _Paradise Now_’s revolution, to take place outside the theater.

In the _Paradise Now_ passage that had stayed most clearly in Estrin’s imagination, actors bludgeon each other with verbal signifiers of difference: “You’re young!” yells one; “You’re old!” comes the reply. “You’re tall!” cries another; “You’re short!” is summarily lobbed back—and on and on, invoking race, gender, body type, and other criteria of social division. Musing that “there is really no end to potential divisions among people,” Estrin imagined mounting a real-life assault on social barriers, in what amounted to a socially motivated version of a reality TV–style apartment swap:

Two families—one from each side of a conflict—are needed to cooperate in the making of this piece. Each must agree to move into the other’s home. The experiments then proceed simultaneously.

Estrin imagined participating in a “redneck-hippie” version of the exchange, seeing himself driving a “battered ’37 Chevie van, painted in psychedelic colors” into a conformist suburban neighborhood, then proceeding to live
according to his “hippie” habits, while simultaneously maintaining “the most open and communicative life style possible.” The “spectators” would be unsuspecting neighbors, and the performance’s duration undefined: “The time scale of the piece would relate to the intention,” Estrin explains. “Whatever happened, life would be different afterward for all concerned.” The performance idea, put another way, is simply a social vision for more fully integrated neighborhoods, which would in turn encourage more open-minded communities.

This scenario—most of all among Estrin’s theatrical ideas—can be understood as an example of what Laura Levin calls “embedded performance,” projects that often involve “the strategic embedding of self into environment as a mode of socio-political critique.” Levin’s examples range from visual artists posing for photos in complex costumes that render them indistinguishable from their backdrops, to pranksters like the Yes Men, who pose as representatives of the organizations they critique. Embedded performance, she argues, can function in a variety of ways: it can highlight the insider’s perspective within the “frame” of a landscape or social situation, can reveal unexpected affinities between performers and environments, and can allow performers to gain entrance to usually restricted sites. Levin argues that embeddedness, which has been accused of fostering a biased, insider’s perspective, can, on the contrary, be “a performative strategy used by artists to work against a dominant perspective and the obfuscating frames produced by media and state.” Embedded performers alter the background—sometimes, simply by making it visible.

Estrin’s “A New Family Moves In” can be viewed as just such a project. Performer-participants are physically embedded within the frame of a social setting in which they do not obviously belong, as a means of critiquing assumptions about belonging itself. But here—and in viral performance as a whole—the emphasis is subtly but revealingly different from Levin’s embeddedness. Viral performances focus not only on the relation between a performer and her environment, but also importantly on the relationship between a performer and her spectator, who is assumed to be in ideological flux, open to a shift in perspective, able to alter the environment as well. Embedding performers in an environment is the first step for Estrin, while provoking spectators into action is the necessary result.

“A New Family Moves In,” perhaps his most ambitious script for “infiltrative theater,” is limited in many ways, most significantly by the near-impossibility of staging it. (The more expansive Estrin’s imagination became, the less likely his scenarios were to find embodiment.) Still, as an instance of a script inspired by revolutionary theater—the Living Theatre’s wildest visions of contagious revolution coming true—the piece is representative of infiltrative theater’s viral possibilities. Its drama is ongoing and ever-mutating (rather than temporally bounded), leaving open the possibilities for how the new family might influence its new community, and the time it might take to
do so. The spectators, unidentified as such, determine the drama’s outcome through their responses to the new neighbors, while the unmarked performers never leave their “stage,” living out their dramatic fiction as if it were daily reality—which, very quickly, it would become. By remaining invisible, by infiltrating neighborhoods like guerrillas, Estrin’s “new family” would infect their surroundings for an unbounded time to come.

Liberating the Spectator: Boal’s Invisible Theater

In a brief section of his autobiography, *Hamlet and the Baker’s Son*, the Brazilian playwright, director, and theorist Augusto Boal remembered an experience he had as a spectator when he was traveling in Europe, and went to see a politically radical theater troupe on tour from the United States. One scene from this radical work of theater stayed with him afterward: a section in which the company clearly intended to infectiously inspire the audience to action, but which struck Boal as artistically and politically dishonest. He wrote:

I remember a North American group in Europe, doing an anarchist play in which every night the actors tore up their passports and incited the spectators to do the same. Clearly the US Consulate did not furnish them with new passports every morning to be torn up that night: false prop passports incited the spectators to tear up their own real passports.\(^38\)

Though he does not cite them by name, it is highly likely that Boal is referring to the Living Theatre (which also toured his home country of Brazil in 1970 and 1971).\(^39\) Like Estrin, Boal found the Living Theatre’s infectious dramaturgies inspiring and provocative, and as he developed the collection of theatrical techniques for which he would become famous—known collectively as the “Theater of the Oppressed”—ideas about how spectators could be mobilized to action remained central to Boal’s thinking. In artistic contrast with Estrin (and the Living Theatre), though, Boal sought immediacy in the communication between performers and spectators. There would be no “Rite of Guerilla Theatre,” sacrificing thoughtful conversation for emotional affect; there would be no surprising infiltration for perplexed spectators to unravel, no attempt to provoke skepticism by means of the confusing or strange. Rather, the actions of both performers and spectators would be, as much as possible, the same; spectators would be inspired to reconsider everyday actions during the process of performing them.

Boal’s commitment to this tactic was inspired by a series of revelations about performance and reality, including his response to *Paradise Now*, as well as an earlier and much-recounted incident in which his acting company
from the Arena theater was touring an agitprop play in Brazil’s northeast provinces, advocating peasants’ rights against oppressive landholders. After one performance, a farmer from the audience approached Boal, thrilled to have apparently found allies, and offered Boal’s company guns to join in the attack on their landlords, which the actors bashfully turned down. “We were ashamed at having to decline this new invitation—an invitation to really fight rather than just talk about fighting,” Boal remembers. “We told him we were genuine artists and not genuine peasant farmers.” He concluded: “That episode made me comprehend the falsity of the ‘messenger’ form of political theatre. We have no right to incite anyone to do something we are not prepared to do ourselves.”

In rejecting his own attempt to preach revolution without practicing it, Boal also condemned the Living Theatre’s ethics, as they destroyed false passports while suggesting that spectators destroy real ones. And yet the forms Boal called forum theater, invisible theater, and legislative theater—as well as his well-known idea of the spect-actor, a viewer who enters a performance and alters its outcome—all share political and artistic concerns, and theatrical strategies, with the Living Theatre (and with Artaud before them). Likewise, though he advocated reasoned dialogue over artistic ambush, his dramaturgies overlapped with those of Estrin; and overlapped, too, with the audience choreographies of General Idea, though his tone was less satirical, his direction of spectators less formal, than theirs.

Boal worked in many artistic modes, from drama to musical theater to the array of performance practices that he labeled the “Theater of the Oppressed.” But I focus here on a single strand of his work: the theory and practice of “invisible theater,” first envisioned in the early 1970s. Invisible theater, most clearly among Boal’s projects, employed a viral dramaturgy, instigating the communicable spread of ideas and actions through audiences and wider publics. In invisible performances, Boal most explicitly envisioned choreographing his spectators. Invisible theater, too, of all Boal’s innovations, offers the most ambitious conception of how performance can fuse with ordinary life. I single out this mode and place it in the context of viral performance as a means of illuminating the artistic, ontological, and political assumptions that underlie Boal’s theatrical thinking more broadly. Locating invisible theater within the category of viral performance also helps to distinguish it from the street theater and guerrilla performances with which it has often been grouped, to uncover other, less obvious affinities with avant-garde performance forms.

If Estrin’s infiltrative strategies flirted with legal boundaries, and the Living Theatre weathered frequent encounters with police, invisible theater operated below the public radar out of legal and political necessity. Boal and his collaborators conceived this performance mode in the mid-1970s, under a violently repressive dictatorship in Argentina, during one of Boal’s many stops in a long, itinerant exile from Brazil’s own authoritarian regime.
With a group of Argentine collaborators, he planned a public performance celebrating a much-admired Buenos Aires ordinance which mandated that restaurants provide free meals to the poor. After friends warned Boal of the collaborations among exiled Nazis, Argentine secret police, and the CIA, he realized that attending his own performance would be dangerous and that he risked not only capture but assassination. Rather than cancel the performance, his cast suggested remounting the play in the form of “invisible theater.” It would no longer be performed onstage, but in a real restaurant, with the real waiters and restaurant managers replacing the actors who had played those roles. Boal would watch the show from another table:

From my table on the other side of the room, I was able to observe this extraordinary thing: the interpenetration of fiction and reality. The superimposition of two levels of the real: the reality of the quotidian and the reality of the rehearsed fiction.

Boal concluded that the invisible performance, because it was apparently real, could harness a power to motivate spectators that explicit stage fictions lacked. As with infiltrative theater, invisible theater would address dispersed publics, one newly conscious spectator at a time. Rather than pressuring new recruits through a display of massive numbers, it would “infect” them by prompting the reconsideration of seemingly unalterable conditions. Rather than seeking to overwhelm the existing social order through the frenzy of a charged crowd, these performance modes would permeate society and, Boal hoped, reproduce themselves through considered conversation.

In Joanne Pottlitzer’s forthcoming book *Symbols of Resistance: The Legacy of Artists under Pinochet (1973–1990)*, the Chilean actor and activist Mónica Echeverría recalls that, after hearing Boal speak in 1988, she planned an “invisible theater” performance to protest economic conditions under the Pinochet regime. Posing as a wealthy customer in a middle-class supermarket, she filled a grocery cart with caviar and other luxury purchases; a fellow actress, traversing the same supermarket with a young child, selected inexpensive necessities—rice, beans, and bread. When they reached the checkout counter, the “lower-income” performer began railing against the price of food and against the regime, and Echeverría confronted her publicly:

I started yelling at her with a bourgeois voice, “Shut your mouth! What do you want to do? Go back to the times of Allende? How can you even think about it? We have everything we ever wanted with Pinochet . . .”

While the performance lasted, the gathered spectators believed what they saw. They begged the two actresses to quiet down, bringing whiskey for Echeverría and water for her fellow performer.
To Boal, each unwitting participant in a scenario like Echeverría’s would become a spect-actor, an audience member whose actions steer the performance toward its unrehearsed conclusion. “All these experiments of a people’s theater have the same objective,” he wrote, “the liberation of the spectator, on whom the theater has imposed finished visions of the world.”\footnote{47} But although liberation of the spectator was often at least temporarily successful—in the sense of provoking sincere participation—the infectious reactions invisible theater inspired were not always the kind Boal intended, or even imagined.

In a 1990 \textit{TDR} article, Boal describes an experience of twelve years earlier, when he visited Belgium in 1978 to conduct an invisible theater workshop with European theater artists. After three days of training in Brussels, Boal’s company and their Belgian companions visited the city of Liège, where they planned and staged an invisible theater performance similar to Echeverría’s. The piece took place in a supermarket, where its protagonist, an actor named Francois, filled his cart with food, then informed the checkout clerk that he was unemployed and could not pay for the goods. Instead, he proposed, he would work for the supermarket until the value of his labor equaled the value of the food in his shopping cart. The confused supermarket clerk anxiously summoned her manager, who in turn summoned the Belgian police. The police were initially reluctant to arrest Francois, since he hadn’t stolen any of the goods—in fact, in the meantime, real customers in the supermarket had raised the necessary funds for him to purchase the food—but they took him to a local station for interrogation.

In the meantime, the performers had inspired a wide-ranging conversation among the supermarket’s customers on the subjects of unemployment, Belgian politics, and the relationships between competing Belgian communities: precisely the form of dialogue that Boal’s company had hoped to provoke.\footnote{48} Though the invisible theater piece culminated in the arrest of one of the company, it spurred its spectators to engage in consciousness-raising conversation and debate. Believing that Francois was one of 600,000 Belgians unemployed at the time, they accepted his predicament as a real one and leapt with little prompting into unscripted conversation about the problems of unemployment in their country.\footnote{49} (In fact, the police were also initially sympathetic to his plight—although after learning that Francois was a performer, was not unemployed, and had been following a partially prearranged scenario, they angrily filed charges against him for inciting disorder and for presenting a public performance without permission.)\footnote{50}

Boal’s 1978 experiment in Liège, and Echeverría’s Chilean supermarket performance—as well as, for that matter, Boal’s very first invisible theater performance, the restaurant scenario of 1971—featured similar casts of characters and thrust their spectators into similar debates. Boal, like Estrin with his visions of placing tiny reminders of exploitation among the fruits and vegetables on supermarket shelves, wanted performance to challenge capitalism’s permeation of everyday life. Each transformed ordinary items—a dollar,
a loaf of bread—into theatrical props, throwing into relief the constant, active exchange and circulation of monetary value and material objects. In the Liège performance, Boal’s actors reminded the supermarket clerk of the direct correlation between her hourly wages and the goods on the supermarket shelves, telling her:

You Miss, for instance, what do you do? You work at this cash register 8 hours a day and by the end of the week, after having worked for 40 or 45 hours, are paid. Then, with the same money, you do your own shopping in this same supermarket.51

This theatrical strategy echoes the observations put forward by McLuhan (and Canetti before him) that money, crowds, and numbers are intimately linked, that all three demand accumulation, that all ultimately point to the circulation of meaning among and between people. “As a vast social metaphor, bridge, or translator,” writes McLuhan, “money—like writing—speeds up exchange and tightens the bonds of interdependence in any community.”52 It is no accident that Boal’s invisible performances frequently focused on places where money is directly exchanged; such actions paralleled the communication, circulation, and exchange of ideas and actions that invisible theater hoped to inspire among its audiences.

But, crucially, Boal hoped to provoke such circulations among his audience members without revealing to them that they were audience members in the first place—and here is where his dramaturgy of invisibility and his dramaturgy of provocation come into fascinating tension with each other. In her discussion of embedded performance, Levin takes care to distinguish Boal’s invisibility from guerrilla forms like the work of artist-activist-pranksters Sacha Baron Cohen and the Yes Men. “While the term ‘invisible theatre’ is useful for thinking about unexpected performance actions in public space,” she writes, “‘guerrilla theatre’ might be more accurate, as the chameleons that follow use camouflage tactics that resemble those of the military: acts of concealment that precede an ambush.”53 For the artists Levin describes, “guerrilla” suggests a dramaturgy of concealment and surprise, infiltration and revelation. This term, too, applies to Estrin, who also claimed “guerrilla” as an accurate descriptor of his work. But for Boal (and for General Idea, in a very different way), revelation and surprise—climax and denouement—are precisely what destroy the performance’s powers of circulation. Invisible theater, for Boal, should never be revealed as a performance fiction; such a revelation would prevent the continued spread of actions that it inspires.

Boal’s insistence on keeping performances covert led to a revealing dispute, during the same 1978 visit to Liège, over the politics and ontology of invisible theater. His supermarket performance inspired an artistic response, a second invisible piece that was not created by Boal and that challenged the
theatrical structures his company had attempted to introduce. Several days after his troupe performed, Boal was scheduled to lead a public forum on various topics affecting Belgian communities—racism, unemployment, women’s rights. Before he could begin, though, the workshop was interrupted by a group of policemen with a dog, who demanded that he show them identification and insisted he accompany them to the police station. Boal’s Belgian collaborators were infuriated, and the crowd chased the police out of the theater; they left, threatening to return with reinforcements.

These police did not return, though. Boal’s friends called various branches of the Belgian law enforcement system, only to find that none had ordered the arrest. Boal remembered that the police dog had appeared terrified of him—unlike the behavior of a trained police dog—and that the police had never shown identification. Soon, the group realized that the “arrest” was most likely an act of theater that had employed the same strategies as Boal’s own. As Boal wondered aloud whether a right-wing group had staged the arrest in protest of his public appearance, one of the theater artists attending his forum abruptly confessed that her own troupe, the Belgian company Cirque Divers, had orchestrated the false arrest as an invisible theater experiment. The members of Cirque Divers offered a nihilistic explanation of their motives, telling Boal that they’d intended to perform an act of straightforward disruption, one that had no cause or explanation: “We don’t believe in people any longer,” they told Boal.54 (Friends of Boal offered another interpretation, recalling that Cirque Divers had initially asked him to conduct his Belgian workshop with their company, and that Boal had chosen other primary collaborators instead. Perhaps the rejected company was jealous and had staged a coup simply to attract attention or prevent Boal from working too closely with their rivals.)

Boal never learned the exact motivations of the artists who so successfully upended his plans, but his response to them offers several insights about the dramaturgy and the politics underlying his vision for invisible theater. Reflecting on the events, he distinguished the actions of Cirque Divers from his own dramaturgy, arguing that even if the Belgian company’s provocation seemed to take the shape of invisible theater, it did not qualify as an example of the form because its intentions and concerns were different. “THE INVISIBLE THEATRE never places itself in an illegal position because it does not intend to violate the law,” he wrote. “It intends to question the legitimacy of the law, which is a very different matter altogether.”55 More than this, Boal posited that, in the theater, “pure technique does not exist in the same sense that pure mathematics does. Two plus two is four, regardless of the question. But theatre does not struggle against curved lines, angles, numbers, or figures; theatre struggles with the unexpected one wishes to know and it struggles with people.”56 (And yet, to remember McLuhan, numbers can be a matter of touch and feel, and performance’s affective spread can be a question of mathematical accumulation.)
Invisible theater, to Boal, was only invisible theater when its tactics and modes were used to the ends he intended for them: questioning legal, social, and political systems, and systematically throwing light on the forces of economic oppression. Yet, as the Cirque Divers performance suggested, the dramaturgy of invisible theater does provide a “pure form” of a sort, a format for surreptitious theatrical provocation. Always political, sometimes provocatively so, it is—like viral dramaturgies more broadly—available and attractive to both forces of revolution and agents of political or economic oppression, equally appealing as a strategy for undermining the routines of consumerism and as a means of marketing new products to routine-dulled consumers. The “arrest” staged by members of Cirque Divers did meet the initial criteria Boal had established for his first invisible theater performance. It was not staged in a theater (or at least, did not use the theater in any conventional sense), did not announce itself as a performance, and gave the spectators no hint that they were witnessing a planned spectacle. It successfully provoked its audience into an infuriated dialogue with the “policemen” who had appeared to arrest Boal, and later into a conversation about the legality of Boal’s travel in Belgium and of various forms of identification. Just as Boal’s supermarket staging, days earlier, had forced unwitting spectators to decide quickly whether they would assist Francois or ignore him, Cirque Divers’s invisible performance prompted its audience to either stand with Boal or to abandon him on the spot.

In his article describing these events, Boal offered a single, central reason that the actions of Cirque Divers did not qualify as invisible theater: the Belgian company’s provocation was not only thematically unrelated to invisible theater’s concerns, but also, in practical terms, failed to challenge systems of oppression. “The theatre of the oppressed techniques are meant to help the oppressed,” continued Boal. “They are actually their weapons of liberation . . . the Cirque Divers actors, apart from doubling the already existing oppression, committed an illegal act by wearing police uniforms which made them subject to a new charge, the fourth one in this crazy story.”  

Here, Boal surpassed his previous suggestion that invisible theater needed to be oriented thematically toward liberation to argue, further, that invisible theater actually needed to put liberating actions into effect. In other words, to have the infectious results he sought, invisible performances must inspire not only critical contemplation but also action on the part of its audiences. Brecht’s coolly intelligent spectator, smoking and appraising the stage action, would not suffice here, nor would Rancière’s emancipated spectator. The only kind of spectator who could fulfill Boal’s goals for invisible theater was the spect-actor, spontaneously reaching into his or her pocket and pulling out real money to pay for Francois’s supermarket cart full of real necessities.

And yet: Francois, the protagonist of the supermarket scenario, was an actor, he was not unemployed, and he did not need the groceries these
unwitting participants were purchasing for him—at least not as desperately as he claimed to. The impromptu audience members had taken real action, but they had done so in response to a fictive scenario, one that reflected realities but was not literally true. Boal acknowledged this seeming contradiction in writing about the incident, insisting that

we had not lied at Liège, in spite of having been accused by the police after they discovered that Francois had a good job and was not unemployed or hungry. It was not true that the actor was the character but it was true that they both existed! And their problems were indeed real problems . . . consequently everything was true.\(^{59}\)

Boal here employed the same theatrical logic for which he had critiqued *Paradise Now*; the same logic that *TDR* reader Martin Trueblood objected to in Estrin’s infiltrative performances. Like these other works, Boal’s supermarket scenario had attempted to embody large-scale social problems allegorically, symbolically, and in so infectious a way that spectators could not resist participating, whether or not the embodiments were literally real. Infectiousness here transcended the literal truth, just as it did for Estrin, General Idea, and the Living Theatre before them. Contagion demanded performance fiction—even when the performance aimed to become inextricable from the real.

Another of Boal’s invisible theater performances, also from 1978, contains a similar approach to spectatorship and contagion, aligning suggestively with the embeddedness of Estrin’s guerrilla performances as well as with the technological choreographies of General Idea. During a visit to Bari, Italy, Boal’s troupe staged a piece in which a young Brazilian actor sat on a park bench alone, with a tape recorder in hand. As the park filled with passersby, the performer began to make darkly emotional statements aloud, capturing and then replaying each on the recorder as he did. “I am by myself,” he announced. “I don’t have any friends. Nobody wants to talk to me because I am a foreigner and in this country and in this city there is discrimination.”\(^{60}\) The actor continued, his pronouncements growing more desperate and increasingly demanding intervention. “I am unemployed,” he declared. “I tried to kill myself yesterday . . . Maybe today I’ll do it.”\(^{61}\) As he presented these confessions to passing strangers, the recorder played his own taped voice back at him, reiterating his words for all to hear.

As Boal remembers, strangers passing through the park did attempt to intervene, approaching the forlorn-looking actor to offer support, sympathy, and company. “It was a scene of rare tenderness, almost an intimate scene despite its public setting with crowds, cars, and noise,” wrote Boal.\(^{62}\) Afterward, though, the members of his own theater company were confused. Hadn’t they deceived the public, they wondered, given that the performer in question was not an immigrant living in Italy, and was not unemployed, alone, or suffering from depression? As with the Belgian performance, Boal
quelled these doubts by asserting the performance’s broad underlying truths, regardless of its literal accuracy:

The truth was that the Brazilian actor was not suffering any of the tortures that he was describing. But it was true that those tortures existed. If it wasn’t true that he himself had attempted suicide, it was certainly true that another émigré a few months earlier had actually killed himself. So although the Brazilian actor’s story wasn’t strictly true, it was truth.63

Again, the desire to provoke audience response transcended, for Boal, the imperative toward factual fidelity. In his description, Boal made no mention of whether the presence of the performer’s tape recorder changed his impromptu audience’s response—whether it attracted more listeners by amplifying the actor’s voice, whether it suggested to observers that the actor was anyone other than a dissatisfied immigrant giving expression to his despair. And yet such a device could have hardly helped but create a rupture in the performance fiction, a hint that what Boal was embedding in the park was not a spontaneously occurring event. As the tape played alongside the live performance, the recording and reiteration of the event would have been concurrent with—and an amplification of—the event itself, just as recording and repetition were, as I will demonstrate shortly, an essential element for the kinds of audience responses General Idea sought to inspire. Recording technology amplified the live event, increased its powers of circulation, and formally reitered the pattern of events and ideas that Boal’s actor performed.

Looked at in this way, Boal’s invisible theater, and the orientation toward spectatorship that it implies, begins to take on some of the formal qualities of other types of viral performance—even though Boal himself was careful to distinguish his work from guerrilla theater and related modes of embeddedness. In an essay describing the “Poetics of the Oppressed,” Boal argued, “it is necessary to emphasize that the invisible theater is not the same thing as a ‘happening’ or the so-called ‘guerrilla theater.’ In the latter we are clearly talking about ‘theater,’ and therefore the wall that separates actors from spectators immediately arises, reducing the spectator to impotence: a spectator is always less than a man!”64 Such an assertion lies at the core of Boal’s approach to the Theater of the Oppressed as a whole, and underpins his objections to both Aristotelian and Brechtian dramaturgy. Aristotle, Boal asserted, wanted spectators to delegate the powers of both thinking and acting to performers; Brecht changed the equation by insisting that spectators think on their own, but still expected them to delegate the action to characters onstage.65

Boal’s invisible performances were intended to be infectious in two ways: first, in the moment, when bystanders step up to help the stranger in distress,
argue with each other, and debate the conditions that caused the distress; and second, when those bystanders go on to discuss the same events with their friends, families, or coworkers, thus spreading the debate to a wider, dispersed field of contemplative spectators. This second mode of contagiousness is the one that Boal aspired to: the rational, thoughtful series of discussions that can take place after an unexpected incident has sparked thought in those who witnessed it. But the first mode is the one that more clearly constitutes an immediate, tangible form of action—the action of spectators helping to solve the supposedly starving person’s problems, by raising funds on the spot, arguing with checkout people in supermarkets, attempting to intervene. Crucially, these spectators give money, or take other action, in order to alleviate an immediate crisis, not as a means to a long-term solution to problems of unemployment or hunger, and they do so in response to witnessing an emotional outburst, not in response to a reasoned analysis of social or political problems.

My aim here is not to critique the ethics of Boal’s approach to spectatorship, but rather to illuminate Boal’s formal approach to audience participation, an approach that trafficked in more complex forms of affective transmission, and a more complicated politics of audience control, than is often recognized. Like the work of Estrin and General Idea, Boal’s invisible theater mobilized audiences not as performers, but as communicative spectators. Like Estrin, Boal removed the visible markers of stage fiction from his invisible performances, and like General Idea, he viewed his performances as parts of a longer, socially transformative process. The performances did not contain shocking “ambushes”—or dramatic climaxes or revelations—because they were not intended to have dramatic endings. Instead, they were intended to circulate continuously, in the absence of visible performance, employing their spectators’ bodies and wider social networks.

**Image Is Virus: General Idea’s Methods of Invasion**

“Image is virus,” wrote General Idea, in a 1973 special issue of *FILE Magazine*, a periodical the group had recently founded as both a parody of mainstream media and a voice of the Canadian underground arts scene. AA Bronson, Jorge Zontal, and Felix Partz viewed the virus as a model for artistic creation and dissemination, and the concept inflected much of the trio’s work from the late 1960s onwards. The aphorism “image is virus” comes from William S. Burroughs’s *Nova Express*, a novel rife with viral imagery that, along with other Burroughs works, provided an important source of inspiration to General Idea. Burroughs’s significance, for the trio, began with his status as an iconic outsider, a writer who did not identify with any reigning literary establishment, and in whose works images and ideas circulated outside of established communications channels. Virus figures as a powerful
image in novels like Naked Lunch, The Soft Machine, Nova Express, and The Ticket That Exploded, standing in for a host of subversive and threatening forces: invasions from other planets; the transformative powers of mind-altering substances; and the paralyzing constrictions of modern society, among others. In Burroughs’s writing, viral imagery appears in tandem with forces of technology and mechanization, a connection that proved foundationally inspirational for General Idea, as it has been for many other artists and writers.67

Bronson, Partz, and Zontal, like Burroughs, viewed images and ideas as viral invaders. Like him, they envisioned their visual, performance, and literary work functioning parasitically and virally within the larger art world and within mainstream culture. Virus was a form of art, a means of making art, and, above all, a description of the relationship between General Idea’s art and its dissemination. “Our familiar, LIFE-like format belied its viral content,” Bronson wrote of FILE in a retrospective essay.68 Using viral imagery frequently and flexibly, General Idea drew on the history of the concept as an emblem of outsider literary and artistic creation, while reimagining the virus not only as an insidious alien force, but also as a route to new artistic methods and forms.69 The group members shaped their artistic identities around a viral model of cultural transmission: “We knew that in order to be glamorous,” they wrote, “we had to become plagiarists, intellectual parasites.”70 Positioning themselves as viral artists two decades before the AIDS epidemic changed the cultural connotations of the word “virus”—and more than three decades before anything “went viral”—General Idea’s body of work stands as one of the twentieth century’s most pathbreaking expressions of the viral in art.

In this section, I trace the contours of General Idea’s viral artistic identity. I argue that conceptions of viral art apply potently and revealingly to the collective’s theater and performance practice, a body of work that has not been analyzed in depth as viral—and, moreover, has rarely been systematically analyzed at all. I thus aim to provide a useful counterpoint to existing narratives of the collective’s work. While General Idea’s visual, editorial, and conceptual practice has been documented in recent art-historical scholarship (for instance, Philip Monk’s 2012 Glamour Is Theft: A User’s Guide to General Idea, and the 2011 anthology General Idea: Haute Culture: A Retrospective 1969–1994), the group’s performance pieces have been analyzed in less detail, and linked less closely to the artists’ viral thinking.

Sometimes, theater has also been deliberately diminished in the collective’s narrative, even where theatrical contexts play a vital role. In Glamour Is Theft, for instance, Monk enters a discussion of the Miss General Idea Pageants, a series of performances staged between 1970 and 1978, by arguing that the first iteration of the pageant should not be considered alongside later versions because its theatrical setting was inappropriate for understanding General Idea’s larger project. He writes:
Towards an Audience Vocabulary

That first pageant was framed by the wrong context, reflective of General Idea’s experimental theatre interests, and performed in a Festival of Underground Theatre. It was not until the next year, at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, that General Idea inhabited the right framework by appropriating the format of an art gallery in turn.71

There is no doubt that the world of galleries and museums, star painters and celebrity sculptors, constituted an essential point of reference and an ongoing object of satire for General Idea across their body of work. And yet to dismiss performance—and even conventional theatrical form—as irrelevant or as the “wrong” context for General Idea’s practice is to miss layers of meaning in their early projects, and to underestimate the significance of live art to their broader theories, particularly the theory of the viral. Theatrical performance was a significant medium for General Idea’s work from the late 1960s through the late 1970s, and their pieces involving live audiences should be understood as a key to their theory of viral media and art.

In the late summer of 1970, the artists comprising General Idea—who, at the time, had not yet adopted their pseudonyms and were operating under the names Ron Gabe, George (or Jorge) Saia, and Michael Tims—participated in the Festival of Underground Theatre at the St. Lawrence Centre in Toronto, Ontario. The St. Lawrence Centre had been built earlier that year, and the festival, the first of its kind in Toronto, proved important for interdisciplinary artistic collaborations and the founding of artists’ spaces. Even artists who were not primarily theater-makers found the festival inspirational. In a catalog of “artist-initiated activity in Canada, 1939–1987,” coedited by Bronson, the 1970 festival’s entry noted:

At this point in Toronto’s history the underground theatre scene was attracting all the talent of a new generation. Many of the visual artists circulating in and around that scene came to use the model of the underground theatre as a beginning for thinking about their own work. The festival, inspired by the Bread and Puppet Theatre, Fluxus and street theatre more generally, seemed to offer a new model for both production of and audience for contemporary art, soon to be tested further in Toronto.72

General Idea had already been involved in Toronto’s underground theater scene for several years. During the late 1960s, Bronson collaborated frequently with artists at the local Theatre Passe Muraille,73 and in 1969 Bronson, Partz, and Zontal designed the stage set and posters for a production there, entitled An Evening with the Maids, based on Jean Genet’s The Maids.74 The group also created live performance works of their own devising, including Laundromat Special #1, also staged at Theatre Passe Muraille and involving a massive, oversized laundry bag, boxes of detergent stacked in an imposing pyramid
shape, and a cast of at least six; as well as *Match My Strike*, a Happening-like performance staged at the Poor Alex Theatre. The latter piece consisted of five independent sections, including a “meat ceremony,” a recitation of poetry, and a paper ceiling that collapsed on the audience.\(^7\)

General Idea made two contributions to the 1970 St. Lawrence Centre festival: a staging of Gertrude Stein’s early play *What Happened* and the first Miss General Idea Beauty Pageant, which became the inspiration for the larger pageant series and the conceptual project that surrounded it. The performance of *What Happened*, as described in the group’s unpublished documentation, was deeply informed by General Idea’s interest in media transmission—and, in fact, by Stein’s own preoccupation with the circulation and transformation of words and images. Prior to the performance, General Idea acquired a telex machine from the telecom company CN Telecommunications, which they pre-programmed to type out act 1 of Stein’s play. Once the performance began, the artists employed the telex to send the Stein text, in real performance time, to numerous recipients including the Toronto Stock Exchange, the library at Simon Fraser University, and Canada Packers, a large meatpacking corporation.

This was one of many ways General Idea toyed with the transmission of Stein’s text. A performer inscribed lines from the play on the theater walls in chalk; a local radio station sent Stein’s words out over the airwaves; and the performers used rubber stamps reading “Gertrude Stein” to label spectators’ arms and legs. As Michael Tims described the piece in his playful press release (which he wrote under the name Eleanor Glass), “The play is taped, typed, telexed, radioed, videoed, written, read, printed, photographed, stamped and telephoned.”\(^7\)

After the performance, General Idea conducted a playful interview with a St. Lawrence Centre staff member, who summarily dismissed their work. “I think it’s a practical joke and a waste of money and somebody’s putting us on,” declared the unnamed interviewee. And yet descriptions of the piece suggest that the group’s performance strategies were deeply in sympathy with Stein’s interest in the transmission, dissemination, and reception of words, gestures, and images—a preoccupation that Stein cited as one of her central motivations for writing plays (and specifically *What Happened*, her first). Stein was famously fascinated by the relationship between spectator and performer, describing the anxiety-inducing situation of live performance as one in which “the emotion of the one seeing and the emotion of the thing seen do not progress together.”\(^7\) She envisioned her plays as theatrical landscapes where such frustratingly syncopated transmission could be circumvented by simultaneity and multiplicity. Communications technology, too, was an important influence for Stein, who was exposed at an early age to performances that employed the telegraph onstage, especially William Gillette’s Civil War drama *Secret Service*, which, she wrote, offered a new theatrical technique involving “silence stillness and quick movement,” at the heart of which were climactic scenes featuring the transmission of text by telegraph.\(^7\)
The telex network, of which General Idea made abundant use in their 1970 staging, was a direct technological descendant of the telegraph.

When she began writing plays, Stein explained, she “concluded that anything that was not a story could be a play and I even made plays in letters and advertisements.” The concept that plays were meant to be transmitted, to travel invisibly from stage to audience, and that they could take the form of correspondence and even advertising—a mode of communication particularly intent on inspiring direct action—underscores the central role that concepts of transmission played in Stein’s work. General Idea’s production drew on Stein’s fascination with technologies of transmission and dissemination, and with the mutation of words and gestures as they spread. On a telex printout from the August 19, 1970, performance of *What Happened*, a note beneath the text of Stein’s play reads “HI THERE MOME AND BEST WISHES ON YOUR FOURTIETH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY” — a non sequitur that reinforces the importance that these transmissions find recipients.

Beyond an expansion on Stein’s ideas about the circulation of images and words, I view General Idea’s staging of *What Happened* as an homage to McLuhan, whose *Understanding Media* had a profound influence on Zontal, Partz, and Bronson. McLuhan’s observations about the formal and structural qualities of media technologies converge in General Idea’s staging. “The ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium,” wrote McLuhan. “The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph.” Technologies of transmission are not neutral containers for “pure” ideas; they are the ideas (a familiar concept now, but a radical one then). McLuhan thought that the telegraph, with its transmission of code across electrical networks, had a particularly democratizing effect on modes of communication. “The separation of functions, and the division of stages, spaces, and tasks are characteristic of literate and visual society and of the Western world,” he wrote. “These divisions tend to dissolve through the action of the instant and organic interrelations of electricity.” General Idea, by systematically passing Stein’s text through telex, video, and radio, tested and retested just such propositions.

For the artists, communications technologies invited the leveling of one long accepted, seemingly obvious hierarchy in particular: the division between spectators who were present in the theater and those who gained even partial access to the performance through technological circulation. Dismantling this distinction is essential for creating the kinds of transmission that viral performance, in general, aspires to. In descriptions of *What Happened*, General Idea asserted:

> The event and the recording of it are interchangeable. During intermissions, all the data gathered during the previous act is played back or displayed (the tapes, photographs, video tapes, verbal descriptions, sketches, documents, etc.).
In context, this statement is strikingly significant, predicting the artistic modes in which General Idea would work for years to come. The idea that a performance event could be “interchangeable” with the documentation of that event—whether in the form of text, image, or video—seems to defy theatrical logic, to deny the ephemeral quality of live performance expressed most famously by (but not limited to) Peggy Phelan’s much-disputed dictum that “performance’s only life is in the present.” Always, the live event stands in close, if vexed, relationship with its documentation; but just as certainly, the live event, it is commonly assumed, is not synonymous, and certainly not “interchangeable,” with its recorded form.

Yet General Idea asserts that it is. Such a radical stance can only hold true if the artists, as General Idea did, make transmission and circulation—not a singular live event—the primary action of their performances. This was not only the trio’s approach to What Happened, but also the way they increasingly staged performances, as they began to conceive theatrical events as “rehearsals of the audience” for the elusive 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant, and to lead their audiences in rehearsed choreographies of spectatorship akin to those envisioned in the trio’s manifesto “Target Audience”: applause, standing ovations, yawning, falling asleep. If recording is conceived not as the static fixing of the live event on paper or videotape, but rather as a means of transmission, itself unfolding in time and space, then the performance and its documentation do begin to look like equals. Likewise, the repetition of theatrical gesture on video begins to look similar in form and function to spectators’ choreographed repetition of archetypal gestures, as in the Miss General Idea series. For the artists, recording a live event was not a way of preserving it, but of spreading it. The Living Theatre used concepts of contagion to collapse the distinction between performer and spectator; General Idea used concepts of contagion to collapse the distinction between a live performance and its many-times-mediated repetition.

Then, too, General Idea began to practice a form of embeddedness—not, as in the case of Estrin or Boal, by creating performances that vanished into everyday life, but rather by creating performances that inhabited the structures of outdated mainstream cultural forms. In addition to performing What Happened at the 1970 St. Lawrence Centre festival, General Idea also staged the first Miss General Idea Pageant, which would eventually take shape as a series of projects in many media forms, and lead to the development of the myth of “Miss General Idea” as a central part of the group’s artistic persona. The first pageant, performed live, featured a contestant named Miss Honey, who competed with a dozen “bears” (performers dressed in large, slightly dilapidated full-body bear suits) for the crown of Miss General Idea. Décor mimicked the style of a mainstream beauty pageant; one photo shows Jorge Zontal kneeling amid oversized vases of flowers, apparently acquired from a local funeral home. Among other elements, the event featured a talent
competition in which Miss Honey emerged victorious at least partially on the basis of her fluency on the telex machine.  

This first live pageant marked the beginning of a series of Miss General Idea-themed works: performances, but also essays, architectural drawings, and fashion designs. As the pageants evolved, General Idea began to transform the series (and in fact, the phantom figure of “Miss General Idea” herself) from a succession of timebound events into an ever-circulating myth. They also increasingly intertwined it with the concept of the viral. The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant took the first step in this direction when, rather than holding a pageant competition, the artists staged a live awards ceremony as the culmination of a contest conducted entirely through the mail. Potential competitors (friends, collaborators, acquaintances within General Idea’s artistic network) were sent entry kits containing their very own “Miss General Idea Gown”—which they were instructed to wear in a series of glamour shots—and information about how to send back their complete bids for the coveted title. The accompanying instructions declare that holding a competition entirely based on written and photographic materials serves the purpose of eliminating “those embarrassing bathing-beauty line-ups, those annoying talent demonstrations.”

But the significance of this choice went much deeper. The collective was closely connected to artists and groups who were participating in what was then called “mail art,” the sending and receiving of artworks through the mail, turning the postal service into a conduit for a performative underground network of countercultural artistic exchange. Closely connected to General Idea’s larger artistic community was the network known as the New York Correspondence School, or NYCS (“Correspondence” was also often spelled “Correspondance,” the portmanteau suggesting that postal dissemination constituted a form of playful choreography), founded by the artist Ray Johnson, which had its first major showing at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970. In his 2009 study Cruising Utopia, José Esteban Muñoz describes the NYCS’s work in explicitly theatrical terms, arguing that Johnson’s collages, mailed to friends and fellow artists, were “performing objects insofar as they danced across the runways and stages provided by the world postal system. They were performative art objects that flowed like queer mercury throughout the channels of majoritarian communication and information.” This approach to subverting mainstream modes of transmission finds parallel in General Idea’s use of information technologies, their founding of FILE Megazine, and explicitly in the establishment of the Image Bank, a Canadian artistic exchange that served as a counterpoint to the NYCS. In addition to working with mail artists like Ray Johnson, General Idea published an “Image Bank Request List” in each issue of FILE, listing calls for mail art from artists and community members. The slogan, printed across the top of each edition of the Image Bank, was “Image is Virus.”
The 1971 pageant, then, involved not only a clever evasion of the live competition, but also the transformation of a singular live performance into an extended act of artistic circulation through the mail. That year’s pageant did feature a live awards ceremony, held at the Art Gallery of Ontario on October 1. The festivities featured a panel of three judges, who decided which mail-order beauty queen should take the prize, as well as awarding a second, unspecified title of Miss Generality. A band played in the background as Miss Honey and the two previous Miss General Ideas 1968 and 1969 made speeches (their titles having been conferred belatedly, despite there having been no pageants in those years, as a way of including more of General Idea’s frequent collaborators in the project). A male contestant performing under the pseudonym Marcel Idea was named the winner.

After the 1971 Miss General Idea contest, the offstage shadow of Miss General Idea grew. Rather than plan a 1972 Miss General Idea pageant, the group decided to reconceive the pageant series as an imaginary, exaggerated, near-apocalyptic progression toward a perpetually deferred final event. There would not be a new Miss General Idea contest the following year, nor the year after that. Instead, the group announced that they were postponing the
next pageant until the prophetically meaningful year of 1984 (there is at least a glancing reference to Orwell here). But this did not mean that General Idea stopped creating live performances about the pageant series; to the contrary, after deciding not to hold the competition anymore, the group’s Miss General Idea–themed performances became richer, more fascinating, more focused. They began staging a series of events that they conceived of as rehearsals for the audience—rehearsals in which spectators would “learn” how to be the fantasy audience that the fantasy 1984 pageant would require. In pieces such as Blocking (1974), Going Thru the Motions (1975), Hot Property (1977), and Towards an Audience Vocabulary (1978), General Idea began placing the physical and emotional responses of the audience at the center of the artistic event and turning the transmission of gesture into the most important theatrical action. Those attending General Idea’s performances became the kind of fantasy spectators described in “Target Audience,” obsessively and enthusiastically rehearsing the paradigmatic poses of spectatorship. They laughed, they applauded, they gasped, and they dozed off, all carefully orchestrated at the artists’ behest.

Before staging these pieces, though, General Idea’s members did something else: they published a series of meditations on their own artistic identities, beginning in the 1973 double issue of FILE, in which they articulated how and why artists and artistic works could be viral. The double issue offered a comprehensive analysis of the changing landscape of media culture; the role of artists, consumers, and spectators within it; and the ways myth and metaphor could serve subversive artistic ends. In the article entitled “Pablum for the Pablum Eaters: A Method of Invasion,” the collective laid out a programmatic description of how subversive artists, in this case the participants in Image Bank, could work within mainstream media culture. Image Bank, General Idea wrote, was “concerned with establishing a culture that relates to official culture as a virus does to an organism.” This viral metaphor, articulated in relation to Image Bank, applies equally to General Idea’s larger self-image as artists. They understood themselves as subversive, parasitic operatives within the larger artistic and media world, and as they continued to publish FILE, they expanded on these guiding artistic principles. “We are obsessed with available form,” they wrote, in the 1975 “Glamour” issue, “We maneuver hungrily, conquering the uncontested territory of culture’s forgotten shells—beauty pageants, pavilions, picture magazines, and other contemporary corpses. Like parasites we animate these dead bodies and speak in alien tongues.” Echoes of Burroughs’s viral alien invaders abounded in these texts.

Scholars have frequently agreed that the “bodies” which General Idea animated were “dead” ones: they were, as the artists wrote, “culture’s forgotten shells,” “contemporary corpses” such as the format of the beauty pageant. This is part of the picture. But what such narratives miss is that the bodies General Idea animated were first and foremost those of their audience members: living, active bodies, performing gesture and action under the artists’
direction. Looked at in this way, the group’s obsessive choreography of spectatorship comes into focus not only as the centerpiece of a playful campaign to inhabit celebrity identities without the necessity of achieving fame, but also as part of a lineage of participatory performance that includes many more overtly political works. Although the playful beauty pageants did not constitute the same kind of directly political intervention that Estrin and Boal created, they functioned, playfully, as obliquely political acts. The beauty pageant offered a form ripe for subversion: partially for its strict dramaturgy of contest and results, partially for its association with hokey mainstream ideas of power, and partially because beauty pageants were at the epicenter of new thinking about gender at the time. The famed Miss America pageant protests in Atlantic City had happened only two years before, in August 1968. Inhabiting the beauty pageant, for General Idea, was a means of subverting from within, infiltrating and redirecting the aims of a product of mainstream culture, rendering an avatar of normativity delightfully queer. Muñoz, explicating the NYCS’s work as a kind of performance, had described the U.S. Postal Service as a “runway”: an image that, likewise, gestures to beauty pageants and fashion shows, their formats ripe for adoption and subversion.

Bronson gestured to the group’s radical politics in a retrospective essay entitled “Myth as Parasite/Image as Virus,” reflecting on projects created between 1969 and 1975. Citing General Idea’s disillusionment in the late 1960s and early 1970s, following the disappointments of the Paris uprising and international situationism, he wrote:

> We had abandoned . . . any shred of belief that we could change the world by activism, by demonstration, by any of the methods we had tried in the 1960s—they had all failed . . . Now we turned to the queer outsider methods of William Burroughs, for example, whose invented universe of sex-mad, body-snatcher espionage archetypes provided the ironic myth-making model we required . . . We abandoned bona fide cultural terrorism, then, and replaced it with viral methods . . . utilizing the distribution and communication forms of mass media and specifically of the cultural world, we could infect the mainstream with our mutations, and stretch that social fabric.93

In my view, audience choreography constituted one of the most explicitly political dimensions of these “mutations.” Though the Miss General Idea pageants were not riots, protest actions, demonstrations, or be-ins, they participated in an ethos of collective action. The revolutionary riot is submerged in the choreographed ovation—but not so deeply submerged as to be undetectable.

The significance of the viral for General Idea’s overall artistic work—especially their visual practice and the philosophical and poetic texts printed in FILE—has been noted by other scholars, most clearly, to date, by Monk
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in *Glamour Is Theft*. There, he observes the connections between virus and concepts such as repetition (“mimicry was viral,” he writes)⁴ and nostalgia. What has been less clearly articulated in scholarship about General Idea is that, for Zontal, Partz, and Bronson, viral mimicry was not only something that took place conceptually or in the visual arena. Viruses were not only theoretical, and they were not only performative in an abstract sense. Rather, the Miss General Idea series demonstrated that viral mimicry was actually constituted from performance. (This is, of course, the art form most directly at the heart of “mimicry.”) Burroughs conjured strange worlds of alien body snatchers on the page. General Idea—commandeering their audiences—actually snatched bodies.

Between 1974 and 1978, with the specter of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant ever before them, the artists created a series of performance pieces aimed at, as they viewed it, training their audience members in the proper modes of spectatorship for the ultimate (and imagined) pageant to be staged years hence. Although, according to the notes in General Idea’s archival files, *Target Audience* was never performed, draft text for the piece testifies to spectators’ centrality to the company’s performance work. From the beginning,

General Idea conceived of their audience members as consumers, something that speaks not only to their understanding of the art world as a marketplace, but also to the simpler idea that the audience would physically engage with and even internalize the performance work. “We tried to visualize an audience that represented today’s spiraling cultural market,” they wrote, “an audience well-versed in cultural inversions.”

The artists described their observations about audience response, which they viewed in terms of circulating gestures, choreographed and rehearsed:

We soon woke up to the fact that audiences in general have a repertoire of stock reactions which they perform when correctly stimulated. We catalogued these responses as they surfaced in rehearsal. The Miss General Idea Pageant was an archetypal format containing archetypal scenes requiring an archetypal audience performing archetypal responses.

The artists noted and codified these ritualized responses—laughter, applause, absorption, boredom, and shock—and subsequently employed them as central actions in pieces such as *Blocking*, *Hot Property*, *Going Thru the Motions*, and *Towards an Audience Vocabulary*, all of which were advertised as various forms of staged “rehearsal” for the 1984 Miss General Idea beauty pageant. In these performances, General Idea constructed pageant-like events, with speeches from contestants, judges, and former winners, descriptions of prizes, and Miss General Idea–related fashion items (the Miss GI Shoe; trademark “V.B. Gowns”; the “hand of the spirit”). Miss General Idea figured, in these performance events, as an avatar for the artists’ imaginations, a character who was ubiquitous because she was nowhere, who represented the fame and glamour to which General Idea ironically aspired.

Central to these performances were carefully scripted sequences in which General Idea’s audience took center stage. In *Going Thru the Motions*, performed at the Art Gallery of Ontario on September 18, 1975, for instance, a climactic scene starring the spectators follows the entrances of Marcel Dot (Miss General Idea 1971), and a performer playing the role of the “Spirit of Miss General Idea.” Stage directions in the manuscript text read:

*The DIRECTOR now rehearses the audience in their reaction to the opening of the envelope. The reaction of the audience is threefold: in sequence—a gasp of shock/surprised laughter/standing ovation.*

*A great deal of attention is lavished on the audience at this part as they are rehearsed in this triple reaction in quick sequence.*

In other words, spectators at *Going Thru the Motions* were not simply asked to respond, or to participate in a singular gesture. They were a central part
of what was described as “the climax of the evening.” The gestures to be performed were, as the artists themselves had observed in Target Audience, stock reactions, entirely recognizable spectatorial responses, organized in sequence and practiced until virtuosically smooth. The gestures, in General Idea’s performance, physically took up residence in the audience’s bodies, inhabited them, moved through them in carefully rehearsed unison. The gestures spread—from performers to spectators, from one iteration to the next—and as they did, became every bit as much the model of a virus as the Living Theatre’s careful staging of the plague.

This approach to choreographing the audience reappeared in several of General Idea’s later pieces, of which two notable examples—Hot Property (1977) and Towards an Audience Vocabulary (1978)—combined the staging of audience responses with the revelatory unveiling of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion’s devastating and premature destruction. In Hot Property, performed at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in October 1977, the artists staged a ceremonial event including speeches from Zontal, Partz, and Bronson, as well as from Mimi Paige (retroactively crowned Miss General Idea 1968); a series of musical numbers; and multiple opportunities for the audience to “practice” a wide range of spectatorial responses including applause, standing ovations, and sleeping.

The video of the piece, edited together with additional footage after the performance, begins with a fascinating image. The camera pans over a wide expanse of land with a ziggurat-shaped territory marked out, the area inside the borders obscured by clouds of smoke and ash. This, we are informed by a voice-over announcer, is the remains of what would have been the architectural pavilion designed to host the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant. (According to archival documentation, the artists created this spectacle by tracing the ziggurat shape into the ground on the ruins of an abandoned factory in Kingston, Ontario, when they visited St. Lawrence College to stage an exhibition there in November 1977. By dropping smoke bombs onto the ziggurat-shaped ground plan and videoing the event from above, they conjured the effects of the smoldering pavilion.)

And yet, just as the 1984 pavilion was demolished before the fact, this video footage was added after the fact. The live audience at Hot Property did not witness the destruction of the Miss General Idea pavilion. Instead, they acted it out. At the end of the performance—as seen on video—the audience waits with bated breath for the announcement of the lucky 1984 Miss General Idea (they are, after all, pretending it is 1984, and that they are attending the valedictory pageant to be held that year). Paige and Bronson ceremoniously walk onstage and ask for the official envelope containing the winner’s name. At that moment, an unseen voice calls out “Fire!” Gleefully, the audience members rise from their seats and stampede out of the theater, straining to reach the exits. They are the protagonists of this performance, swarming out of their seats as if a real evacuation were taking place. The full destruction
of the pavilion—the live emergency, the filmed clouds of smoke—is available only through the transmedial combination of event and video. No matter that the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant never happened. It was more viral because it didn’t: because it lived only in the bodies of its prospective spectators. Only when the audience itself becomes the cast can the performance, the recording, and the transmission become “interchangeable.”

In *Towards an Audience Vocabulary*, staged at Toronto’s Masonic Hall in 1978, General Idea confounded its spectators by confronting them with a “fake” audience, onstage, of “thirty local Toronto celebrities . . . performing the various audience responses: . . . ‘laughing,’ ‘gasping,’ ‘booing,’ ‘sleeping,’ ‘clapping’ and ‘standing ovations.’” Audience response became performance: perhaps one of the most direct artistic embodiments possible of McLuhan’s famous decree that “the medium is the message.”

In its choreography of gathered spectators, General Idea’s theater thus lies directly adjacent to the history of audience-driven, participatory political performance. If these works don’t fit the model of interventionist practice represented by Estrin or Boal, or by other artistic fellow travelers from the era—the Living Theatre, the Performance Group—they nonetheless echo those more overtly radical performances in surprising ways. For General Idea, choreographing their audiences was not an attempt to control spectators; it was an effort to place spectators’ action center stage. Viral performance was an alternative to all-consuming social change; not a substitute for it, but a way of sustaining queer presence in a world not likely to succumb to revolution anytime soon. In their viral performances, General Idea reminded us that beneath the surface of every audience—every applauding, sleeping, bored, confused audience—is a riotous crowd, waiting to collectively take things into their own hands.

Much later, in the late 1980s, General Idea created a work of visual art that became truly famous—a viral work that bears discussion as a descendant of the group’s 1970s-era performances. *Imagevirus*, like many of General Idea’s pieces, originated as a visual riff on an earlier iconic work, in this case the Pop artist Robert Indiana’s famous “LOVE” logo. Indiana had arranged the word’s four letters into a square, the “O” tipping diagonally to the right, the other three block letters solidly upright, blazing crimson against a background of placid blue and green. He first created the “LOVE” logo in 1964, as a Christmas card commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art, but soon it was everywhere, re-created by the artist in paintings and sculptures, copied by others, and reproduced on a 1973 postage stamp.

Seizing upon the simplicity and cultural ubiquity of Indiana’s logo, Zontal, Partz, and Bronson imitated it, replacing the word “LOVE” with the acronym “AIDS”—likewise set in solid red letters, the “D” listing rightwards in an echo of Indiana’s “O.” The first version of General Idea’s “AIDS” logo was a single, six-foot-square painting, which they exhibited in an art show benefiting the Foundation for AIDS Research. As Gregg Bordowitz reports in his
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book on the project, though, the three artists quickly decided that the piece was incomplete, concluding that it did not have enough impact as an individual work. Rather, Bordowitz explains, “it required repetition.” The trio reimagined the piece as a “campaign,” and, between 1987 and 1994, they reprinted the logo on posters, stamps, and fabric; sculpted it in steel; inserted it into fake advertisements; and posted it in city streets.

Eventually, General Idea’s “AIDS” logo confronted passersby from an electronic billboard in Times Square, a giant outdoor canvas in San Francisco, on New York City subway cars and the walls of Toronto train stations, and in art galleries in Frankfurt, Barcelona, and Montreal. The group changed their original red lettering for rich purples and yellows, and the background colors mutated accordingly: red, orange, aquamarine. The three artists fashioned the image into a giant metal sculpture that was displayed around the world, collecting graffiti wherever it went. They created a series of photos that mimicked “Absolut Vodka” ads, depicting the logo plastered to walls and doors, with the caption “Imagevirus,” printed in white across the bottom. Echoing the circulation of an epidemic, commenting on public silence about AIDS, and anticipating the parlance of the internet age, Imagevirus “went viral.”

But General Idea had been viral since the early 1970s: long before the physical devastations of AIDS inflected viral conceptions of art, and long before “going viral” signaled digital dissemination. General Idea’s work was viral not only in its use of the postal system, not only in the artists’ self-presentation through FILE Megazine, but also, and maybe most importantly, through their physical choreography of audience members. Viral images, after all, require host bodies. In my next chapter, “Germ Theater,” I investigate the work of artists who began practicing during the years when General Idea was making Imagevirus—a time when the digital connotations of “viral” began to emerge, and artists began to align investigations of parasite, plague, disease, and radiation with viral and contagious modes of creating performance.