

THE ART OF POLICY: THE WORK OF GROUP MATERIAL

by

Abigail Satinsky

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts

Department of Art History, Theory & Criticism and Department of Art
Administration & Policy

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago
2009

Thesis Committee:

Adviser: Rachel Weiss, Professor, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Readers: Lori Waxman, Professor, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Nato Thompson, Independent Curator and Writer

ABSTRACT

Group Material worked collaboratively from 1979 to 1996 to create exhibition spaces that functioned as forums to put political considerations in conversation with aesthetic forms. This thesis will consider the ways that they navigated, as an artist collective, the complex and paradoxical relationship that artists engaged in activist politics have to the institutions of art that support their initiatives but may not share their worldview. I will address their work during two specific time periods, during the operation of the storefront from 1979-81 and Group Material's *Democracy* show with the Dia Foundation in 1989-91. Group Material treated institutional space with desire and earnestness as a viable place for forming public discourse. How do artists treat institutions as partners in forming public policy and influencing political discourse? What are the conditions that make this a possible and productive relationship?

Group Material took on the role of public amateur, gathering together participants with a vested interest in a socially topical theme to hash out the relationship between symbolic cultural discourse and everyday lived reality. By taking on cultural institutions' methodology of exhibition making, Group Material exposed the limitations of cultural democracy already played out within those spaces. This mode of critique resists looking for an absolute outside of the established "art-world" or resigned acceptance of its authority in favor of negotiation and compromise within contested spaces. The institutional response was welcoming, Group Material offered to bridge a gap between "high art" concerns and non-artists that museums and galleries were either unwilling or unable to take on themselves. Their practice highlights the complex and paradoxical relationship that political artists have to community-based practices and the institutions of art that support these initiatives. I would like to revisit their work to understand how artistic practices can continually make institutions more accountable to the public they serve by appropriating and exposing their mechanisms at work as a creative and political process. What can administrative and curatorial practice today learn from Group Material's production of radical space within the codified art-world?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Bryce Dwyer, Matthew Joynt and Roman Petruniak, members of InCUBATE, for working with me on these questions for the last three years and generally providing support and friendship over the course of our collaboration. Thank you to Doug Ashford for providing me with invaluable resources and taking the time to talk with me as well as being such an open and generous person to interview. Thanks to those who took the time to read through my drafts and give valuable feedback, especially Rachel Weiss and Lori Waxman. Thanks to my family for their continued encouragement and love. And finally, I would like to dedicate my thesis to Ben Schaafsma, my friend and collaborator, without whom I would never have reached this goal and continue to miss everyday.

INTRODUCTION

Group Material worked collaboratively from 1979 to 1996 to create exhibition spaces that functioned as forums to put political considerations in conversation with aesthetic forms. This thesis will consider the ways that they navigated, as an artist collective, the complex and paradoxical relationship that artists engaged in activist politics have to the institutions of art that support their initiatives but may not share their worldview. By taking on cultural institutions' methodologies of exhibition making, Group Material exposed the limitations of cultural democracy already played out within those spaces. Yet their work also critically resists either looking for an absolute outside of the established "art-world" or resigned acceptance of its authority, in favor of negotiation and compromise within contested spaces. Group Material's production of radical space within the codified art-world provides a relevant set of questions for artists, administrators and curators operating today who want to treat institutions as partners in forming public policy and influencing political and cultural discourse.

Initially working in a storefront space, they subsequently created exhibitions for advertising spaces and museums that acted as forums to address the politics of display. Group Material's methodology was to gather together artists and non-artists with a vested interest in a socially topical theme, such as the AIDS epidemic or the United States military interventions in Latin America, to hash out the relationship between cultural discourse and lived reality. The

exhibitions were developed in relationship to specific contexts and invitations and often included a collection of art objects, activist propaganda, consumer products, posters, informational flyers, and statistical information. Using exhibitions as their artistic medium, Group Material's project resisted one individual or authorial voice acting as a political or cultural authority on particular issues at the same time that they emphasized the discourse of art as the unique meeting ground for multiple voices to dialogue. In making exhibitions as art, their work critically investigates where and in what ways the specialized realm of art overlaps with a larger political and social public, and how an emergent field of cultural activism in the Reagan era de-professionalizes both art and politics, allowing new spaces for activated participation.

They treated each exhibition venue, whether in public or institutional space, with desire and earnestness as a viable place for forming public discourse. Their approach was to use each invitation as an opportunity to openly engage the underlying politics of that invitation and foreground voices that they felt typically were left outside of such spaces. In this way they came to operate as a kind of para-institution, creating platforms alongside of, beside, near, and resembling the way institutions worked, that never quite became integrated into their pre-existing structures. As an art practice interrogating itself alongside institutional forms, Group Material openly questioned how institutions actually work and what possible directions they could conceivably take.

There are a number of critical questions that emerge out of this way of working. What does it mean when a group of artists become their own institution? Is it resistant or merely an internalization of institutional forms? How does this mode of operating change the relationship between participants, context of display and the role of the artists as facilitators? What are the assumptions being made about artists as privileged agents, free to create their own autonomy or self-determination? Finally, what is the potential to create a significant political, aesthetic and social experience for participants that can resist just enhancing the prestige of an artist or cultural institution?

With the organizing structure as such a central component of their work, the question of what constitutes a democratic art practice comes into sharp relief and remains unresolved. Their work is not simply engaged with a rule by the people approach, as the exhibitions are carefully constructed visual displays and purposefully subjective in their curatorial choices. Instead, their work is about foregrounding their own choices for display as not only aesthetic, but also ethical and political decisions. Indeed, what makes their work continuously interesting is that it is not “politics” in the abstract or the critique of institutions in general, but rather an engagement with the conditions of particular situations and grounded in representing systems at work, from governmental policy to the art-world. Yates McKee has called this the “art of policy,” which would “look to the aesthetic as a space of neither revolutionary opposition nor technocratic consensus but rather a site of productively uncertain literacy, debate, and advocacy concerning the rights

of the governed vis-à-vis corporate and governmental agencies.”¹ Therefore, Group Material can be looked towards as an experiment with a distinctly pedagogical function, as a set of questions were presented, tried out and then applied as an ongoing learning process.

Group Material began in 1979 with fifteen members: Hannah Alderfer, George Ault, Julie Ault, Patrick Brennan, Liliana Dones, Anne Drillick, Yolanda Hawkins, Beth Jaker, Michael LeBron, Mundy McLaughlin, Marybeth Nelson, Marek Pakulski, Peter Szypula, Tim Rollins, and Michael Udvardy.² After 1981, Group Material closed the storefront and their membership shrank to three, Tim Rollins, Mundy McLaughlin, and Julie Ault. Doug Ashford joined in 1982, Felix Gonzalez-Torres in 1987, Karen Ramspacher in 1989, and Thomas Eggerer and Jochen Klein in 1995. They stopped working together in 1996.³

This thesis will address their work during two specific time periods, during the operation of the storefront from 1979-81 and Group Material's *Democracy* with the Dia Foundation in 1989-91. The first chapter of this thesis will look at Group Material's storefront and their early attempts at building a radical community and cultural space within the neighborhood of the Lower East Side in 1980-81. Along with the managing of this storefront space for politically oriented exhibition-making, came a fundamental re-thinking of artists' relationship with and

¹ McKee, Yates. "Contemporary Art and the Legacies of Democracy" [A Guide to Democracy in America](#). Nato Thompson, ed. New York, New York: Creative Time Books, 2008: 31.

² Group Material Flier (~1979), Political Art Documentation/Distribution Archives at Queens MoMA, accessed 1/24/09

³ Ault, Julie, "A Chronology of Selected Alternative Structures, Spaces, Artists' Groups, and Organizations in New York City, 1965-85." [Alternative art, New York, 1965-1985 : a cultural politics book for the Social Text Collective](#): the Drawing Center, New York / Minneapolis ; London : University of Minnesota Press, 2002: 58.

responsibilities towards communities outside the art-world. This meant thinking through what their neighbors and what they themselves thought of as cultural participation in both a local context and a larger political discourse and the varying positions of agency therein.

At the same time that Group Material was interested in creating relationships between artists and non-artists, their practice also worked towards the creation of alternative infrastructures within the art-world context, placing them in the narrative of the “alternative space movement” of the later 1970s and 1980s. Alternative spaces can manifest in multiple ways, including, but not exclusive to, physical location, audiences, and economic structures. In order to understand what Group Material was positioning themselves against and why their politicized form emerged at the time it did, an understanding is needed of the conditions that created the necessity for the spaces before them. Ultimately, their refusal to take part in the popularized form of the alternative space movement led to a reorganization of the group in order to work site-specifically in both public space and institutional venues on a temporary basis.

The second chapter will address how Group Material applied their practice to their *Democracy* project with the Dia Art Foundation. By the time of the project, Group Material's determined stance in favor of artistic democracy had been accepted by the art world and they had been showing their work in many high-profile exhibitions such as the Whitney Biennial in 1985 and Documenta 8 in 1987. As institutions increasingly legitimated Group Material's practice, their

practice became more self-reflexive, looking specifically at cultural activism as an implicit part of the art industry. Thus the project was not only a critical response to the crisis of American democracy by looking directly at education, electoral politics, cultural participation, and AIDS, but it also questioned their own ways of working. Each component consisted of an exhibition, roundtable discussion, and open town hall meeting, all of which took place between September 1988 and January 1989.

Democracy itself is a shifting and contingent term, which becomes an empty proposition if not grounded in economic and social realities. Group Material's project occurred at a time of rising conservative attacks on progressive culture in the United States by the Reagan-Bush administrations, at the same time as the rapid halt to the 1980's art boom in 1988. This chapter will examine the evolving relationship Group Material had with working within institutional contexts as a kind of "resistant" practice. In this way it is possible to think of Group Material's engagement with established cultural institutions in terms outside of failure or co-optation, to see what productive benefits were gleaned.

I came to Group Material's work through participating in Creative Time's yearlong programming initiative, *Democracy in America: The National Campaign* in 2008. InCUBATE, of which I am a member, was among the 40 artists and groups invited to participate in the culminating exhibition, the *Convergence Center*, at the Park Avenue Armory in New York City. We are an experimental research institute and artist residency program dedicated to exploring new

approaches to arts administration and arts funding. Acting as curators, researchers and co-producers of artist's projects, our main focus has been to explore ways that artists, both historically and today, have incorporated models of resource allocation, community building, funding structures and forms of exchange as part of their artistic practice. We started InCUBATE with a few simple ideas and questions about money. How could we better understand the lack of funding for alternative and innovative cultural work? Is it possible to develop new infrastructures to qualitatively affect artists' lives? Our activities have manifested in a series of traveling exhibitions called *Other Options*, a creative research residency program, and various other projects such as Sunday Soup (a monthly meal that generates funding for a creative project grant). Our core organizational principle is to treat art administration as a creative practice. By doing so, we hope to generate and share a new vocabulary of practical solutions to the everyday problems of producing culture under-the-radar.

For the Convergence Center, InCUBATE created a temporary satellite space of our storefront in Chicago which acted as a Sunday Soup cafe. Over the course of three days, our team designed and constructed the space using cast-off materials found at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts and the Park Avenue Armory, as well as materials scavenged from the streets of New York City. The completed installation included a cashier counter, food preparation and service counters, dining tables and a small library. For one week, we ran a full-services soup café in this space, generating revenue for our granting fund, with local

artists and organizers acting as guest chefs and giving lectures and presentations on their creative projects. InCUBATE administrators were working on site for the entire run of the exhibition and visitors were invited to become grant jurors for projects happening across the country that would be funded through their purchase of soup.

Our project was meant to spark conversation about the governing logic of arts funding in the United States. We tried to create a model that is explicitly functional in the way it generates money, and implicitly critical as a way of generating dialogue about the availability and distribution of resources within the mainstream arts establishment. Competition for funding both private and public is fierce, and this reality forces artists and organizations to base their programming on available funding streams. In an environment where governmental support for experimental art practice is minimal at best, and private support is dictated by the values and priorities of granting foundations, innovative and potentially controversial work is compromised in order to fit within categories deemed "fundable." In contrast, Sunday Soup is a model of arts funding that is transparent and participatory. Community participation in the grant funding and selection process is key. Applying for a grant is intentionally simple and un-bureaucratic in order to encourage broad participation. This enables InCUBATE to stimulate and support experimental, critical and imaginative practices that may not be eligible for more formal funding.

The Convergence Center coincided with the current financial meltdown, as

on September 19 the Bush Administration announced its bailout plan, The Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008, after a series of large emergency loans to companies such as American International Group (AIG) and the federal takeover of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the stockholder-owned mortgage associations. Thus our own relationships to the political and economic realms far larger and more complex than the art world were thrown into sharp relief. With the larger economy in turmoil outside the exhibition space, we found ourselves concerned with keeping our own miniature economy functional, and contemplating economies of scale. We were left with the questions: How do we bridge scales? How do we operate locally, within our own network and simultaneously puncture its borders?

Needless to say, the social and political backdrop surrounding Creative Time's *Democracy in America* in 2008 is drastically different than the circumstances of a project like Group Material's *Democracy* in 1989. Yet the core of that particular project, and their work in general, was an inquiry into the forms of a responsive exhibition. Group Material's *Democracy* was conceived in relationship to the pivotal 1989 election of George H. W. Bush. Creative Time's *Democracy in America* acted in much the same way, as a response to a growing crisis in democracy after eight years of George W. Bush. With the attention of the public peaked by the financial crisis and so many Americans ready to interrogate the logic of our governing systems, we hoped that our InCUBATE installation could also act as a microcosm to address the distribution of resources within the

art-world and extend to the ways in which we are implicated and accountable within the economies of culture.

Therefore, I would like to return to Group Material's work as providing a relevant set of questions for thinking through how exhibitions can extend beyond the rhetorical basis for their inquiry. This includes taking into account the relationship between art, its organizing structures, the conditions for participation, and how those underlying politics affect its reception. By reassessing Group Material's work in relationship to its historical contexts as well as the cultural activism that emerged during that time, I hope to point towards creative organizational forms that could be responsive to the political and cultural situation today.

CHAPTER ONE

In 1980, Group Material opened a storefront space in the Lower East Side, after a year of meetings as a loose association, to organize socially topical exhibitions in a community-based and collectively-run artist space. They announced themselves to their neighborhood as a collective of artists with day jobs, (five graphic designers, two teachers, a waitress, a cartographer, two textile designers, a telephone operator, a dancer, a computer analyst and an electrician)⁴, seeking an audience of artists, students, working people and neighbors for the display of art dedicated to social change. The choice of location, at the time relatively far away from the established cultural institutions, indicated their need to establish independence both socially and economically and the desire to interact with a community of people not directly connected to the systems of art's production and distribution. Group Material writes in their opening flier announcement,

That our address might seem to be an unlikely site for an art gallery makes it all the more important that we begin to rethink the purpose of art and the orientation of its institutions. Group Material wants to explode the assumptions that dictate what art is, who art is for and what an art exhibition can be.⁵

The goal was to make an explicitly political space where cultural concerns could meet at the level of neighborhood life. Their objectives were to build a community-based space for artists and non-artists, to operate as economically

⁴ Group Material announcement flier (1980), Political Art Documentation/Distribution Archives at Queens MoMA, accessed 1/24/09

⁵ Ibid.

autonomous from the commercial art world, and to emphasize collective identification through group identity and display, downplaying individual authorship and hierarchy of presentation. Their methodology was directly democratic, using a participatory form, both within Group Material where everything was decided (ostensibly) by consensus, and through their choices in subject matter and display. The exhibitions included *The Salon of Election '80*, related to the presidential elections of that year; *The Gender Show*, dealing with issues of sexuality and gender identity; *Consumption: Metaphor, Pastime, Necessity*, and *Arroz Con Mango (The People's Choice)*, an exhibition of objects gathered from the neighborhood. Films, lectures and parties accompanied each of these exhibitions, including both a tongue-in-cheek Tupperware party and a lecture by Bertell Ollman, a Marxist professor at New York University as part of *Consumption: Metaphor, Pastime, Necessity* and a bingo night as the closing reception for *Arroz Con Mango (The People's Choice)*.

Tim Rollins, one of the founding members, said in 1980,

We're not just going to be a gallery devoted to showing political art. We want to set up real social relationships with the people here, working people. It's important for us to become a vital part of the block. A lot of people did it in the '60s, and then they got away with it. Now everybody's more complacent and satisfied with the whole art-as-commodity idea. We're not.⁶

They were a group of young artists who were looking to create some kind of social structure of support outside of their jobs and associations from art school. Their identification as a singular entity rather than an individually

⁶ Gerarld Morzorati, "Artful Dodger" [The Soho News](#), October 15, 1980.

identified group of people was a way to build a community of togetherness around their practices, rather than just shuttling individually into the gallery scene.

Julie Ault said, reflecting on that moment for the group,

A lot of us had just come from art school, where we were trained to develop a 'unique' artist voice. We were also trained to believe that after school you then go exercise this voice in the so-called real world. This seems to be pretty much of a false promise considering the limitations and biases which accompanied market principles and the commercial art system, and many of us were not interested in making objects, but in collaborative processes.⁷

Yet coming together meant more than just personal support for developing new work; it had to do with a general disappointment that there weren't venues specifically addressing the relationship between works of art and the larger political sphere. They were looking for a space where, as artists, they could address the immediate issues affecting a wider public, including questions of electoral politics, gender discrimination, and the privatization of public space. At the same time, they were making a public gesture in protest against the art-world for allowing commercialization and privatization to become an accepted part of their "public" cultural institutions, i.e. museums and non-profit spaces.

Their project was responding to the ways in which they saw art as becoming too much of an insular system. Lucy Lippard wrote that this particular problem was a result of artists witnessing how commercial galleries and museums had flourished despite the revolutionary rhetoric floating around the art-world in the 1960s. She writes,

⁷ Julie Ault, from a presentation at La Generazione Delle Immagini, a series of conferences held at the Milan Triennial, Milan, Italy, 1997. Accessed December 15, 2009. www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.p?x=/Pinto/Eng/fault.htm

If the '60s proved that commitment didn't work, the '70s proved that lack of commitment didn't work either. The '80s decade is coming into a legacy of anxiety, of barely articulated challenges to boringly predictable mainstream art. It is going to have to restore the collective responsibility of the artist and create a new kind of community within, not apart from, the rest of the world.⁸

This idea of "collective responsibility" figured prominently in Group Material's work, pushing them to develop more than an oppositional stance, which would have threatened to marginalize their objectives. Their space was meant to be a functioning social center relevant to their specific neighborhood and not just the implementation of a gallery structure in a new undiscovered location. As Patrick Brennan, another early group member says, "We're not just white kids slumming. We're here because we live here, and our problems are the neighborhood's problems. We pay the rent [\$450 a month] so we can be as political and controversial as we want or have to be."⁹ Indeed, they stressed their low budget as way of differentiating themselves from what they considered to be a standard business model and creating a sense of transparency for a social space supported by its own users. Not only did they make it publicly known how much each paid in rent, they also placed emphasis on their own status as working artists with day jobs by only operating at night or weekends. The space was open between five and ten o'clock each evening, in recognition that the neighbors and themselves could only visit the space outside of regular work hours.

⁸ Lippard, Lucy. "Hot Potatoes: Art and Politics in 1980." Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change E.P. Dutton Inc.: New York (1984):170.

⁹ Gerald Morzorati, "Artful Dodger" The Soho News, October 15, 1980.

Group Material emerged out of a context of working artists that were grappling with how civic engagement could relate to the structures of art-making, including precedents such as the Art Workers Coalition and Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, as well as contemporaries like the artist group Political Art Documentation/Distribution and spaces such as Fashion Moda and ABC No Rio. Arlene Goldbard, the founder of the Neighborhood Arts Programs National Organizing Committee (NAPNOC), an advocacy group started in 1976 and involved in building networks for progressive arts groups and local and regional concerns wrote, “Many of the alternative arts groups of the 1970s opposed a dominant idea of the artist as child, fool, or idiot savant, asserting—correctly, it must be argued—the rightful role of the artist as citizen, with as much stake in public affairs and as much right to public expression as a doctor, plumber, or salesclerk.”¹⁰ At its best, the artist-as-citizen creates a meeting ground for established cultural institutions, political organizing strategies, and arts-activity happening on a neighborhood scale. Group Material wanted to build a model that took the objectives of each seriously, meaning that the art-world would pay attention to the concerns of artists and the public, the neighborhood would get involved and treat the space as their own, and political dialogue would flow back and forth. For this to be a viable possibility, there must be a complex negotiation between location and audience, and a linking of individual interests with broader ideals and institutions that are responsible for dominant power structures.

¹⁰ Goldbard, Arlene. “When (Art) Worlds Collide: Institutionalizing the Alternatives” *Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985*. J. Ault. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 191.

In the beginning, it was important for Group Material to manifest these ideas in physical space, as a literal indicator of their rooted-ness in their location and their neighborhood, in order to create a place where their art could connect with a wider social body. Yet the art context also framed their space and practice, as their work gained legitimacy in the art-world through their own creation of a relevant structure for it. This reveals one of the most interesting tensions inherent in their practice-- the ways in which their work engages in activist politics yet is also embedded within the systematic contradictions of the art-world. Their attempt to build structures for participation that allow for these overlapping realities happened not only in specific physical spaces but also historical and social contexts. Therefore, I would like to examine the concerns of the “alternative space movement” of the 1970s and 1980s to see what Group Material was building upon and moving away from when they created their space.

Alternative Space/Anti-Space:

One of the first “alternative spaces” was 112 Workshop/Greene St (now White Columns), initiated by Jeffrey Lew in 1970. Similar to Group Material, the artists involved were looking to build a context for their work, to push for the inclusion of artists who were marginalized by the art market (such as women and people of color), and to create a space for the exhibition of work that wasn’t

instantly saleable. Yet as the artist-run space movement grew in New York City in the 1970s and 1980s, it became clear that it encompassed a wide-ranging set of agendas that operated in a complex relationship to the established art-world. Therefore, to think through what “alternative” means, it’s important to clarify what these spaces were alternative to, what caused them to come into being, and toward what ends.

The idea of building an artist community with like-minded people was evident in early alternative spaces such as 112 Workshop/Greene St., AIR Gallery and Artists’ Space. 112 Workshop/Greene St., supporting the early work of artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark and Barry Le Va, provided crucial physical space for process-oriented work and often offered little differentiation between works-in-progress and a finished piece within the raw exhibition space. AIR Gallery, formed in 1972 and still operating today, is a cooperatively run exhibition space for women artists. AIR, unlike 112 Workshop, replicated the traditional gallery space, challenging the idea that alternative art must be produced by a specific relationship to the space in which it is exhibited. Artists Space, also formed in 1972, grew out of an initiative from the New York Council on the Arts as a service program for artists and included an exhibition program where artists acted as the curatorial selecting body.¹¹

These non-profit spaces were heavily dependent on federal funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, which, under the direction of Brian

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of these spaces, see Beck, Martin, “Alternative: Space.” Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985. J. Ault. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002: 249-279.

O'Doherty, started funding artist spaces in 1972 and created a categorical distinction by 1978. As Brian Wallis points out, "Artists sought to formulate loose administrative structures in these ventures that were communitarian, anti-elitist, collective, anti-commercial, and culturally diverse."¹² He goes on to say that "A key function of alternative spaces, recognized from the beginning was their potential to fulfill and to reshape the necessities of the artist: to emphasize the collective struggle of artists and to counter the alienation of the individual artist from the art economy."¹³

As Wallis goes on, this was a proposition fully supported by the NEA, and championed by Brian O'Doherty, who was himself an influential artist, critic and author of *Inside the White Cube*, which first appeared as essays in *Artforum* in 1976. O'Doherty argued that through alternative spaces "the *best* local artists are brought into the channel of recognition and national artists are brought into contact with the regions." Yet these assertions are countered by Wallis who says that these goals were precisely what alternative art spaces were organizing against, namely standards such as "best" and the emphasis of national recognition.¹⁴ And along with the funding came a pressure from the NEA for alternative spaces to work in the manner of more conventional artist organizations and adapt conventional business structures to become more

¹² Wallis, B. (2002). Public Funding and Alternative Spaces. *Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985*. J. Ault. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002: 170.

¹³ Wallis, Brian. Public Funding and Alternative Spaces. *Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985*. J. Ault. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002: 170.

¹⁴ Wallis, Brian: 172.

efficiently run and fiscally responsible. This emphasis steadily increased throughout the 1970s and 1980s as support for alternative art spaces within the NEA began to create professional art administrators who could manage these spaces. As Arlene Goldbard writes, “Thus, within groups previously controlled by artists doing for themselves, an internal class system was created, stocked with administrators, development directors, marketing directors, and so on.”¹⁵ Wallis supports this claim with this quote from critic Deborah C. Phillips in an article from 1981:

Success and visibility have turned originally rebellious artists' alternatives into full-fledged art institutions with all the bureaucratic trappings that new identity entails. Not surprisingly, their directors and founders have undergone a similar transformation. Now in their middle to late thirties, they are no longer the politicized idealists of the 1960s who initiated these radical projects; they have become professional art administrators.¹⁶

With this increasing professionalization came a frustration on the part of some artists looking to reinvent the conditions of the ‘alternative’ yet again. In the late 1970s to early 1980s, spaces and groups such as Colab and Fashion Moda started to refer to themselves as anti-spaces, meaning that they were organized in opposition to the popularized “alternative space movement.” With the shift in funding towards artist spaces rather than individual artist projects, Collaborative Projects, a k a Colab formed in 1977, a group of artists who came together as an official organization to re-allocate resources amongst individuals and small

¹⁵Goldbard, Arlene. “When (Art) Worlds Collide: Institutionalizing the Alternatives” Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985. J. Ault. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002: 134.

¹⁶ Deborah c. Phillips “New faces in Alternative Spaces,” Art News (November 1981) 90. Quoted in Wallis, B. (2002). “Public Funding and Alternative Spaces.” Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985. J. Ault. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002: 173.

groups of members. They incorporated in 1978, started receiving governmental grants, and subsequently organized some sprawling landmark exhibitions such as *The Manifesto Show* in 1979 at 5 Bleecker St. and “The Times Square Show,” a chaotic mix of fashion, pornography, film and art installations, held in a massage parlor at 201 West Forty-first Street in 1980. Their early members included Charlie Ahearn, John Ahearn, Stefan Eins, Jenny Holzer, Alan Moore and Tom Otterness, among others.

Their early efforts also included the *Real Estate Show* in 1980, an exhibition and “paral-legal” action concentrated on gentrification issues of the Lower East Side that was deeply influential on Group Material for its thematic content and inclusive atmosphere. After the exhibition was shut down by the city and attracted much media attention, including a visit by Joseph Beuys who was touring America at the time, the artists were given a rent-free space at 123 Rivington St., which became ABC No Rio.

While Colab operated in a strategic manner towards the art-world and its funding mechanisms and ended up launching the careers of many, later commercially successful artists, Fashion Moda attempted to change their context completely by moving to the South Bronx. Fashion Moda, directed by William Scott, Joe Lewis, and Stefan Eins was “a Museum of Science, Art, Technology, Invention and Fantasy,” and acted as a hangout and exhibition space for graffiti artists, neighborhood residents, and professionally trained artists.

These practices also operated with significant visibility in the art-world, as both Colab and Fashion Moda were included in the exhibition “Events” at the New Museum in 1981, which focused on artists working collectively outside of the conventional market systems. In a New York Times article by Grace Glueck, “The New Collectives—Reaching for a Wider Audience,” Walter Robinson, president of Colab said at the time,

What we’re about is artists using the power that we have. We want control of our own work. A lot of our original inspiration was based on opposition to the established gallery situation and also to the alternative spaces. With public agencies picking up the tab, the people who run them don’t have to push the work they show. Also, by our grouping together, it’s much easier to get public funding for our shows than as individuals.¹⁷

Stefan Eins is also quoted in the article explaining how the public who accessed their space was different than the typical art audiences,

We’re interested in bringing a community of people and artists together. We want to challenge the assumption that art is an elitist thing; the base has to change. Art is not a question of art school background; it’s a vitality and a way of looking at things that doesn’t have to take a formalist tack.¹⁸

Being “alternative” experienced another reinvention in the East Village in the early 1980s at a time of increasing commercial funding as a result of the art market boom from the late 1970s to early 1988. Over 100 artist-run galleries opened in the area at this time, such as Gracie Mansion, Nature Morte and Civilian Warfare, creating economic support structures for emerging artists on an unprecedented scale. The frenetic pace of expansion was evident in that the East

¹⁷ Grace Glueck. “The New Collectives- Reaching for a Wider Audience” The New York Times, Sunday February 1, 1981.

¹⁸ Grace Glueck. “The New Collectives- Reaching for a Wider Audience” The New York Times, Sunday February 1, 1981.

Village “attitude” was already being historicized as early as 1984, in *the East Village Scene*, an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania. Janet Kardon, the curator for the exhibition, writes, “The East Village attitude, is, indeed, generally characterized by an irreverent stance toward gallery habits...We have then a new gallery system invented to accommodate its own priorities. There is no prevailing esthetic; the pervading attitude of freedom has nurtured diversity rather than a single aesthetic style.”¹⁹ There was also much debate circulating as to whether the newly minted “East Village scene” was actually reflecting different market priorities at all or was rather what Craig Owens called “a miniature replica of the contemporary art market—a kind of Junior Achievement for young culture-industrialists.”²⁰ With the perception that there were infinite resources available through the market, many spaces bypassed the traditional nonprofit route. As Patti Astor from Fun gallery put it, “I just wanted a place to show art and didn't want to bother to fill out the grant forms.”²¹

The experimentation coming from the commercial sector affected the ability of nonprofits to create economic alternatives to the widening scope of the art market. Artist Space founder Irving Sandler recalls some of the realities of the market pressure on the nonprofit sector during this time, saying that,

We thought we might be able to set up a real alternative structure. That of course didn't happen. What we became was a foreign team for

¹⁹ Kardon, Janet. *The East Village scene: October 12-December 2, 1984*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania (1984):3.

²⁰ Craig Owens, "The Problem with Puerilism," *Art in America* 72, no. 6 (Summer 1984): 162-163.

²¹ Interview with Sandy Nairne, June 1993. Quotes in Nairne, Sandy. "The Institutionalization of Dissent." *Thinking about Exhibitions* Ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson and Sandy Nairne. London and New York: Routledge, 1996 :399.

commercial galleries who recognized that we were in tune (because artists were doing the selection) with what was liveliest in the artworld. Indeed about 70 to 80 per cent of the people who became art stars in the eighties had their first show with us.²²

These examples of “alternativeness” are not always in direct opposition to each other, as many artists moved from nonprofit spaces to anti-spaces to commercial spaces and back again. Yet it is to say that alternative always means alternative to something specific. A frustration with the commercial control exercised on exhibition opportunities as well as the need for gathering space for like-minded artists, compelled grassroots alternative art space initiatives in the 1970s. As these spaces became more codified and professional in their objectives, the need for new contexts in new neighborhoods arose in the late 1970s and early 1980s. And soon after the perceived monopoly of funding by long-running nonprofits created artist-run commercial spaces. This understanding of how this system operated and built upon itself creates a clearer picture as to what Group Material was responding to as they decided to open their doors in the Lower East Side in 1980.

Group Material’s Headquarters

Group Material directly opposed the celebratory atmosphere of alternative spaces that were being heralded as a success, both commercially and artistically. From the beginning, their objectives were to expose and illuminate the

²² Irving Sandler “Artist Space” The East Village scene: October 12-December 2, 1984, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania (1984): 10.

dangers of creating a “scene” around political culture in favor of imagining new models for engaged critique and participation. Richard Goldstein wrote in his 1980 *Village Voice* article that Group Material was the most “profoundly social of the anti spaces,” and he noted that they measured themselves against the likes of Colab, who were decidedly uninterested in theory and analyzing the commercialization of their practices. Goldstein’s criticism is that such dogmatic ideological structure doesn’t leave much play for ambiguity or ambivalence, writing,

Group Material measures itself against *The Times Square Show* and concludes that only analysis can save artists from becoming victims of their own enthusiasm. Yet, in the process of demystifying the image, something is lost. The art is so bluntly subordinate to its intention that it seems sedate. I leave the storefront gratified, but unmoved. Horribly enough for someone as earnest as myself, I much preferred *The Times Square Show*, which left me skeptical but aroused.²³

Goldstein’s critique is that he is not part of the intended audience for this exhibition, that Group Material at this time were much more interested in their immediate community partaking in their activities than making sure that it was comprehensible and suitably “arousing” for an outside critic. This is a valid point: if Group Material is declaring their autonomy from the art world, why should Goldstein be interested or invested in that process? This points to some of Group Material’s methodologies that were formative for the question of what constitutes political space, particularly who is invited to participate, on what terms, and how is it possible to critically assess this process? These questions were always in

²³ Richard Goldstein “Enter the Anti Space: ART BEAT The Politics of Culture.” *Village Voice*, November 5 – November 11, 1980.

operation in their practice, not just in later work when working within institutions. Group Material wore their politics on their sleeve, they pushed the position that they were no more able to “demystify the image,” than any other viewer of the exhibition. Group Material member Tim Rollins said at the time, “The whole thing, in the end, should be seen as a catalyst.”²⁴ It could be asked, catalyst for what and for whom?

In Margaret Kohn’s *Radical Space*, a study on the workers’ cooperative and *Case del popolo* (House of the People) movement in pre-fascist Italy, she writes about the conditions that make certain spaces active catalysts in political life. For Kohn, cooperatives and community centers became crucial sites for political mobilization as a result of their being deeply embedded in social life, on both a cultural and economic level. In order for any radical democratic politics to be enacted, the process must exceed specific ideological formations and be built upon social relationships.²⁵ Group Material, in creating a space to assess the way that culture is embedded in everyday life as a discourse of power and exclusion, but also of potential emancipation, was engaged in a similar set of questions. How can a community of shared interest in cultural politics be constructed and cultivated, while at the same time recognizing potentially incommensurable differences and varying levels of authority? What are the necessary “alternative” spaces for this dialogue to happen and how can they be part of lived reality? How

²⁴ Gerald Marzorati “Artful Dodger” *The Soho News*, October 15, 1980.

²⁵ Kohn, Margaret. *Radical Space: Building the House of the People*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003: 7- 8.

can institutions be opened up for critique and whom does it benefit? What is the artists' role as facilitator in that process?

For Kohn, physical space is crucial to democracy, as associations and encounters within a specific location create a community of shared interests, that can reach beyond political identification to create a sense of trust and social relations amongst participants. This does not mean that simple proximity guarantees a coherent community, or one that would be interested in working around shared goals. It simply makes visible that diverse democratic struggles can exist within a shared space.

Yet in order for this to be more than just a formal exercise, it has to be located within an economic and cultural context and look towards existing concentrations of power and authority as the site of contestation. Therefore when Group Material locates themselves outside of the pre-existing cultural institutional space, they both foreground the immediately local as their site of meaning but also react to the art institutions as their necessary other. For them, the art institution is not the sole ground for intervention, but becomes one heightened place of meaning among many that necessitates different forms of action. This approach compelled them to address their location, engaging neighborhood residents who had no particular interest in the burgeoning alternative art "scene" in the Lower East Side and figuring out what was actually important to them. This resulted in the exhibition *The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)*.

The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)

Group Material's self-proclaimed most successful show of the year was *The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)*, where the members of the group asked their primarily Spanish-speaking neighbors for "objects that have meaning for you, your family, and your friends."²⁶ They then organized a display of the items with accompanying stories that explained the objects' significance. The objects ranged from a collection of Pez dispensers to a signed Warhol photograph to Norma Fernandez's "Rope Man" whose accompanying story was "I made this in high school when I was 15. It has a horsehair head. It looks like my ex-husband."²⁷

In their attempt to articulate their roles and responsibilities as artists in the neighborhood, Group Material created a display of their community for itself. They were working to establish a sense of mutual trust by pointedly creating equivalencies between items with sentimental value and items recognizable as art. By highlighting this aesthetic agenda within the authorial space of a gallery, the neighborhood residents could potentially see themselves as specialists of their own cultural history.

As Doug Ashford said in an interview with Critical Art Ensemble,

²⁶ Letter, December 22, 1980, distributed to Group Material's neighbors, in Group Material folder, PAD/D Archives, Museum of Modern Art Library, New York. (Quoted in Moore, A. with Jim Cromwell (2002). *Local History: The Art of Battle for Bohemia in New York*. Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985. J. Ault. Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press: 334.)

²⁷ Elizabeth Hess. "Home Style Looking" The Village Voice Jan 28 – Feb 3, 1981.

Our exhibitions and projects gather different levels of cultural production into one site. By doing this we are automatically serving more audiences than the mainstream. A lot of specific shows have had specific community concerns; a lot of them touch social relationships in the way the artwork is perceived. In other words, why can't an art show be organized that has a different level of concern besides the specialized artist?²⁸

Beyond their concern with neighborhood participation, Group Material was addressing another issue in this exhibition, namely of the artist as its own kind of privileged institution. By resisting their own authority in designating the significance of the objects yet highlighting their importance within the legitimating space of a gallery, Group Material displaced and re-organized the roles of amateur and specialist.

As Doug Ashford has said,

For Group Material the idea was to create a context in which we didn't pretend that authority doesn't exist. Instead the idea was to present authority as something legible, and that legibility leads to different kinds of social understanding.²⁹

This legibility is an important criterion for what makes the artist-as-citizen interesting within the context of a neighborhood community. If most of the population is indeed citizens, then what makes it important to recognize artists as a heightened example of such? The process of breaking down professionalization and re-distributing specialization is paramount here. The space of the gallery becomes a gathering place for people invested on different aesthetic and social levels. The neighbors become specialists of their own

²⁸ Group Material Interviewed by Critical Art Ensemble, Interventions and Provocations: Conversations on Art, Culture, and Resistance. Glenn Harper, Ed. State University of New York Press, Albany (1998): 23.

²⁹ Lecture by Doug Ashford, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. 10/25/08.

experience and have a stake in the process because they contributed something so personally significant. Therefore Group Material, as the organizing body, places themselves in the role of amateurs, learning about what is important to their community.

To think more about what it means to both recognize and work with varying levels of authority, Claire Pentecost has written about the artist as “Public Amateur.” This is a potentially more useful model than artist-as-citizen, which has a sort of circular logic in which the artist is an active citizen by virtue of being an artist engaged in some form of public expression. Pentecost describes a somewhat different approach to artistic practice in which preconceived notions of the public, the institution and the artist can shift and alter through a learning process. She writes,

In such a practice the artist becomes a person who consents to learn in public. It is a proposition of active social participation in which any nonspecialist is empowered to take the initiative to question something within a given discipline, acquire knowledge in a noninstitutionally sanctioned way, and assume the authority to interpret that knowledge, especially in regard to decisions that affect our lives. The motive is not to replace the specialist, but to augment specialization with other models that have legitimate claims to producing and interpreting knowledge.³⁰

In this way, the artist can do away with having to claim and defend a specific agenda; rather, it allows individualized skills and knowledge to become active parts of a public process of constructed aesthetic meaning and political relationships. Group Material, by recognizing their own specialization as artists

³⁰ Pentecost, Claire. “Oh! the public amateur is not afraid to let on that she just figured it out.” Accessed January 15, 2009. <http://publicamateur.wordpress.com/>

engaged in issues of display, can then move towards approaching how representations of different communities' experiences might be possible.

Caution! Alternative Space!

In September of 1981, Group Material released an announcement ending their tenancy at the East 13th St. Storefront, entitled "Caution! Alternative Space!"

This pressing desire for a room of our own was strategic on both the political and psychological fronts. We knew that in order for our project to be taken seriously by a large public, we had to resemble a 'real' gallery. Without these four walls of justification, our work would probably not be considered as art.³¹

Furthermore, they expressed disappointment in being categorized as an "alternative space" because such spaces had proven to be merely individualist springboards to commercial galleries, rather than sustainable alternative networks. They go on to say, "We've learned that the notion of alternative space is not only politically phony and aesthetically naive, it can also be diabolical."³² In order to be taken seriously by the art-world and legible as artists, Group Material's space had to be able to be read as a gallery, but then by extension, their exhibitions became responsive to their own space of art rather than continually negotiating art's own parameters.

Their group process had also broken down and needed to be reconstructed anew. The responsibilities of the space, the frenetic pace, and

³¹ Group Material Flier "Caution! Alternative Space!" (1981), Political Art Documentation/Distribution Archives at Queens MoMA, accessed 1/24/09

³² Ibid.

individuals who wanted to pursue their own artistic careers and those who wanted to become activists outright led to major divergences and a drastic reduction in membership. After this, only Tim Rollins, Mundy McLaughlin, and Julie Ault remained and Doug Ashford joined in 1982.

In an interview with Peter Hall from *Real Life* magazine, Mundy McLaughlin said, referring to the first incarnation of Group Material,

There were always several groups, subgroups threatening to split the whole thing up. They [the activists] would have ideas that sounded alright, but then the way they would work with them would be totally different from the way we [the artists] would. This became a problem. Another problem was the other faction that developed. These guys were artists, but they were more career oriented. They were more interested in using the group as a stepping stone to something better. That really wasn't our idea. If we want to have individual careers, we want that to be separate from Group Material.³³

When asked by Peter Hall, "How are decisions made among the four of you now?" McLaughlin replies, "Arguments, and lots of fights." Obviously, within each group of people there are going to be personality disputes, and part of this is being young and figuring out your way. But it is interesting here how their terms shifted and they re-articulated their goals to be about political space itself as less of a stable form rooted in a particular place built upon a preexisting community and more about creating that community through disruption, disagreement and contention within particular contexts. As Kohn points out, "Political space is a place where people act and speak together rather than a static physical

³³ Peter Hall "Group Material: An Interview" RealLife Magazine #11/12; Winter 1983/84.

location.”³⁴ She goes on to say that a mediating position is needed because “space is a product of social practices but one that has particular properties precisely because of its embodiment in specific types of places.”³⁵

Ashford writes, “Once that space on 13th Street was lost, the four people who were left with Group Material had to salvage an idea of what it meant to operate differently, so we had to be nomadic in relationship to existing institutions.” Moving to a more temporal and institution-specific practice created a way to organize around situational possibilities as Ashford continues, “You know, to do some something different for the galleries at a housing project than you would do at the Whitney or the university or a small art space in a midwestern city and so on and so forth. By putting us in a place in which we had no space, we could see the exhibition as responsive.”³⁶

In order to make their exhibitions responsive, Group Material needed to become invested in the development of forms that didn’t replicate pre-existing institutional and market structures. But in order for these new forms to have any real political currency, they needed to be developed through a group process, creating alliances between artists and non-artists that were animated within particular contexts of power. Their subsequent move to become institutionally site specific reflected this aspiration.

³⁴ Kohn, Margaret. Radical Space: Building the House of the People. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003: 14.

³⁵ Kohn, Margaret. Radical Space: Building the House of the People. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003: 14.

³⁶ Interview with the author 12/11/2008.

CHAPTER 2

Group Material's closing of the storefront represented a deep-seated ambivalence over what constitutes a meaningful infrastructure that would support the kind of art and cultural politics that they wanted to engage in. Following the closing, they undertook a number of projects in public space, such as *Da Zi Baos* and *Subculture*, both in 1982, to work out what it might mean to address a broader audience and set of concerns. After working in this way for a number of years, they started receiving high profile invitations from cultural institutions, including the Whitney Biennial in 1986, Documenta 8 in 1987, and the opportunity to develop a yearlong project at the Dia Foundation, *Democracy*, during the lead-up to George HW Bush's election in 1988-89. As their projects shifted and evolved with higher visibility afforded to them by the art-world, this chapter will assess Group Material's reasons and critical strategies for working increasingly within art institutional contexts.

Public Works: *Da Zi Baos* and *Subculture*

One of Group Material's first public works was *Da Zi Baos* in Union Square in November of 1982. For this project, they illegally posted twelve alternating red and yellow posters with written statements on the exterior of the S. Klein building at 14th street and Park Ave. South. The project *Da Zi Baos (Democracy Wall)*,

which literally means “big word poster” in Chinese, references a practice in China originating at the time of the Cultural Revolution, in which individuals publicly post their reactions to organized politics in public space. Group Material wrote,

On sites legal and illegal, with or without party permission, the display of these graphic political statements is committed to a dialogue with other big-character posters in the vicinity. This popular practice enables the Chinese people to publicly air their opinions, theories and solutions.³⁷

Including their own statement, six of the posters were statements by social justice organizations that Group Material interviewed, while the other six were individuals interviewed by Group Material in Union Square. The organizations were the Committee In Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (C.I.S.P.E.S.), the Home Health Care Workers Union, Planned Parenthood, the Prison Reform Board and the New York State Division of Substance Abuse. The organization statements were black text on a red background; the individual statements were black text on a yellow background. Group Material made the posters by hand for approximately \$200 from their own personal funds, and put them up at night. They stayed there for about five weeks before they became covered over or unreadable.

The statements included:

Even though it's easy and fun, we're sick of being the audience. We want to do something, we want to create our culture instead of just buying it. – Group Material

Government funding of the arts should depend on the actual purpose, what they are giving it for. If it was being based on as far as to help other people or something like that I could see it. – A housewife

³⁷ Group Material Press Release, April 7, 1982. Political Art Documentation/Distribution Archives, MoMA Queens, accessed 1/24/09.

Unions benefit society, but not in my office. - An office worker

These are rough times to stand alone. Even though people are now paid for working, the attitude of masters towards servants remains the same."³⁸ - Home Health Care Workers Union³⁹

The statements don't relate to each other within a specific issue; rather, they are a far-reaching airing of grievances in which individual statements are juxtaposed with responses from organizations that are working on similar concerns. Yet only the organizations and Group Material are identified by proper names, while profession identifies the individuals: a housewife, an office worker, an accounting supervisor, and so on. The piece gives equal space to personal and potentially uninformed opinions (i.e. not experts), alongside organizations working to change social conditions. As Miwon Kwon has written, these divergent positions have a chance to relate to each other in dialogue as an "un-unified public,"⁴⁰ in which incommensurable differences point to an inconclusive democratic process.

As Julie Ault has said,

We were thinking at that time, in 1982, about ways in which public opinion is instrumentalized and wielded by the media in the United States and how opinions and views are reduced to a yes or no, with no complexity or gray area in between, replicating cycles of reductive thinking.⁴¹

³⁸ Julie Ault, from a presentation at La Generazione Delle Immagini, a series of conferences held at the Milan Triennial, Milan, Italy, 1997. Accessed December 15, 2009. www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.p?x=/Pinto/Eng/fault.htm

³⁹ Jan Avikgos "Group Material Timeline: Activism as a Work of Art" But is it Art?: The Spirit of Art as Activism Nina Felshin, Ed. Bay Press, Seattle (1995): 105.

⁴⁰ Miwon Kwon, "Public Art as Publicity" (2002), accessed February 15, 2009 http://republicart.net/disc/publicum/kwon01_en.htm

⁴¹ <http://www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.pl?x=/Facts/Eng/fault.htm>

This thematic framework was such that it did not predetermine a response but allowed multiple strategies to coexist and dialogue with each other, which became influential in later work. As Ault continued,

So in a sense the democracy wall is not so dissimilar from some of our interior shows in terms of the overall framework being a forum or a model of a democratic form.⁴²

Yet, the earlier question of which audience this is a catalyst for reemerges within this project. By creating a piece that uses the language of propaganda and is addressed to the public in general, the actual reactions and conversations that would ensue do not come to fruition. When differing voices are heard for the sake of being heard, *Da Zi Baos* reveals that democracy itself is a rather open-ended agenda. Thus this project acts more like a representation of what democracy could look like, rather than enacting the more complex process where people's competing agendas actually confront each other. Group Material's subsequent move to work in closer collaboration with specific audiences and institutional contexts creates a more developed sense of what interventions in public space could actually produce politically and socially and what artists bring to the table in terms of furthering that conversation.

Subculture, a project from September 1983, was an exhibition of 11-inch-by-28-inch cards installed on New York IRT subway trains for one month and included contributions by 103 artists including Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys and Ida Applebroog. Each artist had fourteen spaces throughout the train system, and

⁴² Julie Ault, from a presentation at La Generazione Delle Immagini, a series of conferences held at the Milan Triennial, Milan, Italy, 1997. Accessed December 15, 2009. www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.p?x=/Pinto/Eng/fault.htm

could either repeat their work fourteen times or create different works for each space. There were approximately two cards for every car, appearing every fourth car. Group Material rented the space for \$5060, which was paid for by the New York State Council on the Arts. None of the contributing artists were paid and they covered their own production costs. Some of the cards included, Lyn Hughes' *Generic Subway Ad*, which said "Advertising space should: (check one) be used by the public; use the public." Or Komar and Melamid's poster, which was a picture of Stalin on a red background and said in Cyrillic (with translation below), "Thank you comrade Stalin for our happy childhood."⁴³

Mundy McLaughlin, the exhibition coordinator for this particular project, said at the time, "I can't even remember specifically it being any one person's idea. We're just interested in social themes. No one-man shows. We never just show ourselves. This thing was partly just a chance to put contemporary work in a place it could be seen. Also: work that people could relate to in some way, as opposed to being alienated from." The reporter interviewing McLaughlin went on to say, "She gave a sigh. Not every comment she's overheard riding those trains has been un-alienated."⁴⁴ Significant here-- and representative of many of Group Material's works during this period-- is the address of ongoing privatization of public space by operating directly within its infrastructure. At the same time and similar to *Da Zi Baos*, it represented a methodological question as to what kind of critical art practice could possibly create any rupture in the rapid expansion of

⁴³ Glenn O'Brien, "Group Material: Taller Latino Americano Gallery and the IRT subway line" [Artforum](#) (December 1983)

⁴⁴ Jerry Talmer, "Art rides a hole in the ground." [New York Post](#) Saturday September 17, 1983.

advertising space and under what conditions people would respond to the work without necessarily reading it as “art” proper. In an effort to point out that these overarching systems of privatization are already operative and deeply influential within daily routines, Group Material was searching for a way in which to both blend seamlessly into existing infrastructures to point out those conditions and also to make their inherent mechanisms available for questioning. Jan Avgikos writes,

Here was art that did not announce itself as art. Here was art that exploited the accessibility of the media to communicate ideas radically different from those that motivate advertising campaigns. Before the public could mount its accustomed resistance to contemporary art (It’s alienating! It speaks a language I don’t understand! It’s not for me!), it had been afforded an art experience and more important, a perspective on social issues that otherwise might receive very little play in the course of daily life.⁴⁵

Unlike *Da Zi Baos*, which was much more controlled in terms of presentation style, the individual works here displayed a range of aesthetic strategies and indeed ambivalence about their relationship to advertising. Though what remains constant is Group Material’s sincere belief that the larger public would benefit from viewing their critical intervention. At the same time that Group Material had an insistent perspective on what should be on view in public spaces, they allowed the artworks and their attendant motivations to operate on their own terms and in conversation with the surrounding advertisements.

Working within institutions: The Whitney Biennial and the Dia Foundation

⁴⁵ Jan Avgikos “Group Material Timeline: Activism as a Work of Art” But is it Art?: The Spirit of Art as Activism Nina Felshin, Ed. Bay Press, Seattle (1995): 104.

Group Material's idea of responsive exhibition-making continued when larger cultural institutions started to extend invitations. Their inclusion of underrepresented voices within a dominant framework began to respond more directly to the way the art-world worked, most explicitly in their *Americana* installation at the Whitney Biennial in 1985. The installation, which took up the entirety of the Whitney's small lobby gallery, included Star Wars and antique auto themed wallpaper, a T.V. set with a *T.V. Guide* placed on top, a Muzak soundtrack, and a salon-style hanging of pictures by LeRoy Neiman, Fritz Scholder, Henry Darger, Alan Belcher, Julie Wachtel, Allan McCollum, Lady Pink, and Tim Rollins in collaboration with his Kids of Survival (K.O.S.) students from the South Bronx, among others. This installation made clear the range of artists and cultural production that was not included within the Biennial, as well as attempting to make the process of curatorial exclusionism transparent to a wider public. As Julie Ault has said,

We were also trying to make a link between aesthetic choices people make shopping for instance in choosing a washing machine or which kind of cereal to buy, and the choices, in some ways based on taste, the Whitney curators make when shopping on a grander scale, for the museum collection.⁴⁶

Group Material's point was not subtle. They wanted to wrest the authorial position from those within the Whitney and by extension the institutions of art and make aesthetic judgment available to anyone entering the exhibition. But what's

⁴⁶ Julie Ault, from a presentation at La Generazione Delle Immagini, a series of conferences held at the Milan Triennial, Milan, Italy, 1997. Accessed December 15, 2009. www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.p?x=/Pinto/Eng/fault.htm

interesting here is not the way in which it was lauded or derided as an attempt at politicizing the Whitney, but how institutional priorities were shifting such that this kind of installation could take place within the Biennial at all.

It was at this point that established museological institutions were reaching out to an expanded set of audiences, partly as a result of significant shifts in funding for the arts during the Reagan era which heavily emphasized the privatization of the public sector and diminished governmental assistance for the arts. As Richard Bolton explains, by 1985 U.S. business provided \$698 billion to the arts, with the government only supplying \$163 million in direct support to the non-profit art sector. Corporations were increasingly seeing the arts as a good marketing strategy, using an approach known as “strategic philanthropy.” As evidence to this effect, Bolton points out a 1986 article in *Public Relations Journal*, which explains, “Taking a risk [supporting controversial art] generally conveys that you...are progressive, adventuresome, and concerned with the future. Alternatively, working with an established art form may imply a sense of concern for tradition and proven quality.”⁴⁷ Thus funding for the art-world changed significantly, as experimental practices as well as larger traditional non-profits faced pressure to become more intermingled with corporate and business culture.

The art market sales boom and the rise of privatized funding for museums and non-profit spaces coincided with “public art” becoming a recognized field of

⁴⁷ Bolton, Richard “Enlightened Self-Interest: The Avant-Garde in the ‘80s.” *Art, Activism & Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*. Ed. Grant Kester. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998: 30-31

critical art practice, as site-specific interventions were produced in collaboration with audiences and intertwined with the social movements of the 1980s. Suzanne Lacy writes that the consciousness of social movements within the art-world developed as a reaction to the predominant political conservatism at the time, which had many side effects directly affecting the arts communities. These included the reversal of many gains of the feminist movement of the 1970s, increasing cultural censorship that targeted women, homosexual and 'ethnic' artists, as well as negligent government response to health and ecological crises such as AIDS.⁴⁸ Around this time as well, David Deitcher notes the emergence of the term "cultural activist," meaning "a variety of cultural practices that criticize mainstream culture and the institutions that regulate it, often embodying the cultural expressions of mainstream communities."⁴⁹ Deitcher attributes this in part to the political theory of Louis Althusser, who argues in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" that, "Oppositional or critical cultural practices have the power to destabilize and hinder the reproductive powers of the dominant ideology."⁵⁰ Thus the symbolic sphere of culture is positioned as an effective staging ground for social and political change. It was a particularly viable moment for this kind of position to emerge, in the sense that artists were becoming radicalized under this political reality and larger cultural institutions were

⁴⁸ Lacy, Suzanne. "Introduction: Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys" *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press Seattle (1995): 28-29

⁴⁹ Deitcher, David. "Social Aesthetics" *Democracy: A Project By Group Material* Brian Wallis, Ed. Dia Art Foundation, Bay Press Seattle (1990):18.

⁵⁰ Deitcher, David. "Social Aesthetics" *Democracy: A Project By Group Material* Brian Wallis, Ed. Dia Art Foundation, Bay Press Seattle (1990):18.

responding. This didn't mean that the art-world instantaneously fashioned a coherent political agenda, but rather that this moment had a sense of potentiality and increased inquiry as to what constitutes art-world participation in the civic realm. As Doug Ashford notes,

But it's definitely true, historically speaking, looking back at the growth of institutions and how they function, that there was a period in which the museum, the notion of curatorship, the role of the museum in relationship to larger cultural issues both fell into a kind of crisis. I think sort of late 70s to late 80s. And in many ways that's why I think a lot of these artists' groups became foregrounded-not to essentialize culture, but I think we all become foregrounded because of the museum crisis and what museums were going to do to try and figure out how to relate to larger audiences, which was not quite negotiated. And you battle within the industry or within discourse between the need for larger audiences and the desire for more critical forms of museum scholarship.⁵¹

It was within this context that Group Material was approached by the Dia Foundation in 1988, at the urging of Yvonne Rainer, then a member of their five-person panel determining Dia's exhibition schedule at their space in Soho at 77 Wooster Street. The Dia Foundation at this point was transforming itself from a traditional patronage model to a more publicly oriented institution and with that came competing for public sources of funding. Before this Dia had been far better known for supporting long-term installation projects for artists such as Walter de Maria, Robert Smithson, and Donald Judd, but now shifted their language to explicitly embrace new forms of inclusive collaboration that were socially topical and activated directly by the audience. Group Material's project was part of a larger series including Martha Rosler's *If you lived here...*, also a multiplatform

⁵¹ Interview with Doug Ashford by Michel Oren (12/16/00) Courtesy of Doug Ashford.

project of exhibitions, lectures and a publication centered on problems of gentrification, homelessness and urban displacement.

In an interview from 1988, Charles Wright, the Executive Director of Dia, explains that Dia had been criticized in the past for what he calls an idealist approach to art, in which audiences directly access the work without the framing devices of the museum and their attendant distractions such as a cafeteria or a bookstore. He says, “The only point of reference is the art. We are trying to restore a directness of contact with art.” Yet he also seems to be saying that this “directness of contact” is not enough to connect with a larger public who they were now trying to engage. When asked about the future of institutions such as the Dia, he notes,

Institutions devoted to contemporary art will turn toward collaborative kinds of projects. Not necessarily big projects, but projects under the control of the artist. I’m not sure we will see significant change in the major institutions. They’re not under the pressure to change. More people go to museums than ever before. But in terms of getting quality or integrity in contemporary art, I think new and less-mainstream organizations will resort to collaborative types of ventures, Dia is not a pioneer in this, but Dia has been doing it for a while and on a scale that others have not undertaken. Collaboration, it’s the best.⁵²

Wright’s statement implies that supporting challenging artistic work had long been part of Dia’s mission, but it also reveals a significant change in emphasis from an artist-centric approach to providing access to audiences. Dia was opening up to an entirely different set of concerns with no real articulated agenda, representing a significant and somewhat unexpected opportunity for Group Material to try out their set of ideas.

⁵² “Interview with Charles Wright: December 2, 1988” *Parachute* 54 (March/April/May/June 1989)

Democracy: a project by Group Material

In response to this opportunity, Group Material, which now consisted of Julie Ault, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Doug Ashford, created the multiplatform *Democracy* between September 1988 and January 1989. The project addressed the “crisis in democracy” in four parts: education, cultural participation, electoral politics, and AIDS. Each part consisted of an exhibition, roundtable discussion, and open town hall meetings, and included both artists and non-artists with vested interests in each of the topics, such as teachers, students, and activists. A publication documenting all the activities and featuring an array of critical essays came out in 1990.

The years 1988-90 were a particularly heightened context of conservative attacks on progressive culture, otherwise known as the time of the “culture wars.” The two major flash-points of contention were the National Endowment for the Arts’ (NEA) funding for an individual artist fellowship for Andres Serrano through the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art and a retrospective for Robert Mapplethorpe at the Corcoran Gallery scheduled for the summer of 1989. Senator Alfonse D’Amato publicly denounced Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, saying, “This so-called piece of art is a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity.” Senator Jesse Helms seconded D’Amato, saying,

The Senator from New York is absolutely correct in his indignation and in his description of the blasphemy of the so-called art work. I do not know

Mr. Andres Serrano, and I hope I never meet him. Because he is not an artist, he is a jerk. Let him be a jerk on his own time and with his own resources. Do not dishonor our lord.⁵³

The Corcoran gallery subsequently cancelled their planned exhibition of Mapplethorpe, trying to avoid further controversy by saying that in order to protect the integrity of the work, it couldn't be shown in such a sensational and politicized atmosphere. Corcoran Director Christina Orr-Cahall (former chair of the NEA) said at the time, "If you think about this for a long time, as we did, this is not censorship; in fact, this is the full artistic freedom which we all support. The extraordinary pressure exerted over the NEA resulted in the change of funding guidelines from grants allocated based on "artistic excellence and artistic merit" to include that artists must adhere to "general standards of decency."⁵⁴ Patrick Buchanan, Reagan's former director of communication said at the time, "Conservatives had best become interested in art if they wish to see civilization survive in the 21st century."⁵⁵

Within this debate, the role of the "artist" becomes highly mythologized and subject to a moral questioning that was previously not deemed relevant. As Grant Kester points out in his article, "Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public," before this particular controversy started, the NEA enjoyed relative autonomy and grants were decided through an extensive

53 Vance, Carol. "The War on Culture." Art Matters. How the Culture Wars Changed America Ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine. New York: New York University Press (1999): 222.

54 Ibid., 226.

55 Wallis, Brian "Democracy and Cultural Activism" Democracy: A Project by Group Material Ed. Brian Wallis. New York: Dia Art Foundation (1990): 9.

peer review process, creating a vibrant alternative art sector that didn't cater much to a non-art public. But now, artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Karen Finley, and Andres Serrano had their work argued about in the mainstream press and alternative art spaces received a huge increase in visitors.

The non-profit art sector now had to make their concerns legible to an uninitiated public that was suddenly very interested in what they were doing. And the prevailing sentiment, resulting from the hysterical scrutiny of conservative politicians and an ill-prepared art community, was that experimental work must contribute to a social good in order to be deemed fundable. Kester writes, "In fact, the belief that it is the particular job of the contemporary artist to act as the conscience of society has become a commonplace in current debates over the function of the arts."⁵⁶

This figured prominently in Group Material's introduction to the Dia project, in which they wrote, "In general, we see ourselves as the outspoken distant relative at the annual reunion who can be counted on to bring up the one subject no one wants to talk about."⁵⁷ Here it is evident how Group Material is struggling with their implication within and their departure from the conventional relationships between art institutions and the public they serve. The family metaphor is useful in that Group Material saw themselves as an integral part of a larger arts system, whose conditions were mostly beyond their control though

⁵⁶ Kester, Grant. "Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public." Art, Activism & Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage. Ed. Grant Kester. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998: 125.

⁵⁷ Group Material. "On Democracy." Democracy: A Project by Group Material. Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1990: 1.

also constructed through personal relationships in which responsibility and accountability could be questioned. Here it is important to distinguish a critical difference in the ways institutions often seek to present themselves to the public (as impervious well-organized machines) as opposed to the way they exist in reality (as fissured, permeable, and changeable subjects). For Group Material, this recognition determined their way of working with the Dia Foundation, meaning that they could approach the situation as a platform built upon contesting agendas where participants were made aware of their interdependence but also how they were limited by each other's interests. To be more specific, the people working at the Dia at that moment supported the project yet Dia as a name existed for the public as largely exclusionary and elitist. Group Material on the other hand had politically radical credibility yet also were looking to implement a culturally democratic agenda that wasn't easily dismissed as coming only from the margins. This platform based upon mutual interest became the starting point on which the project was formed.

A defining feature of the project was putting democracy, as a way of working, on display. As Doug Ashford has said,

Democracy was our theme because its manifestations were already our form – the robust energy of inclusion, judgment and more inclusion, the context of dissensus and the encounter with difference as a daily practice. More than an analogy – we wanted at first to un-anchor the exhibition from any object list and have it change periodically with participation of others activated by concern for this issue.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Lecture by Doug Ashford, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. 10/25/08.

Thus the theme of democracy is a general conceptual framework for the exhibition, yet also is recognized as something that is operative in everyone's daily life; i.e. education, personal health, food, neighborhood politics, etc. For instance, "Education & Democracy" addressed the inadequacy of the educational system while presenting alternative educational methodologies and self-education options. The exhibition installation included over fifty contributions, including sculptures by John Ahearn, Doug Ashford's 'The Malcolm X Project' with his students at Boys and Girls High School in Brooklyn, Joseph Beuys' *FIU Blackboards* and an illustration from *Horton Hears a Who* by Dr. Seuss. The space was set up like a classroom, with the walls painted as blackboards and with rows of desks situated in the middle of the gallery. "Politics and Election" dealt with issues surrounding the electoral process, and included a 40-foot flag that ran along one of the walls of the gallery and a recliner with a television set playing every political campaign commercial since the Eisenhower era. "Cultural Participation" addressed the politics of consumption and incorporated a wall lined with snack foods and interspersed them with works by Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Tina Barney.

The final iteration for Democracy was "AIDS & Democracy: A Case Study." It was in this iteration that debates between the symbolic, contemplative space of the gallery vs. direct political action became particularly pointed, made so apparent by the pressing concerns of the AIDS crisis. Group Material describes their objectives in the press release,

This installation will create a juncture in which sorrow, rage, and fear can be used to reinforce our decision to act, to empower ourselves in the struggle for a society by which all individuals will have their most basic needs fulfilled by a responsible, egalitarian, and truly democratic government.⁵⁹

The works were both contemporary and historical, and included Andres Serrano's *Winged Victory* from 1987, in which a photograph of *Nike of Samothrace*, the symbol of victory for ancient Greeks, is submerged in urine, a self-portrait of Robert Mapplethorpe from 1988, and Dorothea Lange's *Middle Aged Man with Tag*, a photograph taken in a Japanese internment camp on April 6, 1943. This photograph was part of a series Lange took while on assignment for the War Relocation Authority, which initially was impounded by the Army for their critical stance and later became part of the National Archives. These heterogeneous and poetic works reflected on death and loss as well as represented a critical assessment of American history in regards to censorship and repression. These pieces were placed alongside a large amount of activist and educational materials stacked on a long table in the center of the gallery. On either side of the table were television monitors playing a continuous program of videos by activists, video artists, and filmmakers.

The accompanying publication that came out in 1990 also echoed the works in the exhibition, not by directly documenting the display but relating a similar set of concerns. In the gallery was Michael Jenkins's *June 30, 1986* an altered flag hung vertically and consisting of only nine stripes and an absence of

⁵⁹ Dia Art Foundation Press Release, "Group Material Installation 'AIDS and Democracy: A Case Study'" December 8, 1988. Political Art Documentation/Distribution Archives, MoMA Queens, accessed 1/24/09.

stars. The piece refers to the *Bowers v. Hardwick* Supreme Court Justice ruling (5-4) on June 30, 1986, which affirmed a Georgia statute to criminalize consensual sodomy even in the privacy of one's home. The *Hardwick* decision also figures prominently on the cover of the book, *Democracy: A Project by Group Material*, which is a photograph of police officers standing behind a "DO NOT CROSS" barrier, credited to "Jane Rosett, Civil Disobedience against the *Hardwick* Decision, Supreme Court Building, Washington D.C. October 10, 1988." As Yates McKee writes, Group Material's choice of this photograph is meant to highlight a particular moment of AIDS activism as well as to create an equivalence with other forms of activism that come up against governmental and police logics that seek to control social behavior. This is further supported by the inside cover of the publication, a photograph of a Civil rights demonstration taken on August 28, 1963. McKee writes,

Contesting both the overextension and negligence of governing agencies, the civil disobedience action on the cover of *Democracy* thus positions the *demos* (or common people) as those who neither embrace governmental power as the proper representation of their interests nor oppose it as the corruption of their capacities of self-representation: this is democracy as what Michael Feher has called 'nongovernmental politics...a politics determined to act as such.'⁶⁰

So there are multiple relationships and equivalences being built within Group Material's framework. These include establishing shared space for works of art and direct political action, as well as connecting AIDS activism with a larger field

⁶⁰ McKee, Yates. "Contemporary Art and the Legacies of Democracy" [A Guide to Democracy in America](#). Nato Thompson, ed. New York, New York: Creative Time Books, 2008: 30.

of cultural and political struggles that are also engaged with the issue of self-representation.

As with all the other phases of the project, a “Town Meeting” was held as an open forum for the public to weigh in on the designated subject. The town meeting was used to emphasize dialogue and equal participation as one of the most deeply embedded forms of American democracy. Yet it was difficult for Group Material to escape its deeply mythologized underpinnings, as David Deitcher points out in his essay in the Dia publication, “Social Aesthetics.” He cites this passage by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who writes,

In a town meeting the roots of society were reached. Here the rich gave council, but the poor also; and moreover, the just and the unjust. In this open democracy every opinion had utterance; every objection, every fact, every acre of land, every bushel of rye, its entire weight.⁶¹

Group Material had a lot of baggage to work against when they evoked such a nostalgic ideal. The idealized form of the town hall meeting threatened to eclipse the actual conversation happening in the space. Yet, these discussions also had a disconcerting and contradictory element for many participants involved who openly questioned the art context, and by extension the Dia Foundation, as the proper site for a discussion on the cultural response to the AIDS crisis. Deitcher writes that, “they were understood from the beginning as symbolic events: as manifestations of the vanguard world of art.” This is echoed by Avrom

61 David Deitcher. “Social Aesthetics” Democracy: A Project by Group Material. Ed. Wallis, Brian. Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1990: 38.

Finkelstein, a member of Silence = Death Project and Gran Fury, who participated in the Town Meeting. He says,

Tonight, for instance, we are here in an art-funded space talking about AIDS, and I have to say that it makes me very sad that there are so few places where I can talk about AIDS aside from the street screaming with ACT UP or in some sort of cloistered environment like this. The arts community has contributed a tremendous amount, but it falls short of its true cultural responsibility when the information it presents is so highly codified.

He goes on to note,

A case in point is this evening's discussion. Why is it being documented? I think it is important for people to have access to information on AIDS and in that respect I think it's a great idea. But my point is that by discussing these issues in codified ways and in these very elitist circles we are really serving the arts patrons, the people who are funding this evening, the show that accompanies this, and a lot of other cultural events. The implication is that those people in some way contribute to culture in a way that we as individuals are not able or that people who are artists cannot.⁶²

There are a number of frustrations here with art as an insular institution that echo with the other participants and don't really have a settled place to land. The question of whom this project is really for is paramount and not easily answered. To a certain degree, this is what the temporary exhibition platform offers to both the participants and the hosting institution, a chance to acknowledge that all the settled places, i.e. the market, the museum, the funding bodies, etc. were exhausted and breaking apart at that moment. Certainly Group Material doesn't want the demands of a more equitable cultural system aimed solely at the Dia Foundation though it is fully implicated as are the artists

⁶² Edited Town Meeting documentation. Democracy: A Project by Group Material. Wallis, Brian ed. Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1990: 284.

themselves. And the project is also not about educating an audience as to the best practices of cultural activism. Rather, Group Material is proposing that art serves as a model for understanding an embedded network of social problems, in which engagement is not an abstract notion but based in the reality that there are all these artists, activists, and concerned people responding to this epidemic in various ways. Rather than only asking who does the project benefit directly or who is being educated, Group Material challenges how this community of participants see themselves in relationship to other people working on the same issues and how their individual viewpoints test and enhance each other. It is true that the Dia Foundation may pat itself on the back for allowing such a politically progressive exhibition inside their space, but it is also possible to see some efficacy in letting these contentious issues reach a more traditional institution like the Dia. This is what becomes open to debate within this context.

This became frustrating for some people who were looking for the oppositional rhetoric of Group Material's early work. Kim Levin, in an article in the Village Voice, "It's Called Denial: Another Group Material's AIDS Show" criticizes the show for being non-confrontational, saying that Group Material created a palatable exhibition of distanced art works that create an easily consumed metaphor for AIDS rather than confronting its reality. She ends by saying,

The show also raises questions about how Group Material's role, at the end of the '80s, has subtly changed. We still think of Group Material as the freewheeling social-activist group that took social, political art out of an art context and into vacant buildings, onto the advertising lots of subway cars, and within a Sunday New York Times supplement. In an art context — a Whitney Biennial or Documenta 8—Group Material included what regular

curators tend to leave out. ...I wish the AIDS crisis had provoked them to do something more than a well-meaning commendable theme show. As Moore [Patrick Moore, publicity director of the Kitchen] said to me, "It doesn't matter who the artists are or what they are doing. They have to be doing something other than their art." Art is not enough.⁶³

The reaction from Martha Rosler and Group Material printed in the letters section of the Village Voice expressed frustration that Kim Levin was ignoring all the effort that had gone into assembling the extensive amount of educational materials presented at the show as well as seeming to advocate that artists give up their work in favor of activism. Rosler asks, "Does that, I wonder, apply to critics as well?" Group Material's letter called Levin's article, "factually manipulative and inappropriate. Worst of all, it was politically simplistic." They go on to say, "What Levin interprets as handsome and palatable we intended to be evocative and reflective, encouraging critical distance. This crisis demands we utilize every strategy on every front, including art."⁶⁴

"AIDS and Democracy" reveals the deeply challenging position of its participants, evidenced by these debates as to when art is enough or not enough to respond to crisis. The implication on the part of Levin is that if something looks like art, then it can't be activism or politically motivated. Yet, Group Material deliberately places their project outside the realm of political didacticism, as part of its goal is to recognize the agency of the participants. This is where the limitations and the possibilities of the art context are exposed. It makes no sense for artists to drop everything they have learned and take up the moniker of

⁶³ Levin, Kim. "Another Look at Group Material's AIDS Show: It's Called Denial" The Village Voice January 17, 1989, 87.

⁶⁴ "Letters to the Editor" The Village Voice February 7, 1989, 6.

activist in order to somehow become more effective in addressing the AIDS crisis. But Group Material is coming at the issue in a different way; if one is invested in the art-world, as many artists are for economic and social reasons, then how can this community of participants take responsibility for the organization and production of the reception of their work.

The fact that *Democracy* mostly reached those involved in the centralized art-world has been clearly noted, both by the participants and contributors to the publication. But to move beyond this as an admittedly serious limitation and consider what constitutes a common interest here, the question becomes how and under what conditions political art can be integrated into political and social systems of power and whose interest it serves. A fundamental element of this project is that this question becomes a publicly debatable proposition, meaning for both the publics who were physically present and those who learn about it in other ways. Group Material disrupts the expectation that as the exhibiting artists, they have a specific message to impart or to teach; they are no more equipped to answer the questions than anyone else involved. Indeed, they point out the impossibility of one exhibition or one public town meeting ever being adequate to represent the AIDS crisis or democracy in general; rather, it is one site among many in which these problems are debated and contextualized.

It is with this fundamental set of self-reflexive questions that the *Democracy* project serves as a relevant model for addressing contemporary concerns. On the one hand, this project shows that all cultural infrastructures are

potentially open to infiltration and on the other, provides a starting point for when that infiltration is sanctioned and even welcomed. The project begs the question, how is political efficacy decided in this kind of situation? Is a temporary space for these issues to coexist enough? What this project foregrounds is a way of figuring out what the responsibilities and responses that can come from art-world participants that could provide new ways of approaching social concerns. The end result is less located in addressing specific outcomes than foregrounding how representation is never a neutral undertaking. By creating an artistic position that openly declared a stake in the organizational forms of culture yet retained a critical distance that questioned those forms, what I earlier called a para-institution, Group Material creates a space to question the political motivations of participation.

CONCLUSION

Throughout their practice, Group Material identified shifting spatial and temporal boundaries for democratic exchange. By moving between “alternative” and “institutional” spaces and identifying their underlying mechanisms, Group Material's work creates a model for critical practice that resists being dependent on particular cultural infrastructures for support or meaning. At the same time, it takes on the uncertain promise of democracy, in which the rights of the governed are determined through a process of contentious debate and compromise. This is where they locate an “art of policy,” in which their exhibitions enact an ambiguous space of negotiation between artists, publics and institutions, which produce a tension of competing agendas. Their installations bring together a range of ideas, voices, and aesthetic responses that speak to the complexity of political and social issues and the multiple ways they manifest in popular culture and “high art” discourse. Yet Group Material also takes on the concern of an artist’s responsibility when they are invited into institutions to represent those political issues.

The qualities of Group Material’s practice that allowed them to gain a measure of success above and beyond many of the other New York-based politically-oriented artists and collectives that emerged in the 1980s extend beyond their working inside art institutions. From the beginning, Group Material communicated with a singular voice, with the implicit understanding that they represented a larger sphere of disenfranchised people with whom they identified

and for whom they provided a point of entry. As Jan Avgikos, writes in “Group Material Timeline: Activism as a Work of Art” this structure enabled Group Material to speak from an ideological position rather than implying the factual voice of a single creator. She goes on to say that this ideological position stems from a belief that all the collaborative and physical effort that goes into the production of art is indeed the work of art. She writes, “Group Material exhibitions were freighted in support of an ideology that values process as product, subject as object—and work as art. In its scheme of the aesthetic situation the Group occupies the role of individual producer; artists invited to participate in exhibitions do so as co-producers, and their product, or work of art, is signified by the exhibition itself and the collaboration it represents.”⁶⁵

Therefore, though Group Material came to represent a large group of so-called “marginalized voices,” they also functioned as a singular producer, meaning that they provided an access point and considerable track record for working with diverse communities. For institutions looking to broaden their scope and include a more expanded audience, Group Material became the mediators who decided the ethical framework of participation and the terms for all parties involved, and they themselves were accountable after the fact for whether the project was successful or not. By taking on this responsibility as part of their art practice, they also were able to hold on to a measure of independence and could evade becoming merely an affirmational element of institutional priorities. By

⁶⁵ Jan Avgikos “Group Material Timeline: Activism as a Work of Art” But is it Art?: The Spirit of Art as Activism Nina Felshin, Ed. Bay Press, Seattle (1995): 90.

affirmational I am referring to Herbert Marcuse's idea of "affirmational culture" as the way in which culture acts to reaffirm the position of those people and structures in power. As Richard Bolton writes,

"In affirmation culture, social conditions are examined abstractly; conflicts are cloaked in false universality and collectivism, obscured by apparent unity and apparent freedom. By distinguishing culture from civilization in this manner, culture could be removed from social process. Crisis and conflict are displaced to an *imaginary realm*, and resolution is conceived only within this imaginary realm. By calling up and then subverting this desire for change, the existing systems of power is strengthened that is, affirmed."⁶⁶

For Bolton, the avant-garde of the 1980s critically failed because it became incorporated as a marketing strategy for commercial and corporate interests, evident in the skyrocketing markets for contemporary art, an increasing reliance on corporate donations on the part of museums and non-profit spaces, as well as the proliferation of artists participating in advertisements and marketing campaigns. He writes, "For if the artist—someone with a sophisticated understanding of the logic of representation—can be so completely subverted, what hope is there for other kinds of subcultural resistance, once this image encounters its image in the mass media?"⁶⁷ Yet, for Group Material, it's not about artist as the privileged subject battling valiantly against commercial exploitation, but art itself as an experience that both creates and transforms contexts for its own meaning because it is constituted through a social body. By developing their

⁶⁶ Bolton, Richard "Enlightened Self-Interest: The Avant-Garde in the '80s." Art, Activism & Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage. Ed. Grant Kester. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998: 35.

⁶⁷ Bolton, Richard "Enlightened Self-Interest: The Avant-Garde in the '80s." Art, Activism & Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage. Ed. Grant Kester. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998: 47.

own set of priorities and aesthetic guidelines based upon dialogue with invested participants, Group Material attempted to operate outside the valorization of the artist as genius or moral guide and create a platform for multiple voices to debate. It is in this way that Group Material began to shift the terms of a resistant art practice to be inclusive of those not self-defined as artists and aimed for an additive discourse that reached beyond the simple negation of commercialization or privatization.

Starting with their storefront project, Group Material created a space that spoke directly to the limitations of both larger non-profits and cultural institutions as well as the insularity of the alternative art space movement. By widening the scope of what constitutes “art” to include the culture happening on a neighborhood level, they listened and responded to the wants and needs of their specific community. Though as a large group of artists with far-reaching goals to upend the way art was traditionally exhibited, they experienced the pitfalls of operating democratically with people who may not necessarily have similar long-term objectives. In abandoning the physical location and realizing their own limitations in terms of running an art space, they left behind the chance to build long-lasting relationships with their neighbors who participated in exhibitions like *The People’s Choice*, which was part of their initial purpose. But what they moved towards was creating an artistic model that could be replicated, emulated and built upon, rather than focused solely on sustainability or stability. With the remaining members, their project became an experiment in operating differently

from the infrastructures already in place for exhibiting art and treating organizing as a creative form, and therefore it didn't make sense for them to be limited to a single location. Instead of becoming just an exemplary alternative space, doing right by their particular community, they reorganized themselves and pushed against expectations of what community-based artists can do beyond just claiming to contribute to a social good.

Yet this meant moving into ambiguous territory. Rejecting goals of sustainability or stability meant that their projects were always precarious in terms of how they could be relevant to audiences and contexts outside the specific space of the exhibition. As they started to become known for creating exhibitions that brought together artist and activist practices, the idea of symbolic inclusiveness came to be questioned by the artists themselves. This became most apparent in the *Democracy* project, wherein the representation of inclusiveness in a form like the town hall meeting worked for some participants to intentionally obscure the elitism of an institution like the Dia Foundation. At the same time, the project succeeded on the level that artists who identified as activists or worked in some way outside the art context, as educators or health care workers or political theorists, could find a common space to take stock of how cultural activism is being formulated and where it could potentially go.

By the mid-1990s, Group Material had come to be recognized as some of the most preeminent practitioners of community-based art, which had gained widespread institutional recognition. Their work offered to bridge a gap between

“high art” concerns and non-artists that museums and galleries were either unwilling or unable to take on themselves. Yet with that acceptance came a struggle to resist letting institutions off the hook for their own shortcomings. In an interview from 1990, when asked about how Group Material is treated as the group that goes in and addresses or fixes the “marginal people” problem, Doug Ashford replied,

I think that a Group Material project becomes a chore when it’s set up [in that way]. There’s an intellectual history that was marginal and has now partially entered the institutional apparatus of the art world. We have a place there that’s often predicted. And so we end up in the situation, as Julie said, where we’re kind of contractors, ‘well, we know what you do, you do great ceilings, come in and do that ceiling.’ Well, we don’t do ceilings anymore, maybe we should do floors now.”⁶⁸

Group Material stopped working together in 1996. What their practice leaves behind is the opportunity to critically assess what is still excluded from the “institutional apparatus of the art world” and the benefits, if any, of inclusion. Today there is a concerted interest in and purported support for collaborative, collective, and community-based forms of art. And there is a complex history of the institutions of art bringing political artists into the fold and Group Material is a visible part of that trajectory. Yet theirs is not simply a narrative of co-optation because part of Group Material’s work involves consciously entering the institution to question what increased visibility actually produces.

Group Material’s complex relationship to the institutions that framed their practice, by which I mean the infrastructures that order the “art-world” (whether

⁶⁸ “An Interview with Group Material: Social Studies: 4 + 4 Young Americans” Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin Oberlin College XLIV 1 1990

alternative, commercial, or museological), was fundamental to their methodology. Their recognition, that institutions are constructed and continually reconstituted among individual relationships and embedded within political, economic, and social contexts, created an opening for differing political and cultural agendas to emerge and be articulated. Indeed, Group Material saw no clear distinction between a political practice and participation in the established system of distribution for art. Rather, the opportunity for political intervention in the symbolic realm of culture is predicated on understanding its systemic contradictions and attendant resources. These concerns remain central to artists and exhibition-makers working today who want to create meaningful exchange between culture and politics within the spaces of art.

“Alternative” and “institutional” ways of working are linked together in constructing an art-world that is dependent on its participants to determine its direction. There is a responsibility on the part of art-world participants, artists, administrators and audiences, to demand a voice in how their resources will be utilized. Group Material points out the ways in which negotiation and compromise are directly dependent on sharing histories of what's already been done, and imagining the conditions for an ethical and critical art world that would support its constituents. Group Material proceeds by framing questions to identify ways of being in institutions. From these questions arise key principles that can be tested in practice. These are not unbendable or categorical imperatives; rather they are

modes of operating within systems in order to continue learning, growing, and producing new conversations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ashford, Doug. "The Exhibition as an Artistic Medium." *Art Journal* 57 (Summer 1998): 28-37.

Interview with Doug Ashford by Michel Oren (12/16/00) Courtesy of Doug Ashford.

Doug Ashford, Lecture at Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. 10/25/08.

Ashford, Doug, Ed. *Who Cares?* New York: Creative Time Books, 2006.

Ashford, Doug, Wendy Ewald, Nina Felshin, and Patricia C. Phillips. "A Conversation on Social Collaboration." *Art Journal* 65 (2006): 59-82

Ault, Julie "Public Art" www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.pl?x=/Facts/Eng/fault.htm
Guide to contemporary Art in Italy, accessed 02/10/2007 11:44 Am

Ault, Julie, Ed. *Alternative art, New York, 1965-1985: a cultural politics book for the Social Text Collective: the Drawing Center, New York / Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.*

Ault, Julie, Ed. *Cultural economies: histories from the Alternative Arts Movement, NYC / organized by Julie Ault; February 24-April 6, 1996. New York : Drawing Center, 1996.*

Beck, Martin (2002). *Alternative: Space. Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985. J. Ault. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 201-246.*

Bishop, Claire. "Art Rewrites the Rules of Pedagogy." *Modern Painters* (September 2007) : 86-89.

Brenson, Michael. *Acts of Engagement: Writings on Art, Criticism, and Institutions, 1993-2002. New York, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004.*

Buchloh, B. H. D. (1990). "Conceptual Art 1962 - 1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to Critique of Institutions." *October* 55(Winter): 105-143.

Cameron, Dan, Ed. *East village USA / Dan Cameron, Liza Kirwin, Alan W. Moore, Penny Arcade, Patti Astor, Julie Ault, Mitch Corber, Lydia Lunch, Carlo McCormick, Calvin Reid, Mark Russell, Sur Rodney (Sur). New York : New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004.*

Cox, Geoff, Joasia Krysa and Anya Lewin, Ed. *Date browsers 01: Economising Culture*. New York: Autonomedia, 2004.

Critical Art Ensemble. "Observations on Collective Cultural Action." *Art Journal* 57 (Summer 1998): 73-85.

Critical Art Ensemble. "An interview with Group Material." *Interventions and Provocations: Conversations on Art, Culture, and Resistance*. Ed. Glenn Harper. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998: 19-31.

Deutsche, R. (1992). "Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy." *Social Text* 33(1992): 34-53.

Deutsche, R. (2007). *The Art of Not Being Governed Quite So Much*. Hans Haacke: *For Real Works 1959-2006*. M. Flugge, and Fleck, Robert. Dusseldorf, Richter Verlag.

Duncombe, Stephen. *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*. New York: The New Press, 2007.

Fraser, A. (2006). "A museum is not a business. It is run in a businesslike fashion". *Art and its Institutions*. N. Möntmann. London, Black Dog: 86-99.

Glahn, Philip. "Public Art: Avant-Garde Practice and the Possibilities of Critical Articulation." *Afterimage* 28.3 (November/December 2000): 10-12.

Glueck, Grace. "The New Collectives- Reaching for a Wider Audience" *The New York Times*, Sunday February 1, 1981.

Goldbard, Arlene (2002). *When (Art) Worlds Collide: Institutionalizing the Alternatives*. *Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985*. J. Ault. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 183-200.

Goldstein, Richard. "Enter the Anti Space: ART BEAT The Politics of Culture." *The Village Voice*, November 5 – November 11, 1980.

Green, Renee. "Review: Democracy in Question." *Transition* 53 (1991): 163-167

Greenberg, Reesa. "The Exhibition Redistributed: a case for reassessing space." *Thinking about Exhibitions* Ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson and Sandy Nairne. London and New York: Routledge, 1996 :349-371.

Group Material (Assorted Files), Political Art Documentation/Distribution Archives at Queens MoMA, accessed 1/24/09

Hall, Peter. "Group Material: An Interview" Real Life Magazine #11/12; Winter 1983/84.

Harper, Glenn, Ed. Interventions and Provocations: Conversations on Art, Culture, and Resistance. Glenn Harper, Ed. State University of New York Press, Albany (1998).

Hess, Elizabeth. "Home Style Looking" The Village Voice Jan 28 – Feb 3, 1981.

Holmes, B. (2007). Do-It-Yourself Geopolitics. Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination Since 1945. B. S. G. Stimson. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 273-294.

Holmes, Brian. "The Oppositional Device: Or, taking matters *into* whose hands?" 23 Readings on Art, Activism & Education Compiled by the Think Tank that has yet to be named. #13

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Ed. The Revolution Will Not Be Funded. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007.

Kardon, Janet, Ed. The East Village scene : October 12-December 2, 1984, Institute of Contemporary Art. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1984.

Kester, Grant. "Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public." Art, Activism & Opporitionality: Essays from Afterimage. Ed. Grant Kester. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998: 103-136.

Kohn, Margaret. Radical Space: Building the House of the People. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003.

Kwon, Miwon. "Public Art as Publicity" (2002), accessed February 15, 2009 http://republicart.net/disc/publicum/kwon01_en.htm

Lawson, T. (1996). Attempting Community. Cultural Economies: Histories from the Alternative Arts Movement, NYC. New York, The Drawing Center: 11-15.

Levin, Kim. "Another Look at Group Material's AIDS Show: It's Called Denial" The Village Voice January 17, 1989, 87.

Lippard, L. R. (2002). *Biting the Hand: Artists and Museums in New York since 1969. Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985.* J. Ault. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 79-120.

McKenzie, J. S., Rebecca, *Critical Art Ensemble* (2000). "Critical Art Ensemble Tactical Media Practitioners: An Interview." *TDR* 44(4): 136-150.

Moore, Alan. "Artists' Collectives: Focus on New York, 1975-2000." *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945.* Ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007: 193-223.

Moore, A. W. C., Jim (2002). *Local History: The Art of Battle for Bohemia in New York.* Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985. J. Ault. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 321-365.

Morzorati, Gerald. "Artful Dodger" *The Soho News*, October 15, 1980.

Mouffe, C., Duetsche, Rosalyn, et. all. (2001). "Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension." *Grey Room* 2 (Winter 2001): 98-125.

Nairne, Sandy. "The Institutionalization of Dissent." *Thinking about Exhibitions* Ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson and Sandy Nairne. London and New York: Routledge, 1996 :387-411.

O'Brien, Glenn. "Group Material: Taller Latino Americano Gallery and the IRT subway line" *Artforum* (December 1983)

Owens, Craig. "The Problem with Puerilism," *Art in America* 72, no. 6 (Summer 1984): 162-163.

Pentecost, Claire. "Oh! the public amateur is not afraid to let on that she just figured it out." Accessed January 15, 2009. <http://publicamateur.wordpress.com/>

Phillips, Patricia C. "(Inter)Disciplinary Actions." *Public Art Review* 15 (2003): 11-15.

Purves, Ted. Ed. *What we want is free: generosity and exchange in recent art.* Albany: State University of New York Press (2005)

Raunig, G. (2007). *Art and revolution : transversal activism in the long twentieth century.* Los Angeles Cambridge, Mass., Semiotext(e) ; Distributed by The MIT Press.v

Rosler, M. (2004). *Out of the Vox: Martha Rosler on Art's Activist Potential*. Artforum. v.43: 218-219.

Sheikh, S. (2006). The Trouble with Institutions, or, Art and its Publics. *Art and its Institutions*. N. Möntmann. London, Black Dog: 142-149.

Sholette, Gregory. "Fidelity, Betrayal, Autonomy: In and Beyond the Post Cold-War Art Museum" (2002): accessed March 10, 2009.
http://www.gregorysholette.com/writings/writing_index.html

Talmer, Jerry. "Art rides a hole in the ground." *New York Post Saturday* September 17, 1983.

Thompson, Nato, ed. *A Guide to Democracy in America*. New York, New York: Creative Time Books, 2008.

de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. New York, New York: Bantam Classics, First published 1835, reissued 2004

Vance, Carol. "The War on Culture." *Art Matters. How the Culture Wars Changed America* Ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine. New York: New York University Press (1999)

Verwoert, J. (2006). This is Not an Exhibition. On the Practical Ties and Symbolic Differences between the Agency of the Art Institution and the Work of Those on its Outside. *Art and its Institutions*. N. Möntmann. London, Black Dog: 132-141.

Wallis, Brian. *Democracy: A Project by Group Material*. Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1990.

Wallis, Brian (2002). *Public Funding and Alternative Spaces*. *Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985*. J. Ault. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 161-182.

Wallis, Brian, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine, Ed. *Art matters : how the culture wars changed America*. New York : New York University Press, 1999.