



Group Material, *The AIDS Timeline*, installation view, 1989. Photo: Ben Blackwell, courtesy of the MATRIX Gallery, University Art Museum, Berkeley.

GROUP MATERIAL

By Maria F. Porges

Group Material—four artists whose collaborative work consists of curating/orchestrating exhibitions relating to political themes—were in Berkeley to install *The AIDS Timeline* at the University Art Museum. After working all night putting the show up, Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Felix Gonzales-Torres, and Karen Ramspacher were still able to speak eloquently about their work and its implications.

Maria Porges. How did you begin?

Julie Ault. We consider that the whole group co-founded it together, even though Tim kind of initiated it. There were thirteen of us when we started— when we first got together. We saved up money and rented a space and opened this exhibition space on East Thirteenth Street on the lower east side, and at that point we put together a series of nine exhibitions the first year. We were interested in creating a context for our own work—a social context, exhibition context—as well as showing other work we felt had some kind of social value. We were interested in developing a relationship with the immediate community and having that relationship also inform our programming and what we did in the space. An example of a show that we did in that time period was called *The People's Choice* which best exemplifies that community relationship. We went around on New Year's Day and invited people to give us something from their homes that was of cultural value; people kind of came in and out and knew what we were doing but didn't quite get it, and this was kind of a great way of including the people on the block and establishing a better relationship. The show was hung salon style and just included all these different objects which varied from a Robert Morris poster that someone had found in an abandoned apartment to a mother's pictures . . . you know, family photographs of her sons.

Doug Ashford. I wasn't in the group at that

time but this show was phenomenally important then; it was really just about inviting the community to make a picture of themselves, and by doing that it was very very inclusive.

Maria Porges. But were the shows you did at that time aside from this show as specifically political?

JA. Yeah, from the beginning that was really what the focus of Group Material was. We didn't know how we were gonna do it, but we wanted to somehow make something or have some kind of practice that would combine our interest in art with our interest in society and politics and having those things not be separate or exclusive of each other. We had a show about gender. We had a show about consumption as metaphor past

time and necessity. The last exhibition we did was called *An Emergency For Atlanta* and it was at the time of the Atlanta child murders that were happening; that was a show that was pulled together really quickly in response to this thing that was going on. So they were all issue oriented while leaving some room for topical issues.

MP. Do you feel that there is something that can be accomplished curatorially that cannot be accomplished as individual artists in terms of addressing political and social issues?

Felix Gonzales-Torres. I guess we should make that clear that we don't consider ourselves strictly curators. I think we consider ourselves primarily artists, that the installation is our medium.

JA. Or the project.

Karen Rampsacher. To answer your question, though, which was why do we do it this way, instead of doing a united project as in an object, I think we see ourselves as each having really different perspectives on whatever we're looking at, and we each bring something different to the project, like specific information or a point of view. And that's what's really important. We combine those perspectives to try and provide a new sort of way of looking at whatever it is we're looking at, like in this case, AIDS. We all wrote all the text that's there and did a lot of research, and I think for us to do one piece of art probably wouldn't have been as inclusive as this is for us because we're using what other people have already done to help us make our point.

MP. Obviously, you're trying to accomplish something along sociopolitical lines by doing work that is so politically directed. What is it that art can do? Through making work that is seen in galleries and museums, what are you trying to do?

KR. Our stuff is seen in more than just museums and galleries. Like we were just in Hamburg and asked to make a piece for a public space and we ended up designing a shopping bag about military consumerism. The idea is you're going to go into a record store and buy a record and they're going to put it in a bag and this bag is going to have a message on it, and so it's also a piece of art so I think that the play between those two things is really important—that art can be part of media, and that media is what relays messages.

JA. I think that's a tough question because we can end up sounding very idealistic, which we are to a certain extent. If the work, whether it's a shopping bag or an installation, can engage the viewer on some level so that it sparks a dialogue between the people seeing it and also sparks some need for more inquiry or more investigation, then it has accomplished something. Without meaning to sound condescending, there is a kind of educational aspect to some of the projects that we do.

DA. I think I have difficulty with the question. And I think the reason that I do is because the question presumes a certain separation between social thinking and art making. And I don't necessarily agree with that.

JA. Well, and having different values than the normal prescribed values,

government prescribed values.

MP. Well, there are degrees of politics. I think what I'm asking, for instance, something which I asked Sue Coe when she was here a couple of years ago, is about propaganda. Her response was "Propaganda's got a bad name. I'm proud of the fact that what I make is propaganda." But there is some kind of cultural distinction between propaganda and other art.

FG. Group Material, as a project, questions that distinction—questions the cultural definitions of those words.

JA. And that's why we kind of reject the notion or the label of political artists because that seems to be used a lot as a limitation, you know, like it's a way of dismissing you, "Oh, you're political artists, okay, well, I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in esthetics or painterly concerns."

DA. What we're about is trying to be more specific in presenting how different kinds of representations have different purposes. A cultural model is also a political model. As we present those differences and question them, we're bringing up everything; we're putting a box of detergent next to a piece by Ronald Jones and by doing that we really are trying to put them on the same level so people can, as Felix said, question those kinds of definitions that have been given to us.

MP. As you have in this exhibition, where we have information, work by artists and everything . . .

JA. Cultural artifacts.

DA. Work by health educators, work by activists.

JA. Documentation of grass roots organizations.

KR. Advertisers.

DA. And so on.

FG. We really change our function with every project. Sometimes we're artists, sometimes we're designers, sometimes we're contractors, sometimes we want to call ourselves organizers; it really changes with the situation. It's like if you are the artist, you are not the public. It reminds me of when we went to Chicago and the guy asked, "Well, how does the public react, how have the people reacted to the billboard project?" And we say, "Well, we are the people, and we loved it."

MP. If the entire show is your work, then there are still some considerations but you know, you must consider whether it is successful or not? Then what are the criteria?

JA. Levels of accessibility, levels of effectiveness, as well as levels of engagement. And not to sound too utilitarian but it's good when it's useful, when it works towards the end or the model that you have in mind. Rothko is good on the first floor as you come in to a big museum for a reason. Right? I mean, it's serving a purpose there.

DA. The Latino AIDS Project, is good for us; it's high quality because it's useful in helping us solve the problems of that show.

KR. Well, we've also admitted that this is probably one of our most didactic installations because we actually did have sort of a statement that we

wanted to make about the social and political history of AIDS in this country. And why AIDS is a crisis in this country and a kind of, if I can use the word, indictment.

JA. Ultimately an indictment. Any analysis of AIDS has to be an indictment of the government.

KR. Right.

FG. But for National Endowment for the Arts' purposes we should state that it's not political at all.

KR. Yeah, but apathy is a political decision too.

DA. Absolutely.

MP. So I'll ask, what would you like to see happen next with the AIDS timeline and research in this piece?

KR. Right, we'd like to see it become a book. Because we did so much research—we've been working on it for months and months, and once we got here and compiled it, all the information . . . we actually had to cut just tons of stuff—that we said, well this is a really important fact but it's better for a book which can be more detailed than for a wall where you only have a certain limited space, time, and attention span.

JA. Yeah, it's a really fine line, I think, that we're walking on with this exhibition between becoming so overwhelming that people turn away from it or having points of entry where people can become engaged and then want to read these different specific levels of information. A lot of it is really specific. You know we tried to cover the medical aspects, the governmental aspects, the popular culture kind of media aspects, as well as the grass-roots attitudes. As we delved into it we saw just how complex it was to try to represent the issue of AIDS and the history of AIDS and the idea of doing a book would make a lot of sense.

FG. It's funny what happens with information when you take it from here and put it there.

KR. And we didn't even really have to editorialize because the facts spoke for themselves.

MP. Well, history is editorializing—simply by the way you present a sequence of events and what you present . . .

JA. By inclusion and exclusion . . .

FG. We were looking at stuff, like hardcore data, like you know how much money was spent in 1984 for health and human services and how much money was spent for the military. The definition of AIDS by the the cities through 1981 was really narrow; the reason it was so narrow was because the cities had no money to deal with so many cases and such a big crisis. Oh well, AIDS is only like two things, then slowly they start adding more and more definitions.

KR. And still they're slow. There are no specific definitions for women. Thousands of women are dying without ever being diagnosed as having full blown AIDS because they die of things that only women get, such as cervical cancer or Pelvic Inflammatory Disease, which don't count.

JA. Which are not seen as being AIDS related.

KR. Not being seen as AIDS specific, but they are. The statistics—1.5 million people are infected with HIV in this country right now and 6 million worldwide—and the projections for 1992—are petrifying.

MP. By the turn of the century, by the year 2000, it's going to be unbelievable. And everyone is saying it's under control.

KR. The other reason why this should be a book apart from the fact that there's so much information, is because the book can go to a lot of places that the installation never will.

MP. There's one thing I wanted to ask you also about the installation: when you come into the show, you have the timeline going right from where you come in and around. Now that's right to left as opposed to left to right which is the way we usually read. Where do you want people to start, and I'm sure you took that into consideration?

JA. We wanted to start with 1979, to start with the past and go up to the future. Also the architecture of the space is perfect because the ceiling is lower at the beginning where there's less information and then at '83 it starts to really grow, '84 the ceiling gets even higher. The room is designed for a timeline, an AIDS timeline.

FG. There's no such thing as just looking. The looking is always invested with an historical text that every person brings in, and what we are really offering are glimpses by which to connect that person with history. From then on, hopefully, the person will build up knowledge or meaning, which is a kind of thing that we want to create, which is our agenda, and which is very specific.

JA. The juxtaposition of these different histories is not one that is normally seen or that is normally there for you to look at. It's like we're doing the research, we're bringing these things together and editorializing in a specific way because we feel that these things are normally not represented as they should be.

DA. I mean *Real People* would probably not be in your standard medical history of AIDS.

JA. Yeah, a still from the TV show *Real People*.

DA. Batman or the Eurythmics tape or I guess we left out Prince's *Sign O' the Times*, but there were a lot of references in there that either had specific relationships to the crisis or, we felt, helped culturally place people within the moment. In other words, we didn't just want to depict a completely externalized history, we wanted to have some things in there that would bring people in and say, oh, yeah, I remember 1980.

JA. Things you identify with.

DA. Oh, god, that's right, that movie, and oh, there were that many people?

JA. Oh, and the hostages, right . . . oh, AIDS existed then? I didn't hear about it until Rock Hudson.

DA. So that people could then see, as I was going to say, that later on when they get to the historical and cultural events that made AIDS public why and

how they were all of a sudden part of an audience that they had previously been unaware of.

FG. For this one we took into consideration the fact that we were on a college campus.

JA. Originally we thought, oh, Berkeley, California, we're doing a show about AIDS in San Francisco.

FG. Little did we know.

JA. Then we came out and we were naive; we realized that Berkeley and San Francisco are like worlds apart in many ways.

JA. Felix and I were walking around saying, "are we in heaven, did we die?" There's no AIDS here, there's no crisis, there's no anything—you know, it's just that everyone looks so happy.

JA. And then we started really thinking about this. We looked at some statistical studies that had been done about people's—university students'—understanding of transmission of AIDS and if they were practicing safe sex or not, and then the ultimate thing was we had for the democracy wall outside . . .

JA. Larry had someone make a tape with a series of questions that were asked of people on the street, which in this case, outside of the museum, were students walking by. The first question was: "How does AIDS affect you and your lifestyle?" Thirty-one students were interviewed and every one of them said, "It doesn't affect me at all" or "it doesn't affect me much because I don't really sleep around," which was the final quote that we used for the outside of the building. And then we became very much aware that okay, AIDS—there are no givens here—it's not like people are going to know any of this history and we really have to start from scratch and build on that.

DA. That people's unawareness is part of the policy, you know, and I think the democracy wall does that very well right now. It starts off with whoever responded to the tape by saying, "AIDS doesn't affect me because I don't sleep around," and then it ends with former Surgeon General Koop saying, "You know it, I know it, we all know it: the government hasn't done anything." And that these two statements are the flipside of the same thing.

JA. Yeah, but let's not give ignorance a good name here.

Group Material, *The AIDS Timeline* included Tim Rollins + K.O.S., *From the Animal Farm* (Jesse Helms), 1987, pencil and acrylic wash on book pages on linen. Collection of Ernie and Lynn Mieger. Photo: Ben Blackwell, courtesy of the MATRIX Gallery, University Art Museum, Berkeley.

