

INTERVIEW

This interview with Doug Ashford, member of Group Material, by Steve Kurtz of Critical Art Ensemble, took place in Tallahassee, Florida on February 20 and 21, 1988. The interview was edited collectively by Group Material and Critical Art Ensemble. Group Material was founded in 1979 as a constructive response to the inadequate means for artistic representation and cultural dialogue in New York City. It began its activities by opening one of the first storefront artspace in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. There Group Material organized a series of exhibitions that embraced neighborhood concerns and challenged the surrounding mercantile culture.

As GM evolved, the storefront was abandoned for more public sites, and the membership dropped from 12 to 4. The four who remained would form the core of the group in the years to come. They were Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Mundy McLaughlin, and Tim Rollins. From 1981–1987, GM continued with its goals of redefining social relationships within the context of art, and bringing the art community and the general public responsible and well-researched political information through art. All this was done through the GM model of re-presenting the works of others in carefully orchestrated thematic group shows, or through the collection and presentation of information and artifacts from local and nonart communities. In 1986, Mundy McLaughlin left the group to study law, and in 1987, Tim Rollins left so that he could devote more time to his collaboration with Kids of Survival. Recently GM increased its membership by one when Félix González-Torres joined the group.

Some of GM's shows have included DA ZI BAOS—public installation on Union Square, March 1983; Timeline: A Chronicle of U.S. Intervention in Central and Latin America, January 1984 (organized for Artists Call); Americana, March 1985 (organized for the Whitney Biennial); Mass (traveling exhibition); and Constitution (Temple University).

Critical Art Ensemble was formed in 1987 and is based in Tallahassee, Florida. It is comprised of six artists (Steve Kurtz, George Barker, Claudia Bucher, Steve Barnes, Dorian Burr, and Hope Kurtz) who combine their skills in a collaborative process in order to produce politically responsible and critically unified art events that are presented in both art and nonart contexts.

GM: I would be lying if I told you that GM wanted to exist totally outside the systematic contradictions of the "artworld." We entertain the idea of galleries; we entertain the idea of critics and taste. To do otherwise is symbolic self-censorship.

CAE: Existing outside a system isn't possible anyway.

GM: Of course it's not; don't we have to live with the imperfection of how collaboration is viewed in those structures? It's an anomaly.

CAE: Yes. You have to work within the gallery system, and also you don't want to strip the gallery audience of the chance to see the work

by categorically rejecting that system either. I have never viewed GM as trying to undermine the gallery; rather, it's at times participating in the same project as CAE—changing artists' conceptions about where it is legitimate to show and where it isn't. Actually, you can really show anywhere. You don't have to just do the gallery, which is just a single option, not the only option.

GM: Just a specific one that should be researched and understood.

CAE: And the issue that you have also brought up here is that one must know that the gallery system is the infrastructure of the art community. It can't be ignored.

GM: The real irony is that many oppositional stances to a system seem as much a part of it as anything else. Like the whole idea of the alternative space. It's as if these spaces have a guaranteed separation from a commercial order, when in fact they are often the proving grounds for commercialism. This is not an automatically bad thing, of course. I mean, I try to promote work I think is important whenever I can.

CAE: Why did Tim Rollins recently leave Group Material just as the press began to focus on him as a pivotal person in the group?

GM: We all have jobs and our own art practice. At this point, certain levels of production and effect for Tim and KOS now have the potential of happening. For him not to take advantage of this would be foolish. For others to criticize this careerism would be too easy.

CAE: I'm just saying that the way the situation looks now to those outside of New York, who are receiving information filtered through the press, is that the journals and the marketplace were looking for a dominant signature, and Tim's was the signature that became associated with GM. There is nothing wrong with the organization itself; a signature is something that the market is going to fish for, and that is why I was wondering—is Tim leaving as a reaction against this market misrepresentation?

GM: No. There have always been misrepresentations. Part of it has been because of our own sloppiness and part because of how people are—people like the signature and it's hard for them to look at collaborations. Of course the failure of many writers to comprehend our project is predictable—but if we are going to judge our culture only through *Artforum* then we deserve the culture we get. If you want to pick on how GM has been misrepresented, as with the treatment of Tim, you should also ask about all the other ways it has been misrepresented.

GROUP MATERIAL

Critical Art Ensemble

CAE: Such as?

GM: That we are all curators. We are not curators, we are artists who are re-presenting, re-presenting other people's work, in a context that is making "another statement," "a piece." Another misunderstanding is that it's all pedagogical. That went on for a while. That has chilled out, but the belief continued for a while that we are all teachers, and that GM was involved in some kind of educational research. Two of the members of GM were not teachers. This is like saying we're doing psychic research, because one of our members happens to do readings for people on a professional basis.

CAE: Is there anything else you want to say about the disadvantages or advantages of the use of collaboration, as compared to more mainstream styles of art production?

GM: Well, this might sound a little bizarre, but I really don't believe that anyone today is working alone with his muse in the garret. I don't think it's possible any more. (I do think that some people *believe* that they are working in a purely personal and special way.) Information—and don't we all know this yet?—has taken on a universal level where you aren't working by yourself, in the same sense that you can't think politically by yourself. You can't not pay your taxes, you can't not have a checkbook. You can't not have a social security number. Welcome to Modernity.

CAE: So your basic assumption is that art is a social institution that can only function within a social milieu.

GM: Yes, I've always assumed that's a given.

CAE: Is the collective method on the rise?

GM: To collaborate isn't enough. Our proposal wasn't that we would necessarily change the relationship between audience and author just by saying "We're not an individual artist." We wanted to truly affect the social relations that surround the production and distribution of artwork. I still have questions about the consistency seen in much of the other collaborative work that is around. It's like the methodology is hidden. If GM chose this strategy I don't think you would have gotten the variety of that certain thematic involvement with the world; I don't think you would have gotten as many different positions and different involvements with different sorts of political and cultural groups within any one exhibition. But it is really the nature of our product that sets us apart.

CAE: But that is why a collective is necessary. A person can only specialize, speak, or produce in a limited number of realms with any

authority. After that you have to rely on other specialized backup.

GM: My problem with this is that even though I know that a lot of GM's uniqueness is due to the collective method, I don't want to stress method over product. GM has always tried to inform its projects with the expertise and voices of others.

CAE: That's why I see the collective experience, the collective method on the rise—it has to be, because of the massive amount of information that exists. History affords us no other choice but to begin cultural production on a larger scale, with more people and a greater amount of specialists. I would be very shocked if you said to me that the collective method was on the decline.

GM: Yes, but collaboration is the method of many modern agencies—not just progressive or populist ones. This is what law firms do, what museums do. Artists were always kept in the dark about this stuff!

CAE: What do you think about specificity in political art? There is so much art that addresses current social issues within the frame of given responses and data filtered through the media. It is art that is without informational resources, and how can such work have any more credibility than the evening news?

GM: It would probably have less credibility, but I don't think that any serious artists working with public agendas are really trying to compete with Dan Rather. The problems begin when artists are content with his quotes.

CAE: Because if you are just quoting something learned from the media, all that is really being done is quoting a re-presentation of what is happening.

GM: Or a cause of what's happening. This brings us back to methodology and the artist. A lot of political art does the same thing with content that expressionist art does with emotion. That is, it takes this issue and says, "I'm going to paint some dripping red letters, and some screaming children and then I'm going to be a political artist." In contrast, what GM has been trying to do is diagram different social forces, such as in the show *Timeline*, which was informed by working with the Committee of International Solidarity of the People of El Salvador, Taller Latinoamericano, Casa Nicaragua, and others who brought information from sources radically different from the dominant media. Without them and chance meetings with artists and intellectuals who were here in exile from Central America, our work wouldn't have been possible.

Actually, our relationship with these groups began two years earlier with a show called *Luchar*. There were things in that show from



Group Material, *Constitution*, 1987 (photo courtesy of Group Material).

Mexico City, from Salvador, from Managua, that we displayed next to Leon Golub, Martha Rosler, Mike Glier, etc. The opening turned into a kind of mass meeting between artists and activists. There were speeches by Lucy Lippard and the NYC representative of the FDR/FMLN. An organization of El Salvadoran artists and intellectuals was founded. There was a kind of reciprocity, with people's agendas informing various artistic practice and the art exhibition becoming the springboard for political organization. And it didn't end there; two years later we saw Artist's Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America organize cultural professionals as a group around this issue, to actually affect our industry in North and Central America.

CAE: What is the artist's responsibility to the community?

GM: Our exhibitions and projects gather different levels of cultural production into one site. By doing this we are automatically serving more artists and 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? A show like *People's Choice*, which was an exhibition of artworks and artifacts in the early GM space, was obviously working out of a concern for the neighborhood of the exhibition space rather than for art-trained professionals.

CAE: Did you have good community turnout for *People's Choice*?

GM: Well, remember the entire show was made up of objects collected from the block. GM went door to door asking people for their most beautiful paintings, their most important pictures. (This was before my time—I was still a student and part of GM's enthusiastic audience.) It was obvious to everyone that *People's Choice* was the most important show that the group did during that period, because it totally transformed the supposedly neutral gallery into an icon of the neighborhood. The show wasn't based on what the "experts" thought best represented the neighborhood; these objects were what the people on the block valued as beautiful.

Back to our conversation about specialists: you see, merely collaborating with others will not confront the destructive nature of privatized culture. The specialist might be the very audience that for so long has been locked out of the industry. In *Luchar*, the specialist might be the designer making posters in Salvador literally on the front—whose life depends on it.

CAE: When you did the subway piece did you ride on the subway and see what the response was? Were people just reading their *Daily News* or actually paying attention and reading the GM pieces?

GM: We chose those particular ads in the subway, just above eye level, because people really do read them. If you get on and it's crowded, you can't read the paper. There's also the "don't look at me and I won't look at you" routine on the subway already. In that kind of social space, you look up—where *Subculture* was installed.

CAE: You can't do better than that when you penetrate the unspoken part of everyday life.

GM: At that time the subway was a radical site for the installation of "public" art. Now it's standard institutional fare. Now Keith Haring gets commissions from the transit authority.

CAE: Was it part of the agenda for *Subculture* and *DA ZI BAOS* to disrupt everyday life structure?

GM: No. I don't think that it's necessarily any more of a disruption than the normal level of media onslaught that we have to live with. The idea with *Subculture* was that through some level of collectivization, the pooling of resources, any individual can intercept that onslaught, can participate relatively; it was no big financial deal because each artist in the show covered the costs of producing a series of images. We paid the installation fee and dealt with bureaucrats.

CAE: Wouldn't such installations necessarily have an alienating effect since you're breaking habituation? What you put on the subway wasn't a hemorrhoid ad.

GM: Some work mimicked the advertising almost to the letter, and I'm sure that it was read with the same sort of psychotic level of consumption that just goes through you. But my feeling still is that some of the most successful work was the painting, because painting in that context was really shocking. An artist named Merrie Dee did twenty-seven identical paintings of a woman running from a burning shack in the middle of a field. It was a learning experience for me—here we were really talking up the authority of graphic forms and asking everyone to keep in mind the corporate aesthetic and content of most subway advertising—and when we got it all up on the trains . . . the paintings in many ways were the most dangerous.

CAE: Do you find that shows work better outdoors, where you make the first move to engage the audience, with perhaps *People's Choice* notwithstanding?

GM: Let's remember that just because art is placed outdoors, that doesn't make it public. Group Material has tried to approach the relationship between artists and audiences on two levels, among others. Some projects have enlarged the capacity that the gallery has to



(photo: Geoffrey Clementis).

Group Material, *Americana*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1985

represent different aesthetic agendas—*People's Choice* was an example, but so is *Americana*. By exhibiting household appliances at the Whitney Museum we were pointing out that curators aren't the only people that make aesthetic choices. Other projects have tried to expose these agendas to other artists: in *Subculture* we asked "What kind of work would you make for a subway?" and in *Timeline* we asked, "What kind of work would you make to chronicle our government's military intervention?"

CAE: Is GM going to take these shows out of urban areas, and thereby change the context in which they are presented even more?

GM: The *DA ZI BAOS* project, where we interviewed institutions and individuals and compared them at a public level on large-scale poster work, should be done across the country. We have done it in Wales because we were invited to do it by an organization there. I would love that every time we go someplace, like here in Tallahassee, to produce *DA ZI BAOS* in response to local issues. It still is planned to do this at nuclear dump sites in a place like Montana or New Hampshire—one of those rural towns where 60% of the people are unemployed and a local government can say, All right, we'll dump here, and we'll all get jobs and the city will garner a lot of tax revenue. Of course not everyone says yes. What these issues produce is often a level of participatory democracy that is at best rare in urban politics. The town meeting, for *Group Material*, is a particularly relevant cultural process. And it's fascinating how this American institution, this tradition, can be paralleled with a project modelled after the *DA ZI BAOS* (large character posters) of China's cultural revolution.

There is something here about GM's project that I think should be mentioned, because it's important to understand in taking on this kind of work. That is, try not to become satisfied with the opportunities and offers. Throughout the life of the group we've tried to balance invitations with self-initiated works like *DA ZI BAOS*. One has to remember that any agency, not just the patron, can become an ideological taskmaster. And meanwhile, the mayor of Anytown isn't on the phone as we speak, ready to say, "We really like you guys. Why don't you come over and hook up one of those *DA ZI BAOS* for us?"

You should do Documenta. You should do the Whitney Museum—not only for their audiences but to reach a level of institutional notice that helps to develop other audiences. Barbara Kruger has been saying this for years and recently has been attacked for her "commercialism." But whether you love or hate the idea of Mary Boone isn't the point: Barbara's billboards are up in little towns across the country. *We Don't Need Another Hero* was up in Philmont, New York, the home of Oliver North. It wouldn't have happened if she had decided to resign herself to some naive idealist idea of populist art that rejected every capitalist organ of production.

CAE: We've touched on theory, so while we're on this subject, let me ask you about *Resistance (Anti-Baudrillard)*. Why did GM feel so strongly about the use of Baudrillard's theory that you had a show against him? And how much of it was homage to him?

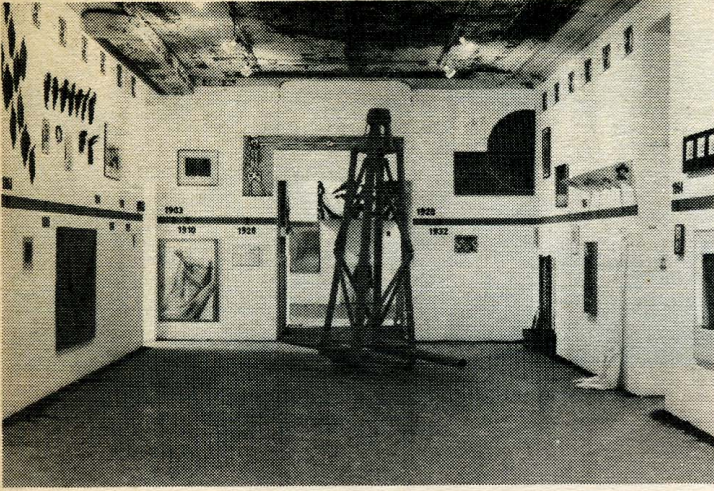
GM: It was not an homage; it was not against him. What GM wanted to do was to take the Baudrillard we had used in the past, the Baudrillard of *The Mirror of Production* and *Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, and compare him to the artworld's love image that was so apparent at that time. *Resistance* wasn't about Baudrillard the person or even directly about his writings for that matter. It was about how critical factors in our industry become complicit with status quo visions of culture and history—a complicity I think we all experience. Even Baudrillard himself got up in public to declare, "This is not about art."

CAE: Most notably at the Columbia lecture.

GM: Right. What we were interested in with *Resistance* was how a contestational theory was being used and abused, and to question that use through the exhibition of different kinds of artifacts. We grounded the whole exhibition on video. We had three monitors that were to act as a triumvirate ground of how media gets sublimated. The objects in the show covered a spectrum of oppositional strategies artists can adopt—from producing graphics for SWAPO (the South-west African People's Organisation) or local New York labor unions to making work in the gallery like Mike Glier, Hans Haacke, Nancy Spero. Also, we tried to show historical precedent for this kind of process: Heartfield in terms of the activist, Redon in terms of the dream, Catherine Allport in terms of photojournalism. You see, if Ashley Bickerton is suddenly proclaimed a "contestational" artist then what kind of artists are in Guerilla Art Action Group?

CAE: So it seems that you were much more worried about (at least at that point) the massive proliferation of simulationist art that was all grounding itself in a misrepresentation of Baudrillard's theories, rather than in Baudrillard's theories themselves.

GM: Yes, that's it but—well, look, there are massive holes in the later work. If social science is science fiction, then that means that all the work in the simulationist program is what all the academics (who are eating the shit up) say it is. But I don't think that Baudrillard is right, and my students at Bedford-Stuyvesant don't think he's right, and I hate to sound corny, but the campesinos in Nicaragua don't think he's right, and eighty percent of the people who have ever struggled to try and change the fuckedupness of this world don't think he's right. I'm pretty convinced that using a theoretical model based entirely on



Group Material, *Timeline*, P.S. 1, 1984 (photo courtesy of Group Material).

language is a mistake. As artists, we leave the social relations and social determination out of this again and again.

CAE: So are we back to the Critical Theory school?

GM: Not necessarily. Although a re-reading now and then couldn't hurt. Let's use post-structuralism as a tool, use it as a way of deciphering things and stories, in a way that might expose the social forces that lead to the inability to read in the first place. Why this author? Why this meal? Why this kind of coffee? Let's use Barthes to find out how the world is built as a series of mythologies, but then try to find out why these mythologies were built and maybe more important—who built them.

CAE: Do you think that the GM *Resistance* show did counter the practice to some degree and change the use of Baudrillard by the New York art community?

GM: Other things happened that make it OK now to say "I hate Baudrillard," but it certainly wasn't because of us.

CAE: I see it as a milestone show because it did help to bring legitimacy to saying "I hate Baudrillard" to the critical literature, as well as to the art community. GM took a major step towards eroding what I see as a fashionable use of artificial rhetoric to justify what is at best mildly critical work.

GM: Forget Foucault, fuck Baudrillard. Let's be careful here because there are two traps in this part of our conversation that we have to avoid. Even though GM is committed to practical models—to actually doing things—we're not anti-theory. Let's not feed the traditional delusionary practices that avoid theoretical contradiction. Dripping red letters are not working.

The second trap is giving in to the abuse of theory, especially in the art historical world. Recently, in the past four or five years, there has been a lot of writing around the idea of a resistant postmodernism. This work, even if outlining an excellent theoretical program, continues to ignore many of the practical models that surround it. There is a whole terrain of cultural production—collaborative, community-based, pedagogical or just plain subcultural processes—that won't fit into the "fine art" category. Here I might sound like a traditional Marxist, but I feel that the reason these models are ignored has to do with class comfort with risky theory over resistant practice.

CAE: It seems that you see the theory-praxis problem as completely unresolved, despite all the rhetoric of the French Marxists that theory is praxis. Do you still have questions about the problem?

GM: In our industry it's certainly a mess. I mean, we both know how rare it is to read something that can both reflect the sense of beauty and the history that one can find in an art object or other cultural moment. Recently, GM has tried to have writers who usually address other disciplines and audiences become involved with our project. For *Constitution* we published essays by Judge Bruce Wright, a federal judge in New York, and Michael and Margie Ratner, from the Center for Constitutional Rights. We really wanted to supply something a little more useful than the usual promotional stuff. We all have to remember that the specialized art community, as an intellectual sphere, is a very unusual place and always has been.

CAE: At least since the nineteenth century.

GM: It's been a site of relatively incredible intellectual mobility. Even here in Tallahassee, it's like a minefield of cultural production, half brilliant and half shit, but nonetheless creating a discourse and an audience for ideas that other fields rarely match. Or look at Artists Call Against U. S. Intervention in Central America—it was able to use the whole institutional framework of the art world to raise money on a totally practical level. Here was a group, of maybe fifteen or twenty in New York, using the market structure to do real political work. Real resources were raised for real struggles.

CAE: What are the information options for those not wanting to read theory?

GM: Well, let's take this supposedly theoretical idea of "appropriation." With the high school kids that I teach, there is an intrinsic knowledge about appropriation, because for them in a sense, all cultural production has to be stolen. White culture historically never let you proclaim the culture that you had. It's not talked about, it's not taught, it's not on TV. And even within a group of young artists—for graffiti writers, to bite something and make it your own is a sign of greatness. Tap dancers build whole repertoires of stolen steps. There's the idea within folk culture of how imagery gets communicated, appropriated, and turned into new imagery.

CAE: So everyday life communication is one of the best sources at that point. Just looking around and seeing the everyday life situation.

GM: "Situation." There's that word again.

CAE: After '68 it endlessly comes up.

GM: Let's hope so.

CAE: There is no getting away from it: postmodernism is in the

shadow of situationism, if the Marxist categories are going to still be used. If I reject the books, is my situation the only other resource?

GM: It depends. I have two minds about it, obviously; about 15 minutes ago I said, "That's a seminal text, you must read it," and now I'm saying don't read shit.

CAE: You're just saying that in terms of application. There is a difference between saying "Read theory," and the idea that you *must* read theory to produce a work.

GM: Yes, I guess there is. I think a lot of it always gets reduced to pedagogy. I guess it's because I was talking to grad students all day yesterday, but in speaking to them I was saying, "You have to read this... You don't know that?..." There is a level of theoretical illiteracy within this professional community and its academic infrastructure that is mindblowing, but on the other hand, if somebody is doing something that is critically terrific and not reading theory, I feel no reason to say "you must read," and I would use as an example folk artists or work that's happening in other self-informed communities outside of the academic sanctuary. I think it's arrogant to assume that this theoretical discourse is a mandatory site for resistance.

CAE: It seems that in your former answers, as in your explanation of *Resistance*, that the issue of fashion-consciousness is touched upon. Theory has never been as fashionable as it is right now, and one of the main reasons is that many of the major breakthroughs have not been in art, but in criticism. Criticism is rapidly developing while art spins its wheels in the muck of a redundant pluralism.

GM: I might agree with you about theoretical developments—if it was possible to really isolate them. There is the possibility of addressing a whole range of human activity—but there still is the problem of marketable and unmarketable criticism. There has always been writing that fits into gallery programs—produced by those who are bought and sold in the same muck that you mention. We know who they are now, and who they were last year. You only have to open an art magazine to see this perfectly ordered lexicon of the market.

Also I think it depends a lot on which side of the fence you stand on. I mean, some people have described Hal Foster as the dominating maestro—oh, please. Here we are at a theoretical flashpoint and all some can do is shout "traitor." Meanwhile, Cornel West is speaking at art world institutions, Doug Crimp is editing an issue of *October* on AIDS, and Lucy Lippard is more important to read than ever. I'm optimistic.

CAE: Tell us about the *Inserts* project that you tried to get in the *New York Daily News* just recently.

GM: It's not unlike *Subculture*, our project for the subway. Group Material feels that these huge organs of the advertising world should be approached for disseminating work. *Inserts* will be a twelve page advertising supplement to the Sunday paper containing ten artists' works developed specifically for this context. It will reach about 200,000 readers in various neighborhoods of the city. This time I feel we're really building a bridge between public funding and a program of dissemination that actually reaches people. Public agencies don't



Group Material, *Resistance: Anti-Baudrillard*, White Columns, 1987 (photo: Ken Schles).

have to limit themselves to supporting the same old pedestrian blockers, lobby fillers or museum blockbusters. I understand from talking to Jenny Holzer that a lot of TV channels will sell late night ad spots for peanuts. Can you imagine the audience?

CAE: So it's the audience size that interests you the most in using this medium?

GM: The size, and the method of address. There are all these resources being spent on the reproduction of artwork—why not make a catalog that exists in the public sphere instead of in the alternative art space?

CAE: What can we expect in the future from GM?

GM: We're working on a project called *Democracy* that will take place at the Dia Art Foundation next fall and winter. It will be a five-month series of exhibitions and meetings that will examine the current crisis in American democracy. In a way this is a dream come true—a chance to rigorously involve other voices in our working process. You see, as great as I feel GM's contribution so far has been—it usually has been a spectacle of relations between different communities. In other words, just because you show a Thomas Lawson painting next to graphics from the Redistribute America Movement doesn't mean that these two kinds of producers develop any working influence, or even acknowledgment for that matter. Of course it happens—but the exhibition in itself remains a model of possibilities instead of actual organizing tools. This is a goal.

Anyway, with *Democracy* we've planned a series of roundtable discussions with artists, critics, policymakers, and theorists, that will both inform the exhibition and establish agendas for public town meetings coinciding with the show. We're trying to replace the traditional lecture/panel method of presenting information with a more public method. Each show will be surrounded by the social forces that make art possible in the first place and each discourse will be exemplified by the cultural work it implies. A book documenting this whole process will be distributed by DIA afterwards.

To me, what's really important is how all this is going to affect history. I don't mean to sound egotistical about it, but ten years after witnessing the beginnings of GM as a member of the audience, I'm finally realizing that it's possible to have an effect on things. It's shocking; sometimes even embarrassing. But now it's crucial that we have control over how our project is represented and stop being distorted by magazine interpreters who just need the fucking copy. Or...I don't know what they need—copy, fashion, theory? So anyway, *Democracy* is a dream of taking the spectacle of the exhibition and turning it into a series of social elevations. Turning it into a situation.