

R E A L L I F E Magazine

Number 11/12, Winter 1983

\$4.00



Group Material

an interview by Peter Hall

Tim Rollins: Everyone comes up and asks, "What is Group Material? Are you a collective? A gallery? A co-op? Are you a political group? What do you do? What's the point?" I suspect they want us to wave a red flag, sing the *Internationale* so that they can begin to dismiss us. Our main work is to create structures in which hundreds of people can participate in ways they never could before.

Doug Ashford: With luck this would confound the established art institutions and the new ones. For example, *¡Luchari!*, the show we did about Central America, confounded the left groups here at the *Taller Latino America*. That was part of the idea. The alienation that exists between artists and the organized left in this country was something we wanted to show.

TR: Group Material has been an aesthetic boot camp. For us and hundreds of other artists, GM functions as a workshop. It's a center for people who want to get involved with political work, but don't want to fall flat on their faces in some more public gallery. It's a place where ideas can be worked through. We've shown a lot of zonkers, but we often find out that two years later that an artist has really developed and so we encourage a broad participation. Our sort of work isn't much good unless lots of other people start doing it.

Peter Hall: *Don't you demand a common message? It seems to me that you're mainly asking people to*

operate within a context, even if you take everything that's given you.

TR: Well, we still curate.

Mundy McLaughlin: *Subculture*, a big show of artists' posters in the subway, is a different case. We got public funds and it is to be in a public space, so we figured we'd be a lot looser, leave it open to any artist who wanted to do it. If someone came up with a really horrible idea we might try to get them to change it. But that would only be in a really horrible situation.

DA: In *Subculture* being more open worked well.

MM: You find out about more artists that way. You find out about a lot of people you didn't know before.

DA: The whole issue of context is set up. The message is in the show as a public event. Ourselves organizing this is the piece.

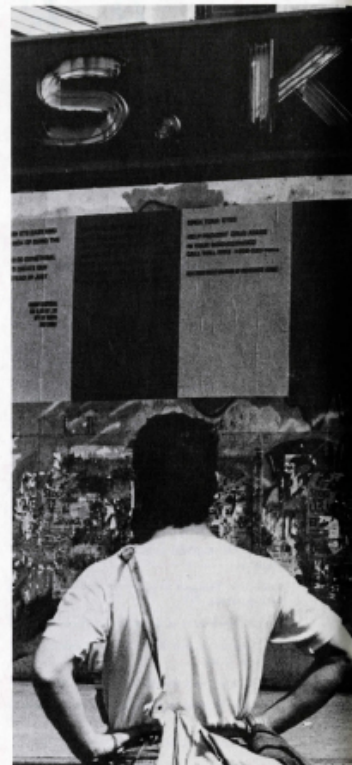
PH: *OK. How long has this group been together?*

Julie Ault: Since 1979.

TR: It started with a year of meetings. We met every Monday night. We got a group together of about fifteen people—old friends from art school, boyfriends and girlfriends, a very loose association.

PH: *What was the common bond?*

TR: The common bond was that people desperately wanted to create a vehicle in which to make work that was meaningful to them. We didn't



Group Material. Dadaist, 1982. Union Square, NY.

see any chance for the type of art we wanted to do, even in the so-called alternative spaces. Our concerns were with our sort of politics, with feminism—which was very strong in the original group—and there was nowhere to place work like that. So we knew the time had come to do it ourselves.

PH: *And it didn't work out that well in its first incarnation, right?*

TR: I thought it worked out great. My analogy always is that the group was like a rocket that took off. The first and second years after blast-off, after a lot of work and change, there began a stage by stage breakdown. The first stage were the people who, for one reason or another, weren't really into it. Then another group got



sick of it and they fell out. So now it's us. We always formed the center of the group anyways.

PH: *There was all that talk of sexual politics...*

MM: There were always several groups, subgroups threatening to split the whole thing up. It was a joke. There was a lot of disagreement about what the group should do, which is natural. But some people really cared about the group and some really cared about their own interests. The people in it now are the ones who wanted Group Material to do something.

PH: *Are those other people still making art?*

MM: Some of them are.

JA: About the people who were into

sexual politics... It wasn't their politics that was the problem. It was that they weren't interested in making art. The four of us are artists. They were into curating educational exhibits, organizing, educating the public about feminism and different issues. Art was not their main interest.

MM: They would have ideas that sounded alright, but then the way they would work with them would be totally different from the way we 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.

PH: *So after a year that configuration broke up...*

JA: No, after a year of meetings and a year in the storefront gallery on East Thirteenth Street. After three-quarters of a year the first faction left, and then the careerist faction left at the end of the same year. Then we started the third year as just the four of us. Is that right?

DA: I don't know. I don't know that much about the history of the group before I joined in the Fall of '82.

PH: *How are decisions made among the four of you now?*

MM: Arguments, and lots of fights.



Group Material: *Primer* (for Raymond Williams), 1982. Installation at Artists Space, NY.

JA: We usually end up all agreeing on something. We compromise.

DA: It depends how fast the decision has to be made. If it needs to be made quickly we all acquiesce and go with the first thing that sounds good.

PH: *What would you say you each specialize in?*

DA: Our roles change all the time, but in the beginning when I first joined I did nothing but criticize and say things like, "That doesn't sound aesthetically consistent to me." I was like the conscience of the group. I

think it was somewhat productive, even though...

TR: He was the thorn in our paw.

DA: It might have been painful...

MM: Yeah, Doug, but we laughed it off. Actually it was really good. We were getting so blah about everything and Doug came in and was really critical. He didn't know what it was like, so he wanted to argue, and it's always good to argue, it gets you interested again.

PH: *Who really handles the task of making final decisions?*

DA: The way things happen is that most projects get organized by one person. And if that person is having problems, then he or she will designate tasks.

MM: Like with *Dazibaos*. That was Julie and me, fifty fifty.

PH: *What was Dazibaos?*

MM: It was a poster exhibition we did on Union Square. We got six statements from six political or social service groups. Then we got six statements from people in the street about the issues that the organized groups were addressing. The groups were all active in the area, and we wanted to see what people thought of them. (The groups were CISPE, Group Material, the Home Care Workers Union, New York State Council on Drug Abuse, Planned Parenthood, and the Prison Reform Board—ed.)

JA: We had the statements printed on huge red and yellow posters and then stuck them illegally on the front of the old Klein building. This was last May.

PH: *It wasn't an exhibition of artists' work?*

MM: No. We were going to do a poster show in Union Square, but it seemed trite to do the same thing we do for every show—call up a bunch of artists and ask them to do something. So we decided to make it a pure Group Material project. It was rewarding. It was one of the only things I've gone by and seen people actually stopping, standing and reading. Really reading it...

JA: The posters looked great. Red yellow red yellow red yellow. Also they were statements of ordinary people's opinions—we listed the occupation of the person represented.

DA: It was a like a cross between propaganda, a gossip column, and Conceptual art.

PH: *Was there any formal notice taken in the press?*

MM: No.

PH: *How do you feel about doing something, doing a lot of work and then...*

MM: It's funny. Some things—like a gallery show, say *Primer* at Artists Space—need to be reviewed because that's the only way they get out to the public. But it almost doesn't matter

with a public project because everyone sees it anyway. The only real reason to have something written about is for documentation, so people can refer to it later.

DA: Last year it was, and remains, a real important thing to work in the artworld and the public realm. We try to do both at once.

PH: *Most people downtown seem to subscribe to the theory that there is an inherent conflict between message and aesthetic art.*

MM: But you can create something politically and socially without having an overt message. I think the fact that a work has a message is almost never going to work. It tries to preach something. But if it has an idea behind it, then that is different.

DA: I think that the contradiction you're talking about is a basic contradiction of modernism that everyone has to work with. It has more to do with how art is understood in this society than with what an individual artist does. When you make a work with content, it's understood as not necessarily being art. I think that perception is changing.

JA: Political art is becoming a trend now.

PH: *But what about the perceived conflict between saying something specific about politics and making art—with an aesthetic expression of the self? Most people in Soho would tell you that this combination is not possible.*

JA: Well I think they're wrong. That's what we're trying to do—combine. I don't know if I like the word 'message'. We're trying to do something innovative with form and content.

DA: The dominant culture teaches you that form and content are opposed. But this opposition is something we refuse to accept—the foundation of Group Material rests on that.

MM: But actually a lot of the time that is just an art world problem. I work in a bar and talk to a lot of people there about art. They're all working class. I tell them the basic idea of what we want to do and they say, "Oh, that's good. You're trying to do something that means something. That's OK." They just don't like things like abstract art, stuff that

doesn't mean anything to them. They like landscapes because they're pretty, but they hate black painting with no images or words, to them that's the worst.

PH: *Basically a lot of avant garde art is avant garde because it scares people. It intimidates them rather than making them think or feel.*

TR: Another problem is that a completely different set of people think that just because a work of art is political, it must be good. The greatest challenge for artists at this particular moment is not to get over

involved with the false problem of form versus content, but to see art as a dialectical situation. This involves four things: form and content, yes, but also *method*—who produces the art, who's involved in this process, how does it get out into the world. The fourth thing is to have a very acute perception of the *context* of art.

This is the greatest of Group Material's innovations. All our shows develop and respond to particular themes. So you can take an abstract painting and place it in a certain context, a thematic context, and the meaning and political function of that



Group Material: *Subculture*, 1985. IRT Subway, NY.

painting has been changed. This is what we did in our *Alienation* show. We learned this tactic from the Conceptualism of the late Sixties and early Seventies when you could put a bunch of dooky into a gallery and it became art. It was really the gallery that made the dooky into art, not vice versa. When we learned that we realized that a gallery was never a neutral institution, so we painted our gallery walls red. We spend a lot of time on exhibition design, working on the idea of the show as more important than just a collection of individual artworks. In this we are very different from Colab who go WHAM, and the art is all over the place.

MM: For *Alienation* we played WPAT—the place to relax—during the show. It was lit with harsh fluorescent light and we served only coffee during the opening. We made everyone wear those "Hello, my name is..." stickers.

PH: In terms of political ideology, how would you describe yourselves?

DA: Crypto-sensationalist-Maoist. That's what we've been labelled.

MM: Really? Who said that? It's so creative.

TR: Mundy's the crypto. I'm the sensationalist. Doug's the Maoist.

PH: Well, have you read a lot of political theory?

DA: Sure. I work as actively as I can within the organized left in America. And I'm cynical. So I'm a sort of anarchist participator.

JA: I can't say I come from this or that political ideology. My ideas about politics come from day-to-day life, popular culture, and all that. I'd like to see more people acting out, being more creative instead of just being consumers. That's my major interest. It relates to my background—my mother is very spiritual, she's a psychic. I've done a lot of reading on that subject, on religion. But I'm not really religious at all. In my work I use religious statements to make political statements.

PH: How about you, Tim?

TR: I'm a democratic Marxist! (group laughter)

MM: I'm pretty undefined in terms of an ideology. All I know is that you can't decide what you're going to do when you're always desperate for money, for food, when you always have to work for someone else. I got this sugar bag the other day, one made by Kraft. On the back it says—and this is supposed to be enlightening—it says **ACHIEVEMENT** in bold letters on the top, and underneath you read, "the person who rows the boat rarely has time to rock it." And this is supposed to make you feel good! I don't get it. It's so true that if you're always working you never have time to achieve anything.

TR: Things like that sugar bag are a major influence on our work. We love this stuff, and not in a campy way. It's much more interesting and revealing than most art. *Dynasty* says more about America than Clyfford Still.

MM: *All My Children* is even better.



Group Material: *Primer* (for Raymond Williams), 1982. Installation at Artios Space, NY.

Radical Culture by Mundy McLaughlin

The words used most often in advertising—and used because they have proven most effective in selling products—are 'new' and 'improved.' People want a change for the better, that is why those words fool them so easily and so often. But real change, in product, in government, in the average person's life, is rare. Usually the 'new' and 'improved' are just reworkings of the prior product, administration, storyline, and therefore do little to change a person's existence.

Something really new is radical. Art (TV, music, visual, literature) is one of those areas where real change can happen. Just as a scientific discovery gives people a new awareness of the physical world (which can change or illuminate other beliefs), and technical innovations alter the working developments in art affect people. Changes in art can give people a new perception of the world, and they can also loosen people up to the idea that things aren't necessarily static. We don't have to be stuck with the same old thing. When James Brown records first came out they had a new rhythm and sound, and a new message. He wanted to stop singing the blues and singing to party, here, and we've got to make a change." When George Romero makes a movie about the dead rising and haunting shopping malls as if by reflex action, and films it with a dead-pan, casual realism, he jolts the moviegoer into an awareness that a lot of his or her activities are done by reflex action and mimicry. Maybe that can arouse a desire for change.

Of course the material world is constantly changing, and people's consciousness changes with events. For this change to be positive individuals must learn something of power, must develop a will to stop playing a passive role in society and in private. For the change we all yearn for to occur individuals must be reminded that people make up society, people created the structures in which they live, and people can change them. A truly radical art can begin this process. Working within the culture we are trying to set off the beginnings of a chain reaction.

Past Present Future by Julie Ault

Accepting the mystery
I study its intent and effect.
Befriend the unfamiliar and you befriend yourself.
Increase your capacity for life.
Life is a product, a product of life.

We have no past—
no history of suffering, of poverty.
We know too much comfort to question ourselves.

A culture of nonculture:
traditions that don't exist.
Our blindness lies in this empty chaotic servitude.
It seems it is not our fault,
how can we see what we have never seen,
we don't know what to look for.

The past begins somewhere—a culture
growing from seeds of possessiveness,
longing for purpose,
put to death once and for all.
The ugly american,
inebriated, unthinking,
overloaded from static electricity.

A simultaneous creation;
relativity,
one informing another, informing another,
inseparable
false delineations
events coexisting
solidified thoughts
appearing, reappearing
till recognition.

The spiritual and the physical meet in art,
each involved in a molecular struggle,
competing for our attention and allegiance.
They are not really at odds.

Priorities of any kind bind my movements,
goals only seek to limit my experience.
I give up on all hopes and desires
and concentrate on life itself.

Particles, 1980-83 by Tim Rollins

Weren't the first curators clergymen? The word 'curate' originally meant someone having a spiritual authority over a certain group of people. After all this work through Group Material, I think we're beginning to understand the question of artistic quality as a completely confused, even metaphysical issue. When we organize these shows, the more bogged-down we get in aesthetic evaluation, the more the social function, the uses, the practical, human meanings of the artwork are disregarded. That's wrong. A truly democratic art is going to be the strangest thing the world has ever seen.

Most American artists ignore their own working class as subject, as audience, as historical reality. A painter stares at the blank canvas, ready for the first mark. Art would be more interesting if the artist, instead of asking "What do I feel?" asked, "Who made this cloth?"

More than wanting a nice car or a big house, I think most people would prefer the redemption of their joy in labor. Since capitalism makes this impossible for the majority (perhaps for everyone), we tend to go for what we can actually get, that is, nice cars and big houses... and art.

Doug and I mapped out the installation for *Lochar!* (this is a show of about 100 artists in solidarity with the leftist struggles in Central America, especially in Nicaragua, Guatemala and, with the greatest sense of urgency, El Salvador.) We finally received the special package—the stuff from Central America, the answer to our requests for anything (drawings, photocopies, slides, even actual artifacts from the civil war) from Nicaragua or El Salvador.

We get the package and both rip the carton open with excitement and anticipation. We are crushed. Nothing but little images of the usual self-consciously crude renderings of erect muscular arms holding rifles, drawings of revolutionary heroes by schoolchildren, some poorly-designed flyers and pamphlets. Doug and I are disappointed yet we feel guilty for not "liking" what was sent. These are objects from a real revolution. People have been shot for producing this art that falls so short of our aesthetic standards. We don't know what to do with the things.

Later in the day I'm at the newstand. I am skimming through the latest issue of *People Magazine*. (This week Liz Taylor is on the cover. I usually find *People* more politically useful than, say, *The New Left Review*.) As I flip through the pages, one black and white photo draws my attention. The picture shows the back of a dumpy guy with glasses intently painting a small, bad picture of lily-pads floating on water. The studio is just too clean for the guy to be a real artist. It's obvious that this person doesn't paint much or often. Underneath the photo, the caption: "I reserve every Sunday for my painting. I just shut the troubles out of my studio. Instead of deciding which problems to solve, I choose which colors to use." I now begin to realize just who this Sunday painter is. It should be funny, but it's not. It's terrifying. I turn back a page, to the beginning of an article about Jose Napoleon Duarte. It's a personality profile on the eve of the phony and disastrous elections in El Salvador. It's that painting of lily-pads that we need for our solidarity exhibition, for more than anything we've received from the revolutionary fronts, it is in that painting of waterlilies that one can best discern the real basis for the misery, genocide and fascism now inflicted on the majority in Central America.

Form and content. Form and content. Form and content. What is rarely discussed is the crucial question of *method* in the production of a radical art. The most interesting new work is that which embraces a social means of production and distribution. A political art can't really be made at working people or for the oppressed. A radical art can't really be made at working themselves, but lack the vehicles to do so.

DaVinci, Caravaggio, James Brown, Daumier, David, Gericault, Godard, George Romero, Dickens, Tatlin, Rodchenko, Stepanova, El Lissitzky, Mayakovsky, Henze, Rzewski, Dr. Seuss, Faulkner, Luxemburg, Grosz, Heartfield, Pasolini, Guston, Freire, Lenya, Etta James, and Brecht.



Napoleón Duarte at the easel.

Kiss of Death by Doug Ashford

Nowadays, as traditionalism and its accompanying graces—the Nation and the Unnameable—infect yet again the dwindling ability art has to mean something, yet again ineffective solutions are mustered. Under the rubric of 'political art' the antidotes are listed and prescribed. Their essential purpose is not the problem: they are to cure the diseased affirmation of institutionalized art; they are to dismiss the problem (as a kind of shorthand).

When listened for across the entire range of artworld conversations the two words 'political art' itself describes the problem (almost simultaneously) they are spoken either as if to be a coming 'salvation of content' or of such confusion and hindrance to be the "kiss of death". Such twofoldness, between authenticity and impulse, is more than just personal attitude. It's a reflection of how the possibility of changing things, of how having any real effect is constantly weakened. It's a reflection of how past idealism generates present contradiction. Or more concretely, how the activist aura as it is part of recent art exhibition, buying and making—might make content illegible.

To reject 'political art' because art isn't politics is to try to transcend simplism with reactionary gospel. Such pat rejections, not just logically adolescent, are truly ideological. Coinciding with such idiocy, the past five years have seen an anti-idiocy plethora of artists trying to operate in a more public arena. This apparent rejection, that of the established framework of art consumption, couldn't have been more prevalent or pertinent. Along with a series of huge street shows came a generation of artist run collectives and spaces. All, if not speaking the same language, came from similar desires for a new syntax.

But desires to rearrange the way art was presented rarely transformed the way art was understood. At the time, the inclination toward other contexts was called revolutionary. In many ways it *was* (and still is): putting artists in direct alignment with a different audience than the artworld could (or would) address; organizing artists under similar social issues and subjects, placing artwork next to work from other producers of images to show a more accurate picture of where culture comes from. The revolution pointed itself in a way that went full circle. As expressionism always has, opposition to the institution became its apology as attempts to confound the language of art became a new dogma. The dripping figure in the street was one idea and in the gallery quite another. The alternatives of the last five years are a kind of idealism the corporate world eats like cake. Or would it presented on the right platter. Today we can watch the anything's O.K./ pluralism of the street show reinforcing the right side of the gallery—recent, giant, commercial "new style" exhibitions are an attestation. Meanwhile, outside of its previous social context, artwork with content is being used to assimilate real political work into a spectacle of pseudo-activism. As such artifacts or ornaments, the ideas of anyone including artists have little meaning.

Revolutions in content and context should respond accordingly.