

DOUG ASHFORD  
INTERVIEWED BY  
ANTONIA LOTZ AND EVE SMITH

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The archival presentation that was recently shown at Raven Row (A History of Irritated Material) included some documentation of Group Material's past meetings. Why did you decide to share this material with the public?

D. A.: The archive that Julie Ault and I have culled from our personal collections and gathered with former colleagues took two years to put together for the Fales Collection here in New York, part of New York University. All archives are simultaneously subjective and authoritative, as collections they are there as mere beginnings; ready to be mis-recognised. If we propose that all histories are not fixed but instead in a permanent state of flux, we also need to accept that values and implication are part of a process of constant refiguring and translating; a process that goes beyond the life of any creators. Ideas or facts that begin as fixed or known can become strange or debatable again, even to those who created or experienced them. So the process of engaging with a document often has to start at a beginning with a frame and container invented by someone - and then someone else must proceed by asking for, or demanding, another interpretation.

A. L. | E. S.: Reading the minutes of some Group Material meetings struck a chord with us as we have recently attempted to work collaboratively. Could you talk about how working as a collective can increase the potential to be critical?

D. A.: The dialogic process foundational to collective work is by definition one of exchanging ideas. This difficult work touches your first question: we posit the inevitability of translation in every exchange over the value of an idea of creation. Things need to be described, put in contact with other things and felt between people to share in value. Such a facing of other people's values is obviously an intrinsic part of all aesthetic experience and that's why the critical life implied by art is so difficult to fully embrace outside of ownership. The dialogue I remember with

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Doug Ashford is a teacher, artist and writer. He is Associate Professor at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art where he has taught design, sculpture and theory since 1989. Ashford's principle art practice from 1982 to 1996 was as a member of Group Material. Since that time he has gone on to make paintings, write and produce independent public projects.

my collaborators was always inspiring when we refused to try to 'own' the result. In a way then, true criticality is to understand the relative autonomy of life and objects.

A. L. | E. S.: Group Material wrote that 'To distinguish ourselves and raise art exhibitions as a political issue, we refused to show artists as singular entities. Instead, we organized artists, non-artists, a very broad range of people, to exhibit around a special social issue.'<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, what are your thoughts on the political dimension of the solo show? What political agency can the curator have while presenting one artist's practice?

D. A.: This seems relative to what the exhibition proposes to a viewer. A group exhibition can present the strict singular viewpoint of the curatorial position as thesis or description - the viewer is left simply agreeing or disagreeing, liking or disliking, buying or keeping the wallet closed. Conversely, a solo show could of course bring multiplicities and therefore radical confusion to audiences - with a viewer asked to work through meanings on their own and deliberate on what is seen and felt. I believe, perhaps distorting Brecht, that the politics of art comes in the capacity delivered to an audience to refigure the values of culture through uncertainty and deliberation.

A. L. | E. S.: Does 'dissensus' within a curatorial collective have to be visible to an audience for it to have an impact? In our case this wasn't especially visible - do you think our decision to work as a temporary collective and organising a solo show was playing too safe?

D. A.: I would say that it depends on what is actually made visible, and how - what are the forms of vision? Group Material also depended on larger collaborations to imply dissensus and difference in determining the value of culture: by including objects that questioned the propositions of the exhibitions, the definitions of authorship, and the formal histories these realities might imply. These objects could be made by artists or not; be found or made; show different scales of investment. The resulting ensemble was then physically designed to position

<sup>1</sup> Julie Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*. Four Corners Books: London, 2000, p. 56.

the viewer at an apex of juxtaposition and comparison - making visible the possibility of a dialogic forum that represents both the complexity of political work and the play of aesthetic experience.

A. L. | E. S.: Could you talk about the process of remembering exhibitions that you made collaboratively, for example, within the recent show at Raven Row or in the *Democracy!* exhibition organised by the Curating Contemporary Art students of the Royal College of Art in 2000? How was it to make *Show and Tell* representative of the group's 'collective memory'?

D. A.: As Julie and I are the principle repositories of Group Material's history since its disbandment we still need to remind each other at times. Some things are completely forgotten - but hopefully remembered by someone else. This means that there should be more memories mined as an antidote to official history - even if we are the writers of this history! So accordingly, I don't make any solid claim to represent the collective memory - only those representations which I produced in the varied presentations since Group Material ended and helped produce the book *Show and Tell*. Since the book was published there have been more than a few reminders by others of things that were reported wrongly or left out. The archive is now there to encourage many more memories to be written.

A. L. | E. S.: Since the disbandment of Group Material in 1996, you went to work as an artist, writer and teacher. Working 'solo' you still tend to be interested in collaboration, how would you describe your practice today in regards to a split between the individual and the collective?

D. A.: The practice of teaching is always an extended collaboration into the values and dreams of others. I need to work on what students want - but it is a limited form of devotional labour, existing only for a period of time and under the particular terms of propositions and response. These days I am much more invested in an idea of such limited partnerships - the artwork I make now takes a great deal of time sitting alone in a room talking to people who are no longer here.