



Group Material, *Timeline: A Chronicle of US Intervention in Central and Latin America, 1984*. 'For Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America', P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York. Photograph: Dorothy Zeidman. Courtesy the artists and Four Corners Books

## Counter-Time: Group Material's Chronicle of US Intervention in Central and South America

— Claire Grace

*The fact is that spatial form is the perceptual basis of our notion of time, that we literally cannot 'tell time' without the mediation of space.*

— W.J.T. Mitchell<sup>1</sup>

*History is, in effect, a science of complex analogies, a science of double vision [...] History in this sense is a special method of studying the present with the aid of the facts of the past.*

— Boris Eikhenbaum<sup>2</sup>

**In this examination of Group Material's *Timeline*, Claire Grace considers the ambivalent relationship to time and historicisation embedded within their use of a graphic, linear timeline with which to represent history.**

For some in the early 1980s, time seemed to circle back on itself. Shadows of the Vietnam War loomed large as the Reagan Doctrine, at the time still emergent, galvanised late-Cold War CIA and military operations in South and Central America, in particular in El Salvador against the

FDR and the FMLN, and in Nicaragua against the Sandinista Liberation Front.<sup>3</sup> Images of state-sponsored atrocities appeared regularly in *The New York Times*, magnifying the long-running history of United States military action elsewhere south of the border. As the crisis mounted, activists across the Americas responded in kind. In New York, political exiles and local sympathisers formed a network of diverse organisations, both small and large, including CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador), Casa Nicaragua, Taller Latinoamericano, INALSE (Institute of El Salvadorian Arts and Letters in Exile) and others, including, in the summer of 1983, Artists Call Against US Intervention in Latin America.<sup>4</sup> Active between 1983 and 1985, Artists Call broadcast a message of solidarity throughout the art world in a national campaign of exhibitions and other events organised in hundreds of alternative and established cultural institutions across the country.<sup>5</sup> In New York alone, more than seven hundred artists participated, including many well-known figures.<sup>6</sup> One of the most remarkable contributions, *Timeline: The Chronicle of US Intervention in Central*

- 1 W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory', in W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.), *The Language of Images*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p.274.
- 2 Boris Eikhenbaum, 'Literary Environment (Leningrad 1929)', in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (ed.), *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1978, p.56. Cited in Leah Dickerman, 'The Fact and the Photograph', *October*, vol.118, Fall 2006, p.152.
- 3 The first letter Artists Call (see below) sent out to 'Fellow Artists' in the summer of 1983 opened: 'We're starting down the Vietnam road again. After the '60s, we felt a sense of defeat, but in fact we helped deflect the full might of this country from landing on the Vietnamese. Now we have to hold back the fist in Central America.' Letter reproduced in Doug Ashford, 'Aesthetic Insurgency: Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America (1982–1985)', in *System Error: War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (exh. cat.), Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2007, p.104. The FDR (Revolutionary Democratic Front) formed in 1980 as a grouping of social democratic parties and political organisations. The FMLN (The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) formed in 1980 as a coalition of left-wing revolutionary guerrilla organisations (and has since become one of two major political parties in El Salvador).
- 4 See D. Ashford, 'Aesthetic Insurgency', *op. cit.*, pp.111–19. Email from Julie Ault, 20 November 2010.
- 5 Organised by an ad-hoc coalition of artists, activists and other cultural practitioners, Artists Call raised tens of thousands in donations for the National University of El Salvador, the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers and a coalition of Salvadoran labour organisations. Exhibitions, performances and other events took place beginning in January 1984. As Jamey Gambrell put it at the time, 'fund raising was almost a secondary activity — the expression of art-world opposition to official US policy in [Central America] was, above all, intended to draw greater public attention to the "unofficial" war being fought there'. 'Artists Call was [...] about artists participating in the formation of political consciousness [...]. Many organizers had participated in artist protests against the Vietnam War...' J. Gambrell, 'Art Against Intervention', *Art in America*, May 1984, pp.9 and 15.
- 6 Participants included Louise Bourgeois, Jimmy Durham, Leon Golub, Hans Haacke, Joyce Kozloff, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sol LeWitt, Ana Mendieta, Claes Oldenburg, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Rauschenberg, Carolee Schneemann, Mark di Suvero and many others.

and Latin America, was made by Group Material, a collective of young New York artists that formed in 1979 and whose members included two key figures in Artists Call (Doug Ashford and Julie Ault).<sup>7</sup>

*Timeline* exemplifies Group Material's installation practice in a number of key respects, not least in its status as a temporary, one time only project specific to both its time (a two-month period in the winter of 1984) and its place (P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, New York).<sup>8</sup> Consistent with the ephemeral nature of many of Group Material's projects, *Timeline* also exemplifies the collective's curatorial approach to installation art. Filling a room at P.S.1, a loose, salon-style hanging chequered all four walls with a multitude of cultural artefacts, all presented on equal footing: newspaper clippings; press photographs; a scarf and banner from the FMLN and the Sandinista Liberation Front; and artworks made in response to the crisis by close to forty contemporary artists, including little-known figures and many prominent ones. Contributors included artists as diverse as Ida Applebroog, Conrad Atkinson, Sue Coe, Mike Glier, Leon Golub, Michael John Gonzalez, Louis Laurita, Faith Ringgold, Nancy Spero, Haim Steinbach, members of Group Material and numerous others. *Timeline* also displayed original works by historical figures such as Honoré Daumier, Tina Modotti and Diego Rivera.<sup>9</sup> A selection of agricultural products referenced North-South trade relations: coffee grinds lined the edges of the room; a small heap of fresh bananas emitted a pungent scent; ten large tobacco leaves clung to one wall, while on another cotton sheeting hung in gauzy folds; and sheets of copper were also displayed. In the centre of the room stood a massive, bright red sculpture in the shape of a maritime navigation buoy, which had featured in a

recent protest in Washington, DC against US policy in Central America.

*Timeline's* 'archival impulse'<sup>10</sup> operated much like other Group Material installations: it pooled relevant artefacts to create a chamber for reflection on a pressing matter of public concern, in this case the impact of US military intervention on political, cultural and economic conditions in South and Central America. But in its representation of chronological time, the 1984 project marked an important shift in Group Material's practice. A red band three-inches wide encircled all four walls, hand-painted at intervals with crisp black frets and four-digit numbers enumerating the years of US interventions in the region.<sup>11</sup> Though the timeline itself included no explanatory text, its dated trajectory provided a framework in which the multifarious collage of images and objects assembled above and below could come together as a richly reflective, if ultimately abstract, historiography. Mapping a temporal axis onto a spatial one, *Timeline* introduced the model of factographic installation later developed by Group Material in what has become perhaps their most well known work, *AIDS Timeline* (1989).<sup>12</sup> Little has been published on the 1984 precursor, or on either work's ambivalent relationship to the graphic form they inhabit, the modern timeline.<sup>13</sup> This essay explores that ambivalence in the context of the 1984 project, looking closely at its implications for historical representation and spectatorship.

Like Group Material's 1989 chronicle of the AIDS crisis, the 1984 work is anything but a straightforward timeline. Codified in late-eighteenth-century England, this powerfully reductive representational device was linked from the start with the idea of teleology. Its linear horizontal form provided what has recently been described as 'an intuitive

visual analogue for concepts of historical progress that were [then] becoming popular'.<sup>14</sup> In its use by Group Material just over two centuries later, seemingly anachronistically within the burgeoning postmodernism of the 1980s, *Timeline* deftly adapts this Enlightenment-era form, applying it just enough to mark a path away from the anxieties postmodernism harbours for both history and time (the former regarded as the pen of oppression, and the latter seen as too fugitive to chart or trace).<sup>15</sup> But even as *Timeline* moves towards temporal and historiographic clarity, it is far from a smooth rehabilitation of the early-modern graphic form it marshals. True to its historical moment, *Timeline* is also shot through with ambivalences of its own. Confronting the certitudes of the timeline with postmodern doubt, *Timeline* works these two temporalities against one another, and in so doing opens up a very different kind of historical encounter.

#### History Lessons

The bright red band that extended horizontally across *Timeline's* four walls hovered at a common eye-level about five feet from the floor. Its vivid colour referenced the

palette of post-revolutionary Soviet graphic design (an important source for Group Material's practice generally), and alluded to the blood lost in the struggles in South and Central America. With these overtones, the crimson timeline not only unified the installation's kaleidoscopic visual field, but also commanded attention as its 'red thread' — its single formal constant and most prominent feature (complimented by the giant protest sculpture at the centre of the room).<sup>16</sup> Spanning from 1823 to 1984, the timeline's scope connected current interventions, naturalised in the US Cold War media as necessary or even heroic, with interventions in the distant past, whose moral depravity was easily identifiable in retrospect.<sup>17</sup> By chronicling the patterns of a silenced history of oppression, *Timeline* functioned as a work of counter-doubt, *Timeline* works these two temporalities against one another, and in so doing opens up a very different kind of historical encounter.

If *Timeline* participated in critical postmodernism by virtue of its subject matter, its 'red thread' cut against the grain. Abiding by the conventions of the

7 During the making of *Timeline*, Group Material's members were: Ashford, Ault, Mundy McLaughlin and Tim Rollins. See J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material*, London: Four Corners Books, 2010, p.59. Other key figures in Artists Call's organisation included Zoe Anglesey, Daniel Flores Ascencio of the newly formed INALSE, Coosje van Bruggen, Josely Carvalho, Leon Golub, Kimiko Hahn, Ted Hannon, Jon Hendricks, Thomas Lawson, Lucy Lippard, Thiago de Mello and others. Though not the subject of this essay, the diversity of Artists Call's organising body was central to the work that was accomplished. Email from D. Ashford, 5 November 2010.

8 Group Material's exhibition (22 January–18 March 1984) took place long before P.S.1 — a converted school building in Long Island City, Queens — officially became affiliated with the Museum of Modern Art in 2000. P.S.1 was then a thriving non-traditional venue for experimental art and site-specific installation.

9 A complete list of the artists and cultural artefacts represented in *Timeline*, as well as a written description of the work and a series of installation photographs all appear in J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, op. cit., pp.83–90 and 258. Information on originals from an email from J. Ault, op. cit.

10 Group Material anticipates the 'archival impulse' coined for a tendency in art production in the 1990s in Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October*, vol.110, Fall 2004, pp.3–22.

11 *Timeline's* numbers were hand-painted by Tim Rollins using an overhead projector and Letraset layout transparencies prepared in advance. Email from J. Ault, op. cit.

12 The term 'factography' derives from Soviet Productivist art of the 1920s and 30s, which was, along with Constructivism, an important influence for Group Material. 'Factography' refers to the presentation within the sphere of art of contemporary and historical data relating to social, economic and political issues. See Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'From Faktura to Factography', *October*, vol.30, Fall 1984, pp.82–119. As Buchloh summarises in a later essay on Hans Haacke, factography extends from the assumption that 'the new masses of industrial societies would warrant new participatory forms of art production that directly related to their daily experiences and thus transcended the traditional class limitations imposed by the esoteric standards of advanced bourgeois visual culture'. B.H.D. Buchloh, 'Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason' (1988), *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955–1975*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2000, pp.239–40. *AIDS Timeline*, which traces the political roots of the AIDS crisis and its demographic and cultural impact, was first exhibited in 1989 at the MATRIX art gallery of the University of California, Berkeley, and was reconfigured for the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1990 and the Whitney Biennial in 1991.

13 The subject merits volumes. My own work considers these two projects as works of counter-memory that *détourne* both modern representational devices they occupy, the timeline (as I discuss here) and the archive. I also develop a reading of these projects as embodied spatialisations of memory reminiscent of classical mnemonic techniques in which narrative is mapped onto imagined architectural spaces (see Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966). Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton, *Cartographies of Time: A History of the Timeline*, Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010, p.245. As the authors demonstrate, the art of graphically representing chronological time has a long history of its own. Tabular formats developed in the fourth century remained popular through the eighteenth century and beyond, and in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance chronographers experimented with an extraordinarily imaginative repertoire of graphic forms, including elaborate systems of roots and trees and anatomical renderings of Christ as well as of dragons and other fantastical creatures. Soon after its emergence in the 1770s, the single-axis horizontal timeline almost completely supplanted these earlier models, catching on precisely because it 'captured the historical spirit of the moment'. *Ibid.*, p.19.

14 See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989; and Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, vol.146, 1984, pp.53–92.

15 See Thomas Lawson, 'Group Material, Timeline, P.S.1', *Artforum*, vol.22, no.8, May 1984, p.83.

16 As just one example, *Newsweek's* 10 October 1983 cover story vaunts what it calls 'The CIA's Secret Warriors', referring by this brassy description to the Special Forces ('Green Berets' by another name), the elite military division dispatched in many Cold War operations during this period, the ranks of which swelled under President Reagan.

17 The term and concept of counter-memory is drawn from Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. D.F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon), Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.

18 J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, op. cit.



timeline's modern form, its single-axis, diachronic extension suggests continuity and definition where postmodernism insists on multiplicity and fragmentation. However appropriate to Group Material's enduring pedagogical investments, and to the specific site of display in this particular case (a former classroom in P.S.1's repurposed school building), *Timeline*'s measured progression of dates affirms precisely the genre of historical and temporal coherence that the anxious pressures of postmodernism had already scattered and dissolved. Indeed, in Group Material's immediate art historical context, from the 1960s at least through the mid-80s, artistic production in the US often steered clear of historical representation. As Mark Godfrey has argued, in the few instances where historical subject matter surfaces in this period, it tends to place less emphasis on the history it addresses than on the limits of historical representation in a world heavily mediated by press photography and television.<sup>20</sup> There are, of course, a number of crucial exceptions, and it is one of the claims of this essay that Group Material's 1984 *Timeline* helped chart an emergent, countervailing trend of historicism in post-War and contemporary avant-garde practice. Among other artists whose work engaged this historical turn early on, Atkinson, Golub, Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler and Spero informed Group

Material's development to varying degrees as mentors or interlocutors, either for the collective generally or for individual members.<sup>21</sup>

*Timeline* ran counter not only to the historical scepticism that characterises post-War art production in the US, but also to its 'almost obsessional uneasiness with time and its measure', a prevailing anxiety Pamela M. Lee describes in *Chronophobia* (2004).<sup>22</sup> In 'nonlinear paradigms of seriality', 'recursion' and endless duration, the art of this period strips time bare of historical meaning even while compulsively belabouring its passage.<sup>23</sup> Examples abound: 1960s Minimalist sculpture, which quite radically emphasises time as a factor of perceptual understanding, nonetheless scours phenomenological experience clean of its historical conditions.<sup>24</sup> The work of Robert Smithson fragments and refracts time to such an extent that although historical practice flickers insistently in a work like *Spiral Jetty* (1970), it ultimately drains away, spiralling vertiginously out of our grasp.<sup>25</sup> Hanne Darboven's 'temporal sublime',<sup>26</sup> from 1968 onwards, only in exceptional cases acknowledges the historical content of the days it endlessly tabulates.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, in the white-on-black date paintings of On Kawara's *Today* series (1966–ongoing), the artist's disciplined registration of days methodically empties time of historical meaning.<sup>28</sup>

- 20 See Mark Godfrey, 'The Artist as Historian', *October*, vol. 120, Spring 2007, pp. 141–42. See also B.H.D. Buehler, 'A Note on Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977*', *October*, vol. 48, Spring 1989, pp. 88–109.
- 21 Atkinson, Golub, Rosler and Spero were also frequently represented in Group Material's installations and projects (including *Timeline*), along with Jenny Holzer, Juan Sanchez, Mike Glier, Hans Haacke and many other consistent contributors. Group Material had other key mentors that should be mentioned, among them Margaret Harrison and Lucy Lippard; five members of the original group also studied with Joseph Kosuth at the School of Visual Arts (though, with the exception of Rollins, these members had left the group by 1981). Ashford studied with Rosler and Haacke at Cooper Union from 1980 to 1981, and subsequently maintained relationships with both artists. Email from J. Ault, *op. cit.*; J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op. cit.*, pp. 7, 49 and 59; and email from D. Ashford, *op. cit.*
- 22 Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2004, p. xii. Lee's account of the centrality of time in the art of the 1960s has been enormously helpful for this essay. Whether these temporal preoccupations took on specifically public dimensions, as she insists, is largely beside the point. Certainly, however, what Lee calls the 'chronophobia' of 1960s art (which she attributes primarily to new developments in technology and the rise of the information age) has roots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the increasingly simultaneous temporality afforded by new inventions such as photography, telephone and radio. The modernist avant-garde responded by theorising time as relative and non-sequential (one thinks of Man Ray's *Indestructible Object*, 1923, and other works from Dada and Surrealism; Joyce and Woolf in the sphere of literature; and Bergson, Freud and Einstein in philosophy and science). See Leesa Fanning, 'Dada and Surrealist Time', in Jan Schall (ed.), *Tempus Fugit, Time Flies*, Kansas City: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2000, p. 88.
- 23 P.M. Lee, *Chronophobia*, *op. cit.*, p. xxiii.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 278. Also see H. Foster, 'The Crux of Minimalism', *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1996.
- 25 See Jennifer Roberts, *Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, pp. 5, 138 and 139.
- 26 P.M. Lee, *Chronophobia*, *op. cit.*, p. 288.
- 27 Alexander Alberro goes so far as to insist that Darboven's tables of countless sequenced dates have 'nothing to do with the world at all'. A. Alberro, 'Time and Conceptual Art', in Jan Schall (ed.), *Tempus Fugit*, *op. cit.*, p. 151. Darboven's monumental *Kulturgeschichte 1880–1983 (Cultural History 1880–1983)* (1980–83) stands as an important exception, perhaps more archival in nature than specifically historical. Dating from the same time frame as Group Material's 1984 project, it offers an important point of comparison, particularly since both projects are, as I explore in my current research, poised between the archive and the timeline. See Dan Adler, *Hanne Darboven: Cultural History 1880–1983*, London: Afterall Books, 2009.



Group Material, *AIDS Timeline (New York City 1991)*, 1991. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photograph: Ken Schles. Courtesy the artists and Four Corners Books

Lee struggles to carve a space for historical agency within the yawning 'temporal extensiveness' she describes.<sup>29</sup> But as her account itself suggests, the ultimate effect of these tireless enumerative systems is to clear time of any trace of historical narrative or incident.<sup>30</sup> Wan and still, they cast their spectator adrift in a kind of post-historical ennui, a world in which, it seems, nothing much happens or matters and no action seems capable of making much difference.<sup>31</sup>

*Timeline* forecloses on this cool indifference. Unlike the vacuous

metronomic temporality of Conceptual art, or the clean phenomenological time of Minimalism, *Timeline* pumped its 161-year span full of historical affect. Its resonance as history resulted from Group Material's decision to cross their signature approach to three-dimensional collage with a graphic representation of time. In this regard, however spare the timeline's numerical typography remained throughout (a minimalist, hand-rendered sans serif as reminiscent of Kawara's as of Constructivist graphic design), contextualised by the installation's

28 Kawara lines each painting's storage box with a page from that day's newspaper. Not meant for exhibition purposes, this practice redundantly corroborates each painting's time and place, but accords little historical meaning to reported events. See P.M. Lee, *Chronophobia*, *op. cit.*, p. 293. Other examples include: Christine Kozlov's *271 Blank Sheets of Paper Corresponding to 271 Days of Concepts Rejected* (1968); Douglas Huebler's *Duration Piece* (1969); Eva Hesse's *Metronomic Irregularity II* (1966); Dennis Oppenheim's *Time Pocket* (1968); and any number of others. Even in the work of Hans Haacke, where history and chronology often play an important role, registering the passage of time does not necessarily grant it historical meaning. In Haacke's *News* (1969–70), five teletype machines print reams of information transmitted live from commercial wire services. Even while the printed scrolls disrupt the ostensible neutrality of the 'white cube' and insist on the gallery's inscription within politics and history, the endlessly accumulating surfeit of information remains illegible as 'news'. The few instances of linear, chronological progressions in the art of the period tend not to address historical time but rather to evoke a more personal commentary: Sophie Calle's *The Shadow* (1981), Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) or Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969). Though not acknowledged by Group Material as a source for their work, it should be mentioned that Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1974–79) not only stands as an important example of historicism in late-twentieth-century art in the US (the work's monumental banquet table, place settings, tiled floor and other elements represent 1,038 women in history), but also includes a wall-mounted historical timeline in the form of seven 'Heritage Panels', photo-and-text collages that document the lives of 999 women dating from prehistory to the twentieth century.

29 P.M. Lee, *Chronophobia*, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

30 See *ibid.*, p. 307.

31 At least in Smithson's case, this temporal sensibility provided a kind of 'cosmic endorsement for his own aversion to activism, political or otherwise', J. Roberts, *Mirror-Travels*, *op. cit.*, p. 9. More important than the careers and activist credentials of any one of these artists is the kind of spectatorship their work presupposes.

layered accumulation of display objects, the four-digit numbers registered not merely as abstract symbols of time, but also as moments of history. Likewise, however richly associative the installation's cultural artefacts might have been on their own, only in the context of the timeline's numbered extension do they come alive as historically articulate objects. Consider Richard Prince's re-photograph of a Marlboro ad, mounted in *Timeline* above

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the year '1823'. One of many works from Prince's Cowboy series (1980–92), the image shows a cowboy from behind as he reaches towards a horse's bridle, perhaps about to mount, or else 'breaking' the animal to follow his commands. In the context of the installation, the visual metaphor for conquest suggested by Prince's work directs attention to the mutually reinforcing roots of North American myths of masculinity and expansionist foreign policy. But it is Group Material's wall-mounted timeline that makes these connections register as specifically historical: 1823 is the year the Monroe Doctrine was first introduced, solidifying the US's expansionist position in the Western hemisphere and providing the rhetorical arsenal cited on numerous future occasions to legitimise US interventions in the Americas.

*Timeline*'s commitment to history reflects Group Material's immersion in efforts to support the struggle for self-determination in Central America. By 1982, they had formed relationships with exiled artists and intellectuals from that region, and had plugged into the activities of CISPES, Casa Nicaragua, the Taller

Latinoamericano and other organisations that together occupied the first floor of 19 West 21st Street, where, joining these organisations, Group Material rented an office space beginning in the autumn of 1982.<sup>32</sup> It was there at the Taller Latinoamericano that Group Material presented *Luchar!* (*Struggle!*, 1982) the previous spring. An important precursor for *Timeline* (as well as for Artists Call), *Luchar!* assembled a range of works made in response to the crisis in Central America, including many by artists later included in *Timeline*.<sup>33</sup> Not unlike *Timeline*, *Luchar!* vividly addressed the realities of torture, state violence and human rights abuses in the region.<sup>34</sup> The 1982 project included no timeline or chronology, however, and remained focused on present-tense conditions rather than their deeper historical roots. The year-and-a-half transition between *Luchar!* and *Timeline* opened the door to historical time, a shift for which Group Material's involvement in Artists Call and the organisations of West 21st Street was perhaps central. CISPES made the cumulative, historical depth of current events explicit by producing a flyer chronicling the dates of US interventions between 1868 and 1983 — a chronology that contributed to Group Material's move towards the marked historicism of *Timeline*, which included the flyer as a scaled-up Photostat mounted on the entrance wall immediately to the right of the title.<sup>35</sup>

Many other points of reference informed Group Material's turn towards *Timeline*'s chronographic ethos. Too numerous to detail fully here, it should be stressed that the collective's historical sensibility extended perhaps less from precedents in the realm of visual art than from popular culture. In this regard, CISPES's flyer joined the many graphic charts and timelines printed regularly in *Newsweek*, *Time* magazine and other similar publications. The exhibition design of Charles and Ray Eames also played a

role; *Mathematica: A World of Numbers ... and Beyond* (1961) and *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* (1975–77) both included wall-mounted timelines, for instance.<sup>36</sup> The installations of British Conceptual artist Conrad Atkinson made a strong impression as well. Atkinson's first exhibition at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York, *Material-Six Works* (1979), included wall-mounted displays chronicling various politically-significant histories, including the struggle in Northern Ireland and the nexus of industrial pollution and public health.<sup>37</sup>

One further precedent should be mentioned here, if only as a heuristic point of comparison: Hans Haacke's *Manet-PROJEKT* (1974). In this work's ten sequential panels, Haacke charts the provenance of Édouard Manet's 1880 painting *Une Botte d'asperges* (*A Bunch of Asparagus*), which had just entered the permanent collection of the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne. Conceived for (and ultimately censored by) this museum, Haacke's work exposes the Nazi-era career of the painting's previous owner, Deutsche Bank chairman Hermann Josef Abs, who had been a prominent figure in the economic establishment of the Third Reich. A timeline of sorts, *Manet-PROJEKT* deploys historical chronology to expose the political contradictions of cultural patronage.<sup>38</sup> As Haacke pointed out in a 1984 interview, inverting the 'art historian's custom to trace the provenance

of a work', provenance serves here not to authenticate the object but rather to expose its underside.<sup>39</sup>

The forensic historicism of Haacke's work and certainly its prehistory in Soviet productivism share points in common (as well as many differences) with Group Material's practice, including projects such as *Timeline* and *AIDS Timeline*. If less concretely factographic than *Manet-PROJEKT*, and broader in its social and political ramifications, *Timeline* could be said to extend in part from a similarly historicising, chronographic impulse. Significantly, too, each work explodes the expectations of the traditional historical form it inhabits.<sup>40</sup>

**Historical Polysemy**

*Timeline* subjects linear historiography to a series of displacements that initiate the viewer into a mode of spectatorship quite different from the one the timeline customarily invites. If expanding the timeline at an architectural scale is now somewhat common (in museum displays, for instance), it is rare in the larger history of the form, whose power as a synoptic medium more often exploits the disembodied, 'at a glance' scale of the printed page.<sup>41</sup> Pulling this totalising view apart, *Timeline* recasts the two-dimensional medium in a three-dimensional volume, opening it out to create a chronographic space. Rather than providing a bird's eye view, it implicates the spectator as a subject embodied within

32 Or in North American English, the second floor.

33 *Luchar!* included projects by Bolívar Arellano, Golub, Lawson, Lippard, OSPAL (Organisation of Solidarity of the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America), Susan Meiselas, Rosler, Christy Rupp, Anton van Dalen, members of Group Material and about forty others. J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, op. cit., p.258. The link between *Luchar!* and Artists Call is described in D. Ashford, 'Aesthetic Insurgency', op. cit., pp.114–16.

34 As described in *Show and Tell*, 'A work by Anne Pitrone — a life-size piñata that depicts a figure in the strappado torture position — generates some controversy. Its symbolically powerful presence is disturbingly evocative of lived reality to some staff members of and visitors to the organisations on the same floor.' J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, op. cit., pp.74–75.

35 Conversation with D. Ashford, 10 September 2010; and conversation with J. Ault, , 20 November 2010. CISPES's timeline is reproduced in J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, op. cit., p.90.

36 First mounted in 1961 at the California Museum of Science and Industry, *Mathematica* was subsequently installed semi-permanently in Chicago, Boston and New York. *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* was organised in collaboration with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and travelled to various venues in Europe before opening in New York in 1976. Group Material encountered these exhibitions primarily through their published documentation. Email from J. Ault, op. cit.

37 Combining diverse cultural and historical material, Atkinson's work and the Eameses' exhibitions paralleled and contributed to the archival, anti-hierarchical inclusiveness of Group Material's installations. T. Rollins, 'Art as Social Action: An Interview with Conrad Atkinson', *Art in America*, vol.68, February 1980, pp.119–23. Ault also names Constructivism as a point of reference for Group Material's historicism. Email from J. Ault, op. cit. I am grateful to Dennis Tenenboym for pointing out that post-revolutionary Soviet graphic design not infrequently incorporates temporally arranged presentations of data, such as graphs and tables.

38 B.H.D. Buchloh, 'Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason', op. cit., pp.222–28.

39 Yve-Alain Bois, D. Crimp, Rosalind Krauss and H. Haacke, 'A Conversation with Hans Haacke', *October*, vol.30, Fall 1984, p.37.

40 In an unpublished portion of an interview with Group Material that appeared in *Parachute* magazine in 1989, Jim Drobnik prompts Ault, Ashford and Felix Gonzalez-Torres to reflect on the relationship between their practice and Haacke's *Manet-PROJEKT*. Their responses convey quite different perspectives, though on the whole their comments draw a distinction between the muckraking specificity of Haacke's work and Group Material's more interrogative and expansive approach. Even while retaining this more inquiry-based, inclusive approach, however, the 'forensic' historicism of a work like *AIDS Timeline* nonetheless resembles the 'real-time' analysis for which Haacke's work is known, in particular in projects such as *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971). This connection has been pointed out in David Deicher, 'Polarity Rules: Looking at Whitney Annuals and Biennials, 1968–2000', in J. Ault (ed.), *Alternative Art New York 1965–1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, pp.244–45. See also J. Drobnik, Interview with Group Material, 21 June 1989, Group Material Archive, Box 7, Interview Transcripts 1, The Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University; and J. Drobnick, 'Dialectical Group Materialism', *Parachute*, no.56, October–December 1989, p.29.

41 D. Rosenberg and A. Grafton, *Cartographies of Time*, op. cit., pp.122 and 241.



time's unfolding. It presents time not only as a linear progression accumulating from left to right, but also as a loop that encircles all four walls, enfolding the past cyclically within the present, and vice versa.

*Timeline* further dislodges the narrative authority of its form by the uncertain relationships it constructs between the dates charted along the wall and the artworks and artefacts arranged around it. Rather than a chronological survey of objects dating from the years the timeline maps, the majority of visual and cultural material dates from the 1970s and 80s, while the timeline plunges back a century and a half earlier. This means that while some years (especially the more recent ones) are paired with synchronically complimentary objects — Atkinson's *For Chile* (1973), for example, hangs just after '1973', the year of Chilean President Salvador Allende's assassination — temporal dissonance largely prevails. Mike Glier's *Clubs of Virtue* (1979) hangs below '1854'; Denise Greene's *Revolution #2* (1983) hangs above '1932'; a cover from the *X-Men* comic book series (published since 1963)

hangs just shy of '1823', and inches behind Francisco Goya's print *They Carried Her Off* (1797–99, plate 8 of *Los Caprichos*). Even when works appear near their date of production — Daumier's *Le Rêve d'un marguillier* (*The Churchwarden's Dream*, 1850), for example, hangs not far from '1854' — more often than not the conceptual distance between numbered events and visual objects demands leaps in cognition to connect the dots across culture and geography, if not time as well. It may not be immediately apparent, for example, that Daumier's caricature of the Catholic Church in nineteenth-century France also illuminates Church politics in the very different context of Central America.<sup>42</sup>

In the relative absence of *temporal* consonance, *thematic* correspondence provides *Timeline* with a second organising principle.<sup>43</sup> Electoral corruption in El Salvador in '1982' thus finds its counterpart in a 1933 photomontage by John Heartfield, which shows voters driven by intimidation to cast ballots for the Nazi party.<sup>44</sup> But as the above description suggests, most of *Timeline*'s thematic correlations stretch

Group Material, *Subculture*, 1983, project on the New York City subways. Work shown by Dennis Adams. Courtesy the artists and Four Corners Books

the imagination just as far, since many objects, rather than cued to an isolated year, resonate meaningfully at any number of points along the timeline's four-wall extension. As apposite as Prince's Marlboro ad re-photograph is for '1823', its aesthetic of Manifest Destiny also reflects the numerous subsequent years in which US government officials cited the Monroe Doctrine as a rationale for intervention (including several years listed on the timeline, such as '1954', which references the coup d'état in Guatemala that year, organised and sponsored by the CIA). Likewise, hanging above the year '1896', a poster from Barbara Kruger's series *You make history when you do business* (1982) precisely describes a much larger historical context of economically motivated military intervention. In Tina Modotti's photograph *Hands Resting on Tool* (1926), which hangs between '1865' and '1885', a labourer's hands pack the closely cropped frame, simultaneously conceding to work while issuing a silent refusal. The photograph conveys volumes about the exploitation of labour during *Timeline*'s entire historical span.

As these examples suggest, restless at their given location on the timeline, most objects echo just as meaningfully across all four walls. Their eloquence across time signals the continuity of oppression in the past and present.<sup>45</sup> By the same token, no single artwork or cultural artefact tells the full story of any one year; instead each intervention appears as an overdetermined complex whose narrative disperses across a heterogeneous constellation of objects. Ultimately, then, the timeline's two-dimensional trajectory serves not as a historical absolute but as a structuring device that encourages viewers to diagram

a virtual, three-dimensional web of connections across both space and time.<sup>46</sup> The installation thereby rethinks the timeline less as a representational form than as an interrogative one, designed as much as anything to provoke the viewer's historical imagination.

*Timeline* further disrupts the conventions of linear historiography by presenting three different competing timelines. Each chronicles the same general subject matter, without coinciding. Multiplied three ways, the work's rival timelines thus cast doubt on the narrative authority of the work as a whole. At P.S.1, Group Material's red and black wall-mounted chronology vied for attention with the timeline provided by CISPES, which describes interventions between 1868 and 1983, each with a single line of text, and which Group Material mounted in a scaled-up version on *Timeline*'s entrance wall.<sup>47</sup> The third chronology consists of a series of black-and-white posters designed by New York artist Bill Allen. Group Material elected to display Allen's posters as part of *Timeline* after having featured them one year earlier in *Subculture* (1983), an exhibition project organised by Group Material in New York City subways.<sup>48</sup> Allen's posters each follow an identical diptych format. The right side reproduces a grainy photograph of a soldier confronting another man. On the left side, in simple typeface against a stark white background, the name of a country in South or Central America or the Caribbean floats above the year of a US invasion in that country. If Allen's spare and repetitive image-text aesthetic takes the timeline to the brink of Conceptual art's temporal blankness, its ultimate emphasis is, as one contemporary reviewer put it, the 'harrowing' repetition of the oppression it

42 Group Material, proposal, *Timeline: A Chronicle of US Intervention in Central and Latin America*, New York: P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, January 1984, Group Material Archive, Box 1, *Timeline: The Chronicle of US Intervention in Central and Latin America*, 1984, The Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.

43 See *ibid.* and J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op. cit.*, p.85.

44 Heartfield's image illustrates the cover of a 1933 edition of the German leftist magazine, *AIZ* (*Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*, or *Workers' Pictorial Newspaper*). Group Material describes this connection in its proposal for *Timeline*, *op. cit.*

45 Thus, as Thomas Lawson put it in a review at the time, 'These seeking exact correspondences between dates and display items would have been disappointed, for the evidence was put to different use. A point-by-point demonstration would simply have been another accretion of power, another construction of influence.' T. Lawson, 'Group Material, *Timeline*, P.S.1', *op. cit.*, p.83.

46 This point is indebted to a discussion about *AIDS Timeline* between Ault and Richard Meyer following Ault's presentation at 'A Museum of Ideas — Contemporary Conversations (2)', 27 March 2010, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

47 Conversation with J. Ault, *op. cit.* CISPES's chronology also appeared in a catalogue P.S.1 published on all the exhibitions on view at the time. In addition to CISPES's chronology, the section dedicated to *Timeline* also includes an updated version of Group Material's initial proposal for *Timeline*, as well as a floor-plan sketch by Rollins. P.S.1 Museum; Institute for Art and Urban Resources, *Winter: January 22 — March 18, 1984* (exh. cat.), New York: Institute for Art and Urban Resources, 1984.

48 Allen's posters were designed for Group Material's 1983 project *Subculture*, in which the collective invited one hundred artists to exhibit in 1,400 rented advertising spaces on New York City trains. Falling between *Lucharl* and *Timeline*, Allen's chronology (along with CISPES's timeline and the other reference points cited above) contributed to Group Material's shift toward the historicising emphasis of the 1984 project. Allen's posters also hung on the walls of Group Material's office on West 21st Street. Conversation with D. Ashford, *op. cit.*; and email from D. Ashford, *op. cit.*



chronicles.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, in the context of *Timeline* the posters formed a dotted line near the ceiling, contributing to the larger work's historical polysemy, where three rival chronologies coexist, highlighting by their differences the problem of historical representation itself.<sup>50</sup>

If *Timeline*'s three chronologies represent history in different terms, they also represent different historical content. The crimson timeline lists only a small selection of dates enumerated in CISPES's version. The latter begins in 1868, while the former begins more than forty years earlier. Many of the dates in Allen's timeline fail to appear in either of the other two (which is only partly explained by Allen's inclusion of interventions in the Caribbean, a region they exclude). On one wall, Allen's timeline lingers at the turn of the century, counting off the years '1898', '1906' and '1909', while below it Group Material's red line rushes ahead to '1954'. On another wall, Allen's timeline roughly aligns with the temporal frame below, with both marking years between 1820 and 1860, but even here the two timelines are syncopated. Only in a handful of instances do their dates coincide.

With three different temporal frames of reference potentially visible at once — the crimson timeline at eye level, the Allen timeline up above and the CISPES timeline on the entrance wall — Group Material's *Timeline* offers anything but a definitive account of history. *Timeline* is in this regard as much about exposing the fallibility of historical representation and the impossibility of narrative closure as it is about presenting a fixed and didactic account of the past. Diachronic as a chronicle, it is also synchronous as a spatialised and multiple form. Definitive as a timeline, the work's juxtaposition of conflicting chronologies shows each one as, in part, a construction.

Beyond the installation's representation of time, its existence in time is just as elusive. If the timeline as a form lays claim to the permanence of narrative authority,

Group Material's *Timeline* defies the model once again. Specific to its time and place, when the installation closed in March 1984 the objects it had gathered dispersed forever. From the vantage point of the present, to experience the installation as it once was is impossible. One has to rely instead on the few existing installation shots and the memories of those who witnessed the work firsthand. Even during the course of the exhibition, *Timeline* emphasised its ephemeral constitution. Bananas ripened, tobacco leaves browned and coffee grinds lost their scent. If these material transformations chart a temporal trajectory, their deterioration and ultimate disintegration suggest decay rather than teleology or linear progress. Counter to conventions of the timeline as a form (as well as to conventions of the art object), the work made itself just as elusive as the historical representation it offered.

As this essay has argued, *Timeline* occupied the form its title names only by inverting many of its conventions. In exploding the expectations of the formal device it inhabits, the work substitutes a different kind of historical encounter for the one the timeline might otherwise invite. In so doing, it not only succeeds in bringing an occluded history to light but also encourages its viewers to think critically and historically about the present, and about the role of narrative form in all historical representations. Rather than the fluid and singular voice of the conventional timeline, here the historical record fragments and divides, multiplying across an intricate circuitry of temporal registers and visual forms. Neither able to settle on any one object, nor fully trust any narrative voice, the viewer must rely on his or her own historical imagination to make sense of the past.<sup>51</sup> As a work of historical representation, therefore, *Timeline* casts doubt on the possibility of any single authoritative account.

But if *Timeline* raises the sceptre of the post-historical, it does so only to prove this notion wrong. Though the work refuses



Group Material, *Timeline: A Chronicle of US Intervention in Central and Latin America*, 1984. 'For Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America', P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York. Photograph: Dorothy Zeidman. Courtesy the artists and Four Corners Books

the authority of linear historiography, it remains recognisable as a timeline nonetheless. By combining this form with strategies of abstraction (the lack of explanatory texts and the loose cognitively challenging connections between dates and objects) and multiplicity (the profusion of objects and narrative voices), *Timeline* exhorts its viewers (as well as its makers) to act as historians themselves. Refusing postmodernism's pessimism towards historical labour and representation, the work insists on the necessity of both tasks, not just for artistic practice but also as modes of spectatorship.<sup>52</sup>

History is only part of *Timeline*'s lesson, however, for its centre of gravity is an object of political agency, a massive bright red sculpture that had been brandished a few weeks before the exhibition opened at a public protest in the nation's capital. Created by Bill Allen, Ann Messner and Barbara Westermann, the sculpture takes the form of a giant maritime navigation buoy. At the demonstration, its bell

rang a repeated toll of warning, marking time not metronomically but according to the jostling movements of protestors holding it aloft by the beams at its base. In *Timeline*, though silenced and stilled by the exhibition context, the buoy's earlier life was referenced in a photograph documenting the Washington demonstration, prominently mounted on the crimson timeline as the very final image of 1984, the installation's culminating moment, when history slips into the present. The chromatic bond between the sculpture and Group Material's timeline establishes a connection between historical analysis and public dissent in the present tense. The red at the centre also marks time along the walls, underscoring collective protest as a force as constant as the chronicle of oppression itself. In turn, the lessons of history that unfold along the walls ultimately converge at the focal point of collective action, interpellating *Timeline*'s viewers not only as historians but also as potential activists.

49 J. Gambrell, 'Art Against Intervention', *op. cit.*, p.15.

50 By including these three different chronologies, Group Material may not have specifically intended for *Timeline* to represent such divergent accounts of the past. However, they were certainly very familiar with both Allen's and CISPES's chronologies prior to executing the wall-mounted timeline. As mentioned above, they invited Allen to exhibit the black-and-white posters as part of *Timeline* after they had been included in Group Material's project *Subculture*. Similarly, working in the environment of West 21st Street they had certainly read CISPES's chronology, if not discussed it at meetings. This suggests some degree of intentionality around the historical multi-vocality that ultimately results.

51 The descriptions in this paragraph draw closely on Godfrey's fascinating and pertinent discussion of the work of Matthew Buckingham. M. Godfrey, 'The Artist as Historian', *op. cit.*, p.149.

52 See B.H.D. Buchloh, 'A Note on Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977*', *op. cit.* M. Godfrey's 'The Artist as Historian', *op. cit.* makes the case that history, relatively absent from Anglo-American post-War art, has recently become a primary concern in artistic practice. Notable examples relevant for Group Material's work include: Rosler's installation *Fascination with the (game of the) exploding (historical) hollow leg* (1985); Richter's series *October 18, 1977* (1988); Mary Kelly's *Mea Culpa* (1999); and, more recently, Chto delat?'s timeline projects (2008–10) and the 'Potosí Principle' exhibition at the Museo Nacional Centro de Reina Sofía in Madrid and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, curated by Alice Greischer, Max Jorge Hinderer and Andreas Siekmann. My current project undertakes a more thoroughgoing comparison with works such as these.