Group Material:
Abstraction as the Onset of the Real

DOUG ASHFORD

How do abstract understandings and images of the world become origins for democratic urgency? If anything was consistently true about Group Material's practice, it was our belief that the display of art is a political event; a space where what it means to be a human subject can be confirmed and debated.

Recently I have been trying to think about two long-term concerns in my work: first is the problem of reconfiguring the arsenal that is the archive—as Julie Ault and I have spent the last two years preparing a public archive of all that is left from Group Material's fifteen-year practice for the Fales Collection of the New York University Library. Second is that for many years my individual work has been based in the production of discrete and idealistically sovereign objects in a form of spectatorship seemingly at odds with the discursively motivated exhibition.

For Group Material, the idea of an art/politics duality as a strict opposition was never accepted when posed as an opposition in our work. Instead we saw the friction between the emotions art produces and its proposal for political *effect* as creating an energy that propels multiple visions of human potential. When either formal or social directions for creative evaluation were deterministically applied, aesthetic disaster loomed. Meanwhile, the rigid adherence to formalisms we inherited from the decade before artificially separated objects from their references, and dried out the poetic relevance of dreams becoming action. It was clear that limitation of either the formal or the ethical in art delivers the same dilemma: a status quo of

Group Material
Democracy: Education. **1988**
Dia Art Foundation, New York

decoration or dogmatism. Today artists are operating in a historical formation very different from the time of Group Material's work. These days the defunding of social democracy *and* the hyperbolic market investment in cultural capital occur at the same time and at an alarming pace. While our public life is officially impoverished, the social turn of art is embraced amidst all other art with significant institutional clout. Last year New York was full of museums presenting exhibitions on "art and democracy," on relational practices, engaging community based art and other previously unmarketable traditions of blurring art with life. In this context I think it is important to ask: "Why now"? What is the use that social practices in art find in the business of art in a time of extraordinary political limitation? This is a question for us as artists, for our institutions and our audiences. Group Material member Félix González-Torres always used to say that everything in culture happens for a reason—and I am curious why it is just now that the relation between politics and art is so accepted. In whose interest is it that we now see the museum proclaim itself as more than a poetic depository, but also an *ethical* space, a space that can modify not only aesthetic decisions but also virtue itself.

The question of "Why now?" is particularly occupying at the archival point of Group Material's work because the investigation of social virtue in artistic invention was key to our initial project: by changing the social conditions for works of art, their effect on subjectivity could be rediscovered. And although I still believe this is a self-evidently beautiful proposal, the nature of our times seems to demand some re-defending of its basis. Group Material's effort was to directly engage with the critique of institutions through remaking the presentational context of existing art: a question about the genealogies of values that art creates when exhibited and promoted, a question of the curatorial and what it could create. But it was a question that came from art and artistic problems—from the formal, symbolic, and vibrant rethinking of visual language. In other words, when we asked what could change if the exhibiting context for art was transformed into a forum of displacement and dialogue, we were

Bernard Picart
Frontspiece, Bernard de
Fontenalle's *Entretiens sur*
la pluralite des mondes **(1717**
edn.) Cabinets des
Estampes, Biblioteques
Nationale, Paris

demanding that art's rediscovery of the self through strangeness and juxtaposition be applied to an entire room, a complete relation, a set of habits and traditions.

But what I want to do is elucidate this problem of the ethical turn in art through a history of Group Material's work: first by discussing how the group discovered the curatorial as an artistic form by examining possible sources for such a practice, then by going over one of Group Material's projects in detail—the Democracy Project, produced in 1988 for the Dia Art Foundation, then located on Wooster Street in New York City, by Julie Ault, Félix González-Torres, and myself. This might help us reflect on the stunning changes taking place as ethics become enfolded into the way museums work.

The image we have been looking at on screen is Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle's frontispiece to his seventeenth-century book *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*—a book of fictitious conversations on the scientific discoveries of the time, their uses, and their virtues. I want to present it as a kind of metaphor for the fact that our "ethical turn" here is both very old and very cosmological—or perhaps metaphysical. It was rendered for the book, which proposed human dialogue as an influence on the character of the universe: a proposal that our social interaction actually changes the world's cosmological systems. I want to repeat this: that social interaction changes the formation of the world. I found this image recently when researching how it came to be that ideal and abstract images of the world could be thought of as part of the origin of modern democratic forms.

Group Material began as a group of artists embracing their desperation. We were desperate with the idea that our work would not be shown, and if it were, it would be seen as only commodity. We were terrified that the complexities of their subjectivities would not be written in this world, and even if they were, they could not be understood. In this way Group Material was a collaboration of necessity: of money and a rented space in the tradition of making a space to organize and present art—a room of one's own.

We thought the true complexity of artistic experience was

Group Material
Primer: (for Raymond
Williams), **1982**
Artists Space, New York

overlooked by both the narrow scholarship of museum studies and the commodified taste within the framework of art reception. We believed that this dual degradation on the effect of art could be countered with a designed intervention using an ensemble of activities brought together collaboratively by artists, non-artists, and new audiences. Embedded in that ensemble was the notion of inclusion over exclusion, the displacement of the work of art into new contexts, the dislocation of the museum into new conceptions of the public. This was not our invention. We found it in the art making that came before us in Courbet, Mayakovsky, Clyfford Still, James Brown, Wallace Stevens, Paolo Friere, Michael Asher, and Charles and Ray Eames. And there were other art historical moments that were in my mind at that time—and still are:

First is that the private reveries of experience produced by cabinets of curiosities were not lost when confronted by the public site of art collecting, the Salon, the anti-Salon, and so on. I would insist that as artists, even as humans, our dreams follow us into work as we move from the bedroom to the studio and into democratic forums and back again. The idea that a visual experience can produce a meeting with an unknown is consistent with all places we occupy. Did you see the thing that I just saw? What I show here are images of the progression of the public display from Wunderkammer to the salons of post-revolutionary Paris, but the idea that the energy of wonder meets us in public and private at the same time is still, for me, a kind of mystery. Second, I want to present the generosity of certain modernist historicisms that these images present in relation to our work: André Malraux's *The Imaginary Museum* and Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* are both in my mind creative mappings that make available to us autonomous misrecognitions of existing protocol. I use that word knowing it has a negative etymological shadow, yet it can be reinvented if you allow me to put it forward as a term of generosity: seeing the categories of meaning that exist in a different or inherently "wrong" fashion. I use it to imply that in every accepted trajectory for the collection and distribution of art there are possible events of resistance—ways to read and ways to upset
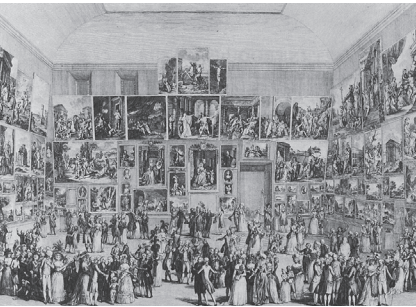
the functionalist appropriation of art by dominating economies of thought and exchange.
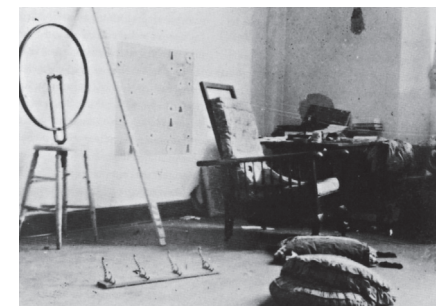
To give another example of the possible generosity of misrecognition I would like us to think of the tradition of natural history taxonomy as a cascade of fiction. All hypotheses begin, in a sense, with belief. What if the categorization of what is defined as human was broken and expanded? In this way, disruption is always inscribed into the original categories of research. Even Linnaeus, with his implied tree of animal categories pictured here, had to admit that one could not take in all the differences and similarities that nature presents at once. It is more than we can ever diagram.

The disruption of art puts such demands on our thought that we might drift or fall—collapse existing definitions and subjectivities in order to reinvent who we are and what our "nature" is. To include disruption in a plan demands we retain the capacity to accept the demise of that plan's expectation and dismantle existing definitions and subjects to engage life independently from existing rhetorical organization. Can the definition of the human be dismantled through artistic labor into a different kind of operation, determined either in secret or in public as collaboration? I would like to see the social in art as suggesting pathos based on an aesthetic of falling, surrender, and confusion—exemplified here in the image of this magical artwork titled *Trebuchet* (1917). It is the trap forcing a visitor to lose control, to fall after walking a few steps into Marcel Duchamp's studio.

Group Material began as a tool for doubled collaboration —a collective of artists in itself and a collecting agent for artistic examples at the same time. This is the first exhibition the group organized, assembled after going door to door in a then working class neighborhood and asking residents for objects. One misunderstanding of Group Material's work is that it was based in movement politics. I think this is a misconception. I don't remember a time when we were working to "empower others" in the sense of doing social work—but we *did* have an idea of how inclusivity must be part of all our interactions. This show, "People's Choice" was produced with the idea that the objects culled from our friends and neighbors would produce an

Pietro Antonio Martini
The Paris Salon of 1787
(Engraving)
Reproduced From Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985

From: Burnett, R. Will
Zoology, The Golden Guide
(Illustration)

Marcel Duchamp
Trebuchet (Trap)
Photo by Henri Pierre Roche, c.1916-1918 – taken form the internet

alternative archive of the experiences of art, an experience deduced from the beliefs of others—those not in the room. How today are we concerned with the notion of an encounter with working procedures that are not present, unseen?

Group Material saw the museum as a site of already existing social influence—a politics in itself and also of others. The reductive notion of institutions determining subjection as an engineer determines mechanical forms was clearly not useful. We wanted to address new audiences with concrete political descriptions—but with a form that would undermine accepted artistic and activist positions alike. *Timeline: A Chronicle of US Intervention in Central and Latin America* chronicled the eighty-eight physical military interventions in Central and South America by the US between 1893 and 1984, the year of the show. But the show was also an essay on the misrecognition of art with time—with a Diego Rivera still life corresponding to the present, and a John Heartfield to the nineteenth century. To misrecognize history itself was an integral part of our insistence on remaking artistic values. *Timeline* was produced for a larger collective effort produced in New York and across the country—Artists Call against US Intervention in Central America—where artists inspired thirty gallery and museum exhibitions in New York, most of the art magazines, and many street events, all of which raised close to $140,000, which was sent to the cultural arm of the Sandanistas, the FMLN and solidarity groups in the US.

The public spaces of the city were at the time no better or worse sites for collective re-imagination than the gallery. Although it is true that the publicity culture in 1984 may have seemed more open to reinvention once emptied of the hierarchical expectations that accompany contained archives and collections. In this project Group Material was more a subcontractor than a designer of artistic groupings. *Subculture* consisted of 2,700 placards produced by 100 artists, which periodically filled the spaces built for advertising on the IRT subway line. Although there were many détournements of commercial languages produced for this project, one notable case was the presence of an actual painting of a woman running out of a burning

Group Material
Subculture, **1983**
(advertisements on the IRT Subway Trains) New York

house—seeing this in the place of a printed ad was radical enough a displacement to cause disturbance.

We saw the street and the museum as potential sites of invigorated dialogue on the nature of the appropriate place for epiphany and action, places where dissensus and conflict could be planned and clashes between public and private could be refigured. The poster project *Da Zi Baos* was modeled after the "big-character posters" (*dàzìbào*) that went up during the Democracy Wall movement in China—the landscape of social reflection in which contestation could be seen as a basis of democracy. We tried to understand this invigorated dialogue as taking place regarding art objects themselves, in the feelings of decenteredness in which delegating objects as having power or aura comes a dialogue of appreciation around that power and its social implications. From poetics comes conversation, then perhaps a collective decentering onto new topics: a search for how collective social resolutions can form poetics.

To this end artifact and art were hung together, archive and collection were dispersed, the line of the commercial gallery was overcome by the salon and could become an emotional enactment of the ensemble of feelings inherent in political action.

AIDS Timeline is perhaps our most fluid example of this—a case where a newspaper and morbidity report, an AIDS profiteer sticker and a non-objective painting were all hung together. To combine the editorial and the emotive was our purpose; the comparison of budgets for B2 bombers with the lyrics of "It's Raining Men," a possibility of resistance found in the abstract emotional connection to a history we were experiencing as it happened. We tried to think of the aesthetic and the political together, formed within the context of art and its possible world of proposition and response and proposition—a multiplication of possibilities.

Hopefully it is evident through these examples that as Group Material's work matured, it became more and more clear that in order to oppose the oblivion of the present a form had to be invented: democratic process made visible. How else could an authentic response to the imposed disaster of contemporary life be seen? As art-

Group Material
DA ZI BAOS. **1982**
Union Square, New York

Group aMaterial
AIDS Timeline
(New York City: 1991)
 Whitney Biennial, 1991

ists we knew that in the street and the symposia forms of response were often beautiful—that collectively diverse declarations of the democratic have all the qualities of art: improvisation, comparison, proportion, absence, and substitution. Despite the plethora of critical tracts produced during this time in the politics of space, the practices that Group Material developed were barely theorized, instead suggested by the callings of the daily matter of life over death: be it the formation of Central American independence movements facing American-sponsored genocide or the activist response to official indifference to the AIDS epidemic. In other words, the form of our art was devised through affinity with the forms of political work we ourselves were invested in: as workers, as labor organizers, as public teachers, as friends. Our forms of exhibition and public practice reflected the need to invent a dynamic situation, a designed moment of reflection that could include discussion and present dissent.

In 1987, the Dia Art Foundation was under reorganization and sought, not unselfishly perhaps, to initiate a generative year of exhibitions to coincide with its new management. Up to that point, their sponsorship was for long-term support of individual artists. To that end they invited Group Material to take over their Wooster Street space and produce work for half a year.

The *Democracy* project itself was really a quartet of practices: private meetings, exhibitions, public assemblies, and finally a book, which collected records of our organizational events with a series of texts that informed them. Democracy was our theme because it was already our form, that is, the exhibition unanchored from the equation of thesis and promotion. Our adopted form was an analogy of the empty room, physically turned over to a "stutter of inclusion"—to dissensus and contestation: a site of constantly changing representations of human will, however uncertain and unrecognized. For me, foregrounding uncertainty was linked to other aesthetic histories, even theological histories, of repositioning the possibility of virtue within another person or unknown thing. Perhaps aesthetic knowledge can be the beginning of the decentering of social movements for emancipation in facing shared alienation. Perhaps this is

part of the political nature of the emotional realignments we might experience and share around the work of art—not, I suppose, a very new idea.

For the *Democracy* project our first thought was to do away with the idea of singular curatorial selection altogether, to throw away the curator's object list, moving beyond metaphor and instead directly engaging an audience that would physically move objects in and out of the gallery in response to the political reality of the day, week, or month: an exhibition that would change with the people who came to see it. It quickly became clear that such liberalizations were unlikely when faced with actually lifting a Joseph Beuys blackboard piece in and out of the showroom.

So instead we decided to treat democracy in essay form—through the outline of four related thematic experiences that would trace three of America's great abstract promises and failures in democracy and ending with one exhibit as case study. The most cogent failure we were living through at the time was the creation of the AIDS crisis due to governmental, media, and medical indifference. Four basic failures of American democracy were chosen: "Education"; "Politics and the Election"; "Cultural Participation"; and "AIDS, a case study". These four shows were hung in rapid sequence over about six months, mirroring the timing of a commercial gallery. Each had a different set of visual organizing principles. But there were quiet consistencies like a variation on the American flag hanging throughout. Each had different constituencies, imagined and explicit—for example, "AIDS, a case study," reflected the working activism of ACT-UP; "Education" included teacher-activist organizations and unions. And each had visual principles applied to their design that could evoke resonance in their shared perception and moods. For example, we had a raffle for "Cultural Participation" and a ceiling full of red, white, and blue balloons for the opening of "Politics and the Election." But more important for my argument here is the fact that we built visual contexts of social investment from interaction with others; from the beginning, we organized a larger identity of authorship through invitation and associations—to prove that all aesthetic

Group Material
Democracy: Education, **1988**
Dia Art Foundation, New York

Group Material
*Democracy: AIDS and Democracy:
A Case Study,* **1988**
Dia Art Foundation, New york

forms are produced with larger social relations, both those lived in our work and those imagined in identifying with things past.

We assembled this social platform in three ways: first, for each show we organized a roundtable discussion that preceded the exhibition, which informed larger collaborations involved in finding objects to display and enlarged the agendas for our audiences. These meetings were attended by both artists and non-artists who could relate to the thematic content of each show, were experienced with the practices related to that particular failure of democracy, or who were invested in the culture those practices sometimes produce. Secondly, and in a less direct manner (but perhaps more crucial to the curatorial shape of the shows), we sought out and invited constituencies and individuals—not all necessarily artists—to contribute work to be exhibited. These "communities of concern" produced the dynamism of the exhibition, creating viewing experiences that had to traverse Joseph Beuys, the children of public schools in East New York, the photos of Lewis Hine, and community graphics. Lastly, for each event we produced a town-meeting type assembly that coincided with both the topic and time period of each exhibition, arranging a large public platform for public discussion. Filling a public hall during each exhibition, responders to calls, activists, professionals, and artists related to the field in question all came forward. The original idea for our "town meetings" was to undo the notion of expertise, to replace the singularity of the proscenium with the multiplicity of the audience, to focus on inclusion in order to not mirror oppressive structures. As has been pointed to by others, this exalted notion of organized dialogue is often only an emulation of participation—a mere mediagenic image of inclusiveness. But our original intention was to allude to the prototypical democratic experience and to try to dissolve the demarcation between experts and initiates—anyone in the audience was a potential speaker. Much of the discussion built upon issues raised in the roundtable meetings and the exhibitions, but overall each was very different due to changes in moderators and attendance. The content was delivered by whoever attended.

After the roundtables, exhibitions, and town meetings, we pro-

**Group Material
Roundtable Discussion for**
*Democracy:
Cultural Participation,* **1988
Photo: Dia Art Foundation,
New York**

duced a publication, which brought together a variety of voices and points of view to address our topics of American democratic failure and provided possible means for responding to its challenges. The book was meant to address an audience far wider than the one that could actually attend the events—and I have to say, it has, particularly in the area of public education, a field I spend most of my energy on these days. I am repeatedly rewarded by interactions with teachers and community organizers who have seen this document as a menu of possibilities for education to continue its Jeffersonian mandate of breaking down the barriers proposed by race, class, and territory in America.

Overall our efforts in the *Democracy* project were an attempt to see how democracy happens at the site of representation itself, not just where information is transferred or built, but rather at the very place where we recognize ourselves in performing art's proposal; where we have the sense that we are ourselves, where we feel a stability that is hailed and recognized by others. A radical representational moment, whether collective or not, is one that suggests we can give ourselves over to a new vision through feeling, an experience linked to contemplation and epiphany. In this way no public description of another, in frame or in detail, can be presented as politically neutral. So when Group Material asked, "How is culture made and who is it for?" we were asking for something greater than simply a larger piece of the art world's real estate. We were asking that the relationships between those who depict the world and those who consume it change, and demonstrating that the context for this change would question more than just the museum: a contestation of all contexts for public life. In making exhibitions and public projects that sought to transform the instrumentality of representational politics, invoking questions about democracy itself, Group Material presented a belief that art directly builds who we are—it engenders us.

As I've already said, Group Material's methodology of cultural displacement was anchored in a strong yet abstract image of the processes of political work. This abstract image of democracy as a
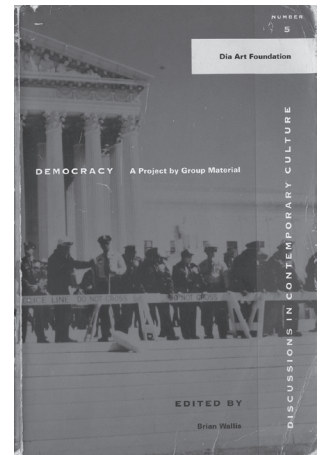
*Democracy: A Project by Group
Material* **(book cover)
Wallis, Brian. ed. Bay Press,
Seattle, 1991**

spatial void means that social assembly could be visually positioned as a struggle that never ends. It is a template for the social forum that rejects the consensus of pluralism and replaces it with a radical abstraction of temporary agonism—an assignment of discussion's unpredictability and inclusion into an imaginable shape—a shape that is always irregular and fluctuating: an abstract matrix for the real.

Art presented as a changeable social forum, as dialogue, gives a context where not just images but political mutuality itself can be personified without figures—a collection of positions and volitions and agencies without specificity. Encountering this complexity in the collection of art is equivalent to viewing a variety of bodies and positions, looking through another's eyes across this vista toward this or that city or even inwards. Can I occupy the eyeballs of another through the position proposed in a work of art? Perhaps through this transubstantiation I encounter someone unknown. The formal and physical presence of another is difficult to discuss rationally because art's sense of a stranger's mind is so much more than the strict diagramming of corporeal perspective, the agreement or disagreement with a position. Accordingly, we believed that the existing management of art, and of culture in general through the market, enforces a complex system of limiting notions of what makes "us" us or "me" me, what normalizes and enacts the contours of fixed identity. The definitions of gender, race, and power were, and still are, dependent on a visual system—images that make possible the generous misrecognition of our own selves.

Group Material
Democracy: AIDS and Democracy:
A Case Study. **1988**
Dia Art Foundation, NYC