

An Artwork is a Person

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The impossible demand to start the revolution everywhere at once is replaced by the statement that communication is possible only at the moment when everyone changes places: when the individual loses herself or himself in the effort of showing an image to someone else.

Colin MacCabe, "On Goddard," 1980

"Join us!" protesters to onlookers at the March on the Pentagon, October 17, 1967

The destructive dismantling of the progressive economic and cultural changes of the 1960s began in earnest in the 1980s. Group Material's overall project was imagined in this period of attempted historical erasure. To design our work we looked to the many layers of human activity that pre-dated this right-wing onslaught by twenty years: the attempted re-invention of American life through civil organization and social rebellion. *Show and Tell, A Chronicle of Group Material* comes at a time of concentrated reflection on the complex political contours of art in the 1980s; fifty years after the world-changing disturbances of Berkeley, Newark, Prague, Nanterre, Watts, Alabama, and Stonewall. Today's ascendant culture of war and its accompanying economic collapse bring home many of the state designed public fictions initiated in the 1980s. That the majority must still live in precarity and deprivation suggests that the darkest fantasies of governmental and corporate coercion were actually quite gnostic: an improbable world of passive spectators forced to endorse a reality imposed on them by executive power. The production of this book in 2009 is then doubly reflective—representing

the productive action of a group of artists in the 1980s that modeled the revolutionary counter-culture that came twenty years before.

Most of the members of Group Material were of childhood age during the active enactments of the 1960s civil rights, women's liberation, free love, gay power, and anti-war movements. Even if our immediate backgrounds were too young to directly witness the physical mobilizations organized in rejection of state totality and corporate greed, the concomitant changes in ethos, fantasy and feelings were tacitly imbedded in our practice. The capacity to re-imagine ourselves through the rebellious inventing of art objects was understood both through analysis and feeling. Group Material understood that connected to the liberation movements against colonialism, patriarchy and capital were artist-led oppositions to the accepted hierarchies between institutions, audiences and artists themselves. Artists' inventions were in many ways a continuation of a larger political momentum.

In this way 60s activisms and 80s interpretive enactments are more than the socioeconomic conditions for Group Material's work: they are the foundations of its aesthetic action. Activist politics presented a moment of collective refusal, but in the organization of that refusal came an identification with others, known and unknown. Political necessity produces conjecture on a number of fronts, and such incomplete desire necessitates affinity with others. Modeling a future by banding together amidst the interests of strangers is a legacy shared by the political imperatives of social organizing and the methodological sensibilities of artists. Although art and politics may still be routinely sequestered in the academy, these two find great sympathy with each other in the actual effective function of people's work to change their circumstances. Artists cannot produce unless connected with others: with those behind the creative acts coming before them or with newly apparent audiences that surround them, real and imagined. This social knowledge invested in creative work is therefore based on a projected kind of empathy—a sense of the ethical coming from imagination and hope. Such feelings are deeply connected to the inevitability of ethical empathy formed in oppositional social agency; its acts of protest and organization are a genesis. That is why during the creative act, justice and beauty seem to come from the same dream.

For many of the actual participants however, memories of the movements of the 1960s are devastated by its practical failures: the inability of majorities to recognize the potential liberation those revolutionary movements and their counter-cultures could provide. The tragedies of missed opportunities, internal sexism, police infiltrations, capitulations and betrayals complete an almost unbearable chronicle. But the activism of the 60s also bring a possible philosophical reflection to thinking about the subjective effects of non-governmental organization, a reflection that is encircled by aesthetics. An oppositional movement makes groupings where the desire(s) of others replaces our sense of singular and individual autonomy. Protesting actions go on to amplify this understanding. If organized acts of civil disobedience put people's bodies on the line, then any sense of the continuation of the self is literally and corporeally opened up to the proximity of strangers. Anyone involved in public acts of political resistance has had such an experience—the look toward another, previously unrecognizable, but made familiar, even loved, in the battle with gigantic repressive authority. The face of the anonymous becomes empathically known. This “new face” producing a fresh affinity found under the duress and risk of social unrest, is an experience of the difference between humans at its most profound: an implicit understanding that however far away liberation may seem, we can still recognize its contours. In times of rebellion the encounter with the desires of another person are magnified into recognition of a different future self.

“We are also part of the audience.” Group Material, “Dialectical Group Materialism – an interview by Jim Drobnick. Parachute. Oct, Nov, Dec, 1989 31

Carl Oglesby of Students for a Democratic Society, writing after the October '67 anti-war mobilization at the Pentagon, tried to come to terms with a shift this massive demonstration mandated: from peaceful protest to direct confrontation and resistance. “If I am correct in assuming that men (sic) resist danger and want freedom from all servitudes, then it follows that rebellion does not take place until it is compulsory. The rebel is someone who is no longer free to choose even his own docile servitude.” If the revolutionary is a figure of refusal then what was the consolidation of dissent that was Group Material's? They were multiple and situation-

specific. We said “no” to the false neutrality of the museum that forbade the social context of relations between our imaginations, “no” to the reduction of other public domains to corporatist management and blind consumption. We said “no” to the sequestering of art as outside the purview of audiences and artists; we said “no” to the disappearance of subaltern cultures under imperialism, and we said “no” to the supposed inevitable death of our friends to AIDS. Our set of refusals were shared with each other and with the many other individuals and groupings responding to social inequity at that time. We recognized that the politics of any group is made real in collecting seemingly unrelated refusals, showing how group action can generate new life into an individual—say anti-war sentiment coming to the teacher from the loss of her students to the draft, or the collection of a painter’s work by an embassy in a CIA-overturned republic. Any singular moment of individual self-conception, of assumptions of the “ethical and reasonable” can be inspired and rethought through the demands of collective rebellion and its resonance. When an individual is moved outside of their normal setting by the effects of movements for social change, their political function changes; their consciousness changes. And likewise, when a participant’s political sense in the world is transformed they are in turn, displaced from their accepted senses.

Similarly, the exhibitions and public projects Group Material produced were a displacement of the art object onto unexpected fields of experiences. By organizing art installations based on political urgency, inquiry and contradiction, the reasonable expectations for art were upset. Abstract paintings occupying space defined by popular insurgency, children’s drawings alongside electoral advertisements next to paintings of heads of state, Dr Seuss books placed above Joseph Beuys blackboards, institutional critique overtaken by “easy-listening” versions of revolutionary 60’s ballads, and so on. Such an inflection, of the meaning of the one onto the connotations of the many, clearly began with dislocating the historical notion of the supposedly autonomous art object onto a politically activated theme. But in addition, the juxtaposition of artworks with everyday market commodities and publicity design went on to evoke the possibility of revelation in the undoing of what already exists. A revolution can even transform the advertisements in the daily paper, the food in the kitchen cabinet, and the tools of the workplace. In a related way, Group Material’s transformation of presidential statements into bus

adverts, snapshots into billboards, subway cars into a gallery spaces, and then the museum gallery itself into a town meeting, were all the refusals of established frameworks for the organization of art, refusals of the limited imaginings of what artists and viewers could be.

As Group Material's work matured, it became increasingly clear that in order to counter the oblivion of the present a form must be invented through the visualization of democratic process. How else could an authentic response to the imposed disaster of contemporary life be constructed? We know that in the street and the symposia forms of response are often beautiful—that collectively diverse declarations of justice have all the qualities of improvisation, comparison, proportion, absence, suggestion, and substitution. In many ways the practices that Group Material developed were un-theorized, suggested by the exigencies of the constituent matters of life over death: be they the formation of Central American independence movements facing American sponsored genocide or the activist response to official indifference to the AIDS epidemic. 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. If such an apparatus of artistic presentation emerges from the framework of political assembly—the installation of art can begin to look and perhaps even act, like a forum. In calling the exhibition a “forum” we were excavating all its meanings: roundtable, caucus, public assembly, parliament, open framework, anarchic exchange, and more. Making the artwork comparable to the apparatus of democracy did have actual political effect; it acted as a ground for meetings, associations, transformations of artistic context and real probabilities for the constituents of those represented by and attending the work. Especially important here in the collected presentation of this book is Group Material's proposal of democracy as a genesis of aesthetic invention, our presentation of the social relations that can be realized by a group of people in an empty room. Group's Material's methodology of cultural displacement was anchored in a strong yet abstract image of the process of political work. This image of democracy as a void means that public assembly is visually positioned as a struggle that never ends. It is a template of “forum” that rejects puerile liberal pluralism and replaces it with a radical abstraction—the assignment of discussion's contingency into a shape that is always irregular and fluctuating.

Art presented as a changeable social forum, as dialogue, presents a context where not just images but political will itself can be personified—as a collection of positions and volition of different people. A visual equivalent could be literally understood as the framing, foreshortening, and background to foreground relationship that goes into any perspectival image. The rhetorical organization of a landscape argues that we take the artist's body position, looking across this or that valley toward this or that town square. It does become unconsciously clear in an experience of a work of art, even in the renaissance convention of occupying the eyeballs of another, that we are in an encounter with someone unknown. Such a formal and physical presence is difficult to discuss rationally because the sense of the point of view of another person is so much more than the strict diagramming of corporeal perspective, the agreement or disagreement with a position. But what can be understood easily is the simple fact that we accept artwork as form of divergent, even oppositional presentation of another's opinion and idea.

Further, dwelling in the sight of a person previously unknown is often a shock. Sometimes even felt like an apparition, it is strangely both erotic and historical, evoking the effect of a long line of encounters that verge on mystical exegesis. When overlaid onto the ideological hailing of modern institutional life—the complex manner in which we become subjects to institutions outside of any conscious contract—the degree to which artworks can present undiscovered organizations of ourselves is even more surprising. But for Group Material our displaced groupings of visual culture could also be understood as concrete figurations, suggesting that when art insists on new narrations of the self, however mysterious, a process can happen in public. A process designed to be a complex dialogue: with others through affiliation and love, and through others in the political act of showing the unknown, the repressed or yet to be seen. Understandings of this process, suggest that our installations were abstract models, art turned to ideas of what could be desired rather than existing manifestations, art that be the matrix for real solutions. They suggest that art's abstract proposals can actually figure real techniques of liberation. To defend the notion of artwork as an encounter with a person and then to display this encounter in the context of new politics was Group Material's contradictory innovation, the design of a place where the self expands by rupturing in relationship to others.

“Why sometimes do images begin to tremble?” “Le Fond de l’air est rouge (A Grin Without a Cat),” 1988

In rereading the documents reproduced in this book, it becomes clear to me that the practice of Group Material the kind of work that simply had to be made—it happened, like the social activism it followed, out of desperation. Group Material thought then, and it was not unusual to have such ideas, that one could create meaning outside of the privatizing influence of corporate culture by re-organizing the actual experience of culture independently. The art projects we developed resembled the forms of the political vanguard by reflecting the modern notion that individuals have a right to bind themselves together to produce a context that might retain work and happiness. It is against the 1980s emergence of a right wing culture of physical control and spectacularized consistency that this generation of artworks and collective action need to be rethought: the false stability of religious fundamentalism, the mediagenic degradation of culture into profit, the relentless never-returning value of our labor, a historical amnesia that disintegrates capacities to read or even to speak to each other directly. These are the vicissitudes of 80s economic and political regression and they still weigh upon us, attempting to re-form us into an anti-culture of mutual repression. A repression no longer exclusive to the barrel of a gun—a repression designed through images.

Group Material saw that politics happens at the site of representation itself, not just where information is transferred, but rather at the place we recognize ourselves; where we have the sense we that we are ourselves, feel a stability that is hailed and recognized by others. A radical representational moment may be collective but it also suggests that we can decide to be given over to a new vision through feeling, experiences linked to contemplation and epiphany. In this way no public description of another, in frame or in detail can be presented as 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 change between those who depict the world and those who consume it, and demonstrating that the context for this change would mandate a provocation of more than just

the museum: a contestation of all contexts for public life. If 1960's social activism made vibrant the organization of the subject herself as a key part of remaking the possibilities apparent in the future, then the battle over representation is much more than a turf war—it is a contest over how the act of signification itself is understood. In making exhibitions and public projects that sought to transform the instrumentality of representational politics, to invoke questions about democracy itself, Group Material presented a belief that art directly builds who we are — it engenders us. This was an insistence that the representations found in art give rise to our sense of self and in the end encompass us as subjects. 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, clearly dependent on a visual system — images that make possible the recognition or misrecognition of ourselves, between ourselves.

The museum like the city and the government that make us in them is always already in ruins. The anxiety of the proximity to power that art, and art's management implies, is therefore always part of art's production. The historical dynamism of the museum carries within it all the battles fought over the public domain since its modern inception. For Group Material the market-dominated context for culture in the 80s and its consolidation in the museum were presented to artists unfairly, as universalizing opportunities steeped in false neutrality. The white walls that Group Material re-painted red critically reacted to the nearly violent anchor of institutions establishing that they, not artists or audiences, were the producers of meaning. The prevailing notions of aesthetic pluralism at that time, the promotional leveling of all artistic forms onto consumption, the blandly humanist notions of equivalence in scholarship and public record — all partook in the deeply ideological construction of democracy as kind of blanketing agreement, a blind consensus. If it is true that capitalism is the most creative form of production the earth has ever known, its reservoir of manufactured agreement strangely needed formal and physical protection.

And it still does. The threat felt by the status quo from art is a real threat. The moment of social unrest of the 60's, like the collectively designed exhibition, shows that you are closer to the ideas of others than you think. This is perhaps why the experience of an art that can concurrently untangle, remake and re-tangle the ideas we have of ourselves is not easy to produce. The struggle to communicate even amongst those invested in a common project seems at times insurmountable. Manifest in this chronicle is the fact that Group Material created work in struggle with itself, with members often in debate and contention, producing artwork that manifested conflict. As part of the audience it is only logical our disagreement with the world would inspire dissent with ourselves. That the work is still here represents the strength, its true protest, the working together of ideas and desires that are in friction. If there is an emotional equivalency to the idea of creative dissensus, it can be found in the resolute presentation of dialogue in a Group Material's process and installations. One of the most compelling memories of the work we did in forming the exhibition was the argument. There is not a single artistic product we made that did not come from discussion, opposition and disagreement. Today, after many artists and many decades of aesthetic experimentation, dissensus can finally be proffered as the theoretical basis for imagining social action—it is an emotional invention of great beauty.

Group Material's self-assignment was to try and locate the dissensual feelings associated with activism, its emotional reverberations and actual evocations, into a realizable model or design. It meant we had to try and invent visual solutions that would be able to question themselves. By insisting that the presentation of art could approach the experience of dialogue and dissent we showed that when art addresses us as subjects in conversation, we treat art as an array of personified encounters—as subject of communion. This may seem like an abstract proposal, one partial to the conservative leveling of the specificity necessary to make social reality open to participation. But the empty room of democracy is an abstraction that insists on artworks as a matrix for real dissent. Ours was not the secluded and exclusive abstraction of high modernity, but one of insistent inclusion and change. A site where multiple and conflicting forms and histories cross over and through one another, mutating into paradoxical and unexpected notions of how we could define ourselves as humans. When artworks become human, when they are engendered as persons in dialogue, the experience of art can make a rebellion.

Epigraph: Colin MacCabe, Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, , 1980),153.

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