group
Material

an interview by Peter Hall

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

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

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

Peter Hall: Don't you demand a common message? It seems to me that you're mainly asking people to operate within a context, even if you take everything else you've done.

TR: Well, we still carry.

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

DA: In Subculture being more open worked well.

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

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

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


TR: It started with a year of meetings. We met every Monday night. We got a grant to do art about fifteen people-roy friends from art school, boyfriends and girlfriends, a very loose association.

PH: What was the common bond?

TR: The common bond was that people desperately wanted to create a vehicle in which to make work that was meaningful to them. We didn't see any chance for the type of art we wanted to do, even in the so-called alternative spaces. Our concern was with our sort of politics, with feminism—which was very strong in the original group—and there was nowhere to place work like that. So we knew the time had come to do it ourselves.

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

TR: I thought it worked out great. My analogy always is that the group was like a rock that took off. The first and second years after blast-off, after a lot of work and change, there began a stage by stage breakdown. The first stage was the people who, for one reason or another, weren't really into it. Then another group got sick of it and they fell out. So now it's us. We always formed the center of the group anyway.

PH: There was all that talk of sexual politics.

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

PH: Are those other people still making art?

MM: Some of them are.

JA: About the people who were into sexual politics. It wasn't their politics that was the problem. It was that they weren't interested in making art. The first of the songwriter. They were into curating educational exhibits, organizing, educating the public about feminism and different issues. Art was not their main interest.

MM: They would have ideas that sounded great, but then the way they would work with them would be totally different from the way we would. This became a problem. Another problem was the other faction that developed. These guys were artists, but they were more career oriented. They were more interested in using the group as a stepping stone to something better. That really wasn't our idea. If we want to have individual careers, we want that to be separate from Group Material.

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

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

DA: I don't know. I don't know that much about the history of the group before I joined in the fall of '80.

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

MM: Arguments, and lots of fights.
DA: The way things happen is that most projects get organized by one person. And that person has the problems, then the other will designate tasks.

MM: Like with Dada, that was Julie and me, fifty fifty.

PH: What about Dada?

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

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

PH: It wasn’t an exhibition of artists’ work?

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

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

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

PH: Was there any formal notice taken of the event?

MM: No.

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

MM: It’s funny. Some things—like a gallery show, say Princeton at Artists Space—need to be reviewed because that’s the only way they get out to the public. But it almost doesn’t matter with a public project because everyone sees it anyway. The only real reason to have something written about it for documentation, so people can refer to it later...

DA: Last year it was, and again, a real important thing to work in the world and the public realm. We try to do both.

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

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

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

JA: Political art is becoming a trend now.

PH: But what about the perceived conflict between saying something specific about politics and making art—there’s always the question of the self and the relationship of the self to the work. Most people I know would say that this combination is not possible.

JA: Well, I think they’re wrong. That’s what we’re trying to do. We’re not saying one thing. We’re saying something specific about politics and making art and we’re saying. It’s also true that the art world is becoming more interesting.

DA: We have a lot of the time that is just an art world problem. I work in a bar and talk to a lot of people there about art. They say, "Oh, that’s good. You’re trying to do something that means something. That’s the way we do it."

PH: It’s not like that. There are things like abstract art, stuff that doesn’t mean anything to them. They like landscapes because they’re pretty, but they have black painting with no images or words, to them that’s the worst.

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

TR: Another thing about it, it is different. Every group has a different perception of the context of art.

This is the power of Group Material’s innovations. All our shows develop and respond to particular themes. So you can take an abstract painting and place it in a specific context, a thematic context, and the meaning and political function of the
Radical Culture

by Mundy McLaughlin

The words used most often in advertising—and used because they have proven most effective in words fuelling them so easily and so often. But real change, in life, in government, in the product, administration, stories, and therefore do little to change a person's existence.

Real change can happen if a scientific discovery gives people a new awareness of the physical world (which can alter the way we relate to each other, ourselves, and their society). Now one such thing that things happen in the world is to be made for the same old thing. When James Brown records first came out they had a new and disturbing idea for the social and political action that came to be known as the Civil Rights movement. This was a time when people were fighting for their rights and the new ideas were being celebrated.

Of course the material world is constantly changing and people's consciousness changes with it. We are living in a world where we see the world in a different way. The world is not what it was. It is now different. People are now more aware of their surroundings and the changes that are happening. The world is not the same.}

Past Present Future

by Julie Ault

Accepting the mystery

1. What is linear and affect?
2. Behind the facemask and you behold yourself.
3. Increase your capacity for life.
4. Life is a product, a product of life.

We have no panic.

no history of suffering, of poverty

We know too much to mistake ourselves.

A culture of excess, of shortage.

A culture of excess.

Ours is a culture that needs direction. It is a culture that needs a sense of purpose. If there is no direction, things will happen by default.

The past begins somewhere—a culture growing from seeds of possibility. It is a time of change.

A simultaneous creation.

A collection of images and ideas, some of which are inspired by others, some of which are created by you.

The spiritual and the physical meet in art.

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

Reflection of your own inner thoughts.

I give up on all hopes and desires and concentrate on life itself.

R.E.A.L.L.I.F.E
**Particles, 1980-83** by Tim Rollins

Were art's first customers clerics? The word "art" originally meant someone having a thick head's being instructed to understand the station of a spiritual or metaphysical nature. When we organize these thoughts, the mere social function, the age, the practical human meanings of the artwork has ever been.

Most American artists ignore their own working class as audience, as subjects, as interested in the arts; instead of asking: What do I feel?" asked: "What made this cloth?"

More than wanting a nice car or a big house, I think that people want to express the redemption anymore; we need to get for what we can actually get, that is, the cars, the houses, and art. Some like the idea of art, some don't, but in the way we go about it, we are not satisfied with the artist struggles in Guatemala, or in other parts of the world. We finally received the special package, and the art and the actual art forms (the fine and visual art) from Nicaragua or El Salvador.

We get the package and both rip the concert open with excitement and anticipation. We see the miniature tiles, drawings of revolutionary heroes by schoolchildren, some poorly designed, some strong, original. These are objects from a real revolution. People have been shot for doing such art.

Later in the day, I'm in the backyard. I am skinning through the latest issue of People (July 1981). The No. 1 question: What do you see? I like to find People in such a political, social, or political way, which means putting my attention. The picture shows the streets, the crowds, the buildings, the people. The words "art" and "people" often go together. I tell the person who takes the photo to make a film of this.