

**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 FMLN and in Nicaragua against the Sandinista Liberation Front. 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 CISPE (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. 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. In New York alone, more than seven hundred artists participated, including many well-known figures. One of the most remarkable contributions, *Timeline: The Chronicle of US Intervention in Central America*, was shown at Barbara Gladstone and then distributed to over seven hundred cultural institutions across the country. Artists Call was about artists participating in the “unofficial” war being fought there.

For Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America

*Artists: Group Material* 27

In 1980, the New York basketball team the Nets won the NBA championship. In 1980, the New York basketball team the Nets won the NBA championship.

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**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

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 Isekhimen


3. This first letter Artists Call (commend) 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: Artistic Call Against US Intervention in Central America* (1982–1985), in *System Error: War as a Form (That Goes On) Moving (Out of),* Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2007, p. 104. The FER (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). In 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. 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. In New York alone, more than seven hundred artists participated, including many well-known figures. One of the most remarkable contributions, *Timeline: The Chronicle of US Intervention in Central America*, was shown at Barbara Gladstone and then distributed to over seven hundred cultural institutions across the country. Artists Call was about artists participating in the “unofficial” war being fought there.

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In 1980, the New York basketball team the Nets won the NBA championship. In 1980, the New York basketball team the Nets won the NBA championship.
and Latin America, was made by Group Material, a collective of young New York artists that formed in 1970 and which members included two key figures in Artists Call (Doug Ashford and Julie Sult). 7

Timeline exemplifies Group Material’s installation practice in a number of key respects, not least in its status as a temporary, one-time project specific to both its time and place (P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, New York). 8

Consistent with the ephemeral nature of Group Material’s projects, Timeline also exemplifies the collective’s curatorial approach to installation art. Filming 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 Louise Bourgeois, Conrad Atkinson, Sue Coe, Mike Glier, Leon Golub, Michael John Gonzalez, Louisaurita, Faith Ringgold, Noelle Smith, 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. 9

A selection of agricultural products referenced North-South trade relations: coffee grinds limned the edges of the room; a small heap of fresh bananas emitted a faintly sweet scent; and a navigation buoy, which had featured in a War media as necessary or even heroic, opens up a very different approach to the graphic form they inhabit, the modern timeline. 10

This essay that ambivalence relationship to the graphic form, the modern timeline. 11

Like Group Material’s 1980 chronicle of the AIDS crisis, the 1984 work is anything but a straightforward timeline. Collided in late-eighteenth century England, this powerfully reductive representational device was linked with interventions in the distant past, with counter-memory as a tool in the struggle to record the blood lost in the struggles in South and Central America. With these overtones, the timeline of the scope of missing links currently interventions, with the interventions in the distant past, with counter-memory as a tool in the struggle to record the blood lost in the struggles in South and Central America. With these overtones, the timeline of the scope of missing links currently

Timeline moves towards temporal and geographic clarity, it is far from a smooth rehabilitation of the early modern graphic form it mar Xu, Manh, "Artists: Group Material". 29

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 work) and its place in the history of art and design, evidenced by the giant protest sculpture at the centre of the room. 30

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11 The term ‘photography’ derives from Soviet Constructivism of the 1920s and 30s, which was, along with Constructivism, an important influence for Group Material. ‘Photography’ refers to the presentation within the sphere of art of contemporary and historical data relating to social, economic and political issues. See Benjamin H. S. (ed.). ‘Photography’, October, vol. 59, Fall 1994, pp. 67–119. As such, the theme of this paper, the timely representation and participation in the historical moment, has recently been described as ‘an intuitive visual analogue for concepts of historical memory’. See Francesca Aranega, ‘The CIA’s Secret War: A Chronicle of Group Material’, 1980, published in 1980 and distributed widely, was first exhibited in 1980 at the MATEIR art gallery of the University of California, Berkeley, and was reviewed for the Whitney Biennial in 1981.

12 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.

13 Little has been published on the 1984 precursor, or on either ambivalent relationship to the graphic form they inhabit, the modern timeline. 11


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Group Material’s development to varying degrees as mentors or interlocutors, either for the collective generally or for individual members.20 Time line 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 Chronophobus (2014).21 ‘Nonlinear paradigms of seriality’, ‘recreation’ and endless duration, the art of this period strips time of historical meaning even while compulsively belabouring its passage.22 Examples abound: 1960s Minimalist sculpture, which quite radically emphasis as a factor of perceptual understanding, nonetheless scour phenomenaological experience clean of its historical conditions.23 The work of Robert Smithson fragments and recontextualizes time to such an extent that although historical practice flickers insistently in a work like Spiral Hill (1975), it ultimately drains away, spiralling vertiginously out of our grasp.24 Hanne Darboven’s ‘temporal sublime’,25 from 1968 onwards, only in exceptional cases acknowledges the historical context of the days it endlessly tabulates. Likewise, in the white-on-black date paintings of On Kawara’s Today (1966-ongoing), the artist’s disciplined registration of days methodically empties time of historical meaning.26

21 Atkinson, Golub, Rucker and Spero were often represented in Group Material’s installations and projects (including Timeline), along with Sherry Hansen, Fran Sander, Mike Ski, Jesse Hatzis, and many other consistent contributors. Group Material had other key mentors that should be mentioned, among them Margaret Harrison and key topics five members of the original group also studied with Joseph Eakin at the School of Visual Arts (though, with the exception of Allison, these members had left the group by 1981). Atkinson studied with Sander and Hacke at Cooper Union, from 1980 to 1981, and subsequently maintained relationships with both artists. From: Eakin, Michael. ‘Guru’, op. cit., pp. 5 and 59; and email from S. Ackland, op. cit.
22 Pamela M. Lee, Chronophobus: On Time in the Art of J. M. G.atism, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2006, p. 111. Lee’s success of the centrality of time in the art of the 1950s has been enormously helpful for this essay. Whether these temporal preoccupations took in specifically public dimensions, as the text is, 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 focused on the fluidity and non-synchronisation of time in Modernism, and in the art of the 1960s the metronomic temporality of Conceptual Art, for instance, tends not to address historical time but rather to evoke a more personal commentary: Sophie Calle’s The Notebooks: A Diary (1983), Douglas Huebler’s The Matter of Time (1969–75), or Vito Acconci’s Carving: A Traditional Sculpture Concept (1968), for example. The common denominator is the metronomic temporality of Conceptual art, the clean, concise, and precise nature of its engagement with time and its measure in the way it is presented through the medium of time itself.
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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 Nikon Coolpix ad, mounted in Timeline above the year “1839”. One of many works from Prince’s Cowboy series (1986—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 metaphor for conquest suggested by The World of Franklin and Jeannette Franklin (as well as many diaries with the prefix ‘Manet-PROJEKT’), which had just entered Haacke’s archives. In this work’s ten sequential panels, Haacke charts the provenance of Édouard Manet’s 1866 painting Une 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. As Haucke 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 political orientation.

The forensic historicism of Haacke’s work and certainly its prehistory in Soviet productivity share points in common (as well as many different names) with Group Material’s practice, including projects such as Timeline and AIDS Timeline. If Haucke’s work made 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 political orientation.

Of course, in the case of the World of Franklin and Jeannette Franklin (as well as many other projects with the prefix ‘Manet-PROJEKT’), which had just entered Haacke’s archives. In this work’s ten sequential panels, Haacke charts the provenance of Édouard Manet’s 1866 painting Une 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.

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the imagination just as far, since many objects, rather than cues to an isolated year, resonate meaningfully at any number of points along the timeline’s four-wall extension. As a result of Prince’s Marlboro ad in a magazine for ‘1879’, 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 ‘1934’, which references the coup d'état in Guatemala that year, organized 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 onda (1926), which hangs between ‘1895’ and ‘1895’, a labourer’s hands press the closely cramped figure, simultaneously concealing to work while issuing a silent refusal. The photograph conveys volumes about the exploitation of labour during Zinacantec’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. 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. 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. 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’s soldier. Allen’s posters each follow an identical diptych format. The subject side reproduces a grainy photograph of a soldier confronting another man. On the left side, in simple typeset against a stark white background, the name of a country in South or Central America or the Caribbean floats above the year of US invasion in that country. If Allen’s space and reimagined 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 “haunting” repetition of the oppression in...
Group Material’s *Timeline* defies the model once again. Specific to its time and place, when the installation closed in March 1984 the object 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 *Timeline*’s three chronologies represent history in different terms, they also represent different historical content. The timeline itself 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 1926 and 1966, but even here the timelines are synoptized. 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. Dialectical 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, 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 loosely cognitively challenging connections between dates and objects) and multiplicity (the profusion of objects and narrative voices), *Timeline* exorbitantly its viewers (as well as its makers) to act as historians themselves. Refusing postmod- ernism’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.

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 branned 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 on the form of a giant maritime navigation buoy. At the demonstration, its bell was taken by the beams at its base. The ball of the buoy is made of 1,000 red marble cubes, its bell rang a repeated toll of warning, marking time not metronomically but according to the posturing movements of protesters holding it and the police 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 demonstra- tion, 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 lesson of history that unfolds 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.

36 | Afterall

37 | Articulate Group Material