



# But is it



*Art*  
**?**

**The Spirit of Art  
as Activism**

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## Group Material Timeline:

### Activism as a Work of Art

***Our project is clear. We invite everyone to question the entire culture we have taken for granted.***

— Group Material

#### Terms of Agreement

What does it mean “to question the entire culture we have taken for granted”? Let’s accept that there are cultures within cultures within cultures. Let’s start, in the most literal sense, with one immediately at hand. Imagine the following scenario. You pick up a book entitled *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*. You happen to flip to a chapter on Group Material and start to read an essay that begins, quite self-consciously, by drawing attention to the context in which it appears and by calling into question the premises set forth by the book’s title. The author suggests that the question of when something is and is not art is a threadbare polemic that has been tossed around for most of the century, and that it reflects not only deeply rooted ideological biases whereby “art” and “activism” are set in hegemonic opposition but a fundamental crisis concerning art’s identity and function within the social order.

If art is in question and if art transforms into activism, it follows deductively that art ceases to exist. (Notice how the inflection shifts if we reverse the order of the subject and predicate of the syllogism to read, “But is it activism? The spirit of activism as art.” In this construction it is the existence of activism that is called into question, not that of art.) The end of art was *the* black hole of the historical avant-garde: those who argued to protect art’s autonomy from the social order saw its demise in debased forms of representation; those who

turned against the “institution of art” protested against its lack of social relevance. Hardly abated, the dispute surfaced with a vengeance in the 1980s when art’s viability was considered, by many, to be in doubt and its ability to achieve renewed function within social praxis was put to the test, as is evinced by the groundswell of “alternative” discourses and practices and spaces that arose in opposition to the art world’s status quo. In the spirit of “questioning the entire culture we have taken for granted,” the author suggests that the narrative models upon which 1980s-style activism was based and continues to be promoted might not be that “alternative” after all.

Challenging the underlying logic of the question (“But is it art?”), the response (“The spirit of art as activism”), and the conclusion it begs (“the end”) as implicitly Modernist—which leads us to formulate the wrong questions and answers about art in relation to a world that is decidedly no longer compatible with Modernist ethics or values—the author directs the reader’s attention to the systematic impact of a progressive, hierarchically structured model that dictates the polarization of autonomous art and socially engaged, or political, art; that, in turn, frames the production and interpretation of art history; that, in turn, frames artistic theory and practice in the twentieth century; that, in turn, frames a highly debated and, as yet, unresolved dilemma within contemporary art; that, in turn, frames the context of this essay and the history it puts forth as a chronicle of Group Material’s formation and activities; that, in turn, frames the relative success or failure of political and conceptual dimensions within its work; that, in turn, frames our perspective on late twentieth-century art; that, in turn, frames the question of the frame itself as the principal regulatory mechanism of art. The author, resorting to rhetorical overkill, proposes that frameworks, in and of themselves and configured in overlapping networks, constitute primary sites of meaning. She also infers that the frame can neither be ignored nor regarded as ideologically neutral—particularly if we posit art as the means to question the entire culture we have taken for granted.

But what about the imperative the author issued to the reader at the outset of this text? To imagine an event identical to one that actually transpires, and to do so at the same time that the reader is engaged in that event, requires a complex mode of perception analogous

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to the experience of being at once inside and outside the frame. The author exhorts the reader to consider the self-conscious or reflexive quality of this perceptual maneuver—one in which the subject is indistinguishable from its direct object—as a potential model for criticality. (I, the author, deploy this model semantically by referencing myself in the first, second, and third person, inflections that draw attention to my voice as the speaking subject, the subject addressed, and the subject spoken of.) I suggest, furthermore, that only from a position of reflexive criticality can we evaluate possible alternatives to the Modernist conundrum we have yet to resolve: When an activity is designated as “art” and its function is described as political, in the final analysis what efficacy does it possess to do more than rail against the limitations of its self-imposed status?

**Point of Departure: The Storefront Project**

In 1979, fifteen young artists, writers, and activists, all of whom held “day jobs,” began to meet in each other’s homes every Monday night to discuss the possibility of creating an alternative means of producing and exhibiting art that would be responsive to their own needs and cultural dialogues in New York City. They questioned the exclusionary policies of the institution and the dominance of a market economy, and they were dedicated to exploring “those assumptions that dictate what art is, who art is for, and what an art exhibition can be,” as they would state in one of their first official press releases, dated October 2, 1980. This group—a loose association of old friends from art school and assorted companions, composed of five graphic designers, two teachers, a waitress, a cartographer, two textile designers, a telephone operator, a dancer, a computer analyst, and an electrician—shared the conviction that art should be a force for social communication and political change. Their common interest was to provide a context for art and ideas that, in the broadest sense, dealt with the politics of representation and identified a range of themes related to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class struggle, education, cultural imperialism, and otherwise “unmarketable” contents. Committed to activism at the most grassroots level, the group sought to address the needs of an expanded audience of working people and nonart professionals from all walks of life; to make art that wasn’t



compromised by the interests of a narrow few but that spoke the language of the people; to show how the complexity of social problems can be investigated through artistic means; and, most important, to respond constructively to the effects of discrimination and alienation upon the individual and society as a whole. The group envisioned forms of communication as savvy as those produced by Madison Avenue and as accessible as popular entertainment but highly informed by cultural theory and methodologies of institutional critique. The self-appointed challenge, in effect, was to throw out the rule book, rethink art from the ground up, and imbue it with new substance and meaning.

During the initial meetings, the members formulated a course of study and action. They also began, strategically or not, to write their own history—a history that focuses more on ideology than “facticity” and that preserves, almost exclusively, a singular voice: the voice of the group. Consequently, it is that entity that speaks, from the perspective of its own historical development, in various printed documents that the members would later distribute to their audiences and that read as a “how-to” manifesto on cultural activism. In *Caution! Alternative Space!*, dated September 1981, the group gives one such account of its start-up process and gradual progress from “home” to “home away from home”:

Starting two years ago, we met and planned in living rooms after work. We saved money collectively. After a year of this, we were theoretically and financially ready to look for a gallery space. This was our dream—to find a place that we could rent, control, and operate in any manner we saw fit. This pressing desire for a room of our own was strategic on both the political and psychological fronts. We knew that in order for our project to be taken seriously by a large public, we had to resemble a “real” gallery. Without these four walls of justification, our work would probably not be considered as art.

On September 20, 1980, the collective issued a press release announcing the opening of one of the first storefront art spaces on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Located at 244 East 13th Street, the gallery was named Group Material.

Like their predecessors in the historical avant-garde—the first in the twentieth century to define their practice in opposition to the institution of art and the idea of art as autonomous from society—the artists who came together under the moniker of Group Material were motivated out of individual frustration with the traditions of Modernist formal aesthetics whereby art had become increasingly divorced from the social realities of everyday life. Distributed as “information” in the form of press releases, posters, calendars of events, exhibition announcements, and related handouts, their early manifestos attacked the elitism of the art world, its market-based power structure, its bankrupt values, its patterns of consumption, and its demand for a nonconfrontational, aesthetically pleasing product. Rather than accommodate the prevailing system, Group Material envisioned a new social art order, which it described with all the youthful enthusiasm and utopian optimism that characterizes the early manifestos of Italian Futurism, Dada, and Russian Constructivism. Its mission was to lead art back into life, thus bringing new life to art. Art would become relevant not only to the lives of the Group’s members, but to those disenfranchised audiences with whom they identified. Sponsoring cultural diversity, emphasizing community, promoting democratic ideals, righting injustice, art itself would become an instrument of social change. Art would represent not the privilege of the upper class, but the prerogative of the masses to speak for themselves and be heard. Art would make a difference at a time when “difference” had become a political cause célèbre. The kernel of the Group’s thinking is expressed in the *Group Material Calendar of Events, 1980–81*:

**The challenge was to rethink art from the ground up.**

We are desperately tired and critical of the drawn out traditions of formalism, conservatism, and pseudo avant-gardism that dominate the official art world. As artists and writers we want to maintain control over our work, directing our energies to the demands of social conditions as opposed to the demands of the art market. While most art institutions separate art from the world, neutralizing any abrasive forms and contents, Group Material accentuates the cutting edge of art. We want our work and the work of others to take a broader cultural activism.

By “real gallery” business standards, Group Material was unorthodox. Group Material, in fact, was not a “business” at all. Its hours—5:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. weekdays, noon to 10:00 p.m. weekends and some holidays—were oriented toward people who, like the Group’s members, had “day jobs.” Fiscal responsibility for the gallery was shared by the members, who continued to pool their resources to cover operating expenses. They did not “represent” artists, nor were they obliged to broker politics or package their ideas in the form of salable commodities. They were not dependent upon private collectors, institutional patronage, or corporate sponsorship, nor did they solicit government grants for support. They positioned themselves in opposition to the market economy and upon occasion referred to themselves as an alternative-alternative space, but in the same breath they disdained the associations that adhere to prominent “alternative spaces,” which they perceived in appearance, policy, and social function to be tantamount to farms situated at the low end of the food chain that feeds dominant commercial galleries and institutions of high rank. Group Material was determined to be something else.

By “real gallery” exhibition standards, the Group’s curatorial policy was unorthodox. It refused to show artists as singular entities, yet its exhibitions were much more than group shows: Group Material elevated the concept of exhibition to the status of art work. The entire spectrum of activity directed toward the production of art—the conceptual processes, the physical labor, the collaborative efforts—in the most literal sense, is the *work* of art. Emphasizing the substantive value of work as equal rather than subordinate to art, and refusing to define the existence or function of art as independent from the work required to produce it, Group Material exhibitions were freighted in support of an ideology that values process *as* product, subject *as* object—and work *as* art. In its scheme of the aesthetic situation, the Group occupies the role of individual producer; artists invited to participate in exhibitions do so as coproducers, and their product, or work of art, is signified by the exhibition itself and the collaboration it represents. Such parities unite to perform a radical critique of an economy predicated upon the superior exchange value of marketable commodities hallmarked by the “hand” of the creator.

From the outset, the emphasis of the Group Material exhibition was multiplicity and diversity. Each installation consisted of art produced by individual Group Material members as well as dozens of others whose numbers included “famous” artists (read: marquee status, major gallery representation), “community” artists (read: no gallery affiliation), and “nonprofessional” artists (read: no art-school training, no art practice per se). Over the course of its first year, and into its second year, the Group’s signature exhibition style gradually began to develop largely through discovery rather than purposefully. When it was fully established, “made-to-be-art” objects were integrated with a variety of other types of artifacts and consumer products, thus creating a discursive field in which no single piece was elevated over another as a cultural signifier. Installation design was characterized by montage, bringing into narrative fusion sequences of objects and wall texts that related to different aspects of a single theme. The effect of overall compositional unity was amplified by the use of blocks of wall color and graphic design components that established a series of horizontal or vertical vectors as the structural coordinates of the installation layout. These, in turn, were closely linked to the interior architectural features of the gallery, thus generating an environmental dimension that synthesizes “art space” with the actual space of the viewer.

Relative to the scheme wherein the exhibition signifies the work of art and the Group occupies the role of producer, the “viewer” is represented by an equally expanded signifier indexed to a large and demographically varied public audience. Unlike the typical artists’ collective that provides its immediate membership and affiliates with exhibition opportunities and exposure to a select audience, Group Material discerned the need to broaden its audience and affiliate base beyond the exclusive constituency of the art world to the rank-and-file members of the general public. This was axiomatic to the objective that art take a “broad cultural activism.” Denoting local residents as a symbolic formation of “the public,” the Group grounded its grassroots practice and programming in relation to the neighborhood community.



Efforts to mobilize a “dialectical approach to reality through the means of art” were predicated on the synthesis of two separate and distinct models of social space: the gallery and the neighborhood. Whereas the gallery connotes a highly specialized, elite, and closed society, the neighborhood symbolizes a diverse, heterogeneous, and open society—particularly if the neighborhood is signified by Manhattan’s Lower East Side, a melting pot of ethnic groups and subcultures that live side by side, each with a different language, belief system, and political persuasion. In theory, synthesis of the two social orders would serve the best of both worlds: cultural theory and institutional critique meet grassroots realities and fund a forum for the advancement of social welfare, and all benefit from the exchange.

The storefront gallery opened its doors on October 4, 1980, with *The Inaugural Exhibition*—a survey of “new cultural militancy emergent in the work of artists, collectives, and non-artists in the U.S. and abroad”—and a dance party. The *Calendar of Events*, sent out as a press release and available at the gallery as a handout, served as a manifesto and statement of intent:

We will show art that tends to be under-represented or excluded from the official art world due to the art’s sexual, political, ethnic, colloquial, or unmarketable nature. Our exhibitions will not feature artists as individual personalities. Instead, every show has a distinct social theme, a context that militates art works in order to explore and illuminate a variety of controversial cultural problems and issues. Some of our first shows concern: gender, the “aesthetics” of consumption and advertising, alienation, political art by children, the relation between the imagery of high fashion and class authority, cooking as a working class art, and many more.

Group Material investigates problematic social issues through artistic means. The multiplicity of meanings surrounding a subject are presented so that a broad audience can be introduced to the theme, engaging in evaluations and further examinations on their own. Our work is accessible and informal without sacrificing complexity and rigor. . . . We invite everyone to question the entire culture we take for granted.

During the storefront gallery’s first year of operation, 1980–81, programming followed projections outlined in the *Calendar of Events*

and was shaped to create an interface between art and neighborhood communities. Exhibitions were characterized by managed eclecticism, the salon-style assemblage of persons, politics, texts, themes, varied media, and visual displays implementing an atmosphere of “complexity and contradiction,” considered by Group Material as analogous to the social issues it addressed. Performances, films, videos, lectures and discussions, and music often complemented the welcoming, festive environments, fostering the “something for everyone” approach.

The challenge to the historian who composes an account of individual Group Material exhibitions is considerable. Visual documentation is often incomplete or altogether lacking; written records and personal recollections more often than not reflect discrepancies from one source to the next; the sheer number of participants, objects, and contents included in each exhibition tends to defy descriptive listing; citation of only the most famous participants, the most familiar paintings and sculptures, violates the egalitarian spirit of Group Material’s social experiment. What is most significant is that artists of multiple stylistic and conceptual orientations were invited to contribute art works (either preexisting or made for the occasion) for side by side display with mass-produced objects within a context guaranteed to “multiply their meanings,” or distort their function, in contrast to the austere “white cube” setting that normatively serves as the frame for art.

Following *The Inaugural Exhibition*, (October 4–27, 1980), Group Material issued an open call to artists to participate in *The Salon of Election '80* (November 1–16, 1980), which officially opened on November 4, 1980, the night of the presidential election. The evening featured live television coverage of Jimmy Carter’s defeat and Ronald Reagan’s landslide victory—a victory that ushered into power a coalition of the Moral Majority and right-wing conservatives and that launched the repressive regime that was to govern the country for the next decade. On the heels of that event, Group Material’s December exhibition, *Alienation* (November 21–December 21, 1980), examined “the modern breakup of reality, the causes and effects of the separations dividing us from each other, our work, our production, our nature, our selves.” The announcement for *Alienation* analyzed the condition of social malaise as determined by the

forces of dominant culture and encouraged viewers and readers to interrogate the relation between labor, capital, and class structure within their own lives:

[We get up in the morning][But the morning isn't ours][We get ready for work][But the work isn't ours][We go to the workplace][But the workplace isn't ours][We work all day][But the day isn't ours][We produce a lot of wealth][But the wealth isn't ours][We get paid some money][But the money isn't ours][We go back home][But the home isn't ours][We would like to be social][But society isn't ours]

In addition to a salon-style installation of art works and visual materials, programming for *Alienation* consisted of a film festival, showcasing premier works by local independent filmmakers and a screening of James Whale's 1931 classic, *Frankenstein*; a lecture by Bertell Ollman, a Marxist and political-science professor at New York University and author on the subject of alienation, class struggle, and late capitalism; and a one-night musical extravaganza and "wild dance party." *Revolting Music*, the music and dance component of *Alienation*, featured revolutionary hits of the past three decades, with lyrics demonstrating class, sexual, and racial consciousness—and a "light show" of slides and film clips picturing "western insurrections."

Group Material's message was clear: We have the power to unite and militate against the forces of oppression. Community is our strength. Art is our weapon. Activism is our common cause. The Group's challenge, however, was to integrate and involve the neighborhood residents in the process of social communication and political change. How is culture made, and who is it for? Group Material members had the answer readily at hand when they went door-to-door with a letter addressed to the "friends and neighbors of 13th Street," dated December 22, 1980, introducing themselves and inviting residents on the block to contribute personal possessions (for one month only) for the January exhibition, *The People's Choice* (January 9–February 2, 1981), later renamed *Arroz con Mango*.

"We are a group of young people who have been organizing different kinds of events in our storefront. We've had parties, art shows, movies, and art classes for kids," the letter stated. Neighbors were



Group Material, *The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)*, January 1981. East 13th Street, New York City.

invited to donate “things that might not usually find their way into an art gallery: the things that you personally find beautiful, the objects that you keep for your own pleasure, the objects that have meaning for you, your family, and your friends. . . . Choose something you feel will communicate to others. . . . If there’s a story about your object, write it down and we will display it along with your thing.” The neighbors responded generously, and *The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)* was enormously successful with its profusion of family photographs and cherished mementos, folk art and handicrafts, religious imagery and reproductions of art masterpieces, china dolls and tchotchkes. Even a collection of Pez candy dispensers was displayed in the storefront gallery where “kids were always rushing in and out” and where, from





Group Material,  
*Facere/Fascis*, April  
1981. East 13th Street,  
New York City.

time to time, their parents came as well. The cultural aesthetics of the neighborhood also provided the substance of *Food and Culture (Eat This Show)*, June 27–July 11, 1981, which opened the following summer. Organized as a “cook-in and eat-in,” it brought together “the common cooks and cooking of the Lower East Side,” as the press release read, “presenting edible information about ourselves, our histories, our backgrounds.”

*Consumption: Metaphor, Pastime, Necessity*, March 21–April 20, 1981 (also referred to in documentation of the period as *The Aesthetics of Consumption*), putting a sharper spin on populism, focused on critique rather than celebration. It surveyed “the imagery of our endless urge to buy” and included a “TV commercial festival” and an exhibition of “useless products.” Critical appraisal of patterns of consumption and the relation between high-fashion imagery and class authority was the subject of *Facere/Fascis* (April 25–May 18, 1981), which consisted of a montage of wall texts, mass-produced clothing and fashion accessories, advertising imagery, and other “visual aids,” demonstrating, in the words of the press release, “the gesture, the gaze, the stance, the class, high fashion as a dimension of the new fascist discourse.” An earlier exhibition, *It’s a Gender Show (also appearing in documentation of the period as It’s a Boy! It’s a Girl! It’s a Gender Show!)*, February 7–March 9, 1981, explored aspects of identity formation and the social institutions that endorse, if not enforce, sexual conformity to stereotypical conventions of masculine and feminine behavior.

The intended irony of the Group Material exhibition was the promotion of a “single issue” within an atmosphere verging on controlled chaos. *It's a Gender Show* proved to be no exception to the rule. Works by approximately fifty-five artists were brought together and displayed with gender-specific consumer products, all of which were presented on equal terms and installed in the characteristic high-low intermix. The exhibition investigated sexual freedom as a condition of social change and provided a forum for debate on the politics of gender. The timing of *It's a Gender Show* was critical, for it coincided with interest in cultural forms of representation, or “picture theory,” and the assimilation of the languages of feminism, psychoanalysis, sociology, and Marxism into the discourses of postmodernism and contemporary art. With participants that included Adrian Piper, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Laurie Simmons, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Sylvia Kolbowski, *Facere/Fascis* and *It's a Gender Show* set a precedent for elaborations on the politics of gender, sexuality, and representation that would develop as one of the most acute issues of late twentieth-century art.

#### **Point of Definition: From Home to Headquarters**

Group Material's first press release had proclaimed the opening of the storefront gallery and its “permanent” location at 244 East 13th Street. Within a year, almost to the month, the 13th Street gallery was closed and new “headquarters” were established at 132 East 26th Street near Lexington Avenue. A press release and handout entitled *Caution! Alternative Space!*, dated September 1981, explained the move:

The maintenance and operation of the storefront had become a ball-and-chain on the collective. More and more our energies were swallowed by the space, the space, the space. Repairs, new installations, gallery sitting, hysterically paced curating, fundraising and personal disputes cut into our very limited time as a bunch of individuals who had to work full-time jobs during the day or night or both. People got broke, people got tired, people quit. As Group Material closed its first season, we knew we could not continue this course without self-destructing. Everything had to change. The mistake was obvious. Just like the alternative spaces we had set out to criticize, here we were

sitting on 13th Street, waiting for everyone to rush down and see our shows instead of taking the initiative ourselves for mobilizing into more public areas. We had to cease being a space and become a working group once again.

The storefront gallery on 13th Street was home to some exceptional exhibitions that defined a cutting edge of contemporary art; but as the social experiment envisioned in Group Material manifestos, it had failed. The primary stumbling block in the path to political change through art was the problem of community participation. Group Material's ambition for art to take a broader cultural activism was predicated upon the involvement of a large audience that would supersede the confines of the "art world." If art's use-value was to address issues that impact the lives of working people rather than the elite ruling class—if it was to function as a tool for political change rather than as a sign of privilege and wealth—the means of its production, distribution, and display had to reflect social relations that differ ideologically from those inscribed by dominant culture. Art cannot be about the people; it cannot be for the people; it must be by the people.

Having found "the people" in the residents of 13th Street and the Lower East Side, Group Material used every means at its disposal to create an environment to precipitate the vital exchange between the gallery and the neighborhood. The boundaries of art were expanded to address issues that shaped the special character of the neighborhood and the lives of its inhabitants. Programming had been designed, in part, to reflect and "re-present" the concerns of the residents: their

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is it for?**

opinions, their aesthetics, their culture. Art had been made accessible, elitist barriers broken, educational opportunities provided, and a community environment fostered by nonart activities—the potlucks, the art classes for kids, the dances, the film series, all open invitations to participate—and yet collaboration between the collective and the residents stalled at the most basic level. Members of the neighborhood were not assimilated within Group Material's ranks, nor did 13th Streeters initiate an independent action group; the gallery did not become a community hotbed of political protest nor did it spawn locally organized campaigns for improved

neighborhood safety, housing, sanitation, education, and political representation. The “ball-and-chain” problem suggests that the Group Material gallery never developed much beyond being a space operated and curated by a collective of young artists, writers, and activists, who set up shop on the Lower East Side, eager to organize “the people,” to enlist them as cultural activists, and, additionally, to give them art.

Was there increased empathy for art by those who typically are excluded from its privileged enclaves? Did politically conscious art galvanize a new order of social relations? Were neighborhood conditions actually improved? Did “art into activism” produce substantive change? Many of the results of the storefront experiment are intangible and can never be calculated. To question Group Material’s missionary zeal from another perspective, however, the Group’s appropriation of an economically depressed, predominantly Hispanic neighborhood can be interpreted as an act of colonization. While members of the collective may have shared common political goals and the belief that art could function dialectically to unite the intelligentsia and the working class, the same cannot be assumed in regard to “the people” of 13th Street. Dance parties and potlucks and movie nights and art classes for children may have resonated with ideological correctness for the activists, but who can say that such events were perceived by locals as anything more than free entertainment provided by congenial “outsiders”? While Group Material’s embrace of neighborhood concerns can be legitimately criticized as “getting down” with the community it had moved in on, it can also be said that the Group learned the hard way that, ironically, oppositional stances often correspond to the systems they are designed to combat. In *Caution! Alternative Space!*, Group Material acknowledges difficulties and contradictions that surfaced in the initial formation of their practice:

We’ve learned that the notion of alternative space isn’t only politically phony and aesthetically naive—it can also be diabolical. It is impossible to create a radical and innovative art if this work is anchored in one special gallery location. Art can have the most political content and right-on form, but the stuff just hangs there silent unless its means of distribution make political sense as well.



The collective's founding formula for cultural activism was predicated on the union of social orders synonymous with the gallery and the neighborhood. As representations of "alternative art" and "the public," respectively, neither prototype had proven sufficiently flexible to function beyond conventions incumbent to each model or to offset the degree to which they are typically regarded as mutually exclusive. The gallery, unlike the church, the school, the sports arena, etc., did not correspond to traditional community space; rather, it replicated a system of display and distribution analogous to commerce and high culture. The neighborhood, on the other hand, was too narrow a sample to stand as a cogent synecdoche of the urban population as a whole. (It should be noted as well that in 1979–80, the Lower East Side had yet to absorb the great influx of artists' communities, galleries, clubs, and, subsequently, real-estate speculators and investors that would significantly alter the predominantly Hispanic cultural environment of the neighborhood and define the bohemian climate of the "East Village" and later gentrification.)

The anticipated dynamic alliance between the gallery and the neighborhood necessary to facilitate social change through art had not occurred. In addition, the "ball-and-chain" problem aggravated internal disputes within the collective, which had begun to splinter under the weight of maintaining a space originated to operate as a "home away from home." In contrast to the "security blanket" of the 600-square-foot storefront situated in the friendly, protective environment of the 13th Street neighborhood, the 26th Street location was not intended to function as a gallery, or a quasi-alternative space, or a neighborhood social center. The headquarters would occasionally host an exhibition or two, but its primary purpose was to be a base of operations from which to produce a variety of site-specific projects, many of which were conceived for installation in nonart places (transit systems, city streets and squares, urban walls, etc.), designed to appear in nonart spaces (usually those occupied by commercial advertising), and targeted to address random nonart audiences (commuters, passersby). Armed with the lessons of the storefront experience, Group Material began to take art to the people rather than wait for the people to come to art. In contrast to its initial manifestos, the press release announcing

the opening of the headquarters describes a “leaner and meaner” subversive strategy for cultural activism:

If a more inclusive and democratic vision for art is our project, then we cannot possibly rely on winning validation from bright, white rooms and full-color repros in the art world glossies. To tap and promote the lived aesthetic of a largely “non-art” public—this is our goal, our contradiction, our energy. GROUP MATERIAL WANTS TO OCCUPY THAT MOST VITAL OF ALTERNATIVE SPACES—THAT WALL-LESS EXPANSE THAT BARS ARTISTS AND THEIR WORK FROM THE CRUCIAL SOCIAL CONCERNS OF THE AMERICAN WORKING CLASS.

During the summer of 1981, Group Material reached an important crossroads in its development. The Group had honed its abilities to communicate with a larger public, to produce projects with appeal for both art and nonart audiences, to articulate political ideas through art without the encumbrance of maintaining an art space. The Group, however, had not managed to overcome internal problems. Diversity, which had initially characterized the membership profile and contributed to the strength of the collective, had grown into divisiveness. As is often the case with large collaborative bodies, levels of commitment varied, factions within the group formed, differences of opinion hardened, and conflict hampered collaboration. Disputes developed, first between the artists and the nonartists, and later between the “collaborators” and the “careerists.” The final result was that the original group of fifteen members fragmented and broke apart, and Group Material emerged in the fall of 1981 as a very streamlined collective of three artists—Julie Ault, Mundy McLaughlin, and Tim Rollins. In 1982, Doug Ashford joined the Group, and the four collaborated until 1986. (In 1986, Mundy McLaughlin left to study law; in 1987 Tim Rollins left to devote more time to his work with “Kids of Survival”; Felix Gonzalez-Torres joined in 1988; and in 1989, Karen Ranspacher began to work with the Group on AIDS-related projects.)

Rarely had behind-the-scenes struggles been discussed publicly, yet they marked key turning points in Group Material’s evolution. In an interview in *RealLife Magazine* (no. 11/12, Winter 1983–84) with Peter Hall, the three core Group Material members broke the silence

and spoke about the difficulty of working with nonartists and those whose interests were at odds with the collaborative process:

Tim Rollins: 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 were 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 anyways.

Mundy McLaughlin: There were always several groups, sub-groups threatening to split the whole thing up. It was a joke. There was a lot of disagreement about what the group should do, which is 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.

Julie Ault: It wasn't their politics that was the problem. It was that they weren't interested in making art. The four of us [including Doug Ashford, who had recently joined the Group] are artists. They were into curating educational exhibits, organizing, educating the public about feminism and different issues. Art was not their main interest.

McLaughlin: They would have ideas that sounded alright, 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.

The newly reformed Group Material differed from the first collective both in internal solidarity and artistic emphasis: its mature exhibition style came to fruition and the consensual, conceptual basis of its cultural activism was clarified, first and foremost, as an art activity. Members abided by principles that had been in place since the storefront days, and, by outward appearances, their practice remained

consistent with that established during the Group's first incarnation. They were committed to bringing well-rehearsed and responsible political information to art communities and the general public; to using art as a tool for understanding and redefining social relations independent of bureaucratic or institutional givens; and to juxtaposing work by artists and nonartists in careful orchestration with mass-produced objects, text, video, film, and other media, thereby creating semantically complex narrative and visual fields capable of generating multiplied meanings and sustaining contradiction in relation to a matrix of social themes.

If art was to function as an instrument for communication and change, if a truly political art was to be brought about, if art was to have renewed relevance in daily life, the question was asked, what kind of art would that be? What method of production, what channels of distribution, what mode of display would engender this new art? Group Material did not deploy art simply as a means to define social problems, to campaign for causes, or to convey messages about culture: art *was* the issue. The Group's "exhibitions" were not merely displays of art: they were works of art in and of themselves. That orientation had not changed; however, new emphasis upon the artistic value of the product affected its practice, particularly with respect to the nagging questions of distribution and display. In its formal properties, Group Material's art was indebted to tenets of Process art and Conceptual art. It challenged the status of the object over ideas; it rejected the worth ascribed to the individual creator over collaborative producers; it was positioned in opposition to the demands of the market for durable goods that retain their exchange value over time; it posited meaning as arbitrary, transitory, and contingent upon contextual relations rather than intrinsic and fixed. Group Material's institutional critique of art—the hierarchies, the value structures, the economy, the commodification—was interchangeable with a critique of dominant culture.

The most innovative aspect of Group Material's art, however, was its strong dialectical component, which resulted from a series of dislocations. Collaborative effort displaced emphasis from the individual

**The most innovative aspect of Group Material's art was its strong dialectical component.**





Group Material (Dennis Adams), *Subculture*, IRT subway trains, September 1983, New York City.

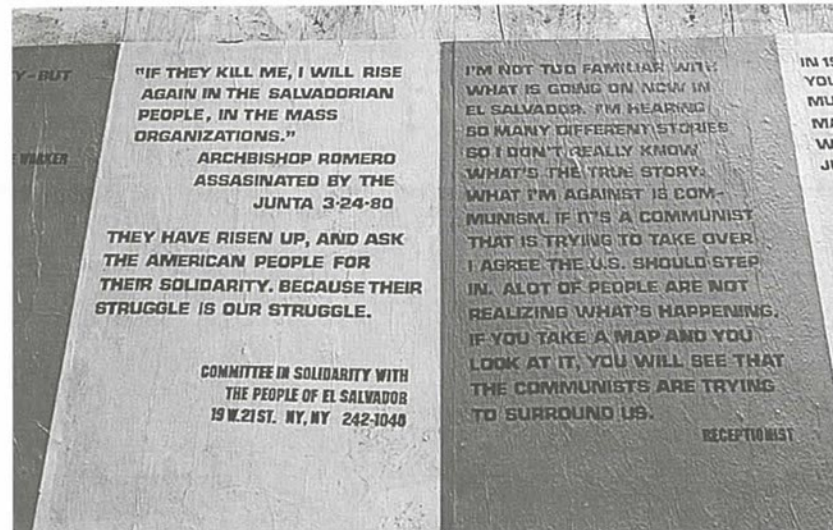
producer. Paintings and sculptures were included in installation projects, but their normative values were displaced within an exhibition environment that leveled difference and enforced parity between widely disparate classes of objects. These and other techniques had been the stock-in-trade of Group Material since its inception and continued as such after the re-formation in the fall of 1981. Under the direction of Ashford, Ault, McLaughlin, and Rollins, however, the progressive dislocation of artistic practice from commercial gallery space to alternative space to wide-open public space underwent considerable revision; in fact, this direction was reversed. Group Material projects began to appear in a variety of exhibition settings that once would have been considered antithetical to its philosophy of cultural activism.

In a key project of this period, *M-5*, ad space was rented for the month of December 1981 on Fifth Avenue buses (M3, M4, M5, M20) that serviced routes traversing the length of Manhattan from SoHo to 125th Street. Art works produced to conform to the physical dimensions of the card slots and emulating the appearance of regular print advertising carried meanings distinct from the commercial tableaux usually presented to commuters. Here was art that did not announce itself as art. Here was art that exploited the accessibility of the media to communicate ideas radically different from those that motivate advertising campaigns. Before the public could mount its accustomed resistance to contemporary art (It's alienating! It speaks a language I don't understand! It's not for me!), it had been afforded an art experi-

ence and, more important, a perspective on social issues that otherwise might receive very little play in the course of daily life. The art spoke about alienation from the workplace, urban fear, public education, the “new face of Uncle Sam,” independence for Puerto Rico, and other political topics. The *M-5* model was implemented again in *Subculture*, which was installed during the month of September 1983 in more than 1,400 card slots in subway cars on the New York City IRT line. More than one hundred artists were invited by Group Material to participate in the “exhibition,” each contributing a work in an edition of fourteen that was distributed over the same number of card slots. *Subculture* was also presented as a one-night exhibition at the Group Material headquarters, located at that time at 19 West 21st Street in Manhattan.

Another important exhibition model pioneered during Group Material’s formative second public year and used in subsequent projects was the “opinion wall,” or “democracy wall,” first produced as *DaZiBaos* in March 1982. Derived from the Chinese words (*da zi bao*), for “big character poster,” *DaZiBaos* consisted of huge red-and-yellow “propaganda posters” illegally pasted on the exterior of the old S. Klein building facing Union Square at 14th Street and Park Avenue in Manhattan. Unlike every other Group Material project, no other artists were invited to participate. Printed on the posters were twelve interrelated statements: six by organizations actively working on social and political problems and six by individuals Group Material members approached at random in Union Square and interviewed about the issues that the organized groups were addressing. The organizations included CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, an agency working against U.S. intervention in El Salvador); the Home Health Care Workers Union; Planned Parenthood; the Prison Reform Board; and the New York State Division of Substance Abuse. The individuals, identified on the posters only by occupation, included an accounting supervisor (on abortion); a homeless person (on crime); a housewife (on government funding of the arts); an office worker (on unions); a receptionist (on U.S. intervention in El Salvador); and an unemployed person (on drug abuse). As Group Material member Mundy McLaughlin observed in *RealLife Magazine*, “It was one of the only things I’ve gone by and seen people actually

Group Material,  
*DaZiBaos*, March 1982,  
 mounted on facade of  
 S. Klein building, Union  
 Square, New York City.



stopping, standing, and reading. . . . It was like a cross between propaganda, a gossip column, and Conceptual Art."

### **Tactical Maneuvers: The Politics of Place**

Contrary to the initial policy of the collective, Group Material began to produce projects in collaboration with a variety of institutions, including established alternative spaces and major museums, and to participate in prestigious exhibitions such as Documenta and the Whitney Biennial. Crossing institutional boundaries became as much



a political statement as the social themes the Group addressed. As the ideological basis of art into activism, Group Material had always defined “alternative action” as distinct from prevailing systems of production, distribution, and display; yet, it stopped short of advocating the complete overthrow or elimination of those systems. The decision to work directly with the institution was strategic, for it erased the moral undertones of an “us versus them” mentality that characterized the storefront activities. To perform an institutional critique from a position within the institution not only facilitated new dimensions of “complexity and contradiction,” but it made them explicit. To the extent that we are all in complicity with the forces that fuel dominant culture, Group Material’s blueprint for cultural activism suddenly assumed new relativity.

The Group’s determination to use every means of distribution at its disposal rather than only those bearing the approved imprimatur of “alternative” or “grassroots” coincided with the art world’s recognition of Group Material’s practice and product as legitimate and profitable. Its resolve to join forces with the institution and, reciprocally, the institution’s embrace of Group Material was efficient from the perspective of both parties. On the one hand, Group Material gained access to the distribution machinery of the institution by exploiting its desire to project an image of conscientiousness and political correctness. On the other hand, applying the logic of “biting the hand that feeds you,” the official alternative spaces, major museums, and international exhibitions that commissioned, or permitted, Group Material’s critique were able to neutralize that critique with respect to their own policies and practices. In what can be referred to as “sleeping with the enemy,” Group Material acknowledged the power of the institution in society as a cultural producer, and thus made a tactical attempt to appropriate its authority with respect to the social issues the collective addressed.

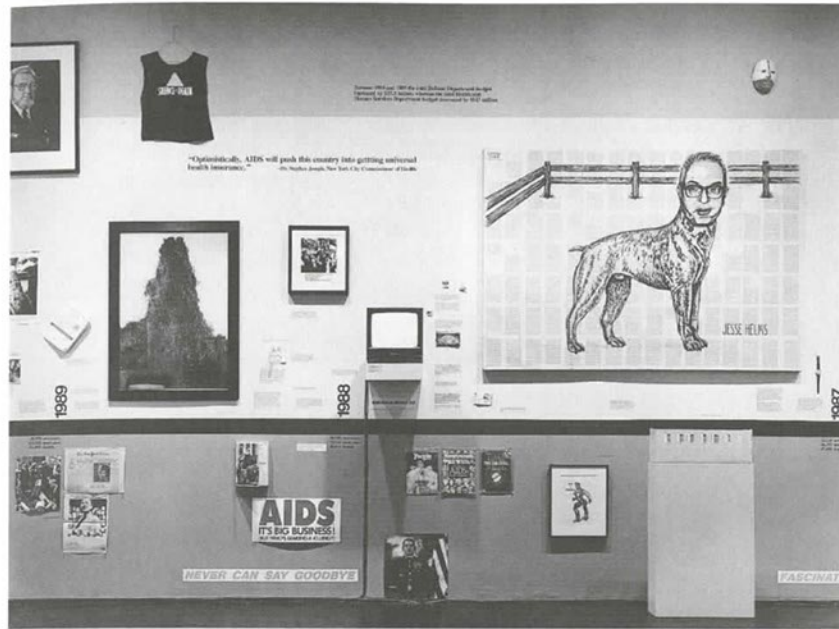
In following years, from approximately the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, Group Material collaborated with public and private institutions to pursue objectives outlined in its earliest manifestos for cultural activism. From Conceptual art, the artists in Group Material had learned to question the nature of art by focusing on the institutional structures that frame and regulate the aesthetic situation. It had



applied those lessons to the sphere of social experience, thereby questioning cultural formations. Yet, to interrogate the relations inscribed in art and culture, and to claim to do so from a position deemed “alternative” or outside dominant culture, had proven grossly inefficient if not entirely fallacious in the assumption that the institution alone nullifies the political power of art and that art, if liberated, will automatically and altruistically speak on behalf of the disenfranchised and underprivileged members of society. In collaboration with the institution, Group Material resolved the biggest thorn in its side—the problem of distribution and display that previously had drained its resources and, despite grassroots efforts, had failed to mobilize a proportionately large and active working-class audience that would not only appreciate Group Material’s field activity but support it as well. By example of the Group’s social experiment, perhaps we should reconsider the entire notion of a “political art” as defined in opposition to dominant culture and its institutions and, in this light, question whether independence from prevailing systems is at all desirable or even possible.

In its “institutional” phase, Group Material braided together the most successful elements of earlier projects to develop a repertoire of installation models and outreach projects that included the timeline, the opinion wall, the town meeting, and community service announcements that appeared in leased ad space. The impetus of its work was informational and was orchestrated to bring together in any one exhibition the voices of many individuals and groups and, on the basis of its own cachet, to introduce subjects seldom, if ever, discussed in the rarefied precincts of the institution. With approximately thirty exhibition projects to its credit (dating from 1984 to 1994), Group Material succeeded in bringing to the public the social issues and debates that had been outlined by the original collective as priorities in questioning the entire culture we take for granted.

A number of exhibition projects were devoted to two themes in particular: AIDS and democracy. Variations of *AIDS Timeline* were produced at the Matrix Gallery of the University Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley (November 1989–January 1990); the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford (September–November 1990); and the 1991 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American



Group Material, *AIDS Timeline*, November 1989, Matrix Gallery, University Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley.



Group Material, *AIDS and Insurance*, city bus posters, September 1990, Hartford, Connecticut. Sponsored by Real Art Ways, Hartford.

Art, New York (April–November 1991). Related projects include *AIDS and Democracy*, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin (January 1989); and *AIDS and Insurance*, a public installation on city buses produced in conjunction with Real Art Ways, Hartford (September–November 1990). The *AIDS Timeline* projects provide a chronicle of the AIDS epidemic drawn in relation to cultural and historical contexts; responses to the crisis on the part of the federal government, political leaders, and society at large; grassroots efforts to mount organized resistance; and the experiences of those infected with the disease, and their families, loved ones, friends, and collaborators. In Group Material's words, the *Timeline* "indicts the government's inaction on AIDS and society's complicity in that inaction," but it accomplishes far more than that. It is brutal in its anger over the government's criminal negligence and discriminatory policies; it is touching in its re-creation of the sociosexual indulgences and naivete of the late 1970s; it is poignant in its reflection of innocence and complicity and the dawning realization that life would never be the same—for anyone; and it is ambitious in its presentation of a wealth of material brought to bear on the subject.

Installation of the Berkeley *AIDS Timeline* extended far beyond the physical walls of the gallery. On the facade of the building, Group Material produced an "opinion wall," fashioned in the *DaZiBaos* mode originated in 1982, that consisted of quotes from Berkeley residents and reflected the level of AIDS awareness in the Berkeley community. In the November 10, 1989, edition of the *Daily Californian*, the Group issued an appeal for community activism with a half-

page graphic, commissioned from the New York activist group Gran Fury. In it, the readership was urged to get angry, to end the apathy, and to fight back. At the University's Recreational Sports Facility, an extensive video program was presented that included documentaries of AIDS protests, children talking about AIDS, homoerotic art, and demonstrations of safe sex. The *Timeline* incorporated such a plethora of art works, everyday artifacts, popular culture references, historical documentation, educational information, and voices of experience that its political message could be heard by all.

Did the eventual appearance of the *Timeline* at a major museum's most prestigious exhibition—the 1991 Whitney Biennial—constitute “sleeping with the enemy”? Was it more legitimate to present the *AIDS and Insurance* project in collaboration with Real Art Ways, an alternative space in Hartford, than it was to produce an installation at the powerful Whitney Museum of American Art in New York? Would the *Timeline* have been more authentic as “political art” if it had struggled to life in an “alternative-alternative” space in an economically depressed area? The answer to all the above is a resounding “No.” Perhaps the social relations embedded in the institution didn't change very much. Perhaps the institution got high mileage from buying political correctness at a relatively low price. Perhaps the individual careers of Group Material members benefited tremendously from the collective validation they received. Those are the realities of “art and activism,” but that is not to say that they compose a negative reality.

We might do well to reflect, briefly, on the position advanced by the utopian-minded artists of the historical avant-garde in the early twentieth century who thought in black-and-white and who could see but one option for political art: oppose the institution, put art in the hands of the proletariat, and join hands in the revolution. Whether that prescription ever worked in the modern world is debatable. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, however, that argument and the discursive structures upon which it is based are entirely inadequate to confront the complexity of the postmodern world. Those who championed Group Material's initial grassroots activism but condemned its later collaboration with the institutions of dominant culture; those who expect political art to transform rather than be consumed by the “superstructure”; those who believe that an art practice can be validated





Group Material, *Education and Democracy*, September 1988, part one of *Democracy*, the Dia Art Foundation, New York City.



Group Material, *Cultural Participation*, November 1988, part three of *Democracy*, the Dia Art Foundation, New York City.

by virtue of the political message it broadcasts—they are the ones who wave the “alternative” banner, who fall victim in droves to political correctness, and who fail to recognize the extent to which they have institutionalized the politics out of art by consigning it to fight battles it can never win.

When Group Material joined forces with the Dia Art Foundation in New York City to produce a four-part series entitled *Democracy* (September 1988–January 1989), its pedigree was already well established. It had been invited to *Documenta 8* (1987) and to the 1985 and 1991 Whitney Biennials; it had produced projects for major alternative spaces and university galleries across the country and had participated in several international exhibitions. This proven track record garnered Dia’s attention and fiscal support. Dia didn’t suddenly develop a political conscience: internal organizational changes and the shift from private to public funding necessitated that it broaden its programming to be “publicly responsible.” Dia, then and now, is in the business of art, and it’s safe to assume that on that basis alone it handed over the resources of its downtown gallery to Group Material for almost five months to produce *Education and Democracy*, *Politics and Elections*, *Cultural Participation*, and *AIDS and Democracy: A Case Study*. Group Material spread the wealth around, inviting dozens upon dozens of unknown artists to participate as “coproducers” in the project who otherwise would never have found entrée into Dia. The Group brought diverse groups of people into the gallery who ordinarily would never have set foot in SoHo or ventured into the world of contemporary art. It attempted to foster political debate and facilitate new alliances between the many factions and generations that comprise the art world, bringing into play the opinions of artists, dealers, curators, collectors, teachers, and students. It is a foregone conclusion that Dia considered Group Material’s work certifiable “art.” Did it matter whether or not social relations changed as a direct result of *Democracy*? In the eyes of Dia, probably not. Dia got exactly what it bargained for: a highly original and innovative contemporary art, and in a market that places utmost value on originality and innovation, the Group Material product was a very hot commodity indeed.



Group Material, *The Castle*, June 1987.  
*Documenta 8*, Museum  
Fridericianum, Kassel,  
Germany.

The four-part *Democracy* project epitomized the style and spirit of period postmodernism. Consumer culture and the commodification of art echoed thematically in the “high/low” montage of paintings and sculptures and mass-produced objects. Narratives gleaned from academia and popular culture, from theoretical treatises and television, demonstrated fluency with the most intellectual discourses that converge in late twentieth-century art. The vanguard art of the 1960s and 1970s—installation work, Process art, Conceptual art, Pop art, and “alternative” art (a grab bag that includes performance, video, political art, body art, collaboration, etc.)—was synthesized. Connections between such disparate movements having been made tangible, the history of the 1970s could be rewritten in more flattering terms than amorphous pluralism. Such was the product *Group Material* delivered, and for which it became famous.

Insofar as its political convictions were concerned, *Group Material* was both in and out of place in the market economy of art. On the one hand, the Group itself had become a commodity and an institution—an inevitable consequence of its success and its ambition to reach large audiences, to produce substantial multifaceted events, and to make its collective voice heard. On the other hand, the Group wanted to talk about democracy—the last thing the art world would consider marketable content. The electoral process? Public education? Housing and welfare? The Bill of Rights and the Constitution? How did that correspond to the discourse of postmodernism? What did



Group Material,  
*Democracy Wall*, October  
1993, for *In and Out of  
Place: Contemporary Art  
and the American Social  
Landscape*, Museum of  
Fine Arts, Boston,  
Massachusetts.



that have to do with Conceptualism or an institutional critique of art? For many the answer was, “Nothing at all.”

To talk about the principles of democracy, to quote the “founding fathers,” to organize town meetings on structural problems in public education, or to assemble a think tank on ways to improve the electoral process wasn’t particularly fashionable. (The art community had its causes—AIDS, and, in general, cultural participation.) Group Material, nevertheless, remained true to its goals: to question the *entire* culture and the culture we take for granted; to reach far beyond the interests of the art world—(most apparent in aspects of the *Democracy* project)—and it was the art world that gave it the means



to do so. Group Material's statement, prefacing the publication of *Democracy* (Bay Press, Seattle; Dia, New York, 1990), begins with a quote from Judge Bruce Wright, New York State Supreme Court:

Participating in the system doesn't mean that we must identify with it, stop criticizing it, or stop improving the little piece of turf on which we operate.

With this proviso, the text written by Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres is as true a manifesto as any ever produced by Group Material. (Ault was the one remaining member of the collective as formed in 1979.) In it, they describe their philosophy of cultural activism and offer a model of political art that is among the most comprehensive and lucid ever given in the twentieth century:

Our exhibitions and projects are intended to be forums in which multiple points of view are represented in a variety of styles and methods. We believe, as the feminist writer bell hooks has said, that "we must focus on a policy of inclusion so as not to mirror oppressive structures." As a result, each exhibition is a veritable model of democracy. Mirroring the various forms of representation that structure our understanding of culture, our exhibitions bring together so-called fine art with products from supermarkets, mass-cultural artifacts with historical objects, factual documentation with homemade projects. We are not interested in making definitive evaluations or declarative statements, but in creating situations that offer our chosen subject as a complex and open-ended issue. We encourage greater audience participation through interpretation.

As of the summer of 1994, Group Material continues to develop projects, although far less actively than in the past. Gonzalez-Torres pursues a full-time career yet remains a current member of the Group. Ramspacher is an inactive member. Doug Ashford and Julie Ault are the sole truly active members. They occasionally initiate exhibitions and continue to teach and lecture on behalf of Group Material, but it is not economically feasible to give it their full-time energies. (Members of the Group were never salaried.) Although it resists closure, after fifteen years of practice Group Material is on the verge of becoming history; but the chapter it wrote on the theory and practice of contemporary art has shaped our common history and will be interpreted and debated for decades to come.