

The Double Edge of History
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The United States did not suddenly become a conservative nation—it has always been one. One might conclude otherwise judging from a surface reading of the relatively liberal “anything is possible” atmosphere in American culture. But its undercurrent—the origins, histories, and myths that shaped this country at its core—is deeply conservative.

Culture is one arena where the paradoxical condition of American society frequently manifests. For example, just as National and State Arts Endowments finally revised their policies to ensure nondiscriminatory consideration and support in the field, calls for the termination of government arts subsidies grew louder and more persistent. In response to accusations of elitism and bigotry many institutions have aimed to be more inclusive in recent decades. Yet just as many mainstream establishments sought to reform exclusionary practices and to “reach out to new audiences,” the threatened demise of the already crippled National Endowment for the Arts effectively erodes art’s potential social functions, simultaneously sending museum directors on the hunt for financing through corporate partnerships and chasing after marketing consultants for moneymaking strategies.

The salient terms deployed in public discourse on cultural funding and other civic issues have been predominantly defined in support of conservative and commercialist agendas. Social agency, American-style, is linked to survival and accomplishment in marketplaces and in promotional culture at large. Consider for instance that the highly inflated art market of the 1980s was followed—not coincidentally—in 1989 by attacks on public cultural funding from the fundamentalist religious right with subsequent attacks from like-minded members of Congress. Glossy magazine coverage glamorizing the art world and reports of record-breaking prices for contemporary art made ideal preconditions for congressional initiatives to “get the government out of culture,” leaving artists to fend for themselves economically and philosophically.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, often with help from the NEA, many alternative spaces and group structures were established as constructive responses to the explicit and implied limitations in the commerce-oriented art world. Critical efforts to theorize representation as a contested arena and to create venues for self-representation were generated and accommodated in these sites. One such entity was the artists’ collaborative Group Material, which early in 1997 articulated its ending.

Particular cultural circumstances produce particular responses and activities. Group Material cohered around shared desires to fuse political interests and art in practice, and to articulate collaboration as a socially engaged practice. When the group formed in 1979 in New York City we were friends and friends of friends. The goals were to make a workspace for ourselves and to have fun. We sought, in our formation and projects, to counter the competitive art system as well as a host of interlocking discriminations and elitism evident in how art was then being taught, displayed, described, and distributed. Perhaps Group Material’s most significant act of activism was to begin itself.

Within the first couple of years decisions were made to protect the group from a potential path of unnecessary perpetuation. We considered the common trajectory of numerous alternative organizations that had rapidly institutionalized themselves and reasoned that if we refused those processes and rejected their trappings—a stable location, salaried positions, standardized procedures and programming—continuity would be based on desires and needs of the group’s participants, along with a perceived complementary imperative in the art field. The group itself was our medium, and flexibility was crucial—so that it could expand or shrink, redirect focus and change direction at will. (For the first year or so Group Material consisted of thirteen members: Hannah Alderfer, George

Ault, Julie Ault, Patrick Brennan, Liliana Dones, Yolanda Hawkins, Beth Jaker, Mundy McLaughlin, Marybeth Nelson, Marek Pakulski, Tim Rollins, Peter Szypula, Michael Udvardy. But by the summer of 1981 we had shrunk to three—Mundy, Tim and myself. Doug Ashford joined in 1982. In '86 Mundy left and in '87 Felix Gonzalez-Torres came into the group. Also in '87 Tim left. In '89 Karen Ramsbacher joined and remained through '91. Felix stopped participating actively in 1991. And late in '94 Thomas Eggerer and Jochen Klein joined, remaining through '96.)

Group Material's activities were most concentrated throughout the 1980's, years of relatively generous public funding for the arts, clear presidential enemies, and an active do-it-yourself atmosphere which permeated cultural production in multiple fields and disciplines.

Group Material was primarily concerned with making situations within art and cultural contexts that focused on topical issues and political and social circumstances—no lasting objects, no permanence intended. In order to avoid marginalization and be effectual in presenting models of how we thought cultural description and politicized questioning might be practiced, we frequently utilized mainstream venues such as museums and advertising spaces. The group's viability as an independent entity working temporally within such existing establishments was dependent on an institutional "need" for "respectful" contestation—for something "like" Group Material (collaborative, political, pluralist, stylish, etc.), and on our ability to negotiate various social relations, agencies, and situations with the right proportions of fixed and unfixed "identity" and "signature."

From 1986 on we intermittently reflected on whether we still found our process fulfilling and how our work was being received. We discussed whether to disband or keep going and repeatedly chose to reinvest. But over time a shift in self-perception occurred—in combination with members' growing financial needs, and desires to work individually and in other collaborative constellations—that made for a series of turning points within the group's internal dynamics and public functioning.

At some unpinpointable time, what had been a productive and generative foundation (a history) transformed into webs of expectations, both internal to the group and from outside sources. At some unpinpointable time, the forms we developed and utilized (salon-style designed thematic exhibitions, democracy walls, roundtable discussions, advertising space as exhibition site) became overly familiar—if not to audiences, then to ourselves. An influence in the process of enforced continuity is the cultural treadmill we boarded in hopes of utilizing every opportunity and venue as a platform. This movement into acute self-consciousness—of GM as "an artist" (first name Group, last name Material), objectified, and "in history"—marked a threshold crossed. From enthusiasm to being jaded is not a simple procedure. The group rhythm we had relished had been disrupted.

Along with our awareness—through experience not conjecture—of the situations described above came another realization. By 1992 it was apparent that our desires to symbolically and concretely break down hierarchies and diffuse borders between "high" and "low," public and private, producer and consumer, etc., were being visibly addressed by many mainstream cultural institutions. It remains unclear to what extent such efforts that appear to redress previous systemic biases are responding to pressures, are strategically seductive, and how deeply institutions are and will be effected over time.

Questions emerged at this juncture. If we took a break, could we digest the differences a decade made and reinvent our practice so it would be fulfilling for us as well as filling a need in culture? What would disbanding mean in respect to the evaluation of the group and in respect to our professional identities? Would it be irresponsible to sacrifice the cachet the group achieved? If we chose to continue could new members be integrated in a productive fashion?

From 1993 to 1996 Group Material worked on only one project each year. Diminishing the volume of projects had positive effects and afforded us time to consider options for the group's continuance or dispersal, but it was also becoming clear that Group Material's history was a presence which in various ways overdetermined our then-present as well as our imagined future.

In 1997, seventeen years after it originated, Group Material formally self-dissolved. When asked why it ended, I hear another question—more latent—“what is the tragedy of Group Material?” It’s sort of like being asked to perform one’s own autopsy. Because of an accumulation of histories and reasons that cannot adequately or accurately be communicated its active life finished. There is no agreed upon narrative—tragic or triumphant—but rather a mix of accomplishments, thoughts, regrets, relief, desires, recollections, and questions.

Group Material's dissolution does not negate its history, history that at least for now remains largely unhistoricized. Should this history be documented in a book that could last and circulate? If so, by whom—its former members or an art historian? The fragments that contribute to any history can be selected and configured to make a particular structure—to shape the past and/or to mobilize the present. That Group Material has an interest in it’s own historicization, in how it’s done, is intrinsic to the group’s working paradigm. Producing such a book is enticing “as a project” in which the investigative and representational methods Group Material utilized would be mirrored and enacted in relation to its own history. Conversely there is a certain appeal in preserving the ephemeral aspect of the entire project by not bringing documentation together in one packaged history. Ambivalence about any such enterprise perseveres.

The hierarchies of cultural economies are reproduced in respect to what “becomes” part of history. With no associated objects or projects currently circulating in the art economy, efforts disappear—they are written out of its history. Conferring value in this way is a strategy to marginalize certain positions and enterprises. The histories of groups and collectives often remain unwritten—no money (it takes money to write history), no marquee appeal. Another contributing factor is a feature of group structure itself. As discursive and multivoiced it is inherently complicated and treacherous to represent.

There are certain challenges specific to a process of the historization of the conditions and impacts of group activities. For a complex understanding of activities that sought to divert and subvert master narratives it’s important to propose alternatives to streamlined narratives that operate along linear logic in which one thing leads to another. Providing an orderly view or encapsulation of debated events and meanings is to some extent a revision of events whereby conflicts and contradictions are ultimately resolved, at least in their representation.

The dangers of taking pleasure in the past and the benefits of remembering in order to reinvent are not clearly posted. There is the risk of peddling nostalgia, of getting lost and/or paralyzed in emotionally inflected nostalgic territory in which recreation of the past obscures and replaces (or displaces) the present. To aid critical understanding of past specificities, and their effect in the present, it seems more productive to consider loose continuums of production than to provide a form of periodization as punctuation.

How to balance multiple relations to history? Alternatives to traditional historiographic practices might trace spatial and temporal configurations of interconnected events, activities, and associations of ideas nested in cultural circumstances, and by design provide spaces for multiple meanings, conflicting imaginations, conflicting “facts” and partiality. Historiography might be approached akin to artistic methodologies, utilize juxtaposition and artistic license, render ambivalently rather than declaratively, and ultimately acknowledge, not only in principle but as part of a historicizing method itself, that historiography is a creative as well as an interpretive practice: that it is a form of production.

The list of group entities, alternative spaces, and organizations that have dissolved or closed their doors seems to signal distress and dysfunction for certain critical strategies, as well as the disintegration of non-profit networks. Although some organizations that wanted to were unable to survive, many that are now gone were strategic and time-based by purpose (i.e. protest strategies are

usually one step in processes advocating social change). Other endeavors have become institutionalized, incorporated into larger entities, reconfigured, and so on. But facts always have multiple meanings. For a less bleak panorama one should register the fact that critical alternative activities have altered accepted notions of possible functions and definitions of art.

Perhaps the most pressing question in respect to dissolutions of GM and other groups is should they be read as a barometer or emblematic of the so-called dismal state of art-field activism? In my opinion claims that collective production's "time" has passed or that certain strategies are no longer relevant are absurd. One cannot in good faith cite the endings of Gran Fury, Women's Action Coalition (WAC), Group Material, or any other collective entity as evidence of such claims. Perhaps for some that do, it's a wish. Perhaps for others, it is an alibi. Uncertainty over the status and future of oppositional processes and structures continues but it is counterproductive to translate that uncertainty into pessimism.

Originally published in *springer*, Bd. III Heft 3 (Fall 1997).

Reprinted in Julie Ault, Martin Beck, *Critical Condition, Selected Texts in Dialogue* (Essen: Kokerei Zollverein/Zeitgenössische Kunst und Kritik, 2003)