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By RICHARD L. BERKE
Special to The New York Times
WASHINGTON, May 21 — Be
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tion are about a dozen wealthy fun
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sire to participate in politics at the
highest level.
For no pay, these volunteers toil at a
behind-the-scenes task that is far from
INSERTS
GROUP MAT

k Times

Sunday, May 22, 1988

Times

New York: Today, morning fog, hazy sun, chance of rain. High 65-70 coast, 72-78 inland. Tonight, patchy fog. Low 57-62. Tomorrow, partly sunny. Yesterday: High 67, low 57. Details, page 33.

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emirchyan

Tass via Reuters

Press

SOVIET DISMISSES TWO PARTY CHIEFS IN TENSE REPUBLICS

ETHNIC UNREST A FACTOR

Gorbachev Opportunity Seen in the New Armenian and Azerbaijani Protests

By BILL KELLER

Special to The New York Times

MOSCOW, May 21 — The Communist Party leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan were dismissed today after fresh outbreaks of ethnic tensions in the two southern republics, the official press agency Tass reported.

The ouster of the Armenian party leader, Karen S. Demirchyan, and the Azerbaijan chief, Kyamran I. Baginov, reflected high-level impatience in Moscow with the continuing tensions in the two republics, where civil unrest first broke out in February.

After a meeting of the ruling Politburo in Moscow Thursday, senior members of the Kremlin leadership flew to the southern republics to take part in the local meetings that removed the two men, according to Tass reports.

New Protests Broke Out

After a period of relative calm, huge street demonstrations reportedly broke out anew this week in the Armenian capital of Yerevan, the Azerbaijani capital of Baku, and the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountainous region governed by Azerbaijan but populated primarily by Armenians.

The renewed unrest comes at a critical juncture for Mr. Gorbachev, who is trying to consolidate his control over the Communist Party in time for a crucial party conference in late June. The Soviet leader is also scheduled to meet President Reagan for a summit [illegible]

TERIAL

Previous spread:
Group Material,
Inserts, 1988. Insert
into the 22 May 1988
Sunday *New York*
Times

Group Material,
The People's Choice
(Arroz con Mango),
1981. Installation
view, 244 East 13th
Street, New York.
Both images courtesy
the artists and Four
Corners Books

Citizen Artists: Group Material

– Alison Green

'The dismantling of the progressive economic and cultural changes of the 1960s began in earnest in the 1980s, and Group Material's overall project was imagined in this period of attempted historical erasure.'[1] So opens Doug Ashford's text in the recent publication *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material* (2010). It is an apt beginning to remembering how embattled the Left was in the 1980s, and to thinking retrospectively through the impact and importance of the trenchant and timely work of Group Material, the New York-based collective active from 1979 to 1996.

Alison Green discusses the contemporary relevance of Group Material's use of artistic and activist strategies, and how their practice might disrupt current narratives of the 'social turn'.

Like all good art practices, Group Material's seems utterly contemporary. It can be discussed in any number of ways: as a collective rather than individual practice, as activists and 'brand hackers', as a clever employment of postmodernist theory and of their innovations as artists working curatorially. The group's projects foreshadowed the 'social turn' in recent art, as well as 'relational', 'context' or 'participatory' practices, and especially the production of critically oriented installations in museum exhibitions and biennials. But Group Material seems curiously absent from recent discussions about contemporary art, perhaps occluded by its most famous member, Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Show and Tell*, edited by Julie Ault, a long-time member of Group Material, provides a good occasion to address many of these issues. The book itself is many things — a resource on the group's history, a study of archiving and a manual for how (or how not) to organise a collective art practice.[2] (Reading about the first year of Group Material tells you two things: don't try to work with too many people, and don't get bogged down paying rent on a gallery space. Later entries are bracing in their revelations of discord, disaffection and burn out.) So this is a compelling moment to look at their particular form of productive opposition. It is also a moment, hopefully, to resist — as I think *Show and Tell* does — hagiography or the conclusion that a political-critical practice is no longer possible. In what follows, this text proposes that Group Material's most significant legacy is the processes that their work produced, and the discursiveness that became crucial to their projects' different forms and contexts.

Group Material began as a group of artists, all interested in social issues and in — that 1980s concept — the 'politics of representation'.[3] There were between ten and thirteen members at first, but during the second year this unwieldy number fell to three, and the group's size henceforth fluctuated between three and four.[4] Group Material — the name itself allowing for flexibility and signifying a 'materialist' approach — organised itself around several motivations, such as working as a collective against individual art practices, working against 'careerism' and reconnecting art's production and reception. The group's

1 Doug Ashford, 'An Artwork Is a Person', in Julie Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material*, London: Four Corners Books, 2010, p.220.

2 At the same time as the book was being prepared, an archive was created and deposited in the Downtown Collection, Fales Library & Special Collections, at New York University's Bobst Library. See J. Ault, 'Case Reopened: Group Material', in *Ibid.*, pp.209—16.

3 Jan Avgikos uses this term in her essay 'Group Material Timeline: Activism as a Work of Art', in Nina Felshin (ed.), *But Is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p.87.

4 *Show and Tell* lists the members as they join and depart the group. In the second year, Ault, Tim Rollins and Mundy McLaughlin were the three left from the original group. Doug Ashford joined early on, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres joined in 1987, coincident with Rollins's departure. Karen Ramspacher was active from 1988 until around 1991, and the German artists Thomas Eggerer and Jochen Klein joined the group near its end.

origins, concurring with the late conceptual and activist practices of Martha Rosler and Conrad Atkinson and coinciding with a resurgence of expressionist painting in galleries, made them an important foil for the commercial and conservative mainstream of the 80s. A number of the early members had studied with Joseph Kosuth at the School of Visual Arts in New York, and Group Material's founding overlapped with some members' joining Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, organised by (among others) Kosuth, Lucy Lippard, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero and Carl Andre.[5] In a mid-80s article, Lippard set Group Material in the context of other artist-activist projects and alternative spaces that had recently developed in New York — from Colab and Fashion Moda to the Alliance for Cultural Democracy — reflecting an 'influx of belligerently disillusioned and/or idealistic young artists, well-trained and ambitious, but dissatisfied with the narrowness and elitism of the art world into which they were supposed to blend seamlessly'.[6] Group Material was certainly idealistic, and also experimental; as founding member Tim Rollins recalled about one of their early shows, 'It was full of fantasy and surprise and joy and humor and wit — all of the things so often lacking in political art.'[7] What is also striking was their use of design: ideas found visual form and were articulated in texts, whether a press release or exhibition announcement, or in visual and textual interfaces developed for exhibitions.

The notion of an expanded practice was not new, but Group Material employed a remarkable range of 'curatorial' strategies involving working collectively, politically and in relation to specific cultural situations. Their first move was to rent a storefront gallery. Rollins described it as a 'not a space but a place, a laboratory of our own'.[8] Another article of faith, as it were, was the post-Conceptual practice of not producing art. Instead they solicited contributions from other people, ranging from their community of artists to non-professional artists and non-artists. Asked to show at the New Museum in 1985, they invited 200 people to each contribute a 12-by-12-inch flat object, which took their places alongside album covers and magazine ads in a grid spelling out the word 'MASS'. For a show at Washington Project for the Arts in Washington, DC, they invited 'responses' from across the United States by putting small advertisements in local newspapers. The press release for *Messages to Washington* (1985) states: 'Group Material is tired of hearing people's opinions as watered down by "public opinion polls", distorted by the mass media and through their letters as interpreted by President Reagan. We have an idea other people feel the same way.'[9] An early exhibition they organised, *The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)* (1981), in their own Lower East Side gallery was conceived in opposition to artists' participation in the gentrification of outlying neighbourhoods. To create a tight loop between audience and location, they put out a request to their mostly Latino neighbours to loan things from their own walls and shelves, 'things that might not normally find their way into an art gallery'.[10] In rejecting the role of the artist-as-maker they became something else — producers, organisers, interpreters of art and other artefacts, 'cultural workers', even. They mobilised the exhibition as an active site where all things were under scrutiny: institutional power, aesthetics, cultural value and political discourse.

As a curatorial practice, Group Material made exhibitions both political and aesthetically innovative. *The People's Choice* was made up of a hundred or so diverse objects, including class photographs and collectibles, a mural by local kids, posters, 'folk art', kitsch and religious icons. They were installed floor to ceiling as they arrived. Labels identified the owners, some of which included a personal story about the object. The significance this 'democratic' attitude — especially

5 Rollins describes being involved with the AMCC's *Anti-catalog*, an alternative history of American art put together in response to the Whitney Museum of American Art's bicentennial exhibition of the collection of John D. Rockefeller, which included no artists of colour and only one woman. See 'Tim Rollins talks to David Deitcher — '80s Then — Interview', *Artforum*, vol.41, no. 8, April 2003, pp.78—79. See also Lucy R. Lippard, 'Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power', in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York and Boston: New Museum and David Godine, 1984, pp.351—52.
6 L.R. Lippard, 'Trojan Horses', *op. cit.*, p.353.
7 'Tim Rollins talks to David Deitcher,' *op. cit.*, p.78.
8 T. Rollins, 'What Was to Be Done?', in J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op. cit.*, p.218.
9 'Messages to Washington', in J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op. cit.*, p.111.
10 'Dear Friends and Neighbors of 13th Street', in J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op. cit.*, p.35.

Group Material, *Americana*, 1985. Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photograph: Geoffrey Clements. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art

in relation to other artists who make installations of multitudes of things (Thomas Hirschhorn's and Jason Rhoades's more packed ones come to mind) — is not the rejection of the programme of the white cube, but how the display supported the set of meanings already granted by the owners of the objects. In a review of the show, Thomas Lawson commented: 'The value of these artifacts lay precisely in their sentimentality, a quality that is absent from most artwork that strives to mean something to a general audience.'[11] Accordingly, *The People's Choice* might be distinguished from exhibitions seeking to problematise divisions between high and low culture but which result in reasserting the hierarchy. The key to the difference is in the act of a positive representation of a particular community, initiated by a social process: the community was specific, nameable and present, even if open and internally diverse.

Nevertheless, *The People's Choice* and its local success (as well as its recognition within the art world) did not lead Group Material to become a community-based art practice. Internal group discussions over the following year revealed there were those who wanted to be activists, those who wanted art careers and those — the ones who continued to work as Group Material — who were interested in activism *and* art.[12] As Ashford writes in *Show and Tell*: 'Group Material's self-assignment was to locate the dissensual feelings associated with activism, its emotional reverberations and actual evocations, into a realisable model or design.'[13]

The group's main point of resistance was the commercial art world and its reliance on named artists and discrete, saleable objects. *The People's Choice* tried to open this closed circle of aesthetic value. In a later show like *Americana*, their contribution to the 1985 Whitney Biennial, Group Material proposed a 'precise and innovative exhibition design',[14] a layered and salon-style hanging of mass-produced commodities (such as a clothes washer and dryer, pop music and a TV continually broadcasting one of the networks) alongside historical works of social critique by artists under-recognised by the Whitney and works of contemporary art critical of

11 Thomas Lawson, 'The People's Choice, Group Material', *Artforum*, vol.19, no.8, April 1981, p.67, reprinted in J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op. cit.*, p.32.
12 See Peter Hall, 'Group Material: An Interview', *REALLIFE Magazine*, no.11/12, Winter 1983—84, quoted in J. Avgikos, 'Group Material Timeline', *op. cit.*, p.102. See also J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op. cit.*, pp.48—49.
13 D. Ashford, 'An Artwork is a Person', in J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, p.225.
14 Proposal for 'Americana', in J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op. cit.*, p.94.

Group Material, *Democracy Poll*, 1990, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (NGBK), Berlin. Interview statement installed at U-Bahn station. Photograph: Regina von Pock. Courtesy the artists and Four Corners Books

North American culture.[15] Group Material's self-stated aim was to 'demonstrate how art is dependent on a social context for its meaning'.[16] Effectively, they curated an alternative show, critiquing the way the Whitney represented American culture and tacitly arbitrated success in the New York art world in their biennials.

The other key strategy in Group Material's practice was using channels outside art circuits. At one point or another in their run of projects, they used every form of public advertisement available: bus and subway posters (*M5*, 1981—82; *AIDS and Insurance*, 1990; and *Subculture*, 1983); newspaper inserts (*Inserts*, 1988 and *Cash Prize*, 1991); commercial billboards (*Your Message Here*, 1990); shopping bags (*Shopping Bag*, 1989); and all of them in concert in one show in Berlin that addressed German reunification (*Democracy Poll*, 1990). The initiation of such projects in 1981 roughly coincided with abandoning their gallery space. At the time they explained: '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.'[17]

In the case of using fly posters — the series of works Group Material called *DA ZI BAOS* after the Chinese 'big character posters' — it was not the intervention per se but the discourse it produced that made the interventions effective. Contrast the twelve

15 Kim Levin's review of the Biennial touches on flashpoints in the so-called culture wars of the 1980s — she accuses Group Material of being handmaidens to the Whitney's effort at inclusion inclusiveness that year, and also of bringing the 'quality' of the show down. K. Levin, 'The Whitney Laundry', *The Village Voice*, 9 April 1985, reprinted in J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op. cit.*, p.96.

16 Proposal for 'Americana', *op. cit.*, p.94. Also on 'Americana', see J. Ault, 'Three Snapshots from the Eighties: On Group Material', in Paul O'Neill (ed.), *Curating Subjects*, London: Open Editions, 2007, pp.34—36.

17 Quoted in J. Avgikos, 'Group Material Timeline', *op. cit.*, p.99. It has been argued elsewhere that interventions like these are only marginally effective, especially as they are ultimately co-opted by capitalism itself. For a recent text that addresses advertising's appropriation of avant-garde gestures, see Friedrich von Borries and Matthias Böttger, 'False Freedom: The Construction of Space in Late Capitalism', in BAVO (ed.), *Urban Politics Now*, Rotterdam: NAi, 2007, pp.128—40.

posters, alternating red and yellow, which they put up on a façade of a bankrupt department store in Union Square, New York, in 1982, to Daniel Buren's iconic striped posters pasted on Paris billboards in the late 1960s. *DA ZI BAOS* represented public, though not official, discourse. Texts presented different voices speaking in different modes, from man-on-the-street opinion to position statement. And this was targeted toward an issue: the *Democracy Wall* that accompanied Group Material's *AIDS Timeline* exhibition at the University of California at Berkeley in 1989 and 1990 represented campus opinion on AIDS.[18]

Far from the distinct, identifiable and fluid communities Group Material aimed their work at, audiences now are museum audiences, government target groups, or most de-politicised of all, individuals.

The timing and siting of these projects was crucial. To stage an exhibition on AIDS in 1989 in the Bay Area and advertise it on the outside of a museum was to deploy this space as a site for political action.[19]

Many of Group Material's projects developed forms of discourse that tested out issues of participation and inclusion, as well as self-criticality.[20] When offered an exhibition at the Dia Art Foundation in New York, they staged a four-part show, *Democracy* (1988—89), which addressed four topical issues: education, election politics (the show overlapped with the 1988 presidential election of George H.W. Bush), cultural participation and AIDS. There were four different installations, and each was accompanied by a town meeting led by public figures, artists and members of the group. As an example of their discursive strategy, the town meeting, titled *Politics and Election*, opened with the statement that just because you invite the public to a meeting doesn't mean they become empowered. This was followed by a discussion about site, in which questions were raised about Dia's being chosen as the meeting's location — thus offering that very rare thing: dialogue, rather than consensus.[21] And this dialogue runs right through to the everyday aspects of Group Material's practice: reading between the lines in *Show and Tell*, there is evidence of how their working process remained as open and discursive as the exhibitions, despite the group's small size and intimate interrelations. Their projects had hundreds of participants, from artists to activists to the staff of the institutions with whom they were working.[22]

Of all their works, Group Material's 'timelines' might constitute their best undoing of institutional contexts. The timelines, which used works of art, artefacts and found documents, were the most didactic of Group Material's projects, and the ones in which the group's political agenda was most strategically keyed into the format of the show.[23] Chronological structure signalled authority and evidence, but in other ways the timelines are classic examples of intertextuality. A lineup of

18 The question they asked was 'How does AIDS affect you, and your lifestyle?' Responses ranged from 'testing must remain anonymous' and 'My whole life has changed due to AIDS [...] I live with a constant thought of death and how to prepare for it...' to 'AIDS doesn't affect me at the moment; I don't sleep around'. See J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op. cit.*, pp.160—61 and 250—51. For the *Democracy Wall* at Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff, Group Material solicited position statements from right-wing organisations, including the National Front. A text offered by the National Cleansing Campaign was particularly shocking in its rant against the 'complete destruction that faces the Anglo-Saxon and kindred people' through 'drugs, brainwashing, homosexuality, rape and murder'. See *ibid.*, pp.100—05.

19 For an important period account of art, activism and AIDS see Douglas Crimp, 'AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism', *October*, vol.43, Winter 1987, pp.3—16.

20 Recent discussions of Jacques Rancière's writings on dissensus are important here. See Janina A. Ciezadlo, 'Pluralistic Conversation', *Afterimage*, vol.36, no.4, January/February 2009, pp.3—4, which summarises the conference 'Disruptions: The Political in Art Now', at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 2008, which included both Rancière and Doug Ashford as speakers.

21 *Politics and Election* transcript, Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University. See also B. Wallis (ed.), *Democracy: A Project of Group Material* (Discussions in Contemporary Culture # 5), New York and Seattle: Dia Art Foundation and Bay Press, 1990.

22 See 'Behind the Timeline: Collected Histories', in J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op. cit.*, pp.238—53.

23 The first instance of Group Material using the format was *Timeline: A Chronicle of U.S. Intervention in Central and Latin America*, at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in 1984, in a show that was itself part of a national campaign to protest US intervention in the region. The *AIDS Timeline* was installed in three North American museums from 1989 to 1991 (UC Berkeley; the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT; and the 1991 Whitney Biennial). It also appeared in a print version that ran simultaneously in a number of art magazines and journals to coincide with the 1 December 1990 Day Without Art.

magazine covers referenced the mass media's (inflammatory) discussion of AIDS while agitprop paraphernalia from protest groups like ACT UP and Gran Fury demonstrated the smart, growing political movement against the US government. Works of art were multivalent: in some cases they were as informative as the timeline's running text; in others they represented a critical position; and some eulogised death.[24] Other inclusions were aimed to educate people (and possibly shock them), as in Robert Buck's *Safer Sex Preview Booth* (1989), which screened instructional/pornographic sex videos made by the Gay Men's Health Crisis.[25]

The significance of the timelines as exhibition strategies was in their heterogeneous attempt to inform, politicise and represent a particular community, while also activating a general audience. In effect, Group Material created 'other spaces', or heterotopias, in Michel Foucault's sense of places where 'real' sites of culture are 'simultaneously represented, contested and inverted'.[26] The knowledge presented in these exhibitions was complex, contentious and often contradictory. Richard Meyer, who worked on *AIDS Timeline* at UC Berkeley as a postgraduate student and curatorial intern, commented that it was not documentary in its approach: it was, rather, 'this really complicated notion of a visual and lived history, where images don't have fixed representation'.[27] What seems relevant in this observation is how the show facilitates the production (rather than the reproduction) of meaning, and thereby reflects other strategies the group used to produce dialogue. This is not the de-politicised 'mash-up' of contemporary postmodernism, but something more akin to critical discourse in its best sense.

Recent evaluations of socially engaged practice provide some ground for evaluating Group Material's work in contemporary rather than historical terms, although it is notable that they are minimally present in the current wave of critical writings about both innovative curatorial practices and social engagement. To mention only one thread in a complex dialogue, Claire Bishop's description of aesthetics as the 'ability to think contradiction' functions well as a descriptor of Group Material's practice.[28] She points to the 'critical space' produced by both institutions and aesthetic practice itself, and argues that it functions as a brake against the instrumentalisation of art for (merely) social ends.[29] Strikingly similar discussions took place on the pages of *The Village Voice* about Group Material's Dia show *AIDS and Democracy: A Case Study* (1988—89). Critic Elizabeth Hess found the mixed — she called it 'conceptual' — use of agitprop, works of art and visual culture created distance, and this allowed for critical reflection. Whilst Bishop's opposition is between aesthetics and what she calls 'ethics', Hess's was barricade politics, as made clear in a follow-up review by Kim Levin, who charged Group Material with becoming 'traditional curators' and merely 'preaching to believers'. For Levin the appropriate response to the AIDS crisis was to get out and protest.[30] In fact, Group Material did both: they did a lot of marching in addition to organising exhibitions. Despite the similarities of these discussions, there are significant differences between Group Material and the more recent practices being cited. Bishop argues, for example, that Phil Collins's video installation *they shoot horses* (2004), which documents the two dance marathons he staged (separately) for Palestinian and Israeli teenagers, produces critical reflection. Indeed it may do so in many ways, but it is tempting to imagine that Group Material's response to a politicised subject like the Arab-Israeli conflict would raise the stakes of the

24 Crimp notes that early responses to AIDS both by and about the art community were limited to catharsis and transcendence, and makes the argument for political action. D. Crimp, 'AIDS', *op. cit.*, pp.3—6. Nonetheless, it is important to realise now that the political was personally experienced: in the lead-up to putting *AIDS Timeline* in the 1991 Whitney Biennial, Gonzalez-Torres was mourning the loss of his partner to AIDS.

25 See the entries by Robert Buck and Larry Rinder in 'Behind the Timeline: Collected Histories', in J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op. cit.*, p.246, which indicate how controversial some of the material in the *AIDS Timeline* was.

26 Michel Foucault, 'Des Espaces Autres', (1967), trans. Jay Miskowiec, 1984, available at: http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html (last accessed on 27 September 2010).

27 J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op. cit.*, p.239.

28 Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', in Margriet Schavemaker and Mischa Rakier (ed.), *Right About Now: Art & Theory Since the 1990s*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2007, p.68.

29 *Ibid.*, p.65.

30 Both articles are reprinted in J. Ault (ed.), *Show and Tell*, *op.cit.*, pp.153—54.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres on the opening day of Group Material, *AIDS Timeline*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, 30 September 1990. Courtesy the artists and Four Corners Books

audience's engagement quite a lot higher than Collins's work does.

Against the institutionalisation of participatory practices, it might be useful to revive the term activism. Lippard early on contextualised Group Material in the traditions of 1960s Conceptualism and Institutional Critique, and, crucially, as part of a new wave resolving the division between activism and aesthetic practice. Jan Avgikos's informative mid-1990s essay on the group positioned them as the middle way between 'the market' and 'political correctness' (which she describes as an impossible politics); to this end she coined the term 'cultural activism' to describe the hybrid nature of their practice. A decade later, in her influential book *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Miwon Kwon cited Group Material as occupying a productive role in the culture wars of the 1990s, in the context of how both progressives and neoconservatives learned how to mobilise 'communities'.[31] Recent discussions like Bishop's shift significantly away from the 'public' in public art and towards established art-world circuits. Far from the distinct, identifiable and fluid communities Group Material aimed their work at, audiences now are museum audiences, government target groups or, most de-politicised of all, individuals. One might well ask where the commitment to 'activate' or 'empower' visitors to such exhibitions has gone. Where are the points of difference crucial to the notion of critique?

Also germane to this discussion are the different fates of Group Material and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who — posthumously — is an ever-present figure on the exhibition circuit, and whose work, although made of 'poor' and endlessly replenishable commodities, has been seamlessly incorporated into the art market's and art museum's proclivities. Standing in front of Gonzalez-Torres's sculpture *'Untitled' (Supreme Majority)* (1991), white and mute, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York this summer, I wondered if any of the art-going audience there knew he was a member of Group Material. How does one see the politics of this work? In this context, it produces very little. It turns out the written history is (partially) to

31 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2002, p.147 and note 31. Kwon wrote more extensively about Group Material in a text on their final project: 'Three Rivers Arts Festival: Pittsburgh, PA', *Documents*, no.7, 1996, reprinted in *Texte zur Kunst*, vol.23, August 1996, pp.149—51.

Group Material, *YOUR MESSAGE HERE*, 1990, Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago. Billboard by Stephen Lapthisophon. Courtesy the artists and Four Corners Books

blame for the erasure of Group Material from Gonzalez-Torres's biography; most sources underplay his participation in the group.[32] Writing for the catalogue of the last major show before his death, Nancy Spector asserted: 'Gonzalez-Torres's career as an individual artist has developed quite separately from his ongoing collaboration with Group Material, but reverberations from its collective effort to generate social awareness, without dictating specific meaning, are readily detectable in his work.'[33] Such divisions seem difficult to countenance now, for both parties involved, since the strategies in Gonzalez-Torres's work — the candy spills, the lights, the billboards, wall texts, paper stacks — are so evident in Group Material's repertoire of engagement. And here is the point: Gonzalez-Torres's minimalism lends itself to the elegiac reading it has received, the slow loosening of the aesthetic and political conjunction it created. One might also speculate that his key position within Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) has contributed to the evacuation of political specificity in his work, especially because of the terms by which 'relational' forms of art practice have been embraced by institutions. Bourriaud's emphasis on art that replicates already existing situations is problematically generalised against the way Gonzalez-Torres's work emphasised difference and critique (how can there be any politics in replication?). More recent writing on Gonzalez-Torres is somewhat corrective, as in the 2006 monograph edited by Ault, and also Joe Scanlan's provocative *Artforum* article from last year.[34] Although neither of these explicitly realigns Gonzalez-Torres with Group Material, both recontextualise his politics in terms that resonate with the group's aspirations as activists. An additional point of reference for this discussion is provided by a recent publication on Tim Rollins, who pursued a practice outside Group Material that was collaborative, socially-engaged,

32 To mention just a few one might consult: Wikipedia's entry, accessed on 9 September 2010, doesn't mention Group Material. Oddly, the 58-page-long biography on the website of Gonzalez-Torres's long-time dealer, Andrea Rosen lists only three of the more likely figure of seventeen projects he did with or as part of Group Material. MoMA's website cites his early involvement with the group, but separates it from his individual practice.

33 Nancy Spector, 'From Criticism to Collaboration: The 80s', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (exh. cat.), New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995, p.13. As with other sources, Group Material is not present in the book's bibliography or exhibition history, even though the latter includes individual, group and 'collaborative two-person exhibitions'. *Ibid.*, pp.198—217.

34 J. Ault (ed.), *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: Steidl, 2006; and Joe Scanlan, 'The Uses of Disorder', *Artforum*, vol.48, no.6, February 2010, pp.162—69.

Group Material, *DA ZI BAOS*, 1982, Union Square, New York. Photograph: Andres Serrano. Courtesy the artists and Four Corners Books

discursive and — fancy that! — commercially successful.[35] The history drawn up by this book fleshes out the overlaps and continuities between Rollins's relationship to Group Material and his practice as Tim Rollins and KOS.

It's hard not to feel that Group Material broke significant ground but missed the party. The year they broke up, 1996, coincides with a proliferation of new forms of social practice lately successful in museum exhibitions and biennials, whether in the work of Francis Alÿs or Jeremy Deller, or equally in that of later artists like Paul Chan and Jeanne van Heeswijk. It's also hard not to feel — if Gonzalez-Torres's 'success' is any measure — that the politics of social practices must be negotiated carefully and continually. As one might expect, Group Material addressed this in their work: their contribution to documenta 8 was a self-contained, circular installation titled *The Castle* (1987). Its point of departure was an orphaned quotation from Kafka's novel *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*, 1922), in which a land surveyor, known only by the initial K., is informed posthumously that his application for citizenship to the walled town has been denied. He would nonetheless be permitted to live and work there. This is as good a metaphor as any for activist art's place in the art world — it's useful to have around but it will never enter into its commodified heart. As for Group Material's place in history? As Fredric Jameson wrote, 'History is what hurts.'[36]

35 See Ian Berry (ed.), *Tim Rollins and KOS: A History*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2009. Rollins left the group in 1987 because it wasn't activist enough.

36 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Art*, London: Methuen, 1981, p.102.