

What Was to be Done?

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It was 1978 and we had no choice. We had to do something. We wanted to make a scene. A brilliant desperation was in the air for we young artists who wanted—needed—to be politically engaged but lacked any venues for new and true artistic inquiry, experimentation, demonstration, and change.

Group Material had some powerful foreshadows: Russian Constructivism, Dada and Surrealism, the Arts and Crafts movements in England and later the United States, the Shakers, and other utopian communities. But when I go back and wonder how Group Material came to be, I have to acknowledge the incongruous influence of two very, very different artists—the British activist Conrad Atkinson and the gay neo-expressionist painter Jedd Garet.

My revelation moment occurred when I encountered a special issue of the British art publication *Studio International*, edited by Richard Cork. The title of the issue was “Art for Whom?”. It presented and explored a survey of socially engaged, community based arts projects throughout the UK at the moment (and to my mind the only true avant garde movement around). In those pages I was introduced to the art of Conrad Atkinson and Margaret Harrison. What excited and inspired me about Atkinson’s and Harrison’s projects was the direct engagement with specific individuals and communities to develop and produce artwork that was both visually and politically vital. This was work that actually transformed the situation that was the impetus for the work. Unlike so much “political art” then (and now, sadly), this was not art about politics, about the People as an abstraction. This was work made in concert with communities in crisis with a direct intention to change things to positive effect. This was art as dialogue, not representation and reportage (descriptive, removed, and safe).

Many of the first members of Group Material were my classmates at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) from 1975 to 1977. We were deeply involved in Joseph Kosuth’s reading and discussion seminar in art and cultural politics. Jedd Garet was also a classmate of ours and while I don’t remember if he was in Kosuth’s seminar class, I’m

certain he was in the studio class we all took with the painter Jennifer Bartlett. While Jedd would be quietly making his things in the corner of the studio (this was a required studio class lasting several hours) our gang would be forever arguing with Jennifer about the purpose, meaning, and nature of art. We weren't making objects. We were making dialogue. We sincerely considered the collective conversation as our work and it drove Jennifer crazy. (This was way before "Situational Aesthetics.") We were probably tendentious, a little obnoxious, but I recall a great energy, an irreverence and humor in the talks and we all learned a lot. Even Jennifer had a begrudging respect for what we were attempting to do.

Anyway, we had all just graduated from SVA without the prospects of anything. Jedd Garet, on the other hand, got a large exhibition at the fabulous Robert Miller Gallery straight out of school. Jedd was making these very punky, neo-surrealist paintings that were very popular with lots of folk at the time and championed by critics like Robert Pincus-Witten and Robert Rosenblum. While our gang's ideas of what could be and Jedd's were light-years away, Jedd was still a good friend and so we all went to his wildly successful opening at the gallery. After, we retreated to a bar downtown and then it started. Everyone was complaining and hand wringing. "No one is ever going to want to be involved in our kind of work . . . there is no place for political art in this city . . . oh, what to do, what to do?!!"

That's when it hit me. We needed our own place.

Born and raised in the hills of central rural Maine, American pragmatism is built into my DNA. Back home, if you need to build a barn, you don't get a committee together to do a study of the history and practice of barn building over the past three centuries and don't need to go into barn-building theory (e.g. The Barn and "the Other"). You build a damn barn. We needed a barn, not a space but a place, a laboratory of our own. We could operate outside the commercial and increasingly not-alternative spaces of the mainstream art scene in order to make our own ways in our own contexts. This is what we wanted and needed to do. Exhibitions as inquiries. And we wanted to do this in a physical space occupied not just by objects, artists and the art-involved audience but a hub of social relations. We wanted to get away from the slumming, abject, funky, raggedy-looking feel of so many of the artist-run galleries at the time without reverting to the expensive-looking Soho white cube paradigm. We wanted to develop social action with style—our style. We wanted to be independent, self-reliant. We wanted to be communitarian (not Communist), not only community-based but also community-engaged, connecting what happens inside the exhibition space / headquarters with social life on the street and neighborhood just outside the doors.

As students many of us were involved in an organization called Artists Meeting for Cultural Change. It was like a town meeting that met at the Paula Cooper Gallery in Soho one Sunday night a month. Participants included Kosuth and Sarah Charlesworth and folk like Lucy Lippard, Leon Golub and Nancy Spero, and many others, including, ironically some seriously troubled sociopaths. We were the youngest of the constant debaters. While the experience of those meetings was a unique education, our gang was eventually turned off and disappointed by the relentlessly negative and combative spirit of the enterprise. The old New Left were conjuring up a culture of impossibility, so unlike the spirit of the civil rights movement that I witnessed and experienced as a young kid.

I remember that in our early conversations about the plans for the Group Material project, we all began to realize that no social system and consciousness is hermetic and airtight. Things like these are more porous than we first believe. Under enough outside pressure, things can spring leaks. There were hopeful models of work that excited us: the feminist Heresies Collective, *The Times Square Show* and *The Real Estate Show*, Jenny Holzer's first Truism posters plastered all over downtown, Mike Glier's *White Male Power* show at Annina Nosei's space in Soho, what Keith Haring was doing with his drawings in the ad spaces in the New York City subways, and the whole riotous community-building neighborhood club scene we visited almost every night (Max's Kansas City, Club 57, The Pyramid, Mudd Club, Danceteria, Tier Three, the UFO club, CBGB, Crisco Disco) that induced fresh possibilities for the making and experiencing of new modes and ways of making art.

Could we do this? Could we flow into an organic democracy that would produce works of art and anthologies of social and cultural concerns? Could we create an arena that renegotiates the physical, psychological and class-bound barriers between art and so-called non-art? Could we relearn our thinking and practice to be less reactive and more proactive in coming up with innovative solutions to some very real limitations and problems in very real communities in some very real lives? Often, when the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of his definition of transformative Love, he would describe this as the kind of Love that would go to any non-violent means necessary to create "the Beloved Community." Could we do this?