



But is it



Art
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**The Spirit of Art
as Activism**

Edited by
Nina Felshin



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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

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 Oiman, 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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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 Ramsbacher 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, subgroups 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 (Derr Adams), *Subculture*, IRT subway trains, September 1983, New York City.

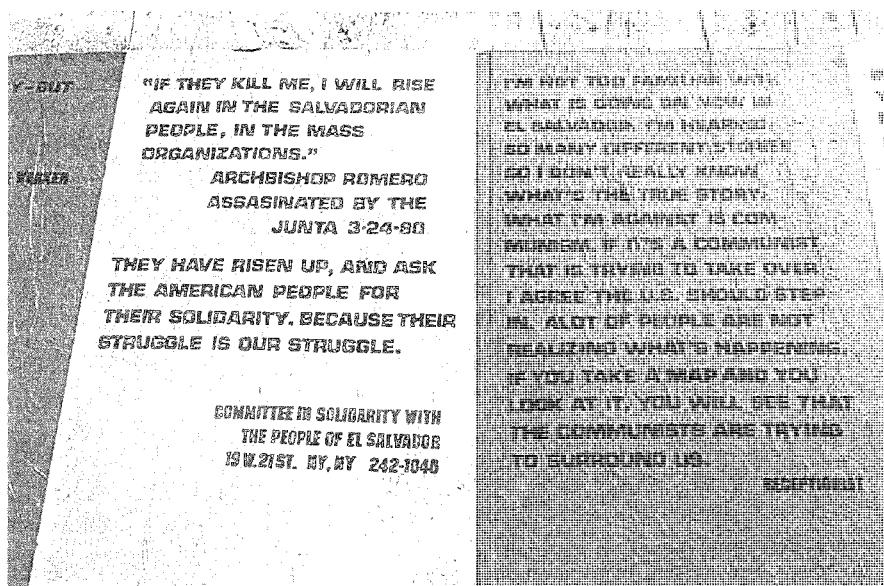
producer. Paintings and sculptures were included in installation projects, but their normative values were displaced within an exhibition environment that leveled difference and enforced parity between widely disparate classes of objects. These and other techniques had been the stock-in-trade of Group 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.

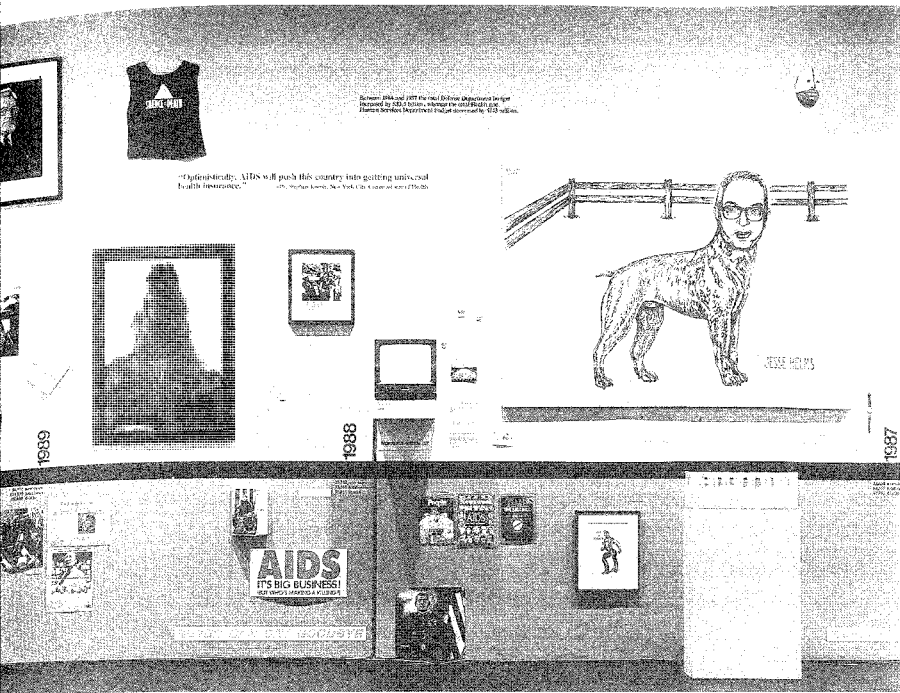
The Group’s determination to use every means of distribution at its disposal rather than only those bearing the approved imprimatur of “alternative” or “grassroots” coincided with the art world’s recognition of Group Material’s practice and product as legitimate and profitable. Its resolve to join forces 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

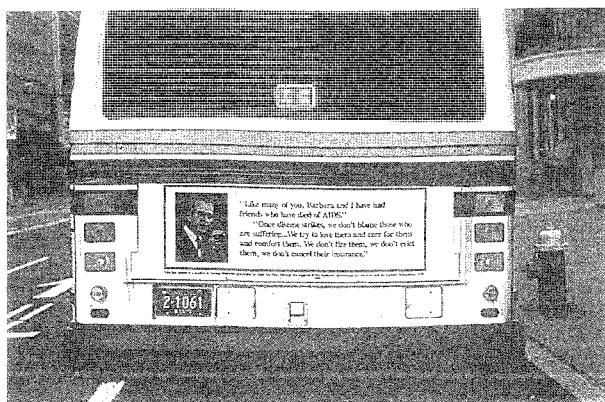
applied those lessons to the sphere of social experience, thereby questioning cultural formations. Yet, to interrogate the relations inscribed in art and culture, and to claim to do so from a position deemed “alternative” or outside dominant culture, had proven grossly inefficient if not entirely fallacious 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.

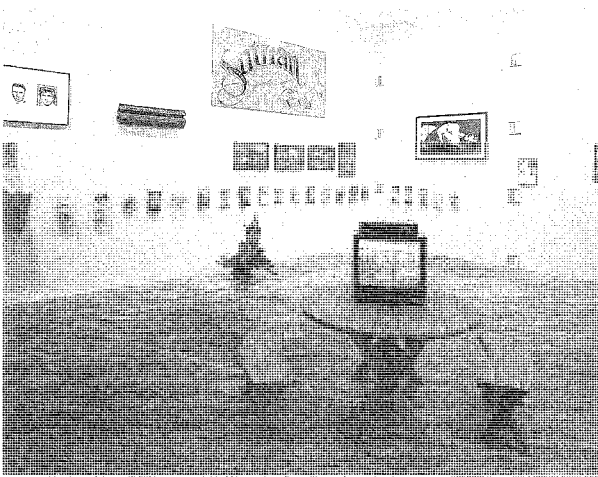
Art, New York (April–November 1991). Related projects include *AIDS and Democracy*, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin (January 1989); and *AIDS and Insurance*, a public installation on city buses produced in conjunction with Real Art Ways, Hartford (September–November 1990). The *AIDS Timeline* 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

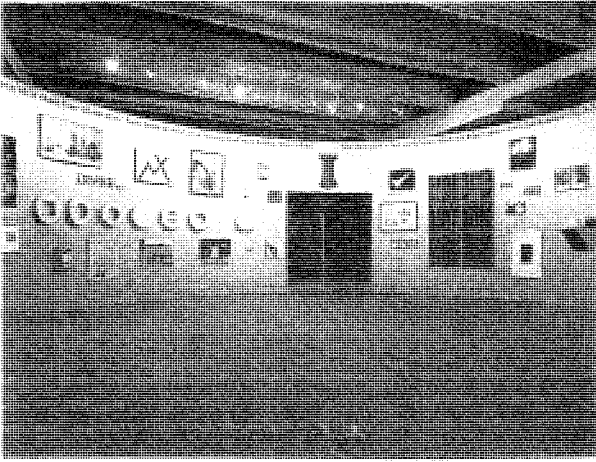


Group Material, *Educational and Democracy*, September 1988, part one of *Democracy*, the Dia Art Foundation, New York

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

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.

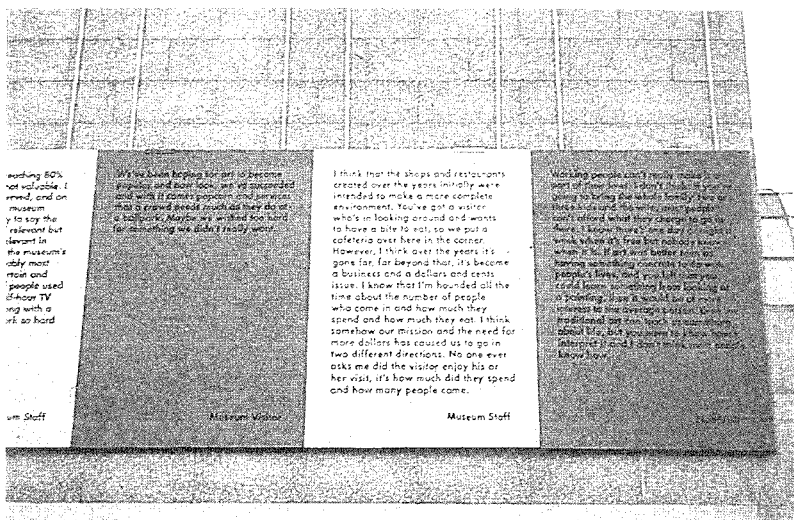
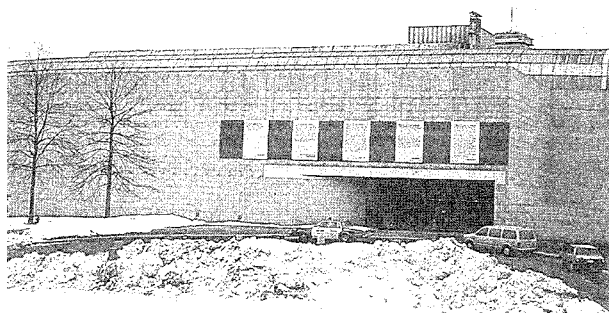


Group Material, *The Castle*, June 1987. *Documenta 8*, Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany.

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.



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um Staff

As I've been trying to get to become
popular and low cost, we've succeeded
and with it some papers and surveys
and a crowd people thought they'd be
a ball park. Maybe we will do too hard
for something we didn't really want.

Museum Visitor

I think that the shops and restaurants
created over the years initially were
intended to make a more complete
environment. You've got a visitor
who's in looking around and wants
to have a bite to eat, so we put a
cafeteria over here in the corner.
However, I think over the years, it's
gone far beyond that. It's become
a business and a dollars and cents
issue. I know that I'm hounded all the
time about the number of people
who come in and how much they
spend and how much they not. I think
somehow our mission and the need for
more dollars has caused us to go in
two different directions. No one ever
asks me did the visitor enjoy his or
her visit, it's how much did they spend
and how many people come.

Museum Staff

Nothing people aren't really taking a
part of their lives. I don't think it's
going to bring the whole world. You've
got to think about the things people
can't afford what they choose to go to
there. I know there's one day of people
which which it's free but nobody knows
when it is. If you had better even be
having something concrete to show
people's love, and you just say you
find from something from looking at
it. Perhaps, there would be of great
interest to the average person. You
could find the time back on something
about life, but you have to know how
interesting it and I don't think you really
know how.

Museum Staff

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. Rampschacher 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.

Ecopolitics/Ecopoetry:

Helen and Newton Harrison's Environmental Talking Cure

Postmodern theory relegates nature to the junk heap of outmoded concepts. Declaring that “the jungle ride at Disney World may in fact be more real to most people than the real jungle in the Amazon,”¹ the prophets of simulation within the art world and the enthusiasts for industrial development without happily embrace a future in which nature is reinvented on a daily basis to conform to the requirements of technology and commerce.

Back in the discredited “real world,” however, the ozone layer continues to thin, rain forests turn into deserts, toxic waste threatens the groundwater upon which our cities depend, and species that may contain the cure to cancer or AIDS disappear before their beneficent properties can be discovered.

In light of such unhappy developments, an international environmental movement has emerged over the last three decades that seeks political and social changes in our treatment of the environment. Because of the complexity of the problems, a diverse and occasionally conflicting set of agendas and prescriptions has been set forth by various environmental groups. The Green Party, which has become a fixture in North America and Europe, espouses a platform of environmental action, conservation, deindustrialization, land reclamation, and social justice. Green Party candidates have been elected to political office in Canada, England, and Sweden, and the party has emerged as a major political player in Germany.

While the Green Party seeks politically viable approaches to environmental problems, other groups stake out less palatable philosophical positions. Movements like deep ecology and ecofeminism argue against the anthropomorphism and patriarchal bias embodied in our

practices of land use, noting that there is a connection between Western culture's exploitation of women and its exploitation of the earth. At the furthest extreme are groups such as Earth First that take the radical position that humankind has abdicated its rights to the earth. They advocate drastic population reduction and a return to a preindustrial state.

In the United States, environmental consciousness waxes and wanes with changes in the political climate. After an early surge of interest in environmental problems that culminated in the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1972, the business-oriented Republican administrations of the 1980s attempted to portray environmentalism as a choice between owls and jobs. In the 1990s, politicians have discovered that an expression of interest in an environmental agenda is frequently very attractive to a public disaffected with the politics of consumption that dominated the last decade.

An international environmental movement has emerged over the last three decades that seeks political and social changes in our treatment of the environment.

Among the general public, environmental consciousness has tended to oscillate between the two extremes of ecological despair (to borrow a phrase from artist Robert Smithson, who was himself an early advocate of land reclamation through art) and blind faith in technology's ability to save us from ourselves. Well-publicized scares—Love Canal, the odyssey of the garbage barge, the discovery of mercury in tuna—create momentary frenzies of ecological concern, but too often the apparently insurmountable problems that humankind's stewardship has visited upon the earth lead instead to a state of passive resignation.

Art has always had a special connection with the natural landscape. Is there an equally sympathetic place in the environmental debate for artists who wish to move beyond simple expressions of concern toward a more active and activist stance? Responding to this question, a small group of contemporary artists with roots in the activist tendencies of the 1960s and 1970s has begun to explore the possibility of practical links between art and ecology.

They argue that the artist's habits of metaphor, cross-reference, inclusiveness, and holistic thinking may help unplug a discourse that often finds itself mired in the narrow channels of technological and bureaucratic thinking. They hold that new conceptualizations of intractable environmental problems may lead to new solutions. And they have committed themselves to exposing to public view the debates that surround these issues in the belief that common sense and a proper understanding of our collective self-interest are the most potent weapons in the battle for ecological sanity.

Helen and Newton Harrison: Taking the Long View

Among the first and the most visionary advocates of this approach are Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison. A husband-and-wife team who shared a teaching position at the University of California in San Diego from 1969 to 1993, the Harrisons first began thinking about ecological issues in the early 1970s. This was a period when artistic opinion about the environment was dominated by artists such as Michael Heizer, whose *Double Negative* (1969) involved the displacement of 240,000 tons of earth in the Nevada desert; Walter De Maria, who set 400 steel poles in straight lines over a square mile of the New Mexico desert to draw lightning to his *Lightning Field* (1977); and Robert Smithson, whose *Spiral Jetty* (1970) was a giant coil of rock stretching from the shore into Utah's Great Salt Lake. Created to move art out of the gallery into the real world and to defy the turning of art into a commodity, projects like these also had a less savory side in their tendency to usurp the earth as just another kind of raw material available for artistic transformation and exploitation.

By contrast, the Harrisons took a much more beneficent and systemic view of the natural environment. An early ecological work was included in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's 1971 *Art and Technology* exhibition, a show that matched artists and scientists in collaborative teams. The Harrisons' work, entitled *Notation on the Eco System of the Western Salt Works with the Inclusion of Brine Shrimp*, studied the interaction of *Dunaliella* algae and ocean brine shrimp. This was a far cry from the repositioning of mounds of earth in the desert or the dredging of the ocean floor.

The Harrisons' growing interest in the complexity of ecological systems can be traced in *Lagoon Cycle*, an environmental narrative that they developed over the years 1973 to 1985. The earliest texts of *Lagoon Cycle* focus on the search for an organism that can live under museum conditions; as the narrative proceeds, however, the Harrisons continually widen the scope of their environmental concerns until they conclude with a discourse on the greenhouse effect and a consideration of the ecosystem of the entire Pacific Ocean. In a sense, *Lagoon Cycle* also chronicles the evolution of the Harrisons' environmental consciousness as they become increasingly aware of the need to think big and to question the ideas of specialists working on environmental problems. This outward expansion has led them into discussions with specialists from a variety of scientific, political, and sociological fields. And it has led them to promulgate ideas that have been adopted in part or in toto by city officials, despite the fact that they may contradict conventional wisdom.

Over the years, the Harrisons have developed a unique ecopolitics, couched in the form of an ecopoetry. Combining text with photographs, drawings, and maps, the Harrisons employ the language of storytelling to present the results of their investigations into a particular problem or a specific ecosystem. Each work is presented as a poetic dialogue woven together from diverse voices, including those of planners, ecologists, botanists, foresters, the artists themselves, and even the rivers and waterways whose histories and futures are under consideration. Borrowing promiscuously from other disciplines, the voices use metaphor, irony, and analogy to suggest new ecological strategies and approaches.

For example, in a 1992 work entitled *The Serpentine Lattice*, which deals with the Northwest rain forest, the Harrisons draw from the language of aesthetics to create a potent image of a new relationship between humankind and nature: "A new reversal of ground comes into being where human activity becomes a figure within an ecological field as simultaneously the ecology ceases being an ever shrinking figure within the field of human activity." In their *Great Lakes Proposal* from 1977, the authors reach into the world of geopolitics to make the argument, only partially tongue-in-cheek, that political boundaries should be redrawn along ecological lines. And in a third

work, *Sacramento Meditations*, also from 1977, they make use of the economist's language of cost-benefit analysis to argue that current flood-control policies are efficient only when such long-term effects as wetlands contamination and salinization of the soil are suppressed.

Though the Harrisons have occasionally dealt with issues like the deforestation of the Pacific Northwest, the defensive psychology of urban design, and the possibility of a memorial to the victims of Nazi atrocities created from rubble and scrub flowers on the former site of the SS headquarters, the Harrisons' most consistent subject has been a systemic analysis of watersheds here and abroad. They take issue with conventional thinking about flood control, irrigation, and land use, arguing that efforts to change the course of waterways, to make dry land productive, or to dry out wetlands to enable the expansion of urban boundaries ultimately breed disaster for both the land and its human inhabitants. Instead, they advocate various forms of restoration and reclamation to bring human needs back into synchronism with natural processes.

Sacramento Meditations: Assessing the Cost of Belief

In 1976, the Harrisons created a work they regard as having been pivotal for their subsequent watershed investigations. *Sacramento Meditations* (1977) is a critique of the irrigation policies of the Sacramento–San Joaquin watershed in Northern California. This multidisciplinary project, which included a sixty-four-foot mural, a series of billboards, radio and television performances, a poster campaign, and a graffiti campaign, became a model for thinking about the relationship between ecology and urban development.

The work's overall question, as stated in a series of posters plastered around San Francisco, is: "What if all that irrigated farming isn't necessary?" Within the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the mural, comprising a series of nine texts accompanied by various mappings of the state of California, made the case for replacing the usual short-term thinking and special-interest politics with an understanding of the area's problems on a macro scale.

The Harrisons advocate various forms of restoration and reclamation to bring human needs back into synchronism with natural processes.



“Somebody’s crazy!
They’re draining swamps
and growing rice on the
desert.” So read Helen
and Newton Harrison’s
graffiti scrawled on
San Francisco streets
during the 1977 run of
Sacramento Meditations,
their many-pronged
attack on the folly of
irrigation practices in
the Sacramento–San
Joaquin watershed in
Northern California.

The second text of the work powerfully reveals the fallacies of conventional thinking:

“VISIONARY” PLANNERS INGENUOUSLY USING MODERN TECHNOLOGIES TO SECURE THE INHABITANTS OF CALIFORNIA FROM FLOOD AND DROUGHT HAVE CONTROLLED THE FLOW OF WATER IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE INTERCONNECTED ARRAY OF RESERVOIRS DAMS POWER STATIONS PUMPING STATIONS DITCHES AND CANALS TO IRRIGATE THE CENTRAL VALLEY AND TO SEND WATER OVER THE TEHACHAPI MOUNTAINS TO THE METROPOLITAN WATER DISTRICT IN THE SOUTH CREATING THE LARGEST IRRIGATION SYSTEM IN HISTORY GENERATING AN EIGHT BILLION DOLLAR INDUSTRY THAT SUPPLIES FOOD AND FIBER TO THE STATE THE NATION AND THE WORLD

AN IMPROVABLE PROFITABLE EXPANDABLE SYSTEM

“TECHNOCRATIC” PLANNERS SUBSIDIZED BY THE TAXPAYERS OF THE NATION AND IN HIDDEN INTEREST GIFTS BY THE STATE AT THE EXPENSE OF NONIRRIGATED FARMING ELSEWHERE PRIMARILY FOR THE PROFIT OF A FEW LARGE LANDHOLDERS AND AGRIBUSINESS HAVE TURNED THE ENTIRE WATERSHED OF THE CENTRAL VALLEY INTO ONE LARGE IRRIGATION SYSTEM SERVING OVER SIX AND ONE HALF MILLION ACRES COMPOSED OF DAMS THAT BECOME USELESS THROUGH SILTING A PUMPING SYSTEM THAT

WILL USE MORE ENERGY THAN IT CREATES AND A DIKING SYSTEM THAT REQUIRES ONGOING REPAIR THAT IN CONCERT REDUCE THE QUALITY AND LONG TERM PRODUCTIVITY OF BOTH THE LAND AND THE WATER THROUGH PROGRESSIVE SALINIZATION

AN ENERGY EXPENSIVE SELF-CANCELING SYSTEM

Noting that the results of such current practices have been salt-contaminated land, the creation of deadly wetlands as pesticides and herbicides flow into the mouth of the reversed river, and several severe droughts brought on by evaporation resulting from wasteful irrigation processes, the Harrisons suggest in the mural text that we must shift from a paradigm of “Exploit and Consume” to the paradigm of



Newton and Helen Harrison pose before a wall of maps inside the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art during a 1979 presentation of *Sacramento Meditations*.

“Appropriation and Beneficial Use.” They argue for the reinstatement of natural ecologies and the detachment of irrigation from processes of flood control.

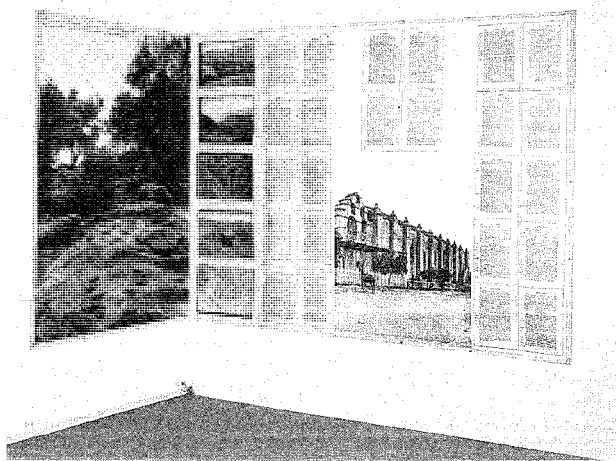
With their exhortations in *Sacramento Meditations* to “pay attention to the cost of belief,” the Harrisons deconstructed conventional planning language in a way that makes its contradictions evident even to the nonspecialist audience. In subsequent work they have continued to position themselves as mediators between the conflicting demands and interests represented by such diverse groups as official planners, the present and future human inhabitants of an ecosystem, and the natural world itself. Likening their process to the flow of a river, they talk about “conversational drift” and suggest that their ultimate goal is to “change the conversation.” This figure of speech captures their sense that change on a large scale happens only when the underlying metaphors that shape public belief are subtly altered and internalized.

Pasadena Projects: Healing Wounds, Creating Refuges

The open-ended nature of the Harrisons’ thinking is evident in a series of projects that brought them back to the same ecosystem over a period of years. In the Pasadena projects they investigated the watershed system providing flood control for the entire Los Angeles River basin. The Harrisons’ first exploration of this area, *Gabrielino Meditations* (1975), was an essentially speculative application of the ecologically beneficent practices pursued by the nearly extinct Native Americans who once inhabited the Los Angeles River basin. The Gabrielinos practiced a form of slash-and-burn agriculture that controlled forest growth and replenished the land. The realization that at this site humans once lived in harmony with nature where they now have all but obliterated it remained a potent undercurrent in the Harrisons’ Pasadena projects.

In 1984, they returned to the area at the invitation of a local garden club to give a lecture on their work. They were taken on a tour of the popular recreation area along the lower Arroyo River and were surprised to discover that running through the valley, apparently all but invisible to the local inhabitants, was a concrete channel lined on both sides with barbed wire. To the Harrisons, the straightened,

telen and Newton Harrison, *Gabrielino Meditations*, first presented at the art gallery of Long Beach State University, 1976. The installation combined vintage photographs with excerpts from letters written in 1850 by journalist Hugo Reed and published in the *Los Angeles Star*. This work tells the story of the Gabrielino Indians, who flourished in the Los Angeles River basin before the advent of Spanish missionaries and practiced ecologically sound forms of agriculture.



concrete-lined channel substituting for the original river was a wound in the land.

In *Arroyo Seco Release/A Serpentine for Pasadena*, a work initially presented at the Baxter Art Gallery of the California Institute of Technology in early 1985, the Harrisons presented their plan for healing that wound. Reviewing the history of the Arroyo, they discovered that the once powerful river had been dammed, diverted, and forced into the concrete channels to manage periodic flooding. Changes in flooding patterns had greatly decreased the diversity and abundance of wildlife native to the area. Since a variety of considerations made it impossible to return the river to its original state, they proposed instead that the channel be capped with concrete and covered with topsoil. A serpentine low-flow streambed on the surface would wind through the valley from the Devil's Gate Dam upstream to the Los Angeles River downstream, in the process creating a series of intimate natural spaces. Meanwhile, the resulting overflow at flood time would bring back the original wetlands habitat while leaving the now hidden channel functional and unobstructed.

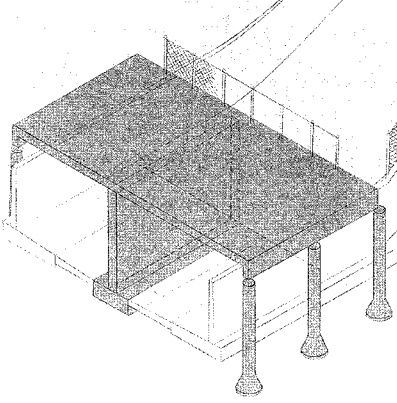
The text accompanying the maps and photographs in this work presents a basic principle:

TO CAP THE EXISTING FLOOD CHANNEL
AND TO REBUILD THE EXISTING
FLOOD CHANNEL WITH A SERPENTINE
COURSE TO THE PARK FROM WILKINS STREET
TO THE LA LOMA BRIDGE

TO REBUILD THE LAND FROM OUTSIDE
THE CAPSED FLOOD

BY
COVERING THE FLOOD CHANNEL
BY
COVERING THE CAP WITH EARTH

TO REBUILD THE EXISTING ECOSYSTEM
BY REPLACING THE BANKS OF STREAMS
WITH SUCH NATIVE TREES GRASSES AND/OR SHRUBS
AS CAN SURVIVE THE ARIANZ CONDITIONS.



Helen and Newton
Harrison, *Arroyo Seco
Release/A Serpentine for
Pasadena*, 1985. This
excerpt details the
Harrisons' plan to cap the
existing flood channel and
rebuild a viable ecological
system across its top.

Let a grand restitution take place
Let the process of flood control
Be separated from the destruction of rivers

The Harrisons' concluding text expresses a hope that their suggestions might serve as a model for future planning in the entire area:

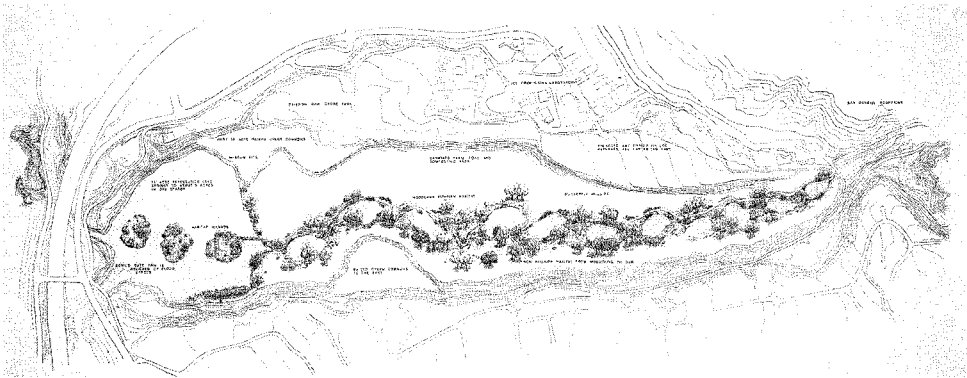
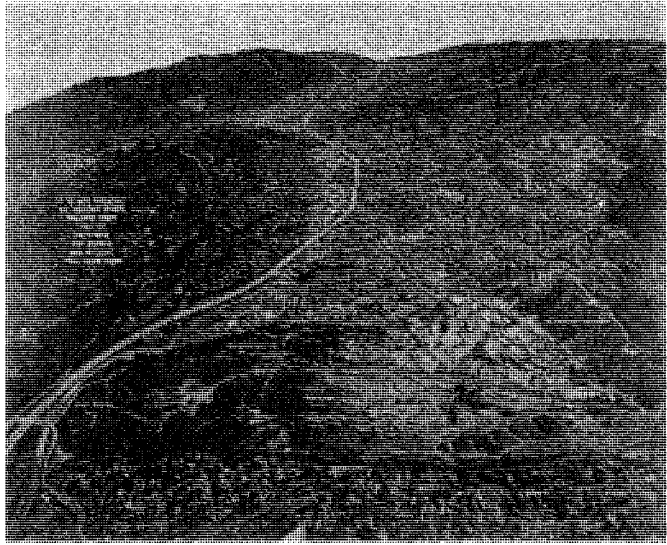
If you stand on the Colorado Street Bridge
You can image this restitution of the Arroyo

If you fly high enough
You can image the same
For every stream and river in the basin.

Despite the great interest in the project among local officials, the discovery of structural problems in the Devil's Gate Dam at the head of the lower Arroyo River made it impossible to realize. Returning to Pasadena in 1986, the Harrisons turned their focus to the dam and the debris basin stretching from its base to the foot of the Santa Gabriel Mountains, where they discovered a new set of problems. Because the dam was deemed vulnerable to earthquakes, the basin was drained and kept empty of water and had filled with rubble deposited by water cascading down the Santa Gabriel Mountains. This accumulation produced unfortunate aesthetic consequences obvious to all the urbanites who flocked to the lower Arroyo for a glimpse of natural beauty. The ecological impact included the hindrance of water percolation into the underground water basin that served as a water source for nearby communities.

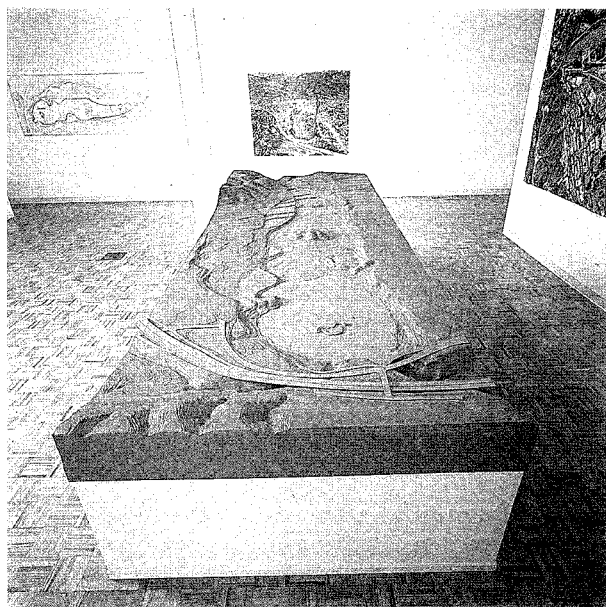
With their first concern being to restore this severely damaged area to some semblance of its natural ecology, the Harrisons focused on both the creation of streams and lagoons and the replanting of native plants, which would attract wildlife while slowing the flow of debris into the basin. Through these measures, they argued, the area could also become more useful to human inhabitants. Earth removed from the debris basin could be used to create new commons and ridges. A new streambed could gradually refill the underground basin. In turn, this streambed would make the widening of channels below the dam unnecessary, avoiding the concomitant environmental damage. A series of trails and parks along the new streambed would enhance the area's recreational value.

An aerial view of Pasadena's Devil's Gate Dam circa 1986 reveals the drained debris basin and rubble pile the Harrisons encountered when invited to develop a watershed restoration plan for the area.



Helen and Newton Harrison, *Devil's Gate: A Refuge for Pasadena*, 1986. "A String of Emeralds" was the Harrisons' metaphor for a chain of interconnecting streams and lagoons they proposed. They argued that this new ecosystem would slow the flow of debris from the Devil's Gate Dam while creating a wildlife refuge and recreation area.

the architectural model
for the Harrisons' Devil's
Gate project was an
important element in the
presentation of their
ideas to local government
and ecological groups.



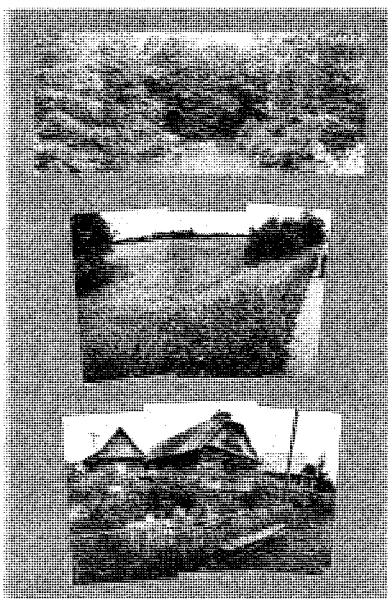
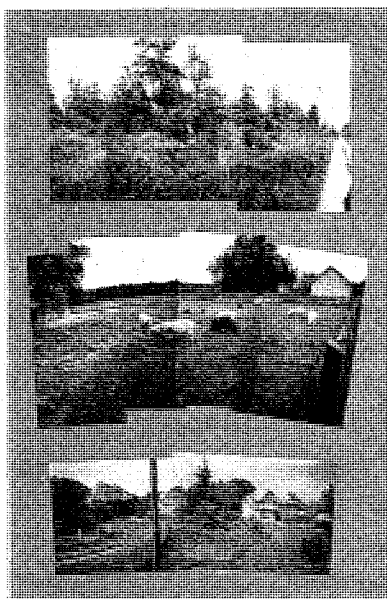
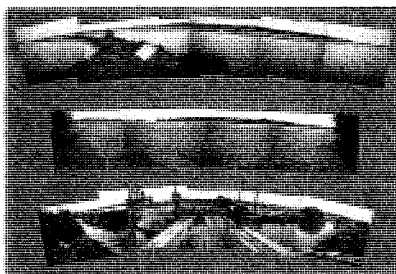
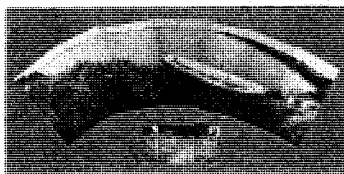
While the Harrisons' introduction to the Los Angeles River basin came from the Garden Club of Pasadena, by the time they began working on Devil's Gate, they had begun to garner considerable support among local government and citizen groups. The city of Pasadena, the Friends of the Arroyo, the Pasadena Men's Committee for the Arts, and the Community Action for the Parks all contributed funding and services toward the completion of the proposal, which was presented at the Pasadena Gallery of Contemporary Arts and the Art Center College of Design. Restoration of Devil's Gate had been named a priority in the city of Pasadena's strategic plan, and many aspects of the Harrisons' plan were subsequently adopted by the city of Pasadena. The Harrisons were invited to speak at the opening ceremonies for the Hahamungana Watershed Park, which, in a satisfying circularity, was renamed in honor of the original Gabrielino Indians, whom the artists had celebrated in their first Pasadena piece.

Sava River: Expanding to a National Scale

In the 1989 project entitled *Atempause für den Save Fluss* (Breathing Space for the Sava River), the Harrisons again widened the scope of their inquiry. This work takes on the environmental problems that

Helen and Newton Harrison, *Atempause für den Save Fluss* (Breathing Space for the Sava River), 1989. The Harrisons' plan for the Sava River included a proposal to create a nature preserve for migrating waterfowl in an area currently containing large fish ponds.

Noting that runoff from the chemical fertilizers employed in the farms that line the Sava River jeopardizes the watershed, the Harrisons proposed the replacement of current practices by organic farming.



plague the entire length of the Sava River, which runs through the former Yugoslavia. Initiated during the artists' residency in Berlin under the auspices of the D.A.A.D. (German Academic Exchange Program), an artist fellowship and residency program funded by the German government, this work was sparked by conversations with the German botanist Hartmut Ern about the doleful state of the Sava River. The Harrisons discovered that, although the river and its floodplain had been damaged by the practice of industrial farming, a process that leaches toxic fertilizers into the soil and water, the damage was repairable. The environmental burdens of the new intrusions on the river—a paper mill, a coal mine, an atomic energy plant, and a fertilizer factory—had not yet succeeded in polluting the entire river. The Harrisons ascertained that, in fact, only four or five purification systems would be required along the one-hundred-mile length of the river to restore it to a state of reasonable health.

Again, they searched for natural means to restore the river. They proposed, instead of building dams and canals and draining the swamps for flood control, creating a nature corridor to insulate the river from unnecessary contamination. A series of ponds would provide a reedbed purification system that would clean the water in swamps and water reserves. These in turn, the Harrisons claimed, would serve as havens for the wildlife that was rapidly disappearing from the area. They suggested that the industrial farming practice be replaced by organic farming, which would end the discharge of toxic chemicals into the watershed, and that produce yielded by organic farms in the area could be profitably sold by local farmers at the local organic produce market.

The Harrisons' reaction to the atomic energy plant and its impact on the Sava River illuminates the flexibility of their thinking about technology. Strengthened by the Chernobyl debacle, local representatives of the antinuclear movement were calling for dismantling the plant in favor of a series of hydroelectric dams. However, the Harrisons concluded that although the plant was relatively safe, the effects of a series of new dams on the river could be devastating. They proposed that the plant remain and that the warm water created by its cooling process serve as the source for a fish hatchery.

As with all the Harrisons' projects, their work on the Sava comprised two parts. The first involved the actual conversations with the planners, scientists, and ordinary people they encountered during their investigations and the reverberations these conversations set in motion. Prior to the tragic outbreak of hostilities in the former Yugoslavia in 1992, this project had received considerable support from scientific and governmental bodies in the area. The Zoological Society and the Nature Protection Agency had agreed to fight for an enlarged nature reserve, and the Croatian government was considering presenting the plan to the World Bank, which had agreed to fund a river purification program. The second part of the project consisted of the

**We become
aware of a
multiplicity of
perspectives and
possibilities for
this river.**

visual record that the Harrisons produced in the form of an installation of maps, text, and photographs. First exhibited in the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein in Berlin, this work wraps around the gallery walls. Viewers follow the course of the river visually as they read the texts in which the Harrisons meditate upon the specific problems and solutions at various junctures. Perhaps more

than any other narrative by the Harrisons, this project captures the conversational nature of their work. Sections of the text are written as dialogues between the artists and various individuals whom they encountered in their investigations. We hear from a botanist about the dangerous effect that modern flood-control methods were having on the native stork and sea eagle population. They present concerns of a young ornithologist who was also working with the concept of reedbed purification systems. They talk with a landscape architect engaged in mapping the current floodplains of Europe against the vastly more extensive ones that originally existed there.

We become aware of a multiplicity of perspectives and possibilities for this river. In order to emphasize the idea that the future is not fixed, the Harrisons talk about past and future alterations of the river's course and surroundings as forging a series of new histories. They urge a responsibility toward its future history:

There is still time for a new history for the Sava
which, while corseted within levees
is not channeled in concrete.

There is still time for a new history for the Sava
for its alluvial wetlands
while shrunken
are larger than any in Western Europe.
There is still time for a new history of the Sava
for its dams are modest and covered with growth.
There is still time for a new history for the Sava
for its flow is not swallowed or reversed.

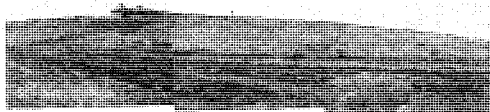
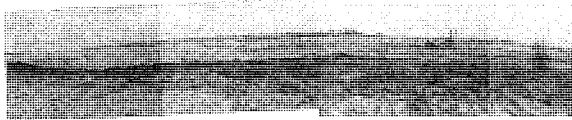
There is still time for a new history for the Sava
which, while polluted, is not poisoned.

Bitterfeld: Ecology and Economics

The full title of this project, *Ruminations of the Closure of the Open Pit Mines at Bitterfeld and the Condition of the Waters, the Earth and the Air* (1994), offers a hint of its scope. Responding to an invitation from the Chamber of Architects of Hessen, Germany, to participate in a seminar held at the Bauhaus in Dessau, the Harrisons found themselves part of a team of architects, landscape architects, and students. The group gathered to consider possible plans for restoration of the nearby Bitterfeld coal mines, essentially a twenty-four-square-kilometer excavation pit and a thirty-six-square-kilometer earth pile resulting from the recent closing of the mines.

The Harrisons quickly found themselves at odds with most of the other participants, who were exploring conventional “art” solutions such as the creation of sound sculptures from abandoned machines, the arrangement of markers to create a line of sight across the landscape, or the creation of a lake within the empty pit. A cursory examination of the surrounding ecosystem informed the Harrisons that forming a lake spelled potential disaster, thanks to the presence of nearby toxic chemical dumps, which contaminated the groundwater that would seep into the pit.

They proposed dealing with the contamination problem first by installing a series of small water-purification systems to extract the toxins so that the purified water could be allowed to rise safely in the proposed lake. Next they turned their attention to a feature of the landscape that had not even been considered a problem by the seminar planners. The air above Bitterfeld was heavily polluted from 150



The practice of strip mining in the former East Germany produced many barren landscapes. At Bitterfeld, the Harrisons formulated a plan to restore a devastated piece of land and sky through purification of polluted groundwater and air.

years of burning coal. The Harrisons suggested that a giant spiral of trees be planted to pull the carbon accumulations from the air while beginning the process of regenerating the surrounding earth.

An important aspect of the Harrisons' proposal was their argument that what made ecological sense was also economical. They noted that in the long term, it made more sense to put money into water purification and recreational development of the area than into accident insurance. They suggested that the skills and techniques developed in restoring the land and air could become very valuable commodities in a future in which environmental cleanup is sure to be a major growth industry. Similarly, if properly managed, the forest planted to purify the air could also serve as the basis for an ongoing timber industry. And finally, the Harrisons encouraged planners to think about costs and benefits as part of a larger economic system, noting in their text: "NOW IT DOES NOT SEEM UNREASONABLE THAT THE CHEMICAL COMPANIES THAT PRODUCED MOST OF THE TOXIC WASTE DUMPS BE HELD IN PART RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS CLEANUP."

As a result of the Harrisons' proposal, which was reported and discussed in the local press, the West German company that was created to deal with the Bitterfeld site dropped its plan for a potentially poisoned lake until the problems of toxic groundwater seepage could be solved. Meanwhile, a prize was awarded to the Harrisons for

their proposal from the local minister of ecology. At this writing, the Harrisons are engaging in further discussions with local officials on the means of implementing their plan.

Questioning the Orthodoxies

Although the Harrisons work with specific sites and particular problems, they also take a long view, using these situations as case studies with which to explore the larger economic, philosophic, and cultural assumptions behind environmental policy. Implicit in each project is a critique of conventional thinking about environmental problems.

For instance, *Sacramento Meditations* challenged the assumption that natural ecosystems can and should be radically altered to serve ever growing populations. One line of graffiti the Harrisons wrote on the sidewalk as part of this piece suggests the absurdity of this kind of thinking: "Somebody's crazy! They're draining swamps and growing rice on the desert." Underlying this work is the unspoken question: Without restraint of population growth, do efforts at restoration and reclamation only delay the inevitable?

In Pasadena, the Harrisons' successive reengagement with the Los Angeles River basin made them aware that environmental problems are rarely self-contained and obedient to the boundaries imposed by local government. Instead, each problem opens up a series of others as one traces it to its original causes. Yet local power struggles and conflicts about jurisdiction may make it difficult to address the larger problems. As a result, most successful reclamation and restoration projects deal with limited land areas, despite the obvious advantages of thinking bigger. In the end, then, the Harrisons' Pasadena projects open up the question of scale: Are land and water restoration possible on a large scale or must they be limited to small, exemplary pieces of the landscape?

The Sava River project was an attempt to answer the first part of this question affirmatively. Here, the Harrisons took on a river that stretched the length of an entire country. That they came as close as they did to affecting national policy on the river is a tribute to the possibilities of large-scale thinking.

Finally, as with many other projects but in a particularly potent way, the Bitterfeld project dealt with questions of the economic

viability of ecological policies. Here the Harrisons presented an economic calculus that makes the case that jobs and environmentalism are not incompatible. A similar thinking underlies their suggestion in the Sava project that the higher prices available for produce from organic farms might offset the loss of productivity when pesticides are abandoned. Such calculations are, of course, highly speculative, and as long as population levels remain high and continue to increase, it will be difficult to be persuasive on this point.

In the end, although the Harrisons point with pride to those situations in which their ideas have been implemented in some form or another, this process of raising questions and challenging assumptions is more central to their work than are any concrete results. Ultimately they are artists, not scientists or administrators, yet this distinction remains one of the most misunderstood aspects of their work.

But Is It Art?

Not content merely to challenge the orthodoxies of environmental thinking, the Harrisons also raise important questions about the nature of art. Critics within the art world frequently object to their work, claiming that it belongs more properly to the realm of science than art. What sort of formal criteria, they ask, can be brought to bear on work whose subject matter involves issues such as groundwater purification and wetlands restoration, with presentations relying heavily on maps, and aerial photographs and drawings that have clearly been selected for their informational rather than aesthetic value? Granted, the Harrisons' ideas about reforestation, floodplain restoration, and habitat generation are useful, but by what stretch can they also be termed "artistic"?

Although it is true that the Harrisons' work does not resemble art in any traditional sense, it employs a multilevel, metaphoric kind of thinking that differs sharply from the more linear and instrumental approach of conventional science and technology. This can be seen not only in the kind of language employed in the Harrisons' written texts but also in the ease with which the artists are able to shift paradigms, moving between the notion, for example, of nature as the figure as well as the ground of human activity or reversing the percep-

tion of flooding as a problem to its being regarded as the potential solution to the creation of a viable local ecology.

As children of the Conceptual art movement of the 1970s, the Harrisons have well understood Conceptualism's lesson that the meaning of an art work is to be found not in the object itself but in the physical and conceptual frame that surrounds it. In its more orthodox commodifying form, Conceptual art involves a critique of the institutions of the art world. It questions commodifying art, the separation of art from life, and the barriers set up between art and audience by museums and galleries. In an analogous way, the Harrisons remove the frame from the environment, critiquing the institutions that have been set up to manage land use and natural resources. As landscape artists of a new kind, they propose that nature is best comprehended not as a collection of landscape features to be memorialized in paint but as a set of interrelationships among the forces of biology, climate, and technology.

But if there are powerful philosophical reasons for insisting on their status as artists rather than ecologists or planners, there are important practical reasons as well. The Harrisons function as outsiders to local politics. They become engaged with a situation or, in their terminology, "enter a conversation," when they are invited by a local arts organization. In almost every case the art world has provided their initial entry into a project, whether by providing funding to support research, as was the case with D.A.A.D. and the Sava River, or by asking the Harrisons to prepare an art project that deals with local ecology, as was the case in Pasadena. Once they have begun thinking about a problem, they contact specialists and local authorities. While they may later work directly with local planning agencies or city officials, their initial plans are drawn up independently of local politics. They may eventually be presented in city hall, which was the case with the Devil's Gate proposal, but they are born from a different milieu.

As landscape artists of a new kind, they propose that nature is best comprehended as a set of interrelationships among the forces of biology, climate, and technology.

The maintenance of such freedom from local pressures to, for example, center their plan on a proposed golf course rather than designing a plan directly addressing their interest in responding to the area's crisis ecology, jibes with the Harrisons' overall philosophy. Every aspect of their approach to an environmental "conversation" is designed to circumvent the exclusionary tendencies of contemporary city planning. They refuse to be bound by the rules of any specialized field or the political needs of any special-interest group. As a result, they are able to transcend political boundaries and conceptual divisions that make it impossible to confront the causes of environmental problems.

Equally important to the Harrisons is the issue of access. They object to the complexities of specialized planning language, arguing that its primary purpose is to lock out the nonexpert. This is why they have consciously cultivated an accessible and inviting form of storytelling in the texts that accompany their proposals. It is also the reason that they rely on aerial photographs to explain their proposals rather than the plan and section format of conventional planning—photographs are more accessible to the layperson, and their use allows proposals to be read and understood by the nonspecialist public.

Public "Art" Versus "Public" Art

The thrust and the success of the Harrisons' work cannot be fully understood without a consideration of recent changes in the definition of public art. Having progressed beyond so-called "plop art," a derogatory term for the kind of large and often ungainly outdoor sculptures that adorn too many public plazas and lobbies, to the notion of "site specific" art works that address the physical nature of the space around them, discussions about public art have of late begun to center around a form of social or political site specificity. What links an art work to a place, according to this thinking, is not its physical presence but rather its interaction with the social, political, and economic forces that shape the life of any community.

As a result, works of "public art" in the new sense no longer need to be physical objects that are clearly visible in a public space. The definition has been stretched to include community projects whose public aspect is the artists' interaction with community members;

interventions in the mass media, which may take the form of artist-designed billboards, radio or newspaper spots, or television commercials; or artists' participation in developmental planning boards or public works projects.

This shift in the definition of public art clearly embraces the approach the Harrisons have evolved over the last twenty years. Although the physical result of their process is often simply an arrangement of text, photographs, and maps that appear in their gallery installations and catalogs, the public aspect of their work has more to do with the way in which they have been able to insert their ideas into policy discussions. Given the inevitable process of negotiation and compromise attending the disposition of any large area of public land, the Harrisons' comprehensive proposals are never likely to be adopted wholesale. They do, however, become part of the planning process to the extent that their assumptions are internalized by decision makers who come to view suggestions stimulated from the Harrisons' work as their own. Thus, in a sense, each project has both a visible and an invisible life as it participates in the ongoing "conversation."

In an article on the Harrisons in *Art Journal*, Craig Adcock cites the often repeated charge that the Harrisons' work hides itself within the cloistered setting of the gallery and museum context. He quotes their reply in this snippet of conversation:

N.H.: The Harrisons would counterargue that the museum is a safe place for a town meeting—

H.H.: —a safe and neutral place—

N.H.: —and that their works in Baltimore, Pasadena, Berlin, and Yugoslavia became forums for storytelling. In those places, the museum setting enabled their projects to move toward realization.²

Is that enough? Despite a great deal of lip service to openness and accessibility, the art world has a notoriously poor record when it comes to breaking down the barriers between contemporary art and the non-art-educated audience. The Harrisons have done a remarkable job in getting their message heard by planners, architects, ecologists, and other specialists. One senses that despite their devotion to democratic ideals, it has not been so easy to reach the "ordinary citizen" who does not frequent art galleries.

This is the dilemma that has faced many adherents to the new public art. In their efforts to bridge the gap between art and life, they have begun to argue against the idea of the “public” as the faceless mass of an anonymous citizenry and against the idea that public art is art created for this entity. Rather, they argue, there are many publics, all representing different constellations of needs and desires. Genuine public art, then, becomes art that acknowledges and attempts to mediate between these different agendas. According to this definition, public art is not limited to a particular kind of physical site. Instead, what distinguishes it is a way of thinking about politics, community, and society.

In keeping with this redefinition, the Harrisons suggest that the most important issues surrounding the environmental debate involve the dissemination of power. Their work asks: *Who shapes the ecological discourse and why?* As spokespersons for future generations as well as for contemporary noncommercial interests, they inject seldom heard voices and seldom discussed considerations into the ecological debate. They address decision makers from a point outside the usual perimeters of environmental discussion. In the process, they provide a model for a “talking cure” that may help us break out of the self-destructive channels of thought that now govern environmental policy planning and point us toward a much more productive relationship between humankind and the environment.