

New York



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“The People’s Choice”

Group Material

Group Material is a loose association of about 12 artists committed to working in the area where esthetics and politics meet. The group has existed in one form or another for about a year, operating from a storefront on East 13th Street since last July, and presenting theme shows in which the idea behind each show is considered more important than any of the pieces in it.

The members of Group Material find the notion of production problematic when they consider the role of art objects. To keep from having that production co-opted (something very few overtly political artists have been able to avoid), they downplay and at times repudiate the object in favor of the context. The group’s real work is their use of the storefront as a catalyst. Their ambition, at least at present, is remarkably free of individual careerism, and is focused instead on the creation of the conditions necessary for making communication possible.

One could quarrel with their anachronistic denial of the potential that the art object holds, but not with their genuine desire to initiate discourse. The problem lies within their well-worn means. But these questions are cavils, evidence merely of factional dispute. What is more important in the case of Group Material is their emphasis on the need for discourse, the break that they are attempting from the self-enclosed systems of recent art.

For “The People’s Choice” the group invited the residents on the block to exhibit things that they liked and were important to them. Most brought personal mementoes, photographs and gifts, and a few brought objects that indicated the idiosyncratic tastes of real collectors. Nearly everything came with a story; as a whole, the show turned into a narrative of everyday life, a folk tale in which intimacies were shared without shame.

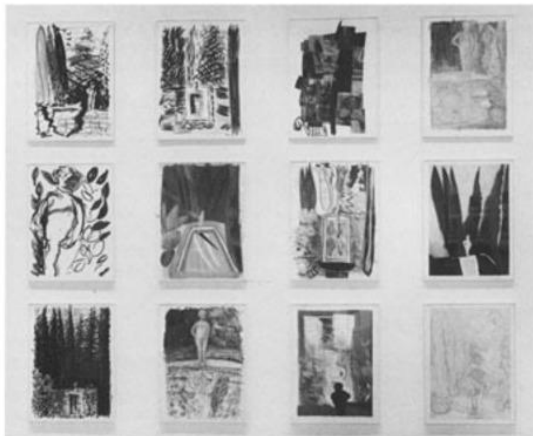
The artwork on display was diverse in both intent and degree of sophistication. There was a mural done by the kids on the block as part of a weekly project. There were a few amateurish paintings of family, favorite landscapes and pleasing abstract shapes. There were some small clay pieces by someone's grandmother, now dead. The value of these artifacts lay precisely in their sentimentality, a quality that is absent from most artwork that strives to mean something to a general audience.

Most of the paintings were family souvenirs or gifts. The photographs were of babies, first communions, weddings, pictures taken in the army and, in one case, a billboard of superimposed snapshots documenting the history of an entire family. Each picture had its own story, and together they added up to a moving, detailed record of a small community within the city.

Another category was that of the collectors, people who had chosen to exercise a quirky, personal taste in furnishing their homes. There was a collection of small toy animals from above a person's kitchen sink, another of PEZ brand candy dispensers, a three-dimensional picture of a covered bridge and a strange-looking valet chair. The function of all of these is mostly esthetic, yet they still have extra-esthetic narratives that sustain them. The most shocking of these was the Robert Morris poster from 1974, infamous in another context, in which the artist posed in S&M costume. It was presented here with the explanation that it was taken from the apartment of a man who had hanged himself.

Apparently different from the very personal, very local content of the bulk of the show, the sculpture of Jorge Luis Rodriguez seemed at first out of place. But the welded-steel construction, a shiny-surfaced dressing table with a crazed, Cubist-inspired structure, soon began to seem more at home. Not only was the image itself a domestic one, and obviously intended to be seen as such, but it soon became clear that Rodriguez's role on the block was a special one. He is the community's artist, working with the community's own icons and supported by the people he serves.

The artists of Group Material are clearly serious in their commitment to the idea that art can be used as an instrument for social and political change, and to date their interventions have demonstrated a remarkable intelligence. But like all such groups, they will probably suffer from the contradiction that lies at the heart of their existence. No matter what their aspirations are, no matter their abilities, at some point each member of the group will be faced with a terrible, if familiar, choice—between political or esthetic action. Until then, Group Material will probably present some of the most provocative and thoughtful shows to be seen in New York.



Jennifer Bartlett, "In the Garden" drawings #125-136, 1981, from an installation of 187 drawings.

historical subject matter and crafts execution. Woodman's reliefs look like they would be more comfortable in the lobby of a George Washington Motor Lodge. His figures are posed and dressed like modish versions of Thomas Hart Benton's working-class heroes. Woodman's folksy limbo, rendered with a palette of dusty colors, is so mindlessly nonchalant, so gratuitously nostalgic, that the rote selection of subject matter becomes almost insufferably fatuous. Here and there, smaller pieces give some vague indication of intellectual tension (a blind woman being led across the street is about as provocative as the images get), but overall the work suffers from a kind of eagerness to please that is alternately obsequious and patronizing.

Rarely do contemporary artists provide as detailed evidence of their gestural processes as JENNIFER BARTLETT does in her recent work. As an added bonus, she cares deeply about the creative tradition that has influenced her work. "In the Garden," an installation of 187 drawings, is very much about the landscape tradition; it is also about the history of 20th-century art—about breaking down the imitative powers of the line and imbuing them with something more abstract, more nervously emotional.

Bartlett frees her hand to respond to such masters of the personalized line as Van Gogh, Matisse, Feininger, and Kan-

dinsky. In each of her drawings she investigates, tirelessly and inventively, the same scheme: a reflecting pool accented by an ornamental *mannequin* pis, backed by a stand of trees and framed with a boxwood hedge. The series begins with the pool in sunlight, rather objectively drawn, and ends with a suite of expressionist nocturnal drawings in which selected views of the garden are paired with vignettes of some feral night creature. The style in these final drawings is so idiosyncratically assured that one almost forgets the stylistic tour de force which led up to them.

Composed primarily of drawings set up as marginally intersecting diptychs within each frame, the installation moves through modernism with such steamroller authority that references to Howard Pyle, Ad Reinhardt and David Hockney can coexist on the same wall without seeming to be mutually exclusive. Whether, in reality, these three would benefit from such proximity remains a moot point, but as indexed by Bartlett they are part of a very distinct lineage.

Relationships are juggled in the series for both emotional and compositional resonance. The introduction and removal of color are actions startling in their dramatic, emotive power. The garden is pulled apart, detail by detail, and reassembled. The more familiar we become with the topography, the more compelling and varied it seems. Aerial

views, close-ups and middle-distance shots are included. The juxtapositions and editing of the images are almost cinematic. (I can't remember an exhibition where Eisensteinian montage played such an important part.)

When Bartlett's renderings of the pool are at their loveliest, and most traditional, she removes a zigzag piece of hedge, rudely interrupting the perfect boxwood frame. When the *mannequin* pis has been clearly established as a poolside ornament, Bartlett commences a suite of figure drawings in which the figure—alternately male and female—both cups and manipulates its sex. Like the hermaphroditic *Semi Dio* in Fellini's *Satyricon*, gender is not the point, but its associative powers are.

At a moment when there is so much molelike scrimming going on in American art, when the trendsetters are sprinting through brand-name genres as if in a relay race (Oh my God, Punk just stumbled; look sharp, Decorative is dropping back; New Wave and New Image are neck and neck), it is reassuring to take some time, to slow down and recollect. Bartlett's "In the Garden" is a healthy response to the insidious, self-serving malaise of "genrefication."

—RICHARD FLOOD

"The People's Choice," Group Material; RICHARD SERRA, Blum Helman Gallery; TONY KING, O.K. Harris Gallery;

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Richard Serra, T W U 14, 1981. Paintstick on paper. 50 x 38"

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When it is successful, RICHARD SERRA's work has a highly-charged pres-

ence that is strangely at odds with his neo-Constructivist, anti-Expressionist ethic. When he fails to achieve that tension, though, his work is merely good-looking, with its devices exposed as the facile tricks of a master cosmetician. Shorn of grace, his sculptures are reduced to being nothing more than public works.

When he first started making his big wall drawings he came close to doing the impossible, because they make sense in relation to his sculpture without being in the suspect class of "sculptors' drawings." They are simply drawings, material and process combined in a direct way, providing as direct and uncompromising an effect as possible. One can admire the intelligence which produced them, and feel moved by their presentness, a rare enough combination. So it is all the more disappointing to come across this latest show of drawings, for in an essential way the new work contradicts everything the older drawings stand for. They represent a victory of taste over esthetics.

These drawings are indeed not just drawings, but drawings of something. Massive black shapes loom out of the paper, with a few faint lines etched into the surface serving to delineate edges, and in the process reveal the undeniably representational character of the drawings. They are in fact pictures of Serra's most recent sculptures—and not just pictures, but expressive pic-

tures, with the look of tortured self-examination. The black Paintstick is vigorously scrubbed into the paper, giving the surfaces a frenzied texture, while the smudges and handprints left on the white areas introduce an element of pathos. The traces of a sensibility are all but lost in the surrender to image-making.

The shift from Serra's flirtation with triviality to the genuine trivia produced by TONY KING is an abrupt one—so abrupt that one is likely to find oneself thinking more and more favorably of the former's drawings. After all, they do look good.

King has abandoned an intricately sterile brand of abstraction (in which interlocking shapes were painted to appear three-dimensional) for an equally sterile brand of representational painting, in which the artist reproduces dollar bills. Graphically, his renderings are exact, but his color is deliberately off, allowing a certain amount of painterly expressiveness to creep in. The subject matter ranges from the one-dollar bill to the 500-dollar bill, with the presidential portrait side up, and with each painting's size correlated to the denomination of the bill it replicates. The painting of the 500-dollar bill, then, is very large, but still not extravagant enough to outrage or amuse.

King has something on his mind, but he has not been able to translate it into anything substantial. He obviously intends his work to function as a direct and honest confrontation with the realities of the art market, figuring that if it's all about money anyway, why not paint the stuff? It's a cute idea, and it does provoke a small smile. But for anyone with a memory, the smile quickly fades; Warhol used the same device, with more wit, quite a few years ago, in one of his least successful series. Money is a compelling subject, both in art and in conversation, but somehow its direct representation fails to provoke more than the shallowest of responses. King's attempt remains a cheap shot. Money is worth more than that.

—THOMAS LAWSON

EZRA STOLLER, RICHARD FLEISCHNER, Max Protetch Gallery; ALAIN KIRILI, Sonnabend Gallery;

EZRA STOLLER is the dean of modern architecture photography. The 85 photographs in this exhibit, taken over the last 40 years, show many of the American buildings in the modern canon. We know them well—or so we think. Actual-

ly, many of us know only the photographs. So now it is important to see how they work—as photographs, yes, but as documents, too.

They are styled: it is as if Stoller poses the buildings as he presents them. They are made photogenic—volumes are highlighted, textures are touched up—almost *photographic*, as if they had been redesigned in the photographs. Somehow Stoller is able to translate architectural form into photographic form and not deform either one. But his work is an interpretation, as is all documentary photography. And it is important, especially when one looks at architecture through such photography, to remember this.

Photography is instantaneous; architecture is not. As a photographer Stoller must select one synoptic moment—the view of the building giving the best insight into the architecture. How Stoller frames, how he sets scale and point of view, how he sees photographically, are crucial. Fortunately, Stoller was trained as an architect, and thus no doubt is especially aware of these considerations.

Many of the photographs present concepts that seem very close to those of the architects themselves. The Johnson Wax Building by Frank Lloyd Wright looks waxed—its skin is translucent, its interior opaque. As Stoller photographs it, from a point near the base, and empty of people, it stands like a monument, which is perhaps the effect Wright intended. Conversely, in a photograph of Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building, Stoller reduces the modernist monolith—all we see is the plaza and five floors. Perhaps he does this in the interest of human scale (this is one of the few images in which many people appear). In any case, the photograph is true to architecture in the city, where buildings frame and crop other buildings.

If the Seagram photograph evokes urban density, the photographs of The Salk Institute by Louis Kahn and The Athenaeum by Richard Meier evoke architectural complexity. In both cases we see the structures from within. Elsewhere, Stoller is more detached. The Chamberlain Cottage by Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, and Fallingwater by Wright, are seen as they are—the former as formal and rigorous, the latter as elegantly "natural." The photographs are decorous: the points of view are well-suited to the designs. Now and then Stoller seems too sympathetic to the work, as in his depiction of the

Richard Serra

Blum/Heiman Gallery

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