

Pale Riders: How a Band of Radical Outsiders Briefly Stole the New York City Art World

A book review by Gregory Sholette, 2010 *

Show & Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material, edited by Julie Ault with essays by Ault, Tim Rollins, Doug Ashford, and Sabrina Locks, (Four Corners Books: London, UK), 272 pages, color illustrations, 2010

Tim Rollins and K.O.S.: A History, edited by Ian Berry with contributions by Julie Ault, Susan Cahan, David Deitcher, Eleanor Heartney, Larry Rinder, and James Romaine, (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA), 220 pages, 120 color illustrations, 2010.

Two new books present an alternative art history about collaborative, political art stemming from New York City in the 1980s, while simultaneously weaving a fable of cultural renewal instigated by a band of Marxist-inspired cultural outsiders.

Julie Ault and Tim Rollins grew up in rural Maine. They met as art students at the state university in Augusta. Precociously at 19 Rollins educates himself about conceptual art and *arte Povera*. He needles the provincialism of fellow students, advertising the screening of a *blue movie*. Instead of a tawdry smut film the auditorium of clamoring and soon to be angry young men are subjected to nothing more than grainy blue light emanating from a super-8 projector. Ault recounts this and other memories about her friend and (later) artistic collaborator in *Tim Rollins and K.O.S.: A History*. The book is a lustrously illustrated volume about *Kids of Survival*; the art and education project Rollins founded in the South Bronx some Nineteen years ago. But our story begins seven years earlier. From the Augusta, New York City beckoned as both destination and escape. The two artists leave mountain woodland for concrete jungle. It's the late 1970s and once relocated to the promised land of cultural radicalism its glitter considerably darkens. Regressive expressionist painting and empty formalist gestures appear to feed a cynical market for 'cutting edge' art pumped up by expensive advertisements in cultural journals still claiming to hold the intellectual high ground. Disappointment turns to contempt turns to critique. 'We cannot possibly rely on winning validation from bright, white rooms and full-color repros in the art world glossies' proclaimed Ault, Rollins, and Canadian artist Mundy McLaughlin in 1981. The three had recently banded together with seven others to form the politically-driven artists' collective known as Group Material. Refurbishing a frayed, East Village storefront into a non-commercial art space their number soon swelled to fourteen. 'Five graphic designers, two teachers, a waitress, a cartographer, two textile designers, a telephone operator, a dancer, a computer analyst and an electrician.' Notably, the list of members announced during their inaugural exhibition reveals that many were, like Ault, Rollins, and McLaughlin, recent newcomers to New York City. But after a year of intensive thematic exhibitions focused on issues of social alienation, consumerism, and gender politics Group Material's first manifestation caves-in.

* *Note: this is a long version of a review that appears in the Oxford Art Journal, Vol. 33, Issue 3, Winter, 2010*

The majority of participants leave to pursue individual careers. Reduced to three Rollins, Ault, and McLaughlin soon add a fourth, Doug Ashford, a recent graduate of The Cooper Union Art School and student of conceptual artist Hans Haacke. The mixture of personalities plus the smaller cast of participants proves stabilizing. Group Material continues to operate for another fifteen years. Despite future personnel changes they remain compact and cellular as if echoing the broader shift in the 1980s from large, mass political movements to flexible, fine-tuned interventionism on behalf of particular issues (AIDS, the environment, gender equality, cultural identity). Appearing in print concurrently with MIT Press's *Rollins/K.O.S.* is Four Corners Books *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material*. Smartly edited by Ault, it gathers together a selection of the troupe's fervent manifestos, internal memos, and dialogically orchestrated art exhibitions. While specific works of art are the focus of *Rollins and K.O.S.*, by contrast *Show and Tell* produces an experience somewhat similar to leafing chronologically through a hefty archive. Viewed together these twin volumes compliment each other while delivering up a packed core sample of the largely overlooked collaborative, committed art that began to take root in the early 1980s, even as May '68's glow dimmed. Throughout these books the curious mixture of utopian, political, and art world ambition captures a turning point historian Karl Werckmeister describes as Citadel Culture: the emergence of an aesthetic imagination framed by the recondite regimes of Reagan, Thatcher, Mulroney, and Douglas, among other world leaders associated with the embrace of ultra-deregulated capitalism. ¹ Only in the case of Ault, Rollins, and Group Material the very limitations of this fortress mentality became the central target of their collective critique.

Though, it confounds expectations in several important ways, not the least of which is the unorthodox multi-authored career it depicts (more below), *Rollins and K.O.S.* is essentially a conventional art book. It establishes a particular oeuvre for the purposes of tracing creative development and the provenance of specific works. *Show and Tell* is unquestionably something else. On one hand the book is indeed what it claims: a chronicle and not a traditional history in so far as the course of Group Material's progress is recounted through a selection of scanned images, memos, minutes, and flyers, all of which are now housed at New York University's Fales Library on Washington Square. ¹ Served up with their creases, coffee stains, and typos intact, these internal documents appear as a contiguous trace of events, rather than a set of moments that could be described as forming a historical narrative. And yet creases and stains of another type do materialize. From minor squabbles over organizational procedure to strained arguments about gender politics and power hierarchies numerous micro-political obstacles are glimpsed. None of this is surprising to anyone familiar with collective practice. Still, an uneasy voyeurism comes into play; one that Ault sagaciously avoids papering-over. By interjecting her views minimally, by adding just enough commentary to fill in missing details and connect events in time and space, Ault reveals a conviction that given the right context any document, art work, artifact, newspaper clipping, even mass-produced consumer product, will 'speak' to conditions of social reality. Think of this as a kind of materialist-

optimism. Though it is not a single message spoken by the *Show and Tell* archive, it is Ault writes an open structure, ‘within which readers and users of the book are invited to make meaning of and cross reference the imbedded information and material ingredients’. [Ault 215] Still, faith in the evidential nature of the archive is unambiguous. It is also conspicuously similar to Group Material’s own artistic and exhibition practice whereby contemporary visual and material culture was arranged metonymically, across gallery walls like so many confessants lined up to speak on the social or political topic *de jure*. Nevertheless, only a very superficial reading would conclude this practice was a form of virtuosic connoisseurship. What Group Material’s curatorial style offered the attentive viewer was an anthropological critique focused as much on the art world as on mass culture. At the same time, this critique was itself a performance of sorts, one whose accuracy continues to shape contemporary debates about aesthetics and politics to this day.

One need only look at the salient features of contemporary global culture to see the ongoing reverberations between Rollins/K.O.S. and Group Material on one hand, and recent social art practices on the other. This includes the marked shift away from artist as lone object maker; the rise of collectives, communal practices, and art tribes; a spreading interest in interventionist public art; and the reimagining of the art exhibition as an interactive space where critical pedagogy usurps passive aesthetic contemplation. Group Material’s varied activities prefigure these trends, but it’s also quite likely the collective’s widely circulated models of curatorial experiment *directly* influenced many of today’s cultural practitioners. Is there any mature artist, curator, or art’s administrator today who is not aware of *Timeline: A Chronicle of U.S. Intervention in Central and Latin America* created for P.S.1 in 1984; *Americana* installed at the Whitney Museum Biennial in 1985; the multi-platform project *Democracy* presented at Dia Art Foundation’s gallery in New York City in 1990; or *The Castle (Das Schloss)*, an exhibition inspired by Kafka’s novel of the same name that was including in *Documenta 8* in 1987.

Just as significantly, Group Material’s innovative public and interventionist projects including their early 80s guerilla street installation *Da Zi Boas* on the corner of Union Square in Manhattan, or the *Subculture* project that was legally inserted into the advertising spaces of the New York subway system now hold iconic status amongst younger art activists today. What is less recognized, or simply ignored, is the root of this ‘engaged’ style within a specific historical, political, and geographic juncture. That intersection, the one Group Material was born out of, includes the hard-edged structural adjustment foisted on bankrupt New York City, the gentrification of low-income and working class neighborhoods, and the surging army of young, affluent professionals later dubbed ‘knowledge workers’ or simply the ‘creative class’.

Around the world art and curatorial programs now claim these installations for their own, enclosing them within the prevailing narrative of institutional critique. What is less recognized, or simply ignored, is the root of this ‘engaged’ style within a specific historical, political, and geographic juncture. That intersection, the one Group Material was born out of, includes the hard-edged structural adjustment foisted

on bankrupt New York City, the gentrification of low-income and working class neighborhoods, and the surging army of young, affluent professionals later dubbed knowledge workers or simply the ‘creative class’. Were we to produce our own timeline for Rollins/K.O.S. and Group Material, it would synchronize precisely with these conditions, which in turn dovetail with the implementation of deregulation, privatization, and compulsory entrepreneurship as both a monetary *and* cultural phenomenon. Both books disclose how these artists recoiled at the emergence of such enterprise culture even as its vacuous slipstream tugged at them from multiple directions. Group Material’s response was to re-imagine the traditional white art gallery cube as a space of real-time social encounter. They subverted modernist exhibition conventions, painting walls beige or gray, or covering them in patterned wallpaper. But most often they saturated the gallery with an intrusive, primary red purchased at an art supply store on Canal Street. That gesture apparently cost them their first National Endowment for the Arts Grant when Ronald Reagan’s handpicked director Frank Hodsoll rejected his own staff’s recommendation to fund Group Material because Hodsoll declared their crimson colored exhibitions communist inspired. The art ensemble’s curatorial style diverged from the norm in other ways. As if thumbing their collective noses at Michael Fried who once described post-abstract minimalist art as a turn away from visual art towards ‘theater’, Group Material’s variegated installations were in fact self-consciously staged events, and they in turn performers, or more accurately, performer producers. Donning the role of the (amateur) curator and (novice) ethnographer Group Material members embraced the autodidactic turn initiated says John Roberts by the conceptual artists of the 1960s. 2 Not surprisingly Rollin and Ashford’s art school mentors included Joseph Kosuth, Conrad Atkinson, and Hans Haacke, idea-based artists who delved earnestly into such specialized non-art disciplines as linguistics, semiotics, economics, and political economy. But it was the very notion of learning as a process of self-discipline and political autonomy that sits at the heart of these maneuvers. And hovering nearby is the figure of Brecht, cigar half lit, weighing in on the tactics of each project as much for their political efficacy as for their culinary merits.

Donning the role of the (amateur) curator and (novice) ethnographer Group Material members embraced the autodidactic turn initiated by the conceptual artists of the 1960s. Not surprisingly founding members Rollins, Marybeth Nelson, Hannah Alderfer, Beth Jaker, and Peter Szypula were mentored by Joseph Kosuth. Rollins also studied with Conrad Atkinson, and Ashford with Hans Haacke. These decidedly idea-based artists delved earnestly into such specialized non-art disciplines as linguistics, semiotics, economics, and political economy.

In an unpublished 1996 interview I made with Rollins he spoke of the *Lehrstücke*, or ‘learning play’ as a key influence on both Group Material and K.O.S. Brecht’s idea was to teach his audience how to dialectically analyze a theatrical work, rather than succumb to its more accessible spectacle of mimesis. Except that instead of stage apparatus being transformed into an organ of class analysis and struggle for Rollins and Group Material the goal became how to re-tool the art gallery into an instrument of critical

pedagogy. Various formats were tried. Some abandoned, others reworked and refined. For their installation *Timeline* the group pasted a bold vermilion band around P.S.1's exhibition space, horizontally cleaving it in half, top and bottom. Every few feet the red line was punctuated by a date set in large type: 1920, 1932, 1954, 1964. The dates were linked with occasions when the US military intervened in the affairs of its American neighbors to the South. Like historical *Stations of the Cross* geographic locations are singled out for meditation. Guatemala, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama. The repetition is chilling. And the chill was especially piercing in 1984 when it appeared Ronald Reagan would lead an invasion into recently liberated Nicaragua, a Central American nation whose impoverished populous joyously overthrew US puppet dictator Anastasio Somoza just five years earlier. Above and below the timeline Group Material installed a mélange of art works by such diverse artists as Öyvind Fahlström, Ann Messner, Sue Coe, Nancy Spero, and Faith Ringold. In the background played a soundtrack by composers Hans Werner Henze, Victor Jara, and Frederic Rzewski. And strung in between the art works hung an assortment of artifacts including an assortment of oppositional posters produced by local resistance groups in Latin America, and a triangular kerchief with the letters F.M.L.N. stitched across it for *Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front*, the Salvadorian opposition typically pictured covering their faces with just such a red bandana. These objects and graphics provided an oblique commentary on historical events creating a net effect at once informational and illustrative of Benjamin's dictum (inspired by Brecht) that political art must go beyond adding social content by challenging the very means of cultural production itself. With *Timeline* Group Material proved itself fully proficient on both counts. Images of the exhibition reproduced in *Show and Tell* reveal peeling brown paint that mottles a tin ceiling and bare bulb spotlights that unevenly flood irregular walls. Something resonates here between venue and exhibition. The exhibition was installed inside of P.S.1, a Queens Public School converted to an art center in the mid-1970s (it would be another thirteen years before the understated though sterile renovation of the school and its affiliation with the Museum of Modern Art). The 'all-over' style of *Timeline* and the still-tattered spaces of P.S.1 harkens back to the roots of Group Material's exhibition strategy, one they originally borrowed from Fashion Mod: a funky, late 1970s – early 1980s South Bronx alternative gallery where high art mixed collided with local hip-hop, rap, and street culture. Fashion Moda was itself influenced by Collaborative Projects, a.k.a. COLAB: another 1970s artists' collective lost within the footnotes of the art historical canon. When describing this 'all-over' exhibition approach COLAB liked to use the phrase 'salon style'. It's a sly reference to the official exhibitions of the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* in which thousands of paintings cascaded across exhibition halls, frames butting against frame. 'Salon de COLAB' may have looked similar to its Parisian namesake, but it was the result of a very different, virtually anarchic process. It began with the renting of an empty commercial building, the addition of a designated theme —The Dog Show, The Manifesto Show, The Times Square Show— and finished when an army of affiliated artists filled the raw space floor to ceiling with their works.

While Group Material initially mimicked this communal, all-over, organic, exhibition format, they also began retooling it from the get-go. What for COLAB was a low-maintenance means of compacting many needy artists into one venue without losing all sense of cohesion, became for Group Material a mechanism for engaging with such high-minded theoretical concepts as reification, cultural hegemony, and the power politics of the male gaze. But always, high art met mass culture as if Adorno's two torn halves had to be put to the test: do they or do they not add up to a whole? For the 1980 exhibition *Alienation* the group sought (at least in part) to transform American Marxist Bertell Ollman's academic book of the same title into a pedagogical installation. However, for the press release the group appropriated a typographic style associated with Ridley Scott's 1979 sci-fi horror film 'Alien'.

**[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]]**

A Tupperware party was programmed during the show *Consumption, Metaphor, Pastime, Necessity*, and in conjunction with an exhibition about the fashion industry called *Facere/Fascis*, Group Material hosts a Dress/Dance/Dazzle party at Club 57, a local venue for punk music. The aim of the dancing was to help relieve 'spring fever'. Yet as time went on the large dose of Brecht was increasingly seasoned with Wagnerian measures. The collective's variegated and theatrical exhibitions become increasingly burnished, the spaces they occupied less marginal and more mainstream. By the time they constructed their strikingly imposing Kafka project *The Castle* for Documenta in 1987, the group's exhibition strategy had come to resemble a *gesamtkunstwerk*, a total artwork in which one synthetic vision subsumes all the particulars displayed within it. *The Castle* consisted of a custom-built semicircular wall set within the larger exhibition space of Documenta. Running across the top and bottom are excerpts from Kafka's novel. German above, English translation below, the text appears as a gray line bracketing just a couple dozen carefully selected drawings, sculptures, prints, and photographs. Interspersed between these fine art pieces are 'pages torn from popular magazines, recorded tapes of music, decorative household objects, things we buy in supermarkets'. A large painting of a retail store's metal gate by Martin Wong echoes the central door cut in the wall. A series of seemingly abstract shapes by Ronald Jones reveal themselves to be based on proposed conference table configurations during the Paris Peace Accords between the US and Vietnam. Below these enigmatic looking pieces is a box of laundry detergent with the word ALL printed across the front in rubbery, happy-looking letters. The stage is set. High and low culture contrast here, come into conflict there, and seemingly change place as we move across the concave curtain. And if not surprisingly some artists began to bristle at having their individual creations assimilated into a larger conceptual framework, especially not one of their own initial intent or choosing, no one can argue that the final tableau was and remains uniquely powerful. And like the ambiguous politics of Werckmeister's citadel culture, Group Material describes *The Castle* as 'dangerous', 'amorphous', and the 'object of our love and attention' [125]. The scope of the installation, and others from this same period, also appears strangely anachronistic, even modernist in its ambitions. Curiously, this is the point of simultaneous intersection and

division between the quartet Group Material and Rollins. A few months after Documenta, Rollins leaves the group in order to focus exclusively on the collaborative and experimental teaching project he began years earlier in the South Bronx, recently christened K.O.S. (Kids of Survival). McLaughlin had already left the year before, and the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres joined up. The new threesome continues to work together until Gonzalez-Torres dies from complications due to AIDS in 1996, which is where Group Material's chronicle *Show and Tell* comes to an end.

The Whiteness of the Whale (After Herman Melville) 1985 – 1987 is one of several paintings Rollins and K.O.S. were working on at the time. Its based on a chapter of Moby Dick in which Melville upends the standard, Eurocentric reading of white as a sign of purity and goodness. Rollins/K.O.S. pasted pages from Melville's book on a large linen canvas (147 ½ by 135 inches; 58.1 by 53.1 centimeters). The leaves form neat rows that become a massive gray grid. The 'crew', as Rollins once called his student collaborators, then added layers of bone-white matte paint to the pages so the novel has almost completely faded from view. The whiteness spreads and thins at the edges like a blinding sheet of snow, or a forbidding mountain peak, or a monstrous albino whale that eclipses our horizon. What at first appears as an homage to Malevich's *White on White* (or Rauschenberg, or perhaps Ryman), is also bound up with issues of identity and color, obsession and fear, all of which are made explicit in Melville's haunting description of what he calls the silent, superstitious dread that accompanies certain experiences of whiteness. One thinks too of Baudelaire's description of annihilated modern space, 'Avalanche, will you sweep me along in your fall?' (*Avalanche, veux-tu m'emporter dans ta chute?*), and one thinks of course of the 'white cube' being subverted here (or is it simply being reclaimed?). Many of the works reproduced in the book are just as startling. The thrill is generated just as much by their intellectual ambition, as it is by an unpretentious application of color, form, line, balance, repetition, and scale. In other words, all of the fundamental painterly elements one typically learns in an introductory art class are deployed by K.O.S. This pedagogical forthrightness also carries over to the content of the pieces in so far as their subject matter emerges out of a first-time encounter with classic literature. This includes Melville's Moby Dick of course, but also *The Red Badge of Courage* (Krane), *Animal Farm* (Orwell), and *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne). Each novel is transformed by Rollins and crew into a small galaxy of visual art works—several large paintings and numerous drawings—all of which appear to rotate about a single iconic image or set of images: a gaping war wound, a gathering of barnyard animals whose heads are those of contemporary politicians, a series of variations on the letter A. Kafka's writings are a group favorite. Instead of Gregor Samsa's beetled shell the story's tossed apple is embedded into mounted pages of *Metamorphosis* itself. K.O.S.'s version of Kafka's *Amerika* riotously gathers dozens of elasticized golden trumpets together, stretching and drooping as they weave in and out of several monumental canvases, and also one public mural version rendered on the side of a Bronx school that was later painted over.

Even as the reproductions in *Tim Rollins and K.O.S. A History* lure us in with their aesthetic pleasure it is significant that this is an educational project that has completely reset the benchmark for the field of art education. That point is summarized in Susan Cahan's comprehensive essay 'The Wonder Years'. Not only has Rollins/K.O.S. proved an unyielding intervention into the mainstream art world they also 'defied assumptions about who is eligible for recognition as an artist'. Students like Victor, Rick, Carlos, Angel, Jose, Christopher (who was murdered in 1992), Nelson, Jose, and others that Rollins mentored over the decades formed 'bonds and alliances across lines of age, class, and ethnicity'. It is also clear that sometime around 1984 Rollins and his crew began to aim for nothing less than the revitalization of the modernist project melding aesthetic experimentation with social content. That may seem quite opposite the associations we naturally link to someone who co-founded a collective notorious for its dance parties, scrappy public interventions, and vulgar injection of mass-produced commodities into art exhibitions. Nevertheless, Rollins/K.O.S., no less than Group Material in their own way, continued seeking to re-infuse art with a lost political and aesthetic depth as though the mantle of the early 20th Century *avant-garde* had solemnly been passed to them. 'We are desperately tired and critical of the drawn-out traditions of formalism, conservatism and pseudo avant-gardism that dominate the official art world,' Group Material exclaimed in their first public manifesto from 1980. Or more recently Rollins tells Ian Berry in a conversation printed in the book that the origins of K.O.S. emerged out of his dissatisfaction with 'elite, closed interactions and the lack of genuine political effect.' He goes on to add 'Lenin said that without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary practice, and I think John Dewey would say that without revolutionary practice, there can be no revolutionary theory.' Like Dewey, Rollins theories about art, education, and politics emerge after the fact from the success and failures of production. At the same time he acknowledges the pivotal influence of Russian constructivist art and ideas on his thinking. When asked about the use of red painted walls he instinctively cites El Lissitzky's 1919 lithograph 'Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge', as if crashing the 'white cube' with red paint, or student artworks, or by any other means necessary was ultimately always a question of aesthetics as much as, or perhaps even more so than politics. [Rollins 241] What would it take to free the radical formal experimentation of the early Russian avant-garde from its entombment within museums, history books, and academic lectures?

By the start of the 1980s the death of abstract art was fully conspicuous. This meant several things. On one hand there would be no more Herculean theories of flatness or painterliness to justify room-sized canvases lacquered in monochromatic pigments, just as there would be no more intellectual barricades to hold back the dark torrent of pulp and punk and limitless expressions of popular sentiment from the fortress of high art. But it also left certain spoils of modernism –the fabled fusion of revolutionary form and content–up for grabs. That is, it seemed up for grabs if one chose to look at the narrative this way, instead of the way post-modern thinkers describe such failed ambitions as either romantically utopian, or even proto-totalitarian, as Boris Groys has argued with regard to the Russian avant-garde. The search for a new and sophisticated synthesis of politics and art, one shorn of nostalgia for some hazy proletariat aesthetic, would lead Rollins,

Ault, Ashford, Mclaughlin, Gonzalez-Torres and all those associated with these circles on a pilgrimage of sorts. The journey's goal was to generate a socially committed art suitable to an era of deregulated capital, neo-conservative reaction, and collapsed faith in socialist revolution. This did not mean erasing history. As Ashford succinctly puts it 'the process of re-imagining ourselves through the rebellious inventing of art objects was, in many ways, a continuation of a larger political momentum.' [221] That moment in which the past and present coincide might be thought of as part of a *longue durée* in which ever-shifting, cultural dark matter impinges on the day to day world, producing collisions that constitute, always provisionally, an aesthetics of resistance. A new political art for a new era! And indeed, on more than one occasion in the 1980s I recall Rollins exclaiming 'No more charcoal drawings of Lenin!' as if by declaring a ban on the unlikely return of socialist realism we had already forged some cool new political art aesthetic. But pilgrimages like this have a way of turning back on their own beginnings. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that Rollins invokes Marx, Brecht, or Raymond Williams less today, and more often the work of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. He speaks of his own backwoods Baptist origins in Maine. But, perhaps this evangelical turn is not so strange after all. Let us not forget that the 1980s was also the era of Liberation Theology in which Latin American priests and nuns interpreted Christ's teachings as a call for economic and social justice. For many, the rise of the Christian Right has eclipsed this memory as well as that of other, progressive theologians. At the end of his short text in *Show and Tell* Rollins paraphrases Martin Luther King Jr. if a non-violent form of love might one day transform society into 'the Beloved Community'.

The work sumptuously reproduced in both of these books, as well as the documentation of ephemera in *Show and Tell*, reveal traces of cleverness and insight, success and defeat. A series of works by Rollins/K.O.S based on Aristophanes feels too formulaic and stamped-out. A few pages away we discover projects like *Pinocchio (After Carlo Collodi)*, or *The Temptation of Saint Antony*. These are disturbing and raw works none-the-less exquisite in their execution. A Group Material exhibition about the Constitution of the United States looks over-designed as if produced for a trade exhibition. But by reworking their signature Timeline concept in 1990 so as to address the AIDS epidemic the collective eloquently and urgently demonstrated that sophisticated political statements could, and must be made through the medium of contemporary visual art. At moment when the debate over art and politics has once again been raised around the globe these books will be welcomed, perhaps not entirely uncritically, but welcomed nonetheless by a generation of younger scholars interested in collective, socially committed art, and unafraid what they find will disturb the normative canons of art history. That inevitable historical annexation may be contrary to Ault's hope that *Show and Tell* honor multiple ways of 'knowing, showing, and telling' [216]. For despite attempts to defuse traditional modes of linear historicizing these paired publications engender their own sense of plot. It hinges on the exogamous origins of our leading protagonists who, like a band of outsiders, ride into town, take on the degraded Gotham art world, and hope to re-instill its abandoned sense of social purpose. They succeed, for a time. Only to discover they

have inherited the archive. 'There is no political power without control of the archive, of memory' insists Derrida. ³ And apparently the price of victory in this instance means having to take one's turn at interpreting the past. Fortunately, both of these books take on that responsibility unflinchingly.

Notes

1. Karl Werckmeister, *Citadel Culture* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1991).
2. John Roberts and John Beech, *The Philistine Controversy* (Verso, London and New York, 2002), 295.
3. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995), p. 4, note 1.