

REVIEWS

USA
New York



Group Material, "Primer (For Raymond Williams)," installation view.

"Primer (for Raymond Williams)"

Group Material's "Primer (for Raymond Williams)" is collaborative, its intent political, its participants diverse in age, gender, and class, its setting non-commercial. This impeccable correctness could no doubt be annoying to those who implicitly worry about political art developing a hegemony, challenging pure art, however defined, to a duel from which only one will emerge alive.

Be that as it may, it might be more useful to abandon the debate over whether collaborations like this one are propaganda rather than art and to see them in a protean relationship with other efforts analogous to that between documentary and "fictional" films. There's a difference of emphasis, often of aim, but less so of procedure, the methods of one often being put to the uses of the other. Documentary has the air of letting the facts speak for themselves; so do "Primer" and like-minded affairs such as last year's "Anti-WWIII" installation, where the found objects that go to make up much of the material function as "facts" (edited, of course, inevitably, in the very choosing). In "Primer," James Brown record albums and excerpts from Ann Landers' lonely-hearts column, carefully selected to demonstrate that the answer doesn't matter if the question is wrong, fall into this category. Without being cynical, one might argue that the work of "naive" contributors (such as the six South Bronx children here) are also treated as found objects in that they are brought into rather than made in an art context; they are presented as "facts" in so far as they are deemed expressions of the way things really are, straight from the hearts of the populace. Such an approach is open to the charge of condescension, but it's a charge to be answered only by those who may or may not be the objects of that condescension. Certainly the offerings of Dottie the K, a 71-year old graffiti artist who punched a hole in a door with the message "No Forced Eviction from our

own door," and Adalberto Badillo, 13, who produced a startling memento mori out of a piece of discarded wood with Snoopy on one side and a skeleton fleeing from a burning building on the other, need no special pleading.

Against the charges of didacticism and of suppression of autonomous creativity the comparison with documentary is also useful, didacticism being, even if obliquely, practically integral to the genre and consequently inappropriate as a criticism. And far from bearing the fingerprints of the auteur, documentary purports to be an impersonal eye in order to support the ideology of factuality. The ostensible randomness of Group Material's alphabetical list of ordinary words takes this tone, even though the ultimate goal of the paintings, posters, and sculptures that illustrate them is to violate their habitual neutrality. Besides, the boundaries blur: how different is the Jordache horse on sheet metal, the work of Leonard Rahming, Tim Rollins, and Johnny Santiago, from the media-derived imagery of new and old Pop artists, some of whose self-professed intentions are also socially critical?

Possibly this attempt to make a place for collective political art could be viewed as a blunting of its impact through accommodation. But to suggest that one art form coexists with others is not to say that it always does so peacefully; it is only to admit that reality itself is dialectical: every method must interlock, break down, and recombine with others while it lives. And while it lives, each example can only be judged on its own merits; the merits of "Primer," I think, were pretty strong.

—JEANNE SILVERTHORNE