

(The futurity of) democracy in America: utopia as an exercise in possibilities

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On November 27th, 2008, in New York and Los Angeles 1.2 millions copies of the New York Times were handed out for free, reporting on the first page the news: “Iraq war ends”. In the following pages of the newspaper one could find articles dealing with these issues: after his self-accusation, ex-President George W.Bush is indicted on the charge of High Treason for having falsified information telling Iraqi possessed weapon of mass destruction, in order to pursue the war; in the context of the new White House’s Truth and Prosecution Program, former Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld confesses and attempts an apology for secret C.I.A interrogations and torture centres worldwide; President Barack Obama announces the imminent approval of an economic package including a federal minimum wage, nationalization of oil to fund climate change efforts, a National Health Insurance Act and a bill eliminating tuition fees at public universities. All the measures concerning national and international politics that Obama had promised during his well-supported electoral campaign and which have found him elected as the President of USA, have been achieved, and further unexpected openings towards an outlook of transparency and social justice are announced by the NY newspaper.

But later a detail occurs to the readers’ incredulous eyes: the New York Times issue is dated July 4th, 2009, and instead of the sentence usually appearing under the heading of the Times (“All the News *That’s Fit* to Print”), stands the phrase “All the News *We Hope* to Print”. The newspaper is indeed a fake, accurately imitated and distributed by The Yes Men, a group of American activists who have been launching during the last years several performance acts aimed at exposing the hypocrisy of the main international organizations involved in neo-liberal politics.

In their public actions (for instance, in the frame of an international WTO meeting, at the Canadian oil conference GO-EXPO, and in the role of spokesmen for Dow Jones Industrial Average’s on BBC news) the Yes Men use a standard pattern, which differs in relation to the specific circumstance: one or more members of the group

impersonate spokesmen of the selected organization, delivering a provocative speech which exaggerates the organization's views on the matter of social injustice, exploitation, indifference to the environment (or whatever concerns the more or less explicit politics of the given company); only at the very end the speech is clearly unmasked, succeeding in ridiculizing the company's ethic of respectability and showing its contradictions.

The fake New York Times apparently seems to fit in the same pattern, being a performance of imitation and exaggeration related to a specific politics, in order to attract the attention of the media with a wise Situationist-like gesture. Indeed, in the latest Yes Men performance, post-dated July 4th, 2009, something different seems to be going on: in the place of the previous performance of cynical *detournement*, there is here a gesture of joy, a sort of rehearsal for liberation, a mode of celebrating, and at the same time warning about, the politics of Hope. The main tool employed in this action, with everything it implies, is undoubtedly futurity.

What I am interested in exploring, through some examples, is what happens when futurity is engendered within the structure of a performance, being *conditio sine qua non* for its happening, in terms of actual context of feasibility, materials of realization or expansion of temporality. Imagining futurity is itself an attempt at thinking beyond the real, and offers to current thought a range of possibilities, which projects the performance onto an horizon of potentiality, oversteps the actuality of the present and builds a domain for the "not yet". In such a gesture is located a strong utopian drive.

With reference to the notion of "utopian performative" employed by Jill Dolan¹ and further developed by José Muñoz², I would like to link my train of thoughts to the broader question of considering certain performances as utopian gestures in themselves, as a doing imbued with potentiality, and how they face futurity not just as what comes next, but as the articulation of a project which, if not achieved in reality,

¹ J.Dolan, Performance, *Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative'*, in "Theatre Journal", Vol.53, n.3. October 2001, pp. 455-479.

² J.Munoz, *Impossible Spaces: Kevin McCarty's The Chamaleon Club*, in "GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies", Vol. 11, N.3 , 2005, pp. 427-436

could at least be imagined; and in being imagined exercise a pressure on the possibility today of imagination and planning.

In relation to the latest developments of US politics (with the election of Obama and his massive emphasis on the idea of Change and Hope), I would like to focus on two performance projects that, together with the fake New York Times, develop a praxis which embodies the future as an essential element of performance. Expressing, through this choice, the nature of utopian gestures, they engage a dialogue with their specific presentness and suggest trajectories for an imagining of otherworldliness, maintaining the centrality of hope and change-, but charging those words with the idea of an utopian kind of democracy, beyond contingency and its most likely contradictions.

As Slavoj Zizek seems somehow to suggest in one of his latest articles: “words are never ‘only’ words. They matter because they define the outline of what we can do. In this regard, Obama has already demonstrated an extraordinary ability to change the limits of what one can publicly say. (...) Nothing was decided with Obama’s victory, but it widens our freedom and thereby the scope of our decisions.”³

In the last year and a half, the Danish artist Marco Evaristti has been working on a project entitled *Five to Twelve - an Art Project on the Death Penalty*. Developed through several phases, the project should culminate with an installation that ought never to happen, as conceived according to its own purposes and the aim of the artist himself.

If the final installation takes place, as a matter of fact, the death of a man would have happened, and his corpse, grinded into small pieces, would be the main material of the artwork.

In December 2007, Evaristti went for the first time in Texas to meet Gene Hathorn, death row inmate at the Polanski Unit, a High Security prison outside Livingston, where he spent the last twenty-four years convicted for the murder of his father, his step-mother and his step-brother. During their meeting, Evaristti proposed to Hathorn

³ S.Zizek, *Una vittoria contro cinici e pessimisti*, in “Internazionale”, n. 770, 14/20 November 2008, p.27.

first of all a collaboration (by selling his drawings and texts) to raise \$ 125.000 for an investigation around the circumstances of his conviction, in order to try to obtain a final appeal for his trial.

If this request for an appeal fails, as has happened twice before, and the death row execution is confirmed (and due to take place within one year), Evaristti's proposal would entail a second form of collaboration by Hathorn : the agreement to donate his remains to the artist and consent to their use for in an art installation.

If Hathorn's lot will be a death as decided by the Texas State, Evaristti's plan is to deep-freeze his corpse and then turn it into fish food. The result will be located in a gallery space, along with a huge aquarium full of goldfish; visitors to the exhibition would then be asked to feed the fishes with the fish food, aware that the remains of a man are mixed in it. Gene Hathorn has agreed to sign a release, in the event his last appeal is unsuccessful, and, as according to the Texas Department for Criminal Justice spokesman, there should not be any problem in validating Hathorn's will, since prisoners are able to select a person to handle the disposition of their corpses.

The idea of turning Hathorn's body into fish food occurred to Evaristti - as he states in an interview in *The Independent*⁴ and on the artist's website⁵- because of the legal history of the murderer, which has been defined in the court papers as "human trash"; in this statement Hathorn recognizes precisely the condition of existence on death row in the United States. The donation of his body to be re-cycled as fish nourishment - Evaristti states - appealed to Hathorn, who was happy to imagine the further use of his substance, a privilege usually denied to most trash.

Evaristti's project is controversial, and caused a sensation in the international press, which often accused the artist of planning a shocking and macabre performance in order to attract the attention of media.

Out of an evaluation of the installation itself, I am interested in suggesting a reflection on the purposes and the mode of development of Evaristti's performance, which projects its outcome in the future and contributes to its non-achievement by

⁴ A.Akbar, *Any last request? Yes, says the row inmate. Turn me into fish food*, in "The Independent", Thursday, September 4, 2008.

⁵ M.Evaristti, *A Journey Into the American Nightmare*, in <http://www.evaristti.com/defaultF.html>

means of its very first phase (the attempt to raise money for an appeal with Hathorn's artworks and Evaristi's side projects). This project seems to have its *raison d'etre* not just in the moment of performance, which might happen in one year after Gene Hathorn's execution; but in everything surrounding and anticipating this moment, inescapable as established by a law that today is still working according to the reason of the State. Pestering a corpse (even after the agreement of the convicted man) looks like a repulsive idea, and provokes a debate on the inviolability of remains and brought on (as it happens) a response in the media. But - according to Evaristi's purposes - given the circumstances of Hathorn's death, the disgust that this announced gesture provoked necessarily implies a reflection upon what is still possible to inflict on a man's body when he is still alive; i.e. a reflection about the death penalty and its cruelty. The outcries surrounding Evaristi's *Five to Twelve*, which will probably endure until the very end of Evaristi/Hathorn journey and maybe to the final installation, are therefore a function of the basic idea sustaining this project: to draw attention on the hypocrisy of public disgust for what happens to a man's remains and show how this clearly contradicts the widespread acceptance of a praxis legitimating murder on behalf of the State.

The quixotic attempt to avoid Hathorn's death sentence through the request for a final appeal contains in itself an utopian drive. Indeed the performance, which might conclude Evaristi's project started in 2007, could be regarded as an utopian gesture: if we agree with Herbert Blau in considering what comes into play watching a performance, we realize that in sharing the liveness of the performance we inevitably face the idea of death. In the request Evaristi (perhaps) will make to the visitors of his installation, Blau's observation seems to be radically confirmed, and even exceeded: whereas the "live" is totally cancelled, the spectator can do nothing but face the experience of death without mediation. Gene Hathorn's corpse, the corpse of a killer being murdered by the hand of the State, is handed over to the "live" action of the spectators (through the request to keep the fishes "alive" with the nourishment) and in doing so the visitors are offered the thought of a potential utopia of justice.

*“Literally anything that you can dream of for this performance is for sale. And we mean anything”*⁶

Democracy in America, presented by The Foundry Theatre and directed by Annie Dorsen, run at New York Performance Space 122 from March 30, 2008, to the end of April. From the playbill of the show: “From November 26th 2007- February 29th 2008, Democracy was for sale online at www.buydemocracy.com. The public was invited to generate the content for the show you’re about to see. DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA is an assemblage of what was purchased, the list of purchases is below (in order of appearance)”. This statement was followed by a long list of items along with the name of the person who purchased them and the price paid for their appearance as material in the show. These were items of a very diverse nature: the name of a character, Claudine Goodell (\$ 75); a National Geographic map of the world (\$ 21.25); two iconic images from Abu Ghraib enlarged to poster size, one of them captioned “This is theatre”, the other captioned “This is not theatre”, visible throughout the piece (\$100); a simple rendition of the song “Me, Myself and I” (\$ 100), a one minute scene lit entirely by the glow of audience cell phones (\$50); an infectious smile (\$5), etcetera.

Annie Dorsen decided to develop this project pondering on the idea aroused from the reading of Alexis de Tocqueville’s texts, about a kind of democracy where, traditional ties of obligation, dependence and custom being broken, everyone is (at least theoretically) free to pursue his own goals; and about how this process could give birth to a coherent whole (a nation) where the achievement of individual desires and actions could compete and coexist simultaneously⁷.

Democracy in America spreads from the attempt to build a “mini-model” for this process. According to this aim, the spectators are asked to express their wishes and to quantify their value, donating to the forthcoming show (the show which is to happen in the future) an object, a suggestion, a clue for the actors’ performance, an image or

⁶<http://www.buydemocracy.com/article.php/welcome>

⁷ A. Dorsen, “Democracy in America”’s playbill.

whatever else. The directions/purchases gathered by February 29th were assembled later by the director and the three actors in a collage, which lasted less than an hour. Allowing the “materials” to engender a dialogue among them and to performatively solve conflicts of primacy, duration, overlapping and scenic” value”, the director wilfully decided to avoid any thematic structure, either prior or in retrospect. In this way, each element, although interacting with the others, could find its own autonomy within the piece, and generate unexpected trajectories of meaning and poetry.

Annie Dorsen’s project is certainly a “delegated performance”⁸, insofar the director delegates to the spectator the task of generating the content of the performance; but the delegating gesture here is even multiple, since the spectators are asked to choose by implication the actions to delegate to the director and actors. When, during the performance, the actors involve the audience asking members to perform some actions (for instance, light the scene with the glow of their mobile phones, perform a strip-tease on the stage, etc.) the delegating gesture seems to rebound, as if self-generating within the project.

The whole idea (from the way Dorsen describes it on the website buydemocracy.com: “If you can dream it, you can buy it, and we’ll perform it”) is largely ironic, suggesting the multiplicity of issues this project raises, issues related to the purchasing power and the possibility of giving economic value to every desire, even (and moreover) in the domain of art; issues related to strict theatre practice, to the value of improvisation on given material and to the space of freedom of the performance itself; but also outstanding political issues, about the possibility of building a “polis” of wishes and rights, sustaining and empowering the idea of a whole.

Annie Dorsen’s utopianism is powerfully expressed by the sheer beauty of a particular moment in *Democracy in America*, which succeeds in linking the quality of the performance with the creation of a shared environment in terms of relations and reception. I refer to the moment when Miranda, Anthony Torn’s daughter (he is one

⁸ I refer to the latest work developed by Claire Bishop on the idea of “delegated” or “outsourced” performance, and to the panel presented at the last PSI conference in Copenhagen, entitled “Outsourced Performance?” and featuring papers by C.Bishop, E. Scheer, N. Ridout e M.Sprio.

of the actors), appears on the screen at the back, and starts declaiming the poem “I miss” (purchased/donated by John C. for 75 dollars). The poem is a love lyric, and Miranda is being prompted by a woman’s voice off-screen, the little girl listening to it and repeating the words with the enthusiastic wonder of someone who cannot totally get the whole meaning of the text, and who enjoys pronouncing every single word, every word mysterious for the children’s world. In a spell-like attitude, the audience watches Miranda on the screen, as she smiles and repeats those words, but little by little, as the text starts to be more and more intense and starts alluding to desire and a mature kind of confidence, the audience finds itself in the position of sharing a feeling of embarrassed intimacy, together with a focused attraction towards the child’s face enlarged on the screen. The text that is prompted to the little girl from off-screen is again offered to the audience as a gesture of delegation, involving the materials offered of another purchase: the purchase of a spectator who, one night during the running of the show, would sit in the audience, and listen to his text being declaimed by a kid’s voice, which turns the meaning upside down, especially when followed immediately after by the Ride of the Valkyries (another spectator’s wish) from the middle of the poem. This is an interlude for a strong kind of sharing.

In the space of utopia, constructed by Annie Dorsen through the subordination of the outcome of her project to the “future” demands and offers of her audience, the experimental mini-model of democracy seems to function as if, imbued with irony, covered with advertisements, and therefore full of contradictions but simultaneously optimistic in its imagining of an harmonious agreement. In this project, with art standing as a laboratory for political theory, Alexis de Toqueville’s thoughts seem to resonate with a new form of hope.

Some exercises in possibility

On November 12, 2008, at 05.17 am, a reader of the fake New York Times, replying to those who criticized the imposture as disrespectful of the war victims’ families, left on the fake website the following comment: “this is not a sad joke, this is an

exercise in possibilities”⁹. Similarly, the “impossible” model for democracy experienced in *Democracy in America* is hard to conceive as contingent politics, avoiding the traps of neo-liberalism and the consequences of American individualism, but rather stands for as a store room for imagination, for a broader kind of hope concerning what could actually be a utopia of achieved democracy.

Evaristti’s *Five to Twelve* is so named after an anecdote Evaristti reports to have happened during his second meeting with Hathorn in jail: the time on the convicted’s watch stood still at five to twelve all day long, and so it has been for the last twenty-four years. When Evaristti asked him the reason, he answered: “Time for me and you is different. To you time is about things you are to do and when to do them. To me is about nothing. It is just an awareness of emptiness.”¹⁰

Ernst Bloch, in “The Principle Hope”¹¹ suggests that hope is the emotional mode par excellence to access the thought of futurity, especially if we consider utopia as a “politics of emotions”. So far, all three of the performances I have referred to, clearly express a “politics of emotions” that seems to openly dialogue with US presentness and Obama’s politics; but they also seem to suggest that this this politics aims higher, and warn it not to be content with thw compromises of the present. It proposes to to leave room for participation and the support of those citizens who listen to and build out of words. To leave room for utopia, at least in the domain of imagination.

⁹ <http://www.nytimes-se.com/2009/07/04/troops-to-return-immediately/>; trad: “ questo non è un gioco triste, questo è un esercizio di possibilità”.

¹⁰ M.Evaristti, *A Journey Into the American Nightmare*, cit.

¹¹ E. Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1959; trad. it.di Enrico De Angelis, *Il Principio Speranza*, Milano, Garzanti, 1994, p. 1276.