

## Questions for Annie Dorsen



- 1- How did the Democracy in America project start taking place? I know that one of the point of departure for this idea was a reading group of Alexis De Toqueville's Democracy in America you carried out with some friends in the last years; clearly, one of the main concerns in this activity was a reflection on the specific moment of the American politics and the will to figure out a sort of community of thought about some important issues in your political and cultural tradition. I would like to know more about this.**

The piece began with a moment of frustration during the lead up to the 2004 election. Out of some kind of naïve thought that Tocqueville might help me understand what the hell was happening, how we could possibly be on the verge of re-electing Bush for another four years, I pulled a copy of *Democracy in America* off the shelf. So the piece was always based on this desire to understand, and at first, it was a completely improvised event. I knew I wanted to try to replicate the process of trying to think in a highly distracted environment – there should be no progress made, only a kind of continually blocked effort towards clarity. But in the end the form changed completely.

The biggest shift in the process was this movement from grappling with our own responses to the political moment to offering ourselves up as conduits for others' ideas. For the performers, this required a major change of approach. They had to switch completely from being very very present as thinking bodies, to more or less turning themselves off in order to follow the commands of our little mini-marketplace. So we went from showing the thinking body to showing in a sense the mindless body.

The critique that we began to develop made its way from the content of the piece into its structure.

- 2- The outcome of this project was presented in March, during a pivotal moment for the American political course, during the electoral campaign and just a few months before Barack Obama was elected. How do the central issues your project arises relate to this**

## Questions for Annie Dorsen

**massive change United States are going through? And, how do they relate to the (possible) contradictions the Obama 'politics of hope' propose?**

The collapse of the financial system and the election of Obama have utterly changed the atmosphere. (It's worth noting, though, that Obama's slogan is hardly as unique as he is – Kerry had “help is on the way,” Bush used “renewing America's purpose,” and Clinton had “we can do better.” Clinton was also, of course, known as “The Man from Hope.” “Change we can believe in” follows right in line. Only Gore lacked a punchy, hope-driven message of re-branding – his slogan was the rhetorically limp “I want to fight for you.”) Reanimating the clichés of American political discourse is a prerequisite of office. And rekindling some faith in America's claim to military, economic, and most of all moral superiority is one of the primary responsibilities of the president, or at least of the winning presidential candidate. It's interesting that Obama, a politician known for his rigorous pragmatism in political affairs, takes “hope” as his motto. In this sense, he perfectly embodies the contradictions of a ruthless system that covers itself in a continual appeal to emotions, to so-called eternal values, and to optimism.

Obama's many personal and intellectual qualities do mark him as a fundamental improvement over our previous regime of clowns and criminals. But it is these inherent qualities of Obama, the man, that most powerfully speak to his ability to change our politics. In this sense, the pundits who were sure a black guy couldn't win had it exactly wrong. His blackness and his unfamiliar name (along with his intelligence, his calm, and his near-perfect timing) allowed the hopes for a renewed progressive politics to adhere to HIM, rather than to his campaign promises, his policies, or his track record.

Two elements of our recent “supersized election event,” as I like to call it, seem specifically relevant to the Democracy project. One is its enormous cost. Early accountings estimate that the two candidates spent close to or just over a billion dollars. An obscene amount of money. And no one blinks, shudders or otherwise remarks on it. This is the new normal. The second is the sophisticated use of interactive technology that Obama's campaign deployed. The barackobama.com organizing tools transformed participation. Working for the Obama campaign became an ethically elevated form of online shopping – convenient, anonymous and fun. As the apparatus of campaigns, both financial and technological, become more complex and unwieldy, it requires intensified effort to create the sense of a sincere grassroots movement. In this sense we can see the Obama phenomenon as an exaggeration of contemporary trends in modern democracy, rather than a corrective or an alternative to them.

**3- I am interested in considering what might concern thinking about a performance whose condition of feasibility is absolutely related to the idea of futurity; a performance like yours, I mean, which embeds futurity (materials you don't have and might not gather, for instance) as the prime condition of its happening. How did this relationship with futurity affect your work?**

The other large influence on this piece is John Cage. I'd been studying his methodologies and music concurrently with work on *Democracy*, and was curious about what other meanings might be found in the use of chance operations. Cage writes about using chance to “imitate the processes of nature,” for example, and this doesn't have much relevance to my work. But the attitude of neutral inquiry

## Questions for Annie Dorsen

does for sure. I'm for a strict interpretation of the term *experimental* in regards to artwork. It's only experimental if the goal is to discover something that was not known before, and if the creators are learning along with the audience.

In a practical sense, there was quite a lot of speculation about what we might receive from the world. The only true obstacle would have been had we not received enough material. Although at the same time I didn't really know what "enough" would be – in other words, I hadn't predetermined how I would arrange these things, how much overlapping I would use, and so on, so until we began rehearsals I had no concept of how the timeline would be filled, whether the piece would last four hours or twenty minutes. All of these things were discoveries.

And of course there are other consequences to working this way. So many decisions had to be made before we had any material to work with. Early rehearsals were truly exploratory, as we applied some initial concepts and merely observed their functioning. And in a funny way, the piece had no inherent style or personality until the audience joined us. Because we approached all the material in a spirit of neutrality, we hadn't decided beforehand certain things that one normally decides – for example, some basic questions about tone. The audience taught us about those things, and each performer developed a particular relationship to the audience through the performing of the piece.

- 4- I would like to suggest that a project placing the futurity as a prime condition of existence for a performance to be staged (i.e. conceiving futurity in its inner structure) necessarily embodies a utopian drive. What do you think about it? I would like to stimulate you a brief reflection on the value of utopia in the political thinking, and how it relates to your project, moreover in relation with the idea of democracy in America (as a concept and as the Toqueville tradition) and to the current state of American politics.**

Well in the case of *Democracy* the utopian and the dystopian are not so far apart. I admit to having a pessimistic frame of mind while I was working on the piece. But it's true that the very basis of this performance implies an as-yet-unknowable possible future. Chance functions as a proposed historical process. (The future already looked at from the perspective of a further future, in which the performance would be analyzed as history.) We ask, very simply, what did people do, and why?

American politics has been marked by utopian thinking from the first moment. From the city on a hill to manifest destiny to the great society to yes we can, with a thousand stops along the way. That's why Toqueville's central question retains both its relevance and its radical potential. If he's asking, in essence, "what kind of nation will be created on the basis of the self-interested actions of a multitude," – well, he's bringing a dose of realism to the idealistic project of American democracy. What does it really come to, in the end? What do a myriad of small, autonomous and self-motivated actions add up to? He's looking for meaning in all this. Of course he's looking for a particular kind of meaning, one derived from his own European aristocratic values, with all their traces of medievalism intact: heroism, honor, sacrifice, glory. And what he finds is a culture that is energetic, innovative, flexible – but also plagued by mediocrity, commercialism, banality, and self-absorption.

During the reading group phase, I asked a simple question that no one had any good answers to: what do you want from government – in other words, what kind of meaning, if any, do you look for

## **Questions for Annie Dorsen**

from our political culture? Freedom from interference, guaranteed rights, roads and bridges and traffic lights, protection from foreign invaders, protection from domestic criminals, a community of shared values, and so on...or is it something else entirely? Utopian thinking is an act of imagination, obviously, and the reluctance or inability to imagine alternatives seems to me to demonstrate either the efficacy of propaganda or the capitulation to what-is.