Certain resemblances

On performance, event and political images

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Some images of political events can be conjured without being reproduced. At the same time as arresting the viewer, writes Sharon Hayes, they give pause as to how political affiliation, political community and collective political horizons are formed.

1. On 14 February 1965, seven days before he was shot and killed at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, Malcolm X gave a speech at an awards ceremony in Detroit, Michigan. Near the end of this speech, he said:

Quickly, if you’ll notice in 1963, everyone was talking about the “centennial of progress!” I think that’s what they called it. A hundred years since the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and everyone is celebrating how much white and Black people have learned to love each other in America. You probably remember how they were talking in January of 1963. Well, if you had stood up in January at the same time that they were talking all this talk about a good year ahead, good things ahead, and told them that by May, Birmingham would have exploded, and Bull Connor would be known as an international thug for the brutality that he heaped upon Black people; if you would tell the people in January of ’63 that John F. Kennedy would be killed for his role in everything; if you had told them in January that Medgar Evers would be murdered and nobody able to bring his killer to justice; or if you were to have told them in January of 1963 that a church would be bombed in Birmingham, with four little Black girls blown to bits while they were praying and serving Jesus – why, they would say you’re crazy.

In 1964 they started out the same way. That was the year of promise. If you were to have told them while they were talking about this great year of promise ahead, you know, civil rights and all of that, what was coming, that before long three civil rights workers would be brutally murdered and the government unable to do anything about it. A Negro educator in Georgia brutally murdered in broad daylight and the men who did it be known, and the government not able to do anything about it. If you had said this in January of ’64, they’d say you were nuts. Now they are starting out 1965 the same way. Talking about the “Great Society”,
you know, “antipoverty.”

If you tell them right now what is in store for 1965, they’ll think you’re crazy for sure. But 1965 will be the longest and hottest and bloodiest year of them all. It has to be, not because you want it to be, or I want it to be, or we want it to be, but because the conditions that created these explosions in 1963 are still here; the conditions that created explosions in ’64 are still here. You can’t say that you’re not going to have an explosion and you leave the condition, the ingredients, still here. As long as those ingredients, explosive ingredients, remain, then you’re going to have the potential for explosion on your hands.

While Malcolm X’s often-cited readiness for his own death is often narrated as premonition, in this rumination on the disconnect between media-generated rhetorical optimism and brutal lived experience, Malcolm X clearly positions his awareness as a material recognition rather than a psychic revelation. In this 1965 speech, Malcolm X sets out a conditional protagonist, a “you” that might have predicted the events that transpired in the volatile years of ’63, ’64 and ’65 in the United States. A conditional “you” that would have, had he or she done so, been deemed crazy, certified as “nuts”. In the tactics of Malcolm X’s brilliant political pedagogy, this “you” is thrown out to the audience to whom he speaks, given to potentially be anyone of them, just as it is given to be Malcolm X himself. There is a group of people who want you to believe everything is going well now and will continue to do so in the near future he says, and we, who know better, are posited as crazy for thinking and for knowing otherwise. In this open proposal to change, in fact to challenge, the dominant narrative of collective expectation, Malcolm X elucidates the complexity of the relationship between rhetorical production, lived experience(s) and, to use his characterization of that particular historic moment, the explosive (un)predictability of future events.

In this case, Malcolm X posits experience and an astute awareness of the conditions of the present moment as the foundational ground on which the future can be imagined or, perhaps more appropriately to Malcolm X’s political project, the foundational ground on which the conditional “you”, he, we are given to prepare for possible futures. Malcolm X asserts the refutation of certain horizons of expectation (to use Reinhart Koselleck’s meta-historical category) as a way to incite a political challenge to very particular oppressive conditions of experience.

2. Teresa de Lauretis writes: “Experience is the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, originating in, oneself) those relations – material, economic, and interpersonal – which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical.” [1]

3. In an anecdotal sense, experience is thought of as something that an individual subject possesses or accumulates from events that happen to him or her – collective or individual, repeated or singular.

4. In 2004, I asked two young women in their mid-20s to go onto the streets of New York

6. In my work, I am trying to think through so-called “arresting images” as a disruption to various straightforward narratives of the progressive march of historical time. I’m trying to understand what these images suggest about how we understand and constitute the “experience” of an event, particularly any number of traumatic/dramatic political events: pivotal protests, bodily acts of resistance, eruptions of state violence.

Arresting images are those images we know from political events that can be conjured without reproducing them. From my geo-political-historical frame: an anguished woman kneeling over the body of a fallen student at Kent State, Tommie Smith and John Carlos raising their gloved fists from their pedestals as gold and bronze metal winners at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, a slight man with a white shirt and black pants, standing clutching a bag of some sort, in the path of four military tanks in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. These images are, I think, colloquially called “arresting images” because they seize us. They seize me, they hold me, freeze me, in some affective space of witnessing – witnessing what I also know to be an event I have not witnessed.

7. Amelia Jones writes: “I was not yet three years old, living in central North Carolina, when Carolee Schneemann performed Meat Joy at the Festival of Free Expression in Paris in 1964; three when Yoko Ono performed Cut Piece in Kyoto; eight when Vito
Acconci did his Push Ups in the sand at Jones Beach and Barbara T. Smith began her exploration of bodily experiences with her Ritual Meal performance in Los Angeles; nine when Adrian Piper paraded through the streets of New York making herself repulsive in the Catalysis series; ten when Valie Export rolled over glass in Eros/Ion in Frankfurt; twelve in 1973 when, in Milan, Gina Pane cut her arm to make blood roses flow (Sentimental Action); fifteen (still in North Carolina, completely unaware of any art world doings) when Marina Abramovic and Ulay collided against each other in Relation in Space at the Venice Biennale in 1976. I was thirty years old – then 1991 – when I began to study performance or body art from this explosive and important period, entirely through its documentation.” [3]

Jones’ recitative paragraph asserts: I was somewhere else when these events happened, I didn’t see them, I don’t have an experience of them, but I have an experience, which shouldn’t be considered less important, of the work through its documentation.

But political events, political traumas in particular, exceed the particular boundaries of their temporal and spatial occurrence. Martin Luther King’s assassination in 1968 in Memphis, TN, happened to everyone, not just to people in Memphis in 1968 who may have been witness to the event itself. This is what large cultural traumas do, they happen to all of us. This is why we so habitually recount where we were... when JFK was assassinated, when Malcolm X was shot, when Fred Hampton was murdered, when the wall came down, when the space shuttle blew up, when the towers fell, when the village was bombed. We mean I was here where I experienced the event. In this sense “being there” and “not having been there” loses its distinct geographic necessity.

8. Jones’ recitation could be rewritten:

“I was not yet three years old, living in central North Carolina, when Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life in prison in 1964; three when the United States Congress passed the Civil Rights Act; eight when the Chicago 8 went to trial for their actions at the Democratic National Convention; nine when four students were shot and killed at Kent State in Ohio; ten when Idi Amin seized power in Uganda; twelve in 1973 when, in Chile, a military junta violently overthrew the government of Salvador Allende, etc…

9. I first heard the work of Tehching Hsieh narrated as one-sentence descriptions.

“Tehching Hsieh, lived in a cage inside of his apartment for a year.”

“Tehching Hsieh punched a time clock every hour of every day for a year.”

“Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano lived for a year tied together by a 7ft. rope.”

Similarly, I heard about Adrian Piper’s Catalysis series through a series of oral description, such as: “Adrian Piper soaked her clothes in cod liver oil for a week and then rode the New York City subway system.”

It was only much later that I saw any images of Hsieh’s one-year performance from 1979-80, 1980-81 or of his one-year performance with Linda Montano, 1983-84, or any images of Piper’s Catalysis III or Catalysis IV and in each instance the photograph was utterly incapable of representing the event but all held my attention, seized me in much
the same way as I have experienced with various photographs of protests or other political events.

10. Robert Smithson explains his concept of site and non-site as follows:

   By drawing a diagram, a ground plan of a house, a street plan to the location of a site, or a topographic map, one draws a “logical two dimensional picture”. A “logical picture” differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the things it stands for. It is a two dimensional analogy or metaphor – A is Z. The Non-Site (an indoor earthwork) is a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet it represents an actual site in N.J. (The Pine Barrens Plains). It is by this three dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it – thus The Non-Site.” [4]

11. While in Smithson’s formulation, the non-site represents the site but does not resemble it, in the relationship of an event to its document, it is the reverse: the not-event does not represent the event it resembles it. Photographs of performance or political events are, in fact usually extremely poor representations of the events they are given to capture. They may, with the aid of a caption, give us one or two bodies who were there or involved or show us where the event occurred, but they rarely tell us anything at all about the other registers of the events unfolding: how, why, for how long? Did it begin slowly or just suddenly ignite, was it planned or spontaneous, how did it sound or smell?

   And as with Robert Smithson’s site and non-site, the not-event (photographs but also films, videos, audio clips) are bound to the event and, in turn, these not-events also bind those of us who view, watch or listen to them.

12. The not-event of the document, whether a photo, an audio tape, a narration, speaks to us, addresses us, in an attenuated psychic space between “being there” and “not being there” and this produces a kind of opening, I think, a temporal opening that has as much to do with our present relationship to the past as it does to our ability to project ourselves into the future.

13. In an essay about Carolyn Dinshaw’s theorization of “touching history”, activist and scholar Ann Pellegrini writes about racing to meet a writing deadline while the undetermined US presidential election of 2000 unfolded on television. “While the vote counting continued, halted, continued again, until the Supreme Court’s votes were counted once and for all, cable TV was my constant companion; like me, it was up at all hours with not much new to report. How many times did pundits – those “mediatized” historians of the sixty-minute hour – tell us, variably, that “we were witnessing history,” “this election is one for the history books,” or “we will be telling our grandkids about this one?” She continues, “The forecast anchors that future and this present in a certain past.” [5]

   How different this description-masked-as-reportage is from the slogan-offered-as-warning of 1960s and ’70s: “The whole world is watching.” The admonition of spectatorial responsibility that was constitutive of and constituted by the notion of “arresting” images.
14. Those images that we can conjure without reproduction, the ones that position us as witnesses to events that we do not coincide with physically or temporally, circulate across time and space in relation to our singular and collective identifications. By this I mean that these “arresting images” don’t accumulate like an ever-expanding archive but rather we cathect to specific images, we choose and are chosen by certain documents of certain events. Through these relationships, we accumulate a field of events to which we are witnesses, not passive observers of a thing that has past, but watchers with collective and individual spectatorial responsibility in the present moment. I say field out of a necessity to assign some organizing word to this collection of image-events that I don’t think has a definitive shape despite the ways in which it continually slides in and out of various organizational spatial understandings: timeline, landscape, horizon, etc.

15. There’s an anecdote that I remember from a Lacan seminar I took with Juli Carson in grad school. Let’s say I sit down, accidentally, on a chair with a tack on it and I leap up and scream “Ow!” I make an assumption that the tack caused the pain, however one could also say that it was the pain that made me recognize the existence of the tack and so that it is the pain that caused the tack.

I often refer to this anecdote to refute the simplified construction of before and after in relation to the document of an event. It could be said, I assert, that the image of the slight man with a white shirt and black pants who stood in front of a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square in Beijing on 4 June 1989 caused the event in as much as the action is predicated on that man’s ability to envision the image.

16. This complication of the conventional operation of causality also disrupts our simplified understanding of a photograph’s indexical relationship to the person/event/object it images.

The relationships between photographs and events, actions and expectations, documents and projections are formed through the complex cooperation of imagined and actualized experiences (past, present and future) and practices of record-making. The investment then, in a descriptive reality that constitutes the photograph as of the past, as following the event, as loss, as deficit, as nostalgia, is the investment of the newscaster who offers us the understanding of ourselves as passive observers of political experiences rather than as bodies/subjects with experience(s) of the past, present and future at once. And thus, as bodies with knowledge, imagination, desire and claim, individual and collective, of and toward a range of unpredictable and productively-confusing future possibilities.

17. In *Modern Language Notes*, February 1937, Herman Ebeling, writes that that the word anachronism from the Greek *ana chronos*, can be defined as “an error in respect to dates; an error which implies the misplacing of persons or events in time”. [6] Anachronism is also defined as “The representation of someone as existing or something as happening in other than chronological, proper, or historical order. Also as “the representation of an event, person, or thing in a historical context in which it could not have occurred or existed”. “A person or thing that belongs or seems to belong to another time.” “A person or a thing remaining or appearing after its own time period.” “An error in chronology.” “An artifact that belongs to another time.” “A person who seems to be displaced in time, who belongs to another age.” “A chronological misplacing of persons, events, objects, or customs in regard to each other. The state or condition of being
chronologically out of place. Something that is no longer suitable for or relevant to modern times. Such as the statement: She regards the marriage ceremony as a quaint anachronism.” [7]

18. I’m invested in deploying anachronism as an active error, a willful mistake, a deliberate confusion of temporality that exists as or insinuates itself into/as experience. Can we reverse Koselleck’s conceptual coupling: to speak, instead, of horizons of experience and spaces of expectation? If I, as an artist, disrupt the spatial and temporal assumptions that underlie our understanding of what events, persons, objects, actions constitute our realm of experience, can I construct, even if for a very brief period of time, a space in which it is possible to consider the future, our expectation of what is to come and our own position in and responsibility toward the explosive (un)predictability of 2011, 2012, 2013 and beyond?


Footnotes


6. Herman L. Ebeling, "The word 'anachronism'“, Modern Language Notes 52 (February 1937): 120f


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