



After After Before – Juli Carson

[If] communism can no longer be the unsurpassable horizon of our time [it's] not because we have passed beyond any horizon... The ultimate limit of community traces an entirely different line.¹

– Jean-Luc Nancy

That we know not how to name what awaits us is the sure sign that it awaits us.²

– Jean-François Lyotard

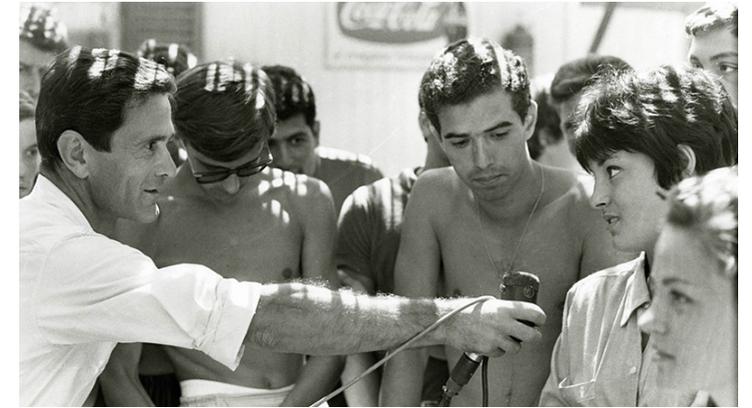
We hear it all the time. That name denoting an absolute, sovereign citizenry: *community*. The “black community,” the “Jewish community,” the “gay community.” But where are these homogenous entities? Pollsters and sociologists make a living calculating their communal desire through *demographics*, but it's increasingly hard to identify communities with any cohesion – aesthetically, philosophically or politically – aside from the contingent voting blocks they collectively form when the “public sphere” threatens expulsion. If the word “community” is ultimately a sign of *itself*, then perhaps it's an indication that community *has yet to be*, something we nevertheless aim at establishing. A good simile is the horizon. When you approach it, the horizon is both fixed and *not* fixed, receding at the same distance from you based upon the location of your own perspective. And yet, community is nothing like the horizon. Although it's visually deceiving, the horizon is quite real and mathematically calculable. But a community – one based upon a political program or absolute ideal – is really nothing *but* a mirage. As Jean-Luc Nancy argues, throughout time, communities have been nostalgically conceived upon a *lost* commune, a phantasmatic “horizon” *behind* us. It's a communal-ideal we've been chasing ever since Plato kicked the artists out of his Republic, the Christians created their brotherhoods, and Rousseau penned his *Social Contract* in service of Enlightenment *fraternité*. Even Guy Debord's *Situationist International* falls in line with this thinking, his renowned *Society of the Spectacle* being no less conceived upon a communal model of lost immanence than were his predecessors' treatises. And so it follows, from Nancy's point of view, what these communities have *really* lost “is lost only in the sense that such ‘loss’ is constitutive of ‘community’ itself.”³ Hence the horizon – that communal-ideal predicated on collective desire for a perceived loss – that lay *before* Sharon



Hayes's experimental documentary, *After Before*. Question is, does Hayes chase it or interrogate it?

Fast forward to the year 2004. The world is tumultuously unstable, something we haven't yet adjusted to after 9/11. The CIA admits there were no weapons of mass destruction used to justify the U.S. invasion of Iraq; terrorists bomb four rush-hour trains in Madrid, killing 191 people; Chechen president Akhmad Kadyrov is assassinated; Nick Berg, an American civilian contractor in Iraq, is decapitated by al-Qaeda-linked terrorists who web-distribute the video; hearings begin in Iraq in the trial of former president Saddam Hussein; the Orange Revolution begins in the Ukraine; a 9.1–9.3 Mw Indian Ocean earthquake results in one of the largest tsunamis in recorded history, killing 280,000 people. Amidst this wreckage – geopolitical and natural – four epistemological shifts occur: Google releases Gmail; students create Facebook from their Harvard dorm rooms; the EU adds 10 member states from Central and Eastern Europe; and, in the summer, republican delegates meet in New York City to nominate George W. Bush for re-election as president of the United States. In the shadow of these events, two women – protagonists in Hayes's *After Before* – hit the streets of NYC to randomly interview people about the upcoming presidential election. “Are you prepared for November 2?” they ask. Or alternately, “Are you prepared for November 3?” which receives quizzical reactions. As Hayes pointed out at the time, her quasi-fictional, quasi-documentary work was motivated by neither a desire to “document” that moment nor the promise of “truth-telling.” That would be *cinéma-vérité*. Rather, Hayes set out to be an interloper in the media's homogenous representation of communal voices into a simple polemic of left versus right. Predicated on the realization that communities are in fact rhizomatic and contradictory, it wasn't a *lost* community Hayes was searching for, but a *contingent* one, present amidst all this historic noise.

In a way, it's true. Since *After Before* provides a snapshot of “New Yorkers” at the precipice of a sea change, it does activate historical desire. But what it piques is a longing for a *present*, an entirely different lack – not an actual loss – grammatically echoed by the film's title and mode of production. Shot two months before the November elections, Hayes knew her multi-channel installation would open in May of 2005, well after the results were tallied and the new president inaugurated. As an artwork, then, the film simultaneously denotes two temporalities: the *after* and the *before* of the electoral event haunting it. Which is to say, the artwork falls



into the infinite regress of what Freud called *deferred action*, wherein the present tense can only ever be anticipated in advance or read through hindsight. This psychoanalytic formulation challenges the classic Aristotelian model of time, the latter of which structures conventional documentary narrative and, correspondingly, the communal histories they set out to represent. For Aristotle, time marks change by our distinguishing between a “before” and an “after” in relation to a given event. The “now,” on the other hand, stands outside of time because when we feel we are *in* time, we position ourselves somewhere along the linear succession of “befores” and “afters.” Put another way, in the “now,” *no time seems to have passed*. It is frozen. But when we perceive of a “before” and an “after,” then we are speaking of time. Aristotelian subjects of time thus come to *be* on the perceived loss of what came *before* them in the current moment. But Hayes wants it both ways. Her subjects – of film, history and community – both *speak of* and *exist in* time, hence *collapsing* the documentarian's golden rule of sequential “befores” and “afters.” Instead, we experience a regression into endlessly divisible “nows,” an infinite *presence* of time looping past into present, present into past.

Still, a past horizon haunts *After Before*. In 1960s Europe, experimental filmmakers conducted on-the-street interviews to gauge a given community's desire – *Are you happy?* – amidst epistemological shifts in national, racial and sexual politics. In Paris, there was Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronique d'un été* (1961), followed by Chris Marker's *Le Joli Mai* (1962). The former was “made without actors, but lived by men and women who devoted some of their time to a novel experiment of *film truth*,” according to the directors, while in the latter Simone Signoret muses that “one would like to travel back to Paris after a long absence to find out whether the same keys open the same doors.” By 1962, France had signed the Évian Accords, a prequel to ending The Algerian War for Independence, though backlashes were immanent, evidenced by one event echoing throughout *Le Joli Mai*: The Charonne Massacre, in which police brutality resulted in the deaths of 8 union and communist members protesting the bombings of Algerian and French citizens by the far-right paramilitary group *Organisation de l'armée secrète*. Looking at Marker's Paris today – in the wake of similar attacks by

Left and Cover: *After Before*, 2005, video stills. Performers: Kemba Bloodworth and Ewa Einhorn.

Center: *After Before*, 2005, *Exile of the Imaginary: Politics, Aesthetics, Love*, installation view, 2007. Photo: Werner Kaligofsky © Generali Foundation.

Right: Pier Pasolini, *Comizi d'amore*, 1965, video still.

ISIS – perhaps the same keys *do* open the same doors. If so, it's another case of *before* collapsing with *after*, when dialectical, progressive change stands frozen in its tracks. An engineer in *Le Joli Mai* put it this way: "For most people, the future is a bit like the horizon, you never reach it. It takes 30 years to get there, then 30 years more... An amazing thing is happening, the future has a lead on us." Hence the *other* horizon that lay behind us: the avant-garde desire to *capture* life in order to change it, an idyllic union of art and politics first anticipated by the historical soviet avant-garde. But this horizon is one that Marker and company could never quite reach, and one to which Hayes and her contemporaries can never quite return.

While *After Before* retains aspects of her predecessors' experimental tactics, Hayes eschews any notion of "community" at the limit of infinitely retreating horizon lines, both past and future. I would instead say, evoking Nancy, that *After Before* locates its "community" in the repressed gap between infinite pairs of *parallax* lines. Two aspects of parallax vision are important to consider here. First, parallax vision constructs an *apparent* difference of an object's position when viewed from two different lines of sight. Secondly, objects to which we are closer always appear more peripatetic than do objects in the distance. Metaphorically speaking, that "object" can stand for an event, an identity, a concept or a community within range of our historical (distant) or contemporary (close) point-of-view. It follows, then, that communities viewed from a *critical distance* – as either "lost" or "yet to be" – appear to *congeal* into one absolute body, one at which both nostalgic and futurist artists aim. But a community viewed at a very close range – from a space of *comp-licit proximity* – would appear to scatter about, hither and yon, just beyond our grasp. This is the parallax community that Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Comizi d'amore* captured in 1964, another film reference for Hayes in conceiving of *After Before*. Employing the same interview format as Marker, Pasolini set out to *deconsecrate* a community of Catholic Italians unprepared to reconcile their so-called economic miracle (the future) with their pernicious medieval attitudes about sex (the past). This rabbit hole of *non-presence* – a libidinal lacuna subtending two paternal lines of visions, one catholic, the other capitalist – was one that Pasolini willfully jumped into, in an effort to prove a point. When looked at from close range, his Italian "community" was in fact what George Bataille would have called *formless*. It's the same rabbit hole Hayes followed in shooting *After Before*, and today it's a portal to understanding what's still at stake in watching the film, *after* all is said and done.

Fast forward to 2016. It's President Barack Hussein Obama's last days in office, and the cultural landscape is a labyrinth of polemical politics. The sovereign subject – that sacred object of all communities – bounces about on this field, to and fro, between various parallaxes. But one polemic, amidst the others, stops time in its tracks. In response to Black Lives Matter – the civil disobedience collective formed in 2012 to protest the continuing wrongful deaths of African Americans at the hands of a militarized U.S. police force – a white nationalist group forms White Lives Matter, which the Southern Poverty Law Center swiftly declares a hate group. This is the *proximate* point-of-view from which I see (again) a poignant moment in *After Before*. When the interviewers ask, "What is the first political

image you remember?" a series of primal scenes rush forward from the interviewees. One answer – *The image of my 6th grade teacher in 1954 telling me to remember this time because it was the time of Brown vs. The Board of Education* – evokes a horizon behind us. But another response by a young black man – *I've been watching political views my whole life...me, myself one day? I wish I could be president* – points to a horizon that still lay in front of them. Standing in front of *After Before* today, I simultaneously cast two lines of sight upon it: the historic perspective of the 50s/60s, which I retrospectively occupy to look *forward* to *After Before*, and the contemporary perspective of 2008-2016, which I currently occupy to look *back* upon it. As such, *After Before*'s multifaceted "community" shimmers its (non)presence before me, refracting like a jewel within the subtended lacuna between these two gazes – the past and the future – where the film continues *to do its work* on me. As I write these words, now, in the summer of 2016, I look back at *After Before* in anticipation of the forthcoming presidential election – one in which all the racial and sexual issues of the cultural revolution are right back on the table – and conclude:

That I know not what awaits us is a sure sign that it awaits us.

- 1 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 8.
- 2 Jean-Francois Lyotard, quoted in *French Vogue*, June – July 1985, 476.
- 3 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 12.

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Sharon Hayes After Before

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