Harrell Fletcher: Shaping a New Social

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“I am getting along nicely in the dark.”

(An excerpt from James Joyce’s Ulysses (Joyce, 1960) read by Walter Cutler in Harrell Fletcher’s The Problem of Possible Redemption, 2003)

In Harrell Fletcher’s collaborative video, The Problem of Possible Redemption, seniors from the Parkville Senior Center in Connecticut read lines from James Joyce’s novel Ulysses. The video consists of a series of close-up shots, through a wide-angle lens, of seniors reading from cue cards, pausing to address the camera periodically. The technical crafting of the video is honest and intimate in its simplicity and proximity to the seniors. Ulysses’s themes of “society, war, and personal morality” told by seniors at a close distance puts the viewer in a position rarely experienced. The Problem of Possible Redemption can be initially interpreted as a video document of seniors reading excerpts from a novel, but upon further analysis it can also be construed as an occasion to consider the voice of seniors and their collective wisdom, as told through the stream-of-consciousness work of Ulysses.

This artwork and many others by Harrell Fletcher exemplify his artistic inquiry through social practice. The traditional tools and media that we associate with art making—drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, and video—are present in many of his art works, yet the work of art is the practice of shaping new kinds of social encounters. In The Problem of Possible Redemption, we encounter people from an important and growing part of our communities in a different way. What Fletcher and his art do is ask participants, viewers, and makers to reconsider their habitual interpretations and engagements with others. Though it is not a guarantee for a more socially just encounter, understandings prompted from such experiences provide an occasion to think and act differently about one’s complicity in the social structures we create and perpetuate.

The Problem of Possible Redemption points to possibilities for art education that rethink traditional media and processes taught in art classrooms. It does not replace traditional teaching of media, rather it suggests how the social—the habitual and patterned contexts, relations, interactions, and perceptions between people—is a medium in itself. How can we reshape local contexts, communities, and social practices, even if for a moment, to bring us new understandings of each other? This is a question that underlies much of the public and community art in North America and relational aesthetics of European art practice of the last 20 years. Fletcher reflects,

Since I’ve been paying attention, it’s become incredibly obvious how few meaningful questions people ask each other. I recommend that people try a little harder. How much do you really know about the people who you encounter on a daily basis? (Fletcher, 2002, p. 5)

If we think of the medium of an artwork as an opportunity for shaping new social encounters, we can then consider how works of art can meaningfully create opportunities for social and personal transformation.

References


Harrell Fletcher. The Problem of Possible Redemption, 2003, a video adaptation of James Joyce's *Ulysses* shot at the Parkville Senior Center, Connecticut, 00:13:25 m. Courtesy Harrell Fletcher.