

Democracy, Art, and the Frustrations of Populism

by [Seph Rodney](#) on July 25, 2016



Installation view, 'Of the People' at Smack Mellon (all photos by Etienne Frossard, courtesy the artists and Smack Mellon)

Art exhibitions concerned with politics are very much of the moment. There is [For Freedoms](#), at Jack Shainman Gallery, where the space has been turned into the headquarters for an artist-run super PAC; [POTUS](#) at CRG Gallery, featuring work by Brian Tolle that takes a comical view of past and present presidents; and earlier in the year, [#MakeAmericaGreatAgain](#), an impromptu exhibit convened in response to one of Donald Trump's lunatic boasts. [Of the People](#), at Smack Mellon, enters this conversation with a well-curated show by Erin Donnelly that is weighted towards storytelling, engaging in imaginative ways the political issues brought to greater public notice by the presidential race. However, it has a premise I find antagonizing.



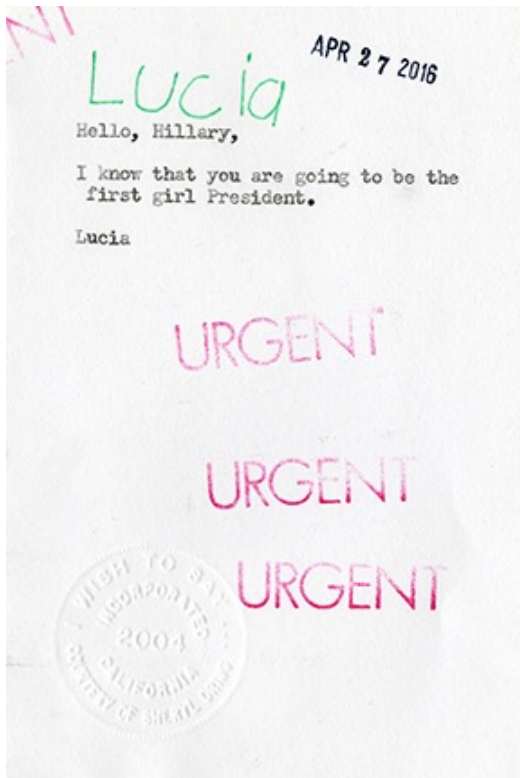
Screenprint by Pops, participant in Brooklyn Hi-Art Machine workshop, part of “Dear President, All Mouths Need Feeding and Demand Universal Basic Income” (2016) (click to enlarge)

Let's start with the title. It likely originates in [President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address](#). Lincoln wrote this during the American Civil War for the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, after a particularly brutal and demoralizing battle. It is essentially an exhortation to the living gathered to ceremonially assign a plot of ground to soldiers who died, to take up the serious and necessary task of dedicating themselves to the cause of keeping the nation whole. He eloquently reframes the soldiers' deaths as a catalyst for “a new birth of freedom” founded on the promise that Americans engaged in a war that threatened to end the great experiment would rededicate themselves to making sure, “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” There is something of that anti-elitist, do-it-yourself, spirit in this show that esteems standard, ordinary, common folk as the basis for a political system that promises freedom for all the citizenry. Many of the pieces here feature common people asserting their individual political voices to buttress this idea.



Installation view of 'Of the People' featuring Sheryl Oring's, "I Wish to Say" (2016), consisting of note cards suspended between pillars

Mildred Beltre and Oasa DuVerney of Brooklyn Hi-Art Machine produced "Dear President, All Mouths Need Feeding and Demand Universal Basic Income," (2016) which documents the collective design of election-related protest posters created with participants in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood. The placards displayed are simple and clear and graphically imposing. These are meant to speak *to* political figures. Similarly, "I Wish to Say" by Sheryl Oring is a truly sprawling and ambitious project, asks people to convey their thoughts and feelings to their elected and appointed officials. The piece consists of typewritten messages mailed to sitting presidents and candidates running for office, all generated by a team of students from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and PEN writers who typed up the messages given by members of the public. The messages are hung on index cards and consist of a range of responses including the crassly selfish, such as "We wish that tourists visiting the US could get more benefits such as tax free items." Someone else wrote something more thoughtful, saying, "We speak constantly of the dream of America, If it is a dream, ... it is mired in an unsettled and restless present." Exactly.



Sheryl Oring, "I Wish to Say" (detail, 2016)

Jeremy D. Olson's "Campaign Office" (2016), a piece that will grow through the length of the exhibition, takes a different tact in allowing visitors to see themselves as these figures. "Campaign Office" features a green-screen setup where would-be candidates can self-nominate for the highest executive position in the country by recording a stump speech, generated from 2016 campaign announcement speeches, against a backdrop culled from previous authentic announcements, and then filling out official documents required to declare oneself a candidate for president.

Perhaps my favorite work is the series of drawings with text, including a color handout visitors can take, by Ben Pinder IV, titled "A Brief and Mythic History of Super PACs." It's hilariously funny, showing creatures that are half man-half Bison interacting with people with the heads of eagles, other hybrids flying on the backs of enormous turkeys, and white men and women triumphant with their military-grade guns standing over the creatures they've killed. It's all about the undue reverence we pay to ideals that have limited usefulness.



Jeremy D. Olson, "Campaign Office" (2016), installation, dimensions varied

And here is why I find the show troubling. Much of the work in it is premised on the idea that more voices need to be included for politics to work in fair and useful ways for the majority. This is true — at times. But what do we do when we are so angry, suggestible, and near sighted that we vote in droves to nominate a startlingly ignorant, racist buffoon with poor impulse control to stand as a presidential candidate? The

British have just begun to grasp the grave consequences of handing an **utterly uniformed populace** hugely momentous policy decisions via public referendum. We imagine that our system of representative democracy is ultimately good, but we consistently see evidence that people can be persuaded to vote against their own best interests. Witness **the Republican party's successful linking** of the idea of corporate profit making without responsibility to individual freedom, while manufacturing jobs have been siphoned off to China and India leaving large sections of the populace furious and desperate. This exhibition by and large imagines that the antidote to our current situation of **living in an oligarchy**, where "a small ruling class dominates the political system to the exclusion of all others," is fuller and wider participation of non-elites.



Left to right: Ben Pinder IV "Opening Day Celebrations" (2016), "A Brief and Mythic History of Super PACs" (Cover, 2016), "A Brief and Mythic History of Super PACs" (Inside, 2016), "Big Guns" (2016), "State of the Union" (2015), "April 2016 Quarterly Report" (2016), "A Brief and Mythic History of Super PACs" (2016)

I am not entirely convinced that is a solution, so the exhibition leaves me unsettled. I wished this exhibition answered all the questions it raises, but recognize that democracy is not a political panacea. Rather, it is only the beginning of a long series of negotiations which require an informed citizenry ready and willing to engage in them.

Of the People continues at Smack Mellon (92 Plymouth Street, DUMBO, Brooklyn) until July 31.

*Hyperallergic is hosting a panel at Smack Mellon on Wednesday, July 27, 7pm, on **art and propaganda**. Moderated by Hyperallergic's editor-in-chief and cofounder, Hrag Vartanian, the conversation will feature Miriam M. Basilio, associate professor of art history and museum studies at NYU; artist Daniel Bejar, who is included in the exhibition; and artist Sue Schaffner, part of public-art duo DYKE ACTION MACHINE!*