

*America of My Dreams*  
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Philosopher Ernst Bloch understood the critical importance of hope. A German-Jewish Marxist philosopher at the University of Frankfurt during the rise of the Nazi's, Bloch fled to America at the beginning of the war. Unable to find work at an American institution, Bloch turned to hope and committed himself to composing a three-volume opus elaborating a theory of hope as the engine of human progress aptly titled The Principle of Hope.<sup>1</sup> After the war, Bloch returned to the German Democratic Republic until he was forced to flee to West Germany in 1961 when the orthodoxy of the Communist state began to view Bloch's vanguard attachment to utopianism as a threat. Appointed at Tübingen University, Bloch's critiques flocked to his appointment address to see if his attachment to hope had faded following the disappointment of Eastern Germany's failure and his personal betrayal by a Communist state he had long defended. Unsurprisingly, the central question (and title) of Bloch's address was "Can Be Hope Be Disappointed." More surprisingly, his answer was that in order for a progressive politics to be enacted, hope can and sometimes must be disappointed.

Summarizing this postulate, Bloch declared:

And yet, does *well-founded* hope, mediated, guiding hope, have any better prospects? It too can be, and will be disappointed; indeed, it must be so, as a matter of honour, or *else it would not be hope*.... Hope must be unconditionally disappointable, *first*, because it is open in a forward direction, in a future-oriented direction; it does not address itself to that which already exists. For this reason, hope—while actually in a state of suspension—is committed to change rather than repetition, and what is more, incorporates the element of chance, without which there can be nothing new.<sup>2</sup>

Hope is not that immaterial escapist fantasy on which we hang the future; it is the very stuff out of which we must begin the terrifying work of constructing tomorrow. As Bloch

reminds us, a future that will be better than the present we currently inhabit requires an orientation to that which is not-yet-known, perhaps that which is not-yet-conscious (as Bloch would describe it). Thus, facing towards the unknown, our hope must and *will* be disappointed.

In a series of snapshots, Kenneth Pietrobono *plays* with this kind of material hope. The Polaroid's that make up "America of My Dreams" were shot a few weeks before the success of Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential bid set free a flood of euphoria through the streets of the U.S. On a chilly night in New York City, friends gathered in Pietrobono's apartment to celebrate his birthday at a period when the material necessity of hope was racing through the bloodstream of the American left. Retrospectively, however, these arteries running on hope (for we had been drained of all else) were so tense with fear of disappointment that we verged on aneurisms all of us. Setting up a makeshift photo set, Pietrobono asked his guests to put that hope to work. Don't just dream of America, perform that America. Standing in vignettes that staged the most banal of political desires that had been relegated to the domain of the outlandish after eight years of the Bush Administration, guests came alive with the chance to *be* the America that we had long only dreamed about.

In one photo, "Environmental protection," Pietrobono grins heartily amidst two other figures. The photographer holds a dove and a young woman, in the middle, holds the sun above while a boy to her left literally hugs a tree. A banal gesture. For years, those who have espoused the need to protect the environment have been callously called "tree huggers," but here, he embraces this slur. And he does so under the banner of the nation, standing within the massive folds of an America flag that, in turn, hugs him.

There is an unabashed glee to this photograph, a childlike whimsy that accompanies those bold moments when, as children, we began to make worlds. We sat on the beach and sculpted peaceful empires of sand only to watch them fade into the tide. Here we learned two lessons: from our hands can come great civilizations but also, as Herodotus warned so many years before, great civilizations have coded within them their ultimate end. Returning the construction of civilization to childlike whimsy, the players in “America of My Dreams” inject whimsy and play back into the process of constructing democracy: *demos* (the people) / *kraits* (rule).

Obama was much criticized by the right for the arrogance of his campaign quote, “We are the one’s that we have been waiting for.” The critics missed the point. Obama understand how pronouns work. “We” is collective. It is not the singular and self possessed “I,” nor the insinuating and indicting “you.” It’s the inclusive. The collective. *We are the one’s that we have been waiting for.* Our future cannot come at another’s hands, but must be born of our own labor and toil. Following Obama’s election, critics on the left and right criticized the explosion of euphoria. We were told, especially by the left, that we should not think our prayers have been answered by a man who has been incorporated into a structure of governance that has a shitty track record of truly realizing the democratic potential of “government by and for the people.” A fair enough point, but these critics missed part of the driving force of the euphoria for many of us. What we felt driving through us was the weight of history and fruits of our hard working hope.

The morning of November 6<sup>th</sup>, I waited in line for an hour in my Harlem precinct to cast my vote. Running into my neighbor on the way out, I hugged her. “I waited an hour,” I said,” but it’s ok. We’ve been waiting eight years. Shit. We’ve been waiting

300.” That night, rushing into the streets, people came together to raise our voices to the sky. In that moment, it was not that Obama had saved us from Bush, from our country, from our history, or from ourselves. It was that *we were there*, collectively, imagining and building the America that we could become.

In “universal health care,” three subjects revel in their access to medicine. On the left, a young woman smiles euphorically while holding up a heart and a prescription, and in the middle a young man draws his own blood. Standing next to him, grinning mischievously, another young woman holds up her prescription and another heart. In gay marriage, four young men celebrate the nuptials of a couple at the center of the photograph holding up their license. The photographs draws out the obvious fact that for many queer couples across the country, their love is already sanctioned by a commitment that by all accounts save word, is a marriage. The official document at once stages the inadequacy of a queer politics that is bent only towards receiving official sanction while highlighting the ridiculous fact that the state withholds such sanction. However, in this photograph it’s the embrace between the two men, arms wrapped around each other, that reminds the viewer that the government does not authorize the love of the people, it is the love of the people *as the people* that authorizes the government.

Projects like Pietrobono’s carry within them the hope of a democratic spirit that moves beyond electoral politics. Democracy cannot happen in a vote. *That* is a Republic, and though we live in one (perhaps more of one than a democracy), in order to be truly democratic subjects we have to be what I have described elsewhere as “critical citizens.” Critical citizens are active citizens who are engaged in building a civic world *because* (not in spite) of our differences. They are critical of power when it is unjust and

responsible for its failures because we are its source – we must be willing to enact the “America of My Dreams” in our every action. We must ask questions when power is used in our name. We must perform the America that we want to be, and de-authorize the America that betrays us. The America of My Dreams will be realized not through the leadership of a good man or woman, but through the active, participatory, democratic *play* of the collective populace. We dream the future. We transform the present. We will be disappointed. And when we are we discover new hopes for a future not-yet-here. But coming...

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), ———, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), ———, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols., vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Bloch, "Can Hope Be Disappointed," in *Literary Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 340-41.