

PAUL ROBESON RESEARCH STATION

Sonya Dyer

Essay by Sophie Hope
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Site Gallery, Sheffield

Paul Robeson never died, said she!

In February 2011, artist Sonya Dyer kept office hours in Site Gallery, Sheffield working at her Paul Robeson Research Station. Dyer was collecting information on aspects of Robeson's life – his political activism, music, travels encounters, influences – and presenting them in the form of photocopies, documents, spider-grams on OHP transparencies, watercolours from photo and a video documenting Paul Robeson Strasse in Berlin. Here, as the research extended into the gallery, the ephemera of Robeson's life was being reworked and represented by Dyer and her visitors in an attempt to get to know the man. For some, this was a first encounter with Robeson and for others a reminder of his music and civil right campaigns. Whatever the relationship visitors had to Robeson, by doing her research in public, Dyer made us wonder how and why a man so prolific and vocal could have escaped anyone's attention. It also served as a reminder of how rare it is to come across public intellectuals today with such creative, articulate and politically astute aplomb as Robeson had demonstrated throughout his lifetime from 1898 – 1976. Without heroicising Robeson, the research station investigated the achievements and sacrifices made by a political artist who bravely explored his values, beliefs and campaigns through his music, acting and social justice work.

Rather than reflect on the life of Robeson here, however, I want to ask how the nature of Robeson's practice that brought together his research, art and politics was reflected in the format and reception of Dyer's public research station. What was the significance of doing this research 'in public'? How did the process of taking one man's life as a starting point lead to threads of thought and action that connected a tomato plant, a Welsh opera singer, the 1950 World Peace Congress and the Sheffield Socialist Choir? The research station is a temporal glimpse of a work in constant progress, an exposé of an intense study with intermittent interruptions from people drawn towards the music and messages resounding in the space. Visitors might have shared memories or searched for more clues about his life, all of which added to this temporary archive at work. One visitor brought in a black Russian Paul Robeson tomato plant for Dyer. Following screenings of films starring Robeson, *The Proud Valley* (1940) and *Song of Freedom* (1936), opera singer Beverley Humphries from the Paul Robeson Wales Trust talked about Robeson's relationship with Wales and the Welsh minors he met in the 1920

who were marching to London on hunger strike over working and living conditions in the Welsh Valleys. Another visitor recalled his parents' traveling on a bus to Sheffield for the Second World Peace Conference in 1950, which Robeson and many other delegates were refused visas to enter England to attend. Drawing on the international status of Robeson, whose music managed to defy borders, Dyer's two week Research Station culminated in a performance by the Sheffield Socialist Choir whose songs of protest resonated among an audience moved to collective tears.

The research station resisted simplifying or reducing information into a timeline or catalogue of a man's life, allowing encounters with the research to remain complex, inter-subjective and partial. Gallery programmes often cast a net wide across their constituencies, hoping to capture the interests of new visitors, drawing them in to prove there is a demand for the gallery's existence. Rather than do a mass call out or enforcing the participation of local community groups, however, the Paul Robeson Research Station attracted self-selecting people who found affinity with Robeson's ideas and who willingly pilgrimaged to the gallery. Others might have experienced chance encounters with the spectre of Robeson whilst on their way to the gallery cafe.

While Dyer's research process was on display, visitors witnessed the careful editing, arranging and organising of her investigation. We were invited to get to the essence of a man; work out our relationship to him and also reflect on what it means for an artist to be showing such a keen interest in someone else. Because the material was being mediated, reworked and filtered as research in progress, I started to question the validity of what I was seeing. How do I know what to believe and how I should behave, when beckoned into someone else's study?

A question for you: have you ever suffered because you've refused silence and put your views into action? What did you risk in the process? Robeson, as far as I can tell, made a career out of speaking his mind, which he did through speech, song and text. He embodied the changes he wanted to see in the world and in many ways his life became his art. It must take immense skill to negotiate the multiple agendas and oppressions that creep over you, wanting to reject or mould you into a recognisable, suitable shape. What does it take to disengage with these agendas and forms of oppression in order to speak

your own mind? What is gained and what is lost in this process? What do you risk by refusing to play the game, rejecting the brief and following your own nose?

The Paul Robeson Research Station looked like it might be playing along safely celebrating a historical figure, whilst trying to avoid slipping into presenting Robeson as a heroic martyr. Yet it seemed to me that it also touched a nerve that caused friction and tension in the context of those encounters as it went beyond the performance of research and became a form of radical education. When wrenched out of a romantic nostalgia for socialist change, this project, just as Robeson's music continues to, tapped into a rebellious and passionate streak that is calling out for change still to come. While we may have ended up all singing The Internationale at the final event, the Research Station created a balance between seductive persuasion and humorous utterances, allowing for multiple, conflictual interpretations to shoot off in all directions. How these encounters with a political artist will be made manifest in the lives of the people of Sheffield will perhaps be the subject of research stations of the future. Whatever the case, this was a powerful wake-up call that the constant pushing at limits of society and refusing to play along to the oppressor's tune, takes an energy and strength that perhaps only a few people can sustain.

This essay by Sophie Hope was commissioned by Site Gallery in response to Sonya Dyer's Platform residency, 'Paul Robeson Research Station', 2011.

Sophie Hope is an artist, curator, researcher, teacher, and writer. She works to inspect the uncertain relationships between art and society, rethinking what it means to be paid to be critical and devising tactics to challenge notions of authorship.

www.sophiehope.org.uk