

Sharon Hayes

LONDON,
at Studio Voltaire
by Milena Tomic

Sharon Hayes: *In My Little Corner of the World, Anyone Would Love You*, 2016, five-channel video installation, 36 minutes, 40 seconds; at Studio Voltaire.



Sharon Hayes's exhibition "In My Little Corner of the World, Anyone Would Love You" presented the activist "speech acts" for which the Baltimore-born, Philadelphia-based artist is known. The focus of the show, installed at a slight angle to the walls of Studio Voltaire (a former chapel), was a five-channel video projected onto an L-shaped structure made of plywood. Each channel shows a room in a house: bedroom, bathroom, living room, kitchen, and office. Performers from the feminist and queer community in Philadelphia appear in the rooms reading aloud from newsletters printed between 1955 and 1977 by American and British groups fighting for women's liberation and gay rights. Together, the performers, whether seated at the kitchen table or resting on a quilt-covered bed, convey a sense of domestic harmony; one person speaks at a time, while the others engage in unobtrusive tasks like typing or stapling papers.

The other side of the plywood was papered with colored photocopies of pages from these newsletters. In addition to reports about court battles for lesbian mothers' cohabitation rights, there were hand-drawn street maps, photographs of meeting places, and announcements for events like a demonstration to repeal abortion laws and a retreat to debate alternatives to the heterosexual family.

The performers in the video work breathe new life into the archive while eliding its historical specificity, since proper names and places are generally omitted. Questions about the home's stability arise when the rooms start shifting between channels, a metaphor, perhaps, for the unpredictable loyalties in a community whose common goal is liberation. "We cannot even begin to talk about obtaining rights when we are so busy taking rights from each other," warns one writer. Another decries her "three-fold oppression" by racists, sexists, and heterosexists, imploring her fellow activists to "work on all three oppressions or not at all." A self-described "mild transvestite" rejects high-heeled shoes as unilateral tools of male oppression; a drag queen laments how so many in the gay community marginalize those who are "enclosed in a male body" but are "feminine in thought, deed, and action." While the readers who deliver these decades-old lines provide no commentaries of their own, they seem relieved of the extreme isolation described by the newsletter writers living in remote communities.

In this work, Hayes revives strategies she employed in earlier projects, such as *In the Near Future* (2005–09), where she held up placards in the streets that bore both fictional and historical slogans. Here, too, Hayes detaches her chosen "speech acts" from the subjects who uttered them and the contexts that gave them meaning, exploiting how the recent past exists in the gap between living memory and historical record. Through the metaphor of a house whose configuration of rooms is precarious, she recalls the fraught nature of intersectional alliances, an issue as relevant now as it was then.