

THE PLACEHOLDER FOR LOVE AND POLITICS



Sharon Hayes, *I March In The Parade of Liberty But As Long As I Love You I'm Not Free*, 2007/2008

In August, Sharon Hayes went to the Democratic National Convention in Denver. She put out a call for volunteers who were "flamboyantly queer—or prepared to play the part." Eventually, she assembled about two dozen people on a busy downtown street, who declaimed in unison something that she describes as a "love address." It's a form of address she has used in several performances of late: part love letter, part tract for the times. It confronts a "you" that might be a solitary lover as much as it might be all the people in the world.

Hinting at the atmosphere of contemporary US culture, where many of these protest performances take place, Hayes explains: "We emerged onto the streets of Denver just as this crazy Christian group was arriving with these placards that said things like 'Homo sex is a sin' or 'Beware! Thieves, aborters, homosexuals, you'll burn in hell!' They kind of surrounded us for a moment, and they were followed by cops in thick riot gear. I thought they're just going to camp there. Yet what was interesting was that because we weren't engaging with them, because we weren't bashing them back, they just passed on. And just as they did, we began our performance."

Hayes was busy this summer. Aside from narrowly avoiding riots, she also exhibited at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin as part of *Freeway Balconies*, a show in which photographer Collier Schorr placed her own work alongside that of artists she considers to be among America's most important new talents. Hayes is also staging a performance at Frieze Art Fair entitled *Unannounced*. It will feature a politico-artistic campaign encompassing leaflets, megaphones, and picket signs that will increase in intensity on each subsequent day of the fair. The performance will expose the make-up of the fair's audience and will reflect notions of inclusivity, exclusivity, and privileged access to information.

With American democracy at the crossroads, performance and video artist Sharon Hayes is making political art sexy again. Organizing flamboyantly queer protests at political conventions, or falsifying the radical speeches of Patty Hearst: Hayes' exploration of the intersection between history, politics, speech, and desire is unique. The artist is taking part in this year's Frieze Projects with her performance "Unannounced" and has also created an original work especially for this issue of db artmag. Morgan Falconer met Hayes at her Brooklyn studio.

Sharon Hayes was born in Baltimore in 1970. The lively, wiry-framed woman, mostly accompanied by a dog named Cosmos, came to New York in the mid-1990s and was drawn to the downtown performance scene. Her peers were politically minded—often feminists and lesbians like herself—but there were mainly theatrical performances rather than performances for a gallery or museum context. "The last work that I made in that vein was called *The Lesbian*," she says. "It was based on a long drive I took across the country to discover lesbians 'in their natural habitat.' The idea was to lay the concept of 'the lesbian' on top of the American landscape. When I came back, I did perhaps the least theatrical thing I'd ever done—it was really just a conversation with the audience."

Realizing that she was seeking something new, she received a place in the Whitney Museum's highly-regarded Independent Study Program, and in 2002 she made a video which now seems seminal. In *Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA)*, she performed speeches that legendary heiress and leftist radical Patty Hearst

made to the camera in the period after she was kidnapped by the SLA in 1974. But Hayes deliberately fluffed the lines, faltered, and invited prompts from behind the camera. It created a strange confusion. Was she signalling sympathy with Hearst's changing views? Or was she mocking a figure who has become almost camp as the years have passed?

Among the elements of that performance, which have since become leitmotifs in Hayes' work, is the rifling of the past. For *In the Near Future*, a performance first staged in 2005, she stood at various points around New York holding placards bearing slogans relating to struggles which, in political terms, were straight from the crypt. On Wall Street she demanded: "Ratify E.R.A. Now!" for instance, protesting for the Equal Rights Amendment to the American constitution, which was first proposed in 1923. In Central Park, she asked "Who Approved the War—in Vietnam?" People actually stopped to tell her. This play with outmoded agitprop slogans, of course, is more than just an acknowledgement of history's political movements. American women are still discriminated against at the workplace and earn much less than their male counterparts. And with the vastly unpopular war in Iraq, the U.S. has acquired a new military quagmire, after all.

"I've started to think of myself almost as a placeholder," she says of *In the Near Future*. "I'm holding the place of a kind of address that had meaning and resonance and impact at a certain moment in time. And I'm thinking about the possibility that this specific resonance and impact could be present at a future time." It's an attitude one also recognizes in the way some of her other images relate to her performances. Her videos go some way towards documenting her performances, but their peculiar styling sets them apart from the actual events. Similarly, she has made silk-screens which are the form of event announcements. She often installs these alongside the soundtracks from performances to hint at the historicity of events. The images refer to the recent past, and often the performances refer to events even further removed, leaving everything suspended uncertainly in time.

She made a series of these posters to tie in with a performance—another "love address"—that she first staged last year on Sixth Avenue in New York, as office workers hurried to lunch. She titled the piece *Everything Else Has Failed! Don't You Think It's Time For Love?* "It's based on the fiction that I'm trying to reach someone who I can't get in touch with," she says. "After all these various forms of communication have failed, I'm just standing on the street throwing the words out and hoping they'll find a way. My interest is in laying political desire and personal desire on top of one another."

Democracy in America is in a parlous state, Hayes believes. "I think there's something about public speech that has broken down in terms of anyone's ability to speak about war on the street and get people to listen." This is a development that seems to leave the public more paralyzed than ever. "People don't know what to do or how to be or how to act. I think there's been a very concerted political effort on the part of the right wing to construct a public that is concerned primarily with its own survival. We're given to believe that all we can worry about is ourselves and our families."



Sharon Hayes, *Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds #13, 16, 20 & 29*, 2003. Installation



above and below: Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future*, New York, 2005, Installation