



Speech Acts

Art historian *Roger Cook* discusses politics, performance and collaboration with artist **Sharon Hayes**

All images courtesy Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin, and the artist.
Revolutionary Love's photograph: Gert Fritman/Wallpaper Art Center



Above:
In the Near Future
2009
Performance
documentation

Right:
*Revolutionary Love 2:
I Am Your Best
Fantasy*
2008
Performance
documentation

I first came across the work of American artist Sharon Hayes when I was researching an article on the staging of homosexual equality and contemporary art for an issue of the Australian journal Borderlands.¹ Listening to an MP3 of her 2008 street performance I March in the Parade of Liberty, But As Long As I Love You I'm Not Free², it struck me as a moving contemporary enactment of the old feminist adage: 'The personal is political.'³ It seemed to me that, like Michel Foucault, Hayes wished to change things by understanding them archaeologically when she revived activist slogans and re-enacted speeches from – or in relation to – the period of the liberation movements, without the essentialism of their identity politics.

ROGER COOK I grew up in the 1950s in an atmosphere of unspoken homophobia, and experienced the period's uncertainties concerning sexual subject formation, which is why I find your work so ethically and politically astute. How was your own subjectivity formed by your background and education as an artist?

SHARON HAYES College was where I became a feminist, a lesbian and then an artist, in that order. My formal study began at Bowdoin College, and continued in a semester at the Trinity/La MaMa Performing Arts Program. About eight years later I attended the Whitney Museum's Independent Studio Program and went to grad school at UCLA immediately afterwards to study with Mary Kelly. At Bowdoin, I studied anthropology, but outside of the classroom I was practicing journalism. Both disciplines had a direct impact on my work. During my junior year in college, I took a dance class and met a performance artist named Dan Hurlin. I realized that performance allowed me to entertain all the curiosities of journalism and anthropology without the limitations that I experienced in the practice of either: in the case of journalism, the necessity to simplify the complex impact of various events in the world, and, in the case of anthropology, the fraught historical dynamic between the ethnographer and his or her subject.

In 1991, I followed Dan to New York and began working in the downtown dance, theatre and performance scene. It was a

scene that was decidedly queer; as a young feminist and lesbian, I found it was an incredibly supportive and generous place. That year was also the middle of the AIDS crisis in the USA, and its wide-ranging impact on the community of artists and activists that I was becoming a part of directly influenced my understanding of the myriad ways in which most aspects of our lives as queer people are political.

RC It is good to remember how the AIDS crisis politically galvanized aspects of the New York art community. In London, I experienced something similar through my association with Derek Jarman, who recruited me to play Jesus Christ in his angry AIDS movie *The Garden* (1990). Though no Pier Paolo Pasolini as a filmmaker, he did show Pasolinian courage in taking responsibility as an intellectual, by declaring himself HIV positive during a period of public panic. In 1998, you made the project and performance *The Lesbian*. What part did it play in the development of your work?

SH *The Lesbian* was based on material that I gathered while on a three-and-a-half-month research project in which I drove across the United States interviewing lesbians, documenting lesbian communities and performing in their living rooms. I used Brechtian techniques to set out the narrative in which I assumed the roles of The Researcher, The Interviewer, The Choreographer and The Girlfriend – all of whom are contrived to explicate The Lesbian. Unable to situate, define or locate The Lesbian, she became positioned everywhere and nowhere. I attempted to develop a discourse of lesbian identity that was slapped – literally – onto the American landscape, becoming a filter, a blanket in a sense, draped on top of other aspects of US national mythology.

The piece was essentially a 75-minute conversation with the audience – not that they talked back, but I walked them through all the aspects of the piece, what was there and what was not there. In the performance, I said I would be taking them through an exhibit of the natural history of lesbians but I'd be borrowing from the conventions



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of theatre to do so, such that the exhibit was organized into scenes. I began at scene 12, I skipped scenes, left some running and continued forward; I gave the audience a script to perform, but said we had to skip it in the interest of time. I presented myself as an unreliable tour guide, and, in turn, presented identity as similarly unstable.

Having finished the piece, I realized that I needed to find a way to work with speech, identity, history and politics without the frame of theatrical form. It was studying on the Whitney and UCLA programmes that then allowed me to take a critical leap in my work from 'doing' to 'using' performance.

RC Can you expand on that distinction between 'doing' and 'using' performance?

SH It came up simply for me: performance shifted from being the assumed form to a chosen strategy. By stepping out of theatrically based performance, I started utilizing various elements of that form to set something into motion, to ask a question, to initiate or suggest an encounter, sometimes to re-insert a past moment of time into a present one. I employed the form for specific reasons and many of them had to do with the relationship between a performer and an audience and, more generally I suppose, a speaker and a listener.

I'm also intensely animated by the relationship of the event to the 'not-event' of the document of a performance or political event. Out in the world of politics, these 'not-events' usually begin from some desire to document something that is unfolding, but if a photograph or a film or a video or a sound clip lives or carries on into the future, it is usually because it is something other than just a document. It usually has some event-like status of its own. This 'not-event', like Robert Smithson's site and non-site, has a relationship to the event that can never be severed. In Smithson's conception of the site and non-site, he speaks of the non-site as representing the site but not resembling it; a map of a place is a non-site, for instance. For me, the 'not-event' of the document of an event is some kind of inversion of this relationship. It perhaps resembles the event (it may include many of the same players/characters; it may have been recorded at the same site as the event) but it does not represent the event. It is, usually, hopelessly partial, fragmented, incomplete. I suppose here I am thinking of documents that are familiar to me; the picture of the woman screaming over the body of a fellow student shot at Kent State University in May 1970, or the image of two athletes raising their fists in a Black Power

salute at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. Neither tells a full story. They manage to seize viewers in an affective state – they hold us, they enervate or activate us. The moment we glance at these photographs, they seem to have happened to us.

rc Vito Acconci spoke of art as 'a family of uses' and of using art instrumentally. But when one considers the totalitarian and fascist uses art can be - and has been - put to, one can identify with the Wildean assertion of the absolute uselessness of art. As I see it, you follow Acconci in seeing art as an exchange between artist and viewer, as a 'distribution system' that engages spectators equally in its sense-making processes.

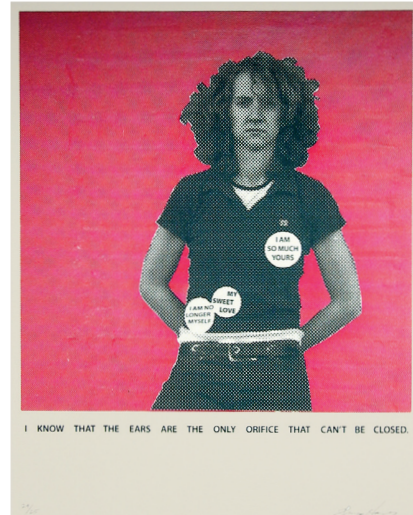
SH I am interested in using performance to non-normatively occupy normative social situations. I've never traced Wilde's uselessness of art to the queer habit of the non-normative but, here in our conversation, I wonder if they might have a relationship. A few years ago, I had occasion to put sound to silent footage shot by the Women's Liberation Cinema Company of the second annual Christopher Street Day Liberation Parade in 1971. The march began in Greenwich Village and went up 6th Avenue to Central Park. As





In the Near Future,
Warsaw
2008
Performance
documentation

*I Know that the Ears
Are the only Orifice that
Can't be Closed*
2008
Silkscreen
46x29 cm



In the Near Future,
London
2008
Performance
documentation

I pored over newspaper reports of the parade and footage of a band of queers – strutting around, kissing the camera, kissing each other, sashaying, flirting – I started to understand, in a way I had never before, 'gay power'. It's a power that comes with a kind of semi-autonomy – the power to not need the institution of marriage, for a man to squeeze another man's ass in public, or a woman to want to fuck another woman. I finally understood how threatening that was – and still is, in many ways – to political and social power structures for all these queers to be running through the streets being boldly and happily queer.

RC Could you say something about the importance of working collaboratively?

SH I am invested in a range of collaborative practices because it is through dialogue and exchange with colleagues, friends, students and lovers that I am most able to understand myself in the world.

RC Last year, Helen Molesworth invited you to re-invent Allan Kaprow's 1961 happening, *YARD*, alongside two other artists for a show in three locations in New York: Hauser & Wirth, the Marble Cemetery and Queens Museum of Art. In a conversation with art historian Judith Rodenbeck you said you see 1961 as representing 'a moment stretching from the mid 1950s to the early '70s, a moment that saw challenges to medium specificity, to the idea of what could constitute the category of art, of

what could constitute an art object', and that 1961 was a moment that constituted a real political challenge that is 'sometimes obfuscated'. You went on to say that one of the challenges of re-inventing Kaprow's *YARD* was working with historical gaps; it is important for you to distinguish between re-enactment, citation, re-invention and anachronism.

SH In his essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' [1940], Walter Benjamin wrote: 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" [...] It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger [...] Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.' It's a brilliant observation to which I continually return in order to understand that the past is relevant and, in fact, present in the present moment and also that there is an urgency for us to be attentive to these ruptures or flashes. I've been invested, in my work, in historical moments, images, texts, speeches and art works that rupture into our present moment, and are able to be recognized in the present because they are relevant to an ongoing, unresolved set of problems, struggles, questions, debates. I don't re-enact past events but I do use material from specific past moments in order to address these continuing struggles. I have re-spoken the texts that Patty Hearst and the Symbionese Liberation Army made during

her kidnapping. I have read all 36 'Address to the Nation' speeches that Ronald Reagan gave during his presidency. I have stood in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York with a sign that declared 'I AM A MAN' and I have re-invented Kaprow's *YARD*. In each of these, I call up historic texts, in order to ask something of the political and social conditions in which we are living now and, as Benjamin suggests, to continue the struggle.

Roger Cook is a writer, art historian and a Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London.

The work of Sharon Hayes is currently featured in the 2010 Whitney Biennial and the 4th Auckland Triennial. In recent years, her work has been included in documenta 12, Kassel, the 11th Istanbul Biennale and the 3rd Yokohama Triennial. In London, she has shown at Lisson Gallery and Tate Modern; and in New York at P.S.1, Contemporary Art Center, Artists Space, Art-in-General and the New Museum.

1 Roger Cook 'Aesthetic Revolution, the Staging of ('Homosexual') Equality and Contemporary Art', in *Borderlands*, Volume 8, No. 2, 2009 'Jacques Rancière on the Shores of Queer Theory'

2 www.shaze.info

3 This slogan was invented by Sulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt as the title for the 1969 article by Carol Hanisch in their 1970 anthology *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation, Radical Feminism*, New York, 1979

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