

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

INTIMATE INVESTIGATIONS

Jesi Khadivi on Sharon Hayes at Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin

The American artist Sharon Hayes has spent the better part of her career mining histories of dissent and activism, reformulating those archives into her own practice as a performance and video artist. Love and sexuality are recurring themes in Hayes work, and a recent show at Tanya Leighton in Berlin brought together these various strands in videos that pay homage to Pier Paolo Pasolini.

Critic and curator Jesi Khadivi offers her take on the relationship between Hayes and Pasolini, and the questions that can be posed today about family structures, reproduction, and lifestyle. What Hayes manages to accomplish is to update the content of Pasolini's work while never losing sight of its stakes.

In 1963, Pier Paolo Pasolini traveled throughout Italy and interviewed Italians of all ages about their thoughts on sex and love. The result was the documentary *Comizi d'Amore* (1965), which assembled a series of frank, often jarring conversations with groups of children, factory workers, families, army buddies, and university students – generally undertaken in public spaces like dance halls, beaches, and city streets. In his review of the film, written for *Le Monde* in 1977, Michel Foucault writes that the documentary, whose title translates to “love conference, meeting, or perhaps forum,” is an “ancient game of the ‘symposium’ played out of doors, compelling for its avoidance of private, confessional, or discreet discourses of love, favoring instead its street vernacular.”¹ In a subtle yet striking scene, set in the Emiliana countryside, Pasolini speaks with a farming family: a fresh-faced teenage girl flanked on either side by her aging parents. He poses a series of deceptively simple questions, coaxing the speakers into a gentle form of antagonism. The couple elaborate their responses to Pasolini's blunt inquiries at much greater length than their

daughter, touching upon their perceptions of the next generation, their own changing sexuality as they age, and their ideas about the relationship between the sexes (according to the father, although they do not enjoy equal freedom, women are only “a little bit more inferior than men”). Throughout her parents' meandering responses, the girl smiles blithely, says little, and gazes directly at the camera. Pasolini alternates between asking each family member for their opinion on a given topic, allowing one person's answer to form the basis of the question for the next. When asked her opinion, the girl offers firm, often one-word answers, each time contradicting the sentiment her mother or father had offered just moments prior. A quiet yet incisive form of dissent takes place here – a subtle rebellion fomented in the space opened by Pasolini's constellation of questions.

Pasolini utilizes the form of the interview, particularly his deft negotiation of questions pertaining to his subjects' perceptions of social institutions, to create zones of friction and disagreement. A similar operation is at work in American artist Sharon Hayes's recent exhibition “*Nel Mezzo*” at Tanya Leighton Gallery in Berlin. *Nel Mezzo*, which roughly translates as “in the middle” or “in the midst,” can be read as a cipher of sorts: an in-between space, a device that collapses different temporalities and contexts, facilitating the cross-contamination – or perhaps better said, co-mingling – of past, present, and future. A concise and focused presentation, the exhibition brings together two chapters of the artist's ongoing *Ricerche* project, which borrows its title from the name that Pasolini gave the different episodes of his *Comizi d'Amore*, alongside a textile banner emblazoned with the slogan “Come Out!”

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Sharon Hayes, "Ricerche: one," 2019, film still

The most recent work in the exhibition, installed directly adjacent to the gallery's entrance, *Come Out!* sets the tone for the conjunction of different temporal, political, and social contexts that mark not only the exhibition, but also Hayes's practice more broadly. Hayes's banner inverts the slogan, which originates from the title of a magazine published by the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) from 1969–73. Newsprint clings to the painted letters on the banner, layering headlines from the week of June 15, 2019 – linking our present moment, through a deconstructed snapshot of current affairs, to the historical moment lived by this radical political liberation movement. Begun nearly 50 years after Pasolini's film, Hayes's *Ricerche* videos pick up where the director left off – even verbatim citing some of his original questions, interspersing them with her own and thus creating a space for dialogue around non-hetero-normative family structures and non-binary gender identifications. "There is something of this persistence or insistence of the past that I like with the reappearance of his questions in the present," Hayes told the art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson in a recent interview. "It was such a pleasure to catalyze that reappearance in the space of an interview, and so unpredictable."²

Ricerche: one (2019), Hayes's second work in the series, begins with the same breezy charm as *Comizi d'Amore*, with the question: "Where do babies come from?" The two-channel video, installed on a freestanding tent-like screen structure, only allows one channel to be viewed at a time. Some of the answers in the first channel, which features children who seem to range in

age from approximately five to seven years old, have changed little since Pasolini first posed the question in his film in the early 1960s: blank faces, shrugs, overly elaborate or seemingly impossible explanations, and occasional old classics like "the stork" and "my mama's belly." As the questioning unfolds, however, some of the youngsters reveal a startlingly in-depth understanding of how babies are made, ranging from the heterosexual sex act to assisted reproductive technology. Moving around to the other side of the screen, one sees a group of college-age students sitting on the beach, to whom Hayes poses the same questions as their younger counterparts. Here, a more nuanced understanding of the broader political questions surrounding the institution of the family emerge – as well as, in some of the speakers, a certain hesitation or fumbling for words when they speak. This is driven less by a lack of understanding about sex, as with some of the younger interviewees, and more by a profound consciousness that these kinds of questions aren't so easy to answer off the cuff, precisely because their own birth stories entail a deconstruction of socially engrained norms related to gender, sexuality, reproduction, and the family. How one mobilizes language in this context is paramount – and perhaps one of the most touching moments in the video is when a young person eloquently explains a birth story that is out of step with most of those in the group, who were born to openly gay parents. Unlike their peers, they share how the story of their birth is painful to recount as they were born to a lesbian mother within the parameters of a heterosexual marriage and there-

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fore their very existence was a condition of their mother's closeting.

While Pasolini adopted the role of a roving reporter in his investigative endeavors – traveling from the countryside to urban dancehalls and factories to Tuscan beaches – Hayes generally convenes her groups of participants in singular, seemingly inconsequential locations. This gesture distills Pasolini's role in the film to its essence: the interlocutor functions as a kind of productive irritant. This is particularly evident in Hayes's first work in the series, *Ricerche: three*, made in 2013 on the campus of Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts. The elite "Seven Sister" college's enrollment policy has recently revised its definition of "woman," originally conceived in a passively, biologically determined sense, to encompass a broader range of gender-fluid and non-normative identities. Hayes gathers 35 students outdoors on campus to ask probing, deadpan questions about sex and sexuality. While Pasolini's Italians seemed to be fighting for the "right" interpretation of social codes, a fundamental truth or morality, five decades later, the Holyoke students brook no illusion about absolute truths. Bound only by the tenuous and capacious label of "woman," this group of speakers performs not only its refusal, but also the impossibility of coalescing into a unified stable unit, underscored by their repeated emphasis that they are "talking about different we's here." Although disagreement and dissent features most prominently in *Ricerche: three*, the zones of micro-agonism that Hayes's questions call into existence carry throughout the works in "Nel Mezzo." Hayes's investigatory interventions into the field of sex, and the social institutions and roles that it engenders, underscore the fruitfulness of friction and how "when participation becomes conflict, conflict becomes space."³

"Sharon Hayes: Nel Mezzo," June 29–August 24, 2019, Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

Notes

- 1 Quoted from Jeannine Tang, "Sharon Hayes: Investigations and Inhabitations," in: *Sharon Hayes*, London: Phaidon, 2018, p. 78.
- 2 Tang, "Sharon Hayes," p. 29.
- 3 Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation: Crossbench Praxis as a Mode of Criticality*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011, p. 93.

Tanya Leighton

Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin
+49 (0)30 21 972 220, info@tanyaleighton.com, www.tanyaleighton.com