



Still from Sharon Hayes, 'In My Little Corner of the World, Anyone Would Love You', 2016. Video. Performer - Swift Shuker. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

MATERIAL AND IN FRONT OF US: SHARON HAYES

Sharon Hayes' *In My Little Corner of the World, Anyone Would Love You* at Studio Voltaire features a five-channel video projection onto plywood hoarding that runs the length of the gallery. Each track plays footage of a different room in the same house. People walk in and out of shot, sitting down to read out loud to themselves or to one or two listeners. They are seen sorting and shuffling papers, stapling, typing, tidying. Occasionally someone will set up a gramophone record to play and sit and listen. The papers from which they read are letters to and from the editors of lesbian, lesbian feminist and effeminate newsletters. Each letter contains its own urgency sewn through stories, questions, warnings and expressions of gratitude for the publication's existence. There are frequent invocations to the others who will read the letters: 'thank you sisters', 'good luck sisters', 'I'm sorry sisters'.

The pamphlets were published in the UK and the US between 1955 and 1977 by organisations including the Daughters of Billitis (DOB), formed in San Francisco in 1955, and the Minorities Research Group (MRG), formed in London in 1963. These groups produced newsletters you had to subscribe to, whose lists were closely guarded. The importance, difficulty and distance of the conversations they contain comes through as they are read, as does the particular pitch of their historical moment. Whilst varied in their political position and relationship to the group they address, the letters all contain a certain clipped formality, a primness that can still be found in the 'Letters to the Editor' sections of certain newspapers. Hayes, she tells me when we meet in south London, 'was interested in the way in which the publications sat inside of their readership, that readership was a community but it was also a readership of writers. Everybody was being solicited to actually write, to actively construct discourse, to give names, to offer stories, to make narrative.'

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Hearing them read aloud now, it's clear that the newsletters were a precursor to chat rooms and comments sections for a marginalised and disparate community. These letters track the vocal, varied, discordant formation of a communal identity: 'inside of both of those operations lesbian identity was constructed, a lesbian identity, not the lesbian identity', says Hayes. It was not easy to agree upon the narrative that these publications should follow: 'a lot of what happened in these early moments of DOB or MRG was active dis-identification.' She's referring in part to the tension between butch lesbians and the DOB who required all members to dress in feminine B meaning in women's clothes – at meetings. Hayes is interested in the way in which moments like these became 'a kind of barrier to members to either understanding the ways in which they are in conversation or the ways in which they may be productively different or distinct.'

Productive difference is central to what's happening in the piece, which features members of the queer and feminist community in Philadelphia. 'The readers occupy identities that were not available at that historical moment, and so one of the big challenges to me was to try to construct or to try to protect the violence that the readers could do to the original writers and vice versa – what does it mean to ask a trans man to read the text of a lesbian? I am deeply committed to believing that these identities that have multiple names – that sometimes for simplicity I organise under queer – that there is this really important conversation between them, that there is a really important conversation between a lesbian and a trans man, between a gender queer person and a trans woman and a lesbian feminist and a feminist.'

Hayes' work – which adapts linguistic theory to political ends – recalls Michel de Certeau. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* he recognised that a moment of speaking (or writing), a moment of using language, cannot be separated into 'moment' and 'word': the one contains and is formed by the other. This is what Hayes engages with when talking about her work as an attempt at 'translating embodiment'. She is acutely aware that these letters are part of a context that is in many ways un-translatable.

Her method here has been to stage reading and listening: 'I was interested in reading aloud as a modality of thought. Sometimes we read out loud to ourselves to be able to hear better.' It's an image that aligns with the idea that the readers of these publications might 'suddenly have an understanding of an identity which they thought before was behavioural or psychological or interior. They suddenly have something exterior.' As we read something out loud to be able to hear it better and to be able to respond to it, so this piece creates a context in which you might be able to hear: 'It was most important to me that the readers not characterise the I, and that they tried to find that place of just enough distance, to be present as themselves and also to allow the words to be addressed. Which is a kind of fine line.'

This is the fine line that winds its way through the work, between identification and difference, which returns us to the question of how difficult it can be to take part in conversations like this. We hear the writers of these letters and the voices of these readers negotiating between the joys and the assumptions of shared experience: 'whether it was the difference of ethnicity or the difference of class or the difference of sexuality or the difference of gender expression it somehow didn't have a place, like it didn't have a place or a method or a way of being held.'

Hayes is keen to use this evidence of what could be termed failure as a means to trouble contemporary genealogies of feminist and queer politics. 'I think what I'm trying to do in the piece is speak to certain rote or reductive ways we have of thinking about the identity "feminist" or "the feminist movement" or the identity "lesbian". Which is to say there's often this idea that somehow there was a kind of coherent identity that existed that was x, y or z, that had all of those characteristics, but in fact those identities were always in contestation, there was always a kind of contestation around the whiteness of lesbian, there was always a contestation around tolerance regarding gender expression. It wasn't that there was a coherent identity and then there was a challenge to that. It was always contested ... Maybe the identity lesbian will not have a life that's longer than seventy years, eighty years, who knows, we'll see.'

Hayes' long-term project *Ricerca* (a re-working of Pasolini's Comizi d'Amore) takes the form of a series of group surveys, questions thrown into a crowd, responses given back in the moment: 'I'm interested in singularity as a kind of operation, something that allows us to see, something that doesn't necessarily speak truth, but produces something that is real and material and in front of us and graspable.'

Maggie Nelson writes, 'words change depending on who speaks them; there is no cure.' I get the sense that Hayes would like conversations about identity to take place in the context of this incurable knowledge. These would be conversations that were always singular, you would have to keep talking. I ask what's stuck with her, having left the archives in which she found the pamphlets. 'Some of the stuff that still pokes at me is the presence of devastating disappointment in these relationships and I think I'm interested in that disappointment. These newsletters can't hide how effortful they are, and they can't hide how disappointed everybody is in each other, there's constantly people addressing each other with disappointment, with anger and rage. I guess that's what lingers, the perseverance through that disappointment. There's a woman who's talking about a threefold oppression; racism because she's black, gender bias because she's lesbian, sexism because she's a woman, and she ends her letter "Get it together. Because we are." In the face of all of that disappointment there's a perseverance to say, I am here and I am trying.'

In My Little Corner of the World, Anyone Would Love You is at Studio Voltaire, London to 5 June and will travel to the Common Guild in Glasgow in October.