

Sharon Hayes

Habla

30 May - 24 September 2012



Sharon Hayes, *Everything Else Has Failed! Don't You Think It's Time for Love?* Performance still, 2007. Photograph by Andrea Geyer

Socially significant themes, most of them inscribed in recent historical events, have been at the heart of Sharon Hayes' work since she presented her first public performances in the mid-1990s. For constantly at issue in this young American's art is the study of the complex relationships that bind history and politics as they register in individual and collective consciousness. "I find the idea of unspooling history quite compelling," she confesses. Whether commissions for particular exhibitions or self generated, Hayes' performances typically explore the conditions under which collective political and social identifications are constructed. "One of the most significant aspects of my practice," she stated several years ago, "[is] an investment in the ways that events mark themselves psychically and socially in our collective imagination."

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Hayes has drawn on various media—primarily video, installation and performance—to investigate how speech, politics and history interrelate. Her conceptual and methodological strategies are typically derived from a range of discursive fields, including ethnography, journalism, rhetoric, theatre and dance. For her, forms of embodiment—self-reflexive, differential or collective—serve as vehicles through which the speaker/dancer and the script/score may be prized apart, so that the means of conveyance, the performative act, can be more closely scrutinized. “In much of my work, I embody a given speech act myself,” she explains, “because it is important to me to stand in a space of responsibility vis-à-vis this re-speaking.” Site, too, plays a crucial role in the conception of most of her works for the public arena; that is, the actual location(s) in which a work is realized becomes an integral element in shaping its content: public address and civic space are congruent in the formation of many of her signature works.

In a number of pieces, Hayes has drawn on pre-existing texts, ranging from presidential speeches to Patty Hearst’s broadcasts as a member of the Symbionese Liberation Army. When re-speaking words she has learnt by heart, Hayes’ delivery necessarily incorporates a certain disjunction, a fracture or fissure that initially arrests, and may then provoke her audience to re-examine the import of events freighted with historical or cultural import. “For many years now I’ve been interested in how performance allows for the possibility that you are both doing and not doing what it is that you seem/look/sound like you’re doing,” she stated in the interview quoted above. “Often, for me, this doing and not doing happens through the execution of some kind of oral translation—taking a speech act that was delivered at one moment in time and re-speaking or readdressing it in another.” For multiple reasons—ethical, conceptual, and formal—it is critical that she herself is the protagonist in her performances: rarely does she cast others into roles.

When looking for a title in Spanish (a language she does not speak) for this show, Hayes turned to Ferdinand de Saussure’s “Course on General Linguistics”, a text that has been formative on her thinking, along with publications by more recent cultural theorists including Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler. The nearest equivalent to “parole” as used by Saussure seems to be “habla”, which Hayes likes not only since it references an ability or aptitude inherent in everyone—the living habit of a language system as opposed to/distinct from “langue”, the system itself—but because “habla” alludes, too, to communication as a means of being in contact, and through that, implies a sense of community. And, not least, “habla” also functions as an imperative: “talk”. Her attraction to this word on account of its nuanced levels of meaning is indicative, more generally, of her exigent yet probing engagement with the performative nature of language in its myriad guises and roles.

(All quotes taken from interviews in *Andrea Geyer/Sharon Hayes*, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen/Göteborgs Konsthall, Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, 2009)

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Museum hours

Monday to Saturday

from 10:00 a.m.

to 9:00 p.m.

Sundays from

10:00 a.m.

to 2:30 p.m.

Closed Tuesdays

Galleries close

15 minutes

prior to Museum

closing

Images

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