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Time for Love: Sharon Hayes at the Whitney

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Sharon Hayes's one-person show, "There's so much I want to say to you," which opened last week at the Whitney Museum, seeks to recreate the public square as a performative site for political exchange.

The exhibition, on the third floor of the museum, contains both new and old work, and illustrates Hayes's approach well. She prefers a neutral stance, collecting and reproducing images and voices. Using video, album covers, recreated lawn signs, audio recordings, and banners, she alludes to forms of public and political communication. For example, the album covers in the piece entitled *An Ear to the Sounds of Our History* (2012) are for recorded political speeches for the most part, a wistful mix of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, with a recording of Louise Nevelson thrown in as a wild card. Hayes arranges the covers in groups on the walls, letting the viewer guess at the connections. The speeches on the omitted vinyl are silenced in this installation. Similarly, Hayes displays a set of five *Voice Portraits* (2012), tight close-up video recordings of performers speaking, projected onto small screens suspended elegantly from the ceiling. The "voices," however, are silent.

VIEW SLIDESHOW Sharon Hayes, An Ear to the Sounds of Our History ('68), 2011, Digital C-print ; Sharon Hayes, An Ear to the Sounds of Our History (A Time to Keep), 2011, Digital C-print ;

The unobtrusive plywood and two-by-four platform by Hayes's collaborator Andrea Geyer lifts what Whitney curator Chrissie Iles called "a stage" a few inches off the museum's floor. The installation recalls Donald Judd's use of plywood, as Iles commented at the press opening. In the past, as in her *REVOLUTIONARY LOVE: I AM YOUR WORST FEAR, I AM YOUR BEST FANTASY* in the 2010 "Greater New York" show at MoMA PS1, Hayes favored a casual, junkyard aesthetic. Geyer's excellent Whitney installation offers several low, black-painted stair modules on which visitors might congregate, read, and talk.

The absence of wall text was intended to defeat the "white cube" aesthetic of the museum environment, to unite the installation and to avoid "labeling," Iles said. Instead, the Whitney provides a 17-page pamphlet with a diagram of the installation and commentary on each of the 16 pieces, without which much of the show would be hard to access.

Often, Hayes's work speaks of a longing for the golden era of artistic and political radicalism of the late 1950s through the '70s, when taboos were clearer and addressing them through public protest was a widespread and popular movement along many fronts. In a collaborative piece, *Gay Power* (2007/2012), feminist writer and activist Kate Millett and Hayes provide audio commentary via headphones for the video projection of a film by the Women's Liberation Cinema of the 1971 Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade, the second march to commemorate the Stonewall rebellion.Millet says of the parade marchers of 1971, which included herself, "We look very brave, but we weren't."Hayes and Millet comment on the friendly atmosphere along the parade route: the construction workers cheering, the cop sitting on his motorcycle calmly, the nude men in the park, decked-out fairies prancing for the camera, and women blowing up balloons. Hayes is less resolved when it comes to the present.Though her show asks us to participate in some way, it remains fairly timid and sanitary and, in the smooth installation, an expression of apolitical art, suitable for a major museum, unlikely to offend or provoke.

Hayes restages her 2009 recreation of Allan Kaprow's legendary 1961 *Yard*, in which he filled the backyard of a gallery with used tires. Hayes' version, *Yard (Sign)* (2009/2012), involves a collection of garden-variety lawn signs: political endorsements and pronouncements and other sundry signs she saw and photographed around the U.S. and then replicated for exhibition.The Whitney asserts that this "functions as a stage

on which disparate voices are gathered, using the boundaries of private property to speak silently to the public." While Hayes's reproduction of lawn signs as art is a fun idea, the ideological transformation claimed for it is difficult to parse and even harder to align with the experience.

In *Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA)*" (2003), produced the year Hayes got her MFA at UCLA, Hayes re-performs on video the audio-recorded ransom request of newspaper heiress Patricia Hearst, who was kidnapped by the guerilla group Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974. Hayes's memory appears to lapse, presumably in a somewhat planned way: she learned the text but not well, so that she could be repeatedly prompted by a group of unseen onlookers.The Whitney's commentary says that "Hayes reveals the theatricality, vulnerability, and confusion of that historical moment." Hayes's reperformance is comic, but it does not reveal the "theatricality, vulnerability and confusion" of the 1970s in the way that, say, watching the indelible surveillance footage of the upper crust Hearst using an enormous automatic weapon to rob a bank with the SLA in 1974 does.

Harkening to the heyday of the student revolt, *Sarah Gordon's Strike Journal, May 1970* (2012) is a vinyl recording of Gordon reading rather awkwardly from her college journal. If you can sneak around the watchful museum guard, you can listen to her on the headphones provided.The pamphlet describes the piece as raising "questions about the recording of history and the individual's role in relation to the collective voice."While it is a pleasure to relive this exciting time with Gordon, the material as it is presented does not by itself raise such questions.

In the sound installation *Everything Else Has Failed! Don't You Think It's Time for Love?* (2007-08), Hayes calls out to passersby in front of the midtown building that houses UBS. Along with references to "the war" (which one she does not say), Hayes reads phrases that sound like they are from the diary of a rejected lover, emotional but not especially interesting writing: "How can you expect me to feel that you don't want me here?" and "I woke up this morning with the memory of your harshness." The explanatory text asserts that Hayes "interrupted the corporate realm," though the photograph on the Whitney's web page of Hayes performing shows pedestrians walking past her, ignoring her completely, suggesting the ineffectiveness of her efforts.

The Whitney's press release says the works are "what Hayes calls 'speech acts'—when speech functions not only as communication but as action." The term "speech acts" commonly refers to the theory of Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin, articulated in lectures he gave at Harvard in 1955, also published as a book under the same title *How to Do Things With Words*. Austin used the phrase "speech acts" to refer to a special kind of speech in which something is accomplished by an utterance, for example, when a justice of the peace says in a wedding ceremony that a couple is married, or a judge pronounces a sentence in a criminal proceeding.

It is peculiar to apply the term to Hayes's work because of the artist's restrained presentation of the images, and the silence and nostalgia that characterize so much of what is on view. What appears to be happening is not so much a "speech act," but an invitation to speech with limited guidance. Clearly, Hayes's heart is in the right place. She cites feminism and AIDS activism as her greatest influences. There could hardly be a more pressing concern than the state of public debate in this presidential election year and as events unfold in the global uprisings of the "Occupiers" and the "Arab Spring."

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