

REBELLION WITHOUT A GOAL:
ON THE WORK OF SHARON HAYES
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In a culture of increasingly managed expression it is up to artists to point out what it means to speak publicly.
—Sharon Hayes¹

Looking again at the work of Sharon Hayes I find myself able to overcome a not uncommon paralysis amongst the creative class: the hesitancy to discuss directly what it means for us to have a public voice. By “public voice” I mean an urgent utterance in front of others that describes what it means to be artist in a time that has either distorted or eliminated the social agency of a large part of population of the earth. I have argued for some time now that the embodiment of agency is a form of aesthetics—something that art does and has always done. In other words, questioning power is beautiful, and in such questioning is a “making visible” of things not seen before. By making things visible artists are therefore engineers of the right to visibility, the right to be seen and heard—a right that is increasingly in danger for all groups in repressive economies and times of war. Sharon Hayes, in her work “After Before”, has made something that encourages me to try to find the re-birth of public practices in aesthetic moments of participatory questioning.

One of the greatest questioners of participation that I know is Jimmie Durham. He once wrote about how proud he was of the mammals—how varied and adaptive we have become in relation to other types of creatures.² This is to say that humans, as members of the group “mammals,” have sisters and brothers with bodies that can fly as bats, dig tunnels as moles, swim like otters or climb like monkeys. I am encouraged by his remark because I see the imagined bodies of animals

as fantasies for re-thinking what artists can do in the spaces of art production so dominated by the conditions of war economy. Not to be species arrogant—but if artists are mammals they are working in an entrepreneurial world run by reptiles. If things get worse mammals might get even better: then in this world artists might get even better. These imagined bodies cause possibilities for re-thinking social systems, for changing political will—for becoming artistically enlarged.

In her video installation *After Before*, Hayes represents political will through the multi-channel video representations of interviews and interviewing, a will that in the reptilian media is represented in the most reductive fashion, as a “yes/no” poll or simple pie chart. In *After Before*, social will becomes a series of overlapping quotations, something invented. Through the duration of the work and by moving through the exhibition room, the viewer finds definitions of audience and speaker complicated and transformed in their representation. The perceived conditions for public speech become part of the architectural spaces and institutional orders we accept from an existing social hierarchy. In a way then all the terms of democratic investment that I may have—audiences, publics, citizenry—are strangely shifted out of the field of video document (what I see and hear) and into a receptive part of an interpretation chain of events. What they say is part of me as a viewer—what I see is part of them as speakers. In this way, groups of people and their opinions have become more than the subject of the artwork: they are the medium of the work. So the goal of rebellion is no longer a subject of the work—it is ignorable for a moment so the viewer can register other questions about public address.

The institutional management of expression (more insidious than outright censorship, more directed than taste culture) is an imaginary space of repression. *After Before* shows the passage of time through a representation of time’s recording, otherwise known as history. Modern history

we can see as a product of the struggle for political representation of direct address. I have a book of these addresses—of speeches, manifestos and petitions here in my hand—and they move me still, whether known and heard often as in “I have a dream...” to unknown as in “Most of us grew up thinking that the US was a strong and humble nation...”³ But Hayes’s work makes me wonder to a certain extent if such address, as an effect, might not just be a kind of ongoing fantasy. This critical wonder seems key to reinventing participatory events. *After Before* allows an audience to stand just to the side of the political position of address: to see it askew. And as many of us know who have been at the side of others—here one can see the profile of the language of participation itself.

Once imaginary bodies have rewritten the language of participation, artists like Hayes can take it a step further: recasting the actual physical sites of rebellion to into unoccupied places. We know from mass protests the way language fails us in public! We chant “the people united will never be defeated,” repeated over and over again, knowing all the time that the people on aspects of our enfranchisement have always been united, and that the people, in the majority at least, have always been defeated.

To me, the question has been: could a rebellion without a goal (aesthetics) change the terms of our involvement in the world (politics)? Gurus of the “experience economy,” for who places are products that can be expended after branding, have re-defined the spectacle of social flexibility, cultural difference and outlaw personae. Starbucks is now presented to us as a countercultural laboratory, and artists are listed as resources of urban renewal. These days our public utterances, our address to others as members of a group—artists, humans, and mammals, whatever—are often used to adjust character of an increasingly managed subjection. If the symbolic and performative function of artworks help create such conditions than they also can lead to their undoing.

Like marchers chanting in the street we already know the failures we describe. It has been there in public art in the way in which official agencies can never really make anything truly festive, in community organizing not being able to show anything truly inclusive. Then there is the way we pretend that these moments of collectivity and agency do work in order to feel that there is some way to participate. This pretension is a beautiful thing. It is a kind of performance that suspends the status quo. It is both intimate and spectacular and creates affinity where it has not before. Rebellion without a goal is an artwork and rebellion without a goal shows that all art is public.

1. Sharon Hayes, interview with the author, November 12, 2005, as part of the Performa Interviews: Art Radio, www.wps1.org

2. Jimmie Durham, cat. to his exhibition at Kunstverien Munich. (1996? In Doug's office)

3. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Speeches in Washington, DC in 1964 and 1965, published in Potter, Paul, *The Sixties Papers*, Praeger, 1984, pp. 218–26.



suddenly.
Could we ask you a
question?
How do you like being
in the states?
- I think it's a
necessary experience.



