LOVE MEETINGS: IMPERSONALITY AND INTIMACY IN THE ART OF SHARON HAYES

Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

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The study that follows establishes the work of contemporary artist Sharon Hayes as critically engaged with some of modern art’s central concerns. Hayes’s art asserts itself principally in terms of vying to produce a field of relations directed toward creating collective form, and it explores varied tones, performances, and uses of language as the substantive sources of connection.

Sharon Hayes’s art speaks to possibilities of a creating a connected public in what is increasingly understood as a sustained state of crisis that characterizes and consumes living in the contemporary world. It asks how best to use art’s concrete signs in their specificity and abstraction to speak to or construct this public, and it considers whether beings in the present can be productively optimistic or inevitably remain situated in loss and longing. Some viewers have interpreted Hayes’s body of work as in
essence about failure. Developing this project means opening up the possibility that along with showing a viewer failure, Hayes also offers forms that make connectivity and possibility available. In this study I will investigate how Hayes’s art engages art’s audience with the immediacy of the intimate language found in what the artist terms “love addresses.” With its simultaneous presentation of these and universalizing aesthetic forms that register modernist aspirations to make collective social form, such art also explores how the conditions for publicness can be developed in the present.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“To your love let there be added awareness of your love.”
~Pier Paulo Pasolini, Love Meetings, 1964

“I know that the ears are the only orifice that can’t be closed . . . I’ve found my voice, and with it I scream, I love you.”
~Sharon Hayes, Revolutionary Love, I Am Your Worst Fear, I Am Your Best Fantasy, 2008

In 1964, the Italian filmmaker and poet Pier Paulo Pasolini set out to create a cinema vérité style documentary that would come to be known as Comizi d’Amore, or, Love Meetings. Traveling throughout the countryside of Italy, and stopping in various areas containing more concentrated clusters of the populace, Pasolini interrogated, on camera, a broad cross-section of Italian citizens and teenagers. The dominant theme of the interviews and film emerge as Pasolini repeatedly enquires into their views concerning sexuality and sexual relationships. The film is structured such that interspersed with the sections of interviews with “ordinary” people, Pasolini holds conversations with his own friends and contemporaries, members of the intelligentsia of Italy. Author Alberto Moravia, psychologist Cesare Musatti, poet Giuseppe Ungaretti, and several journalists, including Oriana Fallaci, all participated.¹ It is within one of these deconstructive sections with the intellectuals that Pasolini engages Moravia on the

question of whether or not he has represented “the real Italy.” Is the real Italy represented in the subjects Pasolini encountered and their responses to his questions, or does it lie in those he didn’t encounter, and what remained unsaid? Moravia’s response is instructive:

You’ve interviewed the real Italy, but another real Italy wouldn’t be interviewed. The two make up a portrait of the one Italy, historical Italy, that is, produced by history, and one can’t be separated from the other, one completes and explains the other. Those who replied did so because the others wouldn’t reply at all.2

As Moravia knew, the interaction of individual subjectivities, navigating responding to an interrogation in a collective public space, mediated by a camera, and guided by particular questions, will produce a complicated network of relations. Some interview subjects will speak out of pressure to fill a void of uncomfortable silence. Some will be eager to perform themselves as inhabiting a particular identity. And some observing viewers of the document may interpret, in fact will be likely to interpret because of the framing device of the documentary (that purported purveyor of truth) the interviewed subjects as holders and dispatchers of overarching and pervasive attitudes constructed by a particular cultural and historical time. This is, as Moravia suggests, the work of history.3 The material evidence of their bodies and pointed speech and the lack thereof (those that are absent or say nothing), rub up against each other, need each other, defy each other, and together complete a historical picture. One kind of love meeting, then: the fragments that make up history coming together and meeting a desire to see a narrative of history unfolding. But the title of the film most obviously refers to the

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3 Or at least the work of history in the Hegelian Marxist model, which, as Juli Carson explains, locates a work’s meaning or “content” in its historical circumstances. See Juli Carson, Exile of the Imaginary: Politics/Aesthetics/Love (Vienna, Austria: Generali Foundation, 2007), 110.
meeting of Pasolini and his interviewees entering into a dialogue via the strained and loaded immediacy of talking about sexual issues. Pasolini, ultimately, wanted to unveil a picture of a conservative Italian public, compelled toward machismo and compulsory heterosexuality, with attitudes rooted in the rank soil of fascism. In one disturbing sequence appears a happy teenage boy, surrounded by a throng of his buddies. While smiling, the boy expounds upon the importance of a man’s honor, going further to explain that in the case of an adulterous wife the woman should be murdered, miming the physical action of a knife stabbing a body, as his crowd of admirers cheers approvingly. Pasolini managed the exposure of such violent and agonizing political attitudes, housed in their views on domestic life tactically. Conversations pertaining to *amour* are perhaps the most convenient entry point into the political when it is not, cannot be, easily engaged in the public sphere.

In *Farewell to an Idea*, art historian T.J. Clark draws upon the poetry of Pasolini in his final pages, homing in on the moment when Pasolini asks “shall I ever again be able to act from pure passion, when I know that our history is finished?”\(^4\) In Clark’s view, Pasolini was a sufferer at the hands of an oppressive fascist regime, and also a persistent believer in passion in the face of national horror. Pasolini’s modernism emerges in his melancholic resignation to the end of history, yet also a lingering idealistic push through to something different coming after the terror of the present. While at once the maker behind the traumatic, horrific visions of *Salò*, Pasolini was also the writer of the poetry to come at the end of *Love Meetings*, exhibiting a commitment to accretion,

growth, wonder, posing love as a base upon which something more can be built: “to your love let there be added awareness of your love.” In Pasolini’s poetry Clark sees a mood that is “relentless, and ultimately impersonal, as if hope and despair were equally irrelevant to the horror of the moment.” This is, it seems, one of modernisms central dialectics: immediacy and impersonality, conveyed together, and oriented toward an unknown future.

Artist Sharon Hayes, working in the lead-up to the 2004 presidential election in the United States, sent two interviewers, young women in their twenties, and a cameraperson, into the streets of New York City to collect and document public opinions by interviewing people on the street. They intended to ask questions that would have citizens consider and speak about the very idea of public opinion. This project is now presented as a “quasi-fictional” documentary, titled After/Before (2005). The interviewers, Ewa Einhorn and Kemba Bloodworth, were expected to act both journalistically and as performers, conscious of the dimension of performance brought, inevitably, by the presence of the camera. The filming of After/Before took place from September through October. One unforeseen consequence of working during this time would be the expectation of the public subjects that they were being looked to for responses to the anniversary of the events of September 11th, 2001. Looking for a way to work around this expectation in order to cull answers from participating subjects that didn’t pertain to the subject of 9/11, Hayes and her performer/interviewers landed upon

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5 Pasolini as quoted in Clark, Farewell to An Idea, 408.
the open and general question “What is the first political image you remember?” In her account of After/Before, Hayes seizes upon two answers in particular:

One was that of a 12-year-old African American girl who was walking with her friends after school in the East Village. ‘The death of John F. Kennedy,’ she said. A few weeks later in Times Square we stopped a young black man who had been born in Saudi Arabia and was going to college in the States: ‘The Black Power salute at the Mexican Olympics,’ he said.7

The responses that came from this question defied expectations that the reported images would be bound, inexorably, to the interview subject’s own specific time or geographic origin. The relations between now and then can be collapsed, created, suspended. The past is suddenly something other than the past, while, because of its mediation and distance, not quite an eternal present. After/Before evinces a kind of longing for a public dialogue about the events of history, and the political events of the world currently inhabited. It also poses a series of questions. What comes after a dialogue, a question, an election, and a riveting, arresting, singular event? What comes before? How do we understand and employ these terms, and how may they be understood or employed differently? What connects beings in the present to past political events and how can we hang onto, learn from, use, or refute a history as we move, without recourse, into the future? It seems to me that the answer posed in Hayes’s work is frequently put forth in the following way: the bridge that allows traversal from past to present to future, that connects one memory of a distant event to a presently lived life, that allows singular


7 Ibid, 88.
subjective memory to be spurred and woven into a collective, embodied space of action, is intently tied to a particular sort of language. It is an intimate language.

As Hayes introduced *After/Before* in a lecture given at the University of Chicago in 2010, she opened by referencing Pasolini’s *Love Meetings*. The 1964 quasi-documentary (its desires, its criticisms, its strategies and maneuvers, its camera lingering on youthful faces, the tone alternating from despair to hope), is mirrored in Hayes’s own work. Pasolini was asking these questions: What can be talked about in public, and can the process of political discourse be invented, opened up, and complicated through talking about sex and relationships? In an affective space reverberating with the legacy of fascism, those bodies, hearts, and minds negotiated Pasolini’s interrogations with a mixture of apprehension, bemusement, disdain, bravado, and exuberance. They would enter into the tight and tenuous space of the political, revealing private prejudices or political desires publicly, through discussing their domestic lives. In the 2000s, times permeated with affective exhaustion and hyperactivity, times ever more connected and yet fragmented, Hayes’s work is exploring what kind of public space can be made and inhabited together, she is searching for the ties that bind us together and the possibilities that may spring from what is forged in that connectivity. “I can’t help but always feel the potential for something big, something really big, to happen when people get together,

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like we are together today” Hayes spoke in a keynote address at a Creative Time summit in 2009. How to allow for or make the potential in such “togetherness?”

In modern art, an answer was often found, at least provisionally, in aesthetic forms that were impersonal, with the hope that they would open up toward the universal. In the pages that follow, I will explore how Sharon Hayes’s work follows in a tradition that exhibited a desire to “speak in a collective voice” by maintaining an aesthetic sense of the impersonal, and continues in aspiring to unification through adding an aspect of intimacy that conveys and speaks to collective longings and hopes for the future. In this project I will analyze two performance artworks by Hayes, *Everything Else Has Failed!* *Don’t You Think It’s Time For Love?* (2007), and *I March in the Parade of Liberty But As Long As I Love You I’m Not Free* (2008), showing that they register modernist ambitions while exploring how to make these ambitions work in their contemporary moment.

**Methodology**

This project draws from several methods of inquiry developed in art historical discourse. It aims to understand the work of Sharon Hayes as related to the social and political circumstances, and critical discourses, of its contemporary time, acting to understand the critical ideas circulating during the art’s production. It also seeks to

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11 For audio and images from these performances, see the artist’s website, [http://www.shaze.info/#](http://www.shaze.info/#) (accessed November 28, 2012).
understand and unpack the potential implications of art that communicates in abstract language and is accordingly resistant to being explained and pinned down neatly by the terms of its particular chronological moment. The approach applied here is one of art criticism informed by aspects of critical theory.

One art historical system of inquiry that is taken to be supportive and useful to the understanding sought here is the approach to social art history, developed by T.J. Clark. The model Clark puts forth in works such as *Image of the People* (1973) and *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (1984), considers the meaning of artwork with regard to the social and political circumstances from which it emerged, seeking to apprehend and illustrate how artists and their art forms engaged with the critical conditions that surrounded the artist at work. Clark writes of social historical study:

> If the social history of art has a specific field of study, it is exactly this—the processes of conversion and relation, which so much art history takes for granted. I want to discover what concrete transactions are hidden behind the mechanical image of ‘reflection,’ to know how ‘background’ becomes ‘foreground’; instead of analogy between form and content, to discover the network of real, complex relations between the two.  

Clark views this *mediation* between form and content (as opposed to the one being inevitably predictive or reflective of the other) as historically situated and specific.

Drawing upon varied supportive materials such as artists’ writings and literature contemporary to the artist, Clark navigates and constructs portraits of the general and specific worlds encountered and inhabited by his objects of study and their negotiations with form.

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Understanding and conveying the critical cultural conditions to which Sharon Hayes’s artworks belong is one aim of my approach. In particular, I look to records of the artist’s engagements with other artists and thinkers to support and inform an interpretation of her work. And Clark’s notion that an artist’s forms reveal a complex engagement with a historically specific time rather than exist as a reflection and inevitable manifestation of it, is relied upon as well. In this exploration into the logic of using intimate and impersonal aesthetic forms to speak to art’s twenty-first century audience, circulating critical work concerning social relations and the public under contemporary conditions are taken as essential to the production of these particular aesthetic forms. Social art historical study is viewed here as a methodology related to my project, as the work takes up understanding the history of critical ideas moving through the culture from which the artwork emerges.

Varied critical theoretical work by writers Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, also help to shape the view of contemporary conditions presented in this project. Their work on public and private life, affective labor, embodiment, and the commons in twenty-first century culture, support an analysis of the artwork that views it as directly engaging with these ideas. The overlapping of critical approaches and their varied designations—Marxism, cultural Marxism, affect theory, queer theory, performance studies—held within the work of these writers are taken here to be usefully supportive for their variance and complexity. Drawing upon varied critical bodies of work is a tactical methodology unto itself that views such “critical promiscuity” as potentially generative of unexpected connections, and as staking a claim for queerness in the systemic space of critical approaches.
Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson, writing on New York-based art collective LTTR (a shifting acronym standing for “Lesbians to the Rescue,” “Lacan Teaches to Repeat,” and “Let’s Take the Roll”), quotes AIDS activist and art theorist Douglas Crimp who wrote in 1988, “It is our promiscuity that will save us.”\textsuperscript{13} Crimp valued promiscuity literally, as a defiant, embodied riposte to the vilification of gay sex taking place in the conservative mass media and the misrepresentation therein of a devastating health crisis, characterized as “punishment for pleasure.”\textsuperscript{14} In Bryan-Wilson’s view, while the terms of public discourse regarding queerness have shifted since 1988, they remain largely conservative, with the goals of much queer political activity revolving around acceptance into institutions like marriage and the military. “Given the current narrow visions of queerness,” Bryan-Wilson writes, “there are still lessons to be learned from Crimp’s promotion of flexibility, openness, and diverse encounters.”\textsuperscript{15} It is this hopeful notion of the value of critically practiced promiscuity contained within queer theory that informs the criticism and analysis here. The logic is such that the reliance on varied critical methods, united in being informed by queer theory, is aligned with the spirit of this project. As theorist Michael Warner suggests, queer theory, in a broad sense, “now has so many branches, and has developed in so many disciplines, that it resists synthesis,” but that it might yet be seen as a way of writing that creates a non-normative social space of


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
belonging. Here I aim to offer a queer reading of Hayes’s art, which seeks to understand and make space for the possibilities to be found in the private-in-public negotiations it makes.

Limitations and Future Study

For the purpose of this project, I choose to work on exploring the implications and political potential of a selection of artworks made by the contemporary artist Sharon Hayes. In doing so, I am limiting the boundaries of this study to a small selection of works, and am not addressing the variety of works contained in Hayes’s oeuvre and every question these may raise for the contemporary viewer. Hayes is not the only contemporary artist that can help us to think about the possibilities of using intimate forms and desire to construct and speak to the needs of a public. Future work will take up the variety of artists who are working in similar modes and explore the different textures and senses of what they are realizing. Such future study will help to broaden an understanding of the potential effects and shifts encouraged by diverse approaches to the boundary between intimacy and publicness in performative works of art.

Literature Review

A variety of sources were consulted in order to develop a critical approach to Hayes’s performative artworks and to come to understand the conditions of current culture in which the works operate. Due to the nature of a project that aims to situate and analyze artwork produced in the very recent past, much of the relevant literature on

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Hayes’s art and position in the contemporary art world is very brief and new. This study aims to build upon the small body of work interrogating Hayes’s practice, thus contributing to a developing discourse treating her work and newly cultivating an understanding of how it exists in relation to the prevailing histories and narratives of modern and contemporary art. In this section I will give an overview of some of the important critical perspectives of Hayes’s work, attending to how these writings frame her in specific ways. In addition to reviewing the important art criticism pertaining to Hayes, I will also introduce and discuss the critical theoretical writings that will be useful to a later analysis of the artworks’ claims and operations.

Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson has interviewed the artist for Grey Room and written on Hayes for Artforum, offering accounts of several of the artist’s works: the four-part video series Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds #13, 16, 20, and 29 (2002), My Fellow Americans (2004), and In the Near Future (2005).17 Within the interview, Bryan-Wilson and Hayes discuss the transformation of the artist’s forms from the series of solo performances using signs and gestures of protest that constituted In the Near Future (2005), to a large scale performance which orchestrated the participation of dozens of others, Revolutionary Love: I Am Your Worst Fear, I Am Your Best Fantasy (2008). In both the interview between Bryan-Wilson and Hayes and the brief piece of criticism from Artforum, the artists concerns are situated and explained as related to the operation of the document and the history of queer politics, suggesting that a relationship

to the past or to the archive may always be queer. Hayes is framed as concerned with political and emotional life experiences in the U.S., and in Bryan-Wilson’s view, what she interrogates and provokes in relation to these experiences, specifically, is “how ‘audiences’ become ‘publics.’” Bryan-Wilson also argues that the artwork typically activates what queer theorist and literary scholar Elizabeth Freeman has called “temporal drag,” or “the pull of the past upon the present.” Hayes’s interests are presented as revealing the distortions that come into play whenever we look back to the political past, performing the possibility that surviving documents of this past are not easy, clear links to a definite, transparent history.

Similarly, critic Juli Carson reads Hayes’s work as illustrative of uneasy experiences of time and history. In Carson’s analysis of After/Before, Hayes is said to “activate historical jouissance, although not as a return to a time before the viewer existed but inversely as a return of an historical moment to the viewer’s present.” Carson sees Hayes as allowing for a moment of presence in history to come forward—something positive arises out of the negative of the receded past. However, it is “based upon temporal collapse rather than the essence of community. In this way, the viewer needs to question what it means to be present in any material, dialectical way.” Carson views Hayes’s body of work as communicating how it feels to occupy a moment in time, and

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18 Julia Bryan-Wilson, “We Have A Future: An Interview with Sharon Hayes,” Grey Room (Fall 2009): 79-80.

19 Bryan-Wilson, “Julia Bryan-Wilson on Sharon Hayes.”


21 Ibid, 115.
that this illustrates the operation of a politically invested and psychoanalytic notion of time.

Drawing out the psychoanalytic valences of Hayes’s body of work seems one appropriate way to approach it as Hayes views herself as working in the lineage of artist Mary Kelly. This relationship was established in the literature in a published conversation between Hayes, Kelly, and artists Andrea Geyer and Wu Ingrid Tsang. Kelly is widely known for her ventures into incorporating and intertwining aesthetics with psychoanalytic enquiry in the space of her highly theoretical artwork. Hayes views her own artwork as attuned to and a beneficiary of opportunities to have an art practice that uses a diverse set of possibilities organized around “an interrogation or a set of procedures,” and to have it be accepted as art by contemporaries even if it doesn’t work in a material or medium that is instantly recognizable as traditional art. This is a possibility that Hayes believes Kelly’s conceptual Post-Partum Document (1976) helped to make possible. In turn, Kelly recognizes in Hayes’s practice an investment in “showing how the voice registers the unconscious dimension of language by calling attention to the contingency of the moment and the specific subject within the moment of the utterance.”

In the published conversation, Hayes sums up ways in which all of these artists overlap in their concerns:

It seems like the four of us, in addition to addressing various political concerns, also have a particular interest in social and political movements (feminism, gay

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22 Andrea Geyer and Sharon Hayes, History is Ours, ed. Stina Edblom and Konrad Bitterli, (Goteborgs Konsthall: Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, 2010), 71. Sharon Hayes and Andrea Geyer in conversation with Mary Kelly and Wu Ingrid Sang.

23 Ibid. 71.
liberation, the current trans movement, etc.) and the ways in which political desires are articulated as collective actions or activities.\textsuperscript{24}

While little analysis has been devoted to the particular manners and means through which this interest in political desire, articulated as collective action, plays out in Hayes’s work, varied critical theoretical literature can help to situate and understand political desire and its relation to collectivity, and the urgency to register these in art today. Furthermore, exploring this critical work will help us to see why Hayes would choose the aesthetic form of the private and impersonal “love address” to engage with or articulate political desire and aspirations to collective form.

In Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Marxism-informed socio-cultural study \textit{Commonwealth}, their final book in a trilogy on democracy in an age of what they term Empire, “love” is posed as an essential element of their project of understanding and producing “the commons.” The commons is an abstract conception of a possible form of global democracy, one that would be open and sustaining to all.\textsuperscript{25} In Hardt and Negri’s view, love is what produces cultural forms in the socially constructed commons, such as language, social bonds, affects, thoughts, and ideas—all of these are forms of wealth which, when constituted through productive, non-corrupted, non-exclusive love, feed back into the common, supporting and producing it. This conception of love conceives it as operating on an intimate level, in social relationships between people, and on a wide social level, producing a community and also a sense of joy in community that all beings could feel. This conception of the commons will be relevant to this study as it considers

\textsuperscript{24} Geyer and Hayes, \textit{History is Our}, 66.

the aims of speaking to and constructing a public in and through registers of love, positing that the very goal is a hopeful one that envisions the possibility of something like a commons.

Affect theorist Lauren Berlant builds upon the work of defining the ideal of political love set out by Hardt and Negri in her essay “A Properly Political Concept of Love.” Berlant offers that while love must be granted always that it is not simple, it can be chaotic, disjointed and full of desire, the desire aspect of love can be particularly powerful. Love can be a desire to change, it can stoke our intentions to be more patient, to stretch, to “try a new incoherence.” What Berlant finds useful in love as a political concept is that love “allows one to want something, to want a world, amid the noise and ambivalence and anxieties about having and losing that merely wanting an object generates, even when the object is a political one.” Love is supportive as the instability of the vulnerability of wanting takes hold, particularly in the face of a history of political and social structures that uphold and grant power to the role of the “sovereign” or “the one.” The sovereign has taken different forms, becoming alternately the king, the political party, or the neo-liberal subject, but is continually re-invested in and valorized in the global economy. What love might be able to accomplish, for Berlant, is support for human beings at the affective level, where they might be able to handle the instability or rupture of change in the movement from living with the structure of the sovereign to the non-sovereign and the unfamiliar form or shape that it might take. Love has the potential

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27 Ibid, 687.
to be the supportive source that would cushion a fall, or make the awkwardness of precarity manageable.

Berlant, however, explores the complex stakes of attachment with greater ambivalence in her recent social theory study *Cruel Optimism* (2011). Characterizing cruel optimism as the relation that exists when one wants something that is actually an obstacle to her flourishing, Berlant argues that in the sustained state of crisis that characterizes our historical present, a conflicted mode of being defines living for the contemporary person. The precarious subject lives with sustained instability and the pressure of aspirational normativity that shifts where his or her affective feelings and emotions, where *living*, take place. Subjects come to live with the sense of something, and the wanting of something rather than the thing itself. Desire becomes hardly even a desire for the concrete, material stuff that would regularly constitute normativity, but a desire for a *sense* of normativity. This offers us insight into how communicating in terms that are impersonal would be relevant to subjects living in a world that consistently feels threatening, precarious, and insecure. For traumatized subjects, genres that rely on speaking in terms of personality, or *interiority*, are burdensome. They pressure their audiences to comply with the constructed norms to which subjects are told they are supposed to aspire. Berlant sees the concept of impersonality, consequently, as a useful interruption to the faults and pressures of “bourgeois universalism.”

In her work *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008), Berlant explores how women in particular are

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29 Ibid, 156-159.
compelled to relate to one another and draw emotional attachments through the connecting threads of the material of “women’s culture”: talk shows, sentimental fiction, “chick flicks,” and melodramas.  

These genres, or, collections of conventions contained in a cultural form, work to shape an “intimate public sphere” through allowing their consumers a sense of belonging and legitimacy that isn’t allowed in the dominant patriarchal culture. Beings may relate to one another, and feel a sense of belonging through the mediating forms of sentimental material:

Whether linked to women or other nondominant people, it flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an x. 

But this experience of belonging is often only opened up to a person through her consumption of this material as commodity, and a member of this intimate public sphere must necessarily inhabit the role of the consumer in order to gather around and through the material.

Consequently, I argue that cultural forms that might allow beings to be drawn in through vernaculars that are on the one hand largely intimate or sentimental—the mode of communication contemporary beings might feel most compelled to listen to—and on the other impersonal—the mode that doesn’t pressure them to comply with the dominant forces that would undermine their abilities to be subjects in the world who are not heteromasculine or heterofeminine, with amassed accumulated capital (the standards of Berlant’s bourgeois universalism)—are ones that would optimistically reach to allow

\[\text{---} 30 \text{ Lauren Berlant, } \textit{The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture} \text{ (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), viii.} \]

\[\text{---} 31 \text{ Ibid.} \]
individuals rare emotional freedom in their relation to the forms. I view Sharon Hayes’s art as aligned with and performing such interests.
CHAPTER II
IMPERSOINALITY AND INTIMACY IN MODERNIST ART PRACTICE

“There are always many modernisms,” T.J. Clark tells us.¹ The variation in modernist aesthetic forms from Claude Monet’s contingent world as fragmented sensation to Kazimir Malevich’s mystical world as sharp forms bound, held, and moving together in space, to Piet Mondrian’s carefully constructed world as resolvable, harmonious grid, offer up widely divergent conceptions of just how the world hangs together or appears ready to fall apart. What holds modernist art in common, making George Seurat’s tight, anxious, figural reaches for luminosity potentially fall under the same wide categorical umbrella as Eva Hesse’s dulled and touchable Accession II (1968),² is the use of aesthetic forms which express a difficulty in or a barrier to individual subjectivities coming together softly and easily. A desire for a form of collective unity has often been the aim of modernist art making,³ and yet what a painting

¹Clark, Farewell to An Idea, 405.
³ Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, Collectivism After Modernism the Art of Social Imagination After 1945 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 6.
like *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884)\(^4\) appears to register is the suffocating impossibility of one body melting into contact with or supporting another.\(^5\) Those halted, heavy, statuesque figures, plunked next to one another in the aspiring utopia of collective public space—the park—and compelled together, yet held apart, by the halos of hollow light circling around them, articulated a modern dream and a modern problem.

The question of how bodies could *be* bodies with other bodies in public space, as modern subjects increasingly felt alienated from their own senses of themselves as sensual, material beings, would be taken up and attempted resolution by art-making in the Western tradition from the nineteenth century onwards. What form could accomplish the difficult task of forging connections between disjointed, desensitized, alienated subjects? How could the social be figured, produced, and lived?

Producing or designing sensuality in art was often posed in response to the alienating effects of technological, industrial development. Surrealist art often pursued an individually-focused version of seeking out the sensual in art practice, with getting lost in one’s own subconscious experience in dreams and experimenting with figuring one’s own self-conscious desires, body, or identity as the way through the devastation wrought by machinery and accumulated capital. Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp’s *Rrose Selavy*


and *eros-as-life* ethos could redress or answer to the horrors of a modern world saturated with cults of warfare, which relied on the exploitative industrial labor needed to produce modern technological weaponry. It was not the personal marks of one’s individual subjectivity and expressivity, however, that would open up to the universal collectivity hoped for by Karl Marx, but rather, “When the worker cooperates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality and develops the capabilities of his species.” The goal of much modernist art would be to relinquish expressions of individuality for the sake of a representation in art that would serve as connective and non-hierarchical. Modernism hopes for the rich potential to be experienced in collectivity, as Blake Stimson and Gregory Shollette explain, quoting Marx,

> Collectivism would bring benefits to not only ‘strikes, sabotage, social creativity, food consumption, apartments,’ but also to ‘the intimate life of the proletariat, right down to its aesthetic, mental and sexual needs,’ that is that it would liberate and give form to an innate human potential for joy and richness.

This vision did not disappear as a hope for art practice in the late twentieth century, even as the social and political landscape shifted toward postmodern acceptance of the distance between modern subjects and their binding aspirational ideals.

In several works of the 1950’s and 60’s, we may observe American artists bypassing an expression of interior psychic experience in the interest of figuring forms that reached toward an impersonal, abstract concept—what I would call an expression of

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8 Ibid.
the world. This version of a modernist ambition was encapsulated in the words of Jasper Johns when he made the claim in 1965, “I’m interested in things that suggest the world rather than suggest the personality.” As art historian Anne Wagner explains, Eva Hesse’s minimalist and post-minimalist contemporaries Carl Andre and Robert Smithson saw Hesse presenting works that functioned as metaphors for general psychic experience rather than as an expression of her own interior psychic feeling:

Smithson memorably said to [art critic Lucy] Lippard that he saw their friend ‘as a very interior person making psychic models.’ Models that is to say, able to somehow epitomize the elusiveness and density of mental and emotional operations—their gaps and erasures, their connotations and leaps—by giving them tangible physical form. Smithson does not say that these ‘psychic models’ document or physicalize the artist’s own interior processes; he claims only that the psychic—as a look or a state—is somehow given accessible form.  

Johns and Robert Rauschenberg created abstracted forms through the medium of assemblage—pieces that moved between painting and object, speaking in coded whispers to one another and in muffled indecipherable tones to their public.  These artists’ early, experimental ventures in painting departed from the dominant mode of personal psychic expression, made through expressive gesture, sought out by contemporaries like Jackson Pollock. Rauschenberg’s *Should Love Come First* (1951)

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9 This quote, taken from a BBC interview with David Sylvester in 1965, is the epigraph to Anne Wagner’s collection of essays *A House Divided: American Art Since 1945*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), which my assertion regarding impersonal aesthetic forms in post-1945 American art certainly draws upon.


and Johns’ *Tango* (1955) worked as a multivalent dialogue. The paintings contained signs that alluded to a homoerotic communication through dance, but resisted being interpreted explicitly in terms of the artists’ intimate relationship. Rauschenberg collaged an inky, muted diagram of waltz dance-step directions onto the canvas, with the position of both dancers taken by the male. *Tango*, the title of Johns’ deep blue encaustic and collage canvas, embedded with an object of a key, called back to Rauschenberg’s composition of a male-male waltz. Johns and Rauschenberg were thinking through love, obligation, secrets, and ways to communicate in these paintings as general concepts, but also as these concepts pertained to their own, then-secret, relationship. The private material the artists unveiled in these related paintings was intentionally suppressed as the authorial control and voices of the artists were subdued by the very process of assemblage, whereby expressive, gestural marks were crucially excluded from the process of making the picture. On one level these pieces communicated between the artists regarding the private feelings and textures of their love. On another, they spoke in abstract and formal terms to art’s audience, who would have understood them primarily as art objects experimenting with materials and use of color. Such art began positioning itself so that it could speak openly and generally to the unknown, anonymous art viewer as a suggestive model for an impersonal idea—concepts of interpersonal communication were evoked through the signifiers of the dance steps and the key and the literal word “tango,” sketched on top of the layers of paint in *Tango*. But these paintings also held onto a private quality that communicated in a quiet, coded, personalized manner to a

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lover or a friend. They produce meaning through the impersonal means of neutral, expressionless signs, while also speaking idiosyncratically and intimately.13

These American artworks never emerge entirely as a manifestation of individual truth, but edge up and around personal expression through impersonal means. For Hesse, it is the material expressivity that enters into the rigid geometry of a minimalist model when carefully formed and touched by her hand that accomplishes the sort of impersonal communication for which modernist artists had always strived. For Johns and Rauschenberg, it was the insistence on personal narratives—slyly embedded in their assemblages—that made sure art was not too easily given over to the postmodern sign’s embrace of the defensive surface. Sharon Hayes’s work must be understood as engaged with similar processes and aims as Hesse, Johns, and Rauschenberg in the way that it, too, shifts between particularized and open, and definite and undefined. Like her ancestors from the 50s and 60s, Hayes lays claim to a broadly reaching, open, and impersonal abstraction, and then cuts into it with individual or intimately personal forms. Her performances interweave the private with the public, insisting first of all that the experience of interiority is a public matter by speaking of interiority in a universal, generalizing way. But then, by engaging an audience through language forms that are decidedly intimate in scale, Hayes points to an uncertainty about how that interiority will be given form in the present, her own work actively creating the new language.

CHAPTER III

LOVE AND LETTERS: SHARON HAYES’S INTIMATE PUBLIC

Emerging in the past decade as a prominent artist in the American contemporary art community, Hayes (b. 1970 in Baltimore, Maryland) has spent much of her artistic career thus far in New York City. Active since about 1995, she is best known for her pieces that probe deep within the culturally constructed definitions of art, queerness, history, politics, and speech and the interplay between them. Working with mediums ranging from video to performance to writing, she draws upon methodological approaches and practices developed in theater, film, anthropology, linguistics, and journalism to explore political and social dynamics. As introduced above, Hayes has recently moved into an area of study and creation concerning itself with love and speech, exploring these through performance, text, film, and installation. Hayes’s recent exhibition at the Whitney Museum, *There’s So Much I Want to Say to You* (June 2012), surveyed Hayes’s concerns, displaying a course of artworks produced from 2000-2012.¹

Hayes has created several performance pieces that address issues of love and politics, and queer and social identity. These issues are explored through a performative enactment made in real time, as well as text, audio and film recordings preserving and

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displaying the enactment in installation, and writings preserved in book form. One of the most powerful ways that her thinking about love, politics, and queer identity comes to the fore is through the use of phrases that may appeal to a viewer, hearer, or reader on a personal as well as broader social level. Hayes makes the choice to have her language, manifested in framed letters and projected vocal addresses, equally pleading, heartbroken, and hopeful, marking her public aesthetic projections with these tonal qualities so that they resonate with an insistently personal feel. Within her work, she raises questions about the operations of history, memory, intersubjectivity, desire, and love, and the ways in which all of these components construct a system of relations with which a public may engage. In this section I draw upon the discernible conventions of modern art discussed above and theories of the public in order to think about two of Sharon Hayes’s “love addresses”—*Everything Else Has Failed! Don’t You Think It’s Time For Love?* (2007), and *I March in the Parade of Liberty But As Long As I Love You I’m Not Free* (2008)—and their publication across a number of media. I will examine the love address as a compelling confessional mode that works to constitute a public in a manner similar to the way certain forms of popular culture constitute an “intimate public sphere” according to Lauren Berlant.\(^2\) Like sentimental literature, movies, talk shows, and pop songs, Hayes presents intimate and open narratives in varied mediums which, brought together, draw upon a widespread social need to experience relief and relate through sentimental feeling, a feeling often marginalized by the fiercely anti-sentimental nature of dominant, masculinist culture. Berlant’s intimate public adamantly avoids the political however, and tends to enforce that participants in this intimate public become

\(^2\) Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, viii.
less complex in order to relate to the pressures of “aspiration normativity” reassured by
the persistently heteronormative love plot found in the materials of “women’s culture.”3 I
am particularly interested in how Hayes’s art form of the love address, unlike Berlant’s
“women’s culture,” uses the interplay of the suggestive terrains of love and desire and
public and private for the purposes of public building in explicitly political terms. Hayes
attempts to join the sentimental with the political—romantic disappointment with
political slogans, expressions of longing with images of revolutionary moments from
history—telling us much about the importance of both kinds of affective feeling and
structure in contemporary culture and how linking them, or finding their points of
overlap, may be essential for any project that aims to create a space of the commons to be
successful.

A woman stands with a microphone, her head bowed and eyes cast downward.
It is lunchtime outside of the corporate headquarters of the United Bank of Switzerland.
She looks up and speaks into the microphone, beginning, “My dear love, my sweet lover,
I’m shaking a bit, I’m not sure exactly how to begin.” She continues, explaining where
she is, what day it is, and that she is using a microphone to be heard. “I’m worried that
my letters aren’t getting to you and that yours aren’t getting to me. I don’t know what’s
happening and it’s making me particularly anxious.” She pauses for a minute. People
pass. Some ignore her; some linger and look into her eyes as she meets their gaze. Horns
blare out in the street traffic. She considers that she feels displaced in time, saying she
was trying to measure time by the war, but got lost. She tries to assess the last time she
communicated with her lost love: she thought that maybe the last phone call was “before

Bush said the U.S. troops would stay in Iraq like they stayed in Korea…but you told me
that Laura Bush said that no one suffers like our President and she suffer, so it was
sometime after that.” Then, after another brief pause: “I take heart knowing that your ears
can’t be closed.” This performance piece, Hayes’s *Everything Else Has Failed! Don’t
You Think It’s Time For Love?*, offers us an impression of the artist’s key ideas, and
questions about, love, language, and the public.4

The speech that Hayes gave for five workweek days at noon in front of an
office building comes across, at points, as a reading of a love letter and a registering of a
very common experience. One easily enough gets the sense that the speaker has been left
by her lover, and her calls for reciprocal response are going unanswered. “Emotional, but
not especially interesting” is how one critic describes this language. 5 The speech jolts
and stutters from one thought to the next, as though the speaker can barely move logically
from one phrase to another under the pressure of heartbreak weighing upon her
consciousness. A sequence of phrases comes forward as though they had been scribbled
down as a privately written journal entry. A page from a script for this performance
written by Hayes reveals just such a process. 6 Handwritten in quick, slanted, lines and
loops are some of the words that would make their way into the speech, outlined as notes.

“Surely you know desire is cruel? Love is so easily wounded. Nothing is real but you. I
feel as though a part of me has been torn away, like a limb from battle. Nothing like this

4 For images and audio of this performance see the artist’s website, http://www.shaze.info/#

5 Paul David Young. “Time for Love: Sharon Hayes at the Whitney,” *Art in America

6 Image available in Hayes and Iles, *Sharon Hayes: There’s So Much*, 39
has ever happened to me.” Perhaps these lovelorn phrases have been read as uninteresting as they shape and give form to the rather ordinary, or sentimental experience of a broken relationship. However, the very ordinariness of these flat phrases is one aspect or form that could allow an art viewer entry into engaging with the performance’s expansive, and political, ideas. The lack of specificity is a move made which allows the words to be widely relatable, much like the lyrics of a pop song. But while pop lyrics are engineered to be universally relatable in order to be directly emotionally manipulative, and have commercial ends, Hayes is using the universality of unspecific “love language” differently.7

In one sequence Hayes speaks of reading about the death of a young soldier in Iraq and how it made her want to speak to her lost love object. Phrases like this tie the universality of the language down to a specific political issue, and also, importantly, bring in language that refers to a body, forcing the viewer to attune to something sensuous.

There are also occasions where Hayes pins the piece down to its moment unfolding in time, and relates it to the subjectivities present with her, watching or passing quickly by. The speech identifies something in the face of a viewer and compares it to her lost lover: eyes, a particular sort of gaze, lips: “I look at them and I find traces of you…like that guy walking with his eyes cast down like I’ve seen you do… or this one

7 It is used differently, as well, from the cultural material of the intimate public sphere characterized by Lauren Berlant.
who passes and his gaze holds mine like yours did when we first passed each other fourteen months ago.”

These details register something sensuous or bodily in the presence of those near her, whether the person is staying or fleeting. They then give momentary space to the subjectivity and bodily presence of others within the space of her words and performance. The stranger in proximity to Hayes becomes someone a little less than anonymous to her and to the gathered crowd, as his “lower lip, a little bit redder than the top” is vocally compared to the absent and particular face of the addressee of the speech. It is, importantly, a moving, material detail, but just as essentially, not in any way defining of any present body such that it violently defines, encodes, or implicates him or her as a particular sort of person. Gestures like this one reach out to the bodies present, are intimate enough to personalize and concretize the moment in the performance, but are open enough to not be so forceful, definite or rigid that they are consequently alienating.

At one point in this speech is a sequence where Hayes repeatedly speaks the words “I love you.” She repeats it several times, building up the phrase as a kind of incremental unit that may be serially repeated and varied, like the geometric unit of a minimalist sculpture. In a recounting of this performance, Hayes explained that as she would speak the words to the absent lost lover, she would also find herself speaking directly to the viewers who were present, watching, and close to her. The “I love you,” as it became embodied in the moment and spoken directly to the bodies accumulating in front of her, provoked some of those present viewers to begin to weep. Thus it became a

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8 For images and audio of this performance see the artist’s website, [http://www.shaze.info/#](http://www.shaze.info/#) (accessed November 29, 2012).

means toward an intensely intimate exchange between the artist and this ephemeral momentary public that formed around her. These strangers paused and were compelled toward listening. This is not a particularly easy thing to accomplish amidst the busy activity of the street in New York City and the generally chaotic nature of capital and spectacle-saturated contemporary life.

The subject of listening arises in a letter published in the exhibition catalogue There’s So Much I Want To Say to You, in which Hayes again addresses an anonymous, unknown “You.” She writes:

And here, I spent a long time considering the question you posed: when do we get to hear the world to which we want to listen? I’m not sure why I got so suspended on that. There is such a cacophony of sound in the world, even before I recognized myself as a political person, I felt overrun by things to listen to, things I couldn’t help but hear. And yes, perhaps now I have a much better chance at making choices, at standing with a cocked ear, moving with a microphone toward specific voices or bodies but it’s hard to excise the experience, or what becomes (perhaps) an inevitability, of listening to things you don’t really want to hear. It is oddly difficult to direct one’s listening…desire is not always a good leader.  

Hayes’s investment in desire is made apparent, as is a reluctance to invest in it entirely, as it is such an unruly and unpredictable feeling. What we want to hear or do may be at odds with what would be fulfilling or nourishing to us, whether on the scale of desire for some kind of substantive and supportive personal interrelationship, or desire for a political sense of belonging. And directing our desires and attention is endlessly difficult as our senses are overrun, inundated and distracted by the “too muchness” of the world—stimulations, obligations, entertainments, relationships—all brimming with their demands for time and attention. Hayes herself finds it difficult to know how to listen or direct her attention, and also knows that this feeling of being overrun is a common one, even a

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10 Hayes, “Sharon Hayes, Beyond” in Sharon Hayes: There’s So Much, 86.
potentially binding one. What might be the way out of this difficulty, and what practices can help us know how to direct our attention, listen carefully to one another, and consequently build some sort of relatable way of being together, or a common space in which to communicate and live? A voice on the street calls out to the public and to a lost love “I love you,” and some individuals pause, listen, and wonder how to relate to this affecting claim. The love address aims to cut through the cacophony of sound in the world with a lost hope turned into a possibility. The repetition of this phrase by one vulnerable body, amplified slightly by a microphone, but hardly becoming a chorus, searches for the potential of a chorus. It makes a tenuous step toward creating the connective world to which we may want to listen.

In critical theorist Michael Warner’s studies of what defines a public, he claims that publics are always self-organized, made of a relation among strangers, are constituted through attention, and that the address of public speech is both personal and impersonal.11 Warner believes that public speech is always taken as addressed both to ourselves and addressed to strangers, and in this knowledge, as we hear public speech, we understand ourselves as being both a private person and a public person. We also understand ourselves as “having resonance with others.” 12 The impersonal quality of a public speech, its address to a broad anonymous audience that happens in concert with an address made to individual subjects, is integral to creating this consciousness in the addressee. As we internalize that we are addressed in concert with others, we also register

12 Ibid. 77
some ability located within ourselves to be participatory in a public discourse, as we are not singled out as individuals, but are spoken to as one part of a greater body.

With *Everything Else Has Failed! Don’t You Think It’s Time for Love?*, those gathered and listening could have heard this multiplicity of forms of address, both public and private, and could have begun to understand themselves as part of a complicated network of relations, capable of collectivity. To first become a part of this relationship, to stop and listen, however, they would have to be constituted through attention. The force of the phrase “I love you,” and its powerful resonances of loss in this particular context, is one of the essential components to cultivating the attention of the busy public, subject to the overrun, noisy, world. To hear and see this performative utterance of “I love you,” directed towards particular bodies and faces, understand one’s self as part of its public, and receive it sincerely, pulls one’s attention in an intense, immediate manner. Quietly enough, in this performance, the art asks for response and encourages the viewer’s own activity of being sensitive in, and making the world, in congress with others. Through the functions of the impersonal form of public speech, the receiver is made to empathize with the loss of the speaker, and is called to action so that the loss may be answered to and repaired. With this affective bonding, the art creates the interest in and activity of the art’s receiver to understand themselves as capable of being in space with and collaborative with others, of being part of a greater whole. This is the starting point for the rich potential to make a commons, or, collectively, a world.

There is a built-in intimate and impersonal dynamic in the structure of Hayes’s delivery of phrases in the love address that enables the receiver to enter into a relationship with the stakes of her art (concerning ideas of love, citizenship or belonging)
as art. Like modernist art, the structure in *Everything Else Has Failed...* aims to mobilize the viewer’s awareness of the possibilities for collective engagement. Like Malevich, Hesse, or Johns, Hayes draws on a generalized abstraction. But rather than geometry or grid or field of color on a flat plane, Hayes offers the sentimental language of the love letter as a universally recognizable and open form. But because words such as “lip” and “bed” demand her viewer’s embodied sensitivity—an effect importantly compounded by Hayes’s sincere, if oddly isolated performance—there is a touched, bodily, personalized quality that lends the impersonal, possibly uninteresting love language a uniquely moving resonance. Listening to this address, one is pulled back and forth between recognizing a common, even universal experience of loss of love, and being directed to think specifically about a particular instance of it as intimately related to a particular body—Hayes’s body, a present viewer’s body, a soldier’s body. The receiver enters into the stakes of her art whereby they vacillate back and forth between the universal and the particular, and feel cathartic relief and recognition in both the impersonal, recognizable forms and the individualized bodily details of words and this instance of performance. As the phrase “I love you,” is uttered, a present body experiences it as directed to someone else, but also directed to her individual self; with this strangely compelling but unforceful delivery of emotion, a viewer will receive and process the words as an experience, with which she must come to terms, on her own and with others in that public place and time.

*Everything Else Has Failed! Don’t You Think It’s Time for Love?*, is one work in a series of performances dealing with the relationship between personal and political desire and between love and politics. *I March in the Parade of Liberty But As Long As I*
Love You I’m Not Free, similarly contains elements that model an impersonal and intimate dialectic that enables collective form as a possibility for a public in the present.

For this performative enactment, Hayes walked from The New Museum at Bowery and Prince Streets in lower Manhattan to a different site of public address. The performance consisted of Hayes stopping at street corners every few blocks and speaking a single, repeated love address to an anonymous and unnamed lover. She completed the route every day for eight days. The text of this speech is made up partially of Hayes’s own writing, but is also a pastiche that draws upon and incorporates texts from sources such as De Profundis, Oscar Wilde’s letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, and slogans from early gay Liberation parades in New York City. The use of these lifted and appropriated texts minimizes the importance of Hayes as author of the speech, further depersonalizing and broadening this particular love address. And yet, simultaneously, she emphasizes or suggests the epistolary quality of the address by choosing to incorporate a love letter. Since letter writing is a form of communication that is often quite particular and personal, we once again are offered a negotiation with private and public forms of communication, with both having qualities that draw and direct potentially indifferent viewers to pause, pay close attention, and be bound up in empathy with the content of the speech.

With both Everything Has Failed . . . and I March . . . the personal, diary-like content that speaks of love, longing, and missing the lost love object, is interrupted and woven into by speech that is concerned on the one hand with political issues and on the

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14 Hayes, “I March.”
other, grief related to feeling ineffectual in relation to the political. In *I March . . .*, however, the speech becomes progressively less like the cadence of reading a letter as the patterns of phrasing become much more like chanting. Full paragraphs that recount experiences the speaker had had with her lover transform into short sentences and phrases spoken one after the other. Slogans drawn from early gay liberation parades and activist chants from later protests are interwoven with less identifiable phrases that refer to love and desire:

Love is so easily wounded
Out of the closets and onto the streets.
We will not hide our love away.
We will not be silent.
ACT UP, FIGHT BACK!
Surely you know desire is cruel?
I feel certain I am going mad again.
Nothing is real but you.
What do we want?
When do we want it?

The performance of *I March...* is also perhaps more urgent than the previous performance in terms of seeking to evoke associations with activist action. Hayes did not stand in front of a microphone in one solitary location but walked through the streets and halted on street corners to speak, and she magnified her speech this time with the use of a bullhorn. An investment in directing the art viewer to the social and political circumstances of the present moment becomes apparent in terms where Hayes explicitly mentions political figures and their actions from the recent past. She addresses the love object, stating:

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15 Geyer and Hayes, “Sharon Hayes, I March in the Parade of Liberty But as Long as I Love You I’m Not Free” in *History is Ours*, 19.
I started a list of things I wanted to talk to you about: Cheney’s pompous warning to Iran, the Blackwater scandal, the bombing at the Ghazil market and all this hurried talk of Baghdad returning to normal. As more time passed, I started adding things about us.\textsuperscript{16}

It would be easy to interpret Hayes’ gestures here as registering failure. These performances could be viewed as using the language of the loss of a personal, meaningful, loving relationship as a metaphor for the loss of being heard or feeling effective in the public sphere while being a traumatized subject living in a time of war.\textsuperscript{17}

But such a reading ignores the fact that the performer’s words are still assured through a labored process of walking through the streets at the same time every day, repeating chants from the past as though some new use may found for them in the present, and speaking out in space, making a claim that a body may potentially engage, interact, and find a way to be with others in public. \textit{I March . . .} ends on the following note:

I feel like I could talk to you for a very long time. Like I could stand out here for hours and hours, days and days, for longer even in the hope that some mere phrase, some single word, some broken echo of love might reach you and find its way to bounce back to me. The aim of love, my sweet, is to love, no more, no less. How many times can I say that to you?\textsuperscript{18}

The actions taken in this performance could continue indefinitely, so committed is the artist to the hope that some reciprocity will be achieved, even if the reassurance of love was received only as a “broken echo.” This ambition is similar to Pier Paulo Pasolini’s modernist one—even in the face of national horror, love is proposed as something worthy

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. 16.

\textsuperscript{17} Sharon Hayes, “Artist Talk” (lecture, Affective Publics Reading Group and the Open Practice Committee, University of Chicago, IL, November 2010), http://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/opc/video/2010/11/sharon-hayes/ (accessed August 18, 2012). These ways of interpreting the art come up in Berlant’s introduction of Hayes, and also in the audience discussion following, at the event of Hayes’s artist talk.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 17.
of seeking out, and holding out for. While the performance springs from a time resounding with loss and isolation, the hopeful promise of love and connection is enough to continue to labor for them out on the streets. For now, the traumatized subject speaks alone; in the future, perhaps she wouldn’t have to. She experiments with living with and resting in the feeling of aloneness but always reaching for something better that might come next, through this process of experimental speaking. Using liberation slogans of activist moments that have passed and finding purpose for them in the present, amplifying her voice to a more forceful register, insisting on speaking, even if in isolation, about the revolutionary potential of love, this performance insists on speaking out, and while the moment is a painful one, she announces into the bullhorn that “bitter things could still be turned into joy.”

In Berlant’s tracking of the rise of the precarious public sphere, she sees the world as in a devastating situation “beyond the normative good life structures, where people have a hard time imagining a genre that makes sense of life while they’re in the middle of it” and ultimately that these concepts matter because she wants “better objects for better optimism.” She goes on to clarify, “But to achieve this we need to move our analyses of the historical present into the exploratory mode that crisis, regardless, forces us to occupy.” We may observe this exploratory mode engaged by Hayes with these love addresses. They recognize pain, loss, and uncertainty in the language they use, in the


21 Ibid.
contemporary political issues they touch upon, and in the mode of performance which allows audience indifference as much as response. But they do so in order to find the better objects for better optimism we might hope for, where beings feel themselves held in common with and sensitive to the needs and desires of other beings, not to mention supported and taken care of in turn. What this art can additionally help to accomplish is the effective maintaining of this sense and ability of being with others. This is the achieving of togetherness through the impersonal qualities of art’s abstracted language, and it is not so close and pressure-inducing that those in proximity to it must perform the exhausting and simplifying affective labor with one another typically demanded by participation in the intimate public sphere, where aspiring to a lived normativity is imperative. A balance is reached.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: THERE’S SO MUCH I WANT TO SAY TO YOU

One of Hayes’s most recent works is a piece titled Beyond (2012).¹ I encounter it as a component of what Hayes calls a non-event, a document of an event that displaces it from the original event but works as something of a connecting referent to the original.² I find Beyond as a photograph located in the final pages of the exhibition catalogue put together for Hayes’s exhibition at the Whitney Museum, There’s So Much I Want to Say to You. It is labeled with the caption “research still,” a photograph in one respect, then, and a directive toward open-endedness, in another. It reads as: still, or a frame (a pause), but also, “still,” as in “continue.” Beyond images the tactile presence of a structure: a drop of cloth, propped up on rickety wood handles, backed up against a chain-link fence and marked with textile letters that spell out the title: one word, BEYOND. The material letters are layered over a backdrop of matte blue sky, blank blocks of fluffy white clouds, and cheery cutout rainbows.

When I initially looked at this photograph, my impression was that it could be located in the current of time I was inhabiting, 2012, and that it could likely be read as related to the particular dialogues that accompany an election year. Though a bit faux-

¹ Image available in Hayes: There’s So Much, 85.

² “Certain Resemblances,” in Hayes: There’s So Much, 87-88.
naïve in its execution, it doesn’t quite hit as ironic (one pattern of phrasing that emerges from Hayes in various places is her interest in speaking sincerely.3), and that it could work as a heartfelt sentiment calling out for response. One must take her at her word. Forward with the work of queer liberation, with holding unguarded hopes inside better-knowing bodies, with making or crafting what one can without regard to or need for slick productive skills. It hangs on the fence as though left behind, a breadcrumb, a talisman, from someone who has already moved away from this juncture. It mimics, in a sense, the bold and blank one-word slogan of the 2008 Obama campaign, hope. It exists in relation to that now barren chant as an echo, a modification, a rejoinder, an improvement; not quite a parody, but a caveat, a response, and then a moving forward. To go beyond is not to hope, willfully, optimistically, blindly, or without direction. It is not to be audacious. Beyond is a place to move toward or to imagine. The flag stands and leans precariously against the fence not as the semaphore of suprematism, waving us toward revolution, but lingers as a remnant and prods as a subtle suggestion. If it hints at an ending, and all of the loss that accompanies endings, it also poses the possibility of a continuation, a somewhere. Now let us go there, I thought.

The piece could, potentially, hold this reading. Yet, the very next day, I encountered photographs housed in the New York Public Library’s online archive,

3 Hayes’s disinterest in irony comes up in a published conversation with Yvonne Rainer where she says that she finds irony “facile… a safe cover for something else (perhaps something quite a bit more earnest) going on,” see, Sharon Hayes and Yvonne Rainer, “Familiarity, Irony, Ambivalence: An Email Conversation Between Sharon Hayes and Yvonne Rainer,” in Work the Room: A Handbook of Performance Strategies: Critical Readers in Visual Cultures #8, ed. Ulrike Müller (Berlin: oe and b_books, 2006), 31-48 (also can be found at http://www.shaze.info/assets/texts/sh_familiarity_irony.pdf). Hayes returns to the experience of sincerity again in the lecture given at the University of Chicago in November 2010 where she discussed hearing the answers of those interviewed on the street about political images for her project After/Before “sincerely.”
documenting the Christopher Street Liberation Parade of 1971 in New York City. In one of the photographs a group of queer protesters are gathered in Central Park, embracing, smiling, distracted, apprehensive, ecstatic. They hold the very same sign as in Hayes’s photo. One of Hayes’s works, *Gay Power* (2012), is in fact Super 8 footage of this event taken by the Women’s Liberation Army and narrated over and discussed by writer and activist Kate Millet, who had attended, and Hayes, who would have been a year old at the time. In observing *Gay Power* one witnesses the footage and hears Millet speak of the pervasive feelings of apprehension haunting the liberation parade, as the group collectively carried the sense that it could be shut down or that their normativity-rupturing bodies and relationships could be threatened with violence at any moment.

Hayes’s concerns unfold here. While watching *Gay Power*, the viewer may experience an intense emotional pull to the subject matter, with the film full of bodies sweetly embracing, and the narrative emphasizing how much a tremendous sense of feeling vulnerable permeated the interaction that day. The sensuous and particular come forward. But the material of the slogan is what Hayes detaches and reiterates and reassures in another form. The *Beyond* photograph calls back to the *Gay Power* film so that they perform something of a connection; *Beyond* reaches forward and reaches back, it eliminates some element of distance by forging a connection in alluding to the *Gay Power* footage, and it constitutes itself as a photograph of a collection of simple materials, mediated and at a distance from a receiver. Feelings of sensitivity toward the conditions and circumstances of bodies, hearts, minds, and their abilities to love, pitch

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around with feelings about broader, general political ideas and feelings like “progress” within the viewer.

Hayes’s artwork evokes feelings about being with others in public, and affirms, particularly in the performances discussed here, that a space of connectivity and public togetherness will always be something worth reaching for. But she does so in a manner that has us think about what it means to be a political person in public alongside an emotional, sentimental one. In the end, these ways of being do not seem so far apart.
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Hayes, There’s So Much I Want to Say to You.”