

SOME QUERIES INTO SPACE, GENDER, AND LANGUAGE

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Thinking about the reflexivity of artistic and intellectual circumstances of production, representation, and institutionalization is a privilege we owe to institu-

tions such as Powerhouse/La Centrale. Their dedication to the communities they serve and their respective struggles of emancipation are reflected in their ongoing programming as well as their history. This investment in the historiography and genealogy of emancipatory art practices, and how these interests can be negotiated within the format of the exhibition, is also at the heart of what I explore in this essay through works by k.g. Guttman, a performer and long-term member of La Centrale, and Sharon Hayes, an artist uniquely engaged in the relationship of activism and art production. Their performance-based works reveal and stand for a broad network of relations and discourses, all firmly rooted in the belief that gesture, language, and visual expression are to be seen in a correlative relationship. They constitute, indeed, an investigation of how experience relates to knowledge that not only reflects but also shapes the needs and desires of society.

Standing, blocking, dancing, speaking, running, and walking

When we think of the rich history of performance art in public space, the work of feminist icons such as Adrian Piper, the Guerilla Girls, Cheryl



Fig. 39 Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future*, Vienna, 2006. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

L'Hirondelle, Yayoi Kusama, Vera Frenkel, VALIE EXPORT, Trisha Brown, Joan Jonas, Suzanne Lacy, or Françoise Sullivan quickly come to mind. As time passes, the infinite pool of images and recordings of their perform-

ances becomes emblematic of the emancipatory struggles and achievements not only of the past but in the present day. Each action, from its outset, relied equally on the physical and conceptual presence of the artists in front of as well as behind the camera. For artists engaged in critical practice outside of the mainstream, the low cost of reproduction and distribution inherent to photography and the discovery of video as an artistic medium that can record and simultaneously render were crucial for the existence of these works then and now. These artists' work from the 1970s resulted in the fact that, half a century later, their visionary recordings and actions are crucial for the institutionalization and popularity of performance art.

The paradigmatic role of performance within the visual arts, then and now, is dependent on two key factors: first, the immediacy of performance's effect and second, performance's historical and discursive functioning as a mode of experimentation and exploration. Each of these artists carefully chose her medium of expression, considering both its immediate effect as well as its historical sustainability, caught between the competing needs for originality and an infinite potential for reproduction. [1]



Fig 38. Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future*, New York, 2005. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

Yet, not only did producing visual accounts of their actions serve their archives as well as the success of and belief in making their work accessible to a larger audience, it also raised the question of the politics of originality and authorship—two concepts heralded and treasured by the canon as well as the market. Examples such as Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz's performance *In Mourning and in Rage*, from 1977; Françoise Sullivan's series of photographs of her infamous walk, *La promenade entre le Musée d'art contemporain et le Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal*, from 1970; or photographs of VALIE EXPORT's early public actions in the streets of Vienna, such as *Aus der Mappeder Hundigkeiten*, [2] from 1969, where she walked through the centre of the city with a man on a leash, are all powerful documents of the social desire to "act" against a mass media-dominated and entertainment-driven culture. They took their struggles out into the streets, while keeping a close proximity to the cultural institutions that would guarantee their future. Their images have over the decades become timeless as well as contemporary, caught between originality and reproduction. Each one of these often black and white photographs [3] continues to tackle the dialectical relationship between the live and mediated, engaging in, as described by the art historian Rosalind Krauss at the time, "a kind of aesthetic economy, interdependent and mutually sustaining." [4] Their work stands for an inherent critique of the representational politics of male authorship, built on the fetishization of the object and its validation of the original. Their work made way for a critical and postmodernist understanding of art, where ideas of appropriation, media reflexivity, and conceptual modes of production were recognized as essential factors for relational and performative practices.

These pioneers of performance art left their indexical mark on the surface of not only their immediate present but also the history they were engaged in challenging as well as the future that allowed them to be recognized. As witnesses of their own pasts, Jonas, Sullivan, Lacey, Piper, and later Rebecca Belmore, Tanya Mars, Sylvie Tourangeau, as well as General Idea and many other artists and collectives throughout the 1980s and 1990s held on to their agency as cultural producers. Their work has

inspired and allowed these artists to collaborate with new generations of artists coming from conceptual, socially critical, and relational art practices. This cross-generational interest in performance has led to an expansion of our understanding of performance art—from a genre mainly focused on the authenticity of the body to a hybrid medium of discursively based practices. This shift has, several decades after the act, guaranteed the inclusion of feminist performance art in an expanding canon of art history, sparing many of them their disappearance under the guise of the ephemeral. [5] This development of performance art as contingent practices is particularly significant for the growing artistic interest in performative practices within the public sphere as well as the exhibition space.

Our understanding of public space as a contested site of commercial and private interests rings especially true today, when the question of the real and the authentic in light of the collapse of the live and the mediated, facilitated through new modes of digital reproduction and the vastness of social media, is an intrinsic part of how we read and understand performance. Performance art's capability to serve as an ideological index may stem from the immediate participation of the audience and other forms of interaction on a micro level, but its full potential is situated in the process of transcription to different media and within communicative distribution systems, such as the exhibition.

To get a better understanding of the tightly woven relationships of the personal and political in relation to the public, this essay will take a closer look at two works. The first, by Montréal-based artist k.g. Guttman, is called *Escorte / May I accompany you? (Puis-je vous accompagner?)*, from 2009 to 2012, and the second one is by New York- and Portland-based artist Sharon Hayes, called *In the Near Future*, dating from 2005 to 2009. Both works are series of one-person actions in urban space that continually evolve and are echoed within the framework of the exhibition.

As much as the methods of their approaches differ, their work is equally invested in current and past critical and emancipatory art practices, which since the 1970s have engaged in and reflected on the correlative relationship of gender, language, and



Fig. 40 Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future*, Vienna, 2006. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

site specificity. Hayes' and Guttman's explorations of collective and individual identity are rooted in their shared desire to make the politics of the here and now tangible as both an immediate as well as a mediated experience. Both artists cite the politically and historically determined images of bodies within the public sphere. Their work allows us to ask in what ways an emancipated body, whether still or in movement, bears a potential for political intervention and how the significance of this body, as a sign and a proof of social change, has evolved over the last decade.

Escorte / May I accompany you?

Escorte / May I accompany you? was performed by Guttman from 2009 to 2012 in Montréal, Nantes, Paris, and Vancouver. The parameters of this work are simple and straightforward: the artist walks around the city asking strangers if she can accompany them to their destination. [6] Sometimes she engages in a conversation; sometimes she follows them in silence. Fully relying on the safety of visibility offered by public space, she never follows them inside a building. Guttman's relationship to the people she accompanies and engages with can last from a few minutes to a few days. Neither the reality of their identities nor the purpose of their trajectories are of importance. Their paths of habitual movements write the choreography of her adventures and story.

By pursuing her goal, to be the shadow of her subjects' movements throughout the urban fabric, Guttman references a tradition of work that has existed since the early 1970s, as shown by artists such as Laurie Anderson, Adrian Piper, Sophie Calle, and Vito Acconci. [7] *Escorte / May I accompany you?* focusses on the relationship two strangers can embark on when sharing a conversation while walking through the cityscape. What we see when we look at *Escorte / May I accompany you?* are reproductions and carefully arranged notes of the instances of negotiation orchestrated and recorded by the artist. Similar to yet different from her predecessors—whether Calle's obsessive journeys across a continent or Sullivan's ten-minute walk in the city—Guttman confronts her collaborators and her viewers. Unlike her iconic predecessors, Guttman does not remain alone in following her chosen stranger. Instead, she makes the effort to establish an arrangement with the strangers she strives to accompany. By doing so, she sets herself up

for a loss of control, which allows for the unexpected to happen. These moments of negotiation, refusal, or acceptance not only mark the outset of the collaboration but also the relationship the artist seeks to have with the city she discovers through their eyes. The urban landscape is the stage as well as the background texture that frames and potentially heightens the tension between two people, abstract and real, at the same time.

Guttman lets the stranger take on the responsibility and choices, delegating the power and authorship of her work to her witnesses. Guttman explains, "When I perform the piece *Escorte / May I accompany you?*, I have to muster an incredible amount of trust and hope that I will be taken somewhere, not sure where. My mass gets led around. My physical body gets transformed; my embodiment is given over to another, my own movements given to the movements of others.... It can be exhilarating, boring, heartfelt or troubling." [8]

Guttman plays with the behavioural etiquette of women in public space, who are not expected to simply ask to accompany people, by using the awkwardness of these human encounters as the central point of the work. Sometimes she talks; sometimes she listens. By walking through the city, she gathers stories; she becomes a storyteller. The everyday stories of the random passers-by she accompanies become the narrative nucleus of her drawings, maps, and script-based installations. Guttman transcribes her web-like paths through the urban fabric into series of bright and colourful drawings. In each city, Guttman also asked a photographer to document her while interacting with someone from the public. The participation of the photographer is neither acknowledged through the gaze of the protagonists in the image, nor visible through the framing of the camera. Yet, these photographs—in combination with the drawings, hand-painted diagrams, and the script-like text that accompanies the work—are integral for the installation. They serve as proof, translating the artist's personal engagement and putting into focus the visceral relationship of language and the body exposed in public space. The viewer, looking at the photographs, sketches, and transcriptions of Guttman's conversations, becomes complicit in the story of this negotiation, allowing the work to transition into another form of existence as a multimedia installation.

Despite the fact that they come from opposite sides of performance art—one from a relational approach, the other from an activist background—both Guttman and Hayes address notions of affect and legibility in their works. They insert their bodies via text and spoken words into the public realm as a gesture of immediacy as well as an echo of a collective imaginary of performance art. The specific capacity of Hayes and Guttman to translate and consequently critique the spatial and temporal layers that write performance's history speaks not only to their own sense of the past but also to the politics of inclusion and exclusion at work in any kind of canon.

In the Near Future

Hayes' *In the Near Future* is part of a long-term investigation of artists in various forms of civic protest, consisting of a series of anachronistic and speculative actions in public space. This performance-based work was shown in New York, London, Warsaw, and Vienna. *In the Near Future* consisted of a research phase; a seven-day schedule of one-hour, one-person demonstrations; and a growing documentary archive within the exhibition space. At the outset of this project, Hayes researched the paradigmatic moments inscribed into the cultural memory of the cities she was invited to, resulting in a selection of seven iconic press photographs. These images helped the artist to determine a series of actual sites of protest to be reactivated [9] and to draw out a map that informed her seven daily one-hour actions. Each action consisted of Hayes holding up, in silence, a different protest sign for the duration of one hour. Hayes would not seek engagement with the passers-by, avoiding identifying the status of her action as an artwork. [10]

Advance announcements for the performance series were also invitations for the audience to neither join nor watch her but to instead actively document and thereby contribute to the production of the third element of the work, the exhibition installation. Colleagues as well as the general audience were asked to take pictures of Hayes, using rolls of slide film given to them at the beginning of the action. After each day, the rolls were developed overnight to then be selected by the artist. Eighty of

the images, filling up one slide carousel, were then projected into the exhibition space the following day. With each day, a new performance and a new slide projector would come to life within the exhibition space, creating a steadily growing archive of images following and accompanying each of Hayes' seven demonstrations. Hayes investigates the border between art and activism by entwining their different forms of mediation with active and passive spectatorship. The viewers' participatory labour not only produced the work but also justified Hayes' presence in the public sphere, each day marking the next one's translational achievements.

Hayes' performance in front of the camera within the public sphere gained an additional level of exposure within the exhibition space. The contingency of her work on past slogans and their physical re-citation was also reflected in her choice: the now-derelict medium of slide projectors. A double framing of the past as such empowered each image to gain a new momentum of meaning in the present.

In the Near Future is an archival investigation of the relationship between art and activism. When historical events achieve a new topicality, they often undergo a temporal and spatial shift caused and nurtured by the immediate reaction of the audience, collective memory, and the assumption that the event has been forgotten. Hayes' insertion of protest signs as an urban compositional element is a trigger of cultural memory, situated on the threshold of archival politics and political reality. While playing out the visual analogy of the female body within the landscape of the vernacular, Hayes' body oscillates between the live and the archival and disrupts the linearity of the heteronormative imaginary of history.

Transcending the contemporaneity of concrete politics into an archive of images

Hayes and Guttman's capacity to offer their viewers a different reading of a familiar urban space is accomplished by fulfilling two tasks: the first to interrupt the linearity of traditionally male-dominated power structures, the second to reference cultural history. As such, they offer a rereading of feminist genealogies and traditions—queering the paths of art history and feminism by reading

these histories, as art historian Helen Molesworth says, “against their grain.” [11] Their carefully chosen slogans, such as Hayes’ “I am a Man” or Guttman’s “May I accompany you?”, are markers for their interactions with the public. Their choices of visual framing, documentation, and mediation of these moments of human interaction allow their viewers to critically reflect on the the social imaginary inherent to the representational politics of performance art in public space, and to acknowledge their own role and function as witnesses. Both artists represent the contingency of their live presence and the presentness of their image-based works as installations within the exhibition.

Their approaches entail the interlinking of several levels of temporality. Their works exist in parallel forms of physical existence, each phase taking account of their becoming, their intermedial states of “being,” as well as their transition to a solidified state. Through their careful navigation between layers of media, space, and time, they address performance’s inherent existence on the threshold of the live and mediated, and its relationship with experience and knowledge through the exhibition. This integration of the before and after within the presentness of the work permits the viewer to experience the exhibition as an archive and as a site of production. Hayes’ and Guttman’s translations of their actions from one space to another create a prismatic doubling of their chosen actions—an endless series of words and images produced and played out within the format of the exhibition.

Their works can also be understood as scripts, rather than finished works, for a series of social choreographies to be exhibited, archived, and re-enacted. This contingency of relational and performance-based practices rings especially true in a piece Guttman was commissioned to develop within the archive of La Centrale in celebration of its 40th anniversary. The work, entitled *Conversation*, consists of a simple drawing, which depicts a list of 30 handwritten names, one after another. Each name is connected to another name through an arrow, linking an original La Centrale member from 1974, at the top of the list, to a current member in 2014, at the bottom of the list. Despite the simplicity of its appearance and linear nature, we can quickly guess the complexity

hidden behind this drawing. *Conversation* is a sketch, a script as well as a map of a series of encounters Guttman initiated when she called for founding members to meet and talk to new members of the organization. Guttman did not dictate the subject nor ask for proof of these conversations but simply took note, as with her photographs in *Escorte / May I accompany you?*, of the initial pairings. What we see as her artwork is her initiative to create a situation that will remain alive through the invisibility of its materiality, acted out as a documentation of the event. This parallel use of the exhibition as a public sphere enables both of these artists to create scenarios in which the correlative relationship of the individual to the collective, as well as the past to the present, can fluently be translated from the street to the wall and back to the archive.

Notes

[1] See Barbara Clausen, "After the Act: The (Re)Presentation of Performance Art," in *After the Act: The (Re) Presentation of Performance Art*, MUMOK Theory Series No. 3, dir. Barbara Clausen, (Vienna: MUMOK Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 2007), 7–20.

[2] See VALIE EXPORT, "Works: *Aus der Mappe der Hundigkeit*, 1968," accessed October 15, 2014, [http://www.valieexport.at/en/werke/werke/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4064&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=4&chash=b1511c44d6](http://www.valieexport.at/en/werke/werke/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4064&tx_ttnews[backPid]=4&chash=b1511c44d6)

[3] More often than not, regardless of the authors' original intentions. See also Barbara Clausen, "Documents Between Spectator and Action," in *Live Art on Camera Performance and Photography*, director Alice Maude Roxby, (Southampton: John Hansard Gallery), 68–78.

[4] Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant Garde," in *The Originality of the Avante Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 160.

[5] The categorization of performance art as ephemeral—despite the critical, anti-commercial connotation of this term—has facilitated the exclusion of these vanguard artists from a predominantly heteronormative canon for more than three decades.

[6] The artist chose available materials and actions for this piece. According to her notes, they included herself, dressed as if going to work, and the weather, regardless of sunshine, clouds, or light rain.

[7] Vito Acconci is the only male artist I reference. Acconci's *Following Piece* from 1969 was a series of performances consisting of him following random strangers for hours at a time on the streets of Manhattan. The strangers he followed were never aware of him shadowing their movement within the city.

[8] Unpublished notes by k.g. Guttman from May 28, 2012, sent to the author by email on April 28, 2014.

[9] The text fragments she chose to reproduce on each sign were derived from past movements ("We condemn US aggression in Vietnam," "I Am A Man") or adapted to fit the given context yet remaining generically legible ("Nothing Will Be As Before").

[10] Asked why she was doing this, she would avoid calling herself an artist, rather stating that she was simply researching public forms of protest. Hayes would edit her responses, guarding her pose in front of the numerous cameras present during the protest—a situation that also made it uninviting for passers-by to engage with her on a personal level.

[11] See Helen Molesworth, "How to Install Art as a Feminist," in *Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, eds. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 507.



Fig. 41 et 42 Tanya Mars, *Homage to the City of Women: Leaves of Gold*, performance, le 14 et 15 mai 2014.
Fig. 41 and 42 Tanya Mars, *Homage to the City of Women: Leaves of Gold*, performance, May 14 and 15, 2014.
Photo: Lucie Rocher