

**SHARON
HAYES
IN THE
NEAR
FUTURE**



Contemporary Art Gallery
Vancouver

Sharon Hayes
In the Near Future

Foreword

We live in times of civil unrest on a global stage — demonstrations against the G7 nations wherever their next summit is held, challenges to perceived military aggression and interference in countries elsewhere in the world for obscured political-economic reasons, race riots, tensions regarding environmental concerns, pickets protesting against alleged corporate tax evasions, student demonstrations against tuition fee increases, and most recently the ongoing disputes and civil war across the Middle East. In the West at least it could be said that the advent of this coincides with a decline in numbers coming out to vote at public elections. Occurrences hinge around a lack of, or a disenfranchisement with, democratic process, the system seemingly divorced from our everyday lives, or by which we are no longer empowered. Focus on single issues, no less important, becomes the only way we feel we can protest to affect real change. Or is this a moment in the continuing tradition of social dissent that citizens have engaged in wherever and whenever there was perceived injustice?

At the Contemporary Art Gallery we present *In the Near Future* by Sharon Hayes, her first solo exhibition in Canada. This multi-projection installation documents a series of lone performances — street demonstrations in cities including

New York, London, Vienna, Warsaw, Brussels and Paris. Hayes is pictured with a placard announcing various slogans, for example ‘Organise or Starve’ and ‘We Are Innocent’. In part culled from key historical moments in civic protest they never give away their origin while the figure seen imploring the passers-by rings with a certain authenticity. Tellingly she also relinquishes the actual production of work by getting invited bystanders to photograph her actions. However Hayes is not interested in these methods and strategies for mere nostalgic purposes, rather she questions the role of the individual in public space through such occasions of public speech and their reception by the collective.

In this spirit of exchange we take the opportunity to thank all concerned for their support in making this exhibition happen. In Berlin and New York respectively Tanya Leighton and Feliz Solomon have proved invaluable in assisting with our desire to present this work.

Above all we are indebted to Sharon Hayes who has been most attentive in planning all aspects of the exhibition. Never has her vision seemed more pertinent.

Nigel Prince
Executive Director



“Votes for Women” / Jenifer Pappararo, Curator

In the Near Future by Sharon Hayes takes protest as its subject. But it is not simply fortuitous that Hayes’ work carries such immediate newsworthy relevance given the snowballing of demonstrations in the Middle East. Globally, the beginning of the 21st century has brought a revival of large-scale public protest; worldwide actions against the US invasion of Iraq in early 2003 being a prime example. Even though its direct aims were not met, its scale signaled the resurgence of massive public marches as well as an increased discursive and aesthetic investigation in the history of protest.

The contradiction of an international renaissance in mass demonstration inherently seems a good place to begin questioning not simply the relevance of street protest, but also why this continues to regain significance regardless of ineffectiveness. The mere fact of its recent global nature only serves to magnify its irrelevance. On February 15th 2003, three million people rallied in Rome to oppose the Iraq War without direct consequence beyond being listed in the 2004 *Guinness Book of World Records* as the largest recorded public demonstration. So why has this form of public action rematerialized as a main tactic. Aren’t there other ways to unify in an era of electronic networking that could potentially carry more consequence and have further reach? Is it merely a nostalgic return or does the success lie elsewhere — in the structural details that effect how public marches and gatherings have been, and continue to be, represented and perpetuated

as images? Maybe its reprise is simply based on the fact that it is a *lingua franca* — one that is shared and understood internationally — regardless of the specificity of language or delineation of borders?

For *In the Near Future*, Hayes dissects the “speech-act” of protest and how meaning is derived through what she defined in a recent interview with Chris Mansour for 491, as a “triangular relationship between the words on the sign, the body that holds the sign, and the time and place” of the public action. From 2003 to 2008, the artist staged actions in six different cities. In select public sites she picketed with placards bearing anachronistic and ambiguous slogans. Some she made up, others she altered or directly appropriated from bygone protests, such as, “Who approved the war in Vietnam?” a phrase originally used in 1962 at the Charter Day Protest at the University of California. “I am a Man” was a slogan taken from the civil rights movement in 1968 during the Memphis Sanitation strike used by Hayes on a placard in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City.

For Hayes, each site she performs at carries a particular significance; for example, the New York cathedral was the location where ACT UP held a mass demonstration in 1989 protesting the Roman Catholic stance against AIDS education, condom distribution and abortion. On Wall Street she carried a placard with “Ratify the E.R.A. Now!” — a slogan used in Chicago in 1978 to protest Equal Rights Amendments — Hayes using this avatar of world business, in part to address the still predominant discrepancies in wages between men

and women. Yet, the particularities of this information are not essential to understanding Hayes’ public performances. Her actions are not designed to make clear declarations, she has no direct aim and this is not activism. Each performance is a paring down of the basic strategies of street protest — the way text, body, and place and time go together to define a subject and create a common language. So what is Hayes’s intent in ratifying these signifiers, disconnecting the basic elements from their historical locus. How is the chance individual to interpret a lone woman carrying the sign “*Nous sommes innocents*” (we are innocent) in Brussels? It is easy to imagine someone dismissing her as the filmic archetype of the crazed protestor carrying a hand-made sign warning the imminent end of the world. But if approached Hayes would openly divulge sources, clarify her references and speak about her interests. She would not, however declare her status as an artist or define her actions as an artwork. In doing this she created multiple levels of viewing. There is the more accidental viewer and an invited audience who are aware that Hayes is an artist. She also invited the latter to participate, asking them to document her performances.

A selection of these images are used in what is now the final exhibition installation of *In the Near Future*, where the audience’s documentation of thirteen actions are projected as 35mm slides on corresponding projectors each dedicated to one of the individual performances. Hayes chose 254 varied images that although distinct capture a poignant repetition. While displacing the specificity of each subject and context but also

Who Approved
THE WAR
in — VIETNAM??





connecting each performance, they transform the artist's lone actions into a collective one through both the sheer number of images of herself, but also by their multiple authors. With almost thirteen distinct representations of the artist presented at one time, each is made from different producers and perspectives. Her public acts are visually turned into a group action, and by creating a collective image there is an apparent historicity.

Even though the background of the slogans isn't revealed, the references to historic events are clear. Hayes binds the 'now' of her performances to the documentation of past events, blending past and present in anticipation of a future of actions, establishing the triangular "speech act" of public protest with its potential use in mind. This is made evident by the work's title, but chimes directly with the recent success of protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, and the worldwide support for the Libyan revolt. The slogan "the people want to bring down the regime," first used in Tunisia was adopted by each of the countries. There is a shared purpose not only in the reasons and aims of each uprising, but also in the way it is collectively expressed. Hayes may have started this project with the failed results of February 15, 2003 in mind. However, her paring down of the essential conditions of protest and examination of its recent history reveals an optimism that moves beyond her analysis of how they function into a realm that perpetuates its reappraisal.

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Sharon Hayes
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All images

Sharon Hayes

In the Near Future (details) (2009)

Multiple slide projection installation

Courtesy Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin

