



Sharon Hayes performing at the Guggenheim, New York, 2010

SHARON HAYES

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Over a period of four hours on a Saturday afternoon, the artist Sharon Hayes plays, scratches, mixes and cuts a series of vintage records to a teeming crowd spiralling round the Guggenheim's rotunda. The last two hours coincide with the Guggenheim's 'free time', (or should we call it 'free for all' time), and the scene brings to mind a slightly more hectic version of Thomas Struth's portraits of museum goers caught in opposing, congested trajectories – gazing up to ceilings, looking at artwork, taking photos of everything, standing arms akimbo, perhaps waiting for a transcendent experience. Yet with Hayes' soundtrack playing on four sonorous speakers on the rotunda's floor, the scenario is accompanied not by music but by spoken-word vinyl from the 1960s, filling the museum with haunting and politically-charged voices of times past.

Hayes' performance is part of *Haunted*, an insipid summer exhibition housed in the Guggenheim's upper beehives, and organised by the museum's curator of photography Jennifer Blessing and associate curator Nat Trotman. The show makes a sweeping claim to showcase artists who 'access the past' – an odd assertion that seems applicable to most contemporary practices. Predictably then, the

unstructured exhibition includes a bloated list of artists, ranging from played-out, crowd-pleasing figureheads like Warhol, Rauschenberg, Sherman, Wall and Sugimoto, to confusingly lesser known artists such as Ori Gerscht and Sarah Anne Johnson. Apparently, the curators paid special attention to work made after 2001, an indirectly stated but obvious gesture toward showcasing the artistic community dealing with life after 9/11. Ninety five percent of the work unsurprisingly comes from the Guggenheim's collection. At times it feels as if Blessing and Trotman curated out of the last half of *Art Since 1900* and threw in a few emerging artists for good measure. While the need for a low-budget collection re-hang is understandable, the imposition of a messy curatorial thesis drawn from the museum collection masquerading as a veritable thematic exhibition is not.

Including Sharon Hayes in the performance programme then, accounts for Blessing and Trotman's breakthrough moment. Hayes, a New York-based artist, recently exhibited in both of New York's major art surveys this year – the Whitney Biennial and PS1's 5-yearly Greater New York. Usually working in performance, video and installation, Hayes prefers to think of her role within this staging as a

DJ rather than a performer, and the Guggenheim event makes this explicit for the first time. The four-hour event, practically unendurable in its entirety, is not narrative in structure, but comprises extended moments of interaction between voices from similar genres (the intimacy of the spoken word record, for instance) and time period. The artist previously staged much shorter spoken word DJ sessions in 2004, and later at Art in General, New York and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin. For this epic instalment, Hayes mixes speeches from American Civil Rights era leaders Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr, and follows up with the voices of Presidents John F Kennedy and Lyndon B Johnson. Tellingly, Hayes also plays the spoken word records of presidential wives.

While the performance is not scripted record-to-record, Hayes exhibits familiarity with her material in the manner of going through her personal music collection. She creates dialogue and rhythm between tracks, and the idea of building discourse between records, or personalities, is essential here. Attentively listening as minutes fade into hours, the political events of the recent past seem at once urgent and fervid by the utterances of the 1960s' leaders, but also distant and strained by their lacking relevance and obsolescence as a common topic of conversation. Anachronistic accents and dictation foregrounds the disconnection to the present time, and precipitates questions that rise and dissipate. In which year was Martin Luther King shot? Who was president when Apollo 11 landed on the moon? How long did the Vietnam War last?

Hayes seemingly combats such historical amnesia by revitalising dialogue between near-forgotten personalities and events. Political concerns today are rethought in contrast to their precedent's seeming futility. The artist notes that there is something supernatural about the voice – that, upon listening, the speaker's actual body may be conjured, with its gender, class, size, and locale ingrained within. Within the context of *Haunted*, such a suggestion is albeit open-ended, but Hayes' performance provides proper fodder for what 'accessing the past' could stand for, and how this exercise may help digest the present. Ending with a snippet from a record titled 'Train Your Bird to Talk' a woman's voice sounds 'See you later!', and Hayes walks off stage.

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