



SHARON HAYES

By The Editors

For *Commonwealth*, Sharon Hayes created a new work that extends her long interest in how intimate speech can also be political speech and in the interplay between one's individual subjectivity and sense of belonging to a group. *Ricerche: two* is the third in a series in which she uses the format of the group interview to interrogate questions of identity, affinity, and difference among individuals who are bound together by choice and circumstance. In each *Ricerche* installment, Hayes interviews groups of people, soliciting multiple answers for each question and drawing out distinct and sometimes conflicting perspectives.

In *Ricerche: two* Hayes interviews players from two women's tackle football teams: the Arlington Impact and the Dallas Elite Mustangs. Hayes prompts individual players to discuss their relationship with the sport, how they perceive playing football in relation to their own womanhood, and the sport's impact on how they see themselves as mothers, daughters, workers, citizens, and sexual and romantic partners. The camera tracks the ripples of communal response: laughter, attentive listening, raised eyebrows, sideways glances, clapping, nodding, and hums of communal agreement or dissent. The teams of women are shown to be built from constant negotiations of trust, empathy, difference, and common

purpose. Filmed at close range, the women form a collective body, casually touching—a uniquely charged dynamic in an era of social distancing. For the work’s in-person premiere at the ICA, Hayes designed a wide, gently curving screen to evoke the embrace of a huddle.

– The Editors

Accommodating Contact: Sharon Hayes and Ross Gay in Conversation

HAYES: The piece I showed you is called *Ricerche: two* (*ricerche* means “research” in Italian). It’s one of a series of works I did stepping off of the beautiful and also vexing *Comizi d’amore*, a film by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Pasolini goes across Italy in 1963 interviewing people about sex and sexuality as a way to get to questions of politics and economics. In the film, he interviews people almost exclusively in groups rather than by themselves. There’s a short scene in the film in which he interviews a football club—which in Italy at that time meant a men’s soccer team. For me, Pasolini’s film acts as a ghost sometimes directing my choices, and here I decided to follow him literally. Football to football: European football to US football, which, of course, is not soccer. In the piece, I’m interested in questions around gender and gender expression and the way in which sex and sexuality act symptomatically at this political moment. I wanted to gather women’s tackle football players. From a wide call, I got interest from a team called the Arlington Impact, and then quickly realized there are three women’s tackle football teams in the

Dallas area. So I zoomed in on Dallas, Texas, as a place to talk to people.

Maybe we can begin with this kind of fuzzy intersection between activities. You are and have been an athlete, which is super important to you, and you are and have been an artist of many mediums. I'm curious how you find those spheres living in you. (Laughs)

GAY: I played football in college and that's how I got to college. I started getting serious about making art and it was painting, it was writing. I got very interested in being around some people, and some ideas, and writing, and making art—in part because my life as a football player was not making me very happy. (Laughs)

But there are so many things about sport that overlap with poems or different kinds of art making. One of them is touch. I'm really, really, really interested in touch. If there's anything that I miss from playing football it's that there were moments, there were intimacies, there were touches that were just really moving and important to me. When I think of the writing that I do, more than anything what I'm trying to do is be in contact with people, and with ideas, and with other books, and things. And in some way probably trying to represent the way that I'm constantly in contact, and constantly being held, and constantly being filled up by other ideas or movements. So to me at the very least it's about these touches. Of course, then there are other things about life disciplines or practice that I feel are connected too.

HAYES: One of the things I learned in talking to these 23 players is that for these elite athletes, many of whom played various sports as a kid and some of whom went to college and

had scholarships to play a sport at college, there is a distinct wall they hit as adults trying to carry on and play high-level sports. I do think that the activity of being an elite athlete is an enveloped living. You're enveloped in your sport, and that's enveloped in the team but also in the routines you need to make that life and the choice to play possible.

One of the things that was the most surprising for me was the players' relationship to what they call "the hit" and how much "the hit" was a part of football. Now it seems totally obvious, like you really can't play tackle football without embracing the hit. (Laughs)

GAY: I know. I spent so much time thinking of the hit as it related to my own experience playing football. The violence that is inside of a locker room—the locker rooms I was in—that makes it possible for us to accommodate the hit. And by that, I mean the incredibly sexist and misogynistic and homophobic apparatus of terrible shit that allows for the violence, the hit. And so to hear "the hit" in the context of these players, the sort of reverie, was a really interesting deepening of my thinking.

It made me think how does touch get accommodated, and how do different kinds of touch get accommodated? Even as I think of the apparatus that accommodated certain kinds of violence when I played football, what does that mean when it's a women's team?

HAYES: I grew up playing sports. I stopped in college so my experience is limited, but still I felt that there was something on the field for women's tackle football players that's different than sports I had played—soccer, basketball, softball. And there's something that happens on the field that's different than what

happens in ordinary life. There's a way of being, a way of moving, of touching, of feeling. There's a really interesting comment that one player makes about aggression and the complexity of being aggressive. And so I think you're right in terms of accommodation. One of the things I felt really strongly from these players is the infectiousness of playing football. Just talking to them made me want to play. I wanted to feel what it felt like on the field. Because it seemed unlike anything I had access to. That there is something happening on the field that allows them to be different than they can be anywhere else in their life.

GAY: Certain kinds of contact are deeply fulfilling, and life making, and life meaning. The ways that I resist my own experience with that aggression or the hit is that it was not a prohibition to do what I was doing. It was a mandate. So that's part of what I was aware of: there are all of these normativities inside of it. And it felt like for the folks who you were interviewing, there were different mandates that they were reacting to. Maybe mandate's the wrong word. There were different things though, that they were doing, you know?

And that's a sport where there's different kinds of getting hurt. That's one of those sports where probably someone's going to get hurt in the game. It's unlikely that it doesn't happen. And that can foster a kind of closeness. In terms of touch, what to me feels beautiful about teams and team sports is the way that ultimately we're studying our own . . . precarity is not quite the word. But the fact that we're going to die, and you get to be close with folks in the midst of that. And you know, in a game where probably someone's gonna get hurt, it feels like there's a kind of tenderness that holds. The ways that we're constantly checking in with each other about playing. Like, are you ok? Is your knee okay? Should

we stop? And there's a kind of intimacy that is so much about care. I'm thinking about how sport can actually provide moments of profound tenderness and care. Often my experience has been that it's in the seams of the sports. My curiosity is then about how those seams become the thing. It's in the team or it's in the play that this tenderness gets expressed. And it often gets expressed in the gesture that you do not even see. It might be that someone stumbles a little bit and you just easily grab their forearm and keep them from falling and no one saw it but it goes into the registry of actually how we lived. And fuck, I love that. I love that.

HAYES: How do you think of those points of contact in relation to something called the political or something called politics?

GAY: I was thinking of course that everything is political. I wasn't thinking about it in terms of electoral politics necessarily. But when I think of these practices of care, I've been thinking of witness as a practice of making. To witness is a kind of politics. Saidiya Hartman teaches me that there are all of these things that the archive itself, for all of its reasons, does not accommodate. So it requires that we are able to engage the archive, or imagine an archive, in these other ways, which is to me a kind of different kind of witness. Part of what's interesting to me with sport is that when we witness those instances of care, then we can see them as a kind of making. There is all of this political shit. When I say political shit, there's all of this, again, apparatus that makes us alien from one another. And I feel witnessing instances of care indicates to us that in fact we have the great capacity to be enacting instances of care constantly. And that's why I'm more interested in sport as points of contact than I am in one person winning, or one team winning and the other team losing. I mean,

it's so obvious, but it is still important to say that it's a kind of story about capitalism. But this other thing of these gatherings of care and people working things out is a story of how do we share our shit? How do we practice working things out? How do we come together to think this through?

HAYES: Right, right. There is care and then also resources or lack of resources. I think what I also learned from these players is that it's a grind to get to the field. As adults, it is exponentially harder to carve out time and space and resources to play football. And that they and their sport move against the grain, as one of them described it, also means that they're constantly battling, for sponsorship, resources, access to good fields—all of the things that would make it easier to do what they're doing. And so, I don't want to call it care because it's something else, but the impact of resources on any given player or given team's ability to inhabit this space or the sport or this activity is huge. The resources are totally critical and yet the care occurs in spite of the absence of resources.

GAY: Yeah, resources do one thing, but they don't make care possible. I mean, resources can be put to care of course, but the care is the resource.

HAYES: For women tackle football players, there is no opportunity to play at an elite level outside a pay-to-play system. They pay players' fees, buy or borrow their own gear, have to participate in team fundraising and, of course, have to have health insurance! They can't play without health insurance. And you would think, well of course, but health insurance is unfortunately difficult and expensive to secure in our country. So there's something about capitalism and the pressure it puts

on sports at all of these levels that is a huge and looming factor. I felt it really strongly. But also what you're talking about is that this sort of massive force keeps trying to squeeze out room and squeeze out care. I don't want to make it so oppositional. But for these women trying to do what they love doing and trying to excel and be powerful, these obstacles matter.

GAY: I think it is a good way of putting it: to squeeze out the care, to squeeze out capacity for care. And despite that, it's going to happen. In all the intricacies that I'm not even thinking of, just the way the capital itself is impeding the possibility to get on a fucking field. Capitalism mixed with, you know, sexism mixed with racism mixed with . . .

HAYES: Homophobia.

GAY: Homophobia, right.

HAYES: As you were talking I was thinking about capacities to see the seams or to hear from the seams. And I was thinking about how in your work you sometimes unfold or go into those seams. And language and poetry have a certain capacity to stretch out time or to see something up close that otherwise isn't recognizable from the outside. Forms of representation can contain or carry super violent operations, but they also have the capacities to resist that violence and to allow for something else.

GAY: Yeah, I love in your piece the moments of quiet and looking. They are so beautiful to me and are actually a point of contact. That's one of the things I think too about teams. The best thing for the team or the play is that they can hold a quiet, they're the kind of quiet that could be held. And certain kinds of

representation don't want to hold a quiet, because inside the quiet is all of this shit that we can't predict. But you can feel it.
(Laughs)

– SHARON HAYES AND ROSS GAY

Commonwealth is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

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