

# 9 SCRIPTS FROM A NATION AT WAR

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN  
SHARON HAYES, ASHLEY HUNT, KATYA SANDER,  
DAVID THORNE AND ANDREA GEYER

November 22, 2008 – January 18, 2009

Artists' Roundtable: Saturday, November 22, 2pm  
Moderated by Julia Bryan-Wilson

Public Reading: Saturday, January 10, 1-6pm  
Combatant Status Review Tribunals, pp. 002954-003064  
A five-hour public reading of transcripts of tribunals held  
at the U.S. military prison camp at Guantánamo Bay.

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# 9 SCRIPTS FROM A NATION AT WAR

Claire Pentecost

We are alone with our voices, our many, incommensurate, voices.

Or let me put it another way: One of the anxieties circulating in these staged readings, conversations, and moments of silent presence can be pressed into thought with the question: “Who is listening?”

In *9 Scripts* this question hovers—both in the sense of existential recognition of one human being by another, and also in the sense of justice. Our notion of justice is not a private one. In order for justice to be done, its application must be seen and heard. Hence the development of the camera’s role in struggles for equitable participation in the decisions that determine our lives. And yet one of the pernicious transformations of executive and judicial power under the Bush administration has been to make these decisions increasingly **in camera**: in a chamber, a closed legal chamber, denying witness by the public and the press.

Since I first saw *9 Scripts* in the summer of 2007 [at documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany], I’ve seen and heard many of the recorded events of 1968 as they pass again through the eye of the present, reanimated for their 40th anniversary. When did “1968” begin? Certainly a major event in its mongrel ontogeny was the inception of the Free Speech Movement in 1964. When I watch a clip of Mario Savio on the steps of University of California, Berkeley’s Sproul Hall, I recognize political speech. It is unmistakable, marked by conviction and a palpable insistence on **speaking out!**—speaking out and being heard in a public space, in this case in defiance of the university’s restrictions on public advocacy of political causes. But what really strikes me surveying footage of those events—crowds immobilizing a police car where activist Jack Weinberg was held for 32 hours, students standing on top of that car to speak out, students occupying university buildings two months later—is how secure the FSM activists appear to be in terms of knowing who was listening. There were allies—other students and faculty politicized at that time by the civil rights movement as they would be later by the Viet Nam War, who felt the urgency of organizing on campus. And on another side there was authority—the officials of the university being implored to listen and accommodate the appeal. The arena for the encounter between speakers and listeners was openly demarcated, was in fact the center of the demand for free speech in public space.

*9 Scripts* also occupies a university, but not to reproduce the recognizable signifying practices that became icons of political resistance in an earlier time. In many ways *9 Scripts* is more about **speaking in**. Speaking out presumes a distance between the will of organized sovereign individuals and that of a sovereign authority—the state or its representative. This distance is external to both parties, and it must be bridged by insistent expression, witnessed by the many, in a space we call public, the space where individuals and relatively autonomous collectivities openly perform the ceaseless democratic activity of **becoming state**. Four decades after the struggles of the Free Speech Movement that space is much harder to find. The distance between individuals and between the individual and the state is both everywhere and nowhere. *9 Scripts* locates it within each of us.

The players in this work, whether actors, self-enunciators, or some indeterminate fusion of the two, do not merely read scripts, they speak themselves into roles and speak roles into selves. The scripts, or more precisely their enactment, produce both distances and intimacies—both real and imagined. What’s striking is their demonstration of these distances and intimacies as they now appear to occupy the same space, which is at once internalized and exterior.

To wander through these videos is to inhabit a set of dispersed subjectivities. Even though the enunciations have been fixed by the recording and playback apparatus, their spatial and temporal constancy is undermined by incessant redistribution. Each video is a potential entry point whose internal refrains will be reiterated and reoriented in a different space of response in one or more of the other videos.

I watch a screen fill with type, the painstaking transcription of interviews with Iraqi war vets whose voices are heard in fragments, replayed as often as necessary for the transcriber’s labor of fidelity. Elsewhere I see two of those veterans rereading and correcting parts of that transcription, fitting their own words back to their own voice, to be spoken yet again on a stage in an empty auditorium.

In another video, I watch actors rehearsing bits, either alone with a camera or beside impassive listeners, who are demonstrably regulated by the architectures of reception that constitute the university. The lines the actors polish may erupt off camera in an interview with a lawyer.

Or they may linger as phantasmatic interlocutors when I hear two actors, in another empty lecture hall, reading what seems to be the internal monologue of an interviewer whose questions may have produced articulations I hear elsewhere in the installation. Some of the interviewer’s ruminations clearly refer to the encounter with a professional correspondent, whose performances are captured in a different video. I watch those correspondents, playing themselves, listening to questions I can’t hear, questions whose direction is clarified in their responses, responses both predictable in the frame of journalistic professionalism, and palpably exceeded by the presence of the individual speaking.

In yet another set of exchanges, graduate students of anthropology also perform as themselves, as they meet one on one in an interview format. Although it is clear that only the questions are predetermined, I feel a special unease as I listen to the students struggle to refract genuine personal responses through the received theoretical language of our time, a language I share but also struggle with—even now as I attempt to locate the trenchancy in this complex artwork—which I experience as singular and fresh even as I presume it to be informed by that same language.

Some of the questions the students pose to each other haunt the absurdly restricted proceedings of the Combatant Status Review Tribunals read in public by effectively anonymous citizens, regularly changing chairs and roles in the five-hour performance that the video is based upon. How did you get to this room? What is an enemy? How do you recognize me? Can you imagine my saying something that would provoke you to hit me? Do you believe in an ethical violence? Will you feel differently when all of this is over?

Throughout the work, the persistent dislocation and relocation of sense, voice and speaker, describes profound changes in our understanding of how authority operates in liberal democratic society, and correlatively, how subjectivity is produced. Although power relies as heavily as ever on brute repression, in the decades since the explosion of **speaking out!** against abuses of power, authority has also been eroded and dispersed—both by sporadic concessions to insurgent demands and by a panoply of lateralized forces: the discrediting of self-interested expertise, the rise of technologies that make citizen journalism possible, and the commercialized injunction to use prosumer equipment and the internet

to express ourselves and connect with others doing the same. This granularization of the operations of power assigns us positions, which, if we accept them, can serve to reconsolidate power on ever more insidious terms. But we do not exhaust ourselves in these assignments. It’s not enough to witness the breakdown of archaic authorities. What we find in the spaces of their dissolution is ourselves.

Whether the speakers in *9 Scripts* are speaking their own words or someone else’s, the careful composition of these videos calls our attention again and again to gaps between script and speaker, speaker and listener, audience and self-reflection. In those internalized distances is a space for agency, for a powerful bond of imagination and for unscripted intimacies.

The title counts nine scripts but the videos are ten, a discrepancy we could interpret any number of ways. The script I want to call the tenth is the one with no speaking voice, the one accorded to the citizen, and consisting of “248 predictions about what I will do when democracy comes.” Written in succession on a slate board, each begins with “I will...,” completes a simple declaration, and is immediately erased by a different hand. The individual intentions are both concrete and phantasmatic, encompassing fear, longing and bargaining. The lacuna of chalk dust between each statement poses to us the essentially heterotopic nature of democracy, especially when presumed to be the fulfillment of atomized individual desires.

And what of the consummate figure of individual liberty, that cultural cipher of freedom and self-determination, namely, the artist? Is there a script for the artist, a list of stage directions, permissions, prohibitions, enticements? A great deal could be said about the way these artists appropriate their role, but I want to emphasize one.

They subject their hypothetical freedom to uncommon discipline. This parallels the exigent forms of discipline to which the individuals they depict are subject in their own, putatively different, roles, and it even constitutes a kind of sympathy with those individuals. But it also complicates the question of disciplinary incumbency, positing it no longer as the imposition that artists or radical individuals can or should throw off, but rather as a multifarious regime that is ineluctably part of us. It cannot be excised any more than stigmatized members of the social body can be excised. What’s more, it corresponds to mechanisms that traditionally

limit government’s exercise of power, mechanisms both intrinsic and extrinsic to government itself—law, the press, and civil society actively exercising constitutional rights—all of which are represented, with appropriate ambivalence, in *9 Scripts*. The restraint with which this ambivalence is rendered—through precise acts of listening—is salient in a contemporary context of reckless authority.

...the historical mass is not a puzzle to reconstitute, it is a body to embrace. The historian exists only to recognize a warmth. —Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, 1954

I intended to end with that quote, referring to the excess, the art, of *9 Scripts*, which lays out intricate pieces of our historical moment and asks us to consider how we are living it. Since I tidied up this essay, I watched with an ecstatic crowd in Chicago on November 5th, the Jumbotron announcement at the moment the West Coast polls closed: “Barak Obama elected President of the United States.” It seems few things could more dramatically affirm the fluidity of identity so valorized in our country’s mythology, and in the process subject us all to turbulence in our assignments and the possibilities for speaking them. We’ve elected a person who, when he talks to us, seems to grasp the meaning of his own words. We imagine a careful listener, now the very embodiment of authority. The fruition of such hopeful imagination is contingent on our speaking out and continually shaping the positions we speak in and through. The unprecedented relief decanted in much of the world this week asserts the desire to have a new kind of political conversation, but the substance of that conversation is yet unchanged: enemy, aggression, torture, law, habeas corpus, truth, transparency, ethics, democracy, nation, war.

Claire Pentecost is an artist and writer living in Chicago.

## Biography

Andrea Geyer, Sharon Hayes, Ashley Hunt, Katya Sander and David Thorne have worked together as artists, organizers, researchers, and writers on and off and in varied ways for the last seven years. *9 Scripts from a Nation at War* is their first collaboration as a group of five. They began working on the project in August 2004, the first anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq. *9 Scripts from a Nation at War* was first shown at documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany in 2007. The work has subsequently shown in February 2008 in the exhibition “War Stories” at the Mass College of Art, Boston, and in June 2008 at the Tate Modern, London.