SHARON LOCKHART + KELLY NIPPER

2 ARTISTS IN 3 TAKES
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PREAMBLE
For about two years artists Sharon Lockhart and Kelly Nipper have been writing a play together. Although it is not yet finished, this non-narrative piece will combine text, spoken word and pedestrian movement. An intriguing aspect of this play-in-progress is that the artists have decided it will never be performed before an audience. Lockhart and Nipper will write, cast, rehearse and present the play expressly for their own purpose—to make a series of photographs documenting the performance. Extending the notion of static, directorial photography into real time and space, the play becomes a catalyst for an entirely separate body of collaborative work.

Lockhart and Nipper’s playwriting project reveals their conceptual artistic process: they conceive a specific idea, framework or structure, often with live or performative elements, then make work from that particular system. Fluidly traversing the realms of photography, film and performance, they choreograph and direct their subjects, then frame and freeze images, to construct series of static or moving pictures. While Lockhart and Nipper strive to control the situations and constructs they set up, they also appreciate the inevitability of both chance and change.

Working within a particular duration of time, they make multiple or sequential images of human subjects and/or objects, honing in on the incremental differences that occur within that specific period. Their work is not binary or polemical, nor does it attempt to capture singular, dramatic moments; instead, it focuses on the more complex and subtle interstitial relationships that exist between people, places and things.

In this exhibition Lockhart and Nipper are each represented by three bodies of recent work. Although produced in entirely different contexts and even different countries, when viewed together, one may see the shared aesthetic sensibilities or formal affinities and distinct differences in their artistic production. The specific choices and juxtaposition of the work in the exhibition became a collaboration between the artists and the curator. Just as the artists actively participated in the curatorial process of selecting and installing, this essay adopts their methodology of using a particular framework or system to articulate ideas about the exhibition in three separate “takes.”
TAKE 1

Sharon Lockhart and Kelly Nipper both observe human subjects and objects within carefully constructed environments. Staging singular figures or groups in specific sites, they use pre-determined scores to move performers through these spaces. Working simultaneously as directors and documentors of spare, structured performances, the artists collaborated with choreographers to create precisely paced movement within a fixed frame or space. Lockhart’s film, GOSHOGAOKA, 1997 (below) and Nipper’s photographs and video documentation, NORMA - PRACTICE FOR SUCKING FACE, 1999 (right) are exercises in choreographed and controlled movement, the former set in a middle school gymnasium, the latter in a Santa Monica gallery.¹

In 1996 Sharon Lockhart spent three months in residence in Japan on an Asian Cultural Council grant. She selected a girls’ middle school basketball team as the subject of her film. After observing the team’s training, she worked with choreographer Stephen Galloway to expand the girls everyday exercises and routines into a series of six ten-minute takes. Like an attenuated still photograph, the camera remains intently focused in one position for the entire sixty minutes of GOSHOGAOKA. The red-curtained proscenium looms above, reiterating the gym’s dual function as a site for athletics and theater. The wood floor below, usually a place for spectators, is now the stage for running, calisthenics, drills and massage, producing everyday, ambient noises that become the dominant soundtrack of the film. Although the girls in GOSHOGAOKA did rehearse their routines, some parts resulted from pure chance and random gesture. Ultimately, choreography on celluloid is not experienced as directly as live performance; its deliberate framing inherently less spontaneous and more about artifice.

The film references 1960s postmodern dance by choreographers such as Anna Halprin, founder of the San Francisco Dance Workshop and Yvonne Rainer, a seminal member of the Judson Dance Theater. At the crux of their practices are pedestrian movement, everyday gestures, task-oriented activities, and the use of found objects or ambient sound. As they re-examined theatrical space and abandoned the traditional proscenium, they took dance to lofts, roofs, street spaces, and, like Lockhart, gymnasiums.

The tightly composed, bifurcated frame of stage/floor and the linear choreography reveal the ardent formalism of GOSHOGAOKA, which echoes structuralist and minimalist sensibilities of avant-garde filmmakers James Benning, Ernie Gehr, Michael Snow, Yvonne Rainer and Chantal Akerman. Lockhart’s intensely focused camera, use of ambient sound and everyday setting also recall Akerman’s FROM THE EAST, 1993, a film which also documents a specific group of people in Eastern Europe.²

In GOSHOGAOKA Lockhart creates a static frame for the audience to observe Japanese girls engaged in a typical American sport. As she has noted, “without the certainty a narrative structure provides, the viewer is forced to assume an active role, which produces a prolonged state of contemplation and individual interpretation of one culture looking at another.”³ The frame remains the same, however, the interpretation of the film depends on the viewer’s own subjectivity. As is typical with Lockhart’s work, significance or meaning remains open, as she deftly shifts between conceptualism and formalism, documentary and theater, objectivity and subjectivity.
If Lockhart choreographs and controls to make a particular frame for viewing her film, Kelly Nipper imposes permutations to complicate pre-established structures in installations with live elements. NORMA - PRACTICE FOR SUCKING FACE, a series of seven still photographs and a video projection, documents a 1999 installation.² During a ten-day period, five dancers performed a highly structured 90-minute score of pedestrian movement in the space below a rectangular platform. Using five sets of sculptural objects and 120 gray cushions, the dancers constantly reconfigured the installation with task-oriented pedestrian movements specifically named and ordered in the score (arms, cushions, rounds, laydown, rounds, cushions). Ten minutes into the arms sequence one dancer counted a numeric score in French, the language of both ballet and structuralism. These different movements shifted the dancers from a tight to a dispersed group, from quiet to frenetic moments and from structure into randomness.

Nipper's interests range from Bauhaus weaving workshops and choreography, particularly Oskar Schlemmer's TRIADIC BALLET, to 1960s postmodern dance especially that of Merce Cunningham, Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown. She also works as an archivist/assistant for artist Allan Kaprow and is inspired by his use of spectators and everyday activities in his early Happenings and Activity booklets of the 1970s.

As in GOSHOGAKOA, the performers' footsteps, the sounds of the sculptural objects and the performers' voices become the soundtrack. The dancers' movement was initially uncomfortable and stiff, and after six hours of performing each day, they eventually drifted farther away from precise time and measure; as the duration increased, the structure disintegrated.

Nipper constructed the 30” high platform to mirror the grid of the gallery lighting, however, it was often perceived as a theatrical stage. Like GOSHOGAKOA, this altered the usual spectator/viewer relationship. The actions of the audience could not be pre-determined: a few climbed onto the platform and moved freely throughout the space, but many were reticent to mingle with the dancers. When the viewers did interact, they affected the dancers' movement and the total configuration of the piece. Nipper is interested in what she calls the "impenetrable space between two people or elements" and her titles are not descriptions, but "parallels" to her work. The word "norma" refers to the piece's insistence on norm or structure, while "sucking face," is a slang term for kissing, that implies aggressive but limited contact.⁵

The photographs and video projection of NORMA... are thumbnail sketches of a larger site-specific installation and longer time-based performance. Like Lockhart's filming of GOSHOGAKOA, this installation and event cannot ever be known unless experienced first-hand. Their respective representations of female subjects in mundane, monotonous activities, are vernacular, yet become spectacular when viewed as projected images. What we ultimately see in the gallery or theater are documents of specifically structured movements over a duration of time: very precise and intimate spectacles, forming a subtle yet strong remembrance of things past.
TAKE 2

Lockhart's MARIA DA CONCEIÇÃO PEREIRA DE SOUZA WITH FRUITS OF THE ISLAND OF APEÚ-SALVADOR, PARÁ, BRAZIL, 1999 (below) and Nipper's TESTS - CARBONATION, 1999 (right) both demonstrate the artists' ability to construct visually compelling photographs that capture subtle nuances within multiple-sequenced formats. Each artist toys with a different notion of the photograph as a document, from the portrait to the sequential image as proof or evidence of an event or phenomenon.

In her recent work in Brazil, Lockhart made a new film and two photographic series, one while on Apeú-Salvador, a small island in the province of Pará. During her week-long stay she photographed the island's residents, including Maria da Conceição Pereira de Souza, who is seen in a frontal half-length pose, holding different indigenous fruits in ten separate images. Initially posed by the artist, Maria selected each fruit from a table, then resumed her stance against the wood wall. Gazing directly toward the viewer, her facial expression and pose vary only slightly in the ten images; only the fruit changes from frame to frame. Maria appears entirely self-possessed, beckoning the viewer to focus upon her face and the colorful, unfamiliar island fruits. We may not recognize all these fruits, but by the end of the sequence, we clearly know the details of her unwavering countenance.

The straightforward presentation of the sitter and use of available light recall photographs ranging from typological studies of Germans by August Sander to more contemporary, close-focus portraits by Richard Avedon and Thomas Struth. Lockhart's earlier photographs from 1994 of solitary figures in landscapes also come to mind; for example, her portraits of a young boy and girl standing in front of the Pacific Ocean and North Sea, respectively. The MARIA series, however, differs because of its multiple representations of a singular subject.

Is the MARIA series a portrait of a particular woman, or is it a document representing the island culture of Apeú-Salvador? These intimately scaled, exquisitely detailed photographs reveal her individual physiognomy, but the focus is on constantly changing fruit, which is both a formal device and an attribute of her own culture. Maria, however, holds the fruit slightly away from her body, as though she refuses to be viewed as an objectified and exoticized "other," distancing herself from the anthropological processes of categorizing and indexing. While Lockhart takes care to include Maria's full name and island origins in the title, the multiple representations do not replicate but instead complicate the tendencies of anthropological photography to generalize, romanticize and codify other cultures.
Nipper's TESTS - CARBONATION is a series of five mural size prints from 1999 that documents a gymnastic rhythm ball as it bounces across bright orange, rectangular couches. The photographs capture a few moments when the animated, anthropomorphized ball "jumps" from frame to frame. This whimsical but physically improbable sequence reminds the viewer how the artist uses the camera to construct a reality that may never have existed as it is now perceived. Wrapped around the wall in a classic corner arrangement, the minimal couches evoke the 1950s-1960s hard-edged design of George Nelson. The large-scale images hang low, creating a one-to-one relationship between the viewer's body and the couches. Because they are cropped, however, they appear like abstract paintings, which emphasizes their fictive representation.

The title references the process of carbonation: when carbon dioxide gas and water are mixed together, the water fizzes, then eventually calms down. This reflects Nipper's interest in how patterns of order are deeply imbedded in chaos which seems totally random, but is not. In chaos theory if a system is set into motion, its behavior settles into a fixed point called an "attractor," which achieves stability within an unstable environment. The couch is the "attractor" within the chaos of the rhythm ball's unpredictable, random trajectory.

Considering the possibility of "attractors," one cannot help but think about the function of a couch: it is a place for relaxing or sleeping, and also a site for intimacy and sex. In Nipper's images there is a striking absence of a sitter: the ball becomes the surrogate for any human presence, its bounce a sign for the play or pleasure that often occurs on a couch. The spare, but seductive couches evoke an impending intimacy, reiterating Nipper's interest in the potential relationship or tension that results from human contact and communication.

Lockhart's Maria and Nipper's couches, although entirely disparate subjects represented in a vastly different scale, share the formal qualities of closely observed subjects rendered in highly saturated color within a spare, minimal space. Lockhart focuses on a strong human presence, while Nipper humorously articulates the absence of a figure. In both series, a specific element—the island fruit and the rhythm ball—serves as a link between sequences of multiple images; film-like fragments which we imagine as continuous but are, in fact, constructed. Following a tradition from the late 1960s which continues to this day, Lockhart and Nipper question the veracity and verisimilitude of the photographic image, showing us how the camera purports to document particular temporal or visual "truths."
TAKE 3

In the largest scale work in the exhibition, Lockhart and Nipper view figures within architectural and institutional space, through a complex series of frames or layers. Lockhart's ENRIQUE NAVA ENEDINA: OAXACAN EXHIBIT HALL, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY, MEXICO CITY, 1999 (below), three strikingly detailed, large-scale photographs, is a portrait of a mason who repairs marble floors behind a glass barricade in one of Mexico's primary cultural institutions. Nipper's INTERVAL, 2000 (following page) depicts a four-frame sequence of a dancer in different ballet positions, posed between a wood screen and a vertically paneled wall in a college chapel building.

Lockhart carefully selected three specific moments from Enrique's long, arduous project when he takes a short respite from his work and looks up briefly at the viewer. Formally, the overall composition of clear lines, dark tones and reflective surfaces
evokes a hard-edged minimalism. To see Enrique, one must look through a complex series of frames and transparent layers: from the frames and glass of the triptych, to the frame of the museum’s gallery, and finally, to the glass enclosure that progressively contracts and separates him from the public. Drawn further into this frame-within-the-frame composition, Enrique is surrounded by various Oaxacan art objects, creating an odd juxtaposition of flesh/stone; animate/inanimate; live/dead and present/past. Like the artifacts documenting his culture, Enrique also appears to be on display, subject to the museological processes of cataloging and describing.

Lockhart simultaneously references and problematizes the history of representing people as exoticized others in both anthropological photography and institutional contexts. However, this dense image elicits more questions than it answers and one wonders: What is Enrique’s exact relationship to these histories being told about his ancestors within this institution? What is his own role in the displaying and framing of his culture? Does this poignant portrait honor his intense labor as a source of cultural pride, or is it a disturbing document of his own position within the museum?

As is often the case with Lockhart, we are first attracted by the formal qualities of her photographs and then begin to further contemplate the multiple meanings of her work. These photographs from the Mexico museum and her previous work in a Tokyo museum share an underlying conceptual and structural rigor, an interest in the institutional framing and display of both of its objects and of the people who labor within its pristine spaces.
Just as Lockhart’s Enrique is obscured by the glass panels, Nipper’s figure in the interval is integrated into the wooden foreground and background, intermittently seen and unseen through a pattern of open and closed rectangles forming checkerboard cutouts. Compressed into a shallow stage-like space, the dancer is caught between spaces, places and points in time, each photograph capturing a brief moment of her dislocated dance. In the first two images, the overlapping wood screen and wall hide most of the dancer’s body. In frame three, she steps out, exposing half of her body, while the other side blends into the cut-out pattern. In the final image, she turns around, arms raised, appearing in the reverse of frame one.

Both the dancer’s body language and her aloof, even indifferent expression reveal a kind of shyness or reticence; her upwardly focused eyes never meet the viewer’s gaze. With this intermittent visibility, the alternating interchange between clarity and obscurity, there is a slight frustration at the irreadability or obstruction of the dancer. Refusing to be thoroughly seen or read, she remains enigmatic. What one does see is exactly what the title implies: intervals, or very specific moments within a longer continuum—fragments of a larger whole, snippets of a longer expanse of time. Within the spare environment, these moments are out of context, devoid of duration and entirely without time. It is up to the viewer to fill in the interrupted dance in their mind’s eye.
With its neutral, pared-down geometry, the site is ambiguous: it could be a studio, but it is difficult to know that it is actually part of a college chapel. The only reverence here, however, is toward an unrelenting reductive aesthetic. The screen recalls both modern Japanese architecture and the design and furniture of Charles and Ray Eames. The patterning of overlapping horizontal and vertical lines of the screen walls produces a moiré effect, an illusionism which is like that of 1960s hard-edged painting and op art. Decorated with dots and flourishes, the dancer’s red and white tunic is peasant-style retro, and the entire sequence has the feel of a late 1960s fashion magazine layout.

Lockhart’s Enrique and Nipper’s dancer become melded within specific architectural environments, hidden from the viewer’s direct gaze. Multiple layers and lines, surface and pattern dominate, enveloping the figures. From the multiple-frame format one perceives individual moments, but the overall complexity of the pictures obscures the figures’ activities and identities: it is difficult to discern Enrique’s exact position within the museum or to comprehend the dancer’s fragmented body and perforated presence in the chapel. Like a visual puzzle, one returns to these images again and again to contemplate the intricacies of the representation and their potential meanings.
POSTSCRIPT

The preceding "takes" are glimpses from the larger context of Sharon Lockhart and Kelly Nipper's artistic practice. Their spare aesthetic does not reveal the complex process embedded within their carefully conceived, specifically structured and meticulously executed images. Lockhart and Nipper's minimal vocabulary achieves a maximal affect: one is first seduced by the visual appeal of their work, then begins to see its complexity.

Using photography, video projection and film, they see their subjects through various lenses, literally and figuratively, and each artist has expanded their work into time-based, performative realms. Lockhart and Nipper pivot among different formal, spatial and temporal modes, working betwixt and between various media, locations and time periods. They dwell in the realm of the interstitial, transitional moments, mining images from both memory and history. Preferring prescient moments occurring over increments of time, they capture minute details and slight shifts between static/movement; absence/presence; light/dark; full/void; open/closed or interior/exterior.

Although Lockhart and Nipper make extreme efforts to construct and control, they understand the futility of fixing inherently destabilized, mutable conditions and relish random actions or chance events. Lockhart and Nipper, however, remain consummate auteurs who preside over every aspect of their pictures, directing figures, arranging objects, designing or choosing sets and costumes, always with an aesthetic inspired by 1960s art, dance, music and design. Like their 1960s predecessors, they prefer simple, quotidian moments to reveal what is compelling about the ordinary. Within their scenarios, central figures or objects dominate the pared-down frame or space and become the focal point of serial photographs and projected images. Their expressionless subjects appear aloof or absorbed, but they maintain a strong presence in the roles they assume. Because of this overwhelming interest in performance, Lockhart and Nipper establish various frames for spectatorship: their work revolves around subject/object positions and the relationship between the viewer and the viewed.

Lockhart's UNTITLED (above), made after her visit to Japan, is a photograph of a Ikebana floral arrangement which doubled in a glass reflection. The image appears like a diptych, bisected by a plane of glass separating interior and exterior space. This creates an ambiguous doppelganger effect which alters our perception and experience of what we think is a single arrangement. In the introduction to his book *Matter and Memory*, philosopher Henri Bergson discusses images:

Matter, in our view, is an aggregate of images. And by image, we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a representation, but less that which the realist calls a thing—an existence placed halfway between the thing and the representation.  

Lockhart and Nipper's own "aggregate images" also occupy what Bergson describes as an intermediary existence between the "real" material thing, and its "ideal" representation. Working in yet another interstitial space, they explore representation, perception and visuality: how a subject looks, how it is viewed and how it is experienced. Lockhart and Nipper's images elicit multiple and contingent meanings as they encourage each viewer to make their own interpretive "takes" of their formally exquisite, but frequently enigmatic work.

KAREN MOSS
DIRECTOR OF EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS
ENDNOTES

1 Lockhart worked with Stephen Galloway of the Frankfurt Ballet on GOSHOGAOKA, while Liz Maxwell, who has worked with Trisha Brown, Laura Dean and Donald Byrd, controlled the movement for NORMA...


3 Sharon Lockhart, GOSHOGAOKA Director’s Statement, 1997.

4 This project originally took place July 31-August 14, 1999 at Shoshana Wayne Gallery. In addition to the movement coordinator, Nipper also worked with a vocal and French advisor, Sheila Espinell.

5 The etymology of “norma” refers to the word used to describe pattern and rule for standardizing streets and buildings in ancient Rome.

6 Lockhart accompanied anthropologist Isabel Soares de Souza in field studies of this Brazilian region.

7 The half-length female figure holding fruit also recalls many 15th- and 16th-century German and Flemish images of the Virgin Mary holding grapes or Eve holding the forbidden apple.


BIOGRAPHIES

SHARON LOCKHART (b. 1964, Norwood, Massachusetts) received a BFA at the San Francisco Art Institute and an MFA at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. Since 1994, Lockhart’s work in photography and film has been widely exhibited in national and international venues. Her film GOSHOGAOKA, 1997, launched Lockhart’s career in filmmaking and has been screened in museums and film festivals throughout the United States, Europe, and Japan. Lockhart has also participated in several international art exhibitions including the 1997 Site Santa Fe Biennial and the 1997 and 2000 Whitney Biennials. Most recently, a major survey exhibition organized by the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam will travel to the Kunsthalle Zürich and the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. Lockhart currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

KELLY NIPPER (b. 1971, Edina, Minnesota) received a BFA at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and an MFA at the California Institute of Art. Her first solo exhibition featured NORMA - PRACTICE FOR SUCKING FACE at the Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Santa Monica in 1999. Nipper’s work has also been included in various group exhibitions including Breath at the Soap Factory in Minneapolis and Point Blank exhibited at Charim Klocker Gallery in Vienna. She will also be included in the upcoming 2000 California invitational organized by Friends of Photography in San Francisco, which will subsequently travel to Los Angeles. Nipper currently lives and works in Los Angeles.
SHARON LOCKHART
GOSHOGAOKA, 1997
16mm film
63 minutes, color/sound
Courtesy of Blum & Poe, Santa Monica

UNTITLED, 1998
framed chromogenic print, edition of 6
31 x 38-1/2"n
Private Collection, Courtesy of Blum & Poe, Santa Monica

ENRIQUE NAVA ENEDINA: OAXACAN EXHIBIT HALL, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF
ANTHROPOLOGY, MEXICO CITY, 1999
3 framed chromogenic prints, edition of 6
49 x 217-1/2"
Collection of William and Ruth True, Seattle

MARIA DA CONCEIÇÃO PEREIRA DE SOUZA WITH THE FRUITS OF THE ISLAND
OF APEÚ-SALVADOR, PARÁ, BRAZIL; COCO, AJIRU, MURICI, CAJÚ, MAMÃO,
TUCUMÁ, TAPEREBÁ, GOIABA, TAMARINO, GRAVIOLA, 1999
10 framed chromogenic prints, edition of 6
17" x 203"
Private Collection, Courtesy of Blum & Poe, Santa Monica

KELLY NIPPER
TESTS - CARBONATION, 1999
5 chromogenic prints, edition of 6
48 x 60" each
Courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica

NORMA - PRACTICE FOR SUCKING FACE, 1999
installation detail A-G
7 chromogenic prints, edition of 4
11 x 17" each
Courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica

NORMA - PRACTICE FOR SUCKING FACE, 1999
movement documentation
Laser disc, running time: 14:52 minutes
Courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica

INTERVAL, 2000
4 chromogenic prints, edition of 6
40 x 50" each
Courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica
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