

## On Collaboration: A Conversation with Sharon Lockhart

Sabine Eckmann

SABINE ECKMANN: I'd like to start by talking about the ways in which you have collaborated in the past with communities and people usually unassociated with the art world, but who have importantly become the subjects of your works. Your film and photography projects, which are always shown in museum and gallery spaces in the form of strictly designed installations, such as *Pine Flat* (2005) and *Lunch Break* (2008), illuminate to some degree how you work with your chosen community. It's striking how the people you engage with, framed by an often-static camera, emerge as themselves. In this sense much of your work is quite contrary to how we usually conceptualize staged photographs and films. Your approach could almost be understood as the very deconstruction of this convention, insofar as the strength of your work lies in the fact that your subjects seem unaware of the artistic and technological apparatus that captures them. In the context of your collaborations it appears critical that you give the people you work with their own space to be who they are, and in turn they let you be who you are and do what you need to do as an artist. Much of the actual collaboration then happens beyond or behind the camera. The resulting works ambiguously both reveal and conceal this collaboration at the same time. When conceiving these projects, how does this tension between real-life collaboration and artistic translation influence the creation of the works themselves?

SHARON LOCKHART: Tension is definitely something I work hard to create, but I think it's also sometimes merely a side effect of the process I go through. As you say, there's something distinct about my intervention as an artist. My work is not "reality": it's somehow formalized, or a translation of real life. In the past I've spoken a lot about how I choreograph movements or work with movement advisers and about how what looks like something spontaneous is actually highly orchestrated. I have a sense, however, that you're getting at something else. I think it's also obvious from the work that blatant fictionalizing is not something that interests me. I want viewers to know that there's a conversation between the subjects of the films or photographs and me,

the artist—but not in an overt, over-the-top, heavy kind of way. It's important to me that the translation is seamless, but at the same time present. Equally, the part of the process in which I work with a community, a person, or a group of people is very enjoyable for me as an artist; it's the part that really produces the work. More and more, I see the work as the interaction. The final form it takes is a link to the process.

ECKMANN: When I recall *Lunch Break*, I think of an artistic meditation about time off from the daily routine of regulated labor at the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> I also think about how experimental film and photography intersect and inform each other. The workers themselves—their lives and personalities—don't come to mind immediately. What seems aesthetically significant is that the main film has characteristics of static photographs and that the photographs, through serial variations, recall films. At first these artistic approaches appear unrelated to your actual collaboration with the workers, but I'm wondering if there isn't a connection. That would also hold true for *Pine Flat*, for example. We can understand your collaboration with the workers as a situation that focuses on belonging to a special social group and as one that is about experiencing something new: namely, the process of engaging with an artist and becoming part of an artwork. The actual artworks also concentrate on this tension, in that the photographs and films are very much about themselves, but also about the interpenetration of each other. This is, of course, my view—the view of a critic, curator, and art historian. I would be curious to know how you see your aesthetic collaboration with the people who become the subjects of your films and photographs and who surface in your final installations.

LOCKHART: That's an interesting insight. I've never thought about how the relationship between the mediums of film and photography might be reflected in the collaborative process between my subjects and myself. But yes, there's definitely an interpenetration between the cohesiveness of the group and its externalization for an outside audience. The initial



Fig. 1. Installation view of Sharon Lockhart: *Lunch Break*, Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine, 2010

stage of my process is to develop a group dynamic—for me to become part of the group. In doing that, both the group and I are changed. I'm educating them about my goals and methods, and they're educating me in the same way. Together we're creating a solidarity that can then be externalized in the films and photographs. When I think back to the projects and images I've discarded over the years, I realize it was almost always because I felt that I had not established that intermediary group. The resulting images were all flawed in one of two ways: either I had failed to create that solidarity, or I had not communicated the aesthetic side of the equation successfully enough for it to find its form in the final work. With most of the projects I've taken part in, I would say the subjects fully understood the problematics at play. They understood that there was something at stake in how things looked, but also in how the work might be approached by a viewer.

ECKMANN: I like your notion of solidarity. Not only do your works convey a heightened sense of humanity, but they also instill the idea that in the realm of art, one can create better, and more humane, worlds, despite the coexistence of certain social and political realities, which are invoked as well. Yet recently your collaborations have taken a fairly different turn. At the installation of *Lunch Break* at the Colby College Museum of Art in Maine, you included objects that some of the workers who participated in the project had created, such as lunch baskets and tools.<sup>2</sup> These objects entered into a dialogue with Colby's collection by assuming their own place within the exhibition,

and in so doing extended your project. Was there a decisive moment that triggered or encouraged you to turn to the workers as artists by engaging them on your, rather than their own, terms? Was this a turning point in your work: did it transform the nature of how you collaborate with communities?

LOCKHART: I didn't see the inclusion of the workers' objects in the Colby exhibition as being on my terms; it seemed to me part of the collaboration. Just as with the films and photographs, I'm always setting the terms of the collaboration, but I'm also trying to open up a space my collaborators can feel comfortable entering. As I got to know the workers, I found that many of them were artists of some sort. Perhaps it was self-selection—the ones who gravitated toward me might have been artistically inclined. Colby had asked me to curate a room in the exhibition using their collection, and when I started researching the objects they had, I saw connections with objects the workers had made. For instance, I ended up including from the museum's collection a small sculpture by Alexander Calder made with World War II–scrap metal, displayed next to a 1980 stainless-steel lunch box by Marcel Beaulieu, one of the workers (fig. 1). I think the interaction started earlier, however, when I was creating the series of photographs of the workers' lunch boxes, which were so personal and creative. Their owners really understood what I was after and that I saw them as artworks—that I saw the ritual of lunch in an artistic way. It wasn't much of a leap from there to include the workers' crafts and artworks in the exhibition.



Fig. 2. Installation view of Sharon Lockhart: *Lunch Break*, Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine, 2010

In retrospect, yes, this might have been a turning point in my practice. It's hard to say when it's your own work. It definitely opened up a new way of seeing the collaboration, by showing that the experience we call art can be found in all kinds of places. The Colby show became a conversation with the community, but also a conversation between different kinds of artworks—historical objects like carved spruce-gum boxes and Sherrie Levine's knot paintings, for example (fig. 2). This shift also grew out of the newspaper you and I did together, the *Lunch Break Times*, free copies of which were distributed to the public. For a year I collected articles from people who had worked on the project—artists, art historians, and workers from all over Maine—both to give a voice to the participants and to create an object that could reenter the working world outside the museum. The inclusion of the audience's voice in the museum, through their objects and their articles in the paper, created a dynamic for the exhibition different from what I'm used to. People were coming to see what they did as much as they were coming to see what I did. I found the experience exhilarating.

ECKMANN: This is the right context to think more about what the inclusion of objects made by your collaborators means in relation to your installations and their presentation within a museum context. These interventions differ from project to project. As part of the *Lunch Break* exhibition at the Secession in Vienna, for example, you showed James Benning's baseball-card collection together with your photographs of his beer-bottle collection. This provided a connection to the context

of American working-class culture that defines *Lunch Break*. It also resonated with the knickknacks and personal items that the workers had assembled in the independent businesses they operated in the shipyard, and with the stickers they attached to their actual lunch boxes. With both the workers' objects seen in the *Lunch Break* films and photographs and Benning's collections represented in the Secession installation, the collected items form a kind of portrait of the owner. In the context of the museum, they also invited consideration about collecting and who collects what, in part owing to the different mediums through which they are displayed: on the one hand as a particular hybrid between installation art and exhibition design, and on the other hand through photography, all the while establishing a dialogue between both.

At Colby, as you just described it, you expanded on that approach, intermingling objects from the collection with objects the workers had created based on a curatorial process that looked for similar aesthetic sensibilities (fig. 3). Through this equal footing you mobilized, but also did away with, the history of institutional critique. Perhaps more in line with the Benning project, you also displayed an actual lunch box together with your photographs of the lunch boxes. (By the way, it's striking how your photographs, as formally strict as they are, appear more personal than the actual lunch box itself.) But I want to turn to the role of the specially designed vitrines, in which the workers' objects and selections from the collection were displayed. They seem to embrace a multiplicity of connotations as they relate to and are part of





Fig. 3. Installation view of Sharon Lockhart: *Lunch Break*, Gió Marconi, Milan, 2011, showing lunch box made by Bath Iron Works machinist Butch Greenleaf

the curatorial process, yet they also evoke the displayed objects themselves. Aren't they containers and abstract sculptures at the same time, in this sense twisting not only the history of institutional critique but also the way the viewer experiences the objects created by the workers?

LOCKHART: I think it's easy for some to look past the way in which the vitrines, and also the enclosed architectural structures on which the films are projected, are sculptural in some sense, so I'm glad you pointed that out. I do think of them as containers and abstract sculptures at the same time. They may be seen as framing devices for the work included in them, but they have a relationship to both the architecture and the institution that frames them, and I'd like viewers to think about those relationships. On the other hand, I'm not interested in pointing out how the museum is a privileged place or reaffirming the hierarchies it creates through some kind of negation.

With the Benning room in the Secession it was easier to see that I wasn't referring to such hierarchies because he and I are on an equal footing as artists, and the nod to both of our activities of collecting (through photography, film, or the standard accumulation of objects) was a way of establishing a methodology for viewing a very similar engagement with the shipyard workers. Collections are both an aesthetic undertaking and a conversion of the objects collected into a text. Perhaps that's why the photographs seem more personal than the actual objects: because we're so used to converting a photograph into a text about the person or object it represents, and the objects themselves are more likely to be read as "just objects." If one can appreciate this and not separate the objects from the overall project as addenda, then I think the vitrines and the objects inside them actually reframe the photographs themselves as personal, as a collection, and as a text. In fact, they seem to be more of a text about the person than the objects themselves. This is part of what I was trying to do with the Eshkol installation. It might be easy to miss the way I was engaging with her as a person and an artist, and with her collaborators, through just the films and photographs. But by including the archival material and carpets, I felt that I was shifting the viewer's attention away from what I was doing aesthetically in the works that I created toward what I was doing conceptually, which was creating a space for a cultural/social interaction with Eshkol and her dancers. That my authorship disappeared, in a way, would strengthen the viewer's perception of my actual project and the complex relationships of authoring and interdependencies it implied.

ECKMANN: Many of your projects prior to this one engaged with a contemporary community on the verge of disappearance, such as the blue-collar working class at the beginning of the twenty-first century or adolescents on the cusp of adulthood. Many were also driven by a particular ethnographic interest, as in *Goshogaoka* (1997) and *Teatro Amazonas* (1999). Eshkol, however, is an artist from the past. One way you collaborate with her is through her own close collaborators, the dancers. Yet you also engage with her through her artworks (the



Fig. 4. Members of the crew reading the *Lunch Break Times* during installation of *Sharon Lockhart: Lunch Break*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2011 (left: Travis Kerkela; right: Dave Vetrano)

dance compositions and the wall carpets), pedagogical devices such as the notation system and the wire-and-mesh spheres (small mobiles that visualize abstract movement), as well as her personal archive, which includes her sketches and notes in relation to notation system and personal items such as photographs and her diaries. How does this process of collaborating with someone you never met impact the work? In your mind, is it shaped by the structures and methods of memory and the imagination? What role do the living dancers play in your conversation with Eshkol and the creation of the work?

LOCKHART: This project is perhaps different in that there are two points of collaboration: Eshkol and her dancers. It may seem odd, but I hadn't actually separated the two in my mind. My association with Eshkol seemed so natural and personal when I was introduced to her production. I immediately felt a connection, and it was only later that I came to know the distinction between her creations and those of her collaborators. Bringing up the question of memory and the imagination seems appropriate, because in truth that's the only way I will ever know her. The projects I've done with the work of Morris Louis, Duane Hanson, and On Kawara are similar, in that I saw something I connected with and tried to pull that out and make it visible. Eshkol was different because I had the voices of the dancers to bring her to life for me. The dancers are central to my conversation with Eshkol. They knew her; it's through their memory of her in part that I know her, too. And it was their commitment to Eshkol's vision that drew me to her

as much as Eshkol's own work. They were lifelong collaborators with her (some for forty years), performing her dances and sewing her wall carpets. That she established a collaborative relationship with them seemed to be an important connection to my own interests. They've created a wonderful practice in her absence, keeping her house as a workplace and managing it together. They are like a collective with a shared responsibility for her legacy, which was deeply inspiring to be a part of. This was the place where the real-life collaboration we were speaking of earlier could happen. In the end it was our bond that informed the project as much as my bond with Eshkol's work.

ECKMANN: In *Sharon Lockhart | Noa Eshkol* the artwork itself is the collaboration, as indicated in the title that gives authorship to both Eshkol and yourself, an imaginative dialogue with Eshkol and her lifelong passion for minimalist body movement. This theme is realized through your focus on the meaning and structure of movement, yet also through the inclusion of other creative aspects of Eshkol's life, like the carpets, into your multichannel installation work. Do you see this as a continuation of what you began by including the workers' objects in the Colby installation, or are the two projects entirely different from each other?

LOCKHART: There's definitely a connection. Incorporating Benning in the Secession installation of *Lunch Break* was the beginning, but it was more of an aside. Then developing the Colby show and the *Lunch Break Times*, including the second edition for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (fig. 4), allowed me to see the possibilities for incorporating voices that had an equal footing to mine as part of the work. The Eshkol project expands that idea. I tried to emphasize that by the title of the exhibition, which gives us equal authorship. I really see it as a two-person exhibition, although I created the frame for both of us. Perhaps this goes back to your earlier comment that I was creating a space for the workers on my own terms. Everyone told me that this collaboration could never have taken place if Eshkol were alive. Aside from the fact that she was incredibly uncompromising, she may not have understood my reframing of her work.

ECKMANN: The re-creations of Eshkol's dances, which have rarely been performed publicly, are now captured on film, where they achieve permanence, in contrast to the ephemeral quality of an actual dance performance. It seems to me that in the actual installation, in which the films are projected onto large-scale volumes that architecturally shape the space, you have transformed these performances (fig. 5). Together with the plinths in the installation, which are used to display the carpets but also serve as stage-design elements for the performance of the dances, your collaboration with Eshkol also materializes through a reconfiguration of space. You connect the carpets as sculptures with the compositions of the dances and the bodies of the dancers, something Eshkol didn't do, and with time: the past is the basis for a new present. I think this is very important because it distinguishes *Sharon Lockhart |*



Fig. 5. Installation view of exhibition at The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, showing Sharon Lockhart's *Five Dances* and *Nine Wall Carpets* by Noa Eshkol, 2011

*Noa Eshkol* as a collaboration, an exchange and dialogue between two artists, rather than a re-creation of Eshkol's work and life. What's interesting is that you were able to assert a relation between the fleetingness of memory and the precarious nature of the imagination and the rigid, highly structured, and three-dimensional composition of both the individual films and the installation itself. This work with memory and imagination perpetually penetrates our spatial environment, the here and now in which we live. This causes me to ask if we could also understand this project in terms of deferred action (in German, we say *Nachträglichkeit*), in the sense that through the means of memory, the past materializes in the present as different, yet still joined to its origin.

LOCKHART: The reframing I was just speaking of alters Eshkol's original production in a way that is appreciably different from what her place in the course of history would've allowed her to see. At the same time I was trying to be as true to her process as I could. I recognize that I was drawn to her by historical precedents with which I identified, including many ideas and forms that I was familiar with from my study of mid-twentieth-century art, but that the work would function only if I could surpass that history and create something really new. In this sense, I relate to what you refer to as *Nachträglichkeit*, which I read as a past that somehow haunts the present. All of the components I contributed to the exhibition—the projections, the architectural elements, the photographs, the archive—were just framing devices for what I saw as my own historical precedents.

ECKMANN: Could you explain the role of the historical precedent a little more? In many of your works you engage with a present-day community that often escapes our attention and knowledge. To a certain extent this is also true for Eshkol, as the dancers continue her legacy, which is relatively unknown. But then there is also this aspect that engages in a creative exploration of Eshkol's dance compositions and art, and the way you give her coauthorship over the project. How does this relate to the importance of historical precedents for you?

LOCKHART: I spend a lot of time looking at work that precedes my own. For example, I spent a lot of time looking at postmodern dance and Jean Rouch's work when I made *Goshogaoka* (1997). Yet, the work I make is very much a reworking of the research material. The connection to the past, as you say, creates something uncanny about the repetition. It is familiar but different. In the case of Eshkol, I identified with her approach to dance and also to textiles. She liked to have a structure and then work from there: the textiles were all made from scraps or deconstructed found textiles. She never cut fabric. In the dances, she broke the body down into essential elements that were then recombined in a very mechanical way. In both cases, there are connections to practices that have influenced my own work: Minimalism, postmodern dance, and structuralist film. However, she never fit properly into those movements. Maybe this is what made the material so fertile for me. More than any other project, it allowed me to foreground my process.



ECKMANN: In your work sculptural elements become part of a multi-disciplinary endeavor, as you emphasize yourself. For the films, as well as for the installation itself, it's striking how the large-scale volumes turn your films, Eshkol's carpets, and even her personal archive into experiential components. In that sense, I think that they're more than framing devices. I believe that they heighten Eshkol's presence throughout the space. In short, they seem to make the coauthorship possible. Let me give you an example of what I mean. In *Four Exercises in Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation* (2011), we see the dancer "interacting" with four large-scale architectural elements that reference the dancer's body as much as they, in an abstract manner, embody Eshkol's approach to movement. Not that different is the way in which the dancers engage with the architectural elements to which the carpets are attached in the film *Five Dances and Nine Wall Carpets by Noa Eshkol* (2011). In both cases, you give Eshkol a presence not only through her dances and her carpets but also through these sculptures, as they underscore a Minimalist, yet embodied, experience of movement. I wonder if one could call this a creative, or maybe imaginary, reconstruction?

LOCKHART: It's hard for me to answer that question. As I've said, my comprehension of what Eshkol was doing cannot be exactly what she herself thought of it. Since the experiential elements of the installation are what I most think of as my own, I mistrust them the most in relation to who Eshkol was and what she intended in her work. I tried very hard to be true to my idea of her, and it certainly was my understanding that this Minimalist approach was a central concern and that she wanted viewers always to remain conscious of their relationship to the performer.

ECKMANN: Along those lines, I'm wondering how the viewer finds herself in the role of collaborator. Only by moving through time (through the films and the motions of the dancers) and space (through the display of the films and carpets as three-dimensional elements) is the viewer able conceptually and physically to experience your collaboration with Eshkol.

LOCKHART: I would hope so. I wanted everything to have a very specific relation to the body. This was something with which Eshkol was so completely in tune. She conceived of the dances as "chamber dances," in that they were supposed to take place in a room with a small audience so that the relationship of bodies (viewers and dancers) would be contained and reflexively apparent. This was the organizing principle for the Center for Contemporary Art exhibition in Tel Aviv.<sup>3</sup> The exhibition occupied two spaces. On the second floor of the exhibition space, we installed the film *Four Exercises in Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation*. The architectural elements for this installation consisted of a volume for the projection, a volume for the projector, and a bench (just beyond the projector volume was a vitrine displaying a selection of the daily diaries that Eshkol and the dancers maintained). These elements related to the gray volumes that viewers could see in the film, which

were sized to the height and armspan of the film's only performer, the dancer Ruti Sela, and were presented in arrangements within the frame that highlighted the physical path each dance exercise occupied in space. For example, all three architectural elements were painted gray, and the projector volume and the bench had the same footprint as the volumes in the film. Thus, the three elements physically extrapolated the experience of the film into the installation.

From the open balcony on the second floor, viewers could look down into a gallery that we transformed into a performance space (figs. 6–7), where a series of performances, workshops, and lectures, as well as the dancers' own practices, took place. We designed bleachers for the audience at one end of the gallery, leaving a space roughly the same size as the studio where the dancers practice and bringing their daily routine in Holon to the public. Viewers could experience a real relationship to bodies performing, both when the space was occupied by the dancers and when it was empty, to be filled with bodies like their own. The dances themselves are meant to make you aware of how your body moves.

All of the architectural interventions, which I designed with the architectural firm EscherGuneWardena Architecture, were meant to create a very specific movement through space. At the Israel Museum, one entered the exhibition through the volumes in which the films are projected, which are arranged in a processional way, and, once one moves into the archive room, the plinths with the carpets and the vitrines with the archival materials are arranged so as to create an awareness of their place in the wider architecture. I would hope that the architectural interventions in both spaces operate with the conceptual goals of the works to create a space for viewers to consider themselves within a community and a history. Eshkol's work sparked for me an understanding of how she was able to create a practice that was collaborative with her partners, attentive to the world around her and its history, and yet completely uncompromised in its relation to institutions. I wanted to honor that commitment while opening up the work to a public that was held at arm's length.

1. *Lunch Break* consists of two film installations and three distinct series of photographs that explore the social life of workers during times of retreat from production. The first film, *Lunch Break* (2008), is eighty minutes long, during which the camera travels in extreme slow motion through a seemingly endless corridor, encountering workers and their environment during their lunch break. The second film, *EXIT* (2008), employs, by contrast, a static camera, and is divided into five discrete sections, each of which, over the duration of forty-one minutes, shows workers exiting the factory during the five workdays of the week. The first series of photographs consists of diptychs, triptychs, and single images that portray workers' lunch boxes. A second series of photographs is devoted to the independent businesses run by the workers encountered in the longer film. And the third series comprises deliberately composed group portraits of workers. In the United States the exhibition *Sharon Lockhart: Lunch Break* originated at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum in 2009, and was organized by Sabine Eckmann. It then traveled to the Colby College Museum of Art in Maine (2010) and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2011). In Europe the Vienna Secession showed *Lunch Break* in 2008.

2. In addition to a selection of the films and photographs from *Lunch Break*, the Colby exhibition incorporated works by Maine artists and artisans drawn from its own collection, other Maine museums, and private lenders. These works included paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, and folk art depicting the Maine landscape, the factory town, maritime themes, and people at work and at leisure. They also included historical objects by Maine artisans, such as spruce-gum boxes and earthenware, as well as objects made by some of the workers involved in the production of *Lunch Break*.

3. In Israel, *Sharon Lockhart | Noa Eshkol* was presented at The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, from December 13, 2011 to April 14, 2012; concurrently, an extension of the project occurred at the Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, from December 15, 2011 to February 23, 2012.



Figs. 6-7. Installation views of exhibition at Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, showing performances in the exhibition space