

IN MEDIAS RES

Walead Beshty

What is at stake here, I believe, is the close tie between cinema and history.

—Giorgio Agamben

Achat ... shtayim ... shalosh ... arba'....

The countdown initiates synchronized movements, which are punctuated by the ticking of a metronome. The dancers' bodies, moving in unison, seem to pivot and turn on an invisible armature as though linked together by dowels and gears. The projectors are silent and out of view, yet their machinic presence, their position between our bodies and those we are watching, resonates in the tapping out of time at 120 beats per minute. The sound directs us back to the camera shutter, which too vivisects bodies in time, slicing them into manageable units. The movements themselves are full of stiff radial actions, like rack-and-pinion swaying, which at times veer close to the motions of the everyday and at others appear almost overwrought, brooding, and expressive. Yet in each instance they announce their avoidance of anything so blatant by retreating from citation or signification at the moment when meaning might be consummated. An almost militant fist pump turns into a lunge; what appears to be a glance over the shoulder is extended into a protracted lean. The movements appear commonplace, but in contrast to the routines associated with the Judson Dance Theater, which framed quotidian actions within the aesthetics of dance in an almost Duchampian manner, these gestures seem indifferent to the boundary between art and daily life, focused instead on the transitory act of signifying itself, which by necessity transcends those distinctions. They are movements that announce themselves as gestures by repetition and synchronization in much the same way that Roman Jakobson has noted that “/pa/ is a noise and /papa/ is

a word.”¹ And yet the gestures remain unattached to a specific referent, something like what would be if “papa” had never achieved its status as a word and was instead suspended just before the point where meaning becomes defined—an utterance caught in a moment of becoming, of approaching a limit, as a *being-in-formation*.

As the rhythm of the minimal dance develops, secondary effects begin to accrue; the bodies of the dancers start to betray their age through their varying rigidities and contours. As our awareness of the ticking recedes, the sound of the soft padding of feet on solid flooring, the gentle shuffling, the rumpling of fabrics, the hush of barely audible breaths come to the fore. The sounds of the film blur into the space of the gallery; the noises the film emits are only intermittently distinguishable from the sounds that our own bodies produce as we fold and unfold our arms, shift our weight from leg to leg. As the dancers pivot in front of us, we think about how certain movements feel and how we would sound making them. Our own actions fall into and out of sync with those in front of us; the noises of the dancers' bodies audibly identifying the surfaces they brush and pound against just as our own feet drag against the floor. When we move from film to film through the gallery, there is a consciousness of our own breathing, thudding, shuffling, pausing, and it is as though we can hear others experiencing the same awareness. We think, “If I can hear, they can hear; if they are making noises, I am making noises.” And even as we turn away from one of the five parts of the film to another, the metronome follows us, turning even our movements between the films into an extension of the projection.

Achat ... shtayim ... shalosh ... arba'....

The segments start again. Each of the five parts of Sharon Lockhart's *Five Dances and Nine Wall Carpets* by Noa Eshkol (2011) begins with the same countdown, each is synchronized to the same metronome, and each segment's looping keeps time with the others.

Epigraph: Giorgio Agamben, “Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films,” trans. Brian Holmes, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 313.
1. Roman Jakobson, “Why Mama and Papa?” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (The Hague: Mouton, 1962), 542.

Our eyes wander: rather than being in a dance studio, it looks like the dancers are in an exhibition space not unlike the one we are currently in, their bodies flanked by large rectangular volumes much as we are at this moment. As the metronome metes out time for the dancers, it metes out time for us, governing our movements, pacing them. A fellow viewer is tapping her thigh; another is bobbing gently. Are these self-conscious acts, or are they unaware of their movements? *Was I the one who was fidgeting?* One is gradually co-opted into being a participant in the prolonged dance (and does that mean we were/are *always* dancing?), drawn into it simply by being aware of one's body while simultaneously standing apart from it in contemplation. Simply by being in the room, simply by noticing oneself, one is either in sync or out of sync with the metronome (there's no other option) and thus with the bodies of the dancers and the bodies of other visitors.

This is a moment of being-in-relation to all of the bodies, of producing relations through mutual sensitivities, the site of reception turning into the site of production, and vice versa. The image bleeds into the corporeal space. This is not to say that we are experiencing a waking dream, this would be image as illusion. No, we are here, aware, and present. This is not fantasy; it is simply a moment when it is possible to absorb stimuli from all bodies in the same way. This is experienced as an indifference, an indifference to the separation of the images of bodies from actual bodies in space while being fully aware of the constructedness of the context. It is a giving over to the image while retaining a sense of the real; here the image does not supplant the corporeal but coexists with it.

By definition, an image is not what it is *of*; this is its singular certainty. In order to be an *imago* (likeness) of some thing, it is also by definition not that thing. It is an approach of that thing, and its referent acts as its limit, performing as an adjacency that it cannot be. Thus, identifying with an image means approaching this boundary as well. It requires a moment of misrecognition, a moment when

the clinical distance we feel when shielded by the image screen recedes, and boundaries between the now and the “this has been” disperse into the immediacy of experience. This is what it is to be in the throes of what Walter Benjamin referred to as the dialectical image, “constellated between alienated things and disappearing meaning ... instantiated in the moment of indifference.”² It is this “indifference” to the boundaries between experiences that the work engenders, an indifference toward a position inside or outside the flow (and thus being enthralled in both at once), an indifference to frames of reference, placing us in a zone of counterintuitive continuities—it is fluidity where before there were only partitions. It is an indifference to the separation that lies between *Sharon Lockhart* | *Noa Eshkol*, not a disavowal of it, nor a making indistinct, but an allowance for a thought or action or gesture to move through that boundary between them. It is an indifference to the distinction between film and dance, between the optic and the haptic, as our sense of vision and sense of touch confound, conflate, and circulate through each other.³ It is an indifference to the division between then and now, between production and reception, between bodies in space and bodies in pixels. In short, it is an indifference that breeds other indifferences, that removes obstacles to the flow from one locus to another, that is affirmative, and that allows connections rather than destroys structures; it simply allows an alternate path of cursivity and fluidity to coexist within the taxonomic. It leaves it to bureaucrats and filing cabinets to police the bodies and separate them; it removes the burden of our having to act as functionaries of that program.

This quality of indifference, or being positioned in between and through—as in being in between genres, in between mediums, in between bodies, in between moments—marks much of Sharon Lockhart's work. The in-between is always in a state of disappearing or diffusion only to appear in another location. This in-betweenness disperses when signification becomes locked in, and this is why Lockhart has been so strongly

2. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Roy Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 466.

3. As Erika Fischer-Lichte observes, “In performance ... public vs. private, distance vs. proximity, fiction vs. reality ... are all based on the seemingly insurmountable, fixed opposition between seeing and touching.” Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008), 62.

minorization if you will. They note, “Minor languages are characterized ... by a sobriety and variation that are like a minor treatment of a major language ... deterritorializing the major language.”⁶ The minor language consists of meanings and innuendo that operate within the “cramped space” of the mother tongue; it never attempts to assert an oppositional language and does not seek to “acquire the majority, even in order to install a new constant,” but rather it occupies the majority, perverting it, *détourning* it, putting it to different ends while emphasizing provisionality.⁷ Most importantly, it does not establish itself as the “true” condition, a real that lurks behind the scrim of false consciousness, but rather one reality of many. It stops just short of becoming the dominant, of replicating that which it sought to dethrone. Through this inhabitation, dominant structures become porous, and where they once asserted their naturalized authority to organize the perceptual world and to frame their chosen subject matter, they become one of many mediations, as fleeting as a passing gesture.

In Lockhart’s work, these disruptions often occur as the aestheticization of instrumental forms—the work’s acknowledgment of itself as an aesthetic object—turning on the awareness of the actions portrayed as being presented exclusively for the camera, and the camera being present for the sole purpose of bearing witness to those actions. For example, in one sequence in *Goshogaoka*, the young Japanese basketball players terminate their sprints at the edge of the film frame rather than at the edge of the court. The initial sense of naturalness of these actions is met with the realization of their picturehood; the participants were not only performing for the camera but also modifying their actions for it, adapting to its frame as much as the actions are adapted to their own bodies and the relations between them. The activities vacillate between mapping the field of vision and the field of action, and each location, the rectangular screen and the rectangular court, acts as a scrim or boundary delimiting and defining the other.

identified with disappearances: disappearing cultures, disappearing crafts, disappearing groups. She is drawn to practices that operate in the margins: Japanese girls playing American basketball, an artist performing *ikebana* with agriculture, the eroding culture of American skilled labor, children carving out their own private spaces in the world. When Lockhart comes close (some might argue dangerously close) to certain genres—say ethnography or structuralist cinema—she similarly pulls back and away, inserting a deviation, a wrinkle in the smooth trajectory toward instrumentality. It appears like a search for the point that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari posit occurs when “language stops being representative in order to now move toward its extremities or its limits.”⁴ This capacity is something that Lockhart shares with Eshkol (or at least it is this quality that she draws out of Eshkol’s work), an ability to approach clear and defined expression fearlessly and then, at its limit, the emphatic retreat from the definitive, a retreat from signification in order to display it as *signification*, asserting the communal nature of discourse, what Giorgio Agamben has called the “being-in-language of human beings,”⁵ or what we could call here the “being-in-mediation of human beings.”

This in-betweenness could be understood as a form of inhabitation and deformation, a mixing of genres whose meanings are overdetermined, overloaded, and dominant. It appears at times in Lockhart’s work as a creolization of conventions, a kind of patois or hybrid language, for example, her confluences of German romanticism and structuralism (*Pine Flat*, 2005, figs. 12–16, and *Podwórka*, 2009), of documentary and performativity (*NŌ*, 2003, figs. 9–11), between orchestrations for the camera and events the camera records (*Goshogaoka*, 1997, figs. 6–8), serialization and still life (*Lunch Break*, 2008, figs. 1–5), of social experimentation and contemplative meditation (*Teatro Amazonas*, 1999). It is a deterritorializing of the dominant mode, what Deleuze and Guattari have described as the *minor*, or “that which a minority constructs within a major language”: a

4. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 23.
5. Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” in *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 60.

6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizoanalysis*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 26.
7. *Ibid.*, 106.

8. See Mark Godfrey, “The Flatness of *Pine Flat*,” in *Sharon Lockhart: Pine Flat*, ed. Chus Martínez (Bilbao: Sala Rekalde Erakustaratza, 2006), 112–13, for his discussion of perspective and performance. With regard to his discussion of duration, see 113, n. 1, where he writes: “I wanted to note another remarkable feature of the work. The duration of the film was determined by the space it depicted, namely by the size of the field. When

you watched the film, even if you did not know how many minutes it was, you knew it would last as long as it took for the two farmers to fill the field. As a result, just as the farmers went about their activity with neither haste nor slowness, the viewer had no anxiety about the film’s length.”

Mark Godfrey, in his essay "The Flatness of *Pine Flat*," noted a similar instance in *NŌ*, in which the performance of the activity again draws attention to the pictorial qualities of landscape and thus film, while at the same time the activity provides a legible metric, a kind of pictorial time stamp indicating the duration of the film through the relative "fullness" of the frame.⁸ As James Benning describes, Lockhart "designed the haystacks to appear relatively equal in size ... by making the stacks smaller as they were placed closer to the camera, while their locus was chosen to describe a trapezoidal field, making it easier to map them into the rectangle of the camera frame."⁹ In short, the performed action acknowledges the synchronic and diachronic constructions of the filmic both in duration and as pictorial form. Thus the filmic and the performative engage in a dual modeling, the filmic splaying out the actions presented for the camera as pictures conveyed in sequence, the performative mapping out the filmic visual field as it also circumscribes its temporal axis. It should go without saying that while the former is a description of the conventional use of images, and of film (and really all instrumental mediums), the latter is the truly remarkable aspect of Lockhart's work. Thus, the collapse of the distinction between performance and film, along with the intertwining of the documentary and the phenomenological made explicit in the Eshkol films, had already occurred in Lockhart's work by the mid-1990s.

In the internal dialectic between film and performance, the conventions of authenticity and instrumentality, of genre and convention, become as malleable as any other stylistic conceit in the cinematic repertoire. This serves as an assertion that the film is not, as it might have originally seemed, simply a recording of a phenomenon. Nor is it being essentialized as an autonomous art form; rather, its status is poised between the two, as a "medium" or agent that acts between agendas or forces and is defined by the tensions between those forces. There is no function to the activity other than its being shown and no function to the depiction other than the activity conveyed by

it. Instead, the work situates itself between these valences, opening up a site from which the question of fact or fiction, real or staged, is abandoned as literally immaterial. Here the camera-based operations of cropping and flattening, and even the duration of a roll of film, become social mechanisms, structures that mediate and organize the relations between viewers and images as much as those among viewers. Thus, technological mediation can (or even must) be understood as wholly continuous if not indistinguishable from the social field as part of the structures through which the generation, production, and reproduction of sociality are here made manifest.

This condition of mediality extends to the subject matter Lockhart concentrates on, such as the drills of the young women in *Goshogaoka*. In the film we see only the drill, itself a preparatory act or *apparare*, structuring an approach to a limit without becoming that limit. Furthermore, these drills are modified and established in conjunction with the young basketball players, as were their uniforms, akin to but apart from the conventional forms of each; rather, they are minor adjustments and revisions of the conventional, distinct from, yet embedded within, the standard from which they deviate. Despite their independence from the established or standardized, these activities are pursued with an earnest determination, what Agamben, channeling Kant, called a "purposive purposelessness," attaining a significance that is specific to the context within which the activities developed.¹⁰ Yet they are no more intrinsic to their circumstance than they are autonomous from it; instead, the activities are embodied within and exist in relation between the communities in which they originate and the broader world.

Or consider the film *Lunch Break*, consisting of a ten-minute take of a 1,200-foot hallway at the Bath Iron Works where the workers spend their time during their mandated midday respite. In real time the film would last only ten minutes, but Lockhart extended it to some eighty-three and then looped it. We never reach the end of the hallway; nor do we approach it from the outside. It is in itself a full

world, a world as “break” or “cut.” *Lunch Break* is projected in a construction that forms a light baffle with an adjacent wall and appears like a long hallway from the outside. In other words, the spatiality of film is mapped onto the architectural armature, which creates a phenomenological sensation of looking down an expansive hallway, proposing this not as an illusion but as a provisional continuity (this aspect recurs in *Five Dances and Nine Wall Carpets by Noa Eshkol*, in which the films are projected on forms that sit on the floor and create a spatial continuity between the architectural site and the space depicted in the projection). When one is watching the film, the hallway appears endless, and one settles into its indeterminate length. The incidental movements are drawn out to the point of being durational and then rise to the fore as gestural; they exist as part of the continuity of the film but also as autonomous events that are isolated and stand apart from arc of the film. In essence, the film behaves as an extended interruption, a cut drawn out to occupy an almost endless event, its medial nature extended and stretched until it is mediality alone, an in-between with no external edge. Actions that could be seen as subordinate to the motivated behaviors of work, that could be understood from the perspective of the workday as insignificant (i.e., without meaning), ascend, expand, and gain momentum, transcending the managerial regime that initially gave them shape.

The exhibition of *Lunch Break* at the Colby Museum of Art in 2010 prefigured the approach Lockhart took to the exhibition *Sharon Lockhart | Noa Eshkol*. *Lunch Break* included the craft works of the skilled laborers at the Bath Iron Works, displayed alongside art objects from the museum’s collection, one of several instances in which Lockhart’s work provided a context and occasion for a broader inclusion of cultural practices; in short, a solo authorial gesture is opened up as a passage for alternate agendas and independent flows, becoming a site of exchange within a group rather than a unidirectional message from producer to receiver. As Lockhart put it with regard to the Colby exhibition, “People

were coming to see what they did as much as they were coming to see what I did.”¹¹ While in the Eshkol work Lockhart similarly uses the frame of her own practice to support and distribute the work of another, again allowing her work to act as a vessel (this also occurs in the photographs that accompanied the film *NŌ*, in which she presented the practice of Haruko Takeichi, a *No-Ikebana* artist), the *Sharon Lockhart | Noa Eshkol* exhibition is a markedly more radical step, in which Lockhart’s authorial presence begins to dissipate, transforming a solo exhibition into a two-person show. This was a deliberate effect, a process that Lockhart herself implies was a necessary result: “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.”¹² These “interdependencies” are the instances of fluidity, of continuity despite existing divisions that Lockhart has repeatedly managed to draw forward.

The hybridization of the conventions of exhibition (solo show and group show, the monographic and the two-person exhibition, the artist and curator), even the intermittent appearance and disappearance of Lockhart as author, blows back on the conventional solidity that naturalized forms of aesthetic management, from curatorial practice to authorial autonomy, assert. Just as *Lunch Break* posed the question of who produces culture for whom, and what possibilities are open to museums as conduits for social exchange among the communities in which they are embedded, *Sharon Lockhart | Noa Eshkol* proposes not only the individual artist’s work as a conduit for histories lost or unacknowledged within the institution but also that *all* practices contain other practices embedded within them, each telling provisional histories of art, and that these provisional histories are legible and exist as multitudes extending in every direction if we choose to see them.

While always careful to indicate the interdependencies that exist between her and her subjects cum collaborators, here Lockhart turns the same attention to Eshkol, devoting

11. Sabine Eckmann, “On Collaboration: A Conversation with Sharon Lockhart,” in *Sharon Lockhart | Noa Eshkol*, ed. Stephanie Barron and Britt Salvesen (Munich, London and New York: DeMonico Books/Prestel, 2012), 108.

12. *Ibid.*, 109.

considerable effort to interviewing her dancers and charting the shifting conditions of their relationships and the effects they had on Eshkol's output. Thus, Lockhart positions Eshkol's practice as a kind of platform for interpersonal exchange, a frame for others to inhabit, and in so doing, constructs a similar space from which the reception of Eshkol's work might develop through an engagement with Lockhart's. Yet, Lockhart does not claim this open territory once it is established but simply releases it into the cultural infrastructure (i.e., catalogues, museum collections, galleries, etc.), and by not claiming it under the umbrella of her practice, she refuses to define it or give it boundaries that are circumscribed by her own work, allowing this proposition to achieve potentials beyond the reach of her own practice. Lockhart thus makes a cut in the museological and the historical that can expand to the entirety of the museum or art history and that, while diffusing throughout the structures it inhabits, upends the neat taxonomies and evolutionary canons that permeate them.

This is the political dimension of the minor, for under the auspices of the minor language, "everything takes on a collective value ... there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that 'master' and that could be separated from a collective enunciation."¹³ It is just this condition that mediality provides, for it is not a circulation of images or symbols, or even things; nor is it the hierarchical relation between the originator of a message and its receivers, but the spaces between things, the links, the connectivities, the flows back and forth, exhibited on their own, in states of motion. It is this that Agamben defines as constituent of gesture, proposing it as "the exhibition of a mediality ... the process of making a means visible as such," for in gesture, "nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported." It is the expression of a conveyance, an expression of a "being-in-language." This is where he locates the impulse of cinema, because "in the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss."¹⁴

In short, while the image obstructs or banishes the gesture in its resolute stasis and its ease of dissemination, the cinema recovers it, reinscribing the gesture through the very means by which it was banished, in presenting the gaps between images where gesture reemerges as a mode of communication that stands apart from and outside of the filmic narrative and achieves its once central role as the connective tissue between human beings. This is not only a theoretical argument. It has been noted that a whole generation of Americans who first grew up with cinema credit it with instructing them in multiple forms of sociality as adolescents, most often those of intimacy (the acts of gazing into a lover's eyes or grasping the back of a lover's head are most often cited as being of cinematic origin), which were accessible in still images previous to cinema but became tangible and communicable *as gesture* under the conditions of cinema alone. (That cinema provided a semi-private location for the pursuit of these intimacies should not be ignored either.)

The gestural disappears into the ticking of history and the accumulation of images, only to reemerge in the gaps between images, for that is where the body reasserts itself in film (both on screen and off), and that is where film understands itself as a corporeal medium. Its movement, its gesturality, is not an illusion despite being a composed sequence of stills. Quite the opposite: the movement of film is the movement of our bodies; it is the embodiment of perception that images so often place at a remove. This is the *persistence of vision*, the body's suturing together of the fragments into a whole, completing and filling the gaps, at the loci of loss and absence. Where the gesture was lost, it returns, this time in the body of the viewer. Thus, what Lockhart reawakens here is the work of Eshkol, inserted back into a phenomenological reality, but also the physicality of perception; film, in her hands, allows for the rescue of the past in the uncertainty of the present and thus posits the possibility for a better (more ethical) future, one where history is not opposed to the bodily but is indistinguishable from it, where the politics of

perception is manifest, and where distinctions between the collective and the individual collapse, as do the divisions between production and reception.

The bodies of the viewers are the medium of this transformation; they are the in-between, extending it to the entire exhibition. This is an in-betweenness that is the same as the community, as the collective, which is always poised between outcomes, between concrete definitions, and in short, is always in a state of formation or becoming. In retrospect, the invisible mechanics between the dancers is actually their being-in-gesture together, the constant production and reproduction of the relations of one body to another, their shared status of being-in-the-world together, and their assertion of this to one another. As we watch the film, inexplicably, the invisible armature extends to us, and whether or not we move with it in time, we feel and are connected to it. This mechanism extends outward from the film and the bodies that immediately surround it and expands to fill the room, the galleries, and so on, dissipating slowly over the extended topographies that the various bodies who came into contact with it traverse. Even as the sensibility, the awareness of bodies, of one's own body, diffuses throughout the life world, it remains inscribed within the viewers, permeating them, and establishing possible communities cohered around this establishment of collective sensation, a means of understanding our status as human beings engaged in relations with one another, a sensibility that "reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed."¹⁵

It is this notion of collectivity, of self-awareness and awareness of others, a state of collective empathy and transference, that Agamben is describing when he writes, "Politics is the sphere of pure means, that is, of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings."¹⁶ And it is this notion of ethics and collectivism, unencumbered by the obstructions and abstractions of images and symbols, of institutions and their managers, that Lockhart posits and recovers simultaneously.

15. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 12.
16. Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," 60.