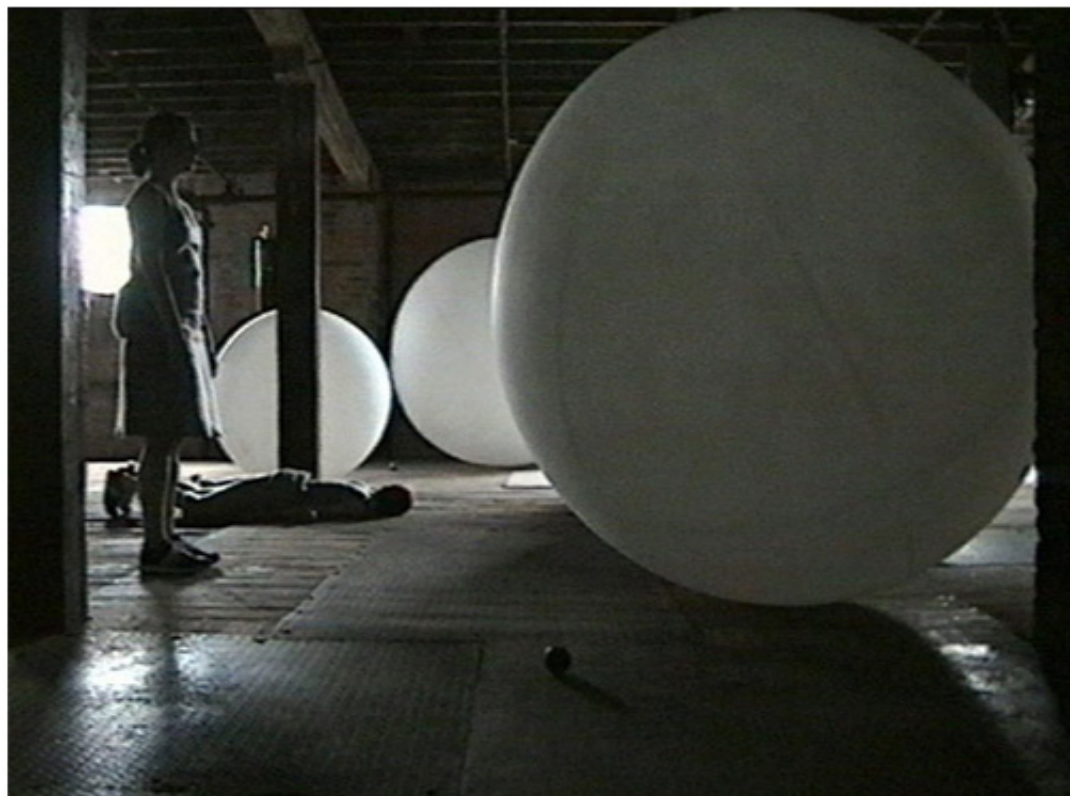


# artext

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In Kelly Nipper's *interval* (2000), a sequence of four photographs, a dancer is sandwiched between a perforated wooden screen and a wooden wall behind it. These two overlapping structures interfere not just with our view of the figure, but also with each other, setting up a rhythmic pattern that becomes as important as the simple positions the dancer adopts. Although the four photographs are clearly meant to be read as a sequence, with the dancer occupying a different position in each one, *interval's* relationship to the implied performance it documents is ambiguous. The interest one would expect to find focused on the "performance" is actually diverted into the *more* complex interplay of screen and wall, while the ostensible "dance" is limited to the most basic postures, culminating in the performer turning her back on the viewer. The shallow field in which the action takes place is about as flat as it is possible to get and still allow for something to take place. This structured flirtation with the two-dimensional does, of course, suggest that the figure is a formal element, as much as an active agent.

*Interval* exemplifies a number of the themes central to Nipper's work. Among these are a fascination with the function of rules to generate composition; close attention to the overlapping of different systems; the relationship of the human figure to highly determined contexts and activities; and a recurrent concern with movement in general and sequential movement in particular. Along with a number of other artists in Los Angeles, Nipper is engaged in a re-invention of certain art making strategies associated with the avant-garde of the 1960s, drawing upon conceptual art, the practice of dancers such as Yvonne Rainer or Steve Paxton, and John Cage's work on the role of rules determined by chance. Her own precise, rule-based structures, however, luxuriate in the visual.

Sharon Lockhart, Nipper's friend and sometime collaborator, shares with her many of the interests enumerated above. Lockhart's film *Goshogaoka* (1997) serves as a point of comparison with Nipper's *norma—practice for sucking face* (1999). Lockhart worked with the choreographer Stephen Galloway to design a series of increasingly complex routines for a Japanese middle-school's girls' basketball team, producing not only the film but a series of related photographs. Nipper's work also began with a per-

formance. Five dancers moved 120 gray pillows around the Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Santa Monica for hours on end, following highly precise instructions laid out by Nipper in advance. This activity was recorded in a video and a series of photographs.

Yet these two works, which were directly juxtaposed by Karen Moss in her exhibition "Sharon Lockhart + Kelly Nipper: 2 Artists in 3 Takes" at the San Francisco Art Institute last year, also demonstrate certain key differences in approach. For Lockhart, the performance requires no live audience; it is merely the material for the real product, a film. For Nipper, the performance itself is the most important element; both the video and the photographs that result from it, while complete in themselves, are secondary to the real-time events. In addition, Lockhart has been increasingly pursuing an anthropological dimension in her work. Nipper seems intent on draining cultural specificity from hers. The consistent neutrality of her settings has the effect of emphasizing her concentration on formal elements.

It is easy to trace these formal concerns from work to work. The four photographs that comprise details 7 and 8 from *shotgun and a figure 8* (2000) are evidently related to *interval*, in that we are given again what seems to be the same wooden wall, and again a figure fragmented and partially concealed, this time by a large piece of plain white fabric with a hole cut in it. But this work is also unmistakably related to the five 1999 photographs named *tests—carbonation*, which show no human figure. Both sets of photographs are linked, however, by a distinctive palette of red-orange and white that is only reversed in *shotgun and a figure 8*, and by the circular motif that can be either a ball or a hole. In *tests—carbonation*, a white ball is seen apparently bouncing along an orange couch. In the later series, the round hole in the white cloth is filled either by a face or the by the wall behind it. Whether we are looking at rapid movement broken up into fragments of stillness or the human body broken up by partial concealment, it is clear that Nipper's primary concern is the way in which individual images work with and against each other, independently and in series.

Series and sequence suggest narrative, but Nipper is more interested in repetition. While in much of her work one action or position follows another in a way that implies a teleological development, what Nipper actually delivers is a series of equivalencies, in which any one state carries almost exactly the same weight as any other. This is evident in the series of photographs that make up the first four details of *shotgun and a figure 8*. The sequence of photographs shows, consecutively, three, one, four, and two pears, sitting upright on a tabletop. The number of pears follows no identifiable pattern, and their mute self-containment almost defies us to attempt interpretation. The series as a whole, however, occupying more than 25 feet of wall space, has a presence that invests the simple changes from one photograph to another with an irresistible fascination. While Nipper's crisp photography leaves us in no doubt of these pears' specificity as real pieces of fruit, their elegant isolation also posits them as Platonically ideal specimens. Our viewing of them thus oscillates back and forth between the real and the ideal, with the photographs themselves occupying the middle ground.

The vaguely scientific quality of Nipper's observation of her pears indicates another important theme in her work, which is the idea of structured experimentation. Titles such as *tests—carbonation* or *tests—belium* (1998) make that element explicit. We might also think of quasi-scientific sources such as Muybridge's early studies of movement through photography. In a somewhat broader sense, which would include not just testing but also *practicing* (as in *norma—practice for sucking face* or *norma—practice for conditioner* [1998]), Nipper's work can be linked again to another strain of '60s work, in this case, the tradition of studio-based experimentation exemplified by the early videos of Bruce Nauman. Already, however, it evinces a sensibility that is less nostalgic than acutely self-aware, both of its origins and of the places it intends to go.

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