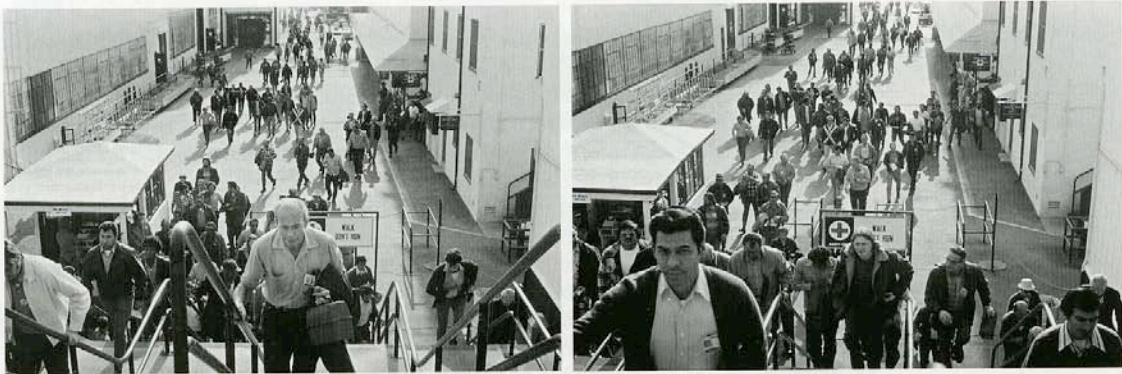


Sharon Lockhart's

MARK GODFREY

Lunch Break



ALLAN SEKULA, *UNTITLED SLIDE SEQUENCE*, 1972, slide no. 1 & 2, slide projection, 25 slides /
DIASEQUENZ OHNE TITEL, Dia 1 & 2, Diaprojektion, 25 Dias. (© Generali Foundation, Vienna)

The question of how to represent labor and the working classes was one of the most contested issues of the early twentieth century. Mexican muralists produced dramatic frescoes of factory workers and their struggles, while in France artists such as Fernand Léger attempted to fuse representations of industry with contemporary post-cubist abstract modes of depiction. In the post-war period, artists have avoided making heroic images of labor, wary of the glorification of "the worker" in Nazi and Socialist realist iconography, and yet, if one were to avoid this pitfall, how then to steer clear of the other extreme: a pitiful or patronizing depiction? Faced with these dilemmas,

MARK GODFREY is curator at Tate Modern and the author of *Abstraction and Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 2007).

artists interested in sites of industrial production tended to produce pictures without people in them: Bernd and Hilla Becher, most famously, imaged the architecture of industry bereft of human presence. Allan Sekula's *UNTITLED SLIDE SEQUENCE* (1972) was an early attempt to turn the seriality of conceptual photography towards the repetition of factory life—in the slideshow workers are seen leaving an aerospace plant. However, few artists went on to explore the ideas initiated by this work. Writing on Sekula's magisterial *FISH STORY* (1995), Benjamin Buchloh explained why, describing the "contemporary (im)possibility of an iconography of labor in a self-declared post-industrial and post-working class society, where large segments of labor and production are in fact concealed from common view since they

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Godfrey, Mark, "Lunch Break", *Parkett*, Issue 85, pg 6 - 10

are exported to the geo-political 'margins.'") Since the nineties, many artists have turned their attention to the derelict ruins of industrial architecture (consider Stan Douglas' images of Detroit), but few have sought out new ways to depict labor in the West. Artists associated with West Coast post-conceptual photography seem to be the exception; alongside Sekula, there's James Welling's WOLFSBURG project (1994), where he photographed the city's Volkswagen plant, and Christopher Williams' photographs of Senegalese workers at a printing press, their gazes pointing just away from the camera. Sharon Lockhart, another Los Angelean, now joins these ranks with her new film LUNCH BREAK (ASSEMBLY HALL, BATH IRON WORKS, NOVEMBER 5, 2007, BATH, MAINE, 2008).

The starting point for Lockhart's research for the film was her encounter with a sculpture by Duane Hanson of three workers on their lunch break at a construction site. In 2002, she produced a four-part group of photographs showing an installation team setting up the work at a Scottish museum. (She managed to make the gallery technicians appear more petrified than Hanson's figures.) Lockhart continued to research the culture of the lunch break in working class life, the lunch break being a brief respite from the working day and a time of camaraderie. She discovered that the hour-long break is itself under threat; in order to increase productivity and meet competition, more and more factories have begun to create schedules that stagger shifts, so that fewer workers spend their lunch together. The lunch break therefore can be thought of as a touchstone for the obsolescence of working-class traditions, and it is also a subject that can be approached without carrying the burden of the historical debates about the representation of labor: by picturing workers on break, Lockhart neither glorifies nor pities them.

Lockhart filmed at a shipyard called "Bath Iron Works" in the state of Maine that constructs ships for the U.S. Navy. Many of the welders, machinists, and builders who work in the yard are former navy sailors. Though the factory's activities meet the demands of a seemingly insatiable military organization, Lockhart chose not to reflect on the reasons why production continues at this plant, nor on the ultimate destination of its output. She filmed in a long corridor be-

tween the construction zone and a wall of lockers, directing a camera to travel down this corridor over a ten-minute period during lunch break. The camera operator maneuvered the camera on a mobile dolly, keeping the trajectory going in as straight a line as possible down the one-thousand foot passage. In postproduction Lockhart slowed the footage down to one eighth of the normal speed. Presented in the gallery, where it is shown in a specially constructed elongated projection box that continues the corridor space depicted within it, the film lasts eighty-three minutes and features one very long traveling shot with neither zooms, adjustments of focus, lateral shifts, nor cuts. Lockhart's frequent collaborator Becky Allen provided a sound track of a low, buzzing industrial hum, interspersed by sounds she had recorded on site such as a radio playing Led Zepelin. LUNCH BREAK deploys an extraordinarily minimal form, but through this form it engages its subject with eloquence and subtlety. Particularly notable are the related treatments of time, space, and the body.

One's first sense is that time is extremely drawn out. Even for those accustomed to the slowed-down time in much avant-garde film, and its resistance to narrative, LUNCH BREAK can feel especially attenuated, further exacerbated by one's sense that the camera is moving in the same direction as one's gaze. Conventionally, a filmmaker would use a panning shot to introduce new information into the frame, but Lockhart's camera gradually (very gradually) continues to reveal only more of what we have already seen. However, as you settle into the film, it becomes quite mesmerizing, and a more nuanced sense of time emerges. Indeed, one could argue that various kinds of time co-exist at any one moment in different parts of the image. At the center, little seems to change, but at the edges, everything is constantly slipping out of the shot—indeed the image seems to be moving at speed. This sensation is not typical of many similarly slow films one might compare with LUNCH BREAK, which use fixed cameras and provide a calmer sense of stillness. Here, by contrast, there is a paradoxical combination of near stasis and utter relentlessness. The film does not show any of its workers actually engaged in any sort of labor, but this combination suggests something of what time might feel like in such

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Godfrey, Mark, "Lunch Break", *Parkett*, Issue 85, pg 6 - 10

a workplace—where everything is always moving and yet always staying the same.

Space becomes as intriguing as time in *LUNCH BREAK*, even as it is explored by a camera just traveling down a corridor. With this one gesture, Lockhart engages many historical precedents: the deep space of renaissance perspective; the space recorded by photographic cameras; the zoom of Michael Snow's *WAVELENGTH* (1967), and the setting of Ernie Gehr's *SERENE VELOCITY* (1970). Bruce Nauman's compressed "Corridor" pieces come to mind, while the experience of Lockhart's film also recalls the way in which Richard Serra's sculptures are encountered: *TILTED ARC* (1981), for instance, stretches out in a trajectory that one first sees and then follows on foot, just as in Lockhart's film, we first look toward the center of the corridor, and then follow this vector as the camera moves forward.

Lockhart was fascinated by how the space was inhabited by the workers like a "living room or lounge," and how while some sat alone, others organized small recessed areas at the sides of the corridor in which they could gather in small groups for lunch. Now and again we see evidence of this comfortable possession of the space, but we are not allowed to dwell on the events unfolding at the sides of the corridor, nor can we imagine experiencing the space as do the workers. Indeed, since the direction of our gaze down the corridor is so clearly allied with the camera's progression, we begin to feel a sense of mastery or control over this elongated space. From our viewpoint, the corridor becomes a space to be controlled through vision, and consequently a site of confinement and separation as much as of relaxation. It is hard not to recall another recent image of a corridor—the chilling passages in Steve McQueen's *HUNGER* (2008) where prison officers tread down a hallway clearing excrement and urine as they proceed slowly towards the camera. It is a stretch from Northern Ireland's Maze Prison to Maine's Bath Iron Works, but even so, we can say that without showing the actual conditions of the labor being conducted in the shipyard, Lockhart skillfully depicts the world within a factory through her nuanced presentation of space, which appears simultaneously as one of community and of alienation.

At the beginning of the film we see a woman in the left portion of the frame. We take her momentarily for a statue until she lifts her hand to her mouth. Because this slight motion is so extended, it becomes monumental. Elsewhere in the film, small physical gestures appear similarly weighty and magnified, which suggests something of Lockhart's interest in Yvonne Rainer's work about ordinary gestures, and in early Chantal Ackerman films such as *JEANNE DIELMAN* (1975), which concentrates on repeated everyday activities. Lockhart's presentation of bodies and their movements can be considered in this vein, but in the context of historical debates about labor and representation, different readings emerge. The figures in *LUNCH BREAK* can seem like zombies, but also like super-humans. At the same time, it seems, the effect of Lockhart's slowing down her footage is to present the workers as alienated and magnificent individuals. One also begins to think about their movement in relation to the presence of the camera. Most employees, concentrating on their lunch, pay no attention to the camera as it passes by. One might assume this is to be the result of the trust that Lockhart established over the months of her time in the factory; they seem comfortable enough to eat lunch without remarking on the artist's presence. One of the strangest aspects of the film is that the camera does not linger on anyone. In this sense, in relation to the subjects before it, the camera at once seems to avoid becoming intrusive but also suggests a stance of empowered disregard.

LUNCH BREAK has much in common formally with Lockhart's previous films. However, there is one crucial departure. Whereas previously Lockhart shot with an analogue camera and projected using celluloid, in this work she has for the first time transferred her 35mm footage to a high-definition digital format and projected from a hard drive and digital projector. The move to this technology has visual consequences, especially once the film is projected very large. When the workers move, their images break apart ever so slightly at their contours into a ripple of unsettled pixels. It is the slightest of tremors, but something that is hard not to notice if one is familiar with Lockhart's previous work. The tremors are most evident at one point in the film when a man walks

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Godfrey, Mark, "Lunch Break", *Parkett*, Issue 85, pg 6 - 10

down the corridor in front of the camera to take his lunch out of a microwave oven and back to his bench; the slowness makes his body all the more massive, yet he seems to dissolve at his edges and to push out the air around him.

Just as the digitization of the film affects its images of workers, it also has an impact on the sense we get of the artist's labor. Throughout the history of avant-garde film, from Dziga Vertov to the structuralist filmmakers of the sixties, there has been an association of filmmaking with physical labor: in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), for instance, the camera-

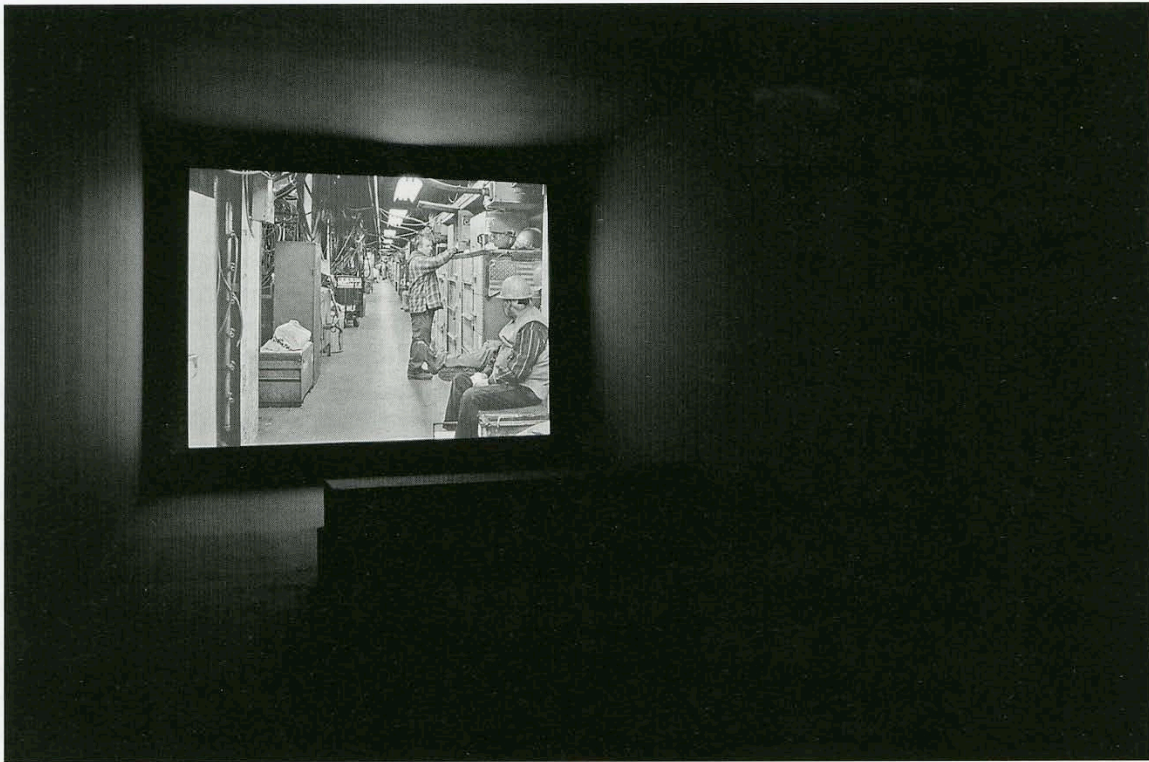
man is shot next to a coal miner, the latter lugging his pick, the former hoisting his tripod, and other passages cut sequences of women working at looms with scenes of splicing celluloid in edit labs. Film is material and making one means carrying equipment, developing strips of celluloid, chopping it apart, and threading it through the mechanical device of the projector. I am not denying that Lockhart's new project involved this sort of material labor (it surely did), but the digitization of the image announces a different kind of artistic work, one more associated with production suites and computer editing.

SHARON LOCKHART, *LUNCH BREAK*, 2008, production still, video, sound, 83 min. / *MITTAGSPAUSE*, Produktionsstill, Video, Klang.
(Sharon Lockhart images: Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, and Neugerriemschneider, Berlin)



GLADSTONE GALLERY

Godfrey, Mark, "Lunch Break", *Parkett*, Issue 85, pg 6 - 10



SHARON LOCKHART, *LUNCH BREAK*, 2008, installation view, Secession, Vienna / MITTAGSPAUSE, Installationsansicht.

The film's digital format therefore impacts the way it represents both the work of the artist and of the shipbuilders. Through this format, the film intimates that the connection between artist-as-worker and worker-as-worker maintained by previous generations is now no longer tenable. It also suggests that the days of industry and lunch breaks are numbered; no matter how many ships remain to be built, other modes of production will begin to dominate. In contrast to other artists who have witnessed the demise of western factories by filming the last days of production (Tacita Dean's *KODAK*, 2006, being a powerful example), Lockhart has managed to film a fully operational shipyard and yet to suggest, through the appearance of her images, the kind of shifts that are soon to take place. As I have said, the digital appear-

ance of the film is most noticeable when people move about. This is what ultimately makes *LUNCH BREAK* so moving: it is as if the slight dissolution of bodies into pixels heralds a more worrying fate of future redundancy—the replacement of men by machines, the loss of jobs. And as the end of the film suggests, this might come abruptly. We expect, throughout the film, that the images will stop when the camera reaches the end of the corridor. Two thirds of the way through the film, we identify the doors that mark this destination. But without warning, some distance short of this point, *LUNCH BREAK* cuts to black.

1) Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Allan Sekula: Photography between Discourse and Document" in *Allan Sekula: Fish Story* (Rotterdam and Düsseldorf: Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art and Richter Verlag, 1995), p. 191.