



Sonya Rapoport, "Koch II", 1972-1974. Spray acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72" x 96", (detail)

Sonya Rapoport: Ensemble Performance

A conversation between Terri Cohn and Alla Efimova
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Berkeley-based artist Sonya Rapoport (1923-2015) left a 66-year artistic legacy of works in many media, including paintings, works on paper, performance artifacts and documentation, sculptural objects, and digital works, that consistently defy expectations. Rapoport questioned the rigid conventions of science in performances and installations from a feminist perspective and was a pioneer among artists using emerging computer technologies in the 1980s.

*Terri Cohn and Alla Efimova are advisors to the Sonya Rapoport Legacy Trust. Cohn worked with Rapoport for more than ten years, curated two exhibitions of the artist's work during her lifetime, and edited *Pairing Polarities: The Art and Life of Sonya Rapoport* (Heyday Press, 2012). As a former curator at the Berkeley Art Museum and director of the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life at UC Berkeley, Efimova also worked with Rapoport for over a decade.*

Cohn and Efimova co-authored a book on Rapoport's final project Yes or No?, published by Mills College Art Museum in 2016.

Terri Cohn: *We were both thrilled to see Rapoport's painting Koch II (1973-1975) included in the exhibition, Hippie Modernism: The Struggle for Utopia that opened at the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive on February 2nd of this year. Let's talk about how this painting, shown publicly for the first time, as far as we know, represents a critical point in Rapoport's career, paving the way for her installations and performances during the next 40 years.*

Alla Efimova: The painting's inclusion, in an exhibition that expands our knowledge of American counterculture art and design, is significant on a number of levels. And Rapoport inadvertently helped define Bay Area art of that period. In a conversation with Peter Selz, as reported by Paul Karlstrom in his biography *Sketches of a Life in Art* (2012), Rapoport referred to the found, kitschy upholstery fabric she used instead of canvas to create her *Fabric Paintings* (1966-68) as "funky." Selz used the term to describe a group of artists with similar interests, coining the term "funk art." *Funk Art* became the title of Selz's 1967 exhibition and a name for a movement.

TC: *Can you talk about Rapoport's early career?*

AE: She was born in 1923 in Boston to a middle-class Jewish family and had a traditional art education in Boston and New York. She moved to Berkeley in 1946 to follow her husband Henry Rapoport who accepted a position as professor of organic chemistry at the University of California, Berkeley. There, she was among the first women to receive an MA in Painting (UC Berkeley, 1949). Her early abstract expressionist paintings were the subject of a solo exhibition at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in 1963. Following the show, Rapoport surprised her critics and mentors by abandoning the dominant abstract expressionist style.

TC: *Her Fabric Paintings were next. How do they represent a break with abstract expressionism?*

AE: In her *Fabric Paintings*, Rapoport set the tone for the next phase of her practice. If abstract expressionism demanded a fresh, white canvas and creative solitude, *Fabric Paintings* opened up the space of collaboration. Rapoport entered a sort of visual dialogue with fabric designers, painting with and around their sometimes garish patterns. She moved away from her practice as a modernist painter to an engagement with performance and installation art. Rapoport abandoned the modernist idea of an individual artist—an auteur—in isolation, and embraced a collaborative practice, working in an “ensemble” mode for the next half century.

TC: *She went on to create the Survey Chart drawings, which further advanced her collaborative mode of working.*

AE: Yes, in 1971 Rapoport discovered a series of vintage geological survey charts in a desk she had purchased. These survey charts from an Idaho Snake River Dam project provided a ready-made surface complete with grids and lines, notations and data. Rapoport began drawing and painting directly on them, responding to their pre-existing set of markings. Additionally, she started using stencils made from found objects. These ready-made stencils represent a kind of indirect collaboration in conversation with the makers of the objects as well.

TC: *How does Koch II fit into this trajectory?*

AE: Instead of drawing and painting on the ready-made surface, Rapoport began copying elements from the survey charts, including the grid, numerical data, and written notation, into large scale, acrylic, airbrushed paintings. These paintings are very formally disciplined in terms of composition and palette, yet they are aligned with and pay homage to the collaborative, ensemble-like production employed in her work with ready-made surfaces and stencils.

Significantly, *Koch II* is now displayed in the context of an exhibition subtitled “The Struggle for Utopia” which alludes to the counterculture of the ‘60s and early ‘70’s search for new forms of community and represents many artists’ groups and communes from the period. Rapoport’s practice embraced collaborative performativity. First, it is

expressed in the mode of production, where Rapoport entered into a visual dialogue with other artists, designers, and object makers. Second, it is evident in her complex staged performances, often produced in collaboration with scientists and engineers, and demanding audience participation.

TC: *While it's interesting to consider Rapoport's collaborative tendencies dating to the early phases of her career, her interactive installations Shoefield (1982-89) and Objects on My Dresser (1979-83; 2015) are most important to talk about in this context. Especially Objects on My Dresser, because it became a lifelong project in twelve phases, the final phase completed and exhibited posthumously. Objects on My Dresser represented a major shift in her work, moving into a new dimension of conceptual, installation, and performance-based practice.*



Sonya Rapoport, "Objects On My Dresser" (detail), 1980. Original photograph with printed labels, 8" x 10".

AE: *Objects on My Dresser* was the artist's response to her mother's death a few years earlier. The project was created in eleven phases over five years (1979-83). The final, 12th phase, was created in the last year of Rapoport's life and exhibited posthumously (2015) at Krowwork in Oakland. The phases range from complex interactive performances to single-page publications and were exhibited at such venues as Franklin Furnace, NY; 80 Langton Street, SF; Artists Space, NY, and published in *Leonardo* and *Heresies Magazine*. In the manner of Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79) that mapped an evolving mother-child relationship theoretically and

“scientifically,” Rapoport’s project is also informed by feminism and psychoanalysis.

Objects on My Dresser makes use of 29 personal objects displayed on the Tansu dresser in the artist’s bedroom. Rapoport opened and unpacked the psychological space of her dresser in a systematic and translatable way. The project is her study of the immensities that emanate from everyday objects subjected to psychoanalysis via an exercise in associative word-image relationships. This became the basis for multiple thematic evolutions and public interactions that document evolving responses to the objects and their connective associations.

Why don’t you talk about the final posthumous phase, *The Transitive Property of Equality*, at Krowwork in November 2015?

TC: *The final phase was a collaboration with artist and curator Farley Gwazda, Rapoport's last studio assistant, and now the director of the Sonya Rapoport Legacy Trust. In this exhibition, the original 29 objects from the artist's dresser appeared again, almost 40 years later. Now they were paired visually with pages from the New York Times, which Rapoport read ritualistically almost every morning. The newspaper collages also served as a call-response dialogue with Bay Area poet Anne Lesley Selcer, who Rapoport got to know through a joint residency project run by the gallery's director Jasmine Moorhead in the previous year. Like other phases, the Transitive Property of Equality was designed as an audience-participatory performance, completed by Gwazda. The installation invited viewers to make choices related to the objects, texts, and images, and to record their data in a holographic database with the help of colored pins. Rapoport activated the work by developing game rule-like instructions, giving the viewers agency to make choices and continue to be in dialogue with the work after the artist herself was gone.*



Sonya Rapoport, "The Transitive Property of Equality?" Installation view: Collages, Objects on My Dresser objects, shelves, 2016 (detail)

AE: This brings up the importance of talking about how the work of an artist like Rapoport, that was centered on her presence and audience participation, can continue once the artist is gone.

TC: Rapoport was of a generation of women artists who in many cases didn't put their careers first, in deference to their family obligations. Rapoport's shift to working in more interactive, expanded modalities, was an important part of the latent feminism of her generation. She could be out of her home studio and in the world, researching or creating, performing and directing. Yet, as in the case of other women artists of the period, Rapoport's performance work was largely based on her domestic life.

AE: Indeed, *Objects on My Dresser* was based on a very domestic, intimate subject: the accumulation of knick-knacks on her dresser. Over time, as an evolving multi-media, multi-disciplinary project, it revealed three modes of collaborative performance that Rapoport employed throughout her career: the shared production of the work, the ritual nature of the production, and finally, the staged interaction with the audience.

TC: Rapoport increasingly demanded greater interaction and dialogue with her audience. She began with the goal of systematizing her own psychological/emotional space, and almost immediately

moved to staging a series of audience interactive performances. For instance, in her 1980 performance at 80 Langton Street, she invited the audience to arrange image-word cards on a spiderweb plot on the floor. In a subsequent phase, (1982-84, 3 galleries in New York) viewers were invited to rearrange Rapoport's configuration based on their own word-image associations.

AE: Can you talk more about her expanded interaction with an audience?

TC: *Phase 5 of Object on My Dresser (1982) was a public window installation, with an audio recording of former participants explanations of their choices broadcast into the street. Passers-by dropped written responses to the visual and sound experiences into an adjacent mailbox.*

AE: Rapoport herself was often an actor in these performances, as both a participant and a catalyst. Her work was dependent on her being the "emcee." It wasn't the type of work she could distance herself from and send it on the road, so to speak. Most of her performances were documented in short films and can be viewed on the Sonya Rapoport Legacy Trust website (www.sonyarapoport.org).

TC: *She was very interested in having the audience engage with the work, and thus become co-collaborators. It's no surprise from there that Rapoport became involved with net art when the Internet became available to the public in the early 1990s. At first, she embraced hypertext and hypertext games. When the Internet became more sophisticated, she collaborated with software engineers to help her develop a more responsive platform.*

AE: The last two decades of Rapoport's career were almost exclusively dedicated to net art projects. What started as a collaborative performance, as evidenced in her work just prior to and following Koch II, found a culmination in the medium most receptive to collaboration and participation: the World Wide Web. While in her 70s and 80s, Rapoport completed 12 Internet-based projects, ranging from Digital Mudra Web (1989-98), based on her interactive gallery installation Digital Mudra, to Kabbalah Kabul: Sending Emanations to

the Aliens (2004-05), one of her most complex net art works. From 2008-2012 she also produced her interactive Artblog.

TC: I am delighted to see Rapoport's work restored to the art historical context of its true origin. Thanks to BAMPFA Director Larry Rinder's curatorial perspective, Koch II is surrounded by "hippie" design and visual artifacts of the Bay Area counterculture.

AE: Indeed, it is an accomplished and striking painting that sparkles when surrounded by bold and boisterous neighbors in the exhibition. You and I agree that Koch II is a milestone in the artist's journey. It represents Rapoport's own search for utopia: a communal approach to meaning making through collaboration, conversation, and play.

Terri Cohn, MA, is a writer, curator, and fine art consultant, who works with and advises artists at all career stages. She has authored numerous essays for catalogs and books, and has contributed interviews and reviews to publications including *SFAQ*, *Art Practical*, *Public Art Review*, *Art in America*, and *caa.reviews*. The recipient of several writing residency rewards, she served on the board of the Djerassi Resident Artist Program and was a founding member of the advisory board of The Art Monastery Italia. She teaches modern and contemporary art history, and career development courses for the University of California, Berkeley's Art and Design Extension program.

Alla Efimova, PhD, is the Founder and Principal of KunstWorks, a firm specializing in working with late-career artists and estates. As an art historian, curator, and museum director, she has been a strong advocate for artists' rights and strategic legacy planning. Efimova is the author of several books, catalogs, and numerous articles and serves on the boards of regional and national cultural organizations. She has taught the history of modern and contemporary art for over two decades.



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