

"Photography is more than an art.  
It is a solar phenomenon where the artist collaborates with the sun."<sup>1</sup>

ALPHONSE DE LAMARTINE

One of the earliest photographs ever taken, a two-by-three-inch still-life by Joseph Nicéphore Nièpce, captures a picnic lunch laid out on an outdoor table circa 1829. Imagine how people at the time might have responded to that image—a slice of life from the Loire Valley—frozen, fixed in a way that no painted still-life had been before. There must have been a suspension of disbelief in the magic produced by this wondrous alchemical process. A century and a half later, we are no longer astonished by the veracity of the photographic print—we are accustomed to traveling in time to that table top, to having vicarious experiences through photographs.

Sarah Charlesworth pays tribute to this Nièpce image in her *Tabula Rasa* (1981, plates 38, 142–143), a white-on-white silkscreen of the original heliograph. The represented image is barely legible—a fugitive, evanescent presence. Once a trace, it is now nearly invisible, disappearing like an old photograph fading back into pure light. But paradoxically it has become more an object than a trace; to see it you must be in its presence—it is completely resistant to being photographed. In the upper corner, Charlesworth has silkscreened an annunciation lily, as if to signify the virginal territory that photography was then, the perfection of its immaculate conception.

*Tabula Rasa* also recalls a more contemporary work: Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning*. Like Rauschenberg, Charlesworth not only pays homage to a predecessor but declares a desire to strip away the past—to start again, free of the past uses and expectations of photography. *Tabula Rasa* portends a new approach to picture making—a passage from capturing the objective and a sense of the real to an emphasis on the fictions created in the process. In this way, the mystery and wonder of photography are revivified.

As the first virtual medium, photography has created a whole new sense of reality—ushering in a new age with metaphysical riddles that have vast implications. Has our constructed world overtaken the natural world? Where are the boundaries of truth and fiction? Today, with digital imaging and retouching, we're more likely to ask if a photograph is "real" or not. During the past century and a half, photography has undergone many transformations as it has transformed the world around us.

It wasn't so long ago that photography was considered a peripheral, marginal art form—one that was certainly transforming art (threatening painting, aiding painting, contributing to painting's decline)—but nevertheless inferior to painting and sculpture in the hierarchy of media. As recently as two decades ago,

2

Quoted in Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), p. 350.

3

Quoted in Irving Sandler, p. 350.

4

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1973), p. 148.

debates still raged about whether photography was indeed art. In 1977, Barbara Rose claimed that photography could not be “other than a minor art because of its intrinsic inability to transcend reality, no matter what its degree of abstraction.”<sup>2</sup> Richard Hennesy wrote in *Artforum* that photography “lacks surface qualities, alienating it from sensuous experience ... the expressive possibilities of photography are hopelessly handicapped. ...”<sup>3</sup> This reluctance to accept photography as a serious art on a par with the other arts probably had as much to do with the popular uses of photography from personal snapshots to advertising spreads as it did with the photograph’s mechanical basis. The ubiquity of photography devalued it to many—it wasn’t rarefied enough, it was too present.

But the question of whether photography is art is a specious one. Art today is not defined by media but by intention. Susan Sontag put it clearly in her book, *On Photography*: “Although photography generates works that can be called art—it requires subjectivity, it can lie, it gives aesthetic pleasure—photography is not, to begin with, an art form at all. Like language, it is a medium in which works of art [among other things] are made.”<sup>4</sup>

Photography today is a vibrant, mainstream medium for artmaking. There is more interesting photographic work being done now than ever before, and it is fertile territory for artistic exploration. In fact, it could be argued that photography currently is the privileged medium. The increasingly central role photographic images have played in our lives is precisely why photography was destined to play a central role in art. We live in an image-based culture where pictures are our shared common terrain, our dominant language. Photography is a complete world of meaning-making activity, giving us our definition of values, a sense of ourselves and our times. We are only now beginning to fully understand the power and importance of representation.

The turning point came in the late 1960s—an intense period of social upheaval and questioning. Social theory opened up new methodologies to look at the world. Semiotics, structuralism, and Marxist theory were radicalizing the way the events, representation, identity, and history were understood and interpreted. The machinations of representation were viewed in wholly different terms. No longer was representation considered “natural,” but it was understood as the result of a complex relationship between the speaker, the receiver and their respective contexts. It became clear that one’s world view is informed by a specific cultural perspective.

Sarah Charlesworth was coming of age at just this time. As a student at **Barnard** in the charged political environment of the late Sixties she was exposed to left-wing politics and feminism. As a young artist trying to find a meaning for art making, she would confront the radical propositions of conceptual art. Out of the questioning of this period came a generation of artists who would achieve prominence in the 1980s, and Charlesworth is a leader among them. Her story, her

journey, her trajectory is a perfect example of the conflict, ambivalence, and search that characterized a whole generation's rite of passage.

Charlesworth had studied painting as a student but put down her brushes after seeing a very early show of conceptual art presented by Seth Siegelaub that included works by Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Barry, and Douglas Huebler. She recalled feeling "nauseous" upon this encounter.<sup>5</sup> Their entirely new way of making art—of privileging the concept over form—made her rethink all of her previous assumptions about art. At the end of the Sixties, conceptual art was articulating many important questions—about the end of modernism, its myths of self-expression, aura, authenticity, uniqueness, and purity, to name some. Conceptualists insisted that art was ideational and formal qualities secondary. Their art was often "dematerialized," and they even suggested that cultural practice could include such activities as reflection, writing, or analysis.

Charlesworth's subsequent romantic involvement with Kosuth—a leading (and vocal) proponent of conceptualism—led to a number of collaborations with him (their mutual influence has been inadequately addressed). As intellectual companions they shared an interest in analyzing art, the artworld and a search for greater meaning. In 1974, Charlesworth became allied with the Art and Language group and with Kosuth founded *The Fox* magazine (which published three issues between 1975 and 1976). She regarded what she did at that time as her artwork whether "it was writing an article for *Heresies*, editing a text, founding *The Fox* or participating on a panel discussion."<sup>6</sup> She took courses at the New School in economics, linguistics, anthropology, and semiotics and was one of the founders of the Artists Movement for Cultural Change, another forum for exchange and discussion in the collective generational quest for meaning. Charlesworth's command of language, of complex methodologies, and utter conviction and seriousness quickly established her as a powerful presence in these circles. At that time, she had not yet found a reason to make objects.<sup>7</sup>

A statement by Charlesworth that appeared in *The Fox* offered one explanation for conceptual art's dematerialization of the art object: "We might begin to inquire whether the retreat from the objectification, commodification and institutionalization of traditional art models, which has characterized the tactics of certain more (theoretically) radical segments of the art community, is not so much a function of the realization of inherently noxious qualities which those models possess, as the instinctive recoil against that which they represent: the commodification and deinstitutionalization of human history and endeavor."<sup>8</sup>

Soon however, in the space of a few intense years, it became all too evident that "a lefter than thou" attitude was developing and the same problems of power formations and capitalist patriarchal power blocs were being repeated in another form—as Marxist-Leninist patriarchal power blocs. *The Fox* ceased publication amid a publicized power struggle and editorial disagreement published in the last

5

Interview with the author, March 1997. The exhibition was presented by Seth Siegelaub at 44 East 52nd Street, Jan. 5–31, 1969.

6

Interview with the author, March 1997.

7

Although she supported herself doing freelance photography, she was not interested in straight photography as an art.

8

Charlesworth, "A Declaration of Dependence," *The Fox*, (no. 1, 1975), p. 5.

9

Charlesworth, "Visiting Socialism" in "Report From China," *Art in America*, (March/April 1979), p. 13.

10

Unidentified typescript from the artist.

11

Quoted in Barbara Kruger and Sarah Charlesworth, "Glossalia," *Bomb Magazine* (Spring 1983), p. 61.

12

Charlesworth, "Unwriting: Notes on Modern History," Catalogue for *Modern History* exhibition at New 57 Gallery, Edinburgh, 1979.

issue. The last meetings of AMCC, which also was splintering, could be conducted only by following parliamentary procedure. The final blow for Charlesworth came on a trip to China in 1978 with a group of artists and writers where she witnessed the "utterly depressing" repressive and totalitarian conditions there. She was further alarmed by the propagandistic frame through which the group was permitted glimpses of "authentic socialist activities."<sup>9</sup> Dispirited and scared, her fixity on the world was once again unhinged.

Despite her frustration and disillusionment with left-wing tyrannies, her involvement with left-wing thinking had helped her develop a conscious critical practice in art. It had stimulated her to see art as part of a larger cultural picture, not in isolation, or self-referentially. She knew formalist descriptions of art masked art's cultural role and she was starting to examine how cultural representation works, and to view photography as the primary language of contemporary culture. The illusion that photography was the paradigm of veracity was permanently shattered: "To me photography is both enchanting and dangerous precisely because of its false appearance of neutrality."<sup>10</sup> Its seemingly "objective" character had long obscured its myth-making function. As the critic Craig Owens stated, "Representation, then, is not—nor can it be—neutral; it is an act—indeed the founding act—of power in our culture."<sup>11</sup> Charlesworth knew she wanted to engage this process of signification in its activity. Her engagement with the visual and linguistic began to coalesce.

About this time, she began to make her first series of objects, a group of photographic pieces entitled *Modern History* (1977–79). The accumulated thought, questioning, and perspective of the previous seven years was contained in this first body of work, which emerged surprisingly mature and fully formed. *Modern History* was conceived as a series of separate serial works. Charlesworth had been collecting front pages of newspapers from around the world following specific events: the Red Brigade's kidnapping of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro, a solar eclipse seen from the perspective of towns along the arc it traced, the Pope's visit to Auschwitz, the killing of ABC newsman Bill Stewart on film, a masked Sandinista guerrilla during the Nicaraguan revolution. Excising the textual portion, she left all photographs, mastheads and dates intact and presented these pages, now image fragments isolated on a field, in a serial fashion. Without the headlines and text, the plane of focus was shifted. Other narratives became apparent through the size, placement, and kind of images given prominence on the front page. The project is at once, as she described it, "'imaginary' and 'objective.' Imaginary in the sense that the work positions us in a hypothetical or imaginary perspective; objective in that it is constructed of actual concrete objects (newspapers, photos, texts) whose formal order is maintained."<sup>12</sup> News doesn't just happen. Who is presenting it and how it is presented sends a variety of messages.

Some of the series track a single event or a specific photograph in a variety of cultural contexts, while others record the continuity in editorial perspective that a single newspaper reveals. One of the most striking observations to be made in *Modern History* is the astonishing scarcity of women represented as players in the “news.” Charlesworth had been sensitized to the questions that feminism opened up, among them, that sexual identity is inscribed in both visual and written language. Photography would prove crucial to the post-feminist project—in analyzing women’s representation in the mass media and how formations of power are played out there. In the *Modern History* series it is clear that history as told by the media was excluding women.

Charlesworth soon became aware of other artists of her generation who had embarked on a similar mission to re-frame and re-present images in a struggle to discover that which is absent, or obscured from our vision. These include the radical re-photography of Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger’s photomontage work, Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons’ staged tableaux, and David Salle’s paintings, among others. All of these artists were using photography as a basis to explore the language of representation. Though their work took different forms, there was a coherence in terms of subject matter: They were directly confronting photography as a given mode of seeing, as a way of describing the world, and most particularly confronting the conditions that have enabled photographic representation to secure its seemingly omniscient authority.<sup>13</sup>

They had all merged the ideational basis of conceptual art with pop art’s absorption of mass culture. Both of these earlier movements had helped to move photography to center stage because much of pop and conceptual art was dependent/reliant on photography for its pop cultural references or its mock neutrality and documentary qualities. These qualities had attracted many artists in the Sixties and Seventies from Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Ed Ruscha, to Robert Smithson, John Baldessari, Bruce Nauman, William Wegman, and Vito Acconci.

A distinguishing feature of Charlesworth’s generation was that its members put the emphasis on “making” a photograph instead of “taking” a photograph. They were using photographic imagery as “material” for artmaking, transforming it through collage, editing, re-ordering, quotation—and in the most extreme cases re-photographing an image to make a double. The Duchampian tradition of the ready-made was extended to the public image bank of popular culture. Charlesworth said, “I don’t think of myself as a photographer. I’ve engaged questions regarding photography’s role in culture ... but it is an engagement with a problem rather than a medium. The creative part of the work is just as much like painting or design as it is like photography. I’m not using a camera and it’s not based on recording a given world but on creating or structuring a given world.”<sup>14</sup>

13

David Dencher, “Questioning Authority: Sarah Charlesworth’s Photographs,” *AFTERIMAGE* (Summer 1984), p. 14.

14

Betsy Sussler, interview with Sarah Charlesworth in *Bomb Magazine* (Winter 1989/90), p. 32–33.

A rift naturally developed between artists using photography and the so-called “straight” photographers still involved with capturing a “moment” and perfecting darkroom technique to produce beautiful photographic prints. Charlesworth and her peers, by contrast, were interested in a different kind of beauty and felt that first one had to understand the cultural construct of “beauty” in order to create it anew. One had to be aware of all the signifiers attached to conventional ideas of beauty.

In a subsequent series that occupied her for half a decade, *Objects of Desire* (1983–88), Charlesworth created re-photographed collages, tearing apart magazines for source material. Metonymy was the operative technique here—fragments of images were used to stand for the whole, to stand for the basic incompleteness and inaccessibility of the total picture. Charlesworth abstracted key forms from public imagery to reveal their “iconic” underpinnings. Taking desire as a starting point, and a feeling of oppression toward many mass cultural stereotypes of desire, she proceeded to isolate and combine fragments of clothing on richly saturated, monochromatic cibachrome fields. In the repeating shapes of the garments and the posture of the figures, a subtext emerged—a tight-fitting evening dress or a bridal gown, for instance, articulates something of the expectations and constraints that inform contemporary women’s lives.

These works made a startling impression: They were crisp, smart, and gorgeous. By fetishizing the surface and increasing the size of the prints to a dramatic scale, she made a successful hybrid between photography and painting. The “souped up” gloss and glamour of these images prompted the viewer to question what makes one feel desire. She had used the strategies of seduction in advertising to make a beautiful object while calling into question certain values those strategies had been used to promote. In so doing, she acknowledged her own attraction toward this material, while simultaneously suggesting that many objects of desire are culturally created. Her own ambiguous relation to the images lay somewhere between desire and alienation.

*Objects of Desire* dispensed with facts and departed from her earlier, more deconstructive approach. Take *Birdwoman* (1986, plate 55) for example, where a pelican flies over a shrouded woman on a blue ground of infinite space. Here the deconstructive and constructive are equal partners—disrupting the way women are traditionally posed and viewed in advertising yet turning those strategies around to advertise new images and a new poetic language. Other artists were doing the same thing: Consider Richard Prince’s *Gangs* done at roughly the same time, where taxonomies of images were set up in grid formations; Cindy Sherman’s self-staged send-ups of fashion photography; or Jenny Holzer’s elaborate installations using electronic LED signs. All of these were very formal works that had tremendous visual power and appeal—they were not dry and didactic and left plenty of room for interpretation and multiple readings.

15

Interview between David Deitcher and Sarah Charlesworth, *AFTER-IMAGE* (Summer 1984), p. 17.

16

Ibid., p. 17.

Charlesworth had grown to believe that “the range of expression of a healthy, whole human being should be challenged to encompass everything from the political, to the sensual, to the intellectual, even to an appreciation of abstract beauty or form.”<sup>15</sup> She had moved away from the hegemonic certainty of conceptual art to embrace several conflicting attitudes about artmaking that defied traditional classification. Though conceptual art and the radical act of re-photography had challenged conventions of self-expression, it had (unintentionally) demonstrated the impossibility of eradicating the subject. Even the most “authorless” work became readily identifiable as the creation of a particular artist in spite of proclamations to the contrary. Charlesworth recognized that all art is based on the artist’s experience in the world—on the interface between personal subjectivity and a given world. She even began to question “whether the notion of critical work is an ideological construct—a kind of hangover from a more politically naive period where we thought there was work that was critical and work that was co-opted and the artists who were critical maintained a very aggressive, anti-institutional stance.”<sup>16</sup>

The diptych *Buddha of Immeasurable Light* (1987, plates 60–61) is a good example of the direction her work continued to move in. On the left there is a Japanese statue of Buddha, on the right a circular aperture in the ceiling of a blackened room that reveals a patch of blue sky. Is it the eye of the camera, of God? Is it the boundary between the inside and outside, between dream and reality? The structure of the diptych establishes other dichotomous resonances between spirit and matter, nature and culture. Photography can reach back to ancient times and forward into outer space, allowing us to have a relationship to things in very distant times and places.

In the *Objects of Desire* series, Charlesworth had expanded her subject matter to include images from a variety of historical and cultural sources. She also introduced a new color each year as a basis for another chapter in the series (red/sexuality; green/nature; blue/metaphysical longing; yellow/material desire).

*Self-Portrait* (1989, plate 93), from her next series *Academy of Secrets* continues Charlesworth’s use of ethnographic images from an array of sources. Vessels and body parts are dispersed against a bright yellow ground alluding to the fragmentation of the body, the body as a metaphor for the mind, an arcane symbology, and the mysteries of alchemy. Through this kind of use of photographic images, Charlesworth made a virtue of incompleteness, uncertainty, and elusiveness (cultural characteristics that might have been described as female) disrupting fixity and neat distinctions.

Charlesworth and her female peers wanted to build a social and cultural space in which to work—they understood they had to first collapse shared meaning to be in a world of their own choosing—to create that world. As the key issue in art became representation—who produces images, how they are distributed, controlled, and selected—they understood and revealed underlying structures to

17

Dan Cameron, "Post-Feminism,"  
*Flash Art* (February/March 1987),  
p. 80–83.

re-make representation to serve their interests. This was an entirely different approach from the first generation of feminist artists in the Seventies who explored myths of female goddesses and creation myths, often using the body as locus in performance and video, or embracing decorative domesticity. Together, this new group of women, spearheaded by Charlesworth, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, and Jenny Holzer, pioneered the development of an American postmodern avant-garde aesthetic.<sup>17</sup> They added a new chapter in the debate over whether there can be an aesthetic rooted in the artist's existence as a woman.

The profound impact this group of women had on the avant-garde of the Eighties is a first in the history of art, and it hasn't been stressed enough. In the Eighties women changed the landscape of art through their work with photographic images. In one sense, photography, always the marginalized stepchild of painting and sculpture, was an open playing field, commercial stakes were lower, and it wasn't established as an exclusively male domain. But more importantly, as critic Dan Cameron observed, "It confirms the adage that women have much to gain from the change within our cultural infrastructure while men are more prone to revive historical issues, if merely to relive their past triumphs. . ."<sup>18</sup> In the Eighties, photography became the center of the debate around the end of modernism.

18

*Ibid.*, p. 83.

Charlesworth and her peers proceeded from questioning the tenets of modernism, to charting a new course and leading a new wave. Weaned on pop culture and nourished by the rigors of conceptual art and leftist politics, they deliberately moved away from tyrannies of "correctness" (even those they had contributed to establishing) and of cynicism to forge an innovative and incisive poetry of metaphor and magic.

A bright yellow puff of smoke curls upward from the slender spout of a bronze Aladdin's lamp. *Materialization* (1993) is a magic trick caught in the act, an illusion created with smoke and mirrors. In works from the recent series *Natural Magic*, magic acts are both captured and created by the camera: The artist with a camera is the magician. From *Tabula Rasa* to *Materialization*, Charlesworth has come full circle renewing photography's uncanny ability to capture and question matter and spirit, illusion and fact, the concrete and immaterial.