

Hickey, Dave, "Sarah Charlesworth: The Pleasures of Knowing"
SARAH CHARLESWORTH: A RETROSPECTIVE, 1997, pp. 107-115.

Sarah Charlesworth: The Pleasures of Knowing Dave Hickey



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There is a framed photograph made by Sarah Charlesworth on the north wall of the corner room where I am writing this essay. I installed it there a few years ago because it seemed an appropriately anxious and seductive image for a room in which writing takes place. It is all the more appropriate today, of course, because the writing taking place concerns Sarah Charlesworth's endeavor. The photograph is entitled simply *Text* (1994, plate 108), although it might just as easily have been entitled *The Pleasures of the Text*—after Roland Barthes' text to which the image alludes—or *The Mysteries of the Text* or even *The Anguish of the Text*, because all of these elements are in it and because it insists on all the fluttery anomalies of writing and reading and seeing—all the questions that cannot be answered when one writes about the world of not-writing.

Questions like: What am I actually doing as I move my fingers over these computer keys from which, over the years, the letters have been worn away? And where, exactly, am I doing it? Is all of this transpiring in my head? In my fingers? On the screen of my little laptop? In your eyes as you read these words? Or in my eyes as I read what I have written? And what of this so-called subject? Does it somehow inhere in the detritus scattered across my desk; in the pages of slides, the yellow legal pad lined with notes in black ink, the Xerox offprints bloody with Magic Marker, the old *ARTS* magazine open to an essay on the artist? And how do all these disparate occasions conspire toward an outcome. Or is there any outcome at all, beyond the accretion of an additional level of encoding?

Charlesworth's *Text* is a black-and-white photograph (as text is black and white). At first glance, it seems to portray a cropped and horizonless landscape of glossy white satin, viewed from a high angle, with the cloth gathered here and there into mountains, valleys, and ridgelines. On second glance, we see that the landscape features of the satin arise from the presence of a book that lies open beneath the surface of the cloth, and we notice that the cloth is not only reflective but apparently translucent, as well. Lines of text are just visible on the surface of the fabric covering the exposed pages; it is unclear, however, whether these lines are printed on the pages of the book, on the reflective cloth, or, even, on the photograph itself.

There no way of knowing this, so we are left with this question: If reading a book, as the image implies, is to snatch the word-soaked satin off the page and carry it away, just what does one carry? The "text" or the reflective, semi-transparent satin? The question applies, as well, to our looking at the photograph. Having looked at the photograph (as I just did), and then turned my attention back to the screen, what have I borne away in memory? This is the ultimate, cautionary question for any writer who addresses the visible world, and one that Sarah Charlesworth never lets us forget. All of her work references the ineffable recursiveness of seeing and reading the world around us; *Text* addresses the elusive complexities of seeing and reading itself, explicitly and inescapably.

Thus, when we look at *Text*, it is immediately apparent that the relationship of the open book to the satin that covers it—which simultaneously distorts and portrays it—is analogous to the relationship of the satin to the photographic image that simultaneously distorts and portrays it, which is analogous to the relationship of the photographic image to the framed object that distorts and portrays it, which is analogous to the relationship of the framed

object to our imperfect seeing of it—which, in my own case, is analogous to the relationship of my remembering that visual encounter to my imperfect portrayal of that memory in writing, etc. It is a process of hierarchical diffusion and decay, an expanding sequence of nested portrayals, each inscribed upon the other, each portrayal simultaneously revealing and disguising that which it portrays.

The instability of this experience is further complicated by the fact that our encounter with *Text* is not just a quotidian activity; it is an “art experience” that entails its own categories of expectation. So, even as we respond to the photographic object and the objects it portrays, we are also responding to a work of art by Sarah Charlesworth, to the title she has assigned it, and to the “kind” of portrayal it is—each of which brings with it a particular atmosphere of meaning—each of which exponentially complicates the presumed mechanical innocence of simply looking at a photograph (with the inference that we never really do “simply” look). When we look at *Text*, for instance, we immediately recognize the “picture” before our eyes as a *landscape*. This cue elicits the proprietary scanning gaze that the landscape genre entails in our culture; it activates, as well, all the pleasures and references of our “landscape experience”; specifically, it calls up for reference our experience of American modernist black-and-white landscape photography.

The title of the piece, however, refers us away from the genre of landscape and landscape photography to Roland Barthes’ heterogeneous theories of reading, and by insisting, specifically, upon “the text,” it implies that the locus of meaning in the image we see resides in that which we see least clearly, that which is most occluded: in the text that we assume to be printed on the pages of the hidden book. In this way, the pleasures of that text, which we cannot read, are displaced onto the pleasures of the view—the pleasures of what we “see” while we are trying to “read.” Thus, if there is any general “moral” to be derived from this complex perceptual experience, it would seem to be that “seeing” and “reading” are totally distinct yet inextricable activities that cannot be conducted in isolation from each other.

This inclusive, double invitation to see the “object” and read the “text” is the pervading ideological feature of Sarah Charlesworth’s practice. Invariably, when we confront Charlesworth’s work, we find ourselves looking, first, at a handsome and authoritative object, then at a “compromised photograph”—a photograph of a “kind of picture”: a landscape (in *Text*), a still-life (in the *Doubleworld* images), a magazine advertisement (in the *Objects of Desire* images), a censored newspaper front page (in *Modern History*), a censored narrative painting (in *Renaissance Paintings and Drawings*); a modernist abstraction (in *Tartan Sets*), or a photograph of photographic pictures (*In-Photography*). More specifically, the titles of these sets of works call our attention to this artifice. They remind us that our learned responses to photographs, picture-genres, and images have been activated and insist on the intricate diffusion of their interdependent meanings.

So we are usually “looking at” a glossy photographic object, then “looking through” that glossy photographic surface so we may “look at” a genre picture in the Western tradition, then “looking through” the genre picture to “look at” portrayed objects that insist, themselves, upon being “looked through”—as we “look through” the satin in *Text* to “look at” the

occluded book, which itself insists upon being “looked through,” upon being *read* although we cannot do so, because at this point the infinite regress of “looking at” and “looking through”—of seeing something then reading it—has dissolved into an entropic blur. (One thinks of Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow Up* here.)

In this way, the process of viewing Charlesworth’s work is made articulate for us: First we see, then we read what we have seen, then we see what we have read and read that, then, again, we see what we have read and read that, and so forth. In this way, the “texts” we see and read recede into the imaginary and whatever “conceptual” knowledge we purportedly derive from this ritual of infinite regress dissolves into neural mystery; it cannot be localized as anything more than the atmosphere of reference that surrounds the process of knowing, the dance of seeing and reading, of looking at and looking through. It is important to note, however, that Charlesworth’s works are not *about* this recursive ritual of seeing and knowing. Each image addresses with the way we see and know specific images and portrayed objects. The recursiveness of the images merely defines the intellectual territory within which knowing takes place and mitigates the presumption that the consequence of this iterative process of seeing and reading constitutes anything like disembodied “knowledge.”

Even in Charlesworth’s earliest work we find this thoughtful insistence that the unrequited “pleasures of the text” cannot be extricated from the bodily “pleasures of the view”—along with a further insistence that both of these are, in fact, and do remain, pleasurable. Consider the most “empirical” work in this exhibition: *April 21, 1978* (1978) from *Modern History*, a series of photographs of newspaper front pages from which the narrative text has been suppressed. Of all the works in *Sarah Charlesworth: A Retrospective*, this series is the most locally specific and historically self-conscious. It documents the dissemination of news subsequent to the kidnapping of Italian premier Aldo Moro and foregrounds the formal strategies through which we encode priorities of gender and status in our public presentation of information.

Even in these images, however, we find Charlesworth’s characteristic emphasis on the way our knowledge of the historical world is tied to our “aesthetic” conventions of arranging it—on the recursive rituals of seeing and reading that dissolve, at one extreme, in the contingent mechanisms of memory and at the other, in the entropic limits of the image. At one point, standing in the gallery with the prints from *April 21, 1978* (1978) on the wall, we will find ourselves looking at a single photograph of a newspaper page (*Tribune de Genève*), which bears a photograph of another newspaper page (*La Repubblica*), which bears a photograph of yet another newspaper page from an earlier edition of *La Repubblica*, which bears another photograph that is cropped and illegible, without non-uniform order, entropic. Viewing this nested sequence, of course, calls our attention to the gallery itself as a framing device, as an “information delivery format” within which a group of photographic objects are arranged. Like the newspapers, the gallery delivers information in a deployed array of framed, floating rectangles—although what we “learn” from our experience of this nested array is, again, little more than the atmosphere of our learning.

In these images, the recursive and formal “pleasures” of our learning would seem to be mitigated by the gravity of the events inferred and portrayed. In fact, they are emphasized by the

implicit analogy between the newspaper page and the gallery wall. This connection is made even more explicit by Charlesworth's suppression of text on the "top" newspaper of her nested sequences. So the nested photographs-within-photographs do their social work: They express their specific content by theatricalizing the peculiar kind of strobed, stop-action serial-memory that photographs have introduced into our historical consciousness. At the same time, they emphasize the formal conventions that modern newspapers share with modernist painting: their common language of arranging and balancing weightless rectangles within weightless rectangles. By foregrounding the common language that newspapers share with Mondrian, Charlesworth infers the analogous function of newspapers and art galleries. More generally, she demonstrates the "art component" of daily life—the formal and musical conventions of modern culture that underpin our very knowing of it—by emphasizing the extent to which "pleasures" of knowing must include those of *looking at* the text in its embodied arrangement before we *look through* it to read its designative significance. Moreover, since the pleasures of arrangement and design precede our consciousness of their efficacy, they remain no less pleasurable for our knowledge of their operation.

In this aspect, Charlesworth's practice recalls Charles S. Peirce's first axiom of pragmatism, which proposes that logic is a branch of ethics, and ethics a branch of aesthetics. In Charlesworth's work, the logic of representation is always informed by the ethics of critique and made public through the aesthetics of arrangement, which is always made explicit and articulate. In fact, the defining characteristic of all of Charlesworth's images, in the context of their times, would seem to be their willingness to construe "representation," "critique," and "pleasure" as coextensive events that mitigate one another without negating their separate effects. Thus, as Charlesworth's work has moved away from the rigorous "high conceptualism" of the mid-1970s, it has become at every stage more "thoughtful" than "conceptual"—more knowing than ideological—more *interested* in pleasure than opposed to it, and more concerned with the *ethics* of representation than with its morality.

The invitation is always two-fold. Thus, the photographs in Charlesworth's *Objects of Desire* series present *themselves* as objects of desire. The photographs portray and critique "objects of desire" appropriated from popular magazines even as they unabashedly propose their own desirability. In doing so, they emphasize the "boutique" aspects of the gallery setting (its status as an architectural "glossy magazine") in much the same way that *Modern History* emphasizes the gallery's information-bearing aspects. Moreover, because it is the photographic objects and not the images that demand our attention, these seductive objects argue for the inextricable dynamic of knowing and desire. To do otherwise, to suppress the desirability of works of art, would be to deny the pleasures of knowing the world in general (or else set the experience of art apart from that quotidian experience as a special category of coded communication) and it is, precisely this denial of art's embodied effects, that, in the mid-1970s, made it possible for conceptual artists to propose works of art as transparent vehicles through which we glimpse the disembodied, Platonic reality of "conceptual" knowledge. By proposing works of art as texts to be read but not seen, however, such works deny the pleasurable, recursive, and contingent activity of knowing the world, which is Charlesworth's great subject.

As this point, it seems appropriate to return to the question that opened this essay: Just what is going on here? Because anything written about works of art as self-disclosing as Sarah Charlesworth's should aspire, at least, to some self-disclosure of its own—should at least admit what "kind" of writing it is, as Charlesworth's works admit their genres. So what kind of writing *is* a "retrospective catalog essay for a living artist"? Well, it is "art writing" to be sure, but it is not strictly "criticism," because the author's commitment to the work is assumed, and as a consequence, at its worst, such writing proposes itself as little more than "background music"—as a score for the exhibition, emphasizing the highlights and brightening up the quiet places. This tendency is reinforced by the fact that, even though an essay like this is not strictly criticism, it is not really scholarship either, because it deals with primary sources and must defer to their authority. Nor can it really aspire to historical authority, because "history," one presumes, begins at a somewhat earlier date.

A piece of writing like this does, however, accept some obligation to see the work in question "as a whole"—to offer some normative generalizations about the habitus of the artist's practice, as I have tried to do in the preceding passages. Most importantly, though, essays of this sort should *look back*; they should take a "retrospective" view, because most of the occasional writing about artists in the midst of their careers tends to *look forward*, to see the artist's most recent work in terms of what has come before, in terms of its origins. Almost of necessity, then, this kind of writing tends to derive the significance of an artist's work from the *zeitgeist* out of which it first arose—and to occlude the fact that most artists make art to *distinguish* their vision from the norms of its milieu.

In the case of Sarah Charlesworth's career, this teleological mindset has occasioned such a distorting emphasis on her early association with Art and Language and the once-trendy "critique of representation" that it is easy to overlook the fact that Charlesworth's work was, almost from its inception, *departing* from that reductive ideology. In truth, one finds more authoritative precursors for Charlesworth's concern with the poetics of knowing in the "embodied" conceptualism of John Baldessari, Edward Ruscha, and Bruce Nauman than in the high Anglican concept art produced in New York in the 1970s.

The real question, however, is not "Where does Charlesworth's work come from?" but "Where has she been going and with whom?" The "with whom" is easy, because Charlesworth's work, from the outset of her career, has been closely associated with the work of her two friends, Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons—and quite rightly, I think. The "where" is somewhat more problematic, but I would suggest that Charlesworth, Sherman, and Simmons have, over the years, been involved in the gradual re-accession and re-inscription of Western pictoriality—in reconstituting its vast repository of representational strategies by denaturalizing them and rendering them explicit. Rather than dispensing with these pictorial strategies on account of their seductive artifice, these artists have simply made that artifice articulate and proceeded with their own agendas on the reasonable premise that the artifice of seduction is less toxic when we are made aware of it, but no less pleasurable.

The trick is to seduce without dissembling, and this strategy is most demonstrable, I think, in the most anomalous series of works that Charlesworth has produced: *Natural Magic* from the

early 1990s. Unlike the bulk of her pictures, these works are *sui generis*, and ironically so. They purport to portray "magic tricks" in progress, so we see photographs of floating cards, bent spoons, levitating cups, and flaming fingers. The joke, of course, is that the "magic" of these magic tricks is completely neutralized by the "magic" of photography. In the frozen, weightless, timeless, painless metaphysical world of the photograph, magic is unnecessary because photography does the things that magic tricks purport to do—so a levitating card is nothing very special in a photograph, although no less alluring.

Looking back at Charlesworth's production through the lens of *Natural Magic*, then, we see the work of an artist as much beguiled as appalled by photographic magic. From the floating rectangles of *Modern History*, to the frozen falling bodies in *Stills*, through the levitating *Objects of Desire*, to the groundless images from *Renaissance Paintings and Drawings*, Charlesworth's interest in the timeless, weightless metaphysical realm of photography is blatantly and relentlessly reiterated. It becomes *articulate*, however, in *Natural Magic*, which, as a series, constitutes an especially cosmopolitan form of critique, in that it demonstrates the "falsity" and "unreality" of photographic space by celebrating its seductive attractions. Thus, Charlesworth embraces the beast rather than attempting to slay it, domesticates it and uses the magic by giving away the trick—in much the same way that Cindy Sherman embraces the beast of narrative cinema or Laurie Simmons embraces the beast of "toy reality." In each case, "the beast" resides in an idiom of embodied expression, a traditional language of arrangement, some simulacrum of beauty.

It is a question of how artists deal with the past in their historical moment: Do they detoxify the past history of art-making or simply amputate it? I would suggest that, left to their own devices and given enough power and permission, most artists opt for amputation, for no better reason than to clear the stage for their own production. In fact, nothing reveals the perverse, reactive nature of art practice in Western culture better than its paradoxical, historical responses to freedom and repression. Why, we may rightly wonder, have periods of surveillance, oppression, and regulation such as existed in the Middle Ages, the Age of the Baroque or the French Empire given birth to practices that revel in complexity and profusion? And why have ages of liberty and permission like the late 18th century and the late 20th century engendered periods of almost hysterical artistic self-regulation that have given birth to a proliferation of practices grounded in self-imposed, reductive rules, and ideologies?

I have no answer for this question beyond the obvious surmise that, granted enough power and permission, artists in our Protestant tradition tend to behave like everyone else: They become obsessed with self-mastery, as a mode of controlling other people's behavior, exercising their power of self-control to restrict other people's permission. The fact that such self-regulation is a function of privilege, however, may explain why the great inclusive, permissive gestures of late twentieth century art have issued from the work of artists who do *not* feel free and empowered—and are thus less inclined to self-regulation. From this perspective, we may view the progress of artistic production in the late 20th century as a kind of silent-film comedy during which work-gangs of empowered white males strive to purify art and bring it into line by righteously subjecting it one regimen after

another—by insisting on the “purely retinal,” the “purely physical,” or the “purely conceptual”—while various disenfranchised women, queers, and provincials strive to disrupt that reductive linearity.

Think of it this way: Up in the front of the boat the guys in power are tossing bales of “unessentials” overboard—content, rhetoric, image, narrative, genre, contingency, complexity, and desire, all go over the side—while, back there in the stern, as the boat chugs along, a bunch of women and queers are frantically hauling those bales out of the water and back into the boat. Pollock, De Kooning, and Rothko dispense with everything but the authentic object and the autonomous self; Don Judd reduces that to the authentic object; Richard Serra reduces that to the actual *stuff*; at the same time, Warhol, Rauschenberg, and Johns are hauling the bales back in, reconstituting the art object as a redeemed image of the protean self in a fluid culture—as an image of the image of the image.

In the Seventies, Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, and Douglas Huebler sought purity in the other direction by dispensing with everything but the pure idea and the descriptive text; Charlesworth, Sherman, and Simmons hauled the bales back in, reconstituting the idea and the text into another brand of redeemed image—another represented representation: the self-described photograph through which we may know our pleasure in its darker and brighter aspects, even as we experience it. In both of these permissive scenarios, the “essential” object or idea—the embodiment of the artist’s intentions—is deemed inessential and replaced by an infinitely recursive imaginary configuration that occurs at the intersection of the artist and the culture. In its restrictive mode, then, late 20th century art purifies Art; in its acquisitive configuration, art redeems culture.

At its heart, then, Sarah Charlesworth’s endeavor seems grounded in a permissive Darwinian proposition that knowing the world is pleasurable in itself, because we must know the world in order to survive in it—just as sex is pleasurable because, presumably, we must propagate. The corollary of this proposition is that any form of knowing the world that is *not* pleasurable is not knowing in its ordinary glory, but some form of intellectual administration that entails our submission to its rigor. Charlesworth’s project allows us the privilege of knowing the world while knowing the pleasure of knowing it. It is grounded in the same premise: that there are no autonomous, disinterested positions from which we may know anything. The signifier of our knowing anything is our admission that we enjoy it, so we either admit our complicity in the pleasures of the text and the coextensive pleasures of the view, or we dwell in the realm of codified ignorance that we call knowledge.