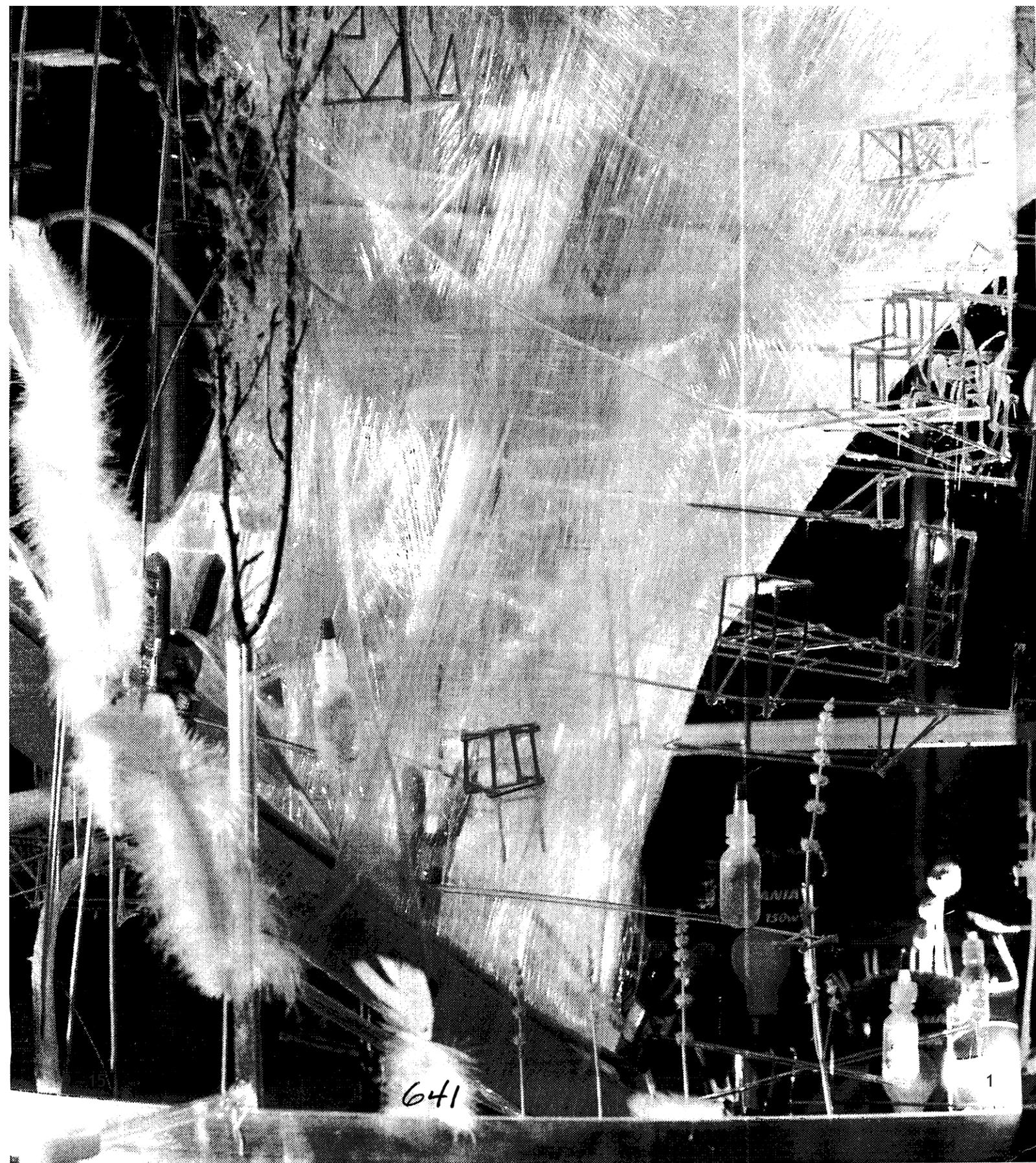
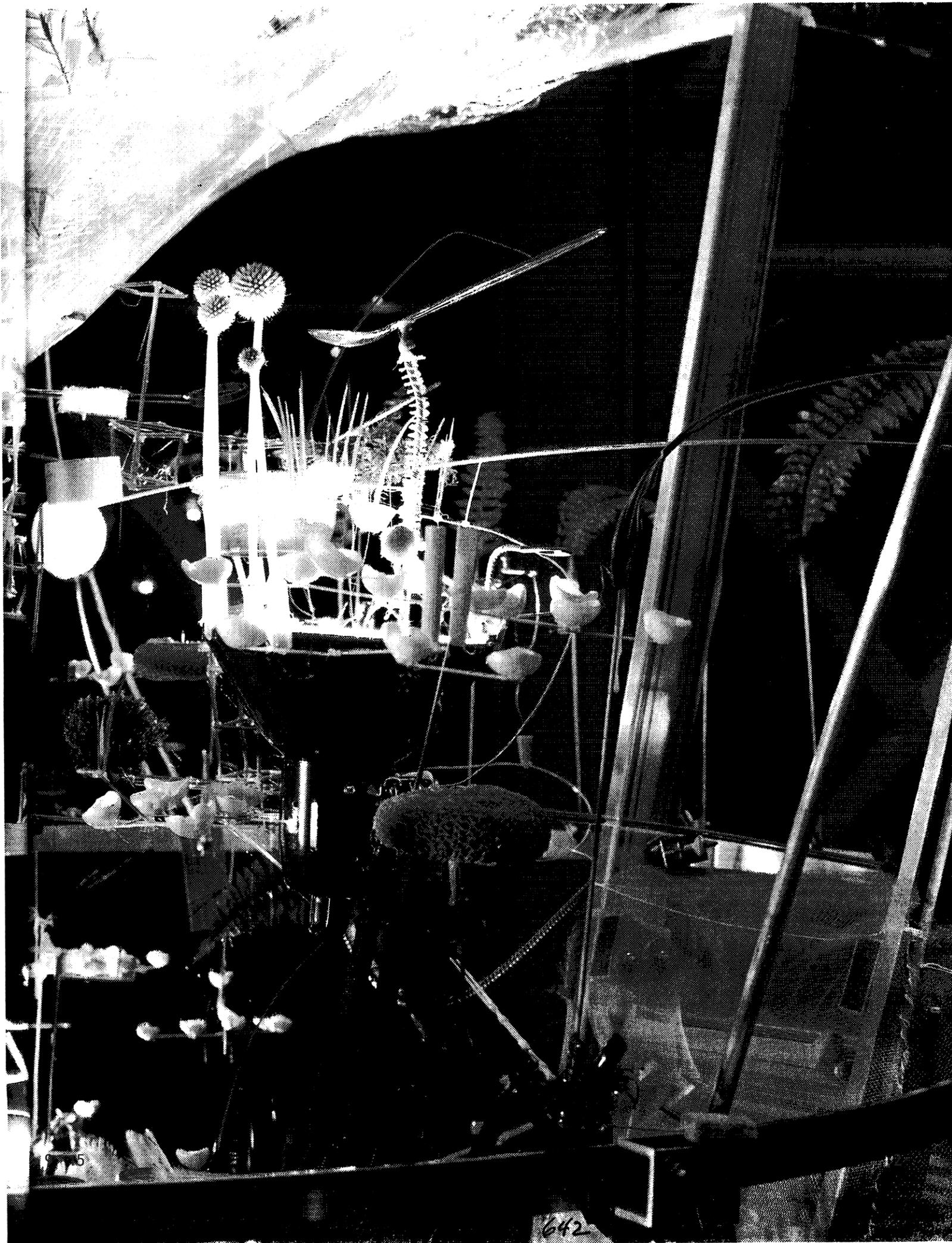


Jean Louis Schefer. "Art as a tight-rope act." In Sarah Sze. Fondation Cartier pour L'Art Contemporain, Paris, 1999.



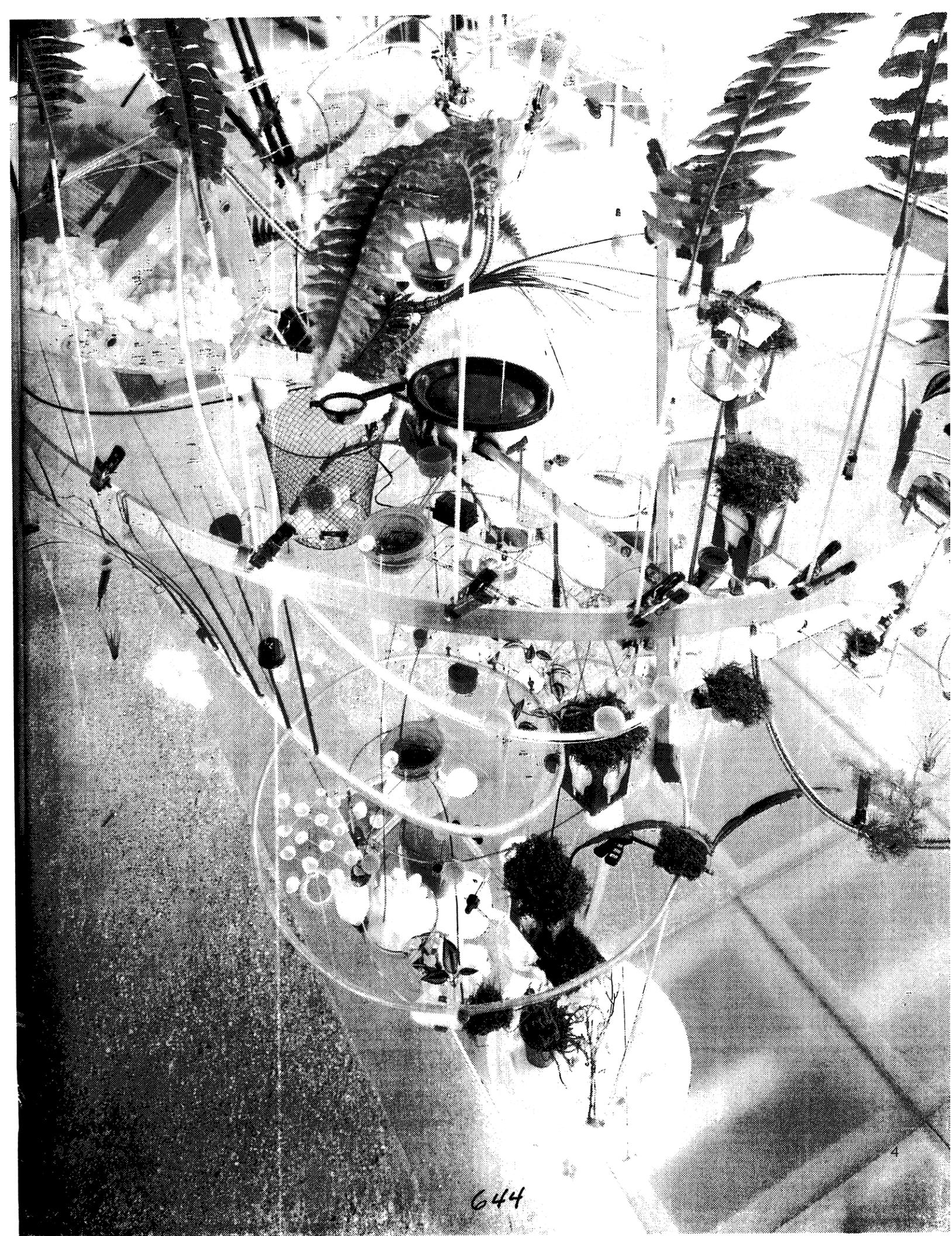


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Space, Sarah Sze tells us, is a fragile thing. The natural correlative of this superb idea is a meditation on architecture which stages, isolates and names qualities of transparency, density, solidity and light, and which soon sets our minds racing: Sarah Sze leaves us floating inside a house as if we were in some liquid element, sensing its complementary qualities of light—its thickness, its absence, its warmth or coldness.

What is the material of these outlandish spaces in which all our experiences, habits, and needs constitute nothing but a dull décor, punctuated here and there by reliefs, openings, passageways? Sarah Sze shows us that we live in these spaces by compensating them with an act of the imagination, much as our imagination compensates the abstractness and incompleteness of a scale model. Besides, we know that works of art are dedicated to making unlikely things possible, to imaginary uses of the world.

Do these imaginary uses simply teach us how to break our habitual usage? How to break the spell of the image, that disembodied form of being through which we credit reality with a kind of permanence?

Akin to a tightrope act, Sze's artistic practice is a laboratory for experimenting with space and its imaginary features. She manipulates space as if it were a liquid in a jar, turning it over, heating it, freezing it, probing the places where it crystallizes. These experiments explore a hypothesis: that space is a geometric mirage.

This puts Sarah Sze's constructions in a very particular light: what corporeal being, what species could think up, invent, and construct these elastic, springy edifices which yield, keel over, and stretch in the wind? To what purpose? Gangways, ladders and nests: who walks, sleeps, or rests here, in thought at least?

Her devices are silent timepieces. They take up an obstinate childhood notion which resists age: the idea that everything measures time; that the addition of miscellaneous objects removed from the usage which stamps a form on them unveils a dream, exposes the nerve of a poetic invention, of a quickening or grace, in a world which would otherwise remain amorphous.

Lucretius said that things, of themselves, carry voices. This capricious architecture displays a certain regularity: structures, rules of construction. Nor

is its swaying that of the liana bridge: where do these gangways lead? Perhaps to unnoticed, unfocused details in the canvas of our lives, which contribute to a composition of which we ourselves are an undefined, gradual constituent. Once the rope is cast, an entire fabric begins to inhabit, invade, order the space.

An entire organism seems to govern and inhabit these constructions, which are like the salivated threads of a spider's web; and that postulated organism produces in us a bizarre theatrical effect of awareness, a confrontation with the part of ourselves which lives in such a space. The drawn threads display their miraculous load with an extraordinary effect of theatrical revelation: we are the improbable inhabitants of this suddenly awakened theatre, thrown together at the most unlikely angles.

What scenes take place in this matchstick theatre? Its drama bares the very fabric of time, which is the nerve of these constructs.

Sarah Sze designs neither objects, nor stage sets; she produces drama. Her theatre is about space as awareness: we are its necessary protagonists, though the drama renders us useless, literally impossible agents, due to the debilitating role of weight in these constructs.

Think of Faulkner's vagabond: he sits on a bench, and becomes a counterweight to the stars. In the same way we act as counterweights to lightness and its forms, to grace and humour.

The effect of this airy weaving and drawing of circles, in which we move with the comparative grace of snails, is to grant us a slow-moving, weightless, heavily ligatured body: we become what is left after the subtraction of our imagination. What other term does our language use to designate this? Imagination. Retrieved by the slow vessel, the dark home we carry about as our body? Its exact, exalting name: the resident lunatic.

Margaret at the spinning wheel: "Ich spinne, ich spinne"; in other words, "I'm weaving, I am a spider, I am mad, I am the rapture of a dream".

This weaver is less a person than a floating point, attached to her body by the thread she unwinds. A minuscule body without contours, which came into being in a child's feverish hands and which pursues the fine balancing line of infantile genius, the only chance we have ever had in our history. On revisiting some pictures of Sarah Sze's scaffoldings, I think of the future of our childhood dreams—books, music, paintings, theatre, legendary empires. Maliciously, as if reversing the movement, as if a house's interior had lost all its furnishings, and cords, strings, an entire apparatus suspended from the fliers were throwing us down into a well, a cave whose nervures the agile imagination explored and drew, with slim ladders, frail flyovers that a fly could destroy, Sarah Sze sets up the nervous system and spinal cord of dreams. These dreams are nothing but the dreams, transports, and ardent pulse of a fervent heart: I will be poet and king and doctor to the poor and tyrant, explorer, gardener. Through our childhood those dreams made us ascend to heaven even as we learned of solitude, watched the clouds spill their loads of sand into the sky and wheel about thousands of figures of horses, castles, mountains and hair. Since the insane love of children knew no measure, these scaffoldings, strings, ropes and sticks had to be brought in, so that we could walk on earth

when the music inside us ceased and this childhood came to an end, with a certain pandemonium, a kind of disorder, setting in where once there was music.

Imaginary wanderings: this indefinitely adaptable device shows us that we live in a fluid medium after all, in the midst of bodies which are quite flexible.

Sarah Sze weaves mazes which fill space and trap us, rather like unwitting insects, in their stretched fabrics or filaments (but is not a second body thus pinned down and arrested in its course by the elastic constraints of its means?): a sudden change of scale and the technique of mounting objects in sequences, in poems or litanies of objects, articulate a special notion of time.

The lines of objects placed next to each other (like the drawings or words of "exquisite corpses"; as if, through the sequences, successive envelopes were shed) do not evoke disorder, or even a bird making its nest out of twigs, but rather a certain reality of time. Abstracted from the uses and functions which confer their forms on them, the objects succeed in telling us something about their bodies. Their sequential or rhapsodic links are descended from the idea of origin and fortuitous encounter, in a way reminiscent of Lautréamont. A revelation *to end* things: not the prospect, but the very joy of imagining the end of the world, the barred road in which history comes to pass, the last theatre of language in which a confused order defines all the scenes, the drama, the music: the monologue of the world awakening before its own ending. A thin line separates the actor—even if he succeeds in distinguishing himself from his own accoutrements and discourse—from being the ironic utensil of a role, of any role at that, and to that extent, indifferent. Mallarmé's *Igitur*, or a character from Beckett: a pendulum which measures the duration of a delay, of a distance, which records the laughter of somebody not yet born at the world's end. The disaster of human language has just taken place; its ideas, its images, the roles they invented are dull, lifeless, without usage or function: the *Igitur* scene is a pendulum, the reflection of a mirror and the theatre of a world that nobody can populate. These souls have no solvency, they have been removed, turned into trinkets, temporal things, travelling clocks, in the space of a century. Why is it that a century has been claimed by the intermittent joy of that awareness—that I was a thing, that I will be a thing, and that I believe myself to be separated from that thing by the sighing of the seconds which count me?

It is in fact a novelty that our awareness of time, coming as it does after the grandiloquence of ruins, has become an awareness of waste; that in this way nature is increased from day to day by what we surrender to it; that we have a poetic of time to put forward.

What is this work of the spinner, the spinning wheel, the wasp building its nest, the swallow, the poet, the child? Does a world exist on their scale, a world so reduced, a shorter pulse, a tighter heart, a minor temporality, a wheel smaller than all others? A universe *within*, made of details which turn invisibly within ours, recording thousands of merely human temporalities?

In her way, the artist tells us something: she weaves or undoes the threads of an enigma. What she herself states is not a commentary, but the way in which we are part of that enigma. She makes herself into a thing for us, but no more than the poet becomes the thing he writes.

This is a very modern and still quite unusual idea, one whose accuracy we should really be trying to measure. Art is a part of the environment which has become conscious: we can attribute no soul to a sum of heterogeneous bodies save through irony; they are products, assortments chanced upon by unknown beings and this is where their poetry lies. This art is constituted neither by its form nor by its addressee: it is an imaginary use of the unknown subject. The enigma which results from this assortment is the author; and it is an enigma not of the artist's intentions, but of identity itself.

Is it only for me that Sarah Sze stirs up such questioning, proposes this irony, this rebus? She also displaces the terms: addition cancels the identity of things, and, principally, their functions. This concept contrasts with the devices of slow, quiet animation of still life painting, its composition of forms in a relation of exchange, its exaltation of form by a balanced correspondence of pure qualities. This highly singular art was one of solitude and, in reality, represented the experimentations of an unknown soul. It involved an operation which it was still possible to carry out on time; its fiction was the immobilizing of light, the simultaneous canvas of its passages, its reflections, its suspension. Such an object relied on the notion that infinite time was available on credit; a time measured by physical qualities and the forms of their expansion or expression. Being well thought out and calculated, these compositions have no centre, but are instead distributed in a paradoxical temporality in forms, or in the constitution of each form. (A veritable alchemy in late Chardin, equilibrium achieved as an instant by imperceptible differences in the distribution of volumes, that is, of surfaces thought of as volumes; differences of light in his glasses of water, where gentleness, acidity, the softness of strawberries, onions, pears, are diluted.)

What kind of still life, then, does Sarah Sze set up, stretch out, and finely articulate? The improbable machinery of time, but nothing more. A romantic concept of ruins, and their mischievous fabrication. But what is the effect of this, what intuition is deduced? The hands of a child dismantling a watch, putting it out of sorts. The purpose of the exercise? To see time, to handle it, to re-assemble it by adding oneself to the machinery, to weave one's own genius into the immobilized device. The idea that the mystery of measured time can become a surface, a scale, an apparatus which, scattered about and abused, contains the dream and silently measures the distant, the infinite space which ties the child to the first second of its existence. This is a mystery that a child may come close to discovering, and our art preserves and nourishes its intuition.

And Sarah Sze? Chardin, the child watchmaker (the teetotum?). Here is a form of unknown time counted, recited, in heaps, in garlands and sarabands of small things which let go of their identity, so to speak. I am brought back to this perpetual idea: what is the secret of these arrangements if not the dream that informs them, for example that of putting things in space and imagining where they make contact, figuring out the props, tracing the sinews?

The dream accelerates. Each dream inauguates a matter, a light, a motivity in things.

Yet there are no forms, only trajectories, passages, stoppings, a sort of camping out here and there. Above all, these works measure out and define

space, from time to time exploring, commenting, or inventing its imaginary qualities. Previously, these spaces only existed as conditions for locating beings and things, movements and volumes, by calculation from a scale.

Through its parasitic constructs an incessant activity, a world of details and small things, enlivened and moving, discloses an idea of what the imagination is: the constructions are an exhaustive commentary on the fragility of connections, they suggest a living agglutination of heterogeneous elements; an airy weight which threatens the void and fills it with bones, straws and fault lines.

A utopia of constructs which expose only vertebrae and points of rupture; a perfect imagining propped up by the fragility of space. A space like that of a home, or the volume from which our bodies are deducted: a volume reached by deduction. Here it is traced, furrowed and punctuated by the passing of an unknown species of animal. The species is as light as an idea, smoke hanging in the air, dust whose motes, dancing in the sunlight, are suddenly stabilized. The unknown body can even walk there, and is none other than ourselves. Ourselves minus ourselves. Or our "bird's vertigo", of which the poet spoke. What kind of spider, fly, or fairy? A single body ascends, stops there, and distracts itself with these ladders; minuscule debris grows like plants, lights up, and sparkles. It is precisely our own body, relieved of its weight and mass, that our gaze takes walking through a landscape, among the clouds, into the figures of paintings. Our eyes take us up bridges, gangways and platforms as they take us far to the horizon, to the entrance to cities, to the top of a tower, to the middle of a mess which surrounds us, into a desert.

What lends these works their unity, their aspect? Not a style, but a style of activity; and the idea that this activity is incessant: it is parasitic on space and erodes time.

Time measured by inadequate instruments.

Therefore the idea is neither a will to make art, nor a practice within the climate of contemporary gestures. It is rather that the nature or place of the question (where am I?) has changed. The proof is before us. A restless and pernicious being trying to strike an unlikely balance. But a balance among what parties, between what things? Between ourselves, I believe, as an awareness of time. We know from experience, from our own dreams that the Me is a memory, and something more which relates these past lives to lost universes; universes of which a peak, a rooftop, a sort of semaphore appears from far off: this Me is a forgotten memory. Meditating on it is part of lost time. But time, precisely, as if we were drawing water from a well, restores this world to us after an underground exploration, the reality of this Me whose only witnesses are the things which saw it and kept its secret; this Me, this time, are confided to very simple mechanisms. Like a spinning top in the eyes of a child.

Sarah Sze tells us, or tells me, something else through these threads of fiction: that some form of play, both conscious and innocent, is preserved in artistic activity and intent. This play takes place at an age for serious games, and is part of the grace and seriousness of an age which lives on in us.

This is one of the things that contemporary art helps us to understand, though not without a delay of some years: a game involving bits of the world and

an idea, for instance the idea of assembling unlikely machines whose engine is a child's soul, or whatever lives on in us of dreaming or hope.

Otherwise, why would these newly defined things have these precise aspects?

What a poetic, experimental idea: to weave in the air with spindles of wool, wood, and plastic?

The modern art of portraiture has already shown us that we are a species unknown to ourselves, whose pictorial assessment is a caricature. This left us with the idea of space, where the imagination constructs profiles, sets down lines, creates nests of sorts. What, then, has literature achieved? Its material, reality, has always been taken up, raised, dressed, and instilled with life by a series of bodies which are unlikely, incomplete, schematic, ill-drawn. Yet these are the things which work, these timepieces without springs or motors which measure our time; it seems to suffice, in fact, that a heart should have beaten inside them.

"It is in the streets of Paris or at the flea markets, in the unusual and coincidental connections of everyday life, that the most disconcerting signs are to be searched for. Art and life are here and now."

Gilles Lipovetsky¹

Secrets and Truths

Sarah Sze's work straddles the border between the visible and the invisible. Consistently eluding our visual grasp, her meticulously constructed structures vanish into a collage of details when we attempt to view them as a whole, yet overwhelm us with their scale when we explore their minutiae. They draw our attention to objects that are so common in today's world we scarcely see them, while simultaneously blinding us to familiar visions of structures, be they architectural or philosophical. The artist clarifies by obscuring. She conceals by revealing.

The aesthetic of the fragment

Sarah Sze assembles fragments of disparate realities, arranging them specifically for the spaces in which she intervenes. The various fragments of reality that she uses can be re-employed in other configurations for other spaces. They are utilized like words, their meanings derived from the context in which they are placed. Each of the elements taken alone stay in suspense; they produce no discourse even if they contain within them all the possible developments. In the words of Roland Barthes, "The fragment is like the musical idea of a song cycle . . . Each piece is self-sufficient, and yet it is never anything but the interstice of its neighbors: the work consists of no more than an inset, an *hors-texte*."²

Each work by the same artist is a fragment of the opus, just as each oeuvre is a fragment in itself, which "contradicts the temptation to find the entire series of explanations."³ There are as many possible beginnings as there are fragments. And there is no end.

The ecology of daily life

Tacks, Q-tips, matches, pills, candies, crackers, sponges, batteries, screws, bolts, tea bags, milk bottle caps, plastic toy soldiers, electrical wires . . . Sze's building blocks are items

that so clutter our daily environment, they barely merit our attention—if we notice them at all. Ceaselessly multiplying, they fill our closets and cellars, our drawers and bookcases. They blanket desktops and supermarket shelves. The new invaders of the world today, these objects enter daily by all methods, from all sides, and contaminate space, bearing no resistance and no order. “Nothing is really ordered, though everything has a false appearance of orderliness.”⁴

Humanity has a propensity to both consume and accumulate objects at an accelerating rate. It is impossible to stop the infernal rhythm despite the fact we have already reached saturation. Cluttering has become a contemporary reality, an ecological attitude.

Building a fragile world

She folds, piles up, arranges, glues. Detail by detail, she proceeds by addition, building elementary constructions, arborescences, offshoots from a network, links between a profusion of disparate objects. Emerging from unexpected places, her installations are like spiders’ webs weaving configurations of zones of energy. Some clusters invoke Facteur Cheval’s metaphoric constructions of fortune made of what happens to be available. Others follow the example of many large sprawling contemporary cities, constructed anarchically and hastily, with no general urban plan.

The architecture itself is extremely fragile, with sprawling structures often held up by nothing more than a thread, driving balance and resistance into a corner. It is a metaphor for the extreme precariousness of humanity as a whole—which is the essence of humanity—as well as that of the individual human being. If control is lost, even for a moment, disruption and collapse will inevitably follow.

Species of spaces

Until now, the artist has essentially invested modest zones that are rarely used—the zones of shadow, outside of the traditional perspective of the spectacular gaze. Window ledges, corners, ceilings, cornices, storerooms, LED signs . . . the margin as surface of investigation. In each of her installations, she has affirmed the periphery as the centre and the centre as periphery, thus erasing all spatial hegemony. It is no longer the orthodox ideology of the solely white cube space, but the affirmation that “there’s a whole lot of small bits of space” to use the words of George Perec, who also wrote: “...spaces have multiplied, been broken up and have diversified. To live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself.”⁵

With the work of Sarah Sze, our eye continually oscillates between a global vision and one of details, never able to fully grasp either. As a result, we are forced to suspend reflexive notions of surfaces and structures, and to reconsider the nature of the spaces in which we live, as well as of the objects with which we coexist. The contemporary world is exposed as a construct of our own making, oversaturated visually and sonically, where objects disappear from view even as they multiply in volume—and where a fear of the void seems more prevalent than ever. Sarah Sze offers us an alternative: a world where neither emptiness nor saturation dominates, where chaos is as relevant as order, and where the common is as important as the extraordinary.

Footnotes

1 Gilles Lipovetsky, *L’Ère du vide. Essais sur l’individualisme contemporain*, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1983, p 101.

2 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York, 1977, p 94.

3 Anne Cauquelin, “L’Œuvre et l’Outil,” in *Dictionnaire de la communication*, Editions PUF, Paris 1992, p 369.

4 Evelyne Volpe, “Ordre, désordre, fouillis...” in *Habiter, habité. L’alchimie de nos maisons*, “Mutations” series, no. 116, Editions Autrement, Paris, September 1990, p 153.

5 Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, edited and translated by John Sturrock, Penguin Books, London, 1997, p 6.