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Remembering Sarah Charlesworth, Groundbreaking "Pictures Generation" Photographer

By Andrew M. Goldstein and Rachel Corbett
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The artist Sarah Charlesworth

— THE BIG STORY —

Sarah Charlesworth, a conceptual artist who applied exacting scrutiny to familiar imagery and objects in an almost prosecutorial search for their hidden truths, has passed away at the age of 66. One of the more stylistically influential members of the so-called "Pictures Generation"—with which, like Cindy Sherman, she was grouped despite not being included in **Douglas Crimp's** 1977 "Pictures" show at **Artists Space**—she devised a signature pictorial approach that married intellectual concepts with utterly refined, elegantly minimal presentation.

Born in New Jersey, Charlesworth attended **Barnard** and then studied photography at the **New School** before joining the avant-garde circle of 1970s New York artists who were laying out the ground rules for conceptual art, collaborating with **Joseph Kosuth** on a short-lived theoretical art journal called *The Fox*. Inspired partly by the French critical theorist **Roland Barthes**, who viewed mass cultural images as signs freighted with latent meaning to be deciphered, she first gained attention for a series of artworks starkly displaying newspaper snippets (headlines, photographs), forcing viewers to examine the way they responded to media's authoritative voice.

This approach, informed by Charlesworth's deep suspicion of art as a commodity, evolved over the years as she turned her eye to imagery that was sometimes deeply disturbing, such as newspaper photographs of people leaping from buildings in her 1980 "Stills" series. But more often, her work is deeply visually pleasurable, isolating images or objects—a dress, a classical statue, a bowl—against colorful monochrome backgrounds for analysis, like forensic evidence, or brain-food canapés on a tray.

This latter body of work, which stretched throughout her career, can today be seen resonating in the work of conceptual photographers like **Elad Lassry** and **Roe Ethridge**, and is highly coveted by collectors. Represented by **Susan Inglett Gallery**, Charlesworth is collected by such institutions as the **Museum of Modern Art**, the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** (which included her in its 2009 "Pictures Generation" show), and LACMA. — **Andrew M. Goldstein**