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Sarah Charlesworth, Artist of Deconstructed Photographs, Dies at 66

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Anthony Barboza, Sarah Charlesworth in the 1990s.

Sarah Charlesworth, an artist whose photo-based works deconstructed, subverted and otherwise addressed cultural assumptions about photography, died on Tuesday in Hartford. She was 66 and had homes in Falls Village, Conn., and Manhattan.

The cause was an aneurysm, her daughter, Sarah Lucy Poe, said.

Ms. Charlesworth was part of a wave of talented artists, many of them women, who rephotographed existing photographs or dissected the medium's conventions with staged tableaux. This work was an important step between the cerebral rigors of

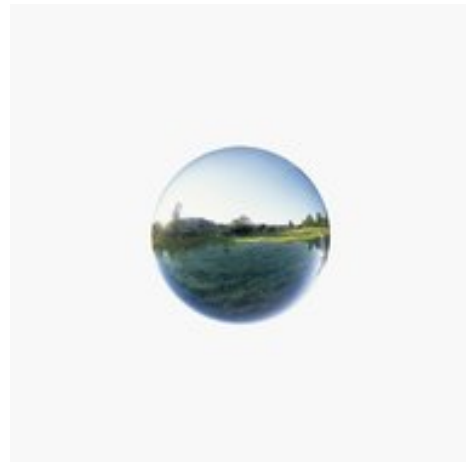
1970s Conceptual Art and the more permissive image-play of 1980s Pictures Art.

Her Pictures Generation contemporaries included Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, Laurie Simmons and Ellen Brooks, as well as Richard Prince, James Casebere and James Welling. and she spoke for many of them when she told Bomb magazine in 1990, "I've engaged questions regarding photography's role in culture for 12 years now, but it is an engagement with a problem rather than a medium."

Ms. Charlesworth is probably best known for large, exquisite photographic works in which rarefied images — ancient masks, figures lifted from Renaissance paintings, disembodied Hollywood-starlet gowns — are isolated against fields of lush monochrome color. At once seductive and didactic, they compete with painting in visual strength, wink at advertising and slyly raise questions about cultural and sexual stereotypes, personal symbolism and the role of pleasure and beauty — in both art and life — as perhaps particularly female pursuits.

Ms. Charlesworth covered a lot of stylistic and intellectual ground in her 40-year career, which encompassed writing and teaching as well as art-making. Possessing a sharp, combative but flexible intelligence, she was a fairly orthodox Marxist when young, but her radical ideals were shattered by a 1978 trip to China on which she found living and political conditions there "utterly disgusting."

Ms. Charlesworth was born on March 29, 1947, in East Orange, N.J., the eldest of five children of Roger and Sarah Morgan Charlesworth. Her father, a mechanical engineer, was an executive at Western Electric whose job took the family to different cities. Interested in art from an early age, she grew up in Summit, N.J., starting high school in Buffalo and finishing it in Oklahoma City, where an art teacher encouraged her to become an artist.



Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC
"Crystal Ball" (2011) from "Available Light," Ms. Charlesworth's most recent solo exhibition, at the Susan Inglett Gallery in Chelsea in 2012.

She went on to attend Bradford Junior College in Haverhill, Mass., receiving further encouragement from Douglas Huebler, an art teacher who was on the verge of becoming a leading Conceptual artist. From there she went to Barnard College, where she studied painting and earned a B.A. in art history in 1969.

That year she saw one of the earliest exhibitions of Conceptual Art, organized in Manhattan by Seth Siegelaub and including works by Huebler, Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth, a precocious, philosophically inclined artist only two years her senior. The show, with its emphasis on ideas over materials, was a shock — it made her “nauseous,” she said — and she stopped painting.

Around 1973 Ms. Charlesworth began a romantic relationship with Mr. Kosuth, which further spurred her development. They worked together on several projects and, as members of Art & Language, a collaborative of Conceptual artists, helped found the Marxist magazine *The Fox* in 1975. It lasted three issues before internal dissension brought it to an end.

Her first mature effort, a series called “Modern History” begun in 1977, approached pure Conceptual Art in its deconstructive focus on the way newspapers use photographs, except that it lacked the texts typical of that style. For this series she photographed, at actual size, the front pages of different newspapers and blanked out everything except for their photographs and mastheads.

One piece in the series, titled “April 21, 1978,” followed a now-famous photograph of the Italian prime minister Aldo Moro — shown as a hostage being held by the radical paramilitary group Red Brigades — across the fronts of 45 newspapers as it varied in size and prominence.

In her next series, “Stills” (1980), Ms. Charlesworth went big, selecting published images of people falling from buildings and enlarging the pictures to six and a half feet tall. She used silver gelatin printing, signaling a new interest in photographic craft. She exhibited these works at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in Manhattan in 1980, which at that point was the living room of Mr. Shafrazi’s apartment.

Ms. Charlesworth began to photograph actual objects only in the early 1990s, culling and arranging them as fastidiously as she had her previous efforts. “Available Light,” her most recent solo exhibition, at the Susan Inglett Gallery in Chelsea in 2012, consisted of still lifes featuring glass spheres, small objects and delicate colors. They showed an artist reveling in photography’s primary substance, light, but maintaining the same level of artifice and even abstraction, and the same awareness of her medium that pervades all her art.

Ms. Charlesworth’s work is represented in dozens of museum collections here and abroad; a 1998 survey organized by Site Santa Fe in Santa Fe, N.M., toured to four additional museums.

Ms. Charlesworth’s marriage in 1983 to the filmmaker Amos Poe ended in divorce. In addition to their daughter, she is survived by their son, Nicholas Tiger Poe; two sisters, Agnes and Rosemary Charlesworth; a brother, Roger; and her partner, the playwright Lonnie Carter.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 1, 2013

*An earlier version of this obituary misstated the roles played by two people in connection with the mid-1970’s Marxist magazine *The Fox*. Karl Beveridge and Carol Condé were contributors to the magazine, not founders. It also misstated the year of Ms. Charlesworth’s exhibition at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery. It was 1980, not 1982.*

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