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Pictures, Without Their Thousand Words

By Richard B. Woodward

Sarah Charlesworth, who died last week at the age of 66, was a conceptual artist before that career path became the well-trodden rut it is today.



Sarah Charlesworth in 1990.
Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC/Anthony Barboza

Sarah Charlesworth, who died last week at the age of 66, was a conceptual artist before that career path became the well-trodden rut it is today. It took some bravery, especially for a woman in the U.S., to make art in the 1970s that had little commercial support and enjoyed even less government favor. Her success (over the course of her career she had more than a dozen one-person shows in New York) and her influence on generations of students (most recently, she was a visual-arts professor at Princeton University) reflects the tilt in the art world toward theory-based work over the past 50 years and her hand in that reorientation.

Like that of her contemporaries Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger and Laurie Simmons, Charlesworth's art was obsessed with mass-media images and tried to channel or blunt their hypnotic power—with mockery, deadpan imitation, hectoring language or by scrambling the originally intended message. None of these artists consider themselves photographers, despite their continual engagement with the medium.

Following the example of the Pop artists, Charlesworth scavenged books, newspapers and magazines for ready-made images she found sufficiently compelling to reproduce and

rearrange. When her tweakings were tuned to the right frequency, they set off sympathetic vibrations inside the heart as well as the brain.

This happened more than once in her series "Modern History," a group of multipanel works begun in 1977. With ruthless simplicity and surprising elegance, she exposed the editorial machinery of newspapers and the unfixed meanings of photographs. Long before prophets of the Internet noted that images drift rootlessly across the globe, Charlesworth illustrated how their identity is altered or can be lost entirely within a new context.

One of her masterworks in this regard is "April 21, 1978," (1978), a survey of the treatment given to the photograph of Aldo Moro, former Prime Minister of Italy. It had been released to the international press by his kidnapers, the Brigade Rosse (Red Brigades), to prove that they meant business.

Charlesworth rephotographed at actual size the front pages of 45 newspapers, deleting all information except for the name of the paper and whatever photographs had appeared on that particular April day. Reading the completed piece, one travels around the world, from Italy to Japan. Some papers ran the image as it was delivered to them; others chose not to cooperate with the terrorists and cropped out the words "Brigate Rosse" from the background.

The photograph of Moro's weary face and upper body darts around the panels, sometimes prominent but just as often crowded out by other larger photographs: of Queen Elizabeth holding up a baby (The Times of London) or former FBI Director, L. Patrick Gray, surrounded by reporters (The New York Times). The stories that prompted use of these illustrations are purposely kept veiled. Most viewers will have to be reminded of who Moro was and why his plight was briefly world-wide news.

Without any need for commentary, the 45 black-and-white prints demonstrate that newspapers, which fancy themselves writing "the first drafts of history," are arbitrarily constructed inside their grids. The text and photographs making up any news story are subject, each hour of each day, to space limits, readership interests, the publisher's taste, geographic distance from the event, and other factors.

By blotting out the text in this work, Charlesworth forces the photographs to stand alone on an almost blank field where they seem orphaned, deprived of much power to inform. The kidnapers chose an image of Moro holding up the front page of the Italian newspaper La Repubblica as proof that he was still alive on the date of the publication and making reproduction of this photograph, on other front pages, a shared and self-reflexive act.

Rather than an exercise in media deconstruction, though, the piece also has true emotional impact. Moro's helplessness in the hands of his kidnappers is mirrored by the way his own image is beyond his control, buffeted by the whims of editors and the relentless currents of news moving around the globe.

On some pages he all but disappears. Less than two weeks later, he was murdered by his captors. The nondescript title is a piercing reminder of how hard it is to keep alive the memory of any person for long, even someone who was on the world's front pages.

She adapted these same techniques to other political stories, including the 1979 assassination of ABC news reporter Bill Stewart in Nicaragua, as well as to lyrical ends. The 29 panels in "Arc of Total Eclipse, February 26, 1979" (1979) reproduce images of a total solar eclipse on front pages of newspapers along its path, from the Pacific Northwest to Greenland. Each image is slightly different, reflecting the various angles and times at which they were taken: an astronomic event interpreted locally through a technology—photography—that writes in the very sunlight that is the story's subject.

In some of Charlesworth's other series—she listed more than 20 on her studio website—her penchant for chilly elegance sometimes got the best of her. The split screens of color and the isolated figures in "Objects of Desire" (1983-88) and "Available Light" (2012) look like modish décor. As with too much conceptual photography, the mind is led in confusing directions that end at that familiar cul-de-sac: a vague indictment of consumerism. (Even though, of course, the pieces are designed to appeal to anyone with an eye and wallet for luxury goods.)

Charlesworth was a co-founder of two important New York magazines: *The Fox* (1975-76), one of the first densely-written, Marxist-inflected journals of art theory; and *Bomb*, the still thriving (1981-) interview-driven and undoctinaire guide to downtown art and culture. Her found image of the Empire State Building being struck by lightning graced the cover of its first issue.

"We also came up with the proportions for the first *Bomb*," the magazine's editor, Betsy Sussler, recalled by email. She had insisted on a page size based on the golden ratio, but neither of them could remember the formula. "There was a bottle of Chanel No. 5 on Sarah's desk, and I felt certain that Chanel used the golden mean for its design." So the perfume bottle became the basis for the magazine's rectangle. "Sarah, usually so insistent herself upon long discussions as to a decision was being made, easily went along with me. To this day I don't understand why; she loved those tussles."