

Welling, James, "Sarah Charlesworth (1947-2013)", APERTURE, 7 July 2013.



July 7th, 2013

Sarah Charlesworth (1947–2013)

By James Welling



Sarah Charlesworth with Princeton students in her Introductory Photography course, fall 2012. Photo: M. Teresa Simao.

We shared a sun-filled office in the Lewis Center and I saw Sarah every week this past fall. I taught on Tuesdays and Wednesdays; Sarah on Wednesday only. Many weeks I stayed over, so I'd be in the office when Sarah rolled in. She'd give me a big smile and a hug. The smile said, "Can you believe we're doing this, Jim? Isn't this the greatest? We're both at Princeton."

Sarah was my big sister last fall. We'd walk over to Prospect House for lunch, discuss the department and our students, and Sarah would fill me in on what I needed to do.

Sarah was tickled to be at Princeton. She was a direct descendent of Jonathan Edwards, a philosopher and theologian who became president of the university in the eighteenth century. Like Edwards, who died only weeks after coming to Princeton, Sarah's time at the university was painfully short.

I preferred to take the train back to New York but I drove back with Sarah once in November. We wanted to attend a MoMA panel on abstraction, so we began our afternoon classes thirty minutes early. We got in Sarah's black Volvo station wagon, which was full of wicker baskets she'd bought up in Connecticut. She moved some around for my suitcase of books to squeeze in. We took a melange of turnpikes and surface streets and were making good time until we got to the Lincoln Tunnel. Crawling along the helix entrance to the tunnel for an hour, we talked about New York versus Los Angeles, digital versus film, Princeton, how bad the traffic was.



Sarah Charlesworth with Princeton students in her Advanced Questions in Photography course at David Zwirner Gallery. Photo: Matt Lange.

When we got to the panel, we were so late we drew attention to ourselves. I was asked a question and mumbled some sort of evasive answer; Sarah received a quick follow-up. She answered with typical Charlesworthian poise. She was more burned out than I was, but she quickly sized up the discussion and offered her nuanced yet opinionated thoughts on abstraction.

After the panel we toasted each other with plastic cups of white wine. And she gave me that smile: "Can you believe we were just at Princeton? And now this."

And now this.