Sarah Sze

Sculpture as Transformation
Random Walk Drawing (Window), 2011.
Mixed media, 156 x 264 x 264 in.
A Conversation with Sarah Sze

BY JOYCE BECKENSTEIN
Joyce Beckenstein: When Sculpture published a previous interview with you in 2003, your work was very different. In broad strokes, how would you characterize the changes?

Sarah Sze: I came to art with more training in architecture and painting. Now, I have a whole new language of sculpture. My earliest sculptures were flat, on the ground. They didn’t explore the fundamental things that you can’t accomplish in painting, like gravity and movement in the round. So, the sculpture became about how the work reveals itself as you move over time through a complicated architectural space. In Things Fall Apart, for example, something as familiar as a car—it’s abstracted from far away—becomes something else as you become more intimate with it. Those works had to do with things put into spaces. The work in “Infinite Line” has to do with what’s left out of spaces. It is a very minimal show in which negative space is as important as positive space. Everything is shaved down to its structure.

JB: How has the evolution from more to less altered your selection of objects?

SS: My palette, which has a Darwinian quality, has grown over time: some things survive, and there’s an evolving use of objects. One of my early pieces had candy in it; I was eating lots of candy at the time, but I don’t use it anymore.

I bought the “rainbow” mop for Random Walk Drawing (Eye Chart) in Mexico City. Early in the morning, street vendors sell long cleaning tools for reaching high places. I love the idea of a tool becoming artwork. The mop [which consists of a fluff of synthetic material with variegated rainbow colors attached to a long stick] is an amazing found object. It deals with space and architecture; it deals with domesticity; it’s like a paintbrush. It’s totally wrong and right. In “Infinite Line,” it lightens the adjacent black scroll and helps you travel narratively through the work. It was a Rauschenberg moment.

JB: And the photographs?

SS: I first used photographs in 360 (Portable Planetarium) (2010) at Tanya Bonakdar.

Little things mean a lot to Sarah Sze. The 2013 U.S. representative to the Venice Biennale is best known for her enormous gravity-defying installations, kaleidoscopic galaxies teeming with found objects from contemporary life and nature. Her disjunctive arrays of dangled plastics, dissected cars, tipsy ladders, and scattered pebbles—clamped, glued, and cantilevered with deft architectural and engineering savvy—hold aloft fragile universes. Sze’s art is about the finite and the infinite, the real and the ephemeral, the mundane and the sublime, time and timelessness. No one has ever accused her of being a Minimalist.

But there were gutsy surprises at her recent Asia Society exhibition, “Sarah Sze: Infinite Line.” New works suggest a different direction for this young, Boston-born artist. Among today’s brightest stars—a Yale graduate and 2003 MacArthur Fellow—Sze has exhibited her work at New York’s most prestigious museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art, and at equally eminent venues throughout Europe and Japan.

They relate to how we see ourselves. Photographs place our bodies in relationship to space, but the space doesn’t exist—it’s a picture. In the Asia Society show, a cup on the floor connects to a huge landscape. You can go from a Styrofoam cup and connect to immense space.

JB: You’ve said that your work has to do with how we value things. How do you value the things in your exhibitions?

SS: The truth is that I avoid talking about work in a personal way because then you just think about my story and don’t have your own transference. But I’ll share this story about my use of the credit card. It came from my grandfather, a proud man. When he went to a nursing home, they took away his wallet, which was an awful moment for him. The impetus for the card came from that moment. What is amazing about visual art and about concrete objects is that meanings can be transferred. It’s not at all cerebral.

JB: But there is a strong cerebral element to your work. “Infinite Line” is laden with visual clues about how we see optically, psychologically, and art historically. There are eye charts, colorblind prints (Random Walk Drawing, 2011), and a plumb line dropping a spiral. And the everyday items populating your previous works are similarly symbolic of their grand titles: Everything That Rises Must Converge, The Uncountables, Things Fall Apart. Do you ever worry that audiences walking into your installations will say, “This is cool,” and then fail to get the bigger picture?

SS: People can enter at any level. They perceive much more than you know, and you should expect the most of your audience. I am interested in work that reveals itself in time, even in the space—so you can’t walk away from it. I want the work to be remembered three years later.

JB: The minimal elements of “Infinite Line” came as a surprise to many who are used to finding a dizzying world of ordinary objects. What prompted the change?

SS: I feel like the expectations for this show were wrong. “Infinite Line” is more modest but fundamentally more important; it is a key to the thinking process. I made four times as much work as is in it, so the process involved editing and taking away, which is...
lots harder. For me, it was always a drawing show, an opportunity for people to see how a stripped-down process is very revealing. The drawings were never shown before because I didn’t want them tacked on to a sculptural show. I wanted a show in which the drawings were primary—the sculpture made in relation to the drawings.

JB: Why is drawing so important to you?
SS: The drawings are the skeletal part of my work. They date from 1996 and are a retrospective element in the show. I wanted to show what you can do only with drawing. Drawings are like letters—the portrait drawings, for example, were done by asking each subject to write down 12 significant events in his or her life and then send me the list in an envelope. I then drew the 12 events as a conversation, and they became a portrait.

JB: But the “drawings” in the drawing room go beyond the limits of that medium. They are clearly related to prints and multimedia works. Once you exhaust the limits of a medium, it seems you want to push for more. How do you make this happen?
SS: I am interested in how something can sit on the border of its identity. The print editions raise interesting questions. What is a print? The pieces of one print, Notepad (2008), come off the wall and become sculpture. Notepad is based on the kind of generic pads that I use for drawing. I eat them up. They’re about my thinking process made concrete. There’s intimacy with them, like a tool. A pad is a print—lines printed on pieces of paper. I
decided to take this mundane object and make it into a very high object. It’s totally absurd. I could have bought the pad in a store. But I got high-quality archival paper and ran it through a press with beautiful blue and just the right red, then ran the whole pad through a laser cutter. And this is the exciting part—I didn’t know how it would work. Things you have no idea about can be interesting and can translate into something interesting for the viewer. I cut an architectural template for a balcony into the pad. The balcony folds out and creates a fire escape. Layers of the pad feather out like paper festooning out of a printer. I want the process to look like a live experiment. It’s fragile because we don’t know what the outcome will be. It’s something in the making that could succeed or fail, grow or die.

**JB:** How does Notepad segue to the sculptural installations in “Infinite Line?”

**SS:** The sculptural installations—Random Walk Drawings—are like pages of a sketchbook pulled out, unfolded, and put into space. This show is a precise experiment in which I figure out how line operates through many mediums. How can I reinvent my knowledge of drawing an arch as sculptural form? How can I use one-point perspective, isometric perspective—those drawing skills—to create three-dimensional space?

**JB:** Why is perspective so important to you?

**SS:** Moving through space is fundamental to our experience. We take it for granted but can be quickly thrown off. When the weather changes or you get sick, your perspective changes; so in my work, perspective and gravity shift. I am interested in orientation and disorientation and how we find ourselves in the world. Much art history is about how people depicted reality. Cubism is really realism—about how we see things as we move through space. As I look out the window, I’m orienting myself and being distracted at the same time.

**JB:** The Random Walk Drawings guide viewers from cityscapes into nature and on to infinity. In 2011, the International Art Critics Association awarded your Still Life With Landscape (Model for a Habitat) first prize for Best Project in a Public Space. It’s now an iconic public sculpture along New York City’s High Line. How do these two “walks” differ?

**SS:** The High Line is a walk like “Infinite Line” is a walk. But the High Line has a different context—it’s a straight line, a promenade. It is also a stripped-down structure—nature comes into the work—the birds and the foliage.

**JB:** Then the direction of each walk was determined by the space you were dealt. How did you create multiple perspectives with the “walk” at Asia Society?

**SS:** The space there is very tough, narrow, and deep. The whole space is about very slight counterbalances that show the fragility of balance. The large window in the room with Random Walk Drawing (Window) was originally covered by a wall that I took down during the installation. There is a weird roof outside, and I had to deal with that space. That made the work about extending...
from interior to exterior, about scale shifts. All of it had to do with the idea of an extended line that goes through something invisible—from the interior of the museum to the outside and beyond into nature. Then there was the challenge of the back corner of the room and how not to make it look like a storage wall. I held it back with light in Random Walk Drawing (Water).

JB: You’ve described the moment when a work-in-progress begins to talk back to you as magical. Did that happen as you resolved the challenges of this installation?

SS: It did, first when I figured out how to deal with that roof. I couldn’t put anything on it that would be seen from the outside. I had to consider the effects of wind and other limitations. The idea of an extended rock garden made perfect sense to me. Then, I got rid of a second scroll in the room, which was very important because the single scroll makes a strong statement from the doorway. It’s all about fragile balances. People ask, “How many objects are in it?” and then say, “Oh, if she piles 700 objects on top of one another and you pull one out, everything will fall apart.” Here I ask, “How can you create the feeling of tension when there is almost nothing there?”

JB: Most people refer to your work as cerebral and talk about it in formal terms. But viewers respond with joy and wonder to its intimate, sensuous, and spiritual aspects. Its core is full of emotion and feeling. How do you explain the divide?

SS: Formal considerations are crucial to any work of art. I think that emotions are difficult to talk about. It’s fundamental that people are moved by visual art just as they are by music. But when they talk about it, they go cerebral. The idea of having space where public and private collide, where something generic is intimate, involves the experience of personally seeing. Seeing is discovery, and recognition has an emotional content to it that is very important.

JB: Much has been made of your Chinese-American heritage. At the Asia Society, identity issues are in large part framed by your use of scrolls and the scroll-like way that the sculptures flow down the wall. How do you feel about these characterizations?

SS: You can’t put an exhibition at the Asia Society in a box. Identity issues are very complex. But the volume rises very high when it comes to the influence of Chinese painting in my work. I made a comment about Chinese landscapes in a lecture on Things Fall Apart, and the press ran with it. But 98 percent of my work comes from American art and Turner. With Turner, a tiny ship in a massive storm borders on complete abstraction. He describes how nature behaves, not how it looks. My work has a strong affinity to landscape and being in the landscape. Gordon Matta-Clark is another strong influence. He changed how people think about space in the city—it’s all about how space becomes dead or alive.
JB: And what about the American fascination with objects and things, from Harnett to Warhol to Sze?
SS: Michelangelo didn’t have an iPod, he had marble. Photographs and images from the Web are part of our reality. Design is at such a high level that you ask, “Why am I making an object when this object is pretty amazing?” Pop art gave artists permission, but incorporating found objects is a basic instinct for art.

JB: Do the changes we see at Asia Society anticipate a journey to a new place?
SS: I studied with Jackie Winsor, who said that doing creative work is up and down. The ability to weather that is what makes you a good artist. Every decision affects the next. The work I’m making now? Yes, it’s directly out of what I learned from this show.

JB: Then we have reason to be ever more intrigued about what happens next, especially since you’ve been chosen to represent the U.S. at the 2013 Biennale. What does that mean to you—is it scary or exciting?
SS: It’s very exciting. Taking on a space and completely creating an environment is what I love to do. I like public art, where people don’t expect to see art in context, but here, you have people who want to see contemporary art. It is such a privilege to create for an amazing international forum where people come to look at art in this ritualistic way and soak it in. My biggest wish is to create a relevant dialogue.

Joyce Beekenstein is a writer living in New York.