SARAH SZE

in conversation with

HANS ULRICH OBRIST

Returning to Fondation Cartier just over twenty years since her show there in 1999, Sarah Sze's* Night into Day *presents two new installation works:* Twice Twilight *and* Tracing Fallen Sky. *Each confuses physical, digital, memory and imagination – narratives of time, space and consequence are interwoven through fantastical, immersive experiences. The pieces converse directly with the architecture of Jean Nouvel's building in Paris, inside becomes outside, surface becomes screen; in Sze's universe, the edges of reality 'bleed' into one another. In 1997, Hans Ulrich Obrist invited Sze to participate in* Migrateurs *in Paris, her first museum show out of grad school. Two decades have past, but underlying themes endure: a need to interpret the world and an appreciation that the marks traced by an artist serve as a permanent record of humanity.

Opposite: *Twice Twilight, detail*, 2020

HANS ULRICH OBRIST Hi Sarah, how is Paris?

SARAH SZE I love Paris, it's so nice to be here. People in New York said I was crazy to come in this complex time, but of course I wanted to come and make the work.

HANS You have a very long history with Paris, I always remember when I was curator at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris in the mid-90s, we met and worked on *Cities on the Move* at The Vienna Secession. Then I invited you to do *Migrateurs* in 1997 at Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris. Can you tell us a little bit about that show and your beginnings in Paris? I think it was your first museum show?

SARAH Yes, *Migrateurs* was my first museum show. It was very important, I had just come out of grad school and you invited me over and said, "Play. Do what you want, just come in." When I arrived on site I thought it was funny how close the building's utilities were to the art, the mixture of art and practical signs; art so closely juxtaposed with directions for how you would live in that space. They almost seemed like signs of life, or of emergency, or how the building functioned as an organism. I tried to highlight this experience of seeing a fire hydrant and a Degas right next to each other. I wanted to colonise these spaces that were not thought of as 'art' in that building, to occupy this in-between space – the space between an object we consider art, and an object we think is essential to survival. In architecture, the escape route has a technical term: 'second means of egress', and *Second Means of Egress* was the name of the piece I did with the Berlin Biennale in 1998 right after. In the United States legally you must always have a second means of egress in case of disaster, so although the work had a playful quality to it, for me it was always about the potential of having to escape, to flee. So many of the works at Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris were on the 'Sortie' signs themselves, the 'Exit' signs. We found these different sites in forgotten slivers of space, and I think I created most of the work right there on-site, just upstairs, figured out how to create the composition, then went and inserted it in a kind of viral way. That word sounds very loaded right now.

HANS But we used it at the time, this notion. It was a Félix González-Torres who taught us it's about infiltrating the museum. You used the stairways later on, as well.

SARAH Yes, of course Felix is so central to that idea of the viral and his work only becomes more important over time. And we did use the space under the stairs for one of the locations as well, with a little nod to Fischli and Weiss, there are all these strange little pockets up in the stairways, and other odd spaces hidden throughout the museum. There is the amazing room in the round with the panoramic *La Fée Electricité* by Raoul Dufy, and when you looked over the barrier edge, you discovered on the floor a string of lamps from where the fresco was illuminated and one of my installations was laid out in the raking light among the dust and shadows, in this forgotten space. The series highlighted these cracks, these fissures. I was reading [Dziga] Vertov yesterday and he was talking about cracks and fissures being where the light always comes through. Much of my early work was about 'where is the crack' in this situation and 'how can you colonise the crack and draw attention to it?' I think it's the fissures where meaning can be found, which is also a very much a filmic idea of course, in terms of someone like Eisenstein and montage.

HANS Initially when we met you worked a lot with sculpture. You once told Okwui Enwezor that you think about the "dispersal of objects, the agglomeration of objects, the absence of form as much as the presence, about the decay of the material as much as the construction of material." That [idea] is still relevant, but at the same time you started to use a lot more digital images. Can you talk about this evolution?

SARAH For me it's interesting to be back at the Fondation Cartier almost 22 years later to do a show in the same space, yet treat the building in a very different way [one of Sze's early major solo shows was at Foundation Cartier in 1999]. Within that timespan the proliferation of the image as part of my everyday has exploded and a by-product of this explosion of images is that images seem to have increasingly become merged with objects in a kind of confusion of our experiences of them both. In the 90s I was really interested in how we use objects to place ourselves in time and space, to make sense of where we were in the world. I think that's changed completely at such a radical pace. I'm stating the obvious and many people have written extensively about this, but the way the digital has infiltrated our daily lives is actually shocking. In 1999 we were taking 8 1/2 x 11" transparencies as documentation of my show here, which seems like 100 years ago, right?

I've always been interested in certain times throughout history where our relationship to the way we experience time and space in the world speeds up radically. The invention of the aeroplane, the invention of the train – you see really interesting work coming out of that time, in film, visual arts, in writing. I think we are in the middle of an extreme hurricane where we are learning to speak a language through images at this exponential pace and we're becoming fluent in a language without really knowing what it means. You and I are of an older generation, but I have two children and their fluency in this new language is remarkable, the way they use the trade of images to do everything, whether it's fall in love, find their keys, buy anything... it's deeply threaded into their way of functioning, it's not one or the other. Some of the dialog around pro- or con- material or digital is very polarised. You can say we need to be more in the physical, but the reality is we rely so fundamentally now on the digital, it's critical and operative; you can't dismiss either, they've become one.

The time of Covid is an awful tragedy globally, inequalities are starkly highlighted and deepened in the burden of deaths, and as a disease, the horrific way that people die in isolation – alone from their loved ones. However, if it is possible to – apart from the tragedy – study this time period, it will be significant also as a huge global social experiment in what it means to be isolated from the world, to not be able to move freely, and to have your one lifeline be the digital. Right now we are in a petri dish. There are strange outcomes such as seeing a newscaster broadcast from the intimacy of their house rather than in a broadcast staged setting. You have access to what books are on their shelves, what the interior of their domestic space looks like... Or some acquaintances become closer and others grown apart, as we are forced to communicate through the digital. In this extended period of isolation and heighted digital communication we'll only begin to understand the ramifications of this social experiment in retrospect, but it has accelerated and put a stark light on our dependency on the digital. It will be interesting how we re-enter free access to the physical.

HANS Behind you I see an amazing installation [Obrist and Sze are talking over Zoom]. You have created another piece of your *Timekeeper* series which began in 2015 and, as you have said, investigates the image and the overlaps of the virtual and the material. In a way they are like mixed-reality pieces, digital and physical at the same time. Can you tell us a little bit about the *Timekeeper* series, how it began and how you developed the site-specific *Timekeeper* piece for the Fondation Cartier? I always felt the architecture of [Jean] Nouvel is very conversational.

SARAH It's almost like a live artificial reality space where what is live and what is recorded are merged, that's something I didn't realise until I arrived on site and saw in person. The whole time I didn't know if I would be able to travel, and there are things you can only figure out in space, like sound was impossible to do remotely. I think this building is absolutely phenomenal and something that people don't always realise is that this building acts as a screen itself, in fact it's a whole series of screens and mirrors – that creates a confusion of the indoors and outdoors. The garden is very intimately tied into the space, it's really a pavilion. For the first show in 1999 I was thinking much more about objects and creating a structure that played with the scale of the body in architecture. The ladder [Sze's first exhibition at Fondation Cartier included several ladders] is always designed in a practical way scaled to the body in relation to the scale of architecture. So it was very much about how you navigate scale in this very elegant space, but with a new kind of skeleton that invaded the original structure. Now, I'm really interested in the building as a series of screens and how the building actually disappears. You see things happening outdoors from indoors, you see the proliferation of images in the fracturing, mirroring, and reflecting. For me it's very much about film, because it's all images in motion and you see the juxtapositions of images in differing states, [looks at screens surrounding her]. There's one moment in the work where everything goes quiet, all the images turn to one image. Then at other moments you see images digitised [points to what looks like a screen], at other instances you see what's actually outside. So there is a live confusion about what is a real image, what is real space, what is a screen, what is a reflection. Up here – those white birds are from an old piece of footage from Marey [Étienne-Jules Marey, a French scientist, physiologist and chronophotographer who used photography and filmmaking in his work]. I wanted to reference the beginnings of film, this moment when the photograph

Twice Twilight, 2020

turned into the film in these experiments in the 1880s when Marey and Muybridge started making moving images. Now we're all living in an ongoing stream, an unedited narrative of visual information that comes from high, comes from low, and authorship is confused. It can be personal and come from my phone archive, or impersonal, I can search on the web for images of a volcano and purchase the image like an object. However all of the images that you see in the exhibition are printed-out stills – printed from a video. There are no photographs in the work, just stills. Then the source video for the still, the string of images that make up a 'moving image', is projected on top of the one printed-out still. There's one moment in time, one frame, where these two things meet and then they bleed out again, so your eye is in this state where it's sort of in-between seeing each in its individual state and also trying to figure out when the still meets its narrative. It becomes a process of trying to unravel this confusion of the edge of where a film or image starts, and the edge of where an object starts. It's also important to me that all of these little pieces of paper are torn, so you're always reminded that the image is physical and the digital is actually physical, and you have the tactile and idiosyncratic quality of the hand in real space. Most of the images have something to do with materiality, so you have, for example, a digital image portraying something that in its materiality, we may take for granted, but is actually quite amazing, for example like honey oozing, paint spilling, milk dripping.

HANS The composite of these mixed realities – a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk – is called *Timekeeper* and you said that the *Timekeeper* "endows breath into materials, the travelling message between humans across centuries." What is a Timekeeper?

SARAH The idea for me is that all artwork acts as a Timekeeper. There's a lot of talk about how you can extend your life, through things like cloning and medicines. Now that we have the genetic code you can reproduce your dog. I think the real extension of life is through, for example, writing a great novel. I have a relationship with Virginia Woolf in that she is alive, alive through her work, she remains in a process of creating live conversation. The real Timekeeper is to create a language that can survive, evolve and generate new ideas over time. As an artist you're always trying to create a conversation with repercussions that affect other people over time beyond your own life, so this idea of a Timekeeper is a reminder that any artwork is a portal to a longer conversation, a tracing of time, a way of locating and dislocating yourself in time. The drive is fuelled by a combination of having something feel very urgent to tell as an artist, saying it in a radically new way and, hopefully, ultimately, over time creating a kind of marker in the way humans once existed. When you look at a Hokusai, he tells us about how humans lived on Earth at that time, and tells us through a unique lens – that's an amazing gift to everyone. So it's to remind people, or even to remind myself, that's why art is a very profound sustenance.

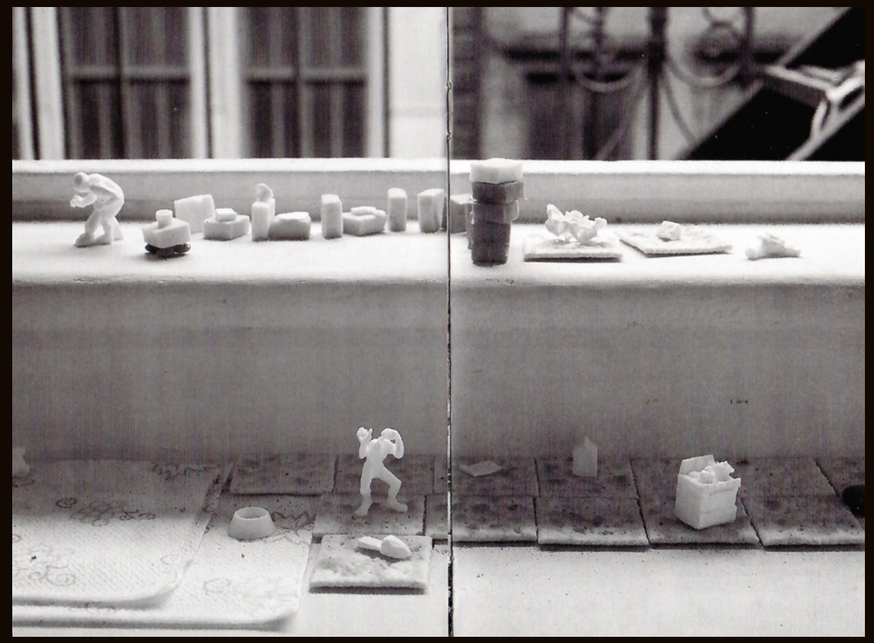
One question about timekeeping that's interesting to me is: what makes it different to be alive now than any other time? You could argue that some of the things that make it different to be human now are that we have the genetic code, the instructions for self; we can make ourselves again. This has never been true in history and it changes entirely the way one thinks of themselves in the world. It brings up many questions, moral and philosophical. Another change is that we've made machines that are potentially smarter

than us and can destroy us. When you talk to people researching AR and VR at the highest levels, the things they say they are struggling with are empathy and creativity – the hardest things to teach a computer are arguably some of the things that define us most as humans.

HANS We are living in an age of new experiments with art and technology, but with Covid, VR is difficult because of disinfecting the goggles... I think for art the idea of AR is more interesting in terms of mixed reality, have you worked with both AR and VR?

SARAH I've always been interested in this idea that when you go into an installation, there's not a curtain or a wall. Instead I wanted to create this blurring of that boundary where you became part of the work, or part of the world, and how those two merged or separated. People have suggested to me, "We want to do VR with your work, we want to have people be able to fly through your piece," but I find this use of VR really uninteresting actually. However, I do think AR is interesting in certain places where there might be a need created. I have done an AR work in conjunction with this show and I like to work across multitudes of different mediums and pose the question: what does each do best? I think what the digital does best is inspire human desire and longing. And I don't mean that in a derogatory way, desire, longing, melancholy of course these are important states in the spectrum of experience that define who we are as humans and a vital place to make work. Dürer's *Melencolia I*, Rembrandt's self-portraits, or Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* for example are, for lack of a better word, masterpieces of longing, desire, and grief and profound expressions of how these states are fundamentally connected to what it means to be human. I find the digital creates a longing all the time because you always want more. So I'm interested in the digital as a medium, as an amazingly expressive tool for a kind of lingering sense of loss. This is the state that I think the digital often stirs up in me, and the residue it often leaves behind. I wanted to show you this piece |*Tracing Fallen Sky*| since you made this very insightful observation about the works operating as mixed-reality pieces, both digital and physical at the same time. In this work there is a pendulum that swings between the boundaries of material and physical, they are married and fall apart, and have that confusion in front of your face. There's a mixture of materials – some that are completely made out of steel, some that are found, all in an arena that's created out of salt, and in the arena these digital images fade and appear as they swim in and out of it. You have the pendulum that swings, and also a digital white ball that transforms from a sun to a moon alternately, and that seems to track the movement of the pendulum in space. What's mesmeric is that the pendulum and the digital ball of light have no relationship to each other, it's just a video moving, but it's set at exactly the same speed as the pendulum so your brain wants to connect them. It looks as if they're magnetically connected, or as if it's a reflection. I didn't want it to just be the shadow, which is there too, haunting them both. So all of them are on a random spin, but because they are moving at the exact same speed you think they are one, and that they are talking to each other. That is a kind of AR idea in real space, where you are constantly questioning, "Am I seeing that physically, am I seeing that digitally?" They are being superimposed all the time, live in real space, but how one creates or effects the other is constantly being questioned and is difficult to fully conceive.

For this show I did an AR experiment where you can hold your phone up in your home and bring the piece into your own space, so the piece itself can become viral, it can travel, these images start to spin and cultivate *in your room*. I think of the phone as actually a viewfinder, like a flashlight. The name of the AR piece is *Night Vision*, it's this idea of being able to see more in a space. I think we use the phone that way, to see time, to see place, the taking of pictures has become a different kind of behaviour. I'm taking pictures for many reasons, but fundamentally I'm constantly reaffirming my existence. Whether I share the pictures or not, a weird second part of my brain is always wondering, "Did I record?" It's a kind of habit of creating a visual storage of memory. I record constantly but I don't look at half the images. I don't use social media, partially because my brother was involved very early on in the development of much of it, as you may know, many of the people who developed it don't encourage their children to use social media because they understand, at least in the United States, the deep loss of privacy and sale of your information. To me the most valuable things in the world are time and privacy. So when people ask, "Why don't you use Instagram," I think, "Why would I ever use Instagram?" What I do find profound



Pages from the artist book by Sarah Sze that accompanied *Migrateurs*, 1997

about Instagram is seeing work through other people's eyes. Like a viewfinder. When I'm in Paris, for example, I can look at #sarahsze and I see how all these people are looking at this very work in Paris, and at the same time I can see how someone sees a work at LaGuardia in New York, and be seeing how all these viewers experience the works. It's an incredible way to travel, through the eyes of others.

HANS Another point that is also interesting is the ecology aspect. I saw your piece at the High Line [*Still Life with Landscape (Model for a Habitat)* June 8, 2011–June 6, 2012] which was a habitat for native bird species. You also had a piece in Bruno Latour's *Critical Zones* exhibition [at Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, running until 8th August 2021 – the exhibition deals with ideas of environment and humans' impact on the Earth]. Bruno was awestruck by your *Timekeeper* because he talks about the idea that the viewer experiences multiplicity, which I think has been in your work from the beginning. I interviewed [Claude] Lévi-Strauss when I lived in Paris and he talked about this idea of the bricolage as a kind of heterogeneous repertoire where you can encounter new things out of found, or old, objects. This heterogeneity of Latour's 'Critical Zone' says that our overall view of the Earth is comprised of smaller parts. So this sculpture you show in Paris is a gigantic ensemble formed out of tiny parts, it's kind of the opposite of Google Earth in a way because you can't just zoom in. The greatest question is how you address the viewer's position. So I'm interested in asking you about this idea of ecology, the 'Critical Zone', how we relate to the Earth, the Universe, Gaia and what it means all in relation to the viewer's position.

SARAH Yes, this is a thread through all my work over the years, in every medium – multiplicity, heterogeneity, and the idea of a work as an ensemble of multiple parts is a constant throughout. Within this idea of an ensemble I think about how a work of art can seep into a viewer and the viewer can seep into the work. From early on, my idea was always that a work should create an entire environment, bring you into it, it should have its own light, its own water system, its own air, its own weather. So that when you moved back into a different kind of weather, or back into the weather of the surrounding world, your senses would be heightened, like the volume had been turned up on your observation of your surroundings. In this site, I wanted the outside environment to blur into the inside of the building and the two spaces to be like one, with the architecture just a thin membrane in between. As you approach the building outdoors it's a sound piece but you likely don't perceive it. Sounds of the piece emanate subtly from the garden before you enter, in the grass and in the trees, but they are in the background, mixed with the sounds of the street. As you enter the building the ambient sound remains the same inside as outside, blurring those two environments.

Bruno actually found my work, then found me and said to me, "I've been trying to get my students to model what you have made in physical form forever and nobody has been able to do it, but I look at your work and this is exactly the model that I'm thinking of." I'm also interested in how we gather and combine materials to try and model behaviour and our inherent failure in fully being able to do that. He expressed to me how he felt that the real importance of having this idea modelled in physical form was that, *if* people could understand that the Earth is not what we envision it to be – an image of a tiny marble, blue, green, seen from outer space, an object that we all think of as this hard rock that you can put a hammer to – but

instead if we could re-imagine, physically, the world as this very thin, very fragile membrane of life, we wouldn't treat it the way we do. There's a fundamental misperception because we've modelled it incorrectly. So it's really interesting to see how a physical representation of something might actually be operative, he proposed that if every single globe image was replaced with this piece here in the Foundation, people would maybe think differently about how they behaved in the world. I believe that was Bruno's point, that the modelling of an idea to convey it can actually instigate fundamental urgent change.

That objects can explain to us about who we are as humans – this is where, in many ways, the science overlaps. There are a lot of forced communications between scientists and artists that don't articulate the deeper connections; it's very hard to do that. My partner is a scientist so it's slightly knitted into my thinking. One example of this overlap in disciplines is this effort to convey thought through materials. With any scientific discovery many laboratories are very close to making the same breakthrough. But there's usually one laboratory that is able to document. It's all about the proof, and the form that proof takes. There are probably tons of hypotheses that are Nobel prize-worthy on the table right now and each of those labs are trying to prove an idea that they all believe is true, so how do you illustrate, visualise, convey that idea to the world? How you make information manifest and understandable is a really interesting question.

For example, when you look at something like the structure of DNA: once that model was made, once you saw the double helix – it was really *that moment* when the public physically saw the model in space that people could understand it... not numbers and letters on paper. That's what a sculpture, and that's what art can do: manifest something in a way that can never be articulated through numbers or words. For me that's such a profound idea, that's what keeps me making art.

HANS Beautiful. I have a last question, which sits in tandem with the idea of inside vs outside in your exhibition: your work in public space. You've done several of these, the subway station [Sze was commissioned to create an installation for the NYC subway station at 96th Street St 2nd Avenue] and more recently at LaGuardia airport [*Shorter than the Day*, a permanent site-specific piece], which was realised during lockdown. In public spaces, viewers become very much a participatory part of the work.

SARAH When I started fully making art, I had worked in the nonprofit world for about five years and it was this incredible luxury to just spend time making my work. People told me, "You really can't do public art, you'll get pigeon-holed and it's very hard, it takes a totally different set of skills because you have to deal with government, bureaucracy, practical considerations..." As I think you know, I studied painting and architecture, so I had it in me partly from architecture. For me I feel it's really important to expand into public space, where I can have a dialog with a broad, diverse audience and try and make what I think is really interesting and challenging work for the public in the context of public space.

I never thought of work in domestic spaces because I never grew up with art in my domestic space. I didn't grow up in a religious family so a museum was like the religious place to go. So museums were really important to me and I only made work for institutions. But I feel my work can do different things in different places, and I like the different questions and challenges that

arise in these different contexts. At LaGuardia, obviously you have the practical limitations and logistical constraints to contend with, but for me, what is interesting about working in a public space is the challenge of creating a kind of intimacy, a fragility, a kind of allure to a space of the imagination in the context of public space, and to have that happen for some people who may not even think it's art. One of my favourite things is the anonymity of public art. The fact that I disappear. Right now, thousands of people are going through the subway station daily, and eventually at LaGuardia thousands of people from all over the world will pass by the work and hopefully in their transit the experience of the work will leave a residue. They can call it art, or not, they can hate it, they can love it – but it's my hope that it will provoke fundamental questions about who they are on Earth. That's the goal.

I also like that public art gives the viewer the chance to discover art in the context of the everyday. For me the idea of seeing things in a state of discovery is really interesting, that's obviously why the pedestal has been obsolete for centuries, the pedestal is like a hand reaching out telling you, "Here, this is what is important" rather than letting the viewer find the importance for themselves and make their own observations, to give them the choice of what to look at. But there are challenges to taking art off the pedestal public spaces. I remember I got to the finals for a commission for the London Tube. They wrote this very polite letter about why I didn't get it, and it was because they thought when people discovered the artwork in the subway they would stop and look for too long and that would create a problem with circulation. I thought, "This is the best rejection letter I have ever gotten." A place of transit is fascinating because it is a place of dislocation and expectation in time and space. I love flying, every time I'm in an airport and get on a plane I think it's a miracle that I'm going to land in another place in another time zone, with another language. LaGuardia is really to me such an interesting site, the human being is in a different state of mind, in motion. The piece at LaGuardia belongs to this idea of a Timekeeper because it's a string of photographs – taken one minute at a time – of the sky over New York. It wraps around so that high noon is at the centre, cradled in between dusk and dawn at its edges. Where it fades out into night and would-be darkness – just before sunrise and right after sunset – becomes the void where you look into the sculpture.

The piece at the Foundation was actually conceived before the one at LaGuardia, so these pieces are generating each other all the time. The piece I did at Tanya's [Tanya Bonakdar Gallery] which I called *Crescent,* was actually the model that was built to figure out how this piece at Cartier could be constructed. It is a building process that is about taking away the structure to make it more and more fragile – removing each piece just to the point where it can still stand. The engineering of much of my work is actually a process of reduction until it is barely holding on. All these pieces are actually just framings of negative space. There is nothing circular in either of those pieces, everything is flat, all the grids are square and all the papers are flat but they are held in a position so that they cradle a negative space. So in terms of Bruno's idea of life, of what the Earth *is*, what life on Earth *is* – the work is not even there. When people say it's a cosmos, there is no sculptural structure, it's all scaffolding holding up images. That sculptural idea is entirely created in the eye of the viewer.

Tracing Fallen Sky, 2020

Tracing Fallen Sky and exhibition view of *Twice Twilight* photos by Thibaut Voisin; *Twice Twilight* detail photo by Luc Boegly; *Migrateurs* book scans courtesy Hans Ulrich Obrist