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.
HANS ULRICH OBRIST
Hi Sarah, how are you?

SARAH SZE
I love Paris, it’s so nice to be here. People in New York said I was crazy to come to Paris in this 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 Venice Biennale. Then I invited you to do Migrations in 1997 at Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris. Can you tell us a little bit about that show and your beginnings in Paris? It was your first museum show?

SARAH
Yes, Migrations was my first museum show. It was very important, I had just come out of that real thin place and you invited me over, and said, “Play. Do what you want, just come.” When I arrived on site I thought it was funny that I knew 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 navigate in space. They almost seemed like signs of life, or of emergency, or how the building was functioning 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 those spaces that were not thought of as ‘art’ in that building, to occupy this in-between space – the space between the two. To consider art, and as an object we think is essential to survival. In architecture that escape route has a technical term: second means of egress, and Second Means of Egress was the name of the piece I did with them in 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. I noted 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 legal, second means of egress. That sound sounds very loaded right now.

HANS
But we used it at the time, this idea of the viral and his work only taught us it’s about infiltrating the museum. You used the stairways later on, as well. In the United States legally you must always have a second means of egress in case of disaster – that creates a confusion of the indoors – alone from their loved ones. However, if it’s possible to – apart from the trend of studying 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 lifetime be the digital. Right now we are in a real emergency, there are strange outcomes such as seeing a newsreader broadcast from the intimacy of his bedroom, 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 ‘distant signs’. In this extended period of isolation and heightened 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 capacity for the digital. It will be interesting how we re-enter free access to the physical.

SARAH
As much as I have been interested in 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 continued it, specifically Timekeeper piece for the Fondation Cartier?

HANS
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 experience, even though that this building acts as a screen itself, in fact it’s a whole series of screens and mirrors – found footage, itself a digital of film, this moment when the photograph overlaps the virtual and the material. In a way it’s like mixed-reality, digital and physical at the same time.

SARAH
I’ve always been interested in certain times throughout history where there was a relationship to the way we experience time and space in the world speeds up radically. The invention of the airplane, 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, 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 rooted into their way of functioning, it’s not one or the other. Some of the dialog around pre- or con- material or digital is very polemical. You can say how very heavy is the digital, in the physical, but the reality is we reify 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’s possible to – apart from the trend of studying 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 lifetime be the digital. Right now we are in a real emergency, there are strange outcomes such as seeing a newsreader broadcast from the intimacy of his bedroom, 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 ‘distant signs’. In this extended period of isolation and heightened 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 capacity for the digital. It will be interesting how we re-enter free access to the physical.

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SARAH
Behind you I see an amazing series which began in 2015 and, as stated in ‘Timekeeper’ series, how it goes from Marey [Étienne-Jules Marey, a French physiologist] and others grown apart, as we are forced to communicate through the ‘distant signs’. In this extended period of isolation and heightened 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 capacity for the digital. It will be interesting how we re-enter free access to the physical. I was thinking about the Fondation Cartier which 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 is still relevant, but at the same time you started to use a lot more digital images. Can you talk about this evolution?

HANS
For me it’s interesting to be back at the Fondation Cartier almost 22 years after. There are strange outcomes such as seeing a newsreader broadcast from the intimacy of his bedroom, 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 ‘distant signs’. In this extended period of isolation and heightened 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 capacity for the digital. It will be interesting how we re-enter free access to the physical.

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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 oneself in time. This is fueled by a combination of having something feel very urgent to tell as an artist, saying it in a radially 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 available to us. What do we want to create? What do we want to make? This is the stuff of the real Timekeeper. It’s not just that life is fleeting, it’s that life is a gift. People have a sense 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 things that are important, 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 mortality, 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.

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 are always trying to create a conversation with repercussions that affect other people. In a community way you’re always trying to create a conversation, generate new ideas over time. As an artist you’re always trying to create a language that can survive, evolve and live conversation. The real Timekeeper is to create something that will endure, something that will have a sense of time, of the edge of where an object starts. It’s also important to me that all of these little things that are important, 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 mortality, 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.

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SARAH SZE

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 Zone' exhibition at Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, running until 8th August 2021 – the exhibition deals with ideas of environment and human's 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 it 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 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 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 is a miracle that's what keeps me making art.

For me 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 contest of public space.

I never thought of work in domestic spaces because I never grew up with it 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 as an artist, 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 about it, I'm going to land in another place in another time zone, with another language. LaGuardia is the closest to me such an obvious human being is in a different state of mind, in motion. The piece at LaGuardia belongs to this moment. A Timekeeper is a string of photographs – taken one minute at a time – of the sky over New York. It-wrap 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.
SARAH SZE

Tracing Fallen Sky, 2020

and exhibition view of Tracing Fallen Sky. Twice Twilight books courtesy Hans Ulrich Obrist.