FRIEZE

Sarah Charlesworth

The Art Institute of Chicago, USA

BY **WILLIAM J. SIMMONS** IN **REVIEWS** | 30 OCT 14



Sarah Charlesworth, *Unidentified Man, Ontani Hotel, Los Angeles*, 1980/2012, from the series 'Stills', photograph

They say that those who survive attempted suicide often recount the overwhelming regret that they experienced the second they jumped – precisely at the point of no going back. Sarah Charlesworth's series 'Stills' (1980/2012), on view for the first time in its entirety at the Art Institute of Chicago, reproduces and magnifies photographs of people – both named and anonymous – attempting to jump to their deaths. Caught between living and dying, the subjects confront that quintessential moment of self-affirmation and self-destruction.

We cannot know if there were survivors amongst those depicted; thus we long for a chance to intervene, to reverse time and to reject the documentary function of the photograph. This desire is perhaps especially pertinent considering Charleworth's passing last year; a well-respected teacher and friend, she imprinted her spirit on the hearts of many. Like Roland Barthes's 'winter garden photograph' – a picture of his mother discussed at length in Camera Lucida (1980) – 'Stills' is between this world and the next, an illustration of the photograph's ability to instigate our will to existence and remembrance. The in-between status of the suspended jump also has parallels in Charlesworth's treatment of her materials: she was among the first artists to print life-size photographs on cheap supports, a direct insult to the prevailing idea of the precious unique print. As a result of Charlesworth's particular process, and demonstrating her love for newspaper and stock photographs, the 'Stills' images fall apart into stacks of horizontals and dots, hovering somewhere between clarity and disintegration. Despite their unsympathetic, deadpan and tabloid-like appearance, there is nevertheless something beautiful about these appropriated acts of desperation, not only for their balletic associations, but also for the understated formal virtuosity of every print. Each of the 14 stills has its own character because of Charlesworth's careful cropping and tearing, the signs of which she leaves visible. Unlike the people they represent, who are often left unnamed, every print has a distinct personality. Portraying people at the precise moment they have lost all control, the artist's own rigour is asserted, leaving us with a simultaneously critical and intensely emotional image.

These are not didactic images and you would be hard-pressed to find a simple illustration of mass media's callous relationship to human life. Charlesworth instead evokes a transitional psychic space and prompts the question: 'What could they be thinking about right now?'. She attempts to make visible the exact moment in which bodies face the possibility of destruction, translated, in the photographic medium, as the point at which forms disentegrate into lines and dots. As a result, we find ourselves in a world marked by inspiring contrasts – beauty and ugliness, anonymity and identification, bodies and pure forms.

Perhaps longing for the past, for a time when choices could yet be amended, the individuals in 'Stills' come to represent an embodied netherworld – a darkroom wherein bodies constantly emerge and are dispersed. We do not know these figures, but there is nevertheless something perversely brave about their acceptance of the unknown. As Kate Linker noted in the panel discussion that accompanied the opening of the exhibition, Charlesworth's 'toughest, strongest images had a kind of seduction'. She invited her viewers to come with her to the darkest places – darkness and light, after all, are the foundations of photographic practice. This first major museum show of the artist's work since her death is exemplary of her radical charge into the unknown.