THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE · INDEPENDENT AND FREE

ARTSEEN | MAY 2020

Sarah Charlesworth: *Image Language*

By Robert C. Morgan



Installation view, *Sarah Charlesworth: Image Language*, Printed Matter, New York, 2020. Courtesy Printed Matter.

Having been in the business of reviewing exhibitions for close to 40 years, this is my first occasion to take on a show where others are essentially in the position of reviewing it for me. Accordingly, before making a few terse remarks of my own, I feel compelled to highlight the extraordinary intellectual exchange between Christine Robinson (Curator) and Matthew C. Lange (Studio Manager of the Sarah Charlesworth Estate), which provided a truly vital perspective on a brilliantly unyielding conceptual artist. This conversation on the subject of Sarah Charlesworth's current exhibition at Printed Matter took place on the afternoon of April 24, and was one of the best I have heard in years, certainly outside of Europe. The carefully developed comments offered by Robinson and Lange were not only informed by in-depth research, but were clearly presented in a manner that was spontaneous, engaging, and focused. Mind you, this was sustained for more than an hour and a half of exhilarating and informative discourse—no mean feat.

The title Image Language sounds perfect for an exhibition at Printed Matter, a grassroots organization founded in the late 1970s, which gives special attention to the connections between words and images as dealt with in artist's books and publications. Charlesworth—who would come to be associated with the Pictures Generation group, and was exhibited in the Met's 2009 exhibition of the same name along with colleagues such as Dara Birnbaum, Sherrie Levine, and Cindy Sherman—was persistently concerned to displace the role of language, ultimately giving it back to the image. In doing this, she became one of the most independent, relevant, and instrumental conceptualists rethinking the legacy of Joseph Kosuth , Lawrence Weiner, Douglas Huebler, and Robert Barry, the four artists shown by Seth Siegelaub in his first Conceptual art exhibition, January 5–31, 1969. Indeed, Charlesworth and Kosuth together founded the Fox, a vehicle of theory—art and politics—in 1975. In addition to serving as a founder and contributor to this journal, Charlesworth was also closely involved in its design and publication. This kind of textual activity was, appropriate to the venue of Printed Matter, discussed with considerable vitality during Robinson and Lange's "walkthrough." The impetus to create the Fox had come partially through Kosuth's connections with writers from Art-Language in Coventry, England, and the two formally published issues reflect this linkage. They were filled with ideological permutations on art that incorporate a heavy political dosage. The next major publication that caught Charlesworth's attention, some years later, was a periodical entitled BOMB, given entirely to writings and related contributions by artists. This was not quite a theoretical publication, but nonetheless focused on artists' ideas.

If I might add a more personal account, I met Charlesworth in 1977 in SoHo in a studio she shared with Kosuth, to whom she had been introduced by another major Conceptualist of the Siegelaub years: Douglas Huebler. As Lange mentioned in his comments, Huebler had been an important mentor for Charlesworth. At the time, she was working with photographs taken from the front pages of newspapers published both in Europe and the United States. A portion of this work is currently on exhibition at Printed Matter—it was shown and described in some detail during the "walkthrough." The remarkable complexity of Charlesworth's practice is staggering. There are layers upon layers of thought that inform and accompany each of these works. The majority of what is presented at the Printed Matter exhibition is drawn from Charlesworth's seemingly infinite collection of photographic imagery, taken from various sources in various working contexts. This exhibition represents the systemic basis of Charlesworth's research and highlights the fundamental archival elements that define her life's work.



Installation view, *Sarah Charlesworth: Image Language*, Printed Matter, New York, 2020. Courtesy Printed Matter.



Installation view, *Sarah Charlesworth: Image Language*, Printed Matter, New York, 2020. Courtesy Printed Matter.

For an artist of Charlesworth's caliber, the role of history is important. From the reality of history, we learn there is little escape. The challenge is to find the artist in a profound way (not always, a purely academic way), and to begin opening the channels that allow one to rediscover sources that have played important roles in an artist's career, without losing sight of their basic distinctiveness and originality. In the opening paragraph, I alluded to Sarah Charlesworth as a "conceptual artist" (with a small "c"), recognizing that her early contact with the legacy of 1960s Conceptual art represented, I believe, a training ground that laid the foundation for her better-known career in the mid-'80s.

As pointed out in the "walkthrough" of Printed Matter's exhibition, there have been many students from the School of Visual Arts—where the artist taught photography for several years until her untimely passing in 2013—who knew Professor Charlesworth primarily as a photographer. However, with the mounting of this exhibition, as well as other previous shows at Paula Cooper Gallery and the New Museum, some have discovered that there was much more to know. Indeed, Charlesworth was a particular kind of photographer: attuned to theory and politics, and utterly possessed by her scholarly intentions, yet never confusing her disparate manner of work with her ultimate role as an artist.