
Sarah Sze's Random Walk-Drawing: An Encounter With The Hyperreal by
Leonie Bradbury

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To the famous categories of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, it is going to be necessary to add the hyperreal, which captures and obstructs the functioning of the three orders.^[i] —Jean Baudrillard

Installation artist Sarah Sze's site-specific works that comprise *Random Walk-Drawing* operate at a nexus between architecture, sculpture, and drawing. Although her materials consist almost entirely of found objects and reclaimed materials, her compositions possess a painterly formality. Like Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*,^[ii] the artist questions how and when something, an object or a substance, becomes art as opposed to remaining an object.^[iii] For *Random Walk-Drawing* found objects are combined to create a spatial engagement that extends beyond the boundaries of the gallery. The way the viewer experiences Sze's unique system of perspective is through the visual and physical engagement of looking.

Sze's installations present conglomerations of objects and materials to create imaginative worlds that are experienced as if from an aerial perspective. The large compositions that make up *Random Walk-Drawing* shimmer between the frameworks of object and image, sculpture and drawing. This simultaneous collapsing of the object and the image, the real and the imaginary, makes its material status unclear. The viewer experiences this alternately as a feeling of grounded-ness, in terms of the topological nature of the work, and destabilization, a result of the installation's oscillating back and forth between the realms of object and image. Sze's work questions not only objects in and of themselves, but rather the way we relate to them through seeing within a particular temporal and spatial context.



Sarah Sze, *Random Walk Drawing* (installation view), 2011, Mixed media, Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy of Tom Powel.

With this particular group of installations, Sze provides a stunning encounter with the real, and in doing so, she offers a response to the digital age and its conditioning of human existence. This heightened awareness of body and mind, and the realization of one's physicality in the gallery space in relation to the art works, facilitates a state of meditative presentness so often lacking in contemporary society. It may seem that this response is purely visual, a celebration of the materiality of the real. However, I will argue that Sze's *Random Walk-Drawing* functions as a visualization of the hyperreal in that it blends reality and representation without a clear distinction where one begins and the other ends: a simulation. French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard defines simulation as the process in which the "representations of things come to replace the things being represented ... the representations become more important than the 'real thing.'"^[iv] Where does Sarah Sze's work fit in? Does her installation *Random Walk-Drawing* reinforce notions of reality or negate them? Are these installations emblems of the real, symbolic, or imaginary? Or can they be interpreted as a visualization of Baudrillard's hyperreal?

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan created the triad "symbolic-real-imaginary" to reflect three interdependent psychoanalytic orders. Rooted in Freudian theory, "they serve to situate subjectivity within a system of perception and a dialogue with the external world."^[v] The imaginary is the realm of images, both conscious and unconscious. It is not simply the

opposite of the real, because the image certainly belongs to reality.[vi] Lacan's 'real' is linked to both the imaginary and the symbolic and "stands for what is neither symbolic nor imaginary. The Lacanian concept of the real "is not to be confused with reality, which is perfectly knowable: the subject of desire knows no more than that, since for it reality is entirely phantasmatic." [vii] The real is used by Lacan to describe 'that-which-is-lacking.' It is a site of resistance or disturbance of the other two orders. For Baudrillard, however, a fourth category needed to be added to Lacan's triad namely the hyperreal.

Prior to answering the question of whether or not Sze's work is a visualization of the hyperreal, we must first closely examine *Random Walk-Drawing*. The following sections, *System of Signs*, *Acts of Seeing*, and *Lines of Sight* will precede the section *Poetic Illusion* where the essay will address the hyperreal. Together these segments provide an in-depth reading of *Random Walk-Drawing* needed in order to come to a better understanding of the nature of the artist's work prior to tackling the central question of whether or not it can be considered a representation of the hyperreal.

System of Signs

Random Walk-Drawing (Eye Chart) (2011) invites the viewer into him/herself. Starting in the front with some low-lying elements on the gallery floor, a thin black hoop opens slightly toward the viewer, while at its center, a large 'rock' weighs down a large sheet of white paper, an eye chart with its letters removed. Behind it the black cutout letters from the chart stand, repeated, in a pile of salt, surrounded by four sticks that form a square. It leads the eye to a bright orange dent puller suction cup, next to it a generic white desktop fan and a lit black lamp. To their left are two bright yellow spools of thread, industrial size. This row of objects is blocked by a large roll of black paper, which is rolled toward and up against the wall and ends near the ceiling with a dowel and ribbon similar to a Chinese scroll. Each item is meticulously placed, the aesthetic decisions and artistic process made visible to the viewer. Connections can be made on multiple levels: visually there are colors that echo or contrast; forms, shapes and textures that lie parallel, pick up or leave off; and symbolically there are references to the office, garage, and studio.



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Sarah Sze, *Random Walk Drawing (Eye Chart)*, 2011, Mixed media, Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy of Tom Powel.

At the seam, where gallery wall and floor meet, the artist has placed a wooden stool, a white pillow and a blue recycling bin in front and on top of the black scroll. The generic fan and desktop lamp, the stool, and recycling bin refer to the ubiquitous office culture of corporate America. Along side these objects are several vertical elements that lead the eye up: a yellow tape measure, more cut paper (white), a standing mirror, and an extension pole with duster. To the far right another stick, upright this time, leads to another eye chart (installed at eye level) and finally rests on a black piece of paper. Half way up the wall-scroll the artist has layered a complicated set of cut paper, simultaneously revealing and concealing the many layers below. The elements are fragments of the artist's life, recognizable and abstractly formal at the same time. For example, the plastic cups with dried up orange paint inside and the many items that bear her name such as the credit cards stacked in a fan under the rocks. All are carefully selected and arranged in their particular order by the Sze. It is a visual order that can be followed throughout the gallery space and connects each piece to another.

Sze's object installations connect to the tradition of the readymade as is evident in works by Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp, as well as Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines* from the 1950s. Like Picasso, Duchamp, and Rauschenberg, Sze pursues a similar questioning of the difference between objects and art, real and imaginary, and in her case specifically sculpture and drawing. In his essay *Contemporary Art: Art Contemporary with Itself*, Baudrillard stated "with ready-mades, the object is no longer there, only the idea of the object."^[viii] He further argues that "the ready-made holds the double curse of modern and contemporary art: the curse of immersion in reality and banality along with the curse of conceptual absorption in the idea of art."^[ix] Sze's objects are recognizable, ordinary. Credit cards, boarding passes, and ballpoint pens are incorporated 'as is.' However, it is in the process of their artistic arrangement that they transform into something other than what they are. It is as part of the installation that they transform from object to image.

Although we recognize the objects for what their functionality is in our lives and the symbolic role they can play in creating a commentary on our daily lives, we can see them now in a new light as shiny, plastic, or paper shapes and textures that relate formally to the other objects and materials that surround them. It is the formal relationship that enables the objects to become synthesized into an image. Each of Sze's pieces is a system of resonance, comprised of a network of relational parts that are merged together visually to form both an installation and an overall image. W. J. T. Mitchell in his essay *Picture Theory* introduces the concept of "multistability" in reference to ambiguous images that contain contrary functions, or multiple readings, within themselves.

According to Mitchell, these types of images elicit “threshold experiences” in which “time and space, figure and ground, subject and object play an endless game of see-saw.”^[x] It is this “see-saw” that creates the shimmering effect. Sze’s installations are certainly self-referential, and literally and figuratively refer to the act of making pictures. They are metapictures in a strict formal sense, a work of art about art itself, a work of art that refers to its own making. Sze takes it a step further in that she also questions the creation of the image through an arrangement of objects to form three-dimensional installations. Jacques Rancière stated, “[t]here is visibility that does not amount to an image; there are images that consist wholly in words.”^[xi] In the case of Sze’s installation *Random Walk-Drawing* she provides an image that consists wholly in objects.

Sze’s installation actively confuses the viewer in that it blurs the boundary between reality (object) and representation (image) and intentionally creates a feeling of disorientation, the viewer is often unsure if an element is part of the work or an accidental intervention of the real. For example, in the piece next to the door as you first walk in, a translucent grey Bic pen cap lies on the floor as if accidentally dropped by a visitor. As a viewer there is a moment of uncertainty: is this part of the art or an unintentional intervention of real life into a work of art. Upon closer inspection the placement, the formal relations between the cap and the surrounding piece become evident and the pen cap transforms into a translucent accent. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas stated, “the real world is transformed into a poetic world—that is, into a world without beginning where one thinks without knowing, what one thinks.”^[xii] Sze’s installation at the Asia Society certainly presents this blending of real and representation, simulation and simulacrum in order to create a poetic experience for the viewer.

Sze collapses the real and the imaginary, object and image. In doing so she presents a novel experience to the viewer, an original event. She provides a fresh way to connect to and view the things that surround us everyday. Her attentiveness to materiality can be situated among a larger societal interest. Cultural theorist Bill Brown in his essay *Thing Theory* observed:

More recently, some delight has been taken in historicism’s ‘desire to make contact with the ‘real,’ in the emergence of material culture studies and the vitality of material history, in accounts of everyday life and the material *habitus*, as in the ‘return of the real’ in contemporary art, this is inseparable, surely, from the very pleasure taken in “objects of the external world,” however problematic that external world may be—however phantasmatic—the externality of that world may be theorized to be.^[xiii]

Sze’s installation reminds us that we experience the world as a thing among things, more specifically, as Brown would put it, a “body as thing among things.”^[xiv] Brown describes the *thingness* of objects as the moment when they stop functioning for us, “when their flow

within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.”^[xv] Sze’s installations are conglomerations of objects that have lost their place in the normal circulation of things. Her materials are ‘things’ that temporarily have stopped functioning as stools, pen caps, or credit cards and become something other, namely art. Brown imagines a thing as that element which “is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems.”^[xvi] Sze is extremely skilled in identifying the totem or fetish value in the objects that she selects for her installations. She leads the viewer to appreciate the shiny yellowness of a tape measure, or the soft whiteness of an ordinary pillow. An appreciation of which one can be reminded once returned home.

Sze does not alter the found object she includes and incorporates them without hiding their original functionality. For example, the blue recycling bin in *(Eye Chart)* is still functional should it be removed from the installation. It is as if it has only momentarily stopped functioning as a recycling bin. Its purpose has simply shifted from a receptacle for recyclables to the formalist role of a blue rectangle against the white gallery wall, whose purpose is to emphasize the space where gallery floor and wall, sites of object and image, meet. It is now part of an aesthetic world where recycling bins are blue rectangles that provide visual balance to a paper scroll.

Together the objects included in *Random Walk-Drawing* reflect culture and our perception of the world in the twenty-first century. Baudrillard described the meaning of objects and the structural system of which they were apart as a system of signs.^[xvii] Sze’s installation also presents us with a system of signs, as each of the various objects and materials brings with it an iconography, a set of associations that allow the viewer to make connections between the work and their world. It also does a lot more than that in its presentation of the materials and the careful formal arrangements, which reveal the aesthetic decision making process and make it traceable throughout the works.

French Curator Christine Macel wrote in her exhibition catalogue on Mexican born artist Damian Ortega that, “rather than objects, Ortega offers... an experience of their perception that goes beyond the object itself to offer a knowledge of the object. The seeing-eye is confronted with its own representation and the very process of its functioning.”^[xviii] It is a description that relates closely to the ideas that inform Sze’s work. Like Ortega, Sze is concerned with the perception of objects, the act of seeing, and likewise she is interested in offering a different way of considering our knowledge of the world around us as presented through objects. However, for Sze, like Ortega, the viewer is invited to go beyond his or her experience of the objects in order to experience another kind of event. What this is, exactly, is left up to the viewer.

Acts of Seeing

We generally see art not as objects, but as images. A fact our increasingly digital culture has only intensified, as we now experience much of the world through (digital) images, rather than actual physical experiences. Sze's emphasis on movement through space is poignant as it relates directly to the way a viewer experiences her installations. You can walk around them, look down on them, but they are not interactive. They are primarily a visual experience that constantly shifts and changes as you walk around the pieces. Sze describes the relationship of the viewer to her work through the act of seeing. She said:

The entire experience of viewing a work is always based on a kind of circulation or choreography through the space. This is something that I think comes from an architectural way of seeing. There's a consideration of how the viewer will see it at every point—even what one sees peripherally when looking at other things. [...] The viewer's perspective and how information is revealed to the viewers as they move through time and space are for me actually what the experience of the work is always about.[xix]

It is the viewer's experience as he or she moves through space that is of most interest to the artist. This movement is a sensation that is experienced live, in the moment, but through the act of looking at this complex network of objects and images.

Random Walk-Drawing includes many references to the act of seeing. The black and white eye chart is used for the testing of visual acuity, a measure of the spatial resolution of the visual processing system.[xx] A second motif repeated throughout the installations is the popular color vision test known as Ishihara Color Test showing plates, where a number is 'hidden' in a field of colored dots that are commonly used to detect color blindness. As part of *Random Walk-Drawing (Window)* (2011), Sze has cut out the dots and placed them in various configurations near the plates. The artist has rendered the plates non-functional. She further repeats the dotting system by cutting out dots from regular photographs and arranging them in a pattern on the gallery floor as is evidenced in *Random Walk-Drawing (Water)* (2011). Sze questions what it means to see and in particular what it means to see color, an important element in the appreciation and creation of a work of art.



Sarah Sze, *Random Walk Drawing (Water)*, 2011 Mixed media, Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy of Tom Powel.

Sze's method of establishing connections between disparate forms and shapes is achieved through formal, and in particular, color relations. For example, dried up blue paint in the bottom of a grouping of plastic cups forms the base of the large geometric, perspectival structure central to *Random Walk-Drawing (Water)*. This indigo blue is carried through visually in the blue string that lines the structure and leads the eye up through engaging geometric pathways onto the gallery wall. There the color is picked up to the right in a photographic image of a waterfall and in two singular lines, one vertical and one horizontal of blue carpenter's chalk. The vertical line draws your eye up towards the ceiling, while the horizontal one carries your eye over to the left to find an independently lit, nest-like structure that casts an intricate shadow on the wall. The large blue recycle bin in the adjacent *Random Walk-Drawing* and little blue pieces of painter's tape continue this particular motif throughout the space.

Sze's installations are a meditation on the nature of representation and of the nature of seeing. They question our relationship to not just her work, but to the world in general. The objects, when combined, become an imaginary world where the viewer is invited to literally

complete the picture through looking. How do we see the world, what does it mean to represent and see the world in images of it? French philosopher Michel Foucault declared that metapictures “encourage introspection, reflection, and meditations on visual experience.” [xxi] This statement describes quite clearly what Sze’s ‘pictures’ also do. For Sze, looking is not passive. Through material and form Sze makes evident the consequence of looking, ultimately relying on one’s desire to see to set the collaboration between object and viewer in motion. Sze’s work rewards the active viewer with a heightened awareness of their surroundings and an expanded way of seeing. There is the sensory experience, primarily seeing, which is contrasted or highlighted by moments of reflection of insight. A collection of what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan would call ‘moments of encounter’ or *tuchés*. [xxii]

Sze introduces a distinctive system of shifting points of view throughout her installations. It is reminiscent of the perspective evident in Chinese scroll paintings where there is limited or no middle ground. She provides an example in her interview with Asia Society curator Melissa Chiu noting, “[i]n Chinese painting, I’m interested in the kinds of scale shifts that result from not having much of a middle ground. The looming landscapes often have very tiny views of the everyday. The result is a magnificent view of nature contrasted with someone, say, washing the floor or milking a cow. That shift is quick and dramatic.” [xxiii] One of the things that Sze is interested in is the question of how we create space, how we describe space, and how we experience space. She continues to say that:

The way you move through a traditional Chinese painting, space peels off as you move back; it has more of a theatrical presence, and I’m using that word in terms of theater sets. With one-point or two-point perspective, objects are not parallel in space and things shrink in space. What’s interesting to me in terms of taking the two-dimensional into three dimensions is that the Asian perspective is actually closer to how we see. It represents real space more accurately in that parallel lines don’t converge when you move through them. [xxiv]

Sze’s emphasis on movement through space in terms of experiencing and transitioning between the two–and three–dimensional is poignant as it relates directly to the way a viewer experiences her installations. It is through careful looking and traveling with one’s gaze through this intricate environment of materiality that we begin to discern the artist’s intentions.

Lines of Sight

The primary manner in which Sze leads the viewer around her work is through her use of line. The artist uses line to create sight connections between her drawings and to link the various components within each piece. Her use of line is both sculptural and linear

simultaneously. Each linear element, such as the yellow tape measure, the white or the blue carpenter's chalk line has a different color and texture. They function as a drawn line on paper would, as an indication of the artists' hand, a visual gesture, but also as a sculptural element.

Sze herself stated that, "in both drawing and sculpture I'm interested in the depiction of gravity and weightlessness as both an operative and a disorienting force. I'm thinking about floating, sinking, rising, drifting, and the resulting fragility, disorientation, and instability."^[xxv] For Sze this installation is about challenging and highlighting the line between drawing and sculpture. She questions: "How do you make a sculpture that acts like a drawing? How do you make a drawing that acts like a sculpture? What do you do with a drawing that you can't do with sculpture, and vice versa?"^[xxvi] Sze's installation at the Asia Society is an investigation into the relational space between the two media, drawing and sculpture, and the two resultant experiential states of grounded-ness and disorientation.

Random Walk-Drawing (Window) is comprised of a number of large natural rocks placed on top of credit cards and several metal pipes and wooden strips balanced on top of other rocky elements. The rocks are circled with string, which continues onto the floor and onto the next rock. The various rocks function as sign posts and/or landmarks in a sensory terrain of materiality. United they provide an immersive topological experience where the correlations between the objects are as important as the elements themselves. These relationships are created through corresponding texture, color, and shapes between the various components. The connections are further emphasized through the artist's use of line as a method to pass between and through points, areas and contours.



Sarah Sze, *Random Walk Drawing (Window)*, 2011 Mixed media, Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy of Tom Powel.

The string contour lines that wrap around the rocks, and connect them to each other, reference mapping technology and topographic imaging. It is in the ‘act of looking’ that the installations *Random Walk-Drawing (Window)* and *Random Walk-Drawing(Water)* become landscapes through and over which the viewer’s eye can travel. With *(Window)* in particular the viewer has an aerial point of view. One feels as if in flight, looking down on a landscape from an airplane window. The eye travels from the elements on the ground, through the linear segments through the window wall and out onto the roof. The lines of sight extend away from the gallery into the city of New York, where they are picked up by the streetscape and architectural surroundings and continue into the world beyond.

The viewer travels through Sze’s assemblage landscapes as a wanderer, the hungry eye satiated through looking. Lacan questions “How could this showing satisfy something, if there is not some appetite of the eye on the part of the person looking? This appetite of the eye that must be fed produces the hypnotic value of painting.”^[xxvii] Lacan places the “moment of seeing” at the center between the “arrest of the gesture” and the dialectic of “indentificatory haste.”^[xxviii] Sze’s line is intimate, disorienting. It reveals the artist’s hand and intention. It is her gesture moving through space. The viewer has to engage with it,

follow it without knowing where it is going. For Lacan, the gaze completes the gesture, just as for Sze the viewer's gaze completes the artist's intention.

Sze describes her intention as follows, "what's really interesting for me about this show [*Infinite Line*] is that it's really about the very profound link between the potential to describe space and the space between drawing and sculpture."^[xxix] For Sze, preparatory drawings are a crucial part of the process in designing the three-dimensional work. She states, "They are similar to architectural drawings in that they're mostly abstract, theoretical; they're about an idea. [...] They're much more about how a piece will grow, speed up, slow down, lead you to a certain corner, bring you back. It's about the larger movement through the space."^[xxx] It is her emphasis on line that connects the various objects to one another. It is through her sense of line, or drawing in space, that the artist leads the viewer's eye around the gallery, at times indeed speeding up and slowing down. In the case of *Random Walk-Drawing (Window)* the artist leads the viewer's eye right out onto the New York City streets. It is through this physical connection of Sze's drawings to the world outside the gallery, that the viewer is asked to reconsider not just the objects in our lives, but also the lines of sight, our way of viewing the world.

Poetic Illusion

Does Sze's combination of image and object into an optical and topological consciousness create a new real? The Oxford English Dictionary defines reality as "the quality of being real or having an actual existence" and supplements this with a definition of real as "having objective existence," and finally to exist as having "place in the domain of reality."^[xxxi] Baudrillard talks of a world experienced through artificial 'empty' images, a simulation of reality, rather than experienced directly. He argues that our perception of reality is always mediated through images, which has resulted in a world where the division between real and the imaginary (object and image) has collapsed. In *Simulacra and Simulations* the author declared, "When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. [...] There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience."^[xxxii] Baudrillard even speaks further of a 'mourning of the real.'

Nostalgia implies a sense of loss, a longing for a previous time. Sze's work does not mourn for the past, but rather engages the viewer in the present. It does however, contain a sense of longing, but it is a longing for a restoration of the real, the tactile. In an age of digital communication and reproduction, a world filled with stimuli and simulations, Sze communicates directly through objects and their materiality, rather than create a simulation of the real. Sze's works are emblems of pure reality. Hyperreality is a way of characterizing what is defined as "real" in a world where a multitude of media can radically shape and filter an original event or experience.

Media theorist Nicolas Oberly explains the historical conditions for the development of the hyperreal as follows:

Common themes include the explosion of new media technologies, the loss of the materiality of objects, the increase in information production, the rise of capitalism and consumerism, and the reliance upon god and/or 'the center' in Western thought. Essentially, certain historical contingencies allow for the wide scale reproduction of simulacra so that the simulations of reality replace the real, producing a giant simulacrum completely disconnected from an earlier reality; this simulacrum is hyperreality.^[xxxiii]

With her emphasis on the materiality of objects, meditative experientiality, and emphasis on the present moment, the *Random Walk-Drawing* series certainly responds to these conditions.

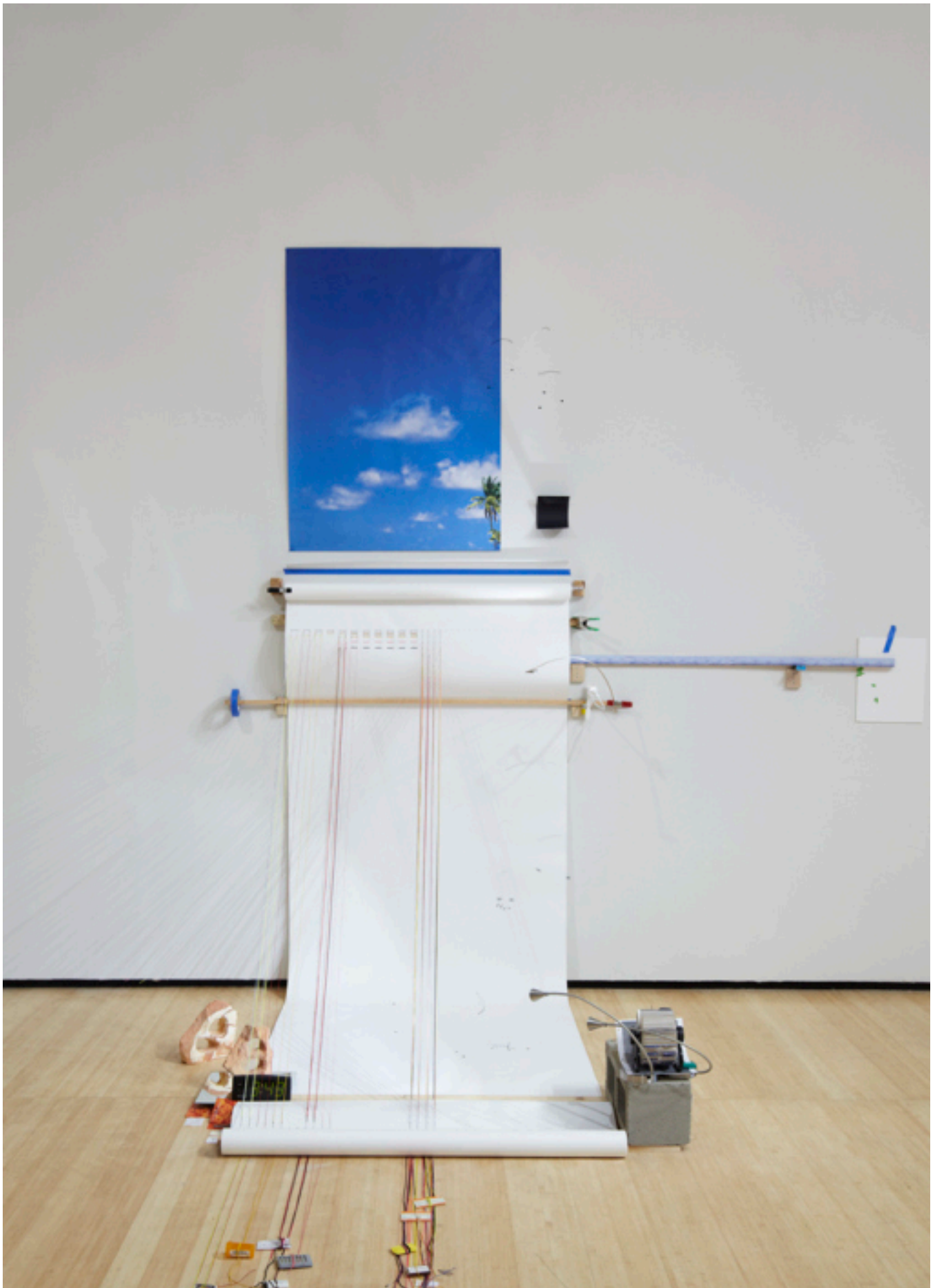
Baudrillard in his essay *Contemporary Art: Art Contemporary with Itself* describes the present moment as one that embodies the reality of time. He explains that, “[t]hings have only to be concentrated into an immediate presentness by accentuating the simultaneity of all networks and all points on the globe for time to be reduced to its smallest simple element, the instant—which is no longer even a “present” moment, but embodies the absolute reality of time in a total abstraction, thus prevailing against the irruption of any event and the eventuality of death.”^[xxxiv] It is in its emphasis on the present and through the establishment of a heightened sense of presentness that *Random Walk-Drawing* comes close to a visualization of the hyperreal.

While Sze celebrates objects in their true nature, she also subverts, negates, and distorts their realness, elevating it to a realm beyond the real and into the imaginary. She engages the aesthetic, the poetic, and fantastical. Baudrillard’s real, in turn, is also fictional, a fantasy or fairy tale generated by “doubling the signs of an unlocatable reality.”^[xxxv] It is due to its multifarious nature impossible to prove the hyperreal. According to Baudrillard it is “now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real.”^[xxxvi] This is especially true when considered within the context of Sze’s installations at the Asia Society. As the installations go in and out of the framework of the image, they oscillate between the realms of the real and the fictive; they see-saw and shimmer. They are unstable, duplicitous, and imaginary. The imaginary is fictive, false, and not real; a simulation of the real, thus hyperreal. However, Sze’s imagery also takes one to a place that is separate from reality, a place that does not have an equivalent in the real; a new place that is not an abstraction or representation of the real. It provides in its stead a visualization of a concept born in the artist’s mind, a work of art.

The hyperreal condition is a way of describing a world where ‘sign value’ of objects replaces the intrinsic value. Baudrillard stated:

What society seeks through production, and overproduction, is the restoration of the real, which escapes it. That is why contemporary “material” production is itself hyperreal. It retains all the features, the whole discourse of traditional production, but it is nothing more than its scaled-down refraction (thus the hyperrealists fasten in a striking resemblance a real from which has fled all meaning and charm, all the profundity and energy of representation). Thus the hyperrealism of simulation is expressed everywhere by the real’s striking resemblance to itself.^[xxxvii]

In Sze’s installation the sign value of the various objects is there, but even more present are the intrinsic values of the objects and the materials she uses to create meaning. They are not empty or artificial like Baudrillard’s simulations, but rather present a rich tapestry of meanings, a layered dialog between the objects and the viewer. One could argue that therefore they are not truly hyperreal.



Sarah Sze, *Random Walk Drawing (Air)*, 2011 Mixed media, Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy of Tom Powel.

The question then becomes if her installations are not hyperreal, can they be seen in opposition to the hyperreal? On the contrary, writing in 1976, Baudrillard himself claimed that, “in fact, hyperrealism must be interpreted in inverse manner: *today reality itself is hyperrealist.*”^[xxxviii] Sze embraces the materiality of contemporary production and restores, even celebrates the physicality and material formality of the found objects she includes. If her work is an embracing of reality, the real, and if this reality, according to Baudrillard, is now itself hyperrealist, then we can argue that Sze’s *Random Walk-Drawing* is an engagement with the hyperreal.

For Baudrillard reality is the leitmotif of our current culture. In his article *Violence of the Virtual and Integral Reality*, he quotes Nietzsche saying that, “[o]nce the true world and the world of appearances are lost, the universe becomes a factual, positive universe, such that it does not even need to be true.”^[xxxix] The author goes on to say that, “[t]his world is as factual as a *ready-made*. Duchamp’s ‘fountain’ is the emblem of our modern hyperreality. It results from the violent counter-transfer of every poetic illusion into pure reality, the object transferred onto oneself, every possible metaphor cut short.”^[xl] If in Baudrillard’s world Duchamp’s *Fountain* is an emblem of the hyperreal, then Sze’s poetic transformation of the recycling bin or Bic pen cap can be hyperreal in ours. *Random Walk-Drawing* is a presentation of a system of ready-mades and in turn functions as a visualization of the hyperreal.

“**And...and...and**”

The *Random Walk-Drawing* series is grounded in its object-ness, while simultaneously flickering in and out of this state. The mode of experience for the various installations that make up *Random Walk-Drawing* is one of disorientation as the individual components that make up the works oscillate between the real and the imaginary. It is a mode that intentionally challenges the viewer’s perception of reality both while engaged with work in the exhibition and beyond as the questions posed by the artist linger on. The works are ‘threshold experiences’ in that the artist plays with time and space, figure and ground, subject and object. The pieces function as conglomerations of objects, materials and visual references that are arranged in a topological manner that go in and out of their dimensional realities, which further de-stabilizes the viewer. Visitors move back and forth between identifying Sze’s materials in their everyday functionality allowing them to become poetic and part of an image.

Sze's three-dimensional drawings insist on the relativity of multiple points of view. The artist's vision is articulated toward the viewer, who is invited to go beyond his or her perception of objects and line in order to experience another kind of event. Sze provides a multifaceted viewing environment where images and objects are presented inside other images and combine to form new images. Together they create a network of signifiers where meanings shift between the everyday purpose of an item and its formal functioning within the image depending on how one is looking. In doing so, Sze provides a contemplative space that exists at an interstice between object and image, the symbolic and imaginary, the real and hyperreal.

Sze offers an investigation of reality that goes beyond questions of object or image and enters a discourse with the hyperreal. Although at first it may seem like her work is a critique of the hyperreal, in fact, due to its celebrating and heightening of the real, it is instead a visualization of the hyperreal. Sze's hyperreal, however, is a mode that is not fixed, but rather functions as an agent negating the realms of the real, symbolic, and imaginary. It is a fluid concept that explores the object and the image; sculpture and drawing; landscape and abstract composition. In its relation to the hyperreal, *Random Walk-Drawing* presents an "and...and...and" rather than an either/or. It is both real and hyperreal; it is answer D) 'all of the above'. It is a system of resonance, layered with meanings derived from object and image, as well as the viewer's engagement through seeing and moving through space. In the hyperreal world of Sze, objects are more than they are, simply because they are just what they are.

Leonie Bradbury, Curator of Contemporary Art

[i] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, (Stanford University Press, 1998), 187.

[ii] The Combines were a hybrid art form that combined painting and sculptural elements including found objects.

[iii] *Random Walk-Drawing* is a series of eight sculptural installations exhibited at The Asia Society, New York, as part of the exhibition *Sarah Sze: Infinite Line*, December 13, 2011– March 25, 2012.

[iv] Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," 173.

[v] Amanda Loos, *Symbolic, Real, Imaginary* (The University of Chicago, Winter 2002).<http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/symbolicrealimaginary.htm>

[vi] Jacques Lacan, "What is a Picture?" in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI The Four*

Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, trans. by Alan Sheridan, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), translator note, 279.

[vii] Ibid. 279.

[viii] Jean Baudrillard, "Contemporary Art: Art Contemporary with Itself," in *The Conspiracy of Art*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Columbia University, Semiotext(e), 2005), 92.

[ix] Ibid, 92.

[x] W. J. T. Mitchell, "Metapictures," in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 1995), 46.

[xi] Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (New York: Verso, 2007), 7.

[xii] Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking of The Other*, trans. by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 25.

[xiii] Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," in *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 28, No.1, Things (Chicago: The University of Chicago, Autumn 2001, 1-22), 2.

[xiv] Brown, *Thing Theory*, 4.

[xv] Ibid, 4.

[xvi] Ibid, 5.

[xvii] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects (Radical Thinkers)* (New York: Verso, 2006), 218.

[xviii] Christine Macel, "When The Object Becomes an Event," in *Damian Ortega*, (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou Service Commercial, France, 2008).

[xix] Melissa Chiu, "The Line Between Drawing and Sculpture: An Interview with Sarah Sze," in *Sarah Sze: Infinite Line*, ed. by Melissa Chiu (New York: Asia Society Museum, 2011), 14.

[xx] Visual acuity (VA) is acuteness or sharpness of vision, measured by the ability to discern letters or numbers at a given distance according to a fixed standard. Oxford Dictionary.

[xxi] Michel Foucault, "The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences," quoted in W.T.J. Mitchell "Metapictures," in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, 72.

[xxii] The *tuché* is a bit of insight into the gap, an 'ah-ha!' moment when we can observe an insight into the space between the unconscious and conscious. The term is borrowed from Aristotle who used it in his 'search for cause.' Lacan translated it as the encounter with the real, which can be either happy or unhappy.

[xxiii] Chiu, 13.

[xxiv] Chiu, 13-14.

[xxv] The Asia Society Museum website, <http://sites.asiasociety.org/sarahsze/>

[xxvi] Chiu, 18.

[xxvii] Lacan, *What is a Picture?*, 115.

[xxviii] Ibid. 117.

[xxix] Chiu, 18.

[xxx] Chiu, 14-15.

[xxxi] Nicolas Oberly, "Reality, Hyperreality (1)," in *Theories of Media*, (The University of Chicago,

Winter, 2003) <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/realityhyperreality.htm>

[xxxii] Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," 174.

[xxxiii] Oberly, "Reality, Hyperreality (1)."

[xxxiv] Jean Baudrillard, "Contemporary Art: Art Contemporary with Itself," <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/contemporary-art-art-contemporary-with-itself/>.

[xxxv] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 81.

[xxxvi] Ibid. 21.

[xxxvii] Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Selected Writings*, 183.

[xxxviii] Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage Publications 1993), 71-72.

[xxxix] Jean Baudrillard, "Violence of the Virtual and Integral Reality," in *IJBS*. Volume 2, Number 2, July, 2005. <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jeanbaudrillard/articles/violence-of-the-virtual-and-integral-reality/>

[xl] Ibid.