SARAH SZE

Blue Poles, 2006

A Percent-for-Art Commission for Sidney-Pacific Graduate Residence of the MIT campus

Architect: Steffian Bradley Architects, Inc.
In fact, *Blue Poles* is a work of art by Sarah Sze, an artist known for her unconventional and often mischievous transformations of the artifacts of daily life. In Sze's temporary installations, familiar domestic items like Q-tips®, vials, garden hoses, electric fans, and wooden chairs mingle with bits of industrial hardware, tubing, aluminum strips, and pipes. These come together in improbable amalgams that stretch and strain through space, flailing arm-like appendages and whiplash antennae, or clinging precariously to preexisting columns, windows, or ceiling ducts. Sometimes, they burst forth from the wall or floor with the energy of mutant creatures just released from their normal confines. Or, they may appear to race through the room, colonizing the ceiling with whirling parts and fluttering bits of paper and cloth. Jerry-rigged and exploding with energy, these unlikely constructions seem imbued with some irrepressible life force. The titles that Sze appends to her works emphasize this embrace of transformation and change: *The Letting Go*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Everything that Rises Must Converge*.

In *Blue Poles* Sze's exuberant sensibility adopts a permanent form. Taking a cue from the surrounding architecture and its celebration of the rectilinear lines and modular structures of architectural modernism, she turns the idea of repetition and rationality on its head. The elements out of which she assembles this improbable structure are familiar enough. They are the stuff of construction sites—metal ladders, rails, and industrial stairs—though their scale may seem more akin to a child's erector set than to the underpinnings of giant skyscrapers. We note the reiteration of modular forms and the reference to utilitarian design. However, the final result is anything but clean, clear, and logical. Instead, this metal structure cleaves to the building like some unstoppable organic entity that threatens, like kudzu or ivy, to overwhelm its unsuspecting host.

Sze, who grew up in Boston, notes that this work was inspired in part by the fire escapes that she observed stretching across the fronts and backs of tenement apartment buildings. Providing both a means
for escape in case of disaster and a place to hang out that is simulta-
neously inside and outside, fire escapes add a human dimension to
the urban landscape. Newer, more modern buildings, like those on
the MIT campus, eschew this old-fashioned safety system for more
invisible means of escape. Thus, by fusing this jumble of ladders onto
a sleek glass facade, Sze joins two apparently antithetical architectural
styles. In the process, she offers a subtle critique of the dehumanizing
quality of much contemporary architecture and design.

In this, she shares a kinship with several other contemporary artists who also take up the discrepancy between modern architect-
ure's rationalist ideals and the messy realities of human life and
urban development. For instance, Japanese artist Tadashi Kawamata
creates chaotic wooden structures that attach themselves like viruses
to existing buildings. Created from milled lumber, they resemble con-
struction-scaffolding run amok and suggest a vision of an urban growth
that is mindless, unstoppable, and quite possibly pernicious to human
life. Similarly, Slovenian artist Marjetica Potrč has honed a vision of
urban architecture through close observation of such phenomena as
the barrios of Caracas, the townships of South Africa, the gypsy settle-
ments in Belfast, and refugee housing in Ljubljana. Potrč's makeshift
sculptures incorporate elements from the sort of ramshackle dwellings
found in such unauthorized and often officially invisible structures.

Like Kawamata and Potrč, Sze acknowledges the futility of
grandiose plans to instill social patterns of action by rationalizing the
built environment. And like them, she celebrates the inevitable chaos
of contemporary life. But her work departs from theirs in her interest
in narrative and fantasy. Sze taps into the corner of the imagination
that delights in models, miniatures, and the possibility that, behind
that wall or that door, an unseen world lurks, governed by rules which
may be quite unlike our own. Thus, despite their obvious impracticality,
it is impossible to regard these blue ladders, steps, and balconies
without speculating on the nature of a reality in which they play some
vital utilitarian role. When they crawl inside the building, they seem
almost like invaders with an insidious purpose. What are they doing
there? What uses do they embody? What creatures do they serve?

The element of imagination brings us to another important aspect
of Sze's work. She uses immediately recognizable objects—whether
lifted without alteration from ordinary life or, as here, re-fabricated in
ways that slightly alter their normal forms—which retain meanings
associated with their ordinary uses and histories. We recognize their
original functions even though they serve ends their makers could
never have envisioned. This gives Sze's installations an entirely dif-
ferent effect than that conveyed by sculptures that consist of formal
structures created from arrangements of abstract elements. Her works
robustly deny the autonomy of the art object. Instead, she shows how
things are caught up in a web of meanings of associations and can’t
be disentangled from each other or from the space in which they find
themselves. As a result, the elements in her works make sense only
in relationship to each other. They encourage us to think associatively
and metaphorically. It is no accident that many commentators have
likened her work to the interwoven and decentralized systems of
data and networks of information that comprise the cyber world.

Sze's use of recognizable objects inevitably invokes the specter
of Marcel Duchamp, the enigmatic trickster whom many purists
today blame for dragging high art off its pedestal and into the realm
of kitsch, banality, and crass commercialism. In fact, as the work of
artists like Sze demonstrates, Duchamp's legacy has been far more
complicated. His “original sin,” according to his detractors, was his
submission of an ordinary urinal (renamed Fountain) to the first exhi-
bition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917. The
meaning of this gesture remains the subject of vigorous debate. Did
Duchamp mean to destroy the category of art as a class of objects
distinct from the prosaic stuff of daily life? Or did he mean to elevate
ordinary objects to the status of art? Was he demonstrating that any-
thing can be art? Or did he mean to say that art can be anything?

However it is interpreted, the Duchampian revolution has exerted
an enormous influence on contemporary artists. No longer confined
to orthodox materials like paint, canvas, steel, bronze, or wood, artists
today feel free to use everything from food, plants, and dust to appli-
cances, chairs, and car parts (or even whole cars) as raw materials for
their work. And while critics may decry this practice as an abdication
of artistic responsibility, it is clear that it has taught audiences to look
anew at both art and the world around them.

In keeping with this grant of freedom, artists like John Chamberlain,
Jessica Stockholder, and Judy Pfaff create works that seem to operate
by the formal rules of traditional painting or sculpture while using
materials that are could not be further from those traditions. Similarly,
Sze weaves together her unorthodox materials and objects to create
works that seem to operate somewhere in-between the conventions
of painting, drawing, sculpture, and architecture. For instance,
Everything that Rises Must Converge created by Sze for the Cartier
Foundation in Paris in 1999, resembled nothing so much as a gestural
abstract painting wrought in three dimensions. Whiplash lines created
by aluminum ladders affixed with numerous other small items overran
the floor, ceiling, and glass walls of architect Jean Nouvel's interior,
giving a new meaning to abstract expressionism's focus on the “over-
all painting.” Sze's installation for the Seattle Opera, titled An Equal
and Opposite Reaction, is more sculptural, consisting of a coiling
tower of white ladders that rises from floor to ceiling like a filigreed
ziggurat or a digitized wedding cake.

Meanwhile, MIT's Blue Poles gives the impression of an architec-
tural drawing transposed to the side of a building. It crawls in and out
of the building like a demented grid, its unadorned ladders serving as
markers of an order that has long since slipped out of control. Thus,
with this work, Sze synthesizes a whole raft of contrasting themes.
She weaves together inside and out, abstraction and representation,
decoration and hard-nosed practicality, drawing and architecture,
rationality and chaos. In the process, she reminds us that art is what
happens in the interstices of the worlds we think we know.

Eleanor Heartney

For more information about this project please visit
http://web.mit.edu/lvac/www/percent/sze.html


Sarah Sze has received numerous awards and honors including a MacArthur Fellowship and a Lotos Club Foundation Prize in the Arts (2003); as well as awards from Atelier Calder, Saché, France, and the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation (1999); and The Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation; Rema Hort Mann Foundation and Paula Rhodes Memorial Award (1997).

Eleanor Heartney is a Contributing Editor to Art in America and Artpress, and received the College Art Association’s Frank Jewett Mather Award for distinction in art criticism in 1992. Her books include: Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads, 1997; Postmodernism, 2001; Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art, 2004; and Defending Complexity: Art, Politics and the New World Order, 2006. Since 2003, she has been Co-President of AICA-USA, the American section of the International Art Critics Association.

**About MIT’s Percent**: MIT’s Percent-for-Art Program, administered by the List Visual Arts Center, allocates up to $250,000 to commission art for each new major renovation or building project. The program was formally instituted in 1968 but earlier collaborations between artists and architects can be found on the Institute’s campus. In 1985 architect I.M. Pei and artists Scott Burton, Kenneth Noland, and Richard Fleischner collaborated on a Percent-for-Art Program for the Wiesner Building and plaza, home to the List Center and the Media Laboratory. Other Percent-for-Art works include a terrazzo floor by Jackie Ferrara for the Tang Center; out-door sculptures by Mark di Suvero, Louise Nevelson, and Tony Smith; Dan Graham’s Yin/Yang Pavilion in Simmons Hall (designed by Steven Holl Architects); Jorge Pardo’s ceiling murals created for MIT’s Graduate Dormitory on Albany Street designed by S/L/A/M Collaborative; and Matthew Ritchie’s Games of Chance and Skill, a three-part map of time and space created for the Albert and Barrie Zesiger Sports and Fitness Center designed by Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates. Other publicly sited art includes works by Alexander Calder, Henry Moore, Pablo Picasso, Beverly Pepper, Michael Heizer, Victor Burgin, Jennifer Bartlett, Bernar Venet, Frank Stella, Isaac Witkin, and Jacques Lipchitz.