

# PAULA COOPER GALLERY

## SARAH CHARLESWORTH

*Modern History*

521 West 21st Street

Saturday, October 23 – Saturday, December 4, 2021

“This is real time, it is modern history in the making.”<sup>1</sup>

Sarah Charlesworth’s first photographic series, *Modern History* reproduces newspaper front pages with the text removed, shifting the focus onto the masthead and images to reveal underlying patterns and visual conventions. A concise body of work comprising only fourteen pieces, Charlesworth officially dated the series to 1977-79, although she would revisit it in the early 1990s and 2000s. The nine pieces on display at Paula Cooper Gallery include the first and last in the series, as well as three little-known predecessors that reveal how the artist arrived at the final format. This is the largest number of *Modern History* works ever assembled in an exhibition.

The *Modern History* works either compare the front page of multiple newspapers published on the same day, or the front page of the same newspaper on consecutive days. *Herald Tribune, September, 1977* follows the latter format, reproducing every front page in a month. By removing the text, Charlesworth unveils a hierarchy of images that privileges male leaders, weaponry, and diplomatic events. Each front page is notably similar, underlining the dependency of the photographs on their original context. *Movie-Television-News-History, June 21, 1979* presents twenty-seven different US newspapers on the day following the televised murder of ABC newscaster Bill Stewart in Nicaragua. The blurry and barely discernible images often appear framed by a television window, making the media the overt subject of the news. In 1991, Charlesworth was compelled to revisit *Modern History* to catalogue the Herald Tribune’s use of images to report on the US invasion of Iraq during the Gulf War. Throughout the thirty-six days of conflict, remarkably aestheticized machines of war prevail.

In *United We Stand/A Nation Divided* and *Reading Persian* (both 1979) Charlesworth juxtaposes pairs of newspaper pages. The former shows the dramatically divergent viewpoints championed by two opposing newspapers reporting on Scotland’s failure to establish a National Assembly, and is unusual for its isolation of headlines rather than images. *Reading Persian* also attends to the relative power of text by presenting two versions of the same Iranian newspaper on the day following the collapse of the Shah’s regime. A blank rectangular space is surrounded by Arabic text on the left and the missing image appears on the right, emphasizing how images function as a global language.

The three works installed in the smaller gallery examine Charlesworth’s early experimentations with newspapers as subject matter. Two versions of *Historical Materialism: Chile Series (For O.L.)* address a period of political unrest in Chile through twenty-five front pages of the New York Times from 1970 to 1976. In one version, the pages are reduced in size and mounted on wood panels but otherwise unchanged. In the other, Charlesworth has highlighted stories about Chile by lightening the surrounding text, without focusing specifically on image selection and placement. With the trial proof for *Herald Tribune, September 1977*, Charlesworth arrives at her signature technique of masking the entirety of the text to leave only images, transforming the news into readymade mythologies tinged with mystery.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Charlesworth, *Modern History (Second Reading)*, exh. cat. (Edinburgh: The New 57 Gallery, 1979), p. 32.

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**Sarah Charlesworth** (1947-2013, b. East Orange, New Jersey) was a key member of the Pictures Generation known for her conceptually-driven and visually alluring photo-based works. Charlesworth has been the subject of one-person exhibitions at a number of institutions including the major survey, "Sarah Charlesworth: Doubleworld," at the New Museum, New York (2015), which traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2017); and a retrospective organized by SITE Santa Fe (1997), which traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (1998), the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC (1998), and the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art (1999). Her work is in important public collections such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Charlesworth taught photography for many years at the School of Visual Arts, New York; the Rhode Island School of Design; and Princeton University.