

Sarah Charlesworth

Academy of Secrets

Brad Phillips

Sarah Charlesworth should be here now to see how the witchy power of images has cursed America. She might know what to do about it.

Born in New Jersey in 1947, Charlesworth died, far too young, of a brain aneurysm in Connecticut at the age of sixty-six. Among the many contributions she left behind is *Academy of Secrets* (1989). In this series, Charlesworth excised images from educational and art history books—spoons, clocks, antlers, hearts, lotus flowers—photographed them on a white board, and intensified the colors in the darkroom. Stripped of context, floating in saturated fields of pigment, these objects become empty talismans, begging to be assigned meaning.

Charlesworth was a central figure in that loosely knit group of artists that came to be known as the Pictures Generation. Her influences included Joseph Kosuth and Douglas Huebler, whose 1973 artist book *Secrets*—a gripping compilation of nearly two thousand anonymously written secrets—made an impression. She appreciated the rigor of those artists but challenged the Conceptual art movement's academic stuffiness by treating images, not language, as the primary sites

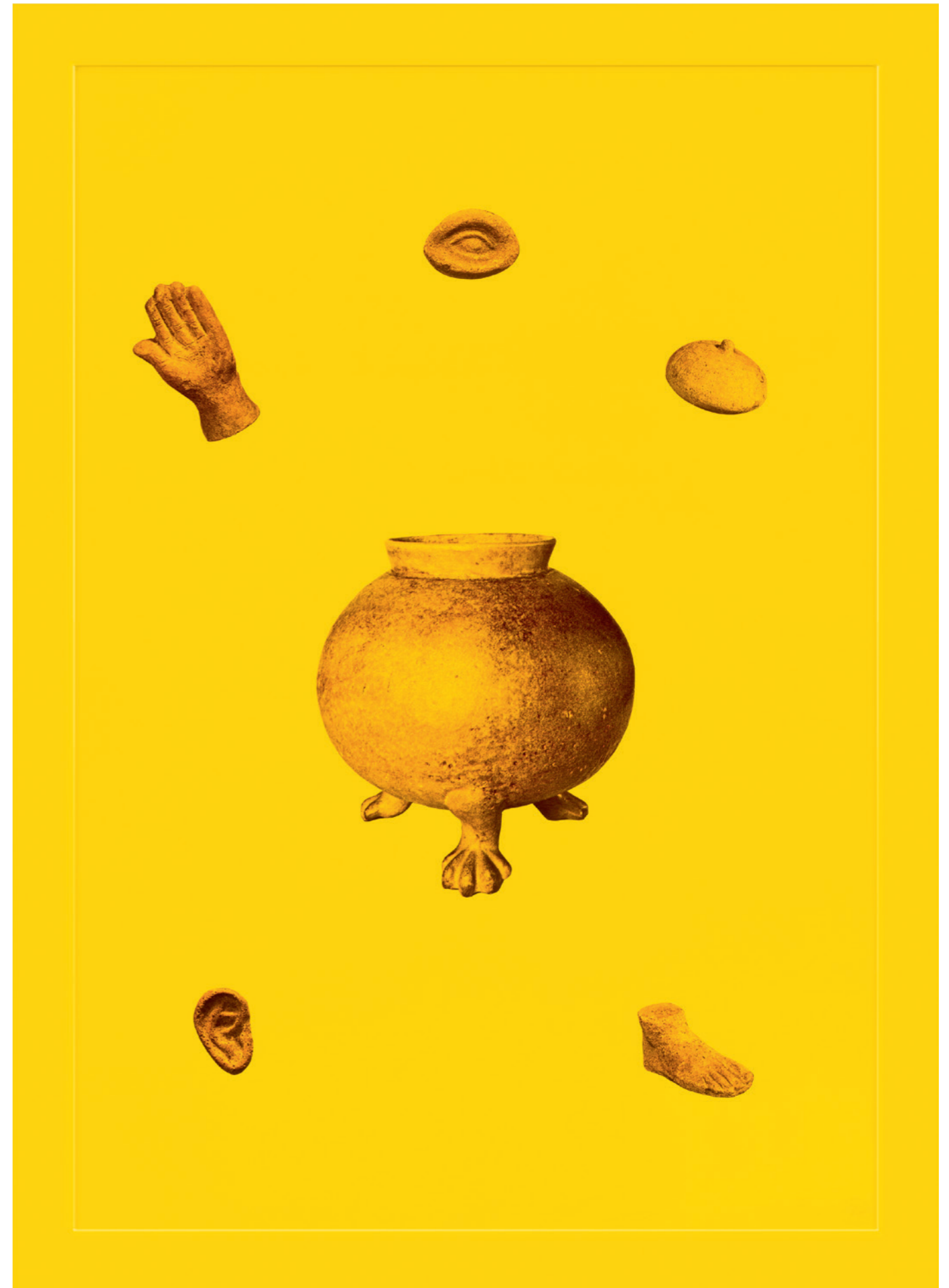
where meaning, authority, and ideology are produced. At a time when American culture was increasingly governed by mass media, Charlesworth understood that photographs were not to be trusted. They were not documents neutrally reproducing reality but components of a system through which narratives of power and victimhood are manufactured and circulated. She emphasized beauty in an art world drowning in wall texts, index cards, and instructions. The “secret,” for Charlesworth, is not buried inside the image; it emerges in the act of looking—in the viewer's need to stabilize what resists explanation.

One of art's most profound qualities is its ability to describe things for which language can be utterly inadequate. That feeling in your stomach as a child when you briefly lost your mother in the grocery store, a broken heart, a frightening diagnosis. Impossible to write accurately, but somehow an Edvard Munch painting or a crushed car by John Chamberlain says it perfectly. This is clearly magical, and *magic* was a word Charlesworth used often. In her test Polaroids, she makes it clear that artists and illusionists share similar powers. Who else can freeze flowers in midair, or liberate a pair of eyes from its face?

Seeking to understand what photography *does* instead of what photography *shows*, she used her camera, her X-Acto knives, and her impeccable sense of composition to explore the spooky power of an image to convey discrete, often contradictory meanings while masquerading as objective truth.

Charlesworth didn't provide artist statements or explanations because, like any good magician, she knew the audience completed the work. She understood that pictures can affect viewers in powerful ways, and that wall texts and press releases can just as powerfully deflate that experience. It's no accident that the Buddha appears throughout her art. Like him, Charlesworth was fascinated by the way our minds continuously invent the world. In *Academy of Secrets*, she invites us to observe not images but our consciousness at work, forever searching for meaning, and forever complicit in its creation.

Brad Phillips is an artist and writer in New York.





Page 95:
Self Portrait, 1989.
Cibachrome print
with lacquered wood
frame

Opposite:
Of Myself, 1989.
Cibachrome print with
lacquered wood frame

This page:
Paste-up (Flowers),
ca. 1989. Collage on
board



This page:
Paste-up (Eyes), ca. 1989.
Collage on board

Opposite:
Animation, 1989.
Cibachrome print with
lacquered wood frame





Opposite:
Test print (Photogram),
ca. 1970s.
Gelatin-silver print

This page:
Test print (Natural History
Museum), ca. 1969.
Gelatin-silver print

This page:
Test frame (Flower),
ca. 2004. Polaroid

Opposite:
*Reference print
(Telekinesis)*,
ca. 1992-93.

Chromogenic print
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