SARA VANDERBEEK AND SARAH CHARLESWORTH

SARAH C: **Sara [G. Rafferty] asked us to interview each other, I guess that's what we're supposed to be doing. So often when you do interviews, it's one person asking questions to the other person, so it's going to be tricky to try and ask questions back and forth and maintain a real train of thought, but…do you want to start or do you want me to?**

SARA V: If you want to go ahead, that's good.

SARAH C: **It's been great in the last few weeks talking to you informally. I'm really happy Sara asked us to do this interview. I've enjoyed very much getting to know your work better, getting the opportunity to talk to you about it and the ideas behind the work. You mentioned once that you had seen a piece of mine that had inspired you to do something else?**

SARA V: Yes.

SARAH C: **What was that?**

SARA V: I'd like to say in response to that, it's been incredible for me to meet you and I've consistently admired your work, but my previous experience of it had been in documentation and not actual prints. I was at the Goldberg Collection and I saw *Fear of Nothing* and I was blown away. There were so many elements within that work that I had been thinking about. I loved the use of collage and photography. It was very mysterious to me as to how it was actually put together. I was looking at both the technical aspects of how the image was made as well as the power of the image itself, the combination of the black field in one print and the mask floating above the three primary forms in the other. What I also loved was the idea of the luxury of fear of nothing.

SARAH C: **[*Laughs.*] Luxury?**

SARA V: In a way, it's something you really search after I think—how amazing would it be to have fear of nothing? And the play on words too…

SARAH C: **There's definitely a play on words in the title of that piece…. it's a two panel piece. They're two separate framed prints hanging next to each other. In the panel on the left is an image of a Roman "horror vacuii" mask, a form which expresses fear of nothing along with three small sculptural elements—a sphere, a cube, a pyramid—these are all against a blue field. The other separate framed print has nothing in it. It's an all black print with a black frame, just plain black. The mask faces in the direction of the empty image. It's funny, because without the visuals, it's funny to be talking about the details of the piece without being able to see them. I also wanted to ask you about specific parts of your images but…you use the word luxury?**

SARA V: I was thinking about how some of the "Objects of Desire" use images of luxury items. I felt you had a little glimpse into my psyche and things I explore in my work. Something I've recently been thinking about is this pervasive sense of anxiety in our culture, particularly I've been using images of these cracked sculptural heads, and I thought what an incredible luxury it would be to have no fear, if you think of fear of nothing in that way.

SARAH C: **Fearlessness.**

SARA V: Fearlessness, yes. Something that I then directly responded to with my piece, *One Repeating Mechanism*, was the use of space in your work. That at one moment the images and objects rest on the surface plane of the photograph like a collage and then at other times there's a feeling of the objects resting in space. Paired with the black void of the other panel, I felt like it was such a great manipulation of the perception of space within a work.

SARAH C: **That's so interesting, because when I was thinking about your work yesterday, knowing that we were going to be talking today, I was thinking a lot about your use of space and thinking about how that compares with how I've used space in different series. I certainly have been *extremely* aware in every series of the placement of images or fragments of images or the scale of one part of an image in relation to another part of an image, how these formal shifts are incredibly significant psychologically, visually, and even politically. In the newspaper pieces, a lot of the politics of the representation of current history or current news, is really played out in formal terms; what's big, what's small, what's left, what's right and so on effects the meaning. I was thinking about the difference between how it has worked in my work and how I see it working in your work. For me so much of it takes**

place on a two dimensional surface. Those pieces in the "Objects of Desire" and most of the early series that used appropriated images, (and I want to return to talk about that word separately), they are basically collages that are then rephotographed and printed photographically. And I think about those spacial relations in quite two-dimensional ways. One of the things that interests me about your work is that it seems to be constructed in both two and three dimensions. In other words, your final form being a photograph, in which the scale relations and descriptions of space are illusionistic. Shadows become really important or the way the planes of different images shift as they tilt or turn as when you photograph a mobile or something like that. That the illusionistic space, which is played out in two dimensions is one way in which you're creating a final image, but as you work sculpturally and are constructing a set or an—I keep seeing this word when I read about you—"assemblage" [*laughs*], which is a word I don't use, when you're constructing an "assemblage," you are working in three dimensions to build this ultimately two dimensional work. It seems like both two and three dimensional space are very important in the construction of your pieces.

SARA V: Yes. [*Laughs*] Leave it at that. I think that's something I'm constantly exploring and feeling the need to push further, how to conflate the two spaces.

SARAH C: I think you do. I think that's one of the things that's really exciting about your work, but go ahead, say what...

SARA V: I build in three dimensions yet never allow the viewer to see the three dimensional object because it's constructed for the camera. It's also important how the image is captured. The shadows become part of the structure as well. Such as in *Mrs. Washington's Bedroom* or parts of *From the Means of Reproduction* a white structure is placed against a white background, so that there's a constant push and pull between the foreground and background. That's why it's so important to me that the final work is a photograph because of how photographs can manipulate space and scale. It can remain mysterious. It's intriguing to me how a photograph can alter your perception of an object, or even in the rephotographing of an image, an image.

SARAH C: It's funny, because I don't think of your work as photographing objects, even though I know you make these objects and then photograph them, and that's your process. I think of them as photographs in the end. Part of what I find really interesting is precisely the way in which they conflate those two kinds of conventional ways of organizing art making or art perception. They really cause us to question the way we organize perception per se. I think all those terms about what is sculpture?, what is a photograph?, whatever, are being thrown into question in the work, and that's one of the things that really interests me. I guess it's one of the things that interests me in art in general, works that challenge the way we're used to seeing things or thinking about things, rather than works that work within a specific convention. I think you told me before that when you were at Cooper [Union] that you studied sculpture and photography?

SARA V: Yes, I did. I studied sculpture, photography, and even film. I think that my experience at Cooper lead to this group of images that I'm working on, but what was nice was that there was a ten year span between that experience of studying those subjects at school and doing all these other things that I feel factored into the work as well, like teaching art to children and working as a commercial photographer, all of these different facets or approaches to making an image.

SARAH C: One thing that I find interesting in your work is the relationship between your use of common references, appropriated images and a much more personal way of interpreting, reconstructing, revaluing, that goes on with your putting glitter on things, or dangling things next to each other, there's a way in which the work seems to me to be both talking about a larger sense of the world and the experience of history and also to be very particular and very personal on another level.

SARA V: I create pieces with this sort of Rube Goldberg logic and a scattered rationale. I don't know if that would really translate to the viewer, but for me small things like nostalgic reminisces over a old photograph: quick glimpses of the world like seeing a weird window display on 9th Avenue, random connections and larger questions inform my decision of what image goes with which, and usually first comes the personal and then it expands out into the general.

SARAH C: It's funny, for me, my work was very influenced by conceptual art and when I first started working publicly, I was very concerned with philosophy and politics and linguistics and semiotics and all this stuff. So...on one level it was very strategic in terms of exploring ideas and I always had some kind of idea about what I thought I was talking about or exploring or looking at or

experimenting with, so it was very intellectual on one level, but I kept realizing after I would make a piece, or after I would complete a series, that there was this other much more personal, much more psychological motor behind the work. For instance the piece you mentioned *Fear of Nothing*. I had always wanted to do a piece that was all black and couldn't quite find the place for it. But when I did that piece, I was having some kind of mental block or something, "what am I going to do next?" I don't know which piece I'm going to work on, oh god! So, that work actually came out of being afraid of what the next work was going to be. So taking this feeling of confusion or fear and thinking, okay, well I'll make a piece about being afraid or unafraid. Even though on one level it was about culture's valuations of culture itself, about having a language, having an image, having an object, having a description of the world, or the fear of nothing, the unknown, the unarticulated, death, castration, powerlessness or the undescribed. On one level it was addressing more intellectual concerns, on another level it was purely emotional.

SARA V: I'm glad you came back to that because we didn't get to finish talking about the play on words in the title, it is not only about fearlessness but also about fear, an artist's continual fear of the idea never coming; What if, in my mind, is the black void?

SARAH C: Don't you find that art making is continually about that? About throwing yourself or your ideas or your process against all the issues or images that are in one's head, against the unmade. I talked to you before about working on the studio wall, I'm always pitching my idea at the studio wall. Or you're talking about building sets, in the very process of building, you're taking something from inside yourself and articulating it in space. I feel like that, maybe it's a truism, that for artists, that's what working is all about, is that coming against the white canvas or the blank white wall, or the set that's not yet constructed and then working through that from the unmade to the made. Do you find that you know before you make a piece what you want to do with it?

SARA V: The way I work is varied, I can be walking down the street and a structure will come into my mind. So with something like *Drawing in Perspective*, this structure flashed into my head and then I had to draw it immediately in my sketchbook. I like sometimes when things feel automatic. I'll take this small rudimentary drawing and start building from it. Then it's while I'm building that I start to refine and distill the idea more and edit or add to the selection images. With this piece in particular I actually took much longer than normal to decide on the images.

SARAH C: So it's interesting that the structure, in the case of this piece, came to you before the images.

SARA V: Yes.

SARAH C: We were talking once before about how we are both collectors of sorts, and that we both collect images. I think you collect all sorts of other things, like fabrics and buttons and stuff like that.

SARA V: Yes.

SARAH C: About how sometimes an image instigates a piece? And sometimes an idea triggers a search for an image I think you were asking me about that before.

SARA V: Its both for me, what is it for you?

SARAH C: For me, it can go both ways too. I guess it also depends on which series we're talking about. I haven't been working with appropriated images so much recently except I am right at the moment working on something with found images. I have big picture collections and they're all filed and for a long time I was just gathering and gathering images and sometimes something would trigger an idea, and sometimes it would be, "I've got to find the perfect picture of such and such...." Sometimes I would actually go on very intensive picture researching missions to find something, and other times it would be just in my process of culling things of interest from magazines, newspapers or art books at flea markets and things like that and an idea would jump into my head.

SARA V: I have a really similar process.

SARAH C: One of the things I was interested in when I first started to get to know your work was how specific the images in the pieces are. Looking at the final work there's always an interesting spatial and color thing going on, then you recognize, oh yeah, it's an image from this or that period or that kind of book or so on. Frequently the images themselves are recognizable or recognizable styles, but I couldn't tell how critical a specific choice of an image is. Why don't you use *Drawing in Perspective* as an example to talk about. It has a Sarah Bernhardt photograph by Nadar in it, doesn't it?

SARA V: Yes. I thought of this piece as a movement through time, as a charting through a life with Sarah Bernhardt as a symbol of that passage. A photograph by Nadar of her young when she had just entered the Conservancy and a photograph of her towards the end of her life, rest at each the end of the structure. The reason for using Sarah Bernhardt was that she was an amazing woman whose life spanned an incredible time in our history. Recently, I have wanted to look at the predecessors of Modernism, to go prior to the early twentieth century and explore what had influenced this important time. I chose her also because my mother used to call me Sara Heart Burn and so I have always had an affinity for her. She was a mythic figure for me personally but she was also an icon of the Second Empire, the Belle Epoque and lived until 1923 when modernist movements were forming and the Bauhaus was active. She was incredibly influential to Oscar Wilde, and [Jean] Cocteau loved her as well...two other figures in history who are also inspirational to me. I'm drawn often to images where the gaze and its relationship to the camera, directs the motion of the piece. In the picture by Nadar, Sarah Bernhardt is addressing him in the photograph, so that within my image, her glance is also directed towards the viewer. With the final image of her that I used at the end of the structure, I found an image where she is glancing backward, I scanned and reprinted the image prior to including it in the construction so that it's a double exposure. In doing so, that last image of her feels as though it is propelling forward even though she is glancing backward. The structure becomes this physical timeline moving through space, and with that sense of movement in the final image it suggests that this series of events and images could continue on beyond my image.

SARAH C: So the piece seems to have several different ways of interpreting it, one being about a life and what a life is, being beautiful and then being an older woman and now being dead in history and gone, an icon that's even buried in time. Also, it reflects on Modernism, in a way, Modernism itself being a perspective and a kind of historical artifact.

SARA V: It reminds me of that piece of yours with Leda from the Renaissance drawings.

SARAH C: Yes, *Leda, Her old Age and Death*, I did a series that was remaking works using details from renaissance paintings and another based on Renaissance drawings. I used details from these works to address subjects that were of concern to me in the present. They in no way attempted to be faithful to the original meanings, but rather to make new meanings out of them. In the paintings I was exploring different psychological models, Freudian, Jungian, and so on and playing with them and making fun of them and imaging that the characters in the Renaissance, the Madonna, Jesus, or the knights, were part of a family, part of the mom, dad, the grandmothers and so on. The drawings are fake drawings that I made using fragments taken from Renaissance drawings. In the one of Leda the central figure is from a drawing by Leonardo of Leda and the swan. She's a naked, sexy young woman. She's embracing an image of an older woman, who's embracing a skeleton. It is the different stages of a woman's life, her youth and her older age and her death. So my piece is made from a combination of sketches by Raphael and Leonardo, but it's a young woman embracing an older woman, embracing a skeleton. It is similar to yours, in that kind of consideration of a life and the use of collage. These drawings were collaged in transparency. It was before the days of Photoshop so I made Xeroxes on acetate and collaged them together and then rephotographed them in layers. Doing physically what you do in Photoshop now.

SARAH C: One of the things that I'm interested in is the use of quotation, something that I think is very different than appropriation in its emphasis. A photograph of Sarah Bernhardt is part of the landscape of our history, of our world. So, in your work, that landscape of imagery, and I feel like this happens a lot in my work as well and is a lot of the background to the work, is that not only specific images but styles and genres these are part of how we organize and think about our experience of the world so in your piece *Extravaganza*, for instance, where you have a Warhol photograph and that image of a woman from...?

SARA V: *Life* magazine. Warhol also used her in a death painting.

SARAH C: It's a whole memorial, in a sense, made out of images that are part of your experience of the world, that reflect on death. To me, it's not about how you could make those yours, but how you can make an artwork about the experience of living in a world that entails both the actual experience of death and war as well as living in a world where death is described in imagery.

SARA V: You really described well something that is at the core of the way that I organize things. Often, I create pieces thinking about how do I give form or structure to a memory or a memory of an image. Something like *Extrava-*

ganza illustrates that well because I wanted it to feel like the images had been gathered rather than organized, so there was no real concrete structure, just random clusters of images caught on this branch. I was thinking about the way that we process and store images and how something like the image of the woman that's in the foreground could loom large and that a significant historical image like that of Martin Luther King on the balcony at the motel where he was shot could rest in the background ever-present.

SARAH C: [inaudible]

SARA V: I have an ever-changing relationship to these images. For me they become like snapshots, these public images are recorded in my memory in the same way as personal events or moments. I'm drawn to an image and then it becomes part of my overall collection of images in my head. I think that it's common though with a lot of people because we are a visually inundated culture and these images become a quick way to reference and catalog our experience of something very specific as death. The glitter was a way to personalize this experience but it was also inspired by Warhol, paste jewels, and reliquaries. Death and its relationship to photography was something that was pervasive in my exhibition "Mirror In the Sky" at D'Amelio Terras, sometimes without my even knowing it.

SARAH C: It's hard not to think about it these days with the war going on. Every single day on the front page of *The New York Times*, there's photographs of dead bodies scattered all over the place and soldiers stalking about. We're living very much in a—it's like, oh, 83 people were killed in Pakistan, oh, 183 in the market in Baghdad today. It seems to be very much part of this moment in time. We're living with this abstract relationship with death that it's very much part of our lives too. Since 9/11 it's been a consistent part of our cultural experience probably more so than other recent periods and similar in ways to the Vietnam War—you even have a piece about the Vietnam War, don't you?

SARA V: Yes.

SARAH C: I guess, in a way, the Vietnam War is being revisited a lot these days in part because of the parallels with the Iraq war. Are you speaking about it on a personal level, or are you speaking about it specifically in relation to this historical moment?

SARA V: It's both. At one moment it's historical and then it's also personal—I think death is so present and, as you said, constantly in our consciousness. I did that piece, *Decorations in a Notebook* because I felt that there are so many parallels to this current war. Although I didn't live through the Vietnam War, I was born shortly thereafter and my mother's generation was very much affected by it and I think therefore it affected me. I hear and read stories of soldiers returning from the Iraq war and I can't help but think about her stories of the Vietnam era.

SARAH C: I guess I misspoke when I said death seems to be more present than in other periods in recent time. Certainly AIDS, throughout the '80s, and continuing into the present, has been very much a part of our personal experience. The AIDS crisis was right in our lives, friends were dying and nobody was understanding about what it was or how to grapple with it. It was a different kind of experience and has remained slightly different in nature because it was so personal, so immediate. While the AIDS crisis continues in many, many forms all over the world, it's a little less immediate in the personal sphere now than it was, say twenty years ago. But the thing about the Iraq war that's so strange and so frustrating is the senselessness and obvious stupidity of it. We live with the constant theme of death in our lives, and yet in such an abstract way. It's just pictures. It's just numbers. It's very hard to find a relationship with this thing that informs your psyche, informs your consciousness, informs your politics, and yet where is it?

SARA V: It's ever-present but it is much more abstract because we're not seeing the person dying in front of us. Even the way they refer to soldiers as "troops." It becomes this term that doesn't even seem to me like they are human. More like they are components of a larger military machine.

SARAH C: I saw a show yesterday of Marcel Broodthaers, an installation at Michael Zwirner Gallery uptown. I think the piece was originally made in 1975 and it's called *Décor* and it's about this exact subject. There are two rooms, one is the nineteenth-century and one is the twentieth-century. In the nineteenth-century room there's two giant cannons and they're huge, just *enormous* cannons and two red velvet chairs, and two silver candelabras and a bunch of potted plants and a giant snake somewhere in the middle. Then the other room is the twentieth-century room, where there were lawn chairs and an umbrella where you'd have a picnic lunch in the summer on the patio and the room is lined with machine guns and there's another cabinet with all kinds of handguns. On the table is a jigsaw puzzle of the Battle of Waterloo. So

it's the kind of co-presence of this nineteenth-century, this salon life, or this twentieth-century leisure, recreational beach scene. The co-presence of this relaxed domestic existence with warfare as a constant. Part of what we're talking about and talking about the Iraq war in particular, is this kind of co-presence of everyday life with a constant background of war. As Mayor Giuliani kept telling us, and Mayor Bloomberg tells us now, even though there's an orange alert or a red alert, let's go back to business as usual, don't worry. The fact of continuing to live one's life as though one weren't in war, because we're not at the site of war, and yet living with the psychic experience of war of our country doing terrible things in the world…how can we address that?

SARA V: My piece, *Medusa*, was made thinking about that in particular. It has hanging in a line, one on top of each other, images of fractured classical heads, this frieze of figures struggling with a snake, almost like the Laocoon group, and at the bottom this [Medardo] Rosso sculpture of a child's head disappearing behind a curtain. I made it thinking about our society as this collective conscience in crisis. We're in this moment of needing to figure things out and we seem lost….To get back to that question we were addressing before about the relationship to images, I'd love to hear you talk about the process that you go through in creating a piece or a series.

SARAH C: It's different in different series. In very broad terms, I worked with found images up until the first series that I shot in the studio in 1993, I think. But from my first show in the late '70s, the "Modern History" series—which was specifically about the representation of events in newspapers and how photographs changed or altered how we see those events—I always worked with images from public culture. Each series had a different kind of question or idea behind it. "Modern History" was about the way images in newspapers informed our sense of what was going on in the world and how specific a perspective from any given newspaper was. I was interested in the way the world was organized for us by imagery. In the "Objects of Desire," I was working primarily with images from magazines. It was a series that went on for about five years and each sub-series had a different color theme to it and a different kind of topic or focus. One series was about sexuality and gender. I cut out images from fashion magazines or karate magazines or brides' magazines or porno magazines, almost like cutting out paper dolls, trying to see the kind of costumes of identity that we put on. The idea of the "Objects of Desire" was that standing behind any individual's identity or the way in which we position ourselves in the world, there is a whole set of pre-articulated possibilities of what is sexy or powerful. In any given series there's a kind of question which generates the working process and later I started working on images and shot them on my own in the studio, because I felt I was at a point in the work where I was much more interested in creating situations rather than exploring or examining existing descriptions. The first series that I shot in the studio was the magic series. I created a bunch of pieces that were sort of fake magic tricks. They came out as though they were a slight of hand or records of some impossible feat taking place in the studio. They were all based on simple photographic techniques. There was no Photoshop in those days, they're all straight images.

SARA V: Like *Control and Abandon*?

SARAH C: That piece was kind of a meditation on what art making is, and how the act of making is a kind of dialogue or interplay between those elements that one controls or pretends to control—the skills that you have and the element of chance and happenstance as it enters into the process. For me, being a big control freak, there's this attention to detail, so when I had the idea for this piece, *Control and Abandon*, I wanted to make it look like a card trick and I was going to have the cards flying through the air and that was going to be my loss of control. I couldn't exactly position them and I was going to shoot it with a strobe so it arrested the actions in ways I couldn't control. Then I went up to Tiffany's and I had cards engraved and they didn't have the perfect type face that I was imagining. I wanted a certain script and I couldn't get that script and I had to settle for italics, and I wasn't quite sure if I liked the blue and red so I also made some green ones, and I also made some white ones. So, I came back from Tiffany's with six double boxes of cards, all hand engraved and built the set up in the studio and got the assistant on the camera, and got the strobe lights positioned just so, and defined my frame. I was going to be throwing the cards in the air from below the camera's frame and my assistant would be on the camera and then I tossed the cards in the air and then they were all over the studio floor. I spent all day long playing 104 card pick up. [*She laughs.*] Every once in awhile I'd go and adjust the reflection or add a fill card. Enacting the piece really was a complete acting out of this whole idea of control and abandon.

SARA V: I love the idea of control and abandon and how it reflects on the process of making work. I always enjoy how you can have an initial idea of what you want

but through the process of creating an image all of these different factors such as timing, lighting, frame of mind, etc.... can affect the final outcome. Which makes me think of an earlier piece, the one with abracadabra.

SARAH C: That piece is called *Work*. It's from the very tail end of the "Objects of Desire." It's Tiffany's turquoise and black. Those are the only two pieces that have anything to do with Tiffany's in all my work and you picked up on it in particular [*laughs*].

SARA V: I don't know what that says about me [*laughs*]. Why Tiffany's turquoise?

SARAH C: I wanted to make a piece that was about value and I was thinking how can I symbolize this? I had the idea of making a piece that used the color of Tiffany's packaging. It's a diptych. The work in the title refers to art work, or about making value through art work or art work as a process of valuation...the two panels in the piece are supposed to represent two aspects of art making. In the black panel is an image of iron age tools, cut in this subliminal 'V' shape. They're very, very, very old tools, the very first hammers or pliers from thousands of years ago and they are meant to suggest a primitive, laborious process, just hard labor, old, hard, grungy work. And in the other panel, that has the color of the Tiffany's packaging in the background, there's an alchemical hex, a visual sign that's meant to enact magic or cure fever. I think it reads 'abracadabra, abracadab,' and so on down to the 'A' at the bottom. In my piece it's the magic, so for me, making artwork is a combination of the hard work, the technical work, the painting, the cropping, the lighting, the fixing, the gluing and just that spin of fun or imagination that animates artwork and makes it come alive for an artist in the working process, when you see work that you respond to and you go, "Oh yeah, wow."

SARA V: That goes back to what we talked about in the beginning, the fear of nothing. The magic of the idea coming together combined with all of the physical effort, like throwing the cards up however many times, to get the shot, doing, redoing, and sweating under lights, all of that process is a fight against that fear and part of the final image...

SARA V: I wanted to come back to appropriation, which is something we keep meaning to talk about.

SARAH C: I keep wanting to hang giant quotation marks around the word every time I use it. I can't use it in a straight forward way, but go ahead, what?

SARA V: You talked about when you started working that you thought that you had invented appropriation.

SARAH C: Well, I mean not in a literal way, but of course...

SARA V: In quotations.

SARAH C: [*Laughs*] That's it, yes. Not in a literal way, of course not. I'm the heir to Duchamp just like everybody else and certainly I'm a student of Warhol and Pop. So not in a literal sense but in a way my very first work was in response to a lot things that had been going on in Pop at that time. When I first started working, photography had been so much about picture taking, about image making, of seeing and framing the world. So, for me, to start working initially with newspapers and then images from magazines and so on, I wasn't appropriating them in the sense of taking them, but rather addressing the language of representation, addressing the conventions by which photography describes and orders the world for us. I wasn't thinking about taking images from the world, but rather creating ways to highlight the meanings that were already existent, the politics behind the way in which images function in our every day life. So, the first time that I saw the first show of Richard Prince's, which I think was at Annina Nossei's gallery on Prince street, he had some of those early pieces with rows of earrings or pictures of watches on them. I recognized in Richard's work the same kind of impulse to point to those conventions of representation. So it was not so much about taking things from the world, but rather being interested in addressing representation itself as an existent form, as something to look at.

SARA V: So, when we talk about appropriation, you usually talk about it with a gesture that cannot be translated on to tape recorder, which is with hands that are marking these giant quotation marks around it. I'm just wondering why you feel such animosity towards appropriation?

SARAH C: I actually really dislike the word. Not only for the reasons that I'm beginning to suggest here, that it's misleading in terms of how we think about the use of work that's already been in the world, work that quotes or references other work in the world, I think in all art forms, that happens, going back to Egyptian, Greek or Roman, art is always quotational. I think that it's part of the nature of an ongoing historical discourse, that things are continually being borrowed, altered, or reconfigured. One of my objections to the word appropriation is that it seems

to stress this kind of stealing aspect, rather than what to me is much more significant, the speaking to aspect, the looking at, exploring, referencing. It's not about taking, but rather looking at, examining. We don't say, "Edward Weston appropriated the pepper," but when Warhol looks at an image of a car crash, we say, "Oh it's work based on appropriation. Depending on how much paint gets thrown on it, it either becomes more original or is more directly appropriated." Using the word becomes a kind of short hand way of generalizing, in order to make it easier to synthesize an argument or a discussion or reference a particular work or artist or the nature of that work. We use that shorthand just because it's easier, and yet, at the same time, it eclipses so much of the subtly and complexity of the way in which that referencing or recontexualizing functions. I'd be curious what you'd say about that. Your work, like mine in many ways, contains references to other work, images that are quoting or incorporating another art work. And I don't think of your work in any way as being copying or stealing, but rather doing something way more complex and challenging in terms of understanding yourself as an occupant of a world of images. Not only a world of textures and colors and lights and shadows and fabrics and buttons, but a world of images that is very real and has an effect on your life and your way of thinking.

SARA V: I have never thought of the word appropriation when I am making my work. I liked the word quotational that you used. I think of the use of images in my photographs in relation to language. I organize my work less as series and more as groups. Within each photograph the images are combined, and through this combination they are endowed with a new meaning, and when that photograph is hung with others, the group becomes part of a larger installation. The individual images remain autonomous and powerful in their own right yet—like a large sentence running along the wall—each element informs the whole, and at the same time, each is necessary to the other.

SARAH C: But I understand that in your work you reference particular genres, that piece with the Vietcong soldier and [Pablo] Picasso's death head. That using images from a particular period is almost a way of referencing that history, and they become a detail within a larger thought, which is the entire work.

SARA V: It is the gathering, combining, and collaging of the images from many varying points in time within one work that's important. And with something like *Decorations in a Notebook*, beyond the enormity of Picasso as a figure within art, there's the fact that he lived through World War II. When I found the image in a catalogue, I reveled in the deep eyes of the death's head and how succinct Picasso was at expressing the atrocities of warfare in his work. I used the A[ssociated] P[ress] photograph of the Vietcong soldier because of that war's connection to the Iraq war today but also because the caption cropped his face so that you could only see his eyes and I connected his empty stare to the hollow sockets of Picasso's sculpture. There's of course the immediate recognition of the skull and the traditions of the memento mori, but it's also the way in which the death's head was depicted with this dramatic catalogue lighting that then references the way in which I was constructing and lighting my photograph. All of these different layers of representation, as well as the sense of removal factor into my work. It's an image of a soldier, of a sculpture, in a way, of an experience in time—documentation in catalogues, journalistic images and accounts. These are the records of events that I collect. Very rarely do I witness these things firsthand—I know them through the photographs that describe them. And as far as a question of appropriation, I may paint or crop an image in order to make it work for a piece but I realized as we've been talking that it is through my combination of images and elements within the construction that these found images become my own.

SARAH C: Other than your own particular process and the way in which you use found images in your constructions, do you think there's a way in which public imagery is being used in a different way by young artists today? Are there artists today whose concerns are similar to yours?

SARA V: I was thinking about that because I realized that more often than not I draw my inspiration from looking at artists of earlier generations.

SARAH C: For instance.

SARA V: I made some notes but I was thinking to also speak of what I'm working currently on and what I'm looking at right now. I'm looking at [Henri] Matisse's sculpture, the series, the "Back I-IV" and how the figure becomes increasingly more abstract in each work of the series. I have been thinking a lot about Classical frieze sculpture in general and in its relationship to photography. In particular its frontal perspective and the way that it controls the way in which it is viewed. A lot of the work in the show was inspired by [Robert] Rauschenberg's combines that I saw in Los Angeles, but currently Louise Nevelson is a

huge figure. And then I recently read a great essay about Surrealist photography by Rosalind Krauss, so I have also been thinking about some of the Surrealists and looking at Florence Henri and Lee Miller. This piece I'm doing right now is based on [Edward] Steichen's *Family of Man* exhibition and the way that the images were hung in the space at all different angles.

SARAH C: Wow.

SARA V: When you spoke about seeing Richard Prince's show, that lead me to think how in general it feels different now. I wondered if you think today that artists feel as though they are part of a community that is working together to explore similar ideas?

SARAH C: That's a hard question. I don't know. When I first started being around the art world, there were way fewer galleries and much more conversation about art. We never really talked about modernism and post-modernism, and I guess they're two big, hairy terms that we don't necessarily need to drag up, but I do think that something has changed in the last fifteen or twenty years about the way in which artists relate to each other and to their sense of the world. I feel like I inherited this almost linear sense of art history. It was, of course, a very limited, western European kind, a specific interpretation, which eclipsed all sorts of things but nonetheless it gave one a sense of continuity, a place or platform from which one could address an ongoing historical discourse. But, I think that part of the shift that's taken place in the last 20 years is that there's a broader, more horizontal field, more cultural locations from which one can speak or be recognized. But it's also become more diffused. There's less of a sense of a coherence or community that one feels a part of. There are many different kinds of practices—it makes the experience of art much richer but also much less focused.

SARA V: Fragmented, is the word I often use. I feel like the advent of the Internet has led to a much more fractured sense of the world and fragmented sense of communication with others. Computers are being made to work more and more like the human mind, but at the same time, our lives are becoming more and more adapted to the tools we are working with. So on a daily basis our minds are consistently addressing several different concerns at once. The linear sense of history has been displaced—everything rests on one gigantic screen and with that everything large and minute has the same importance. With my experience with the gallery, I'm in constant communication with artists but it's not often that we are having a conversation about modernism or postmodernism…But I'm going on a tangent and want to get back to your work…. What are you currently working on?

SARAH C: I have two main trains of thought that I'm working on simultaneously. One is connected to the last body of work that I completed which was a series called "Concrete Color," based on models of color theory. I'm interested in the idea of using art materials, the medium, as the subject and really examining the formal elements of art making as content. I've been doing things with pigments and so on, in the studio, following up on that body of work. And then I've also begun to pick up again on a series that uses toiles and historical fabrics, and replacing the figures with contemporary figures. I'm doing a piece right now about war. I was just so aware of this imagery from the newspapers everyday and wanting to find a way to speak of the experience of being inundated with images of soldiers and guns and bodies and explosions and wreckage. So, I'm trying to do the work right now that's incorporating those images into a piece about war historically. What about you?

SARA V: I'm building a piece that is inspired by the *Family of Man* exhibition, but it's also made in connection to a film that my father made, called "The Human Face is a Monument." He used all Associated Press images of faces through life. Similar to the *Family of Man*, where it was organized from birth to death, using different situations in which humans experience joy, pain, sorrow, etc. He had each face fade from one to the next while the "Fours Seasons" by Vivaldi set the pace. I want my piece to be filmic in the sense that it looks as though it has captured a sequence of superimposition within one still image—some images are spliced and layered, others are whole and rest on different planes. I have included images from different times and cultures but I think since speaking with you, I started to look at current newspaper images and I have started to use not only historical images, but also images that I am seeing today. There's one contemporary image in it that I found of a young boy in Iraq: he's holding on to a chandelier. It's basically the last thing that exists of his house, because it was attacked by mortar.

SARAH C: I've been interested in the way photographs become part of the photographs of the war, that so often you see people holding out photographs of lost or dead relatives—the way in which images within images attest to personal loss. Just today on the front page of the *Times* there was an image of a boy in Baghdad whose father had

been killed and home destroyed. He's holding a scrap book showing his family in happier times. The photograph within the photograph becomes a marker in time, a measure of change.