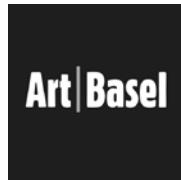


GAGOSIAN



## Under the influence: Katharina Grosse, Sarah Sze, and Hans Ulrich Obrist

*A conversation about subways, digital memory, and the possibilities of painting*

Hans Ulrich Obrist



Katharina Grosse, Sarah Sze, and Hans Ulrich Obrist. Photo by: Julien Gremaud

Who influences whom? How do artistic kinships develop? When Serpentine Galleries' artistic director Hans Ulrich Obrist asked Katharina Grosse to name an artist who had influenced her, she chose Sarah Sze, who is almost 10 years her junior. The admiration Grosse felt for Sze having first seen her work in an art magazine years ago had endured.

Both women are a powerful presence in the art world. Since the mid-1990s, Grosse (b.1961, Freiburg/Breisgau) has relentlessly tested the limits of the painting medium. Her sprawling installations – riotous explosions of colors, in which acrylic paint and gestures redefine every surface – have been shown across the world, most recently at Prague's National Gallery and Sydney's Carriageworks, and as an outdoor installation in New York State for MoMA PS1.

The work of Sarah Sze (b.1969, Boston) can be equally monumental, although monumentality in her case is often the result of an accumulation of small objects, forming fragile constellations. She represented the US at the 2013 Venice Biennale and has shown her work in museums including Haus der Kunst in Munich and the Bronx Museum of the Arts, as well as alongside a section of the High Line park in New York City. Grosse and Sze sat down with Obrist in Basel to map out the network of their common interests.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Panofsky once said that the future is invented with fragments from the past. The idea that artists stand on the shoulders of giants from the past is an old one, but the question of influence is much more complex. The conversation between Sarah Sze, Katharina Grosse, and myself started more than 20 years ago, when I worked at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris as a curator. In 1996-1997, I invited Sarah Sze for her first solo exhibition in Europe. A few years later, in 1999-2000, Katharina Grosse was part of an exhibition called 'Urgent Painting', where she completely transformed the museum's entrance with her installation. Both exhibitions were very much about infiltrating the museum, and already then, I saw a strong connection between the two practices. In Katharina's and Sarah's installations, there is never a single vantage point, you can experience the work in many ways. It changes when people move through it. Many of their works are ephemeral and, for that reason, they also reflected on the concepts of photography and documentation very early on.

I would like to start by asking you both how you came to art, and who influenced you at the beginning of your practice?

**Katharina Grosse:** I saw a photograph of a piece by Sarah while flipping through an art magazine in Germany. It really struck me because it wasn't what I was doing. I am a painter, I use the canvas as a surface to project ideas. Right away I thought, 'What kind of mind made this?' She had created something in between, in a gap in a small, compressed space and I thought, 'Shit, that's great.'



*Katharina Grosse, Wunderbild, 2018. Installation view at National Gallery, Prague, 2018. © Katharina Grosse and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn / commissioned by National Gallery in Prague. Courtesy Galerie nächst St. Stephan, Gagosian, and König Gallery*

**Sarah Sze:** I studied painting and architecture, so we come from similar backgrounds, although we have approached our work in different ways. When I went to graduate school, I started making sculpture and I wanted to think about how we find value in materials, so I gave up painting. The first sculpture I made used a sheet of toilet paper for each object. I wanted the work to blanket the space like a kind of weather, so that you couldn't really separate the space from the architecture itself, which I think also is a shared interest of ours.

**HUO:** Some years ago, I had conversations with Daniel Buren about his relationship to architecture, and he talked about the notion of *in situ*. He says he lets the architecture of where he's working guide how he creates the work, which helps to open up the ways the space can be transformed. The result is that the work only exists in relation to the place that prompted it. Is this true for both of your practices, too?

**SS:** We started making work before the age of the digital image. Now, we see so much work online before we see it physically that we confuse the two. We made work that was inherently in situ and ephemeral and the photographs of it lived on... Still, even at that time, we were aware that the photograph can become the piece. Think of Robert Smithson's photograph of *Spiral Jetty* [1970], from above, in black and white. We know the piece through that image more than the piece itself. The first piece of Katharina's that seared into my memory was her bed [*Das Bett*, 2004]. You looked at the photograph of it and felt like you had an experience of the work through the image itself. There was the idea that it was precious, but also that the image represented a moment in time.

**KG:** The work doesn't only exist in situ but also in the way we talk about it, in the way we interpret it. With a lot of work, the act of photographing it reduces it so that it can only be seen in a certain way. My work is based on how life is about looking at things from many perspectives – it changes when we look at it in different ways. Unlike Buren's, it is not only the material manifestation of a concept, but the sum of influences upon the concept. And that's where the question of influence becomes interesting.



*Katharina Grosse, The Horse Trotted Another Couple Of Metres, Then It Stopped, 2018. Exhibition view at Carriageworks, Sydney, 2018. © Katharina Grosse and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2018. Courtesy of Gagosian.*

**SS:** When I first saw your work, it felt like I was looking at the present, past, and future, all at the same time. I'm interested in the idea of what haunts you over time, because there's so much immediate present. How does something translate into a lasting moment?

**HUO:** Tell us about the subway station (*Blueprint for a Landscape* (2016), installed in New York City's 96th Street station), Sarah, an extreme case where millions of people see your work every day.

**SS:** Subway stations are probably the most permanent thing in New York – buildings can disappear in a second. And this idea that it's both a permanent and a transitional space is very beautiful. For the new subway expansion, they commissioned an artist to do each station, so you

had this opportunity to create an entirely immersive environment. Every single tile is part of the artwork. Subway stations are democratic spaces, they're very interesting places to do an artwork.

**KG:** Something I am inspired by in your work is how you are able to play with scale. For instance, in New York, a city where form and matter is condensed in a very complex way, your response was to create a fragile web that appears to turn the city inside out. You answered the scale you were in with another scale that has its own rules and therefore could match the massiveness of the place. That's not an easy thing to do, because when you create something you think of as a big painting, when it's in an urban environment it can seem tiny.

**SS:** The subway station project was conceived as a blueprint for a landscape. So, it's about using a two-dimensional tool, like drawing, to capture a three-dimensional space. Maybe the question could also be how do you create an object and change its scale through a mark?

**KG:** Your work often allows the possibility of looking at something as if from far away.

**SS:** A scale shift...

**HUO:** Micro, macro.



*Sarah Sze, Blueprint for a Landscape, 2017. Installation view at NYCT Second Avenue – 96 Street Station, New York City. © Sarah Sze*

**SS:** Both our recent shows were about trying to bring the experience of the studio into the exhibition space.

**KG:** The big difference for me is that, in a studio, I have a very different practice, time-wise. I can go back to paintings that I started two weeks ago, take them up again, and put more thought into it. I can charge them with more experiences, whereas when I produce large-scale works, I have a certain amount of time, maybe 10 days. It's very close to Greek tragedy, in which time, space, and action are so related. People walk in the work, they change it, the cloth gets unraveled. The piece can be cut apart, folded again, and maybe find another way to appear later. I've been looking at the question of how to do something site-specific and then use it again in another situation. Can you rebuild your works, or do you restructure them according to the new space?

**SS:** I did a show in London where I tried to talk about that translation of a work between the studio and the gallery itself. I photographed the studio in New York, then measured exactly where everything was, brought it to the gallery, and repositioned it exactly as it was in the studio. I was thinking about how we use a wall as somewhere to map our minds, to storyboard our thoughts. I brought this to the gallery so that the viewer would experience the work as drafts, rather than as a finished piece. It's this idea of trying to figure out how you could map the studio.

**HUO:** It's perfect that we conclude with these comparisons about the importance of the studio in your practices. This has given us a fantastic insight.



*Sarah Sze, Hidden Relief, 2001. Installation view at Asia Society Museum New York, 2001. © Sarah Sze*