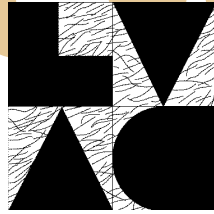


# PublicWorks

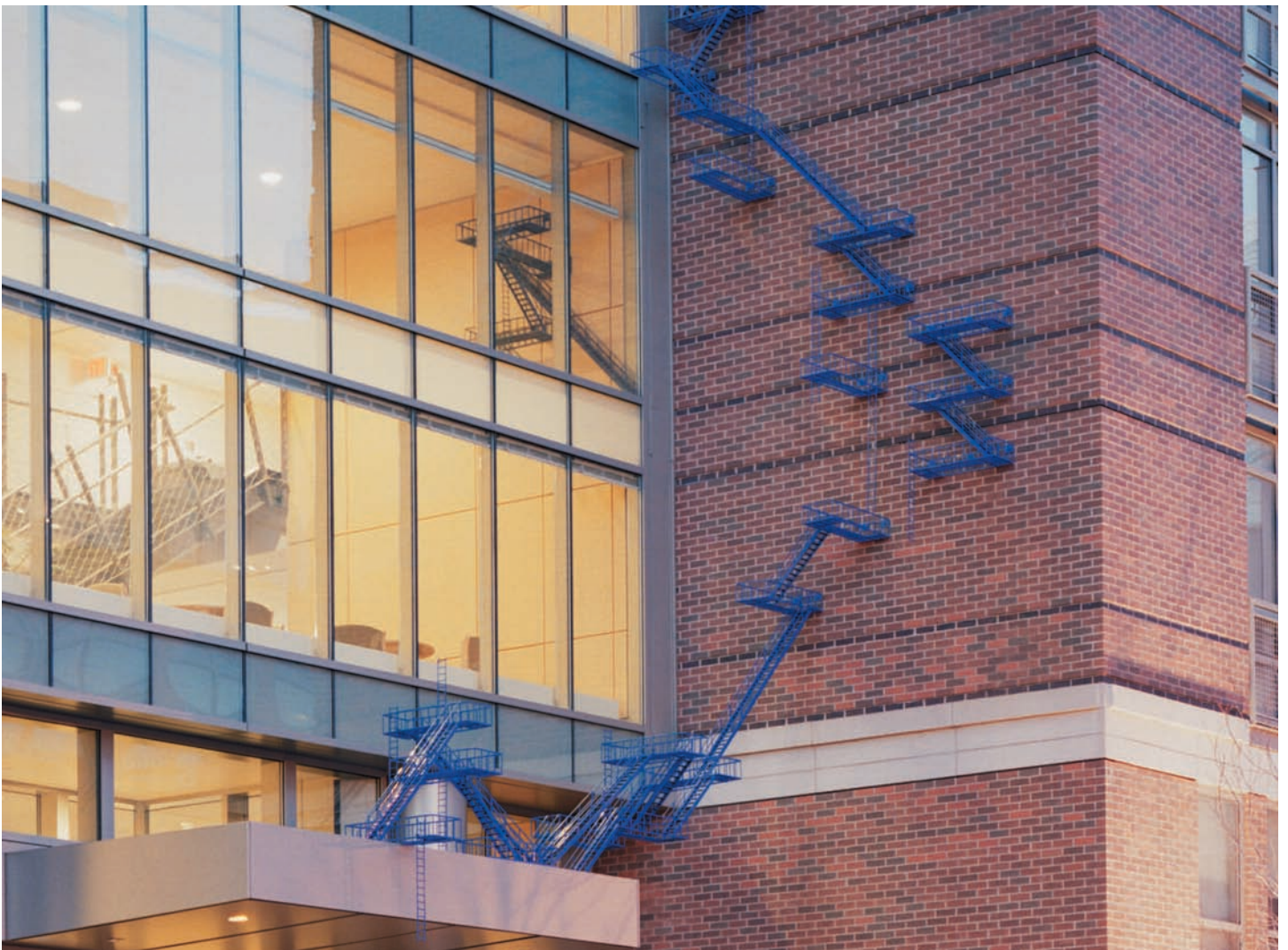


**SARAH SZE**

***Blue Poles, 2006***

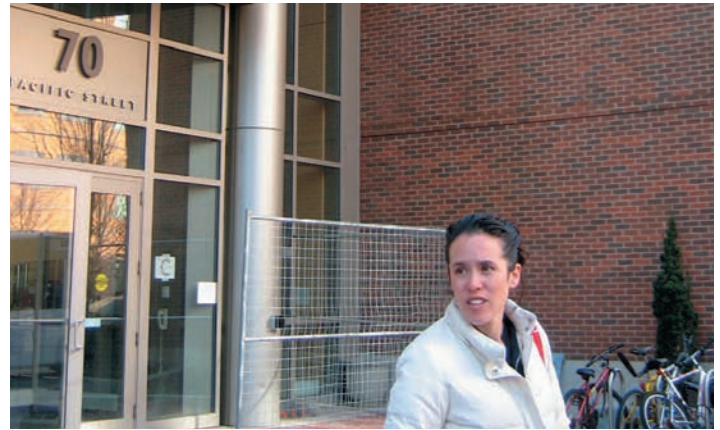
**A Percent-for-Art Commission for Sidney-Pacific  
Graduate Residence of the MIT campus**

**Architect: Steffian Bradley Architects, Inc.**



## Sarah Sze

**A strange blue configuration of ladders and stairs sprouts from the facade of this otherwise no-nonsense dormitory building on the MIT campus. Too small for human use, the blue intrusion nevertheless might function as a means of egress for a small animal. But though it weaves inside and outside the plate glass windows, dropping down at one point to lap over the awning above the door, it doesn't really seem to serve any discernable purpose. Is it something left over from the building's construction? An unauthorized addition by some prankish student?**



Photos by George Bouret

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 whirring 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 simultaneously 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 architecture'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 construction-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 settlements 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 different 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 exhibition 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 anything 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 appliances, 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 "overall 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 architectural 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>

Sculptor and MacArthur Fellow **Sarah Sze** was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1969. She holds a BA from Yale University and an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York. Her solo exhibitions include those at Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York (2005 and 2000); Fondazione Davide Halevim, Milan (2004); The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2003); the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2002); Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (2001); Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig, and Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris (1999); Institute of Contemporary Art, London and the musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1998); and White Columns, White Room, New York (1997). In 2005 Sze created *An Equal and Opposite Reaction* as a permanent installation for the Seattle Opera in Seattle, Washington.

Sze has participated in numerous group exhibitions including *Swarm* at The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, and *The Fluidity of Time: Selections from the MCA Collection*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2005). In 2004, she participated in *The Encounters in the 21st Century: Polyphony-Emerging Resonances*, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan; *Beginning Here: 101 Ways*, School of Visual Arts, New York; *Seeing Other People*, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York; and *State of Play*, Serpentine Gallery, London. 2003 exhibitions included: *world rush\_4* artists, National Gallery of Victoria, Australia; *The Paper Sculpture Show*, Sculpture Center, New York (traveling exhibition); and *The Moderns*, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy. In 2002, Sze's work was shown in *Penetration*, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York; *Artist to Artists: a Decade of The Space Program*, *The Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation*, Ace Gallery, New York; *177th Annual: An Invitational Exhibition*, National Academy of Design, New York; and *Cidades: 25th Bienal de São Paulo, Iconografias Metropolitanas*, São Paulo, Brazil. 2001 exhibitions included: *The Americans-New Art*, Barbican Centre, London; *Let's Get to Work*, Susquehanna Art Museum, Harrisburg, PA; *010101: Art in Technological Times*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; *Boo1 City of*

*Tomorrow, European Housing Expo*, Malmo, Sweden; and *Hidden Relief*, Asia Society, New York. In 2000, she participated in the Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and *Mission pour la célébration de l'an 2000*, La Beauté, Avignon, France; and in 1999 she was included in the 48th International Exhibition of Contemporary Art, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, and in The Carnegie International 1999–2000 at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. 1998 exhibitions include: *Berlin/Berlin*, Berlin Biennial, Akademie der Kunst, Germany; *Deep Thought, Part II*, Basilico Fine Arts, New York; *Where: Allegories of Site in Contemporary Art*, The Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion, Stamford, CT; *People, Places, and Things*, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York; *Manifesta 2, European Biennial of Contemporary Art*, Casino Luxembourg; and *Construction Drawing*, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY. Sze's works were shown in *Migrateurs*, musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, France; *Cities on the Move*, The Vienna Secession, Austria (traveling exhibition); *Some Young New Yorkers*, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY; *Drawings and Paintings*, Wooster Gardens, New York; *The Name of the Place*, Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York in 1997, and *SoHo Annual*, Pratt Artist's League, 420 West Broadway Building, New York in 1996.

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, allots 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.

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Cover: *Blue Poles* (2006) by Sarah Sze at the Sidney-Pacific Graduate Residence, MIT, Cambridge, Mass.  
Photo by George Bouret