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Sarah Sze's "Triple Point": Modeling a Phenomenological Experience of Contemporary Life

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Sarah Sze's *Triple Point*:

Modeling a Phenomenological Experience of Contemporary Life

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
with a concentration in Modern and Contemporary Art
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ABSTRACT

In 2013, the 55th Venice Biennale, the world's oldest bi-annual international contemporary art exhibition, opened under the title *The Encyclopedic Palace*, organized by Italian curator Massimiliano Gioni. The international exhibition section is always flanked by an amalgamation of distinct national spaces, a dual exhibition model that has been the hallmark of the Biennale since 1998. In 2013, the United States pavilion was devoted to American artist Sarah Sze's work *Triple Point* and her signature arrangement of everyday objects and materials, such as Q-tips, water bottles, painter's tape, and desk lamps. The title of Sze's multi-room installation, culled from earlier works as well as created from new materials, refers to the thermodynamic equilibrium of any given substance—specifically, a “triple point” is the temperature and pressure at which a substance is solid, liquid and gas at the same time. The quasi-scientific installations provide constantly shifting viewpoints as the viewer circumnavigates the interconnected spaces of the U.S. pavilion, moving amid, around, and through the work, but also focusing on different individual objects before pulling back to catch glimpses of the work as a whole.

In this thesis, I apply a phenomenological analysis to *Triple Point* in order to make sense of its scientific references in conjunction with its complex form. I view *Triple Point* as a culmination of the ideas that Sze has sustained and explored over the course of her career—such as the investigation of everyday objects in relation to site, space, and viewer—that situates the viewer in an experience caught between empirical order and individual perception. To examine *Triple Point* using the idea of “embodied perception,” I formally analyze the work in relation to

its scientific meanings as suggested by its titles of individual works—*Gleaner*, *Planetarium*, *Eclipse*, *Scale*, *Orrery*, *Pendulum*, *Observatory*, and *Compass*. I then trace the discourse surrounding phenomenology and the rise of installation art through the writings of art historians Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, and Claire Bishop, before finally situating French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as an apt theory for analyzing this work. In embracing both the scientific objectivity implied by Sze’s installations without sacrificing the import of physical perception, I contend that *Triple Point* invites the viewer to look at—but also beyond—the array of familiar objects, emphasizing a shifting sense of the work that is never exhaustively fixed. Thus, *Triple Point* does not expose the classic dichotomies between art and science, natural and manufactured, image and object, but instead opens up the moment of their confluence—the paradoxical achievement of an embodied perception as described by Merleau-Ponty. Understood phenomenologically, *Triple Point* invites viewers to get caught-up in the dynamic experience of “between-ness” invoked by the installation’s title and to engage with their everyday experiences of contemporary life in a new way.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the 55th Venice Biennale opened under the title *The Encyclopedic Palace*. The Biennale's Italian curator, Massimiliano Gioni, asked viewers to consider the utopian dreams of visionaries and outsiders using as a critical point of departure a scale model for a museum meant to hold all the world's knowledge, created in 1955 by Italian-American Marino Auriti.¹ The international exhibition was flanked by an amalgamation of distinct national spaces that has been the hallmark of the Biennale since 1998;² individual pavilions herald the type of contemporary art currently being produced in each country. The 2013 United States pavilion was devoted to New York based artist Sarah Sze, selected by the National Endowment for the Arts with the support of commissioners Holly Block and Carey Lovelace. Unified under the title *Triple Point*, which refers to the thermodynamic equilibrium of a given substance, the seven installations within—and spilling out of—the U.S. pavilion abounded with assemblages of quotidian objects—plastic, strings, fans, lamps, projectors, sugar packets, and ladders—and also “natural” elements—moss, stones, plants, and photographs of rocks—in an aesthetically dazzling accumulation.

Sze's work has been celebrated by some of America's most influential art critics. Her sculptures have received consistent praise from the American philosopher Arthur Danto, who

¹ For more information about the curator's vision for the international exhibition's theme in 2013, see: Massimiliano Gioni et al., *55th International Art Exhibition Il Palazzo Enciclopedico*, vol. 1–2 (Verona: Grafiche Siz s.p.a. for

² This dual exhibition model, an International Exhibition organized by a single curator and national pavilions which each have their own curator and individual project, is split between the original location of the Giardini and the restored spaces of the Arsenale. The concept was first used in the Venice Biennale in 1993 but only made permanent by 1998. See foreword in the exhibition catalogue, Volume I, “An Exhibition-Research,” by Paolo Baratta, President of la Biennale di Venezia in: Massimiliano Gioni, “55th International Art Exhibition Il Palazzo Enciclopedico,” (Verona: Grafiche SIZ, 2013), 15.

called her oeuvre “a body of work unlike any other.”³ More recently, Sze’s sculptural installation *Triple Point* was singled out in the September 2013 issue of *Artforum* as a stand-out in a rather dismal Biennale. German-born art historian Benjamin Buchloh specifically lauded *Triple Point* as a “real attainment,” one of the “greatest surprise[s]” to be found in Venice.⁴ Nigerian-born curator and art critic Okwui Enwezor praised it as a work that “elevated” the Biennale as a whole, and moreover stood out as one of the “strongest” and “most confident” works in the U.S. pavilion he had seen in some time.⁵ The fact that Buchloh and Enwezor—two of the most critical voices in the contemporary art field—have celebrated *Triple Point* speaks to Sze’s strength as a contemporary artist and the necessity of closely examining this work as it relates to the artworld in the current moment. I contend that *Triple Point*’s significance depends upon the work’s aesthetic convergence between seemingly oppositional ways of knowing the world today, such as the scientific quantification of unfathomable amounts of data and the unbounded creative potential of contemporary art, which find common ground in the bodily, or phenomenological, experience of the viewer. Emphasizing embodied perception thus heightens ones awareness of how we locate ourselves in relation our daily environments, objects, and other people—but also how those perceptions are mutable, unstable, and susceptible to change.

Interpretations of Sze’s work have ranged from semiotic readings, re-visitations of modernism, and connections with her Chinese cultural heritage, to visualizations of scientific models.⁶ In this thesis, I apply a phenomenological analysis to *Triple Point* in order to make

³ Arthur C. Danto, “An Introduction to the Sculptural Achievements of Sarah Sze,” in *Sarah Sze*, Arthur C. Danto and Linda Norden (New York: Abrams, 2007), 6.

⁴ Buchloh, 315.

⁵ Okwui Enwezor, “Predicaments of Culture,” in *Artforum International* (2013), 328–329. Okwui Enwezor has been named director of the forthcoming 56th Venice Biennale. Taken from the press release on the office Venice Biennale website, “Board of Directors appoints Okwui Enwezor Director of the Visual Arts Sector (For the 56th International Art Exhibition 2015)”, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/news/04-12.html>.

⁶ Although all these analyses diverge slightly from my own analysis in that I wish to investigate the experience which takes place between the viewer and the object(s) of viewing, there are many merits to interpretations for

sense of its scientific references in conjunction with its complex form. I view *Triple Point* as a culmination of the ideas that Sze has sustained and explored over the course of her career—such as the investigation of everyday objects in relation to site, space, and viewer—that situates the viewer in an experience caught between empirical order and individual perception.

To fully understand how a phenomenological model applies to the experience of *Triple Point*, I first carefully describe the work in its entirety: it is divided in the exhibition spaces of the U.S. pavilion as *Gleaner*, *Planetarium*, *Eclipse*, *Scale*, *Orrery*, *Pendulum*, and *Observatory*. The installations occupy six distinct spaces within the Jeffersonian-style U.S. pavilion and spill out into the courtyard; small sculptures related to *Triple Point* are even placed outside of the Biennale, in the streets of Venice in a series of installations titled *Compass*. I take seriously Sze's explicit references to scientific ideas, immediately noticeable in her use of titles, which I use as entry-points into the compositions and forms. The quasi-scientific installations provide constantly shifting viewpoints as the viewer circumnavigates the interconnected spaces of the U.S. pavilion, moving amid, around, and through the work, but also focusing on different individual objects before pulling back to catch glimpses of the work as a whole.

investigating the objects and object-relations embedded in Sze's complex sculptures. Linda Norden, in her far-ranging and comprehensive essay in a 2007 catalogue raisonné of Sze's oeuvre to that date, includes such topics as a semiotic reading of Sze's work and a sense of modernist abstraction at play (which she poses as a question, "An Abstract tour de Force?" in one of the section headings). See: Linda Norden, "Show and Hide: Reading Sarah Sze," in *Sarah Sze*, Arthur C. Danto and Linda Norden (New York: Abrams, 2007), 8–13. Connections to Sze's cultural heritage, as someone of Chinese descent, and her one year residency in Japan, were of particular interest to those writing about her installation *Infinite Line* at the Asia Society Museum in New York from December 16, 2011–March 18, 2012. This comes to focus in the exhibition catalogue, especially "The Line between Drawing and Sculpture: An Interview with Sarah Sze, Melissa Chiu" and Miwako Tezuka, "Ethos and Logos: Sarah Sze's Shifting Perspectives," in *Sarah Sze: Infinite Line* (New York: Asia Society, 2011), 11–22, 73–82. Discussions surrounding "scientific models" and the work of Sze began in 2005 in a discussion between Arthur Danto and Sze, in which Danto suggested that her work, to him, seemed to look like scientific models. In subsequent messages between the art critic and artist, Sze revealed that the suggestion of scientific models opened up new possibilities for conceptualizing her work and that it continues to be something she thinks about. This conversation was made explicit in an essay written by Danto in 2011 and published posthumously after his death: Arthur C. Danto, "Scientific models and the work of Sarah Sze," in Marion Boulton Stroud et al., *Sarah Sze at the Fabric Workshop and Museum* (Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2014), 58–63.

After a thorough and careful visual analysis of *Triple Point*, I establish Sze as a contemporary artist who has pushed the limitations of objects-as-art in the tradition of Western sculpture by briefly discussing her oeuvre up until the 2013 Venice Biennale. The investigation of everyday objects in relation to site, space, and viewer found in *Triple Point* are thus understood as enduring themes that have sustained Sze's practice since her rise to prominence in the late 1990s. Highlighting key examples in Sze's career demonstrates the way her sculptural installations have engendered such far-ranging interpretations as the investigation of contemporary consumer goods to scientific models—which, as I shall reveal, also significantly informs her use of titles.

The next section, “Reconsidering Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology,” carefully investigates how the sculptural arrangements of *Triple Point* provoke an increased awareness of the sensual body of the viewer, purposely orchestrated by Sze through her spatial arrangements. Using Buchloh’s intriguing suggestion for a phenomenological interpretation of subject-object relations in *Triple Point*, I turn to the rise of this theory in art through the philosophical writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the mid-twentieth century. Translated from the original French to English in 1962, his influential text *The Phenomenology of Perception* undertook the difficult philosophical task of describing how we see by forging a stronger link between perceptual experience and the sensual self than in previous philosophies.⁷ In contrast to interpretations of art such as Clement Greenberg’s formalism and the Modernist emphasis on optical models for viewing art, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical writings offer productive descriptions of the primacy of embodied perception. The notion of the eye as a disembodied tool used to collect information is conveyed by the immutable scientific meanings suggested by the titles of individual works—

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London; New York: Routledge, 1962, 2002).

Gleaner, Planetarium, Eclipse, Scale, Orrery, Pendulum, and Observatory; but this sense of scientific objectivity is undermined by a phenomenological reading of *Triple Point*. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's description of the phenomenological experience helps the viewer to better understand the aesthetic convergence between art and science in this work.

Merleau-Ponty's text *The Phenomenology of Perception* contributed to the rise of an expression of phenomenological experience through Minimalist sculpture in the 1960s. In the subsequent section, "Embodied Perception and the Rise of Installation Art," I investigate how phenomenology was used to describe the viewer's increased perceptual awareness of objects in relation to its environment engendered by Minimalist sculpture. However, Sze's work, with its abundance and variety of objects, does not directly recall the geometric forms made by Minimalist artists like Robert Morris—the now familiar "expanded field" of sculpture mapped by Rosalind Krauss in 1979 has widened, and, in the case of Sze, sculpture becomes situated in a tentative position between landscape, architecture, and *objects*. The embodied experience of Sze's renegotiation of sculpture is furthermore aligned with phenomenology's later re-visitation in installation practices, begun in the mid-to-late twentieth century, as explained by Claire Bishop.⁸ By working through these key moments in what could be termed a "phenomenological history" of recent art, I contend that a sense of active, embodied perception best describes one's experience of the complexity and scale of *Triple Point*. A phenomenological perspective acknowledges the work's multiple viewpoints and the unstable, shifting sense of the objects in

⁸ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Of particular interest will be the chapter "Heightened Perception," conceptually organized around a "phenomenological model" of the viewing subject. Here, Bishop refers to a certain form of installation art—the kind that takes its cue from Minimalist art in the 1960s and the philosophical writings of Merleau-Ponty, discussed in detail later in this essay. However, unlike this analysis, Bishop looks to installation artists whom she sees as clear and direct descendants of the Minimalists—that is, artists whose use of stark and literal materials are meant to emphasize multisensory and interactive modes of viewing, such as Robert Irwin, Michael Asher, Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, and Olafur Eliasson. Bishop, *Installation Art*, 48–81.

the viewer's immediate present. A phenomenological analysis also recognizes the way *Triple Point* situates the viewer in an experience caught between empirical order and individual perception.⁹ Likewise, I suggest that an embodied perception provoked by installation art is a necessary tool for navigating *Triple Point*'s interconnected spaces as a chain of experiences in order to get a holistic sense of the works installed throughout the U.S. pavilion.

Furthermore, the location of this comprehensive installation in the U.S. pavilion for the 2013 Venice Biennale raises an awareness of the political role of the United States in our currently globalizing world. The almost excessive accumulation of objects within the context of the U.S. pavilion yields interesting discussions on the proliferation of mass-produced objects and images on a national and global scale. In the final section "Objects and Beyond" I complicate Sze's presentation of this "stuff" of capitalism run amok in the particular context of the Biennale. At the same time, the artist's signature aesthetic of accumulated objects appears in a new light when one closely and critically examines one's perception of these same objects as rooted in real time and space, of which the viewer's body is a part. Analyzed together, *Triple Point* invites viewers to reconsider their perceptions of multitudinous everyday things, which have become symptomatic of a consumer culture obsessed with buying and accumulating commodities, in light of their new and unfamiliar functions as parts of quasi-scientific structures.

In embracing the appearance of objectivity without sacrificing the import of physical perception, I contend that *Triple Point* invites the viewer to look at—but also beyond—the objects, emphasizing a shifting sense of the work that is never exhaustively fixed. Thus, *Triple Point* does not expose the classic dichotomies between art and science, natural and manufactured, image and object, but instead opens up the moment of their confluence—the

⁹ Quote by Sze from an interview with commissioner Carey Lovelace, as published in the exhibition catalogue *Triple Point: Sarah Sze*. Holly Block et al., *Triple Point: Sarah Sze* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co. in collaboration with The Bronx Museum of Arts, 2013), 13.

paradoxical achievement of an embodied perception as described by Merleau-Ponty. *Triple Point* exposes our contemporary reality as perpetually fluctuating and changing, in which the scientific explanations we often rely on to ground ourselves in the world also constantly shifting or fall short of exhaustively describing our lived experience, a phenomenon captured by the aesthetic convergence between art and science in this work. Paying close attention to specific scientific motifs in conjunction with the perceptual experience of the work deepens an aesthetic analysis of *Triple Point*. In doing so, the viewer's understanding becomes receptive to objective, concrete observations while posing them in new, pleasantly unfamiliar, functions and relations to the world—of which both these quotidian objects and our sensual selves are a part. Similar to the triple point invoked in the title of the work, the viewer is invited to get caught-up in this unique experience of “between-ness” and to engage with their familiar world afresh.

TRIPLE POINT

A commercial aluminum ladder straddles a partially shredded lawn chair. The ladder holds parallel blue strings taut enough to support a cut branch; the chair, meanwhile, is occupied by bits of moss and rocks set on printed bits of tyvek while a lamp casts shadows through pinholes. Looking closer, moss and plants appear to encroach on a whole gamut of objects from below, while vines creep up the ladder's steps and into layers of delicately arranged lumber, packing straps, clamps, clothes, and lamps. This is but one sculptural vignette in *Gleaner*, embedded in the outdoor spaces surrounding the U.S. pavilion, and the first section a viewer encounters in the larger work called *Triple Point*. The courtyard to the U.S. pavilion is completely transformed through Sze's significant additions of everyday "stuff" and deft manipulations of the natural environment surrounding the pavilion.

Selected by the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA), Sze was announced in 2012 as the solo-artist to represent the U.S. at the Venice Biennale with the support of commissioners Holly Block and Carey Lovelace.¹⁰ The following summer Sze enacted an ambitious concept for a series of complex sculptures installed in the U.S. pavilion unified under the title *Triple Point*. The term "triple point" specifically relates to a state of thermodynamic equilibrium in which the solid, liquid, and gaseous states of a substance exist simultaneously under a precise condition of

¹⁰ Holly Block is the Executive Director for The Bronx Museum of the Arts; Carey Lovelace is a critic and independent curator. The exhibit *Triple Point* was organized by The Bronx Museum of the Arts, presented by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State, and produced with the collaboration of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. For press information on the selection of Sarah Sze as the U.S. representative at the 55th Venice Biennale, see: Andrew Russeth, "Sarah Sze Will Represent U.S. At 2013 Venice Biennale," *The Observer*, February 23, 2012; Julia Halperin and Benjamin Sutton, "Sarah Sze Will Represent the United States at the 2013 Venice Biennale," *ART INFO*, February 23, 2012; Jennifer Maloney, "Bronx Museum Gets Venice Role," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 24, 2012.

temperature and pressure. Sze's *Triple Point* includes a series of sculptural installations under seven distinct titles: *Gleaner*, *Planetarium*, *Eclipse*, *Scale*, *Orrery*, *Pendulum*, and *Observatory*. The installations are separated into the six interior rooms and the outdoor courtyard of the U.S. pavilion's exhibition space. *Triple Point* also included a series of sculptures—all singular variations of crafted “boulders,” a new aesthetic motif of Sze's that debuted in Venice—placed throughout the city for the duration of the Biennale under the title *Compass*.¹¹

In order to understand the ideas alluded to by each of the titles unified under *Triple Point*, it is necessary to carefully and critically examine these works' individual compositions and forms. Viewers begin their journey through the multiple spaces and works of the installation with *Gleaner*, located in the outdoor courtyard in front of the pavilion (Figure 1). A strong right diagonal formed by purposeful additions to the Doric façade of the U.S. pavilion partially obscures the Italian inscription, STATI VNITI D'AMERICA, which proudly proclaims the building's allegiance. The rigid and imposing Palladian symmetry of the U.S. pavilion appears to be overrun and further destabilized by the bulk of the accumulation appearing on its right side. The alterations Sze has enacted through *Gleaner* allow the whole outdoor courtyard to be reimagined via her signature sculptural flair. This furthermore allows the artist to completely change the circulation of the interior space—the doors of the central rotunda are blackened and closed, forcing viewers into a circular route in which one enters the pavilion from the left emergency exit and leaves from the far right. The title *Gleaner* broadly refers to gathering material or information. But it is also perhaps an indirect reference to the famous nineteenth

¹¹ Three of these sculptures are included in the official exhibition catalogue for *Triple Point*. They are listed as follows: *Triple Point (Compass)*, *Giardini*, in which a small boulder is placed discreetly within the grounds dedicated to the Venice Biennale; *Triple Point (Compass)*, *Il Gazzettino via Garibaldi*, where one large boulder sits atop a Venetian vendor's rooftop, the street sign specifically noted by the title; and *Triple Point (Compass)*, *1579 via Garibaldi*, where the “1579” refers to a street address posted just below the open window in which one of Sze's miniature boulders is perched.

century French painting, *The Gleaners* (1875) by Jean-François Millet, whose naturalistic depiction of three women gleaning the field is also more than it appears—a contrast between the rural working-class and the abundant wealth of the bourgeois that subtly supported the cry for political revolution in France (Figure 2).¹² Drawing this comparison to a well-known icon of Western painting only furthers the idea that the work Sze has created similarly moves between boundaries, its superficial appearance belying its political undertones.

A dominant feature of the courtyard is Sze's use of various-sized "boulders." Part of the inclusion of these faux stones—which range from intimate sizes, to large constructions more than four feet wide—came from the discovery on the part of the artist that, in Venice, naturally-occurring rocks or boulders cannot be found (stone is shipped in and primarily used as building material).¹³ According to Benjamin Buchloh, "...Sze seizes the occasion—rarely afforded a young artist—to dismantle a whole gamut of prevailing definitions of sculpture," dislodging "the classic conviction, forged in the 1960s, that sculpture, mass, and gravity are coterminous."¹⁴ Nowhere is this dismantling of the "coterminous" relationship between sculpture, mass, and gravity perhaps more apparent than in these faux stones (sculptures created from photographs of rock texture, printed, cut into strips and molded onto armatures for a 'natural' appearance) that dapple the courtyard. Sze's vaulting assemblages seem to grow up the side of the pavilion and over the roof, high over viewers' heads, building upwards using the questionable logic of two-by-fours, metal poles, and string held together with painter's tape and intermittent clamps as a

¹² One of the essential monographs on Millet remains that of Etienne Moreau-Nélaton, *Millet Raconté par lui-même*, 3 vols., Paris, 1921. For a thoughtful reconsideration of Millet's life and artistic career in historical context, see Robert L. Herbert, "Millet Reconsidered," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* vol. 1, (1966): 28–65.

¹³ Quoted from video interview with Carol Vogel for *The New York Times*, "Sarah Sze: The Stones of Venice," *The New York Times*, May 29, 2013, http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/29/sarah-sze-the-stones-of-venice/?_r=0.

¹⁴ Benjamin D. Buchloh, "The Entropic Encyclopedia," *Artforum International* (September 2013), 314.

shaky scaffolding for an aquarium, cement bricks, and boulders—which, by all appearances and the laws of gravity, should come crashing down under its own weight.

The viewer moves from *Gleaner* to the first indoor room, titled *Planetarium* (Figure 3), through the emergency exit door on the left side of the U.S. pavilion—an unconventional entryway into the interior exhibition spaces. In *Planetarium*, Sze enacts unfathomable shifts in scale, from microscopic arrangements of toothpicks, matches, and ripped paper, to cosmological structures—delicate rods that explode in star-like bursts, while projectors and desk lamps illuminate patterns of light and shadow on the pristine gallery walls. Each individual part of the work seems accessible. The viewer can name the various objects and perhaps even feel a sort of familiarity in acknowledging their normal, day-to-day uses. Yet the composition renders the individual parts—complete with cups, fans, and even a mini disco ball—simultaneously unfamiliar as materials for the arching, spherical structure that suggests an experimental version of a functional planetarium.

The next room, *Eclipse* (Figure 4), shifts the upward-looking astronomy of the planetarium down to eclipses of light patterning the floor. The sculptural elements are pushed to the outside edges of the room, inviting viewers through a curved path along the middle of the space. This room feels calmer than *Gleaner* or *Planetarium*, more still—the dimmed lighting adds a hushed reverence. Assemblages of Sze’s now familiar objects, such as cut yarn, toothpicks, nails, and bits of molded clay, are arranged in brightly colored and aesthetically pleasing patterns. Overlapping desks recall the contemporary site of work: the place where we sit, think, and enact ideas.

The way Sze marks presence and absence in this room conflates empirical observation with aesthetic beauty. According to Sze, *Eclipse* attempts to make visible that which has been

removed, using holes that “mark absences physically, right in the place where there should be presence.”¹⁵ Paths of light descend from her variously employed lamps, opening circular holes in the desks that have seemingly been “pushed” downwards. An eclipse is an obstruction of light most often associated with astronomical occurrences such as a solar or lunar eclipse, in which one celestial body obscures the light from or to another celestial body. Sze’s installation bears a striking visual resemblance to this phenomenon. Circles cut from individual desks are suspended by strings held fast by configurations of pebbles, which, obscuring the light’s path, results in shadowy eclipses on the floor. It is as if Sze has taken astronomical motifs of the heavenly bodies and brought them to their inverse on the ground.

Sand acts as a counterforce to the solidity of concrete objects, mounded in anthill-like piles that seems to spill downwards from various tiers. To Sze, the sand is meant to remind viewers of the eventual decay of all matter and thus serves as a vehicle for conveying “the fragility of objects and their inevitable degradation over time.”¹⁶ In one striking instance, a lamp appears to either be cast, precariously, by the sand itself—or disintegrating, its sturdy metal structure gradually succumbing to an inexplicable deterioration. As viewers move among these carefully orchestrated moments, they witness oscillating patterns that teeter between accumulation and collapse.

The third room consists of two parts designated by individual titles, *Scale* and *Orrery*. Located in the rotunda of the Palladian-style building, Sze presents the first installation in the central space of the rotunda (normally the entryway into the U.S. pavilion) and the second installation in an open utility closet. Although it appears relatively sparse in comparison to the rest of the exhibition spaces, the rotunda poignantly underscores the artist’s commitment to

¹⁵ “Sarah Sze and Jennifer Egan Studio Visit,” in Holly Block et al., *Sarah Sze: Triple Point* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co. in collaboration with the The Bronx Museum of Arts, 2013), 112.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

perception and scale. Simply titled *Scale* (Figure 5), the round space of the rotunda quietly and diametrically opposes a large, crafted boulder, measuring more than four feet wide and almost as tall, with a small hole, perhaps an inch in diameter, punched through a niche in the back wall.¹⁷ To Sze, scale relates both to time and space; she admires Emily Dickinson’s ability to, in one sentence, “shoot from a pebble to a boulder.”¹⁸ Sze’s fabricated boulder sits just off-center of the permanent inlaid compass rose on the floor, seemingly refusing the sense of stability and centeredness that comes with using the locating device to which the compass motif refers. The title could allude to the visual scale of the two parts, the boulder and the hole in the wall, a binary of “big” and “small” which is complicated by the way the hole opens up to a larger exterior view behind the pavilion itself; or, *Scale* could allude to a weigh-scale, a humorous allusion to the fact that the fabricated boulder is much lighter than one might initially believe. All these variations on “scale” begin to call into question the way one perceives weight, size, and space.

The fourth installation is located in the rotunda’s only open utility closet (Figure 6). The title, *Orrery*, refers to an eighteenth century apparatus created by the Earl of Orrery—a model of the solar system, like a planetarium, which shows the relative positions and motions of celestial bodies with balls moved by clockwork. Joseph Wright of Derby famously depicted this model in his history painting *The Orrery* in 1766 (Figure 7).¹⁹ This closet space, unexpectedly included as

¹⁷ The view outside of this hole was photographed by Sze and printed; if one looked closely and carefully, it could be found inside the nearby utility closet as a part of the installation *Orrery*.

¹⁸ Sarah Sze, “Sarah Sze at the Fabric Workshop and Museum,” (lecture, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA, April 3, 2014).

¹⁹ This monumental painting, whose full title is *A Philosopher giving that lecture on the Orrery, in which a lamp is put in the place of the sun*, was exhibited with the Incorporated Society of Artists of Great Britain in 1766. The painting encapsulates the spirit of the Enlightenment during the eighteenth century: empirical observation of the natural world, grounded in science and reason with the underlying motivation of progress and the betterment of society. Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–97) was particularly interested in the Enlightenment, depicting scientists and philosophers in large oil paintings, a mode previously reserved for grand narratives such as biblical heroes or Greek gods. For a detailed investigation of the *Orrery*’s provenance, history, and an explanation of Derby’s subjects—

part of the exhibition, is part visual archive, part utility space. The installation made use of existing shelves alongside other found items one might expect to find in a utility closet: a mop, glue, sandbags, paint, extension cords, and some hygrometers (an instrument commonly used by museums to precisely monitor humidity and temperature). In addition to practical items such as these, the closet also included books, pamphlets, and other forgotten mementos of Biennales past—such as a small stack of exhibition catalogues for Robert Smithson’s retrospective at the U.S. pavilion in 1982.²⁰ Thus, remnants of the U.S. pavilion’s specific history are renewed in *Orrery*, delicately arranged and mixed with Sze’s own materials. Consistent with these evidences of passing time, the artist includes a nod to her first major work, *Untitled (SoHo Annual)* by replicating that exhibit’s hallmark, miniature toilet-paper sculptures in white clay and napkins, thereby inserting herself into the building’s existing history at the Biennale. Consequently, *Orrery* maps the history of the U.S. pavilion and the history of Sze’s work the way an orrery maps the heavens in relation to a constant: in this case, the central pivot becomes the Biennale itself.

including insightful explorations of the mechanism at the focal of the lecture, the orrery itself—see Elizabeth E. Barker, “New Light on ‘The Orrery’: Joseph Wright and the representation of astronomy in eighteenth century Britain,” *The British Art Journal* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 29–37.

²⁰ The closet included several examples of the printed promotional material from shows over the course of the history of the U.S. pavilion. The specific exhibition catalogue I single out here was printed on the occasion of *Robert Smithson: A Retrospective View* commissioned by Thomas W. Leavitt and curated by Robert Hobbs in 1982. An expanded list of other artists who have since exhibited at the U.S. pavilion includes: Jenny Holzer (1990, *Jenny Holzer. The Venice* Installation commissioned by Michael Auping), Louise Bourgeois (1993, *Louise Bourgeois. Recent Work* commissioned by Charlotta Kotik), Bill Viola (1995, *Bill Viola. Buried Secrets* commissioned by Marilyn Zeitlin), Ann Hamilton (1999, *Ann Hamilton Myein* commissioned by Katy Kline and Helaine Posner), Robert Gober (2001, *Robert Gober* commissioned by James Rondeau and Olga Viso), Fred Wilson (2003, *Fred Wilson. Speak of Me as I Am* commissioned by Kathleen Goncharov), Ed Ruscha (2005, *Ed Ruscha. Course of Empire*), Felix Gonzalez-Torres (2007, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: America* commissioned by Nancy Spector as a posthumous retrospective of his work), Bruce Nauman (2009, *Bruce Nauman: Topological Gardens* commissioned by Carlos Basualdo and Michael Taylor), Allora & Calzadilla (2011, *Gloria*, curated and commissioned by Lisa Freiman). A full summation of the history of the U.S. Pavilion (purchased by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in 1986) and the exhibitions that have been held there are available through the Guggenheim Collection website. For more information, see “US Pavilion,” <http://www.guggenheim-venice.it/inglese/pavilion/>.

The fifth room, titled *Pendulum* (Figure 8), returns to a dense arrangement of proliferating objects that radiate outward from another compass rose the artist traced out in tape on the floor. Groups of water bottles, stones, and airline ticket stubs huddle around the central “event,” where a pendulum rotates out from the middle of the circle of objects. Suspended from the ceiling, the plumb bob and string (Sze’s functional pendulum) moves in mechanized elliptical orbits, resulting in an agitated and slightly unpredictable motion. The pendulum calls to mind technological advancements that measure time, such as the Foucault pendulum, conceived of by French physicist Jean Foucault in 1851 as a device to demonstrate the rotation of the Earth. Yet Sze’s pendulum moves almost erratically rather than with smooth, calculable swings relative to the motion of the Earth as it spins on its axis. One can feel a slight anxiety caused by the pendulum’s disorienting movement as it arches out dangerously close to the objects amassed around its center, a sense of unease accentuated by fluttering noises made by papers moving under duress by a nearby table fan.

The sculptural movement that builds throughout the U.S. pavilion culminates in the orderly chaos of artistic production in the installation’s final room, *Observatory* (Figure 9). The viewer feels here the workshop revealed. With spectacular views from a full wall of windows facing the courtyard, this seemingly functional artist’s studio is inextricably linked with the outdoor spaces of *Gleaner*. During the installation, Sze and her assistants really did use this room like a workshop. A mussed sleeping bag suggests that unique sense of exhaustion after a long day’s work, while a blinking digital alarm clock frustrates the marking of time. One can imagine this vignette as a visual echo of the emphasis throughout the space on production and activity. The installation also uses the wall of windows facing the courtyard as a focal point, which is framed on the interior side by clay fragments atop of remnants of images depicting natural

elements like fire, water, and plant life. A semi-circle of items cast in sand, like water bottles and tin cans, is visually mirrored on the other side of the window by a half-circle of sandbags on the ground, surrounded by ladders, colorful construction materials, and photographs of rocks. Extended mirrors which line the walls along the perimeter of the room accentuate the pleasant confusion between interior and exterior space; at the same time, the mirrors confuse distinctions between what is real and mere reflections, adding a somewhat startling expansion of an already sizable accumulation.

In *Observatory*, the mystery of the now-familiar boulders is revealed through half-built versions in various stages of production on display with tools, photographic prints, and bits of raw materials scattered throughout. While the “boulders” might have the appearance of naturally formed stone, Sze unveils the sculptures as simulations, photographic prints of rock texture applied by hand to carefully-shaped metal armatures. What started as an interesting side note about a particularity of the landscape of Venice and the (non)availability of stone now has resulted in a recurring theme. Crafted in the studio instead of by the natural elements of wind and erosion over time, these constructed boulders simulate nature but they do not “behave” as an actual boulder should: if the viewer were allowed to touch the objects, one would notice immediately that it does not weigh as much as an imagined boulder might, or that it does not feel naturally coarse or hard like the surface of a real rock.

In fact, Sze’s constructed boulders were, for those who knew to look, precursors or mementos of the U.S. pavilion. During the run of the Biennale, the artist scattered a few boulders and scaled down rocks throughout the city of Venice, whose title—*Compass*—links them to the overall installation of *Triple Point* (Figures 10-12). They behave as “compasses” in that they are connected to the specific locale in which they were placed, such as *Il Gazzettino via Garibaldi*,

whose title refers to the wide Venetian street called the via Garibaldi and the “Gazzettino” shop sign just below the sculpture’s perch (Figure 11).²¹ The rocks, ranging from miniature versions roughly a foot in length to larger iterations closer to three and a half feet at their largest measurement, could be found tucked away in the exhibition spaces of the Giardini (the same section of the Venice Biennale that includes the U.S. pavilion) or scattered throughout the city of Venice itself, such as on top of street vendor carts or peeking out from the shutters of an apartment window. Jacobo Chiozzoto, one of the local vendors in a neighborhood near the Giardini, was provided with one of Sze’s boulders, which was then perched on the roof of his newsstand. He lightheartedly told *The New York Times* art critic Carol Vogel, “When people ask what it is I give different answers depending on who wants to know... Sometimes I say it’s to hold down the roof; other times I tell people it’s an asteroid.”²² The insertion of these boulders, which are primarily located throughout the exhibition spaces of the U.S. pavilion, into public space, adds a unique social dimension to *Triple Point* and invites descriptions in the form of communal narratives rather than aesthetic critique. For instance, rather than pondering their material or form, one will more readily recall a story of how the boulder was encountered, almost by happenstance, atop a vendor’s cart while meandering Venice’s city streets during the summer months of the Biennale.

²¹ Sze’s invocation to a compass in the title of these sculptures might also refer back to the compass rose emblem which is central to the US pavilion and Sze’s installations within it. The central rotunda, which normally serves as the entry-point into the pavilion, includes a permanent inlaid compass rose on the stone floor. Sze appropriated the outline of the compass rose for other spaces within the pavilion, including its trace on the floor in the rooms *Planetarium* and *Pendulum*. According to the coordinators of *Triple Point*, Block and Lovelace, the emblem of the compass rose “refers to the process of orientation—as well as the circular trajectory of *Triple Point*, in which the viewer, finally, exits through the patio garden area, a constructed installation experience at a distance on first approach, and then again, more intimately, as one exists, hence creating the impression of having come full circle.” Holly Block and Carey Lovelace, “A Desire for Intimacy Among Common Objects,” in Holly Block et al., *Sarah Sze: Triple Point* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co. in collaboration with the The Bronx Museum of Arts, 2013), 17.

²² Original quote from: Carol Vogel, “Sarah Sze: The Stones of Venice,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2013.

SARAH SZE

As I have shown, *Triple Point* is an exceptionally complex series of installations that intersperse objects with the existing landscape and architecture of the U.S. pavilion. Sze's maximal use of the ephemera of everyday life is brought back from the edge of overwhelming excess to a sense of having "just enough" through her unparalleled deft organization of objects and her confident treatment of space. Sze's work has long been lauded for these qualities—and her installation for the 2013 Biennale demonstrates an investigation of sculpture that is the product of a successful career sustained over the past two decades.

Sze was born in 1969 in Boston to Chia-Ming and Judy Sze.²³ She originally studied architecture at Yale (graduated 1991, BA) before shifting her focus to the visual arts at the School of Visual Arts, New York City where she received her MFA in 1997. Since then, Sze has cultivated an internationally recognized practice based out of her studio in New York, where she is a professor at Columbia University and where she is represented by the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery.²⁴ Her work also quickly gained elite recognition and traction in the international art circuit, featuring in multiple international biennials all over the globe since the late 1990's; including the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999, the 2002 Bienal de São Paulo, and the 10th Biennale de Lyon in 2010. She was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Fellow Program's "genius grant"

²³ Some analyses have emphasized Sze's familial heritage in relation to her art. Although Sze grew up in Boston and her mother, Judy Sze, is a retired schoolteacher of Anglo-Irish descent, her father Chia-Ming Sze—an architect whose firm has designed municipal projects in New York—is of Chinese descent. Furthermore, her paternal side consists of descendants from a notable Chinese family: according to New Yorker reporter Andrea K. Scott, Chia-Ming's grandfather was the first Chinese Ambassador to the United States, and his father helped create the World Health Organization. See Andrea K. Scott, "A Million Little Pieces," *New Yorker* 88, no. 13 (May 14, 2012).

²⁴ Sze is also represented in the United Kingdom by the Victoria Miro Gallery in London.

in 2003, and her work resides in the museum collections of prominent American institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in addition to multiple museum collections abroad.

Most discussions of Sze's work traces her oeuvre back to 1996, near the end of her graduate degree. That year, Sze garnered an early reputation as a rising star in New York during the inaugural SoHo Annual, organized by the Pratt Artists' League.²⁵ Commonly referred to as her "breakout" exhibition, the theme of her installation, titled *Untitled (SoHo Annual)*, seemed to be an examination of the value of an everyday material.²⁶ Operating under this formative framework, Sze molded sheets of toilet paper into miniature sculptures that almost endlessly multiplied. She placed these small white sculptures in unorthodox exhibition spaces inside the inner rooms of the building, choosing a narrow hallway and its utilitarian shelves, floor, and windowsills to display her work. The arrangement of these ecological-like specimens invoked the *Wunderkammern* run amok, the seventeenth and eighteenth century "cabinets of curiosities" in which collections were arranged, not according to empirical categorizations (such as size or weight) but on a more intimate scale that was intended to invoke wonder and curiosity. Presented in intensely personal arrangements and groupings, Sze's tiny proliferating objects elide strict categorization, organized instead by the internal logic of the artist. While the presentation of

²⁵ The exhibition included work by (then) relatively unknown graduates from the surrounding art schools, juried by art critic Michael Brenson, Curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art Robert Storr, and local art collector Susan Hort. Roberta Smith, critic for *The New York Times*, encouraged gallery-goers to seek out Sze's installation (quite possibly because its unconventional location would make it easy to miss), saying: "Don't miss Sarah Sze's storeroom installation of tiny gossamer sculptures improvised entirely from toilet paper (and saliva), which seems to catalogue a whole genus of newly discovered sea creatures." Roberta Smith, "Culture and Commerce Live Side by Side in Soho," *The New York Times*, September 13, 1996.

²⁶ Sze often begins by critically examining conceptions of value in relation to art and everyday objects. For instance, what gives an object value? How does context effect these conceptions? How does material effect these conceptions?

these small objects molded from toilet paper recalls a similar kind of idiosyncratic display, the close visual similarities between forms direct one's attention back to their medium and location.

But it is arguably the unique *combination* of material, quantity, and location that contributed to the work's success. What is the value of a household good (like toilet paper), once encountered in the 'sanctioned' space of an art institution (especially if it is a back hallway or closet, where one might imagine practical necessities like toilet paper are kept), and in such quantities (as far as the eye can see)? By stripping the toilet paper of its functionality and transforming this mundane stuff into art material through her bodily fluid, the artist creates a situation in which our preconceptions are challenged, and a material we would not normally consider worthy of art is posed in such a way that viewers are invited to consider it in a new light.

Sze's focus on the value of art materials, and thus the value of art itself, formed the core of her early works and garnered her international reputation: it was only a few years later that Sze exhibited with Harald Szeemann's curated exhibition for the Biennale in 1999 with her installation *Capricious Invention of Prisons* (Figure 13). This work is a clear departure from *Untitled (SoHo Annual)* in that Sze's materials include a host of commonplace objects, including toothpicks, rulers, pushpins, light bulbs, wires, wood, and clamps. Here, Sze built her object-based forms almost organically—in this artwork, a windowsill vignette of objects appears to grow upward, creeping like ivy along the ceiling, then penetrating downward along interior corners to disappear into cut holes in the walls.

In *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, created later that same year for the Foundation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris, Sze moved her object groupings from the edges and

floors to the center, confidently incorporating larger objects like ladders alongside smaller arrangements of mass-produced goods in gravity-defying arrangements. Sze deftly alternated between large, ambitious forms—such as the prevailing use of ladders that seem to careen into the air—and small, intimate moments—tiny pieces of plastic that seem to spiral around a lamp on toothpick constellations.

As shown through these examples, Sze's work is closely related to both the site in which it is installed and the architecture which surrounds it. This is continued in a number of Sze's later sculptures. One such example, *Powers of Ten*, complicates the relationship between the sculpture and the landscape. Installed in 2001 for the Center for Curatorial Studies in New York, the work is presented like an underground excavation site of everyday objects, marked by an archeological grid made of string surrounded by construction-orange fencing. An even more striking and complex consideration of the specifics of a site is *Corner Plot*, 2006 (Figure 14). Located in the Doris C. Freedman Plaza in New York City, the work was commissioned by the Public Art Fund of New York.²⁷ The outside structure of *Corner Plot* looks like the corner of a building jutting out at a forty-five degree angle from the sidewalk. Its exterior echoes the white brick apartment building that stands on the opposite corner across Fifth Avenue, further suggesting an imagined scenario in which this sculpture actually marks the remnants of an existing architectural structure. Like a proper building, “windows” in the façade of the sculpture reveal an interior vista through which viewers can voyeuristically peer inside and see Sze's signature accumulations extending several feet below street level. The sculpture extends downward four feet into the sidewalk, and seems—inexplicably—to have sunk into the ground; or perhaps it slowly surfaced like an archeological relic.

²⁷ The Public Art Fund of New York is a non-profit organization whose mission is to enhance public experiences with art and the urban environment.

As Sze's sculptures grew in strength and maturity, so too did the subjects and themes used to describe her work. What started as an examination of the value of art materials, to the relationship between art and its site and architectural contexts, would become even more nuanced and complex as Sze's career developed. Her abundant use of everyday "stuff" attracted comparisons to "consumer maximalists" such as Jason Rhoades and Jessica Stockholder, while her intimate, proliferating groupings of small materials recalled such ecological and natural-history displays as used by Mark Dion.²⁸ More and more common were descriptions of Sze as some experimental scientist, where the precise organization and clean presentation of objects seemed to bear an increasingly striking resemblance to a laboratory or science experiment run amok. The implications and occurrences of this "scientific" association with her work will be examined in detail in the following section.

Scientific models

As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain, and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality. —Albert Einstein

Sze's organization of mundane objects into "scientific models" has recently gained attention in art reviews and literature on her work.²⁹ In my own analysis of *Triple Point*, I have similarly noted the occurrences of scientific ideas, either metaphorically in the sculptural forms or directly through Sze's use of titles. In general, scientific models are used to visualize an object or system, give form to experimental data, explain abstract behavior, or aid in the prediction of a particular system. For example, the Bohr atomic model visualizes the structure of atoms. Alternatively, predictive models are enormously valuable in meteorology, so a weather forecaster might better anticipate natural disasters such as hurricanes or earthquakes. Sze has said

²⁸ Frances Richard, "Sarah Sze," *Artforum International* 49, no. 4 (December 2010): 255–256.

²⁹ The commissioners of *Triple Point*, for example, describe Sze's work with scientific references throughout their discussion of her oeuvre, using these ideas to demonstrate the multivalent interpretations engendered by her sculptures. Block and Lovelace, "A Desire for Intimacy Among Common Objects," esp. 10, 14–15.

that her own “paradigm of a scientific model” would be the model of DNA created by Watson and Crick; she calls it “quite beautiful, even jewel-like.”³⁰ Although beauty is hardly the purpose of modeling natural phenomena as understood by scientific theories, scientists at times are driven by questions involving aesthetics, such as the principals of symmetry and harmony in nature (Einstein’s theory of relativity, for example), or harmony in its quest for “completeness” and universal truths.³¹

Examples of artists as “amateur scientists” who often use archaic methods or ironic stereotypes to respond metaphorically to scientific images and discoveries are increasingly common.³² However, like the allusions to scientific ideas in *Triple Point*, often times an artist’s investigation results in artworks that are not functional as empirical and objective tools. For example, in *Apparatus for the Distillation of Vague Intuitions*, 1994–98, Eve Andrée Laramée presents handmade laboratory equipment such as glass beakers, flasks, and vials. Filled with luminous unknown solutions and pieced together with metal stands, clamps, and copper wiring, Laramée’s installation is a spectacle of scientific methodology. Inscribed with texts for measurement, such as “a handful,” or “a matter of chance,” Laramée subverts scientific

³⁰ Quoted in Danto, *Scientific and Artistic Models in the New Work of Sarah Sze*, 59.

³¹ In a popularly recounted instance of aesthetic tastes influencing scientific designs, mathematician and astrologer Johannes Kepler’s preference for the beauty of circles led to his personal disappointment that, for an accurate representation of the astronomical observation outlined by Tycho Brahe, his own model of the solar system planetary bodies needed to move in elliptical orbits around the sun rather than circles (which he thought was more visually pleasing than “ugly” ellipses). Sian Ede devotes an entire chapter to how beauty is discussed in art and science, tracing origins back to Plato and Aristotle as they contemplated the relationship between outer and inner worlds and the very nature of knowledge (an “epistemological tradition”). In part due to science’s search for coherence and symmetry in the natural world, we know that the universe is full of structures, even though at times they are disordered and complex. Sian Ede, *Art and Science*, Art And... Series (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2005), 16–26.

³² A small sample of recent art historical literature that examines the intersections between art and science include: Peter Louis Galison, Caroline A. Jones and Amy E. Slaton, *Picturing Science, Producing Art* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Laurent Mignonneau and Christa Sommerer, *Art@Science* (Wein; New York: Springer, 1998); Leonard Shlain, *Art & Physics: Parallel Visions in Space, Time, and Light* (New York: Marrow, 1991); Arthur Miller, *Colliding Worlds: How Cutting-Edge Science is Redefining Contemporary Art* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014); and Gavin Parkinson, *Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science: Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). Lecture Course, Columbia University, New York, 1973.

objectivity with subjective experience.³³ Instead of empirically calculable facts, individual perceptions are suggested as models that shape our understanding.³⁴ Like Laramée, while Sze makes no claim to be a scientist herself, her work appears to respond, often improvisationally, to the scientific impulse to categorize and explain the behavior of an observable phenomenon.

Arthur Danto (1924–2013), a leading American philosopher and art critic who explored the philosophical questions of aesthetics and the nature of art since the mid-twentieth century, was the first to suggest that Sze’s work looked like scientific models, as detailed in his essay “Scientific and Artistic models in the new work of Sarah Sze.”³⁵ Long before writing about scientific descriptions of Sze’s work, Danto had been a consistent supporter and admirer of Sze’s sculptural installation. For him, Sze’s use of objects—which he wittily dubbed “Sze-objects”—stem from her continued production of original forms out of unoriginal materials, re-contextualizing our relationship with the clutter of daily life.³⁶

³³ Eve Andrée Laramée focuses on how cultures use science and art as “devices or maps to construct belief systems,” and specifically wishes to draw out “areas of overlap and interconnection between artistic exploration and scientific investigation, and to the slippery human subjectivity underlying both processes.” Quote by the artist, taken from her webpage, *Eve Andrée Laramée*, <http://home.earthlink.net/~wander/>. Her work has been included in recent textbooks alongside other contemporary artists who engage with science as a dominant theme in their work. For more information, see: Dumbadze and Hudson, *Contemporary Art 1989 to the Present*, 2012.

³⁴ The installation has been showcased in numerous exhibitions since its conception in 1994, such as *Unnatural Science* at MASS MoCA. MASS MoCA is also home to Natalie Jeremijenko’s well-known installation of art and science titled *Tree Logic*, an ongoing project begun in 1999. Jeremijenko’s work is largely about process and data, often combining art and science. *Tree Logic* asks viewers to contemplate questions such as “what is the nature of the natural?” with trees that grow opposite of the earth and towards sunlight despite the fact that they are hung upside-down.

³⁵ Arthur Danto, “Scientific and Artistic models in the new work of Sarah Sze,” in Stroud et al., *Sarah Sze at the Fabric Workshop and Museum* (Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2014). The essay was published posthumously, on the occasion of the exhibition *Sarah Sze at the Fabric Workshop and Museum*, which was on view from December 13, 2013–April 6, 2014.

³⁶ Arthur Danto, “An Introduction to the Sculptural Achievements of Sarah Sze,” in Arthur Danto et al., *Sarah Sze* (New York: Abrams, 2007), 6. This subject was familiar territory to Danto: in “The Artworld,” published for the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1964, he proposed an institutional definition of Western art, arguing that ‘art’ could be anything treated as art by members of the ‘artworld’—critics, dealers, collectors, theoreticians, etc. In this essay, Danto attempts to ascertain, by means of identification, what distinguishes a work of art (especially from a ‘real object.’). “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.” Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” *Journal of Philosophy*, no. 19 (1964): 580. Danto refined his original ideas regarding the separation of artworks from real objects in relation to mimesis in

Writing about the evolution of Sze's sculptures, Danto traced the quasi-scientific appearance of Sze's sculptures by recalling a conversation with the artist in 2005.

Since a central dimension of critical analysis consists in finding out what a work of art means, there is nothing more useful to critics than talking with the artist about what she meant... though rarely, it sometimes goes the other way: the artist is struck by something said by a critic that she had not taken into consideration. This happened in my first major conversation with Sarah Sze in 2005. We were talking about models, and I mentioned a distinction between artistic and scientific models, since a work of hers seemed to me to look like a scientific representation. That, she subsequently told me, opened up vistas for her, and indeed helped define the work she has done since.³⁷

Specifically, Danto envisioned "artistic models" as those akin to the marvelous architectural prototypes crafted by Renaissance masters, such as Donato Bramante's wooden miniature of the Tempietto in Rome.³⁸ In contrast, Sze's models are dynamic and open-ended, evoking more of a sense of experimentation than future construction plans. This contrast underscores the necessary distinction between "artistic models" and "scientific models" as Danto saw it. For Danto, the shift away from artistic models precipitated a shift towards the scientific model, which he described as an art that "did something or made something happen,"³⁹ whereas Sze later described the scientific model as "a model that shows the way that something behaves."⁴⁰

Along with the interest in a more scientific approach to models, Sze has utilized titles to hint at intellectual inquiries into philosophy, mathematics, and science since the early 2000s. Such works include *Strange Attractor* (whose title alludes to specific types of dynamic systems in complex mathematical computations) and *Twice (White Dwarf)* (the name of a low mass but

his later essay, Arthur C. Danto, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol. 33, no. 2 (Winter, 1974).

³⁷ As quoted in Arthur Danto, "Scientific and Artistic models in the new work of Sarah Sze," in Stroud et al., *Sarah Sze at the Fabric Workshop and Museum* (Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2014), 59. Danto furthermore felt that his conversation with Sze in 2005 initiated a "significant line" that divides Sze's work between "artistic models" and "scientific models." However, scientific and mathematical concepts are clearly present in works dating back to the early stages of her career prior to that date.

³⁸ Danto, "Scientific and Artistic Models," 62.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "SARAH SZE with Phong Bui," interview conducted by Phong Bui on behalf of The Brooklyn Rail, October 2010. <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2010/10/art/phong-bui-with-sarah-sze>.

dense star) in 2000. Over time, scientific inferences increased in titles: *An Equal and Opposite Reaction* (2005); *Tilting Planet*, displayed in 2006 for the Maimo Konsthall in Malmö, Sweden and in 2009 for the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Newcastle, England; *Untitled (Portable Planetarium)* which appeared first in 2009 at the Lyon Biennale and re-imagined for a solo-exhibition at the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in New York in 2010 as *360 (Portable Planetarium)*; and also *Random Walk* (which refers to probability theory) in her 2011 exhibition at the Asia Society under the exhibition title *Infinite Line*. As this list begins to demonstrate, Sze occasionally has chosen to sustain investigations of a particular idea by re-engaging with a former work's titles and motifs. For example, *Triple Point of Water* debuted in 2003 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (Figure 15), and was revisited in 2004 at the Fondazione Davide Halevim in Milan—and then simply as *Triple Point* in 2013, the exhibition at the center of this study, installed in the U.S. pavilion for the 55th Venice Biennale. In *Triple Point of Water*, PVC pipes, plants, and aquariums—among other household objects—form a colorful labyrinth for water to bubble and percolate in the installation's many nooks and crannies. The predominant use of water and complex pipe systems visually differentiates the work from *Triple Point* in Venice, but in both, one can sense Sze's unique and deft experimentation with sculptural shifts, of forms seemingly caught between states.

The 'triple point' of a given substance refers to a condition in thermodynamics that describes a state of equilibrium caught between phases of matter (solid, liquid, gas) under specific levels of pressure and temperature. In this state, arbitrary changes in these external conditions introduces a change in phase near the critical point of the substance; that is, almost indiscernible shifts in either pressure or temperature drastically alters the substance's appearance and properties. A relatively simple laboratory demonstration can create the occurrence of the

triple point of water—where boiling water “mysteriously” makes both ice and steam—by introducing the precise conditions for all three forms to exist simultaneously.⁴¹ A vacuum pump is used to induce low pressure while a precisely calculated amount of heat induces boiling. Thus, a triple point cell is a vacuum tight container in which water vapor, liquid water, and an ice mantle coexist in a thermodynamic equilibrium.

The triple point of water is used to define the *kelvin*, defined at the temperature 0.01 degrees Celsius, and is the SI base unit of thermodynamic pressure. But almost all substances have a triple point. While the triple point of water has an extremely low thermodynamic pressure, for instance the triple point of carbon dioxide is five times that of regular atmospheric pressure. Simplifying the title of Sze’s earlier work, *Triple Point of Water*, to *Triple Point*, pulls the viewer’s perception from the contemplation of water’s scientific properties to a broader engagement with the triple point phenomenon itself, capturing the moment where one can witness a unique condition of equilibrium.

However, *Triple Point* is not a literal illustration of the laws of thermodynamics. But the work captures a sense of this unusual and unique circumstance, of something caught simultaneously between many states. Instead of superficially borrowing from the term by illustrating the conditions necessary for thermodynamic equilibrium, Sze explores the infinite possibilities surrounding this precariously stable state. As in the case of the theoretical constructs of advanced science and mathematics, we can furthermore see, as commissioners Block and Lovelace point out, that “[j]ust as probability charts the ‘behavior’ of masses of small elements (raindrops on pavement, blades of grain bending in the wind) so Sze orchestrates the molecular components of her work into harmonized complexity that at times seem as complicated as the

⁴¹ Carrington, *Basic Thermodynamics* Oxford Science Publications (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

universe itself.”⁴² Moving through each room of *Triple Point*, the sense that “something has just happened, is happening, or will happen” results in what Block and Lovelace identify as a complex model that is “constantly shifting and changing.”⁴³ But significantly, it is an experience, carefully orchestrated by the artist, which constantly evolves in real time in space as the viewer encounters the successive sculptures of *Triple Point* and renegotiates this experience in each new space of the U.S. pavilion. So how do we articulate that experience—taking into account both individual perception and the empirical order of science? In the next section, the philosophy of phenomenology provides an intellectual pathway through this complex and paradoxical convergence.

⁴² Block and Lovelace, “A Desire for Intimacy Among Common Objects,” 15.

⁴³ Ibid.

RECONSIDERING MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGY

Although emphasis on optical perception remains a powerful factor in art theory and discourse, contemporary artworks demand multi-sensory and interactive experiences as part of today's viewing practices. The viewer's body serves as a central part of our understanding of Sze's *Triple Point*, involving our lived, everyday sensory perceptions. However, applying a phenomenological analysis to *Triple Point* does more than make the viewer aware of his or her own bodily relation to the work, which has been a recurrent theme in sculpture and installation art since the mid-twentieth century. Paying close attention to specific scientific motifs in conjunction with the perceptual experience of the work deepens an aesthetic analysis of *Triple Point*. In doing so, the viewer's understanding becomes receptive to objective, concrete observations while posing them in new, pleasantly unfamiliar, functions and relations to the world—of which both these quotidian objects and our sensual selves are a part, providing a dynamic model of the way both science and individual perceptions inform our everyday lives.

To trace these complex interactions between seemingly oppositional forces—such as the classic dichotomy between art and science—I first turn my attention to the concept of embodied perception as described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961). In contrast to interpretations of art such as Clement Greenberg's formalism and the Modernist emphasis on optical models for viewing art, Merleau-Ponty's philosophical writings offer productive descriptions of the primacy of embodied perception. The notion of the eye as a disembodied tool used to collect information is conveyed by the immutable scientific meanings suggested by the titles of individual works—*Gleaner*, *Planetarium*, *Eclipse*, *Scale*, *Orrery*, *Pendulum*, and *Observatory*; but this sense of

scientific objectivity is undermined by a phenomenological reading of *Triple Point*.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's description of the phenomenological experience helps the viewer to better understand the aesthetic convergence between art and science in this artwork. In analyzing *Triple Point* phenomenologically with respect to the paradoxical confluence between art and science, I contend that we open up a richer meaning of the work.

Etymologically the word *phenomenology* means the study of phenomena, which are observable occurrences in the world. What sets phenomenology apart from other branches of philosophy is its preoccupation with the world as it presents itself to us, and how we understand it.⁴⁴ As a particular tradition in early twentieth century European philosophy, phenomenology was the focus of such prominent philosophers as Edmund Husserl and Franz Brentano. In the mid-twentieth century, Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, considered phenomenology as a method for describing the meaning of human experience. He differentiated his philosophy from his predecessors by forging a stronger link between perceptual experience and the sensual self. This is encapsulated in his now oft-repeated quote, "Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system."⁴⁵ With this metaphor, Merleau-Ponty contends that our bodies are a vital part of how we perceive and actively respond to the world. In contrast to René Descartes's well-known ontology "I think, therefore I am" (the only thing I can know for certain is that I am a thinking subject) which separates the mind from the body, Merleau-Ponty describes

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty was committed to phenomenology as a philosophical method that grounded perceptual experience in embodied and intersubjective modes of viewing. Often contrasting his ideas with other well-known philosophers as Jean-Paul Sartre, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and Sigmund Freud, Merleau-Ponty further differentiates his philosophy of phenomenology by explaining that, "[t]he real has to be described, not constructed or formed. Which means that I cannot put perception into the same category as the synthesis represented by judgments, acts, or predictions." Preface to Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, xxv-xxvi.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 372.

the perception where the “self” is indivisible from the body.⁴⁶ Furthermore, meaning exists neither inside our minds nor in the world itself—it is forged in the space between our selves and the world in which we are actively engaged.⁴⁷ Thus, a philosophy of perception understood phenomenologically focuses on the *relation* between subject (self) and the viewed object.

Merleau-Ponty’s first major text, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, was published in France in 1945, but was not translated into English until 1962. His writings, which had a considerable impact on artists, critics, and art historians in America during the 1960s, are most often associated with the notion of *embodied perception*. To develop his ideas, Merleau-Ponty explored the theoretical conditions of perception. He proposed that perception is grounded in our kinaesthetic, prescientific awareness embedded in a network with objects, other people, and the world. Merleau-Ponty saw the imperative of phenomenological philosophy to be the “rediscovery” of phenomena,

...the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us, the system ‘Self-others-things’ as it comes into being; to reawaken perception and foil its trick of allowing us to forget it as a fact and as perception in the interest of the object which it presents to us and of the rational tradition to which it gives rise.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Descartes’s philosophies, according to Lawrence Hass, put Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical ideas in “sharpest contrast” (he characterizes Descartes as Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical “nemesis”). Although Merleau-Ponty followed a very different train of philosophical thought (particularly concerning the construction of knowledge and the ontological split between mind/body as Descartes described), Merleau-Ponty paid close attention to Descartes’s writings, which were crucial to the scientific revolution and the predominance of Cartesian thought in the West. Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2008), 10–12. For a thoughtful consideration of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in relation to Heidegger over the transcendental question of “art and truth” that also traces these ideas through Rene Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and Fredrick Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, see: Robert Burch, “On the Topic of Art and Truth: Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and the Transcendental Turn,” in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, eds. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 348–370.

⁴⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, ed. J.M. Edie (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 12.

⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 128.

Living perception is an interactive experience: “self-others-things” is a “system” that creates experience together.⁴⁹ The experience of phenomena, then, is making explicit our prescientific experiences before the moment of reflection and explanation, in order to more fully understand what we see. Temporarily forgetting the “rational tradition” (the cognitive “knowing” or explanation) allows us to acknowledge the perceptual experience itself as where meaning is first generated. What is more, Merleau-Ponty found that there seemed to be a reciprocal relationship between the viewer and viewed. In the preface to *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty states that “[a]ll my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view,” and that our experience starts with our sensual selves and “moves out” towards our physical and social environment.⁵⁰ We perceive objects as relative to our bodily position—rather than scientific theory, in which things always have definitive qualities. The subject is situated in the world (at a particular time and place), and to perceive is always from a particular point of view. To Merleau-Ponty, we are not just impartial spectators, but living bodies, and the experience of everyday phenomenon “is the making explicit or bringing to light of the prescientific life of consciousness which alone endows scientific operations with meaning and to which the latter always refer back.”⁵¹ In calling specific attention to “prescientific” perception, Merleau-Ponty is trying to understand experience prior to imposed knowledge systems and quantitative explanations. It is this active engagement with our sensual selves, from which scientific operations are then built, which I wish to engage further in Sze’s *Triple Point*.

⁴⁹ Another term Merleau-Ponty uses to describe this “system” is *symbiosis*, which, according to Hass, best captures this sense of the embodied self, other selves, and the world as “symbiotic, interwoven, and entangled... each ‘component’ contributing to the synergy of living experience.” To Hass, this dynamic interactivity as described in Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodied perception helps us to understand and appreciate the complexity of lived experience (“human reality as it is lived”). Hass, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, 55–56.

⁵⁰ Preface to Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, xxii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 130–131.

Science and art are normally seen as at odds with one another. On one hand there is the rigid, empirical structure of science with its emphasis on detached, and therefore “objective,” observations. On the other hand, art is primarily understood as creative and expressive, linked to the inner workings of the individual artist. In Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological writings, science is a necessary apparatus for explaining how things are “supposed” to appear, but empirical structures are not sufficient for understanding our day-to-day experiences with phenomena. The way we experience objects in our perceptual field is not so readily fixed. In contrast, objects in our environment seem to be shifting, emerging, and appearing in our field of vision.

Perhaps nowhere did Merleau-Ponty see this idea illustrated more clearly than in the paintings of Paul Cézanne. In his essay “Cézanne’s Doubt,” written in 1945, Merleau-Ponty finds traction for his own philosophy of phenomenology.⁵² To Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne’s painted distortions and illusions of apples, tabletops, and baskets of fruit illustrate how we actually, physically *see* three-dimensional objects in our everyday lives. In Cézanne’s paintings, Merleau-Ponty discovers a paradigm for seeing through impressions and sensations in order to produce a heightened awareness of objective phenomena and definitive forms. Rather than expressing fixed outlines or imposed geometries such as those established in Renaissance perspective, nature is reconstructed in its process of appearing to the eye, full of color, volume, and multiple outlines.

⁵² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964). Merleau-Ponty’s essay “Cezanne’s Doubt” was made available in 1964 in the English translation of *Sense and Nonsense*, and “Indirect Voices” in the same year in *Signs*, the English translation of *Signes*. Translations of Merleau-Ponty’s essays on art are collected Merleau-Ponty, *The Maurice Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*. An important guide to his writing is the anthology edited by Alden L. Fisher, *The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969). Scholars have continued to find the theories Merleau-Ponty developed in this essay as particularly relevant for understanding a phenomenological mode of viewing art. Some critical essays on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of painting in relation to Cézanne include Ted Toadvine, “The Art of Doubting: Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne,” *Philosophy Today* 41 (Winter 1997): 545–553; and Forrest Williams, “Cézanne, Phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty” in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, eds. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press), 165–173.

However, it is Cézanne's willingness to embrace the paradoxical aims of his immediate, fleeting impressions of nature while insisting that his goal was the representation of "reality" that lead to his consistent self-doubt, which Emile Bernard calls "Cézanne's suicide: aiming for reality while denying himself the means to attain it."⁵³ Cézanne chose to present his paintings as both faithful observations of nature and as his own unique perspective of the world.

The return to perceptual experience is made possible by a suspension of our everyday way of looking at objects, which requires questioning the theories we naively adopt from traditional science and art. "Lived perception" is not derived from geometrical perspective, such as the linear perspective of Renaissance painting—we must not "substitute for our actual perception what we would see if we were cameras,"⁵⁴ which flattens each object into place. In contrast, the discordant perspectives Merleau-Ponty found within Cézanne's paintings work together to heighten one's awareness of "the impression of an emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes."⁵⁵ Understood phenomenologically, Cézanne's modulated colors and multiple outlines of forms capture an "inexhaustible reality full of reserves"⁵⁶ that emerges to our senses just as objects do in our daily perceptual experience. "We live in the midst of man-made objects, among tools, in houses, streets, cities, and most of the time we see them only through the human actions which put them to use. We become used to thinking that all of this exists necessarily and unshakably."⁵⁷ For Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne's paintings "suspend" these secondary reflections to reveal the moment of apperception, in which many possibilities exist side-by-side.

⁵³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 17.

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," 17.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

Thus, the work of art draws the viewer into an intensified awareness of how he or she sees things. As demonstrated in Merleau-Ponty's interrogation of Cézanne's painting, the work of art reveals the world in a new way.⁵⁸ But unlike art of the early to mid twentieth century, contemporary art practices like Sze's have evolved to include otherwise ordinary objects in a way that radically shift one's perception of everyday life. Merleau-Ponty's embodied perception is particularly useful for the purposeful interrogation of the relationship between viewer, object, and space—but also objectivity and individual perception—that occurs within Sze's *Triple Point*. Rather than separate the stable objects we see and the shifting way in which they appear, Sze expresses with quotidian “stuff” the fluidity of the world as continually moving, inexhaustible, and seemingly caught in the midst of some sort of spontaneous organization. Familiar consumer goods—bottles, strings, lamps, and fans—are stripped of their expected functions and instead applied in delicate and colorfully balanced sculptures. While the titles of the sculptural arrangements allude to some sort of empirical action performed by the objects themselves, they cannot be accurately characterized by those same scientific inferences. For example, the uneasy and unpredictable movements of the swinging plumb-bob in *Pendulum* is no more calculable and ordered than the open utility closet of *Orrery* is a model for the movements of planetary bodies. In contrast, actions in real time and space are engendered by the dispersal of familiar, repeated objects and the imposed circumnavigation within the U.S. pavilion itself. The repetition and

⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty almost exclusively focuses on painting in his investigations of art. However, as demonstrated by Alex Potts, Merleau-Ponty's investigation of painting using phenomenology can be incredibly useful for describing the experience of viewing sculpture. In particular, Merleau-Ponty's ideas share certain affinities with sculptural practices in the 1960s which considered vision as “a part of the self's interaction with the world, as a model of being, rather than an instrument of visual mapping and categorization and control.” Furthermore, vision is embodied and bound up with the “broader situating of the body within the physical environment.” The sculptural object then was understood as an “intervention in the spatial arena shared with the viewer rather than as an isolated, self-contained shape.” Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2000), 207–208.

fragmentation enables the viewer to intercede at any place in each room, and meaning expands as they physically relate part to part (object to object) at their own discretion.

Additionally, viewers encounter *Triple Point* with their whole bodies. There is no possible way for the viewer to stand still within Sze's works—not for long, and not with any hope of exploring the oscillating patterns of minute details and vast accumulations which occur throughout the entire U.S. pavilion. Furthermore, the viewer's navigation of those spaces is orchestrated in a circular route that denies the harmonious symmetry of the neo-Jeffersonian architecture. When one enters the first interior room of the pavilion where *Planetarium* is displayed, he or she will immediately notice the overall arching, spherical structure that spills out from its central mass with thin curving dowel rods adorned with brightly colored clamps and bits of tape. The interior illuminations of ordinary desk lamps and projectors shine outward through the delicately poised, geometric structures. In the dimly lit space, the light casts brilliant shadows that surround the viewer on all four walls of the gallery, creating an immersive environment that simultaneously captures shadows of viewers moving throughout the space. As the viewer looks at the sculpture and moves throughout the room, he or she is constantly aware of the everyday objects placed before him or her, and must frequently turn to see what is just on the other side. On the periphery, the objects cast constellational shadows that are then distorted by the shifting movements of bodies, human or otherwise, that move around *Planetarium*, an unnoticed dynamism that adds to the relationship between the sensual body of the viewer and the objects of perception. The work is not an autonomous whole, but rather a series of disconnected, partial views that present themselves to the viewer in real time and space.

The perceptual experience of Sze's work fits markedly with Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of viewing objects in our everyday perceptual field. To "look," he writes, is to comprehend things in terms of the aspects which they "present."

When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can 'see'; but the back of my lamp is nothing but the face which it 'shows' to the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others around it as spectators of its hidden aspects and as guarantees of the permanence of those aspects. Any seeing of an object by me is instantaneously reiterated among all those objects in the world which are apprehended as co-existent, because each of them is all that the others 'see' of it....⁵⁹

As demonstrated in Merleau-Ponty's description of how we perceive objects in our field of vision, embodied perception is thus understood as bound up with the broader situating of the body within the physical environment.⁶⁰ Thus, "looking" requires an increased spatial awareness and multiple perspectives. Much the same can be recalled in descriptions of *Triple Point*.

Although many contemporary artists use large arrangements of multiple objects to engage the viewer's senses (such as Thomas Hirschhorn, whose accumulations of objects and contemporary detritus are used as a form of critique about politics, consumerism, and the spectacle), in the case of Sze's installation in the U.S. pavilion, the relationship between and among things is as important as the things' relationship to the viewer. Arrangements of tables, lamps, strings, and rocks trace movement that beckons the viewer to follow their repeated occurrences throughout the room. This is all the more accentuated by the pleasant patterns of color—the striking blue of painter's tape is made more attractive by its proximity to vibrant oranges and yellows found in construction equipment and tools—and shifting densities—the light, airiness of slender dowel rods and thin strings which coalesce into a dense arrangement of objects before dissipating

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 144–145.

⁶⁰ This understanding of perception was particularly useful for scholars who wished to consider those sculptural objects, such as those created by Minimalist artists in the 1960s, which brought increased awareness to the interconnected and reflexive relationship between subject and object. See Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, 208.

around the corner into another series of traced lines—which lead the viewer from space to space within and around the U.S. pavilion. Moving and turning, rather than quiet and centered looking, typifies the viewing experience of Sze’s work. Critically reflecting upon the act of viewing as related to the sensual self thus becomes a vital part of any aesthetic analysis of *Triple Point*. Additionally, when looking at Sze’s sculptural arrangements of quotidian objects, one becomes aware of other bodies in the space. This relates to Merleau-Ponty’s theorization of an embodied perceptual experience as contingent upon multiple perspectives embedded in a network of other people, objects, and space. So *Triple Point* makes us especially aware—like Cézanne’s paintings—of how we experience sight in a phenomenological way.

The relationship that is forged between the viewer and the objects of observation becomes an intrinsic part of how we understand Sze’s multivalent accumulations. *There*, I see an orange packing strap, *over there* a pile of blue sand, and *here* I find a row of water bottles; but rather than playing out some utilitarian function, Sze’s objects engender harmoniously balanced patterns of colors and lines, not at all in any arrangement that would suggest their intended, manufactured uses. Furthermore, how one sees the objects has to do with relative positions of one’s body within and around the installation. The viewer becomes drawn into the small details and then pulled back by the overall compositions. Patterns of objects shift between micro and macro, intimate and vast, fragments and wholes. Similarly, the distinctions between subject and object, art and science, real and manufactured all coexist in the spaces of *Triple Point*.

Blurring the distinctions between such classic dichotomies between art and science, a phenomenological analysis of *Triple Point* therefore questions the centered viewing experience often related to the contemplation of art. The constant perceptual shifts within Sze’s sculptural installations denies the disembodied mode of viewing that has dominated much of the history of

Western art. Repeated objects and motifs help to guide the viewer through the spaces of the U.S. pavilion. In *Planetarium*, one might have noticed the compass rose motif the artist traced out in black tape on the floor of the gallery. The compass rose anchors the sculptural installation in the room, but Sze has built the objects on top of it somewhat off-center, further accentuated by the fact that the compass rose itself is also positioned toward the corner of the room. Separately, the slight shifts would hardly warrant much attention. Together, the off-centeredness induces a slight vertiginous tilt felt by the body of the viewer, not unlike the queer feeling one gets when a boat rocks slightly to the side. In each instance the compass rose appears—in the central rotunda, with the sculpture *Scale*, and in the nearby room *Pendulum*, just beyond the rotunda—Sze has positioned her installations in a way that mirrors the slight destabilization felt by the viewer in *Planetarium*. Never quite fully centered or stable, the compass rose reinforces the perceptual shifts that are produced between the viewer and Sze's accumulations.

The positive reception of Sze's installation for the 2013 Venice Biennale by such critical voices as Buchloh and Enwezor is likely due in part to this shifting sense of the work, where rational inferences are questioned and traditional hierarchies are actively subverted. A phenomenological analysis of *Triple Point* enmeshes the viewer and the work of art in an embodied, reflexive encounter. The meaning of the artwork is not wholly inherent in the autonomous object, nor is the meaning hidden among the discreet relationships between individual objects Sze uses for her delicately poised, quasi-scientific sculptures. In contrast, a phenomenological analysis of *Triple Point* addresses the ideological apparatuses at work in artistic production and reception by investigating how structures of knowledge materialize in the artwork, and the way in which the objects in our perceptual field present themselves to viewers. As I have argued, Sze's installation in the U.S. pavilion constructs a world filled with the

ephemera of daily living in a way that remains faithful to phenomena, in the sense of objects as we perceive them, and out of which the meanings later arise. How this is different from other artworks which have been analyzed phenomenologically, beginning with Minimalism in the 1960s and later the rise of installation art at the turn of the twenty-first century, will be discussed in detail in the following section.

EMBODIED PERCEPTION AND THE RISE OF INSTALLATION ART

As noted earlier in this essay, *Triple Point* received significant attention from Benjamin Buchloh in his *Artforum* essay on the 55th Venice Biennale. Despite a critical overtone in his assessment of *The Encyclopedic Palace* (he titled his essay “The Entropic Palace”), Buchloh celebrated Sze’s sculptural installation a “real attainment,” one of the “greatest surprise[s]” to be found in Venice. For Buchloh, *Triple Point* provided a fresh direction in sculpture that “seems to be the result of ceaseless proliferations, lacking any evident criteria of selection, generating flows of utterly incompatible but inextricably intertwined objects, materials, processes, and surfaces, tracing the innumerable, indiscernible, incessantly altered object relationships that structure our lives.”⁶¹ To clarify his position, Buchloh describes her work as occupying a “new position” in the (Western) genealogy of sculpture that finds its antecedents in artistic production from the 1960s to the late 1980s—a description that is significantly phenomenological at its base.⁶²

⁶¹ Buchloh, “The Entropic Palace,” 315.

⁶² Quoted from Benjamin Buchloh, “The Entropic Palace,” 315. Buchloh specifically locates her work also in relation to the sculptural practices that tended to present accumulations of “capitalist object amassment” which “depended on a presumed correlation between the readymade and the commodity.” However, he clearly differentiates her work from sculptors working within this mode (he specifically refers here to Arman’s *Le Plein* and Claes Oldenburg’s *The Store* from the early 1960s), because of what he sees as an accumulation that is “unassimilable (sic) to capital” via the inclusion of living and natural object presented under logic more akin to *scientific models*. Buchloh does not clarify what he means here by referencing the scientific model as a part of what makes Sze’s work both *similar* to the sculptural practices derived from the latter half of the twentieth century but ultimately *different* here; his assessment stays closer to the theories and concepts, such as phenomenology, semiology, and totalitarian spectacle. Though I find his allusion to semiology a valid point for discussing the object-relations (as signs and signifiers) that has typified many linguistic interpretations of Sze’s work throughout her career, I find it much more intriguing to explore his suggestion of phenomenology as it relates to the experience proffered by *Triple Point* vis-à-vis scientific models.

While his assessment of the materials and compositional strategies of *Triple Point* alone carries exciting implications for the evolution of contemporary sculpture, Buchloh's phenomenological description provides an equally intriguing mode for interpreting the subject-object relations evoked by Sze's accumulations in Venice. As I have already explained, broadly speaking phenomenology refers to the philosophical study of perceptual experience, especially as theorized in the philosophical writings of early twentieth-century philosophers like Husserl. However, it was the later writings of Merleau-Ponty that would be specifically connected with the visual arts during the mid-twentieth century. *The Phenomenology of Perception*, which as we may recall was translated to English in 1962, was widely read in America and his writings became a valuable source for considering vision as a part of the self's bodily interaction with the world—especially as a philosophy for analyzing Minimalist art that developed in the 1960s. Minimalist artists, such as Robert Morris,⁶³ used the ideas outlined by this philosophy as way to conceptualize and anticipate a specific exchange (a first-hand, or centered, experience) that occurred between external (art) object and the body (viewer).

In Minimalism, phenomenology was used to describe a specific—and at its inception, radical—perceptual experience of art. During the context of the mid-twentieth century, it was considered radical because Minimalist art emphasized an embodied experience that unfolded between object and viewer in real time and space, rather than a visual experience centered by the autonomous art object.⁶⁴ American art critic Michael Fried's now well-known essay "Art and Objecthood," published in 1967, encapsulates this position. An active supporter of Modernist art,

⁶³ Robert Morris wrote "Notes on Sculpture" in 1966 to describe the experience of Minimalist work like his own, centered on the interaction between the viewer, the object, and the space occupied by the object.

⁶⁴ My own interpretation is indebted to the thorough and insightful interpretation laid out by Alex Potts, especially as Potts outlines the relationship between phenomenology and sculpture during the mid-to-late twentieth century. Of particular importance were chapters 6–7, "The Phenomenological Turn" and "The Performance of Viewing," in *The Sculptural Imagination*. Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, and Minimalist* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2000), 205–268.

Fried's essay sets the formalist quality of the high modernist art he championed—such as sculptors Anthony Caro and David Smith—over and against the 'literalist' (i.e., Minimalist) new tendencies developing in sculpture at that time.⁶⁵ For Fried, the tension between art and literal objects in the mind of the viewer was a psychological and formal challenge to be overcome by the work of art, as seen in the compositional strategies of modernist sculptures by Caro and Smith.

However, the leitmotifs of Fried's discussion—the collapse of the tension between *art* and a mere *object* forged by modernist paintings and sculpture, and the introduction of an adverse *theatricality*—became an important and useful description of Minimalist sculpture, despite Fried's disparagement of Minimalism; a phenomenological description which, to Fried, undermined the autonomy of the artwork. Reacting to the 'pure form' esteemed by high modernism, Minimalism instead explored the role of literal space, the physical body, and time in relation to the viewer. Minimalist artists—such as Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Richard Serra, among others—carefully created sculptures in simple, geometric forms in order to direct their viewer's attention to bodily perception. In other words, Minimalist artists attempted to generate an increased awareness (of the internal self and the external world) between the physical self and the material world with which it was a part.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 153. Furthermore, Fried found the "theatrical" encounter with a Minimalist work to be "disquieting," an anthropomorphic quality that was akin to addressing another bodily presence: "[T]he beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended—and unexacting—relation as subject to the impassive object on the wall or floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person; the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly—for example in somewhat darkened rooms—can be strongly, if momentarily disquieting in just this way..." (Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 163.) Also: "My critique of the literalist address to the viewer's body was not that bodiliness as such had no place in art but rather that literalism theatricalized the body, put it endlessly on stage, made it uncanny or opaque to itself, hollowed it out deadened its expressiveness, denied its finitude and in a sense its humaneness, and so on. There is, I might add, something vaguely monstrous about the body in literalism." (Ibid., 42.)

⁶⁶ Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, 213. This is keenly felt in relation to phenomenology in the seminal work of Robert Morris. In Morris' widely read responses to the criticism of Minimalism, "Notes on Sculpture," published

Through the rise of Minimalism and beyond, sculpture in the mid-twentieth century was being pushed in increasingly diverse arenas. Phenomenology eventually fell from favor in art analysis, but it continued to be an important part of the lineage of sculpture after the 1960s. Sculptors explored increasingly heterogeneous modes of artistic “postmodern” production leading up to the 1980s, including categorizations such as performance, land art, installation art, video art, and body art. This radical expansion became the topic of art historian and art critic Rosalind Krauss, whose influential text *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, published in 1977, challenged the reading of Minimalism as defined by the modernist art critic Michael Fried. In 1979, Krauss went on to address the shifting and rapidly expanding definitions of sculpture in her seminal essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” published for the spring edition of *October* magazine, in which Krauss came to terms with postmodernism in sculpture.⁶⁷

between 1966 and 1968, the sculptor attempted to build a conceptual framework with which to describe the relationship between the viewer and the three-dimensional object. His ideas in particular were inspired heavily by writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

⁶⁷ The importance of this essay for understanding sculptural production during the 1970s is further underlined by its inclusion in the seminal publication *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by art critic and historian Hal Foster. The criticality of the essays within *The Anti-Aesthetic* exemplifies the extent to which philosophers and critics of art attempted to understand “postmodern” art production leading up to the 1980s, including categorizations such as performance, land art, installation art, video art, and body art. Krauss’ influential essay was included in this compilation of seminal texts, alongside such prominent theorists as Fredric Jameson and Edward Said. In *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Hal Foster describes the overlapping concerns of postmodernism as: ... a critique of Western representation(s) and modern ‘supreme fictions’; a desire to think in terms sensitive to difference (of others without opposition, of heterogeneity without hierarchy); a skepticism regarding autonomous ‘spheres’ of culture or separate ‘fields’ of experts; an imperative to go beyond formal filiations (of text to text) to trace social affiliations (the institutional ‘density’ of the text in the world); in short, a will to grasp the present nexus of culture and politics and to affirm a practice resistant both to academic modernism and political reaction.” Quoted from Hal Foster, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1998), xvi. I refer to postmodernism, in its broadest sense, as art after modernism beginning in the 1970s and dominant until the early 1990s. More specifically, I invoke Foster’s interpretation of postmodernism as a period that related to modernism but at the same time remained distinct, reactionary, and resistant to the master narratives and autonomy of the modernist lexicon. (See the full introduction to *The Anti-Aesthetic* by Hal Foster, ix–xvii.) Included in the compilation *The Anti-Aesthetic* are philosophers and critics who have become central for understanding the condition of postmodern culture, such as: Jürgen Habermas, Kenneth Frampton, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, Gregory L. Ulmer, Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and Edward Said. For a more recent discussion that concentrates on the effects of postmodernism on contemporary sculpture, see also Judith Collins, *Sculpture Today* (London; New York: Phaidon Press, 2007); Anna Moszynska, *Sculpture Now* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2013).

To construct her “expanded field,” Krauss introduced a logical model that attempted to illustrate the complexity of the expanded field of sculpture outside of its logical negatives (traditionally, as something “not landscape” and “not-architecture”), including their inverses that had been hitherto excluded (landscape and architecture). The autonomy of Modernist sculpture, in contrast, operated in relation to “loss of site,” and thus “functionally placeless and self referential.” Moreover, Modernist sculpture “had a kind of idealist space to explore, a domain cut off from the project of temporal and spatial representation.”⁶⁸ Focusing on the effects of postmodernism within sculpture, Krauss observed that (as early as the 1960s) an increasing number of artists—including Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Richard Serra, Walter De Maria, Robert Irwin, Sol LeWitt, and Bruce Nauman—felt the modernist paradigm had been exhausted.⁶⁹ Artists during this time had entered a situation in which the sited work, which engaged with its surroundings, was becoming more and more vital:

The expanded field is thus generated by problematizing the set of oppositions between which the modernist category *sculpture* is suspended... *sculpture* is no longer the privileged middle term between two things that it isn't. *Sculpture* is rather only one term on the periphery of a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities.⁷⁰

The result of the expanded field was a shift away from the notions of medium-specificity that had dominated the discourse of Modernist art and towards site-specificity. Instead of sculpture, Krauss interjected terms such as “marked sites,” “site-construction,” and “axiomatic structures.” Thus one can define Sze’s sculptures, such as those found in the rooms of *Triple Point*, in Krauss’ terms: conceptualized specifically in relation to the surrounding architecture it is yet “not-architecture” (“axiomatic structures”), and while they are inherently linked to the city of Venice, the sculptures are built structure that are “not-landscape” (“marked sites”).

⁶⁸ Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8, (Spring, 1979): 34.

⁶⁹ Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 33–34.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

“Heightened Perception”

It is worth noting that, although Sze self-identifies as a sculptor, her works operate somewhat paradoxically between the ephemeral nature of installation art (dismantled after the exhibition concludes) and the autonomy of sculpture (transportable and available for later reflection).⁷¹ By the 1990s, near the end of Sze’s formative training and education at Yale, installation art had matured into the preferred critical vehicle for not only engaging with the specific parameters of site, but also ideas of temporality, perception, experience, and culture (seen in the work of internationally acclaimed artists such as Yayoi Kusama, Anish Kapoor, Thomas Hirshhorn, and Ai Wei Wei).⁷² Furthermore, installation requires the viewer to consider spatial relations. Since installation can incorporate all kinds of images, things, and objects precisely because the material support is space itself (unlike the medium-specificity that defined Modernist art for critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried) installation might be, as Boris Groys suggests, “material par excellence.”⁷³

Dependence on the viewer is a key characteristic of work that addresses space in this manner. Claire Bishop, in her focused history and analysis of installation art published in 2005, postulated that the genre could be differentiated from traditional media in the way that it directly

⁷¹ Also interesting is that the ephemeral nature of the work is complicated by two additional notions: one, that the entire exhibition exists—albeit in mediated form—through an extensive and high-quality virtual “tour” available on *Triple Point*’s online platform (www.sarahszevenice2013.com). Second, that select installations from *Triple Point* were reconstituted at the Bronx Museum of Art for an exhibition entitled “Sarah Sze” Triple Point (Planetarium)” which ran from July 14 to August 14, 2014. See Karen Rosenberg, “In Slender Filaments, a Cosmos Distilled: Sarah Sze’s ‘Triple Point,’ Whittled Down for the Bronx,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 2014. However well-intended in aspirations to make the elite venue of the Biennale more accessible to the larger public, neither is comparable to the first-hand experience of the work, *in situ*, from which the work derives its critical and immediate power.

⁷² A significant point of departure from the tenets of Modernist art, installation art requires time, which contrasts with “the persistent presumption that earlier forms of art could be understood, if not at once, then quite quickly, yet were, at the same time and in various senses, ‘timeless.’” Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 195.

⁷³ Boris Groys, “The Topology of Contemporary Art,” in Condee et al., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 76. Building his argument out of Walter Benjamin’s writing on the loss of the aura and the notion of the copy, Groys continues to say that installation is “a space of decision making: first of all, for decisions concerning the differentiation between old and new, traditional and innovative.”

addresses, insists, or even relies on the viewer's presence in the space.⁷⁴ Bishop offers a contemporary history of installation art that concentrates on viewer experience rather than theme or materials—since, in installation art, space and objects are a “singular entity” regarded as material used by the artists to “create a situation” that addresses the literal presence of the viewer.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the presentation of elements in installation art, as opposed to their representation, is directed at an embodied viewer. The physical participation of the spectator comes from an insistence that s/he walks through, into, and around the work.

When artists acknowledge the area surrounding the art object as significant, they create an environment that forges what Bishop termed a *heightened perception* of space. In the chapter focused on this sense of heightened perception, Bishop uses as a point of departure Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of phenomenology, specifically as Minimalist artists and critics addressed it in the 1960s.⁷⁶ Thus, the chapter is conceptually organized around a “phenomenological model” of the viewing subject. In other words, Bishop argues that in installation art, the artist constructs a situation in which the viewer's awareness of optical perceptions and multisensory tactile environments becomes heightened. Bishop names such broad-ranging artists as Carsten Höller and Michael Asher; “light and space” West coast artists Robert Irwin, James Turrell, and Doug Wheeler; South American artists Hélio Oiticica, Ernesto Neto, and Ana Maria Taveres; and also Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham, Olafur Eliasson. Using Merleau-Ponty's writings as

⁷⁴ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art*, 8.

⁷⁵ Bishop, *Installation Art*, 6. The framework of the book is structured around four main types of experience: the dream scene, heightened perception, mimetic engulfment, and activated spectatorship. To define “experience,” Bishop builds on critical theories of different types of experience, including Sigmund Freud, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, and Poststructuralist critique. However, in using experience as categorization, especially by prioritizing her own first-hand accounts of the artwork presented in this publication, Bishop concedes that her analysis is inherently subjective. For the purpose of this study, I will largely focus on the categorization of heightened perception.

⁷⁶ The chapter is titled “Heightened perception,” in Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 48–81.

a guide, each of the installations Bishop describes focuses attention on the viewer in order to draw out the interdependency of subject and object.

As I have attempted to demonstrate in the previous section on Merleau-Ponty's writings and its possible applications for art, the conceptualization of an embodied viewer derives from philosophies of perception. At its broadest definition, perception is *what* we see and *how* we understand what we see; it is discussed much in art, philosophy, and science in order to understand and articulate the particular dynamics and mechanisms of how we perceive the world around us.

Perception is understood to be something mutable and slippery: not the function of a detached gaze upon the world from a centered consciousness, but integral to the entire body and nervous system, a function that can be wrong-footed at a moment's notice.⁷⁷

Thus, in following writings of Merleau-Ponty, Bishop describes embodied perception as an interconnectedness between subject and object; but in the case of installation, artists created work that expands upon the theories of phenomenology. Two artists whose practices between the 1970s and 1990s utilized multisensory phenomena in order to heighten viewer perception include Bruce Nauman's *Acoustic Wall* (1971) or Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project* (2003). Nauman's *Acoustic Wall* used auditory pressure that increased the closer viewers stood in relation to the wall, subtly effecting their balance and making them aware of how their sense of sound aids spatial perception. Thirty years later Eliasson's *Weather Project* brought an artificial "sun" to the interior of London's Turbine Hall—a large disk with hundreds of mono-frequency bulbs bathed the hall in a yellow glow while a fine mist permeated the space, connecting viewers to a mediated version of nature that played on multisensory perceptions. In both examples, the artist prioritizes the individual's experience of, and with, the work. Bishop uses these two artists, among others, to describe a situation in which installation art directly implicates viewers while

⁷⁷ Bishop, *Installation Art*, 48.

simultaneously disorientating and decentering them⁷⁸—a complex interaction achieved through emphasizing the viewer’s first-hand, bodily perception of the artworks she describes.

Furthermore, Bishop argues that installations produced by post-minimalist artists *expanded* the artistic exploration of embodied perception begun by Minimalist artists in the 1960s. Although each installation analyzed by Bishop clearly bears a formal resemblance to the stark and literal aesthetic of Minimalist sculpture in order to heighten viewer awareness of *how we see*, each artist also recognizes and questions the contingencies of our perceptions. Bishop explains that this shift is largely due to the rise of feminine and poststructuralist theories.⁷⁹ By the 1970s, Merleau-Ponty’s writings on phenomenology were under criticism in light of current discourses surrounding identity politics, difference, gender, and sexuality.⁸⁰ Many installations during the 1970s and 1990s that continued to mine Merleau-Ponty’s ideas thus aimed to decenter the viewer, incorporating identity politics and ‘difference’ into perception by addressing, time, memory, and individual histories.⁸¹ Bishop contends that after the mid-twentieth century, “[viewers] are no longer afforded a single position of mastery from which to survey the art object... we are decentered in relation to the work.”⁸² Hélio Oiticica’s tactile, sensory environments during the 1960’s, for example, precipitated these poststructuralist themes in Western art. His installations *Penetrables* and *Tropicália* brought focused attention to viewer

⁷⁸ Bishop, 80.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 66, 76.

⁸⁰ Bishop specifically contrasts the uniqueness of individual experience with the phenomenological experience described in interactions with Minimalist art as a way of re-evaluating phenomenology’s effectiveness as a tool to describe contemporary artwork. In the wake of poststructuralist theory, Merleau-Ponty’s ideas became criticized for their seeming indifference to sexual, racial, and economic differences; for example, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy centers on a masculine perspective. The primacy of the male subject in Merleau-Ponty’s writings contributed to later feminist critiques, such as Judith Butler, “Sexual Ideology and Phenomenology: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*,” in Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young, *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989), 85–100. However, by the 1990s, Bishop argues phenomenology once again became a useful way of thinking about the perceptual experience of self as caught up in both the objects of perception by also in a simultaneous experience of past-present-future. Bishop, *Installation Art*, 76.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 71.

perception, interactivity, and lived experience. Through Oiticica's creation of "total life experiences," the artist showed that the supposedly neutral body of phenomenological perception was also in fact subject to social, political, racial, and economic differences. Bishop notes that the multiple perspectives in Oiticica's installations emancipate the viewer from the colonial, patriarchic, or economic "mastery" of one-point perspective that also implicated the oppressive political regime in power in Columbia at that time.⁸³ Almost a decade later, American artists such as Vito Acconci began to nuance embodied perception through theories of gender, sexuality, and identity politics. His now famous *Seedbed*, which was performed three times a week over the course of three weeks in January of 1972, combined elements of performance, installation, and Conceptual art.⁸⁴ Over the course of the installation, Acconci would lay hidden in the gallery space beneath a constructed ramp of floorboards devoid of any other physical objects except a speaker. Underneath the ramp, the artist verbally and physically responded to the viewer's presence in the room by masturbating, amplified by the speaker above. While the "live installation" practices of Acconci foregrounded viewer perception as embodied, works such as *Seedbed* also recognized that our bodies are sexual and gendered.⁸⁵

Although the heightened perception Bishop finds in these installations grew out of Minimalist art practices in the 1960s, her interpretation intuitively revitalizes the preoccupation with embodied perspective in light of critical theories that ground individual experience in specific social, political, and economic contexts. Significantly, the installations Bishop examines in this chapter rely upon the viewer's *first-hand* experience of objects in the world rather than a mediated experience, such as with painting or the virtual experience of television and Internet

⁸³ Bishop, 63–64.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

videos.⁸⁶ However, Bishop's seeming aesthetic criteria of dematerialized spaces, simple forms, and obviously multisensory environments to foreground the viewer's perceptual experience also limits her analysis. Since the 1990s, artists have turned to quotidian, ordinary objects to explore the conditions of contemporary life. By using a multitude of objects that saturate the visual field, Sze brings viewers in an even closer relationship with perception as it occurs in our everyday lives. As I have argued, Sze's work thus bring increased awareness to multiple perspectives and physically embodied modes of experience. Understood phenomenologically, Sze's unique use of quotidian objects pushes Bishop's analysis into new terrain—a new aesthetic criteria.

Although Sze's sculptural installations, paradoxically, do not resemble the simplified, reduced forms of Minimalist art typically associated with a phenomenological analysis of art (certainly Sze's characteristic over-abundance of objects seems to be the contrary!), articulating the aesthetic qualities of Sze's work is commonly connected to what I will describe as a perceived embodied experience. While, like Bishop, I find the phenomenological experience to be useful for theorizing the specific way installation directly addresses the viewer, *Triple Point* does not invoke the same "heightened perception" that Bishop describes. In other words, unlike the work of Bruce Nauman or Olafur Eliasson, Sze's work does not aim to increase the viewer's awareness of multisensory input like sound or touch. Rather, *Triple Point* brings the attention of the viewer back to a visual spatial awareness that is also bodily involved, via their physical movement through, around, and alongside the works installed in the U.S. pavilion.

For Sze, the experience of her work is about shifts, unfolding in real space and time. The year before the debut of *Triple Point*, she told *Sculpture Magazine*:

⁸⁶ Ibid., 80.

Moving through space is fundamental to our experience... in my work, perspective and gravity shift. I am interested in orientation and disorientation and how we find ourselves in the world. Much art history is about how people depicted reality. Cubism is really realism—about how we see things as we move through space. As I look out the window, I'm orientating myself and being distracted at the same time.⁸⁷

Here Sze describes a phenomenological approach to her work. One's attention is directed to the specific qualities of the viewing experience, namely, the depiction of "reality" in relation to movement and perspective (a convention firmly connected to the Western *avant-garde* vis-à-vis technical innovations of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque at the turn of the twentieth century). As an artist who received her training and education of critical art theories during the 1980s and 1990s Sze is undoubtedly aware of not only the legacy of phenomenology for describing the experience between object and viewer, but has interpreted these historical antecedents in the light of radical changes in materials, forms, and categories that continued into postmodern art.

Thus, in *Triple Point*, there is no single, fixed vantage point for viewing. Instead, the viewer is forced to move around the sculptures, through passageways that are often partially obstructed. This deliberate orchestration of the viewer's body as one attempts to view the work from its many vantage points evokes "a different bodily awareness, allied to the experiential state of 'wandering'..."⁸⁸ Sze likens this sensory awareness to her personal experience of Venice, a city whose infamous pathways include walking along city-streets or, alternatively, traversing a maze of interior canals on boats called *vaporetti* throughout the day.

It's a profound feeling to have your whole body adjust to the new floor plane you're standing on. You step on to land and have a strange sense of the ground, the weight of the stones under your feet. You are actively aware of the idea of gravity and you retain the memory of your own body on the water.⁸⁹

This phenomenological description, making specific note of the slight shifts felt by the body as one moves from land to water and then back again, can be likewise felt in one's embodied

⁸⁷ Joyce Beckenstein, "Fragile Balances," *Sculpture* 31, no. 7 (2012): 29.

⁸⁸ Block and Lovelace, "A Desire for Intimacy Among Common Objects," 13.

⁸⁹ Quote by Sarah Sze, *Ibid.*

experience of *Triple Point*. The viewer's movements are guided along a circular pathway through the interconnected spaces of the U.S. pavilion—the orchestration is present, but delicate, allowing the viewer the sensation of pleasantly getting “lost” in a myriad of individual moments deftly poised throughout *Triple Point*. Meanwhile, subtle sensory shifts generated by the work continually alter and renegotiate one's experience from room to room.

Rejecting the stability that comes with a centered viewing experience, Sze creates a situation that necessarily invokes an embodied perception—but that same perception is also fragmented, an ongoing negotiation between the individual viewer and the objects of viewing because of the unceasing array of forms and materials that the viewer may encounter throughout the installation space. What is more, *Triple Point* prioritizes the unique, individual experience rather than the pre-empted “type” of embodied viewer—and experiential response—engendered by Minimalist sculpture in the 1960s. By exploring a multitude of objects in *Triple Point* rather than one “minimalist” form, viewers are instead presented with an ongoing situation that decenters perceptual awareness, an experience that is akin to the instability of the contemporary moment, the insatiable “here and now.” Likewise, for Bishop, the direct implication and activation of the viewer in installation art therefore “reveals the ‘true’ nature of what it means to be a human in the world,” rather than one's mediated perception of the world through images, photographs, and videos that today saturate our daily visual field.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Bishop, 80.

OBJECTS AND BEYOND

Through the arguments in these last two sections, I have sought to formally analyze Sze's *Triple Point* in relation to theories of embodied perception. Originally used in the 1960s by Minimalist artists to generate an increased awareness between the physical body of the viewer and the material world, I have re-examined Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception using the notion of "heightened perception" installations developed by Bishop. Unlike the literalist objects of Minimalism or the dematerialized installations which Bishop describes, Sze's *Triple Point* offers an abundance of consumer goods and household products grouped together under scientific titles that complicate one's relationship with, and perceptions of, mass-produced things. Commonplace objects such as tape, clamps, sugar packets, ladders, light bulbs, fans, yarn, and tickets are presented in orderly but exuberant excess. It is Sze's characteristic dedication to quotidian objects such as these that has opened up her work to interpretations focused on the objects themselves as symbolic of hidden meanings through semiotic "readings," in which placement, positioning and expressive treatment of distinct objects signify in relation to the surrounding objects and representations within the artwork.⁹¹ However, this does little to explain the quasi-scientific inferences and forms suggested by the titles of Sze's installation of *Triple Point* within the U.S. pavilion, or how the viewer experiences these objects as they unfold in real time and space.

When analyzed phenomenologically, I believe the viewer can look at—but also beyond—the objects, embracing scientific objectivity without sacrificing the import of individual

⁹¹ Linda Norden, "Show and Hide: Reading Sarah Sze," 8–13.

perception. First I explain how Sze's almost compulsive accumulations of consumer goods recall the contemporary reality of twenty-first century consumer culture. However, *Triple Point* blurs, conceals, and reinterprets these familiar "things" by posing them like scientific interventions that destabilize the viewer's perceptions of, and movements through, the U.S. pavilion. Moreover, a phenomenological analysis of *Triple Point* accounts for the apparent instability and implausibility of Sze's signature "stuff" as sculptural mechanisms that measure, order, and explain the world around us through scientific theories. We cannot grasp the entire meaning of *Triple Point* in an instant of quantitative knowledge nor through an exhaustive list naming the vast consumer goods used to create each sculptural installation. Rather, Sze's vast accumulation of objects, which demand extended duration and constant movement in order to investigate the work in its full detail, re-evaluates our perceptual awareness of these objects in light of the abundance and diversity of contemporary life.

Artists in the twenty-first century have reconsidered the questions posed by artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, and Robert Rauschenberg, turning towards the ready-made object as a new medium to explore, more closely, a post-industrial and post-capitalist world. Jérôme Sans once referred to the quotidian "stuff" which Sze uses to build her installations as the "ecology of daily life," saying:

Sze's building blocks are items that so clutter our daily environment, they barely merit our attention—if we notice them at all... Humanity has a propensity to both consume and accumulate objects at an accelerating rate. It is impossible to stop the infernal rhythm despite the fact we have already reached saturation. Cluttering has become a contemporary reality, an ecological attitude.⁹²

Sze's work seems to be calling attention to this "saturation" of objects contributing to the clutter of our daily lives. However, her sculptural installations can hardly be called messy, and the thoughtful, almost compulsive organization brings her assemblages from the limit of over-

⁹² Jérôme Sans, "Microcosmos," in Jérôme Sans and Jean Louis Schefer, *Sarah Sze* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 29–30.

saturation to a sense of having just enough. So what is the purpose of this exuberant use of our daily excess? By Sans' reckoning, perhaps the purpose is to bring attention to the massive accumulation of things that is a part of our "contemporary reality;" the objects which have such ordinary usages and meanings we hardly give them a second thought.

The objects—somewhat akin, at first glance, to an accumulation of "stuff" that is commonly associated with America's unashamed neophilia (having too much, having it just to have it, having it in excess)—are mixed with handmade sculptures and photographs as composite materials for Sze's quasi-scientific structures. Presented and arranged as a part of Sze's assemblages, all of these familiar objects are rendered somewhat unfamiliar and become anomalies in their new function as a part of sculptural mechanisms meant to be used, according to the artist, as tools to calculate time, measure space, and understand behavior.⁹³ Yet these "sculptural mechanisms" appear inherently flawed or fall comically short of their attempts at prescribing an empirical and intelligible order. For example, *Planetarium* projects the vision of constructed constellations to a disorienting effect, illuminating imagined patterns rather than mapping actual cosmological systems. Sze articulates the functions of these object-based systems as "mechanisms that make measurements of things that are ultimately beyond our capacity to understand."⁹⁴

⁹³ Two alternative and intriguing perspectives on the desire to model behavior within Sze's sculptures have emerged in exhibition catalogues dedicated to her recent work. Johanna Burton's anthropologically situated critique, *à la* Clifford Geertz's 1973 anthropological study, interprets systems of cause and effect between objects situated in the realm of culturally-based signs. Johanna Burton, "Sarah Sze: Objects, Food, and Rooms" in Holly Block et al., *Sarah Sze: Triple Point* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co. in collaboration with the The Bronx Museum of Arts, 2013), 20–29. The following year, Jeffrey Kastner invoked Geroges Perec's *Species of Spaces* (1974) and Susan Stewart's *On Longing* (1993) to describe Sze's object-oriented sculptures as both sites of work and as collections that underscore the behavior of objects in relation to our behavior towards them. Jeffrey Kastner, "Point of Order," in Marion Boulton Stroud, et al., *Sarah Sze at the Fabric Workshop and Museum* (Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2014), 70–75.

⁹⁴ Quote by the artist, in "Sarah Sze and Jennifer Egan Studio Visit," 112.

Yet Sze's sculptures, if meant to function in a manner similar to scientific experiments, hardly make use of the objects and materials normally associated with such activities. One might expect, rather, an orderly abundance of sterile laboratory equipment such as beakers, test tubes, microscopes, and Bunsen burners. Paradoxically, the abundant variety of materials Sze uses to create her quasi-scientific sculptural forms makes moving through the negative spaces of any one of *Triple Point*'s installations more comparable to taking a stroll through a hardware store or supermarket. For *Triple Point*, this is all the more evident in a setting (i.e., the pavilion) that necessarily evokes preconceived conceptions about the United States. Ramon Betts' study of American popular culture effectively demonstrates this connection between consumerism and culture in the recent history of the United States: "Where the nation was praised as the 'arsenal of democracy' during World War II, *it is today the supermarket of the world*: Wal-Mart is currently the most powerful corporation in the world, if judged by annual sales. Sale of consumer goods has become the main national economic indicator. Immediately following the tragic destruction of the twin towers of the New York World Trade Center in 2001, President George W. Bush urged the citizenry of the land to consume, to continue as before."⁹⁵ Yet Sze does not celebrate this environment overrun by a market-based economy in the same way that, say, Pop artists did in their glorification of consumer culture as form *par excellence* in the late-twentieth century. Unlike attractive displays of available consumer goods, *Triple Point* presents these "things" in ways that invite the viewer to contemplate unusual functions for individual objects, drastically altering the way one perceives their function in light of their new context and use.

⁹⁵ Quote, my emphasis, from Raymond F. Betts, *A History of Popular Culture: More of Everything, Faster and Brighter* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

Sze's compositional strategies in *Triple Point* also intervene with the architecture itself. At a glance, the style of the U.S. pavilion itself intentionally evokes the neoclassical style reminiscent of Jeffersonian architecture and American federalism. But rather than creating a specifically national image through her art, Sze has arranged a kaleidoscope of our daily objects that blurs traditional archetypes by altering, concealing, and reinterpreting the exhibition space. Sze's decision to alter the viewer's initial perception of the U.S. pavilion's façade through *Gleaner* and then drastically redirect the route through the interior gallery spaces in a circular pattern is meant to create an oscillating experience of location and dislocation.

I want you to be located when you walk in the door and then dislocated and then relocated as you move through the work, to create this constant experience of teetering... I want to throw off hierarchy and balance in the space and play with fragility and instability, so that the circulation is much more *a collection of experiences* with a sense of wandering and unexpected moments.⁹⁶

This constant re-navigation of the viewer's body in relation to the objects and space in their perceptual field subverts the clearly demarcated interior spaces and functions of neoclassical architecture. Here I am reminded of Betts' account of popular culture, deliberately invoking Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard. "It is a world of constantly shifting forms and arrangements," Betts tells us.

Terms like decentering, fragmentation, heterarchy and polyculturalism all deny a fixed order of things and a certain way of interpreting reality. These form a refutation of the traditional and dominant thought in the West since the eighteenth century: that collective human behavior was unilinear in its movement towards improvement and betterment, and best analyzed at the comfortable distance of the analyst from subject provided by detachment, therefore objectivity (the ivory tower perspective).⁹⁷

The Galilean and Cartesian scientific philosophies that paved the way for the Enlightenment are no longer sufficient for describing the complexities of perspective as we experience them in our daily lives. Merely describing how things are "supposed to" appear, as understood through the

⁹⁶ Quote by the artist, my emphasis, taken from the exhibition catalogue. "Sarah Sze and Jennifer Egan Studio Visit," 108–109.

⁹⁷ Betts, *A History of Popular Culture*, 5.

collection of data and subsequent testing through the scientific method, cannot account for the decentered and fragmented sense of reality that came to light through poststructuralist theory. However, the objective view of science is still useful and necessary—we see this reflected in Sze’s inferences to scientific ideas and devices that coincide with the basic human instinct to categorize, classify, and order the world around us (and the objects within her installations). Empirical order does not need to be in conflict with our individual perceptions; as described by Merleau-Ponty in his writings on the paintings of Paul Cézanne, the artist “expresses what exists” between phenomena and lived perspective.⁹⁸

The strategy of massive accumulation used by Sze in her installations, unlike the revisionist or political critique underpinning the work by some of her contemporaries, explores the characteristics of our present world, in its fullness, diversity, abundance, and speed. Yet I contend that the experience of navigation and discovery embedded in *Triple Point* is also implicitly posed in relationship to the unique history and politics of the architectural setting within the Biennale.⁹⁹ *Gleaner* upends the rigid symmetry of the pavilion by focusing the installation on the large tree on the one side of the building, which grew (unplanned) nearby the wall of windows in the right wing (through which one can “peek” into the spaces of

⁹⁸ Galen A. Johnson, “Phenomenology and Painting: ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’” in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, eds. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 9.

⁹⁹ Although Sze’s installations are clearly responsive to their environments, they do not necessarily operate under the discourse of site-specificity, such as it has been theorized by scholars such as Miwon Kwon. Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004). In one of the essays in the catalog published on the occasion of *Triple Point*, Johanna Burton argues that Sze’s form and materials “acknowledges its environments but operates in a system quite apart from the context that houses it,” and instead offers an analysis through production; that is, creating new situations rather than critiquing old or existing ones. Johanna Burton, “Sarah Sze: Objects, Food, and Rooms,” in Burton et al., *Sarah Sze: Triple Point*, (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co. in collaboration with The Bronx Museum of Arts, 2013), 25–7. While Johanna Burton’s analysis offers an intriguing study of behavioral systems between Sze’s objects, specifically through the lens of Clifford Geertz’s 1973 anthropological study, this essay chooses to focus on the relations between objects and viewers.

Observatory).¹⁰⁰ This dramatic transformation of the courtyard destabilizes the original balance of the architecture. Thus, the purposeful asymmetry of *Gleaner* also subverts the pavilion's Palladian-style balance and harmony, which traditionally stands as a metaphor for stability in government, economy, and culture.

As described, the forms and materials of *Triple Point* provide compelling observations on today's culture. But what does it mean to live in the world today? In investigating the "currents" of contemporary art within the twenty-first century, art historian Terry Smith poses the question like this:

What makes these concerns distinct from the contemporary preoccupations of previous art is that they are addressed—explicitly, although more often implicitly—not only by each work of art to itself and to its contemporaries but also, and definitely, as an interrogation into the ontology of the present, one that asks: What is it to exist in the conditions of the contemporary?¹⁰¹

According to Smith, today's art is aligned with a shift in the cultural paradigm—especially the paradigms of 'style' that dominate art historical characterizations¹⁰²—marked by an incessant questioning of everyday life. Thus, what makes the concerns of contemporary artists distinct from those of the past stems from a sense of heightened self-reflection: it has become "truly an art of the world," as it "comes from the whole world, and frequently tries to imagine the world as a differentiated yet inevitably connected whole." Furthermore, "[t]his is the definition of

¹⁰⁰ Added in the 1970s shortly before the pavilion was earmarked as a historic site, preventing changes to the existing structure.

¹⁰¹ Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, 2. To make sense of the seemingly infinite variety of contemporary art practices, Smith proposes three "currents," of distinct kind, scale, and scope that underpin the evolution of contemporary art within present-day social, political, and economic factors. These currents form the major vectors of the entire publication: the first current is largely Western in scope, as a continuation of historical styles in art, especially Modernism; the second current is decidedly situated within the postcolonial turn, examining the resulting ideologies and experiences in local and global issues in the wake of colonization; the third current is perhaps the broadest and most ambitious, exploring the spread of globalization and what Smith calls a resulting "transnational visual culture," a diverse yet shared set of individual concerns that occur throughout the world.

¹⁰² Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, 245. Following Fredrick Jameson's text *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (published in 1991), Smith notes that this "incessant shifting" or "periodlessness" reflects a sort of anxiety since postmodernism about defining historical periods. However, Smith believes that this anxiety discredits the value of art history and historical materialist critique; instead, artists are keenly aware of history and find its "unresolved legacies" a rich terrain for contemporary art. See: Smith, 245–247.

diversity: it is the key characteristic of contemporary art, as it is of contemporary life, in the world today... it is contemporary with us in the most obvious sense, a vital part of our immediate experience of the present.”¹⁰³ In assessing the overall Venice Biennale in 2013, Enwezor targets

Triple Point as an important and “pervasive” view of our contemporary world:

[I]f many of the national pavilions seem adrift, uninspiring, and sadly craft-oriented, there are nevertheless a number of standouts so persuasive that, for me, they elevate the Biennale as a whole: Sarah Sze’s detailed, microscopic view of the world implanted in the U.S. pavilion is perhaps the strongest and most confident treatment of that space I have seen in years.¹⁰⁴

Enwezor’s description of this work as a “microscopic view of the world” not only speaks to the strength of this work, but points to the way in which *Triple Point* invites a critical reflection upon the national spaces of the pavilion itself. Moreover, the “world” within *Triple Point* is communicated to viewers over time as they physically move through the pavilion, which subtly alters their perceptions of the objects and spaces therein.

Though as an author I can only convey the experience of *Triple Point* through words meant to try and recapture its fullness and diversity, first-hand viewer experience remains central to any analysis of Sze’s *Triple Point*. Sze’s aesthetically dazzling assemblages seem to convey something essential about the primacy of the lived qualities of the visible world—full of color, density, and shifting outlines. However, Sze’s almost excessive accumulations of familiar quotidian objects are layered with quasi-scientific structures and grids (even if they ultimately fall short of any intelligible or empirical order). In today’s “constant flood of information,” according to the 55th Biennale’s curator Massimiliano Gioni, the need for structure seems “even

¹⁰³ Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 9.

¹⁰⁴ Okwui Enwezor, “Predicaments of Culture,” in *Artforum International* (2013), 328–329. In 2014, Okwui Enwezor was named director of the forthcoming 56th Venice Biennale. Originally announced in the press release on the office Venice Biennale website, “Board of Directors appoints Okwui Enwezor Director of the Visual Arts Sector (For the 56th International Art Exhibition 2015)”, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/news/04-12.html>.

more necessary and even more desperate.”¹⁰⁵ An average city dweller sees tens of thousands of images every day¹⁰⁶—found in billboards, newspapers, magazines, television, movies, computer screens, and smart phones—an increasingly virtual and mediated experience of life processed through technology and mass-production. In contrast, *Triple Point* remains closely tied to the physical. Photographs, videos, or “virtual tours” cannot fully recreate the perceptual experience of the work. In each of these mediated experiences, the viewer remains centered, comfortably distanced from the disorienting and dislocating experience of moving through, amid, and around *Triple Point*. Likewise, a mediated experience cannot fully capture our unique embodied experience of everyday life. And today, it is a life that is characterized by a mass-proliferation of goods and services delivered at a fast pace and distributed among globalized networks.

Furthermore, one’s perceptions of these mass-produced goods, which have become so characteristic of today’s everyday experience of objects, are destabilized in *Triple Point*. The viewer can trace occurrences of the ephemera of contemporary life in *Triple Point*: photographic prints of rock texture like CMYK (as in printing tones) paint chips; the mixing of local Venetian co-op goods with globally branded products like IKEA, FIJI water, and Energizer. What was once familiar becomes reimagined, repositioned, and repurposed in Sze’s hands. Our expectations in day-to-day life for, say, a water bottle, are befuddled when said bottle is collected and stacked in quasi-familial groups by brand (FIJI, Evion, and Volvic brands, among others) huddled around a pendulum like spectators, or cast in sand like disintegrating indexes. What is the use of a bottle of water that you cannot use to quench your thirst? The answer is that it is not

¹⁰⁵ 55th International Art Exhibition, 23.

¹⁰⁶ When Raymond Betts published his text on popular culture in 2004, the estimate was that the average city dweller sees somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 images per day. (Betts, *A History of Popular Culture*, 2.) With the almost exponential rise of technology and digital media since the early 2000’s, we can expect this number to be even higher today.

quite a water bottle, as we expect it to be, and the consequence of its new role as a sculptural material is that it is unassailable for normative functions. Plucked up by the hand of the artist and pressed into the service of an assemblage that—perhaps—envisions the water bottle as a necessary component for another object, and yet another, to make something entirely new and to behave in an entirely unique way. Thus our expectations are changed, and we (like the water bottle) behave a little differently in its presence. Something unnerving occurs in this difference. Shifting the way in which the viewer perceives the water bottle balances precipitously between calm, formal order and an unsettling renegotiation of the way one blithely accepts an overabundance of objects indicative of an overrun market.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this essay, I have analyzed *Triple Point* as a culmination of the ideas that Sze has sustained and explored over the course of her career, such as the investigation of everyday objects in relation to site, space, and viewer. However, unlike previous interpretations of Sze's work, I focus on embodied perception in order to formally analyze the work in relation to its scientific meanings as suggested by its titles. Tracing a phenomenological model for the experience of *Triple Point* is both rewarding and necessary. To clarify the significance of *Triple Point*, I have examined the discourse surrounding sculpture and installation through the philosophy of phenomenology, specifically as it was used by Minimalist sculptors in the mid-twentieth century, and Bishop's more recent analysis concerning an embodied experience of installation art at the turn of the last century. As I have explained, these theories then help to describe the viewer's unique perceptual experience as they move through and around individual spaces of the national pavilion. What is more, the partial views engendered by the perpetually shifting sightlines decenter the viewing subject. By organizing objects into aesthetically pleasing assemblages that resemble scientific models, Sze alters one's perception of the overabundance of mundane stuff that has become symptomatic of contemporary life (and significantly, stuff that is indicative of an overrun market).

Furthermore, *Triple Point* appeals to an active, embodied perception in order to navigate its interconnected spaces. As Buchloh suggested, the expansive systems at work recall the sculptural theories developed by artists who "traced their subject's movements

phenomenologically.”¹⁰⁷ This identification proves a useful tool for navigating the oscillating systems within *Triple Point* via the scientific model. But unlike Buchloh, I carefully trace these movements through a postmodernist application of partial views. Traditional centering is denied, both in the literal circumnavigation of the pavilion and in the viewing of individual sculptures. Every room elides a single, coherent view: they require that we move around them and through them, reward intimate glances and distant views, and perhaps even invite us to get lost in them.

As I draw these conjectures, it is hard not to reconsider my own physical and interactive viewing experience of the U.S. pavilion during Sze’s installation of *Triple Point*. There is no way to fully take-in the work from a single vantage point—often, Sze deliberately obscures parts of the work by requiring the viewer to walk around, through, and amid the installation in order to discover all of its parts. I will never forget how, upon first approaching *Gleaner*, I was equal parts awed and overwhelmed by the sheer scale of objects, both natural and man-made, that intervened with the architecture of the U.S. pavilion. Even after what I had hoped was a thorough examination of the courtyard—standing back to get a sense of the whole, moving in close to investigate minute details, moving all around and amid Sze’s additions to the façade—I had the distinct impression that I would always have more to see. As if to confirm my suspicions, when I entered the final interior gallery space in which *Observatory* was installed, the work opened up to a previously “hidden” view of the outdoor space. Just outside the long, full-length wall of windows, a semi-circular garden niche extends the installation of *Observatory* outside. This pleasant bleeding of the indoor/outdoor spaces of the U.S. pavilion, similarly blurring the boundaries between the two works, *Gleaner* and *Observatory*, demonstrates in some small part

¹⁰⁷ Buchloh, “The Entropic Palace,” 315.

the overall analysis I have attempted to make here. As Merleau-Ponty describes in his philosophy of phenomenology, perceptions are never fixed—things are rather always in caught in some state of appearing or in the midst of some spontaneous organization in which the objects in our perceptual field are affected by their relation to other objects, people, and environments.

Sze's fantastical structures, full of staged encounters between scientific inquiry and artistic expression, blurs the boundaries between the stable, orderly classifications of knowledge and our unstable, constantly shifting experience of daily life. We can no more pin-down the meaning of work than we can exhaustively name every object in Sze's massive accumulations: to do so would be to limit the diversity and difference implicit in our experience of contemporary life. Rather than reducing the meaning of the work to a visualization of the classic dichotomies between art and science, natural and manufactured, image and object, *Triple Point* opens up the moment of their confluence. Our embodied perception of Sze's object-intervention in the U.S. pavilion echoes the peculiar state of "between-ness" similar to the triple point invoked in the title of the work—that peculiar thermodynamic equilibrium in which, under precise conditions of temperature and pressure, any given substance is solid, liquid, and gas at the same time. In this way, I find Sze's idiosyncratic appropriation of scientific ideas alongside critical theories of sculpture in *Triple Point* to be a productive and critical engagement with the intricate ways we as human beings continually navigate and locate ourselves in an infinitely complex universe. As Sze says,

Our navigation of large amounts of information at a very fast pace is a very real experience, and that effort to try and locate ourselves is part of our experience of daily life... I think one of the joys and privileges of making artwork is that it can articulate things beyond the verbal. So I think there can be humor, there should be sorrow, there should be wonder, there should be... even failure, disappointment. Art is sustenance. I think it's a really important part of being alive.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Quoted from video interview with Carol Vogel for *The New York Times*, "Sarah Sze: The Stones of Venice," *The New York Times*, May 29, 2013, http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/29/sarah-sze-the-stones-of-venice/?_r=0.

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APPENDIX A: FIGURES



Figure 1. *Triple Point (Gleaner)*. (Sarah Sze, 2013, photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, trees, moss, rocks, aluminum, wood, steel, bricks, stone, sandbags, outdoor pump, outdoor lights, mixed media, dimensions variable.)



Figure 2. *A Philosopher Gives a Lecture at the Orrery* (Joseph Wright of Derby, 1766, oil on canvas, 57 7/8 x 79 7/8 inches. Located at the Derby Museum and Art Gallery, Derby, England.)



Figure 3. *Triple Point (Planetarium)*. (Sarah Sze, 2013, wood, steel, plastic, stone, string, fans, overhead projectors, photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, mixed media, 249 x 216 x 198 inches.)



Figure 4. *Triple Point (Eclipse)*. (Sarah Sze, 2013, wood, aluminum, steel, plastic, stone, string, sand, pigment, lamps, mixed media, dimensions variable.)



Figure 5. *Triple Point (Scale)*. (Sarah Sze, 2013, aluminum, plastic, photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, 40 x 56 x 45 inches.)



Figure 6. *Triple Point (Orrery)*. (Sarah Sze, 2013, stone, existing shelves, found materials, exhibition catalogs, napkins, stone, string, clay, mixed media, dimensions variable.)



Figure 7. *The Gleaners*. (Jean-François Millet, 1857, oil on canvas, 83.7 x 111 cm, Musée d'Orsay.)

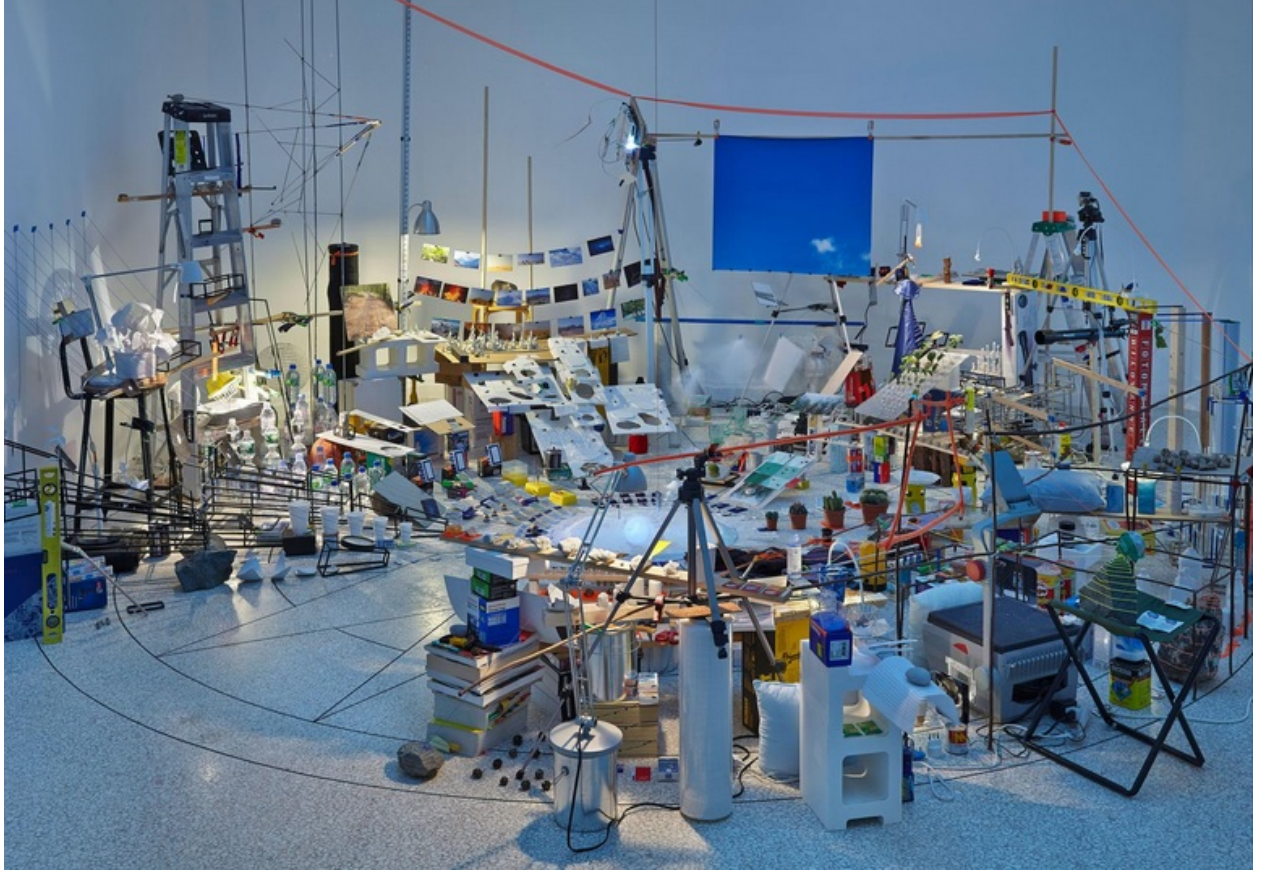


Figure 8. *Triple Point (Pendulum)*. (Sarah Sze, 2013, salt, water, stone, string, projector, video, pendulum, mixed media, dimensions variable.)



Figure 9. *Triple Point (Observatory)*. (Sarah Sze, 2013, mirrors, photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, wood, aluminum, metal, mixed media, dimensions variable.)



Figure 10. *Triple Point (Compass), Giardini.* (Sarah Sze, 2013, Photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, aluminum, plastic, and mixed media, 19 x 25 x 19 inches.)



Figure 11. *Triple Point (Compass), Il Gazzettino via Garibaldi.* (Sarah Sze, 2013, Photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, aluminum, plastic, and mixed media, 30 x 40 x 42 inches.)



Figure 12. *Triple Point (Compass), 1579 via Garibaldi.* (Sarah Sze, 2013, Photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, aluminum, plastic, and mixed media, 16 x 10 x 12 inches.)



Figure 13. *Capricious Invention of Prisons*. (Sarah Sze, 1999, wood, string, plants lights, fans, mixed media, dimensions variable. Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.)

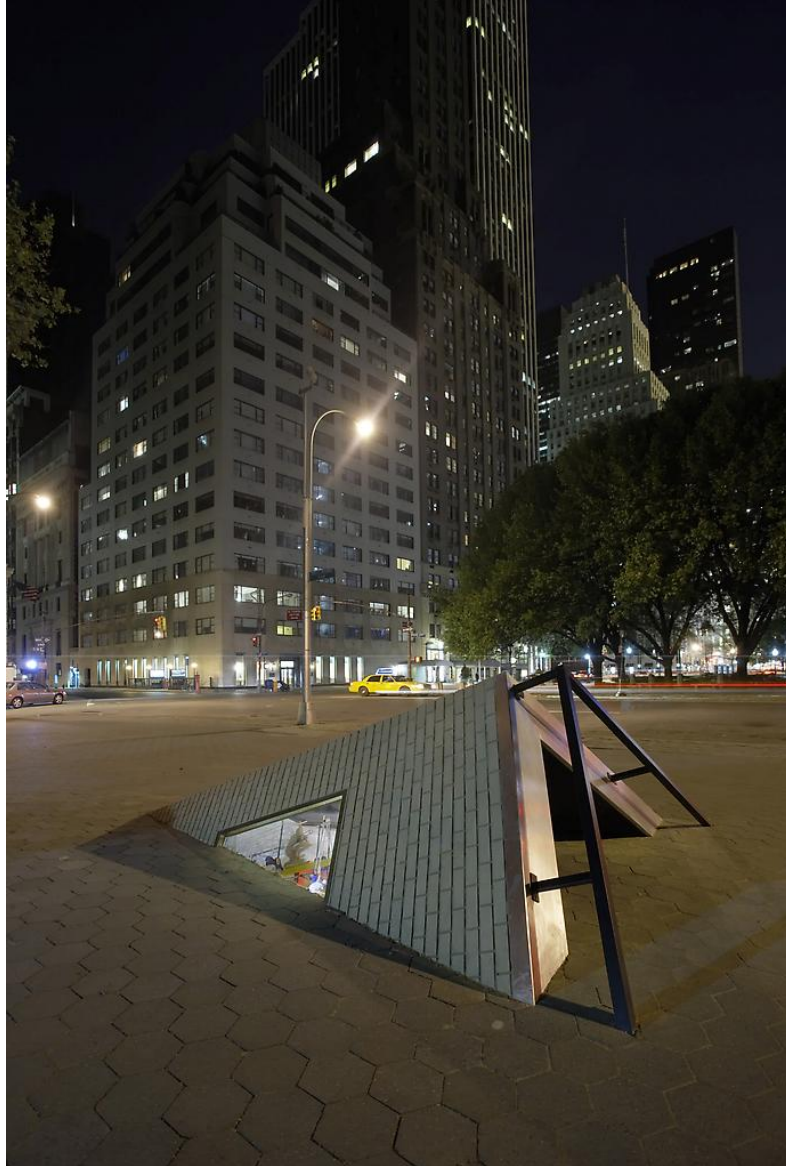


Figure 14. *Corner Plot*. (Sarah Sze, 2006, mixed media, 48 inches deep. Installation view in Doris C. Freedman Plaza, New York, NY. Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.)



Figure 15. *Triple Point of Water*. (Sarah Sze, 2003, pipes, plants, string, aquariums, and mixed media, dimensions variable. The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.)

APPENDIX B: PERMISSIONS

April 23, 2015

Amanda Preuss
6004 N Flora Vista Ave
Tampa, FL 33604

Dear Sze Studio:

I am completing a Masters thesis at the University of South Florida entitled "Sarah Sze's *Triple Point*: Modeling a Phenomenological Experience of Contemporary Life." I would like your permission to reprint in my thesis the following images of Sze's work:

Triple Point (Gleaner). (Sarah Sze, 2013, photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, trees, moss, rocks, aluminum, wood, steel, bricks, stone, sandbags, outdoor pump, outdoor lights, mixed media, dimensions variable.)

Triple Point (Planetarium). (Sarah Sze, 2013, wood, steel, plastic, stone, string, fans, overhead projectors, photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, mixed media, 249 x 216 x 198 inches.)

Triple Point (Eclipse). (Sarah Sze, 2013, wood, aluminum, steel, plastic, stone, string, sand, pigment, lamps, mixed media, dimensions variable.)

Triple Point (Scale). (Sarah Sze, 2013, aluminum, plastic, photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, 40 x 56 x 45 inches.)

Triple Point (Orrery). (Sarah Sze, 2013, stone, existing shelves, found materials, exhibition catalogs, napkins, stone, string, clay, mixed media, dimensions variable.)

Triple Point (Pendulum). (Sarah Sze, 2013, salt, water, stone, string, projector, video, pendulum, mixed media, dimensions variable.)

Triple Point (Observatory). (Sarah Sze, 2013, mirrors, photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, wood, aluminum, metal, mixed media, dimensions variable.)

Triple Point (Compass), Giardini. (Sarah Sze, 2013, Photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, aluminum, plastic, and mixed media, 19 x 25 x 19 inches.)

Triple Point (Compass), Il Gazzettino via Garibaldi. (Sarah Sze, 2013, Photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, aluminum, plastic, and mixed media, 30 x 40 x 42 inches.)

Triple Point (Compass), 1579 via Garibaldi. (Sarah Sze, 2013, Photograph of rock printed on Tyvek, aluminum, plastic, and mixed media, 16 x 10 x 12 inches.)

Capricious Invention of Prisons. (Sarah Sze, 1999, wood, string, plants lights, fans, mixed media, dimensions variable.)

Corner Plot. (Sarah Sze, 2006, mixed media, 48 inches deep. Installation view in Doris C. Freedman Plaza, New York, NY.)

Triple Point of Water. (Sarah Sze, 2003, pipes, plants, string, aquariums, and mixed media, dimensions variable. The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.)

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If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign this letter where indicated below and return it to me in the enclosed return envelope. Your consideration is appreciated.

Sincerely,



Amanda Preuss

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:



Sze Studio, 483 West 37th Street, New York, NY 10018

Date: 4/23/15