

FOCUS

Sara VanDerBeek

Biography, autonomy, portals and portholes; photographs, assemblages and sculptures by *Graham T. Beck*

Sara VanDerBeek is every historicist's dream: an artist whose biography and practice seem so symmetrical that it's tempting to skip all of the written arguments and simply draw a diagram. A daughter of the experimental filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek and a co-founder of the now-defunct downtown New York gallery Guild & Greyshkul, she photographs handmade assemblages adorned with images from art history, American culture, her father's archive and of her own making. With even the most cursory glance, certain influences (and their attendant anxieties) seem to jump from her life onto her photographs.

Most obvious is the curatorial quality of her work: each assemblage is like an exhibition space, the pictures that adorn it are like objects carefully selected for the show, and the photographs themselves serve as a monograph of what once was. In *A Composition for Detroit* (2009) – a wall-size, four-panel work that VanDerBeek debuted in 'New Photography 2009' at the Museum of Modern Art, New York – one of Charles Moore's fire-hosing photographs from the Birmingham campaign of the Civil Rights Movement appears above a Depression-era Walker Evans photo veiled by streaks of dripping paint and below a picture that VanDerBeek took of an abandoned factory in Detroit. These present a distinct theme concerning the USA in conflict with itself – the kind of theoretical peg that a good gallery will offer visitors to hang their hat on, while puzzling over the shadowy *shoji*-like armature that supports the images, and the paint-smeared pane of glass that serves as the backdrop to some of the images and a partial obstruction to others, implying that there's more here than meets the eye. And that's just the first of four panels.

In addition to the artist and one-time-gallerist headings on her sprawling CV, VanDerBeek also serves, with her brother Johannes, as *de facto* executor of their father's estate. Stan, a Black Mountain College alumnus who spent the 1960s collaborating with the likes of Allan Kaprow, Ken Knowlton and Yvonne Rainer, before starting a teaching career in Baltimore, died in 1984. He left behind an office filled with piles of papers, films and scraps, but few clues as to what anything actually was and how the pieces fit together. In 2008, Sara and Johannes intuited an order in the chaos, or at least enough of one to present a well-received exhibition of their father's work that autumn, an experience that seems to have influenced her subsequent photographs.

'The gathering of different framed images that I had imagined [when planning *A Composition for Detroit*] must have been directly influenced by him,' she told Brian Sholis in a 2008 interview. Indeed, when viewed from afar, it's hard not to see the piece as an experimental filmstrip, and each of the four panels as stills. When the framed photographs are viewed one at a time, every one of the collected images stands as its own still, conjuring another disjointed film, a bank of windows, or a Russian doll carved from pictures instead of wood.

Though VanDerBeek's biography maps neatly on to her practice, there is plenty of territory missed by such a simple survey. Looking back at her 2006 exhibition 'Mirror in the Sky', at D'Amelio Terras, New York, colour and whimsy play starring roles. In *Construction 3 (Mother Mask)* (2006), fire-engine red and cobalt-blue supports, which look like pick-up sticks bound with thread, make a figure complemented by corresponding images: an outstretched rod gets a carefully cropped 1950s rubber glove icon set at its end; the vertical dowel that rises above it props up a photo of an African mask. It's a

Below left:
A Composition for Detroit
Installation view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009
Four digital C-type prints

Opposite page:
The Principle of Superimposition 2
2008
Digital C-type print
164x113 cm

Below middle:
'Four Photographers'
(detail)
2008
Digital C-type print
46x53 cm

Below right:
Eclipse 3
2008
Digital C-type print
51x41 cm

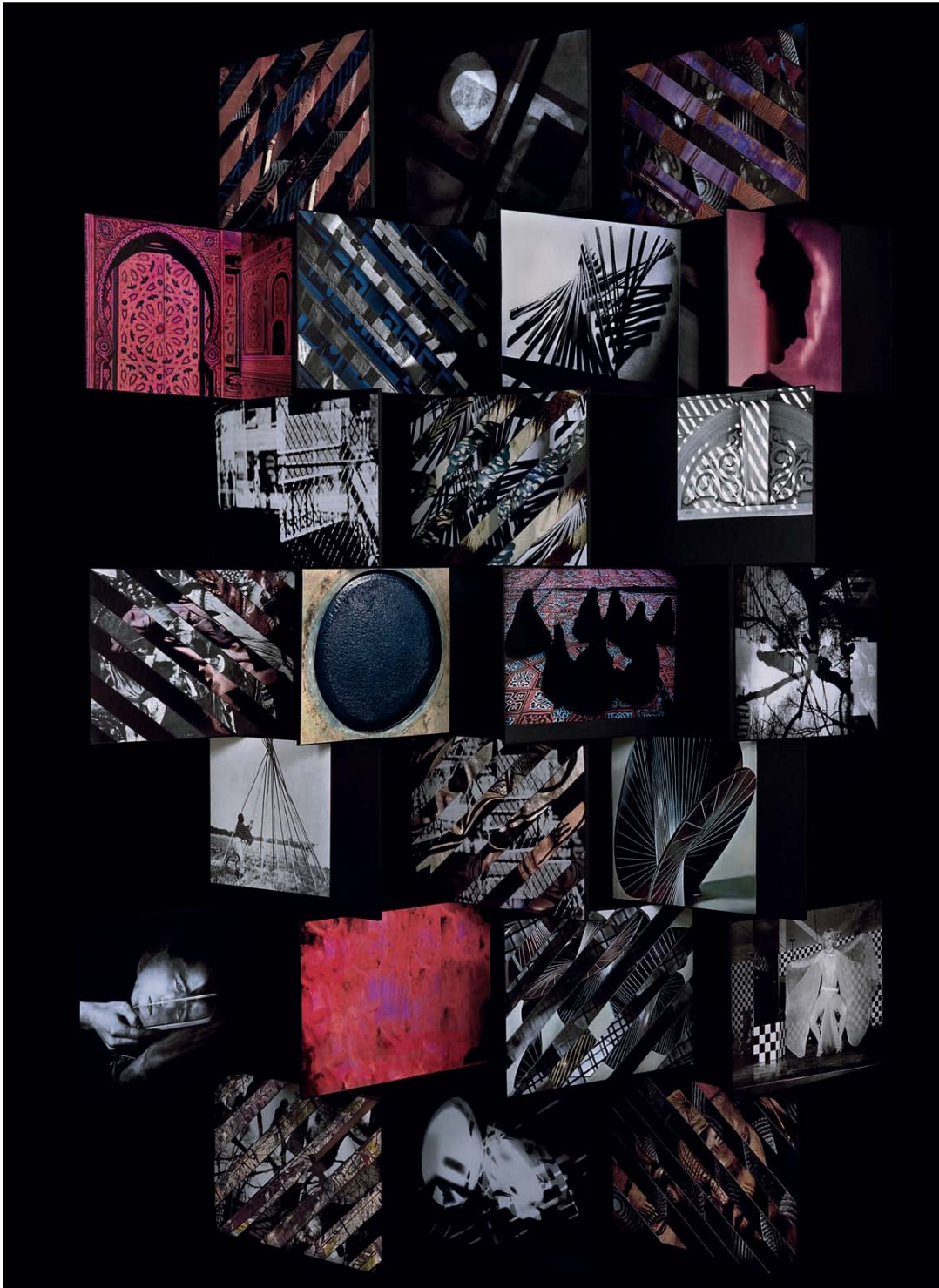
human form: an awkward, metonymic, global figure whose tenderness seems to spring wholly from the piece's parts.

By the time her exhibition 'The Principle of Superimposition' opened in 2008 at The Approach, London, a fascination with architecture had appeared in VanDerBeek's work. In 'Four Photographers' (2008), a six-photo series of plaster tiles, glass panes and small images arranged in layers, to show three dimensions in two, VanDerBeek gives us edifice along with interior details; intimacies on the outside. The same strategy is at work in *A Composition for Detroit*, where photographs of windows, photographs of things, panes of glass and empty rectangles in the armature serve as portals and portholes. In VanDerBeek's land of images, a structure has no more substance than an empty space, a building block no more weight than a face, and a sculpture no more depth than a photograph.

Perhaps that's the way to reconcile the roles of biography and autonomy in VanDerBeek's work: they coexist, taking turns at the steering wheel or, better, turning and shifting and clutching independently, but with the same end. Though nurture seems to be the noticeable party – one can hardly find an article about VanDerBeek without mention of her father or Guild & Greyshkul – nature, or at least an identity independent of her immediate influences, plays its part. For all its referentiality, VanDerBeek's work stands well without her back story – sometimes as a structure, sometimes as a figure and sometimes as a schematic, but always as a photo: flat, framed and frozen in time.



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Courtesy: L'Anello Terras, New York