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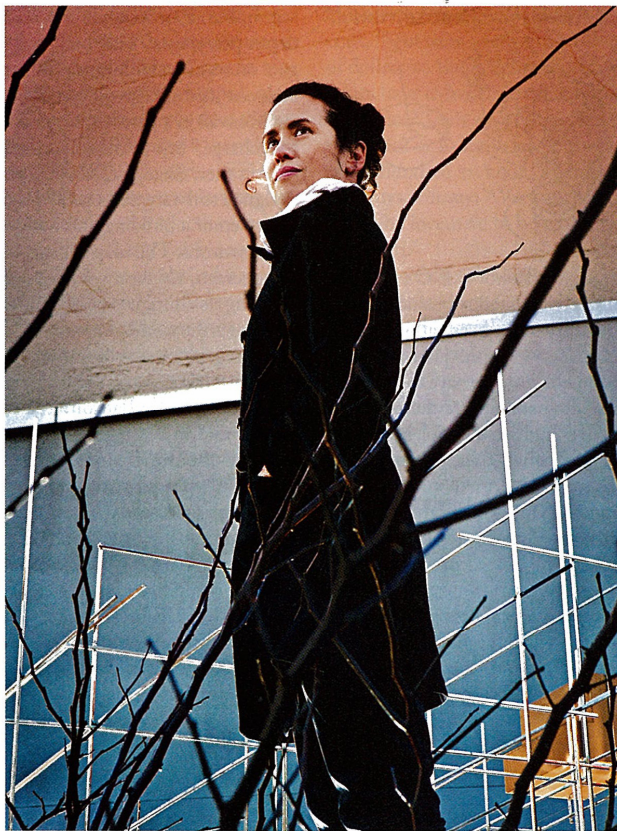
May 14, 2012

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

A MILLION LITTLE PIECES

The sculptural maelstroms of Sarah Sze.

BY ANDREA K. SCOTT



The artist Sarah Sze stood in the foyer on the second floor of the Asia Society, on the Upper East Side, amid dozens of crates, plastic storage bins, Tupperware tubs, and Ziploc bags. It was a late afternoon in December, and she and six assistants were completing the installation of eight new sculptures. The process was so labor-intensive that it had taken more than three weeks. Sze, who is forty-three, looked like one of the Columbia graduate students she teaches. She had her long hair swirled into a loose bun, and wore dark, utilitarian

clothing; a roll of bright-blue carpenter's tape circled her wrist like a readymade bangle.

Sze, who will represent the United States at the Venice Biennale in 2013, arranges everyday objects into sculptural installations of astonishing intricacy. She joins things manufactured to help build other things (ladders, levels, winches, extension cords) with hundreds of commonplace items (Q-tips, pushpins, birthday candles, aspirin tablets), creating elaborate compositions that extend from gallery walls, creep into cor-

ners, and surge toward ceilings. Duchamp paved the way for Sze's work when he made a sculpture by mounting a bicycle wheel on a wooden stool. But her virtuosic creations are equally indebted to the explosive energy of Bernini's Baroque masterpiece "The Ecstasy of St. Teresa," a marble statue that seems to ripple with movement.

Sze's show, which ran through March, was about the relationships between landscape and architecture, and sculpture and line. She walked from the foyer into the galleries, and stood by a floor-to-ceiling window that had been concealed by a wall for a decade—the museum had uncovered it at her request. She began to confer with her studio manager, Mike Barnett, a laconic young man with a MacGyver-like resourcefulness. (He recently fixed the motherboard of Sze's computer by baking it in his oven in order to re-solder the pins.) Sze was wondering about a branch that she had placed in the installation by the window, after pruning it from her rooftop garden, in downtown Manhattan. It rose from the floor like a sapling emerging from a crack in the sidewalk. Twilight had turned the window into a mirror, but in daylight the branch would compete with a view of Park Avenue's median greenery, traffic, and apartment buildings.

"There's a nighttime view and a daytime view," she said to Barnett. "We want that to be a plus, not a minus. Is this getting lost?"

Barnett said, "I think it works."

There was a pause so long that it should have been awkward. Sze finally said, "Even if it's a loose end, that could be interesting. I like that it looks like a fragment—like it could just drift away."

Across the gallery, other assistants were attending to details: a woman was charting the shifting angle of a shadow on the wall with bits of blue tape; a man on a ladder anchored an elaborate laser-cut paper scroll to the wall. In the foyer, Sze's various containers were filled with potential sculptural elements: plastic leaves, silk flowers, empty egg cartons. Most of this material hadn't been used, and the space now resembled the den of an orderly hoarder. Sze doesn't watch television, but on airplanes she entertains herself with the reality show "Storage Wars."

Sze at the High Line, with her sculpture, a habitat for birds. Photograph by Ethan Levitas.

Several pieces of finished sculpture had been fashioned in Sze's studio during the previous months, but since arriving at the museum they'd been dismantled and reconfigured so extensively that only a fifth of the original compositions would end up in the show. "You have to be willing to destroy what you've made, in order to let it evolve," she told me. "It's like writing. A first draft and a second draft can be totally different, but they're both trying to tell the same story." She is married to the Indian-born oncologist Siddhartha Mukherjee, whose first book, "The Emperor of All Maladies," a history of cancer, won last year's Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction. (They have two daughters.) While her husband was writing the book, she has said, she was struck by the similarity of his process to her own—how much changed, and how much was stripped away.

One of Sze's boxes contained cheap rocks sold as aquarium décor. They had reminded her of scholar's rocks, the ornately weathered stones that are a staple of Chinese landscape art, and she'd been happy with the way they had been integrated into several installations. By the window, however, the scale of the rocks had seemed wrong. To explain her dissatisfaction, she quoted Robert Smithsonian, whose "Spiral Jetty" of basalt boulders is in the Great Salt Lake: "Size determines an object, but scale determines art." So, before her assistants dispersed for Thanksgiving, Sze asked them to bring back big rocks from the country. The last-minute decision paid off: twelve large, craggy stones were now positioned across the floor, in a way that suggested an archipelago. Each of the rocks was topped with concentric circles of colorful string, evoking topographical maps or eddying whirlpools. Sze loved the more emphatic look. "The most interesting moments in my work tend to be the ones I least expect," she said. "The idea of knowing exactly where you're going is overrated." This was a surprising remark from an artist whose work, at times, verges on finicky.

The titles of Sze's new sculptures all contained the phrase "random walk," which conjures up a country stroll but is borrowed from probability theory. The idea is that a drunk man holding on to a lamppost is just as likely to stumble backward as forward; the direction of

each step is random and equally probable. The concept dovetailed with the themes of the show. "I'm interested in unpredictability, but I also like the fact that the model for the walk is a one-dimensional line," she said. "It's a drawing about moving through space." Sze added that her meticulous grouping of objects was often inspired by "scientific models, which are about the way a system behaves."

In another part of the gallery, a young woman with a lug-nut washer tattooed on her shoulder was daubing aquamarine paint on a cascade of small wooden dowels. "That could be a model of how a waterfall works," Sze said to me. "The dialogue between something geometric and something fluid is interesting. It might even be willfully goofy, but as an artist you have to give yourself the license to let something be absurd, if that's what it needs to be." The wooden waterfall looked unfinished, with half-filled cups of blue paint littering the floor underneath it. The cups would remain there, Sze explained. She wanted visitors to wonder whether they'd walked in on an experiment. "Each piece should feel like a studio visit," she said.

Sze's new works were far more restrained than the jam-packed accumulations for which she's known—"360 (Portable Planetarium)," a work from 2010, contains thousands of pieces spiralling into the air. The Asia Society had no doubt expected something splashier. Miwako Tezuka, a soft-spoken curator then at the museum, had gently pushed Sze, suggesting that she create an installation in the foyer. Tezuka clearly felt that it was an ideal spot for some drama. Sze politely declined. Her works may look improvisational, but her vision is precise. "The negative space is just as important as the positive space," she assured Tezuka. "The show has to have crescendos and pauses."

Sudden shifts in scale are one of Sze's trademarks, and for every big object at the Asia Society there were myriad small constellations: loose change, pen caps, pebbles, matchbooks, paper disks hole-punched from photographs of sunsets, seascapes, and skies. You'd think that the occasional light-fingered visitor would take something, but in fact the reverse happens: people leave objects behind, as if the sculptures were

shrines. “Some of the things I’ve found are a postage stamp, a mint Life Saver, a bus ticket, a lunch receipt, and a hair band,” Sze said. “They’re all things that people probably had in their pocket and spontaneously decided to add.”

In a similar spirit, people frequently give her materials that they’re sure she’ll eventually use in her art—“things like dollhouse toilets, buttons, boxes of bicycle parts.” She added, “It’s nice that people have this urge to participate when they think of my sculptures, but it’s not how I usually work.” Her mass-produced materials are purchased new, and she doesn’t use trash. “I’m not interested in the romance of detritus,” she told me. “I don’t like objects to have a history.” Unless it’s her own: Sze typically hides personal mementos and local souvenirs in her shows. At the Asia Society, she embedded a sugar packet from a coffee shop near the museum, a set of keys to the second-floor galleries, a few old credit cards, one of Mukherjee’s Air India boarding passes, and an empty pack of birth-control pills.

The last item could be seen as an inside joke. Several years ago, in the *Village Voice*, the art critic Jerry Saltz predicted the birth date of Sze’s oldest daughter, based on what he took to be clues in her show at the Marianne Boesky Gallery, in Chelsea. “The whole room seems to be spelling out the date August 22, 2005,” he wrote. “A single stone rests on a calendar page atop the week of August 14, 2005. A white flower petal has been placed on August 22, 2005. This date is also written out on the side of a white box in the closet. A nearby box has ‘11/14/04’ written on it. The period between the two dates is 280 days, or the *exact number of days* of a full-term pregnancy.” Saltz was wrong, but Sze is amused by the memory. “A close reading like that is all an artist can hope for,” she said. But, she went on, “one of the freedoms that early feminist artists fought for was freedom from the expectation that a woman makes art about being a woman.”

During the Asia Society installation, Sze usually ordered a grilled-cheese-and-tomato sandwich from the corner deli while her team took a lunch break. But, when her schedule allowed, she liked to take everyone out. One afternoon, they dined at Untitled, the new restaurant in the basement of the Whitney Museum of American Art. When the bill arrived, Sze gave the waiter her credit card, which prompted a thought. “We’ve deactivated the accounts on the cards in the show, right?” she asked. It had been taken care of.

As the group got up to leave, a man in a guard’s uniform shyly approached Sze.

“Eric!” she exclaimed, greeting him fondly.

“I still miss your piece,” he said, referring to an installation that Sze had created in the Whitney’s sculpture court, in 2003. The work, “The Triple Point of Water,” called to mind the colorful floating traffic of a coral reef.

“That was one of my favorite things we’ve ever had here,” the guard said. “It was so wonderful watching you work.” That year, she was awarded a MacArthur fellowship, at the age of thirty-four. She was only seven years into her career as an artist.

Sze grew up in Boston. Her father, who is of Chinese descent, is an architect whose firm has designed major municipal projects around town. (He is from a notable family—his grandfather was the first Chinese Ambassador to the United States, and his father helped create the World Health Organization.) Sze’s mother, of Anglo-Irish descent, is a retired schoolteacher. Some critics have overemphasized these parental details, reducing the rhizomatic complexity of her work to child’s play, with Erector sets and Tinkertoys topping the list of metaphors. She grew up in houses that were full of models and blueprints, and Sze recalls that she “was always making things.” On weekends, her parents took her and her older brother—now a partner at the venture-

capital firm Greylock—on drives, in order to check up on their father’s various building projects. Sze attended the Shady Hill School, in Cambridge, from nursery school through ninth grade, then enrolled in Milton Academy. She remains close to her childhood circle of friends.

At the crowded opening party for the Asia Society show, one of those friends, Justine Zinkin—now the C.E.O. of a nonprofit that provides financial services for low-income clients—stood amid the throng of well-wishers, trying valiantly not to step on the art, or on the toes of prominent guests like Peter Norton,

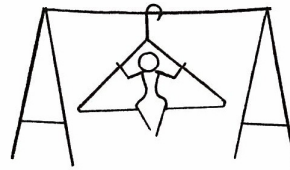
Robert Brustein, and Sharon Percy Rockefeller. Zinkin mentioned to me that she still had the letters that Sze had sent her from summer camp. At the post-opening dinner, held on the top floor of the museum, the collector Martin Eisenberg—whose family owns Bed Bath & Beyond, and who bought one of the first works Sze exhibited—tried to cajole her into letting me see the camp correspondence. Sze resisted. “Marty, I love your enthusiasm,” she told him. “But I’m just not sure that the way I put stickers on envelopes when I was an eighth grader will shed too much light on my art work.”

Sze graduated from Yale in 1991. She spent a year in Japan, followed by several years working with children from poor families. In 1995, she enrolled in the School of Visual Arts, in Manhattan, and her work promptly attracted notice. The following year, in a review of a group show in SoHo, the *Times* critic Roberta Smith singled out a stealthy installation: “Don’t miss Sarah Sze’s store-room installation of tiny gossamer sculptures improvised entirely from toilet paper (and saliva), which seems to catalogue a whole genus of newly discovered sea creatures.” Sze quickly established ornamental aggregations of mundane items as her signature approach, and began exhibiting sculptures in major museums in Austria, France, Denmark, England, and New York.

In 1999, she was invited to create a show for the ground floor of the Fondation Cartier, in Paris, a delicate glass-and-steel building designed by Jean Nouvel. Her previous works had spread across existing surfaces—floors, countertops, walls—but she now seized control of the entire space, with a sculpture that rose up and expanded outward with the centrifugal force of a tornado. A buoyant matrix of aluminum ladders, a nod to Nouvel’s metal façade, created a loose grid for clusters of cutlery, feathers, screwdrivers, plastic tubes, Styrofoam peanuts, and compasses. Sze titled the piece “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” after the Flannery O’Connor story. (Sze’s titles can smack of the earnest lit major, with citations ranging from Dickinson and Borges to Stegner.) The philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto wrote of the piece, “It is as if she had deconstructed the lacy architecture

of the Eiffel Tower to create a fragile cat’s cradle of flying parts that indeed converge to form a structure as delicate as a spiderweb.”

One of Sze’s most ambitious works is called, with a nod to Yeats, “Things Fall Apart.” She installed it in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in 2001, and it is now in the museum’s permanent collection. Like the Fondation Cartier work, it was a methodical maelstrom, but it upped the ante by appearing to defy gravity even as it descended a



stairway of several stories into the museum’s atrium. Its central element was a cherry-red Jeep Cherokee split into four parts—a section for each floor, amid a profusion of eyedroppers, test tubes, bottle brushes, moss-covered rocks, reading lamps, funnels, foam insulation, portable fans, and magnifying lenses. Seen from a distance, the piece was a swooping abstraction that played off the rigid symmetry of the building. Seen up close, the Jeep parts evoked high-speed tragedy while the tiny objects whimsically suggested an enveloping slow-growth forest.

Critics seem compelled to make sense of Sze’s art by cataloguing the objects included in her sculptures. But she resists such linear logic. “The whole point of my art is that logic breaks down,” she said. “When you put it in a list, it feels very literal. The experience of it can only happen in space.”

“Things Fall Apart” was so complex that it became a case study for the museum’s conservation department. Consulting with Sze, curators isolated which aspects were fixed and could age, and which could be refreshed. Dried flowers were allowed to grow yellow, but Sze wanted the work’s aspirin tablets to remain pristine, so they were replaced before they turned to powder. The piece also required quarterly deep-cleaning sessions, with conservators riding up through the atrium on a cherry picker, replacing light bulbs, wiping off reflective surfaces, and dusting countless objects.

Mukherjee, who knew Sze’s work before he met her, said recently, “What struck me most was its intensely emotional quality. The first time you see it, there’s wonder. But the second time there is grief.” In San Francisco, a woman on the museum’s staff, who had lost a child in a car accident, had opposed the installation when she heard that it involved a dismembered Jeep. But, Sze has recalled, “at the opening she introduced herself and thanked me, saying that the experience of seeing the piece had been unexpectedly moving, almost cathartic.”

Richard Serra, who first saw Sze’s art in 2005, believes that she “is changing the potential of sculpture.” Serra told me, “I hadn’t seen anyone deal with place and location in that way. She seems fearless with the variety of materials she uses, but when I look at her work I don’t get hung up on how it was made.” Given the contrast between their approaches, cynics might think that the man of steel is anointing his female complement. But Serra compared Sze to the titans of Abstract Expressionism. “So much sculpture right now comes out of bad painting, and out of collage,” he said. “But this was like seeing Twombly and Pollock in space. There’s a particular sensibility—a braveness of color, a sensitivity for line.” He added, “She creates a relationship of the part to the whole that’s very, very impressive. Here we have a woman who’s figured out a way to make architecture part of the whole.”

One day, I visited Sze’s studio, an impeccably organized series of sunny rooms in an industrial building southwest of the Port Authority. A scruffy dog belonging to Mark Barnett, the studio manager, ambled over to greet me as I looked at drawings for a trio of murals that Sze has designed for the entrances to the subway station under construction at Ninety-sixth Street and Second Avenue. The work, commissioned by the M.T.A., is slated for completion in 2016. The blueprint-like compositions—in a palette of violet, light blue, and dark blue—depicted a floating world of hundreds of objects, from ladders and potted plants to office chairs. At the station, the images will be reproduced on wall tiles, through a digital-printing process.

Next door, Sze was working on several new sculptures destined for the booth of her dealer, Tanya Bonakdar, at the upcoming art fair at the Park Avenue Armory. As we were looking at one of them—an intimate wall-mounted arrangement involving an eye chart, a clamp with a yellow handle, a reading lamp, and a delicate whorl made of twigs, some painted with colorful stripes—the nestlike form suddenly collapsed, creating an impromptu game of pickup sticks. Sze wasn't particularly fazed. "What does the Gutai manifesto say?" she said, referring to a Japanese art movement from the nineteen-fifties. "Decay is just the material's revenge for being extracted from the earth."

Sze had acknowledged that Chinese landscape painting had influenced her use of shifts in scale, but she's wary of interpretations based on her Asian heritage. As we toured her studio, she said that she'd like to see the Asia Society exhibit James Turrell's Zen-like light installations or Rachel Harrison's sculptural riffs on scholar's rocks. Her reasoning was deft: respectful of the institution's cultural context but resisting the impulse to pigeonhole. I asked her if the works at the Asia Society had borrowed from the "five elements" of Chinese philosophy, and ticked off the evidence: wood (branches), fire (lamps), earth (rocks), metal (coins), and water (the plastic cups filled with paint). "So you're wondering how Asian I am?" she asked, rolling her eyes good-naturedly when I went off on a tangent about India's Hindu variation, which counts "space" as an element.

"The most interesting way to think about cultural identity is to focus on the complexity of the question," she said. "Let's put it this way: are there Asian influences in my work? Sure. Have I spent more time thinking about Robert Rauschenberg? Yes."

Rauschenberg's ethos—work in the gap between art and life—is clearly echoed in Sze's use of mundane materials. But there's another connection: Rauschenberg conflated painting and sculpture in iconic "combines" like "Bed," a paint-slathered quilt, sheet, and pillow mounted on wood. At Yale, Sze studied both painting and architecture, and continued to paint until she entered graduate school. She described

her paintings in two words: "Bad ones." She retains a love of the form; the work of art that she'd most like to own is "Blue Poles," by Jackson Pollock. And she remains a keen colorist, the dominant palette being fire-extinguisher red, measuring-tape yellow, and plastic-bottle-cap blue. The polychrome mobiles of Alexander Calder, the master of drawing in space, are perhaps the most obvious forerunners of her work. The connection wasn't lost on the Calder Foundation, which invited Sze to work in Calder's former atelier, in the Loire Valley, for seven months in 2002. Many of Sze's sculptures, like mobiles, have moving parts that shift with the breeze, an element that she supplies in the form of miniature fans. "I try and use movement in my work, but usually movement that has a kind of fluttering or unexpected quality that is the reaction of wind or water," she has said. "Movement that's unpredictable, in a natural sense."

Sze opened the door to her apartment one Saturday night, looking radiant, without makeup, in dark jeans and a black shirt. One hand was adorned with an elegantly filigreed gold ring from India. Her two-year-old daughter, Aria—wearing pink pajamas printed with a white skeleton—was hoisted on her hip.

She and her husband were hosting a dinner party. Mukherjee, a slender man with tousled dark hair and a goatee, was serving cocktails from a pair of tall pitchers. Most people refer to him as Sid, but Sze calls him Siddharth, dropping only the final vowel.

Their apartment, an airy duplex, looked both lived-in—their daughters' heights were ticked off, in pen, on the side of a kitchen cabinet—and worldly. It was filled with Indian artifacts that Mukherjee had collected, and with contemporary art, most of which were trades that Sze had made with friends, including John Currin, Kara Walker, and Lisa Yuskavage. Sze and Mukherjee are increasingly successful: her sculptures sell for as much as six hundred thousand dollars, and his cancer book will reportedly be the basis of a Ken Burns documentary.

Sze chatted with guests as Mukherjee put the final touches on the dinner he'd cooked, starting with an appetizer of spicy ground meat, which was passed around the table with lettuce leaves for wrapping, peanuts for sprinkling, and several sauces. Among the guests were the novelist Amy Waldman, a friend of Sze's since their freshman year at Yale; Waldman's husband, Alex Star, an editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux; the French art dealer Chantal Crousel; and the Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco, who, Sze said, gave her some of "the best advice in my studio, along with Siddharth." Orozco's wife, who works for the U.N., was travelling, but his son was there,

absorbed in a game with Sze's six-year-old daughter, Leela.

"This is what Siddharth does to relax," Sze joked as her husband insisted on clearing the plates between courses. At one point, their guests began discussing the de Kooning retrospective then at MOMA. Orozco, who himself had been the subject of a MOMA retrospective in 2010, expressed reservations about de Kooning, but praised the curator of the show, John Elderfield.

Sze picked up on the positive. "The installation of the show gave you such a strong sense of movement through time," she said. "At each stage, you had the feeling that you could be in the studio with him at that moment."

Another guest, Adam Tucker, a senior program officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, who met Sze when they worked with disadvantaged youths after college, said, "If I had to choose three words to describe Sarah, they'd be 'cogitate,' 'cogitate,' 'cogitate.'" Mukherjee reached for his wife's hand and teased, "Adam, you left out a 'cogitate.'"

In Sze's universe, inanimate objects take on a life of their own. This is especially true of a project installed, through midsummer, on a stretch of the High Line. "Still Life with Landscape (Model for a Habitat)," as the piece is called, is a modular swarm of polished-steel-and-faux-wood geometries, bisected by the promenade, that also functions as a feeder for birds and butterflies, complete with compartments for water and seeds. The work was recently voted the best public project of 2011 by the International Association of Art Critics.

Three days before Christmas, the weather in New York was unseasonably warm as Sze and I walked up Tenth Avenue toward the High Line to visit her piece. Rounding the corner on Twentieth Street, we climbed the narrow metal stairs to the park. Sze was dressed all in black, save for the silver-colored messenger bag slung over her shoulder. I noticed a speck of glitter on her chin—a remnant, she explained, of holiday crafts with her daughters. She unzipped her bag and extracted an orange and a Swiss Army knife. She sliced the orange in half, and placed the sections on stainless-steel spikes that were part of her sculpture. "The old railroad is already a line moving

through space," she pointed out. "So I came up with this kind of ridiculous idea to make a three-dimensional model of a drawing in one-point perspective. It's a representation of deep space in deep space. It's a sculpture that's also a drawing, a still-life that's also a landscape. And I like how the walk itself becomes a negative space in the sculpture." Sze wants her art to be mutable, but that's hard to pull off in a structure of steel and fake wood. Once she decided to incorporate wildlife, she reached out to ornithologists at Cornell, who helped her determine the scale of the birdhouses and the best bait. (Baltimore orioles, it turns out, are wild about oranges.)

In the same way that the trains used to shoot past this point when the High Line was a railway, your eye travels from the sculpture's narrowest point to a widening expanse of boxes and lines. One subtle joke is its duelling perspectives: unlike the train, Sze's sculpture shoots off in two directions at once. The section on the west side of the path expands to the south, and the one on the east side moves north.

Between the holiday tourists and the balmy weather, the High Line was crawling with more people than usual for a Thursday afternoon. The piece is one of the most photographed sites on the High Line, and as Sze punctuated her sculpture with orange wedges a crowd started to gather.

An older woman approached Sze to ask if she worked for the park.

"No, I'm an artist and this is my sculpture," Sze said. "It's also sort of a birdhouse."

The woman's younger companion joked, "Imagine living rent-free in this neighborhood!"

The older woman raised an eyebrow and asked, "Well, then, how did the birds come to you?"

Sze laughed, "They didn't! They were already here. I wanted to make a piece that would use the life of the park, not something that would interrupt it, or that feels like it was just plopped down. I wanted this to feel like an ongoing experiment."

The woman shot back, "If you're interested in experiments, you know you can build bee houses with drain pipe."

"Good idea!" Sze said, grinning. "Maybe I'll do that." ♦

