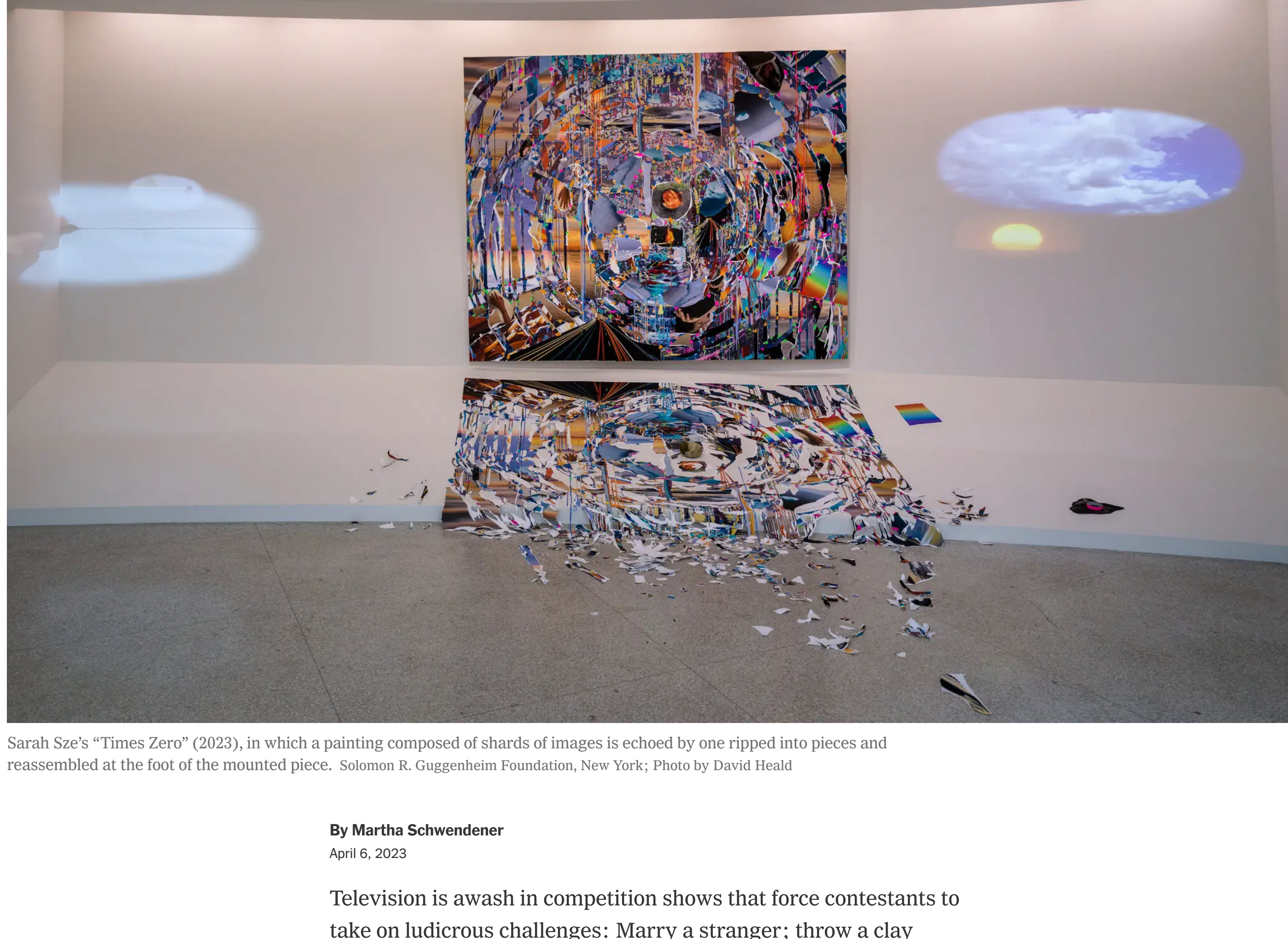


CRITIC'S PICK

Sarah Sze and the Art of Tracking Time

The artist plants her gravity-defying installations in the uppermost nest of the Guggenheim Museum.



Sarah Sze's "Times Zero" (2023), in which a painting composed of shards of images is echoed by one ripped into pieces and reassembled at the foot of the mounted piece. Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York; Photo by David Heald

By **Martha Schwendener**

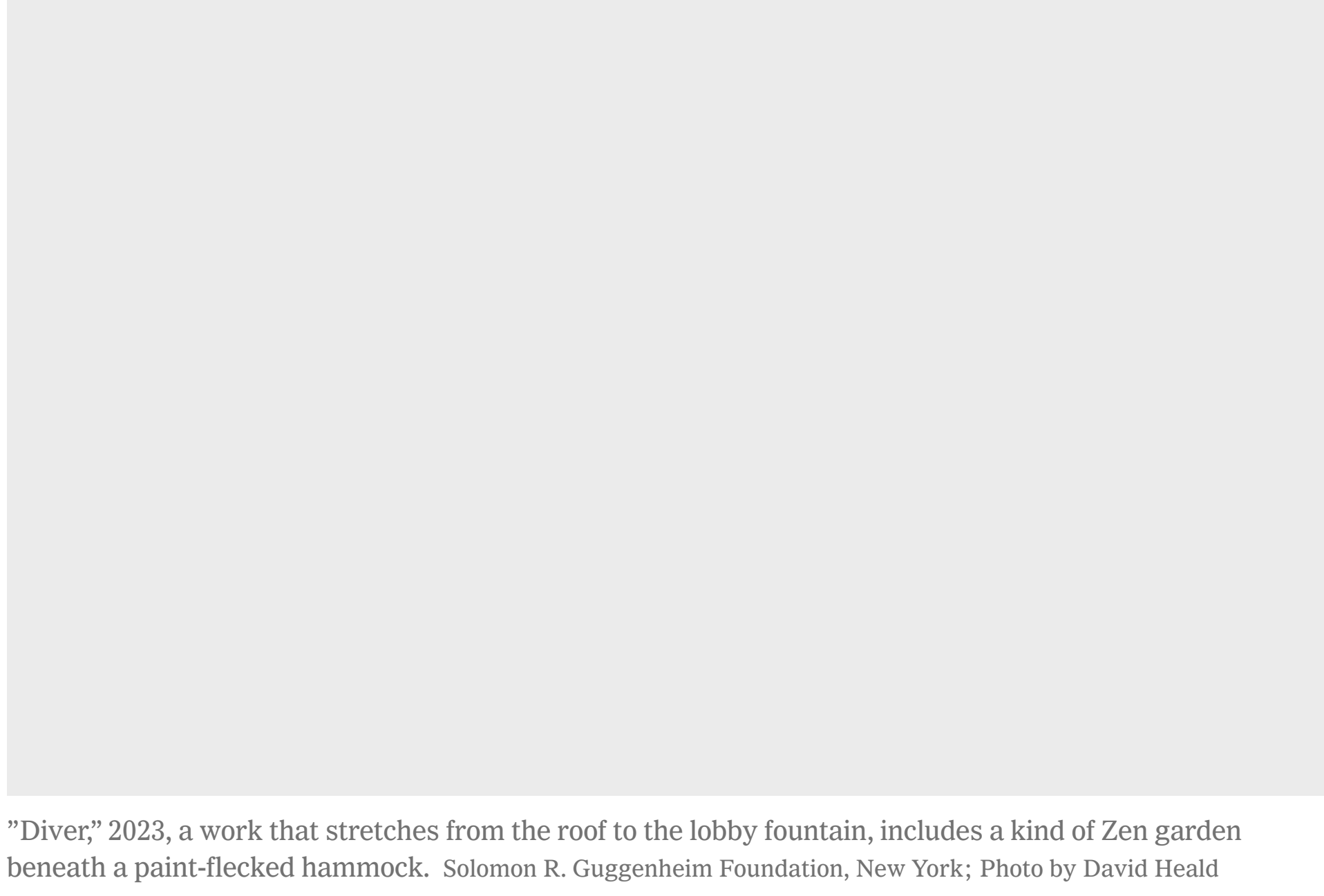
April 6, 2023

Television is awash in competition shows that force contestants to take on ludicrous challenges: Marry a stranger; throw a clay vessel on the wheel, blindfolded; cook a three-course meal in 10 minutes. For artists like Sarah Sze, the insanity starts when the [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum](#) calls. Here's the prompt: Create an exhibition of new work in a spiral space with a sloping floor, shifting natural light, and 200 works by another artist leading into your own show.

Nimble game show contestants prevail against impossible odds and Sze nails the Guggenheim challenge with ["Timelapse," her installation of sculpture](#), video, paintings, photographs, plants and hardware-store supplies stacked, dangled and stretched throughout the museum.

Sze, who was born in Boston in 1969 and represented the United States at the 2013 Venice Biennale, approached the task with two important advantages. One is the ideal pairing with the other artist currently spotlighted at the Guggenheim, the German-born Venezuelan sculptor [Gego \(Gertrud Goldschmidt\)](#), who was trained as an architect, and whose weblike sculptures, crafted in iron, steel and copper, beautifully complement Sze's installation. Gego, who died in 1994, didn't care much about symmetry or solids, and neither does Sze. Gego's works are often suspended in space — you look through them rather than at them — and Sze works in a similar fashion.

The other advantage for Sze in tackling the notoriously difficult Guggenheim space is that she works in a site-specific way. Her installations are planted like vegetation in sympathetic soil, and she noses out overlooked nooks and crannies or the spaces-in-between-spaces existing in any human-built environment. This is clear as soon as you step into the museum and see her work ["Diver" \(2023\)](#), plunging from the rooftop oculus into the museum's lobby fountain.

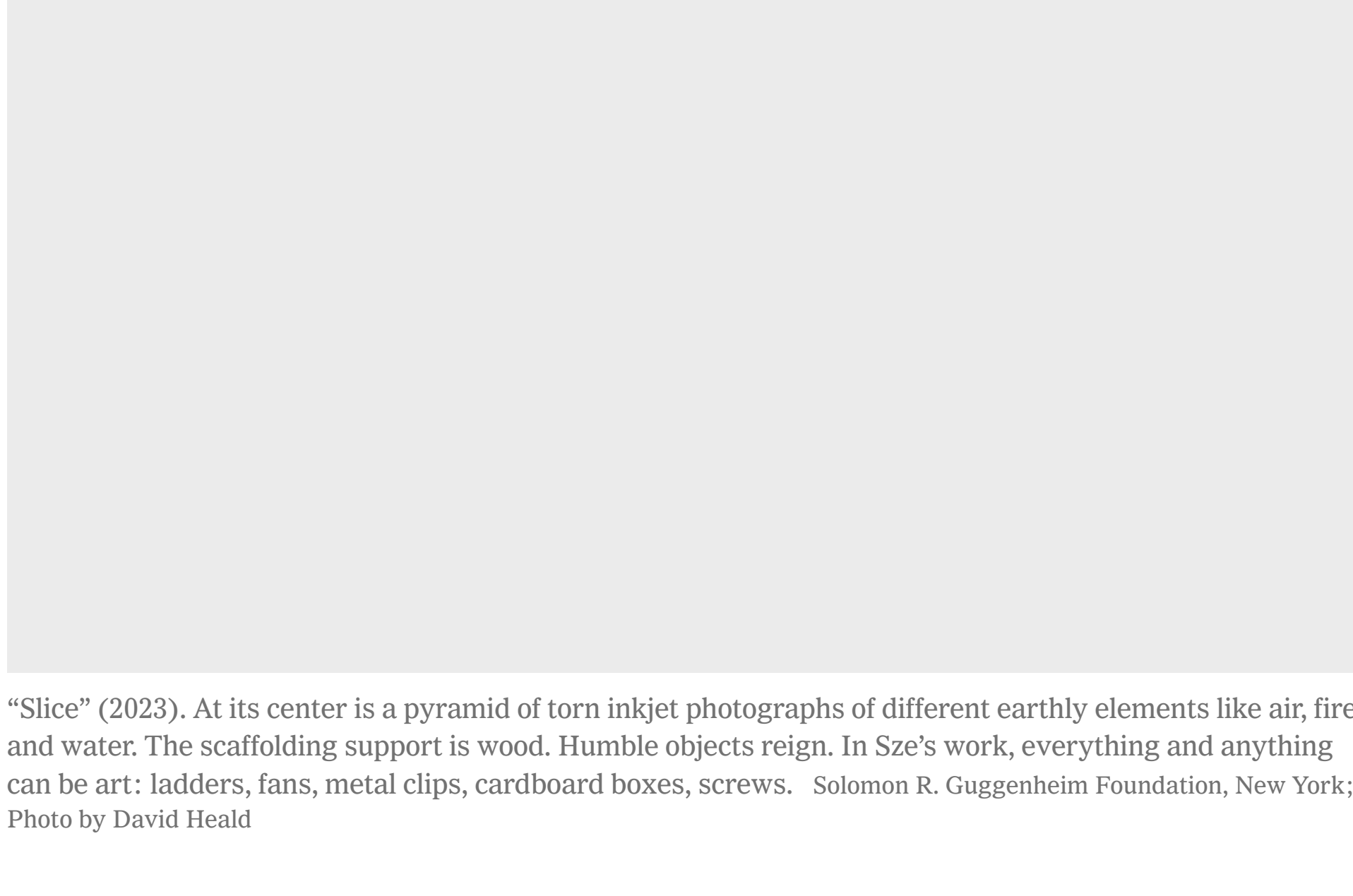


"Diver," 2023, a work that stretches from the roof to the lobby fountain, includes a kind of Zen garden beneath a paint-flecked hammock. Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York; Photo by David Heald

A metal pendulum in ["Diver"](#) hangs from a string rigged just below the oculus into a kind of hippie Zen-garden arranged within the fountain. Rocks sit in the water under a delicate hammock made of string. A video projected into the mix shows Sze's finger pointing into a bowl of rippling water. In the wall label next to this work she describes how the Guggenheim's "void is an incredible piece of non-architecture."

What does this mean — the Guggenheim's void as "non-architecture"? In the same way the philosopher Martin Heidegger argued that a jug was defined by the interior space that holds water, Sze is directing our attention to circular airspace inside Frank Lloyd Wright's spiraling rotunda. You know that space: It's unlikely, if you've ever been to the Guggenheim, that you haven't paused to stare across the "void" — or gaze down from the top floors into the abyss.

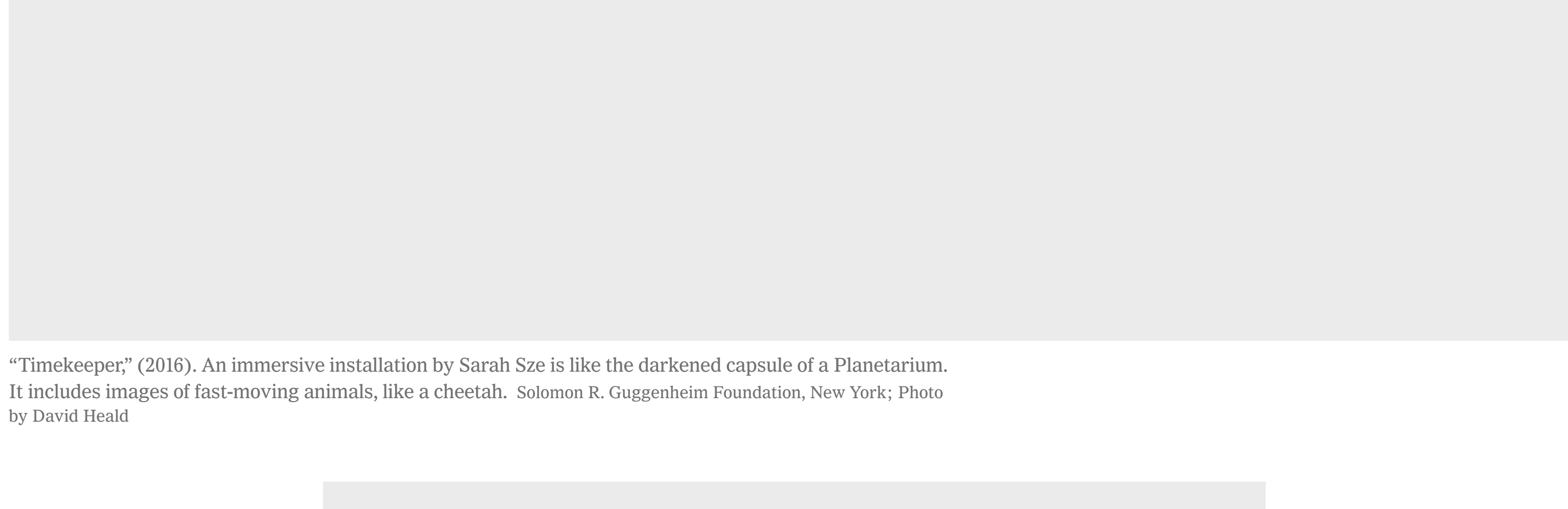
Armed with that idea, you head up the ramp, taking in Gego's retrospective (or fast-tracking up the elevator) before arriving at Sze's installation, which revels in the sloping bays, voids and irregularities of Wright's architecture. Her work is recognizable as soon as you hit the upper floors.



"Slice" (2023). At its center is a pyramid of torn inkjet photographs of different earthly elements like air, fire and water. The scaffolding support is wood. Humble objects reign. In Sze's work, everything and anything can be art: ladders, fans, metal clips, cardboard boxes, screws. Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York; Photo by David Heald

Humble objects reign. In Sze's work, everything and anything can be art: ladders, fans, metal clips, cardboard boxes, screws. Alongside the everyday odds and ends are classical art materials: tubs of paint, stacks of ripped up inkjet prints and paintings created from photographs, acrylic and oil paint. Video images projected onto one wall, or into the assemblages, float across into the next, with theatrical effect. Blowing fans create movement.

Some of the standout works in the eight bays — although all of them flow together like one giant work — include ["Times Zero" \(2023\)](#), where a large abstract painting on the wall is echoed by a painting that has been ripped and sliced into pieces and reassembled at the foot of the one mounted on the wall. At the center of ["Slice" \(2023\)](#) is a pyramid of ripped-up inkjet photographs of different earthly elements like air, fire and water. ["Last Impression" \(2023\)](#) has a clothesline-like structure with string stretching across the bay, creating a kind of mind-bending horizon line. ["Timekeeper" \(2016\)](#), installed in a darkened tower-gallery off the rotunda, is a laboratory of lights, sounds, images and signature objects, including little blowing fans and miniature scaffolds made from glued-together wood.



"Timekeeper," (2016). An immersive installation by Sarah Sze is like the darkened capsule of a Planetarium. It includes images of fast-moving animals, like a cheetah. Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York; Photo by David Heald



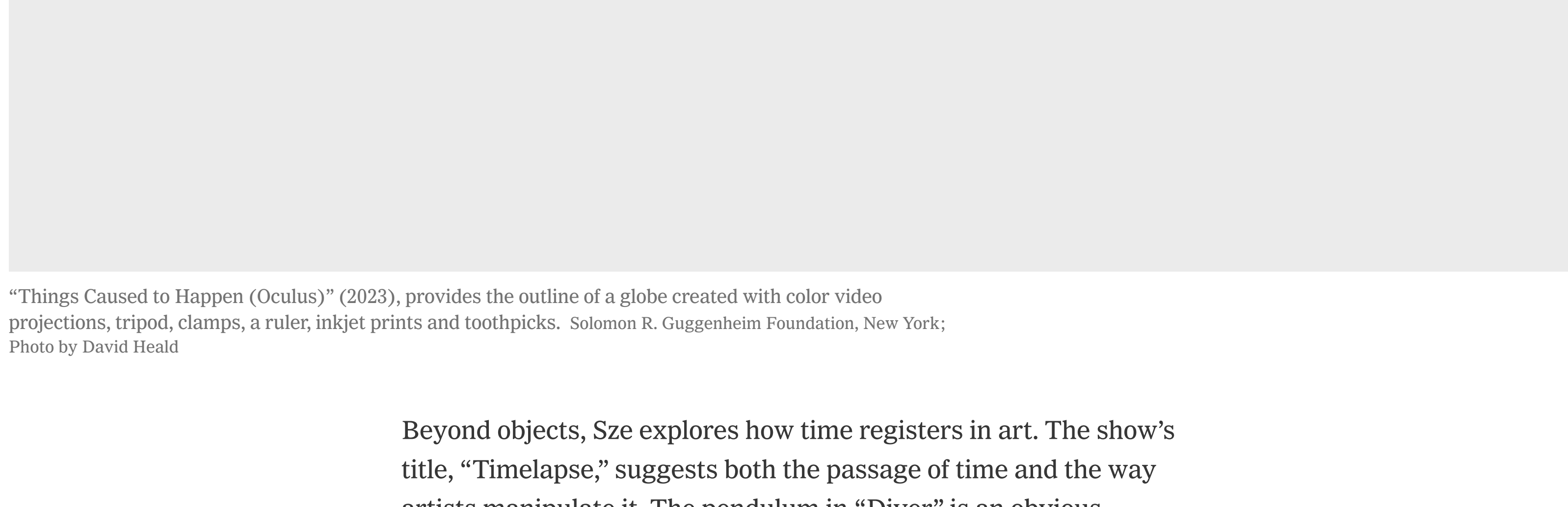
"Last Impression" (2023) has a clothesline-like structure with string stretching across one of the museum's bays, like a horizon. Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York; Photo by David Heald

Arrangement is everything. Sze's lexicon includes stacking, assembling, lighting, rotating and aerating, which reminds us of [Richard Serra's famous 1960s Process Art list of verbs](#) for making art, which included "to scatter," "to arrange," "to hook" and "to suspend." Sze's work is verb-heavy too. There is evidence of a lot of labor, a lot of activity, and the sense of art in the process of becoming, rather than finished and abandoned.

There are many ways to read this tendency in the current cultural moment: As a poetic meditation on objects — like [Gabriele Galimberti's photographs of how differently children play and organize their prized toys](#), depending on where they live; or perhaps a desperate attempt to catalog the world, like in the scene in [Pink Floyd's movie "The Wall" \(1982\)](#) when the protagonist, Pink, played by Bob Geldof, carefully arranges debris from a trashed hotel room in an attempt to hold his fragile mental state together.

(Higher up the philosophical food chain, [Karen Barad and Jane Bennett](#) have argued for the importance of seemingly insignificant bits of matter on our human experience — seen in Sze's work as tiny little things that add up to something larger.)

Sometimes the objects here are images that recur throughout the show: the moon, the sun, and a blue sky flecked with fluffy clouds; a rainbow spectrum and black and white video of digital snow — the kind that used to appear on televisions with bad reception. (The "digital is physical," Sze remarks in one wall text, reminding us that anything and everything can be recruited as sculptural material.) A running cheetah and an erupting volcano appear in multiple works, as well.

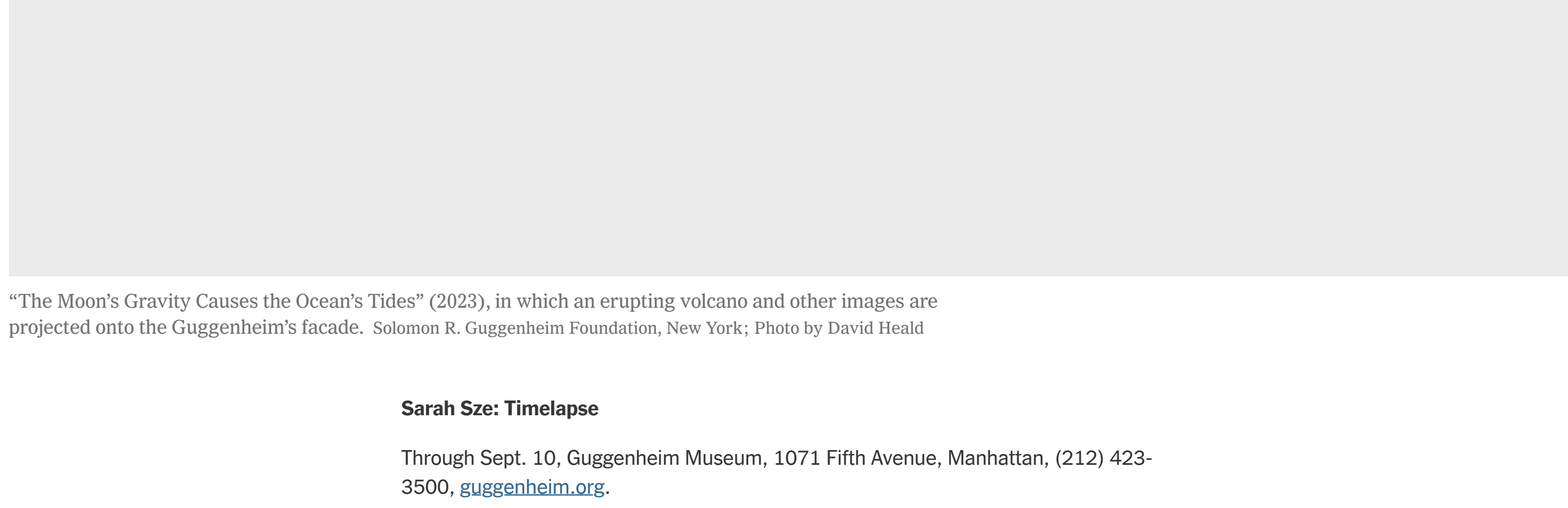


"Things Caused to Happen (Oculus)" (2023), provides the outline of a globe created with color video projections, tripod, clamps, a ruler, inkjet prints and toothpicks. Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York; Photo by David Heald

Beyond objects, Sze explores how time registers in art. The show's title, ["Timelapse,"](#) suggests both the passage of time and the way artists manipulate it. The pendulum in ["Diver"](#) is an obvious reference, as are the blinking digital clocks that crop up in several installations. The artist Robert Smithson, best known for ["Spiral Jetty"](#) in Utah, created installations that combined indoor and outdoor elements, and may be a good way of thinking about Sze's art lineage.

Time, measured by sunlight moving across the oculus, is marked poignantly in the Guggenheim. The museum was open late the day I visited but I needed to stick around until after sunset to see images projected onto the facade as part of Sze's show. To kill time, I walked across the street and stood by the reservoir in Central Park, where a man told a few of us that he'd seen a lightning bolt in the distance. We stood there, a group of strangers, waiting for another bolt to appear.

Then, after the sun disappeared, an image of the moon appeared onto the museum facade before dissolving into gray pixels. More images, familiar from Sze's show, were projected onto the lower facade: The color spectrum, Sze's pointing finger, the erupting volcano. This was not the strongest part of the "Timelapse," but I felt aware nonetheless of the perceptual connections Sze had activated. Time, in that moment, felt palpable.



"The Moon's Gravity Causes the Ocean's Tides" (2023), in which an erupting volcano and other images are projected onto the Guggenheim's facade. Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York; Photo by David Heald

Sarah Sze: Timelapse

Through Sept. 10, Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, (212) 423-3500, [guggenheim.org](#).