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 sorted through his incredible collection and curated it onto her 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 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.