

Socialism and the sea

Allan Sekula, 1951–2013

Photographer, film-maker, cultural theorist and political activist, Allan Sekula was one of the outstanding Marxist intellectuals of his generation. The author of pioneering histories of photography, he produced genre-shifting exhibitions, books and videos. Almost at the end of his life, he co-directed an award-winning documentary film, and was renowned for the sheer range of his interests, his critical intelligence and enduring political commitment. Equally at home with film, literature and social history, he was as happy discussing the Korean economy or global labour conditions as he was criticizing contemporary art; as comfortable in the company of stevedores as professors. He took enormous pleasure in travelling (by ship and plane) and during one intermission in his illness he immediately booked half a dozen journeys. The breadth of his knowledge was truly astonishing, though, like the octopus that fascinated him, his conversation usually headed in the direction of the sea. Sekula was born next to Lake Erie in Pennsylvania and grew up in the Californian port of San Pedro, spending his early years as a wharf rat; he was an incredibly strong swimmer who body-surfed with Stan Weir, the renowned longshoreman, seafarer and Trotskyist organizer. There Allan is, nose just above the ripples, winking at the camera in *Dear Bill Gates* (1999).

During the 1990s the sea increasingly bubbled to the surface of his work. From this time he undertook a sustained study of the maritime economy and its representations; he travelled on a cargo vessel across the middle passage and he sailed on the *Global Mariner*, the agit-ship of the International Transport Workers' Federation. The two long essays in *Fish Story* indicate the breadth of this engagement: spanning representation of the sea from Dutch marine painting to minimalism and Hollywood. In the process, he muses on an astonishing range of topics: the transformation of Dutch panoramic depictions linking sea and land; the wandering vessel in Turner and Conrad; the figure of the sailor and the theme of mutiny in modernist film, photography and literature; Hollywood's dumb fantasies of the sea; the ship as machine; Popeye; and the oceans in the cultural imaginary of left-wing thinkers and military planners. This is typical of



his additive imagination, which was shaped by modernist montage; there was always another connection to make and a further reference to add. At times, he found it difficult to halt the dialectical propulsion of his own thought. *Moby Dick* supplied his paradigm.

Sekula entered the University of California, San Diego in the early 1970s intending to study marine biology, before deciding to major in Visual Arts. UCSD was then an intellectual powerhouse: he took classes on art with John Baldessari and David Antin; he was taught philosophy by Herbert Marcuse, and film by Manny Farber; he argued with Fredric Jameson's students and, at one point, Angela Davies was a classmate. Collaborating with two young faculty members (Fred Lonidier and Phil [now Phel] Steinmetz) and like-minded students, including Martha Rosler and Steve Buck, he began taking a spanner to photography. He would later make a memorable image of this hand tool as if it were a reflection of the machine he used to such effect.

A photo-project and an essay from the mid-1970s marked his emergence. In black-and-white photographs, texts and two taped interviews, *Aerospace Folktales* (1973) is a semi-fictionalized study of the effect of unemployment on an aerospace engineer and his family – the artist's father, mother and siblings. He said of this work: 'I use "autobiographical" material, but assume a certain fictional and sociological distance in order to achieve a degree of typicality.' The participants' comportment towards the camera and the differing points of view contained in text and interviews mean that *Aerospace Folktales* should be seen as one of the very first performative documentaries. Written in the militant voice of the period, 'Dismantling Modernism: Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)' of 1978 is a withering criticism of the bureaucratic photographic modernism that dominated the art museums and magazines; the essay showcased the work of the San Diego group as a manifesto for an alternative model of practice. It now reads like a pioneering statement of biopolitics. Sekula's work constantly developed and changed, but his commitments to documentary realism and the politics of class never ebbed. He remained a lifelong antagonist of the 'dismal science'.

Sekula was one of the first to explore seriously 'the invention of photographic meaning'. Beginning from the premiss that photographic literacy is learned, the studies collected in *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photoworks 1973–1983* (1984)





consider the swings of the hermeneutic pendulum. Photography, he argued, had no specific content; rather it was suspended between what he called the ‘chattering ghosts of bourgeois art and bourgeois science which have haunted photography from its inception’. The champions of photography shift from expressive affect to seemingly objective observation, often opting for a melange of these incompatible perspectives. Flip-flopping from optical pleasure to visual truth, from positivism to romantic metaphysics, photography seems adrift, pulled by the tides. He felt that attitudes to industrial production provided the mass that caused the swells and flows. The power of his account stems from his refusal to fix photographic meaning at any single point on this semantic horizon, focusing on movement and process, while declining to cast polysemy as liberation. If the claim to neutral observation served all manner of political masters, photographic art, he argued, offered ideological cover for industrial society and alienated work, suggesting that destructive technics could be humanized. He demonstrated how, on the basis of the pendulum’s swing, the

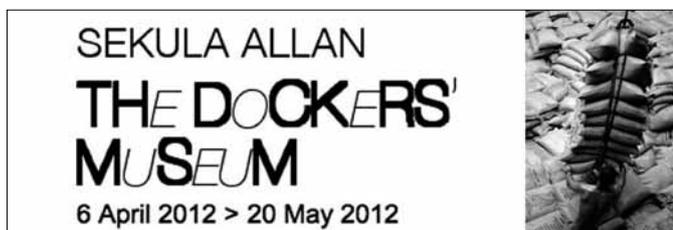
arch-aesthete Alfred Stieglitz and social reformer Lewis Hine could be made to switch places and he illustrated the absurdity of the art market’s fetishization of World War I aerial-reconnaissance pictures, just because Edward Steichen commanded the unit. It is now difficult to recall the transformative effect of these arguments that recast an entire debate.

It was a particular strength that Sekula always combined copious reading in economic and social subjects with insights from Critical Theory. In *Photography Against the Grain* we find references to Marx’s *Capital*, Lukács on reification and Sohn-Rethel’s work on the division of mental and manual labour; he draws on Vološinov, Jakobson and Barthes, but also employs a dazzling array of historical sources. The long essay ‘Photography Between Labour and Capital’ (1983) picks up many of these themes. This study of the archive of a Canadian commercial photographer working in a Cape Breton mining town led him to consider ‘the emerging picture language of industrial capitalism’. Ranging from sixteenth-century woodcuts, via the plates of the *Encyclopaedia*, to the time-and-motion studies of the early twentieth century, he muses on the conventions for representing industrial labour and machines. Much of the research is now dated and one or two of the conclusions questionable, but this stunningly brilliant essay overflows with insights and beginnings. Along with Molly Nesbit’s *Atget’s Seven Albums* (1992), it is, I think, still the very best critical work on the medium.

Reviewing *Photography Against the Grain* in 1986, one idiot (me) confidently forecast that, while his photo-works were interesting, Sekula would be remembered for his critical essays. Whoops! In fact, ‘The Body and the Archive’ of that year was to be his last substantive historical essay. This is a study of the uses of photography in the pseudo-sciences of human classification, which, while it drew on Foucault, kept its distance from the Foucauldian image of a total machine of power–knowledge. It is probably his most cited essay, but thereafter he turned his attention to refashioning documentary at a time when it was increasingly being marginalized. Allan was highly

critical of documentary in its traditional forms (what he once called the ‘find-a-bum school of concerned photography’ in which the image of poverty provided the basis for foregrounding the photographer’s subjectivity), but he showed disdain for trendy dismissals that lumped together all forms of realism and he continued to believe that a dialectical documentary could be brought into being. To this effect, he refused to pursue the route of staged photography that he helped open. As the constructed image increasingly dominated critical photographic work during the 1980s and 1990s, he referred to this as a form of ‘theatricalized epistemological scepticism’. ‘The old myth that photographs tell the truth has succumbed to the new myth that they don’t.’ Sekula saw post-modern photography as a ‘wink’ in the direction of those knowing viewers who subscribed to this new myth. As a generalized scepticism towards documentary took hold, he turned back to this ‘bad object of contemporary art’.

Exhibitions and books began to flow: *Fish Story* appeared in 1995; *Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes* was published in 1996; *Waiting for Tear Gas [white globe to black]* was made in 1999. The book *Dismal Science* also appeared in 1999; *Performance Under Working Conditions* in 2003; *Titanic’s Wake* in 2003; and *Polonia and Other Fables* in 2009. Early works have resurfaced and in 2001 he made the video *Tsukiji*, compellingly documenting work in a Japanese fish market; in 2006 he completed his monumental video-essay *Lottery of the Sea*. In 2010 the film *The Forgotten Space*, made with his friend Noël Burch, was awarded the Special Jury Prize in the Orizzonti Competition at the Venice Film Festival. Recently, *The Dockers’ Museum* and *Ship of Fools* were shown together in a number of European galleries. Taken as a



whole it is one of the most impressive bodies of work produced in any medium during the last twenty years. *Fish Story* and *Lottery of the Sea*, *Waiting for Tear Gas* and *Forgotten Space* are extraordinary works that labour to break the surface of the abstract processes of global capitalism. It is still difficult to comprehend that this tidal wave has now subsided.

A few examples. *Fish Story* was, arguably, the centrepiece of Okwui Enwezor’s *Documenta II* held in Kassel in 2002, tying together, in a mesh of global connections, the artworks responding to local geographies that populated the exhibition. Six years in the making, *Fish Story* blends colour photographs, text panels, essays and slide sequences, and exists as both an exhibition and a book. It was one of the first, and certainly the best, research-based art projects. Sekula suggested this work was a ‘grotesque triple funeral’; a ‘memorial service for painting, socialism and the sea’. It is also his great legacy. *Fish Story* is a brilliant modernist documentary that attempted to totalize late-capitalist globalization by mapping the world economy through representations of maritime trade and the world’s port cities. During a time when cultural debate was dominated by ideas of dematerialization, spectacle, virtuality and the like, Sekula insisted on capitalism and the material reality of the sea. Seafaring, he argues, appears in contemporary culture as anachronism; just some hangover from an outmoded era of production. Once seen as pivotal to the modern world – think of the nautical metaphors that spray English – the global maritime economy has become invisible to metropolitan elites. *Fish Story* works at overcoming this ‘cognitive blindness’, insisting, against prophets of the ‘information age’, that the slow movement of cargo containers by ocean-going vessels is the condition of possibility for capitalist globalization. Despite the fantasies of a dematerialized economy that flows through the airwaves, the world economy turns on this arduous, material labour of seafarers and dock workers. Sekula kept in focus one of the least fashionable categories: male manual labour.

Waiting for Tear Gas [white globe to black] is a sequence of eighty slides created from the pictures Allan took during the five days of protests against the WTO in Seattle in 1999. It is accompanied by a short statement: ‘The rule of thumb for this sort of anti-photojournalism’ is ‘no flash, no telephoto lens, no gas mask, no auto-focus, no press pass and no pressure to grab at all costs the one defining image of dramatic violence.’ There is no doubt about his point of identification with the protestors. His deliberately deskilled practice and refusal of photo-detachment works to give us a view from inside the anti-capitalist crowd. I first saw this work, installed by Jürgen Bock, inside the (Salazarian) *Monument to the Discoverers* in Lisbon. It was a brilliant conceit, in which this vile representation of the beginning of capitalist globalization (decorated with assorted priests, soldiers and navigators) was hollowed out and confronted with its contemporary motley opposition in the New World – white globe to black.

Lottery of the Sea is a long essay in video on the theme of the sea and the market; the title comes from Adam Smith, who expressed his admiration for the risky affair of work on ship that made capitalist trade possible. It opens with East Asian seafarers trading electronic goods; inside every sailor, we are told, there is a merchant struggling to break free. Shift to the glistening flesh on display in an Athens meat market. We hear Allan’s lyrical voice telling us there are two kinds of people, those who love markets in the abstract, but can’t stand them in reality, and those fascinated by actual markets, but who loathe The Market. Almost immediately, he switches vein to a clip from a Hollywood film where a character journeys to Greece in search of ‘the truth’. Adam Smith and the Agora should be enough to tell us it isn’t the usual fare. There are sections on flag-of-convenience vessels, a hauntingly long sequence in which volunteers laboriously clean up an oil spill by hand from the Spanish beaches, reflections on containerization and meditations on working conditions among Filipino seafarers. At three and a half hours, *Lottery of the Sea* is a fragmentary work that takes the maritime economy from many angles, while simultaneously maintaining a focus on representation and documentary form. Walter Benjamin claimed that in film ‘[d]iscontinuous images replace one another in a continuous sequence’. Film editing establishes connections naturalizing the ensemble. In contrast, Sekula avoids this mode of synthesis, encouraging the viewer to consider the relationship between his materials. Like Virginia Woolf and Michael Snow, Allan was fascinated by wave patterns.

Sekula once said that *Fish Story* ‘can be described as a hybrid, “paraliterary” revision of social documentary photography’, which sought to dissolve the relation between essay writing, the ‘poetics’ of sequential photographs and research in cultural, economic and social history. It is a marvellous description that applies to all of his works. For him, the revision of social documentary entailed channelling it through political modernism: Brecht and Benjamin; Vertov and Eisenstein; Godard, Marker, Straub-Huillet. The idea of ‘sequential montage’ is at the centre of his activity – this was his way of responding to Brecht’s suggestion that realism required active construction – while keeping his distance from the vogue for staged images. These pictures are not intended to be viewed as single images, but as carefully edited narrative sequences. His version of political modernism insisted on the cognitive character of the work of art, which had been central to Brecht, Benjamin and the Soviet avant-garde, rather than the idealist conception that dominated second-wave political modernism (where a disturbance in diegesis was thought capable of reconfiguring the Subject). Many of the artist-intellectuals of his generation turned to stylish evocations of desire, but Allan Sekula insists we must attend to capitalism and labour, to unequal power and space; to what a rethought documentary might tell us and show us about the everyday world. A new generation of artists and critics, who came to the fore after 1999, found him already ashore waiting for them.

Steve Edwards