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In Sekula's Wake

Steve Edwards

For almost forty years Allan Sekula has been the most important critical thinker working in photography. To be sure, others made extremely significant contributions, but what made Sekula so central is more than simply his work as a photographer and filmmaker or his critical writing or his pedagogy; it has been his project of thinking photography 'against the grain', to use his favourite adage from Benjamin. All his adult life, Sekula was an intransigent opponent of the rule of capital. When others turned to investigate desire and subjectivity, Allan insisted on the central reality of labour and capital as the ground for any credible biopolitics¹; in the face of the (temporary) preponderance of the constructed image he championed the continued relevance of documentary; against epistemological perspectivalism he pursued a commitment to revealing truths. One way to envisage his practice is as a 'defence of lost causes': he described *Fish Story* (1996), probably his most important work, as 'grotesque triple funeral'; a 'memorial service for painting, socialism and the sea'.² However, I don't think it is right to see this as a practice embedded in nostalgia, it was precisely because he saw photography positioned 'between labour and capital' that his work gained a new, vibrant life in the changed political conjuncture after 1999. As 'postmodernism' died a quiet death (unloved and unmourned), Sekula's realist interrogation of the global marketplace, or capitalist world system, spoke to a new generation of activists and thinkers horrified at the impact of neoliberalism. His consistent engagement with the military industrial complex – from *Aerospace Folktales* (1973) through *War Without Bodies* (1991/96) to *Lottery of the Sea* (2006) – engaged those present antagonists of the hot wars of the new imperialism. His essayistic mode across mediums – what he called 'sequential montage' – chimed with the new structure of feeling evident in the work of artists as diverse as Biemann, Chen, Chto Delat, Ressler, Ruida, Steyerl... Consistency has been his forte; it has dislocated him across time and made him our contemporary.

It is well known that Sekula's early essays – among them 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', 'The Traffic in Photographs' and 'The Body and the Archive' – were among the most powerful criticisms of the supposed neutrality of the documentary mode and resolute challenges to photo-humanism.³ It is probably less-well understood that *Aerospace Folktales* was among the very first of the 'performative' documentaries, employing staging or construction to interrogate hegemony and the sexual division of labour and the rhetoric of the image. *This Ain't China: a Photonovel* (1974) and *School is a Factory* (1978/80) continued in this vein. With the rise of what he called 'epistemological scepticism' in the 1980s he went back to documentary, not in search of unmediated experience, but to defend a 'rational core'. The works that followed *Fish Story* (1995), *Waiting for Tear Gas (White Globe to Black)* (1999), *Lottery of the Sea*, and the film he made with Noël Burch, *The Forgotten Space* (2010), which won the Orizzonti Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival, bear comparison with anything produced in the last twenty years and as a body are probably unrivalled. The level of conceptual understanding involved is simply astonishing.

It is sometimes said that Sekula wasn't a great image maker, but this concern is largely beside the point. His brilliance was as a connective thinker. He had real difficulty halting the processual character of his dialectical mode of working: always seeing one more link; another possible juxtaposition. It was almost an

¹ The brilliant concluding passage in 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary', reads as a pioneering statement of biopolitics. See 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)' (1976/78), Allan Sekula *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983*, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984, pp.74-75

² Allan Sekula, *Fish Story*, Richter Verlag, 1996, p.48

³ 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning' and 'The Traffic in Photographs' are to be found in Allan Sekula *Photography Against the Grain*, *op. cit.*, pp.3-21; 77-101; and 'The Body and the Archive', *October*, No. 39, Winter 1986, pp.3-64

affliction. There are many models for what he was trying to instigate – from the photo-book to Chris Marker – but the key point of reference is, for me, *Moby Dick*. Melville’s extraordinary novel, with its switching of narrative modes, additive method and allegorical form, provided the pattern for imagining the watery world. Even the title *Fish Story* is drawn from this novel. *Fish Story* is *Moby Dick* redrawn through modernist montage and Marxism: in the place of the white whale we have the pursuit of capitalist accumulation. This form enabled him to draw into connection, or alignment, the uneven, but singular, traces of a world-wide economy. Making connections with a camera, but taking as his medium through the sea, portside labour and container shipping, brought into view the unequal and destructive character of global capitalism. As Marx and Engels wrote: ‘All old-established industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilised nations [sic], by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe.’⁴ What else does *Fish Story* treat – for example, the section ‘Dictatorship of the Seven Seas’ – but this destructive, roving pursuit of valorisation.

Sekula set himself against the prevailing fantasy of the derealised, dematerialised economy – beautifully satirised in *Fish Story* as the illusion of those ‘functionaries serving financial and technical elites’ who believe this economy consists of ‘carry on luggage’ - a laptop computer and modem.⁵ He knew, in contrast, that things have to be made before they can be consumed. They are manufactured in maquiladora industries and Export-Processing Zones, cheap wage sectors with minimal health and safety regulations or environmental protection.⁶ These deregulated spaces of production have been hollowed out of the world economy by international capital in search of (often female) labour paid at a fraction of the rates required for the equivalent unionised (male) workforce in the ‘developed’ countries. All this, to feed our debt-fuelled wonderland. Once the commodities have been made, they have to be moved – usually by sea in large, metal containers.⁷ It was containerisation that enabled ‘companies to become restless and search out cheaper labor’ around the world.⁸ Taking a trip around any large port is an instructive experience; the sheer amount of liquid moving through the European orange-juice terminal in Rotterdam is mind boggling. In spite of the debate on immaterial and affective labour, and certainly in opposition to the neoliberal ideology of the ‘trickledown effect’ and ‘economic convergence’, heavy, dangerous, slow, manual labour is at the heart of the modern world. As the opening of *The Forgotten Space* has it: ‘The sea is forgotten until disaster strikes. But perhaps the biggest seagoing disaster is the global supply chain, which – maybe in a more fundamental way than financial speculation – leads the world economy to the abyss.’

To make the connections and track the commodity chains, Sekula employed an expanded model of documentary. His aim was to go beyond the simple division between realism and modernism – certainly, to side step the superficial story of ‘postmodernism’ – combining *American Photographs*, *Union Maids* and the *Messingkauf Dialogues*. The brilliance of this project was to recognise that this laborious task required an

⁴ Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), *Collected Works*, Vol.6, Lawrence & Wishart, 1976, p.488

⁵ Allan Sekula, ‘On “Fish Story”’: The Coffin Learns to Dance’, *Camera Austria*, No. 59/60, 1997, p.53; *Fish Story*, op. cit., p.50

⁶ In 2006, sixty-six million workers were employed in 3,500 EPZs across 130 countries. Ferruccio Gambino and Devi Sacchetto, ‘The Shifting Maelstrom: From Plantations to Assembly Lines’, Marcel van der Linden & Karl Heinz Roth eds, *Beyond Marx: Theorising the Global Labour Relations of the Twenty-First Century*, Brill, 2013, p.111

⁷ For data (2011) on European shipping tonnage see the European Commission Eurostat, ‘Maritime Transport Statistics – Short Sea Shipping of Goods’, epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu

320 million tonnes of cargo entered the UK in 2011 in short sea shipping; with probably some 40% more from deep-sea transport.

⁸ Sekula, *Fish Story*, op. cit., p.49

uneven and combined narrative form. By switching visual modes, putting to work impure forms and establishing chains of contiguity in book, exhibition and film, Sekula put into relation the visual traces of a differentiated, but singular modernity. We trail in his wake.