

# EDUCATION COLLECTION NOTES

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## ALLAN SEKULA MAKING SENSE





(cover) *Mother and premature baby, Kassel*  
 2006–07  
 type C photograph  
 84.5 x 116.2 cm (frame)  
 Art Gallery of New South Wales  
 Gift of Geoff and Vicki Ainsworth 2008  
 49.2008  
 © Allan Sekula

*Large and small disasters (Islas Cies and Bueu 12/20/02)* from the series *Black tide/Marea negra* 2002–03  
 Cibachrome photograph  
 114.5 x 73 cm  
 Art Gallery of New South Wales  
 Gift of Geoff and Vicki Ainsworth 2003  
 43.2003  
 © Allan Sekula



## ARTIST STATEMENTS

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**‘Documentary is thought to be art when it transcends its reference to the world, when the work can be regarded, first and foremost, as an act of self-expression on the part of the artist.’**

Allan Sekula, *Photography against the grain: essays and photo works, 1973–1983*, Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, 1984, p 58

**‘By 1976 I was joking that this [the New Topographics] was the ‘neutron bomb’ school of photography: killing people but leaving real estate standing. So what I was experimenting with as an alternative was a way of suggesting that social topography was inevitably the site of strife, class war, land-grabs, ethnic-cleansing, race-war, repression and empire. This is especially true in California, where the bones of the first inhabitants crunch underfoot with every step.’**

Allan Sekula, ‘Translations and completions’, exhibition notes, *California stories*, Christopher Grimes Gallery, California, 2011, np

**‘My argument here runs against the commonly held view that the computer and telecommunications are the sole engines of the third industrial revolution. In effect, I am arguing for the continued importance of maritime space in order to counter the exaggerated importance attached to that largely metaphysical construct, “cyberspace”, and the corollary myth of “instantaneous” contact between distant spaces.’**

Allan Sekula, *Fish story*, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and Richter Verlag, Rotterdam and Dusseldorf, 1995, p 50

**‘What we’re struggling with here is the big story, and no one thinks they can tell the big story anymore, everyone’s given up; they’re feeling hopeless about their ability to ... tell this story. Maybe in economics it’s similar to the turn to microeconomics, away from macroeconomics, you know, tending your own little garden while the whole earth is trembling.’**

Allan Sekula speaking at ‘Forgotten spaces: discussion platform with Benjamin Buchloh, David Harvey and Allan Sekula’, at a screening of *The forgotten space* at The Cooper Union, May 2011, filmed by Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen, Roberto Meza and Park McArthur. <http://www.afterall.org/online/material-resistance-allan-sekula-s-forgotten-space> (accessed 22 January 2011)

## CRITICAL STATEMENTS

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**‘What is considered “base” in Sekula’s production as an artist (as opposed to his activities as a critic and historian of photography) is the fact that his work programmatically redeploys precisely those subjects and semiotic and textual conventions that have been disqualified within modernism by longstanding interdictions: documentary photography, historical narrative and, most of all, a model of signification that recognises the complex conditions of the sign as functioning simultaneously as a semi-autonomous discursive structure and as a material construct overdetermined by historical and ideological factors.’**

Benjamin Buchloh in Allan Sekula, *Fish story*, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and Richter Verlag, Rotterdam and Dusseldorf, 1995, p 190

**‘As a whole we can say that labour has been absent from the representational field of Modernism and Allan Sekula is one of the first artists...who has broken this prohibition and made it evident that labour is of course the central condition of human self constitution and self definition.’**

Benjamin Buchloh speaking at ‘Forgotten spaces: discussion platform with Benjamin Buchloh, David Harvey and Allan Sekula’, at a screening of *The forgotten space* at The Cooper Union, May 2011, filmed by Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen, Roberto Meza and Park McArthur. <http://www.afterall.org/online/material-resistance-allan-sekula-s-forgotten-space> (accessed 22 January 2011)

# ALLAN SEKULA

## MAKING SENSE

*How does photography serve to legitimate and normalise existing power relationships? ... How is historical and social memory preserved, transformed, restricted and obliterated by photographs?*<sup>1</sup>

Born 1951, Erie, Pennsylvania, USA, Allan Sekula is both a practitioner and theoretician of photography. For more than four decades he has investigated and challenged received systems of photographic representation as an artist, historian, theorist and critic. His work has shifted the terms in which photography is understood and has influenced a generation of artists and scholars. Sekula currently lives and works in Los Angeles and teaches at the California Institute of the Arts.

Located within a lineage of socially and politically conscious intellectuals and artists, Sekula continues a tradition of political engagement through art. His documentary photographs are grounded in a Marxist analysis of labour and economics and his recurrent interest is in depicting practices and conditions within the workplace. He combines text with image – both still and, more recently, moving – to create a multi-level critique of globalisation and late capitalism, investigating what he describes as the ‘imaginary and material geographies of the advanced capitalist world’.<sup>2</sup>

Sekula’s theoretical investigations are, however, always rooted in the particular experiences of specific individuals and communities. In articulating his concept of ‘critical realism’ he expresses this guiding principle of his practice:

I wanted to construct works from within concrete life situations, situations within which there was an overt or active clash of interests and representations. Any interest that I had in artifice and constructed dialogue was part of a search for a certain ‘realism’, a realism not of appearances or social facts but of everyday experience in and against the grip of advanced capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

Sekula’s formative years as an artist and thinker were spent in the ferment and creative fertility of California in the 1970s. Following the great social, political and cultural changes of the 1960s, this was a heady and unique period of art practice and political consciousness in America. The political and social roles of artists, the authority of institutions, and systems of knowledge and representation of the world were all being questioned. The Vietnam War (1959–75) had focused international attention on the anti-colonial movement and concern for the environment gained currency. Critiques of power and knowledge in rising discourses such as feminism and post-colonialism gave a new voice to those previously excluded or marginalised.

When Sekula commenced study at the University of California in San Diego in 1968, the university had become a cultural centre and a focal point for artists, scholars and students with a conceptual approach to art. Significant philosophers and theorists Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) and Fredric Jameson (b1940) were teaching there. Sekula was part of a group of socially and politically active students which included Martha Rosler (b1942), Fred Lonidier (b1943) and Phel Steinmetz (b1944). The group’s radical politics found expression in an engagement with labour, feminism and international politics. The development of their ideas was fostered by the stimulating intellectual climate and dialogue with organisations interested in the social practice of art such as the New York-based Artists Meeting for Cultural Change and the College Art Association Caucus for Marxism and Art.

Sekula’s particular focus was an interrogation of the protocols of photographic representation. His essay ‘Dismantling modernism, reinventing documentary (Notes on the politics of representation)’, 1976 provided the conceptual framework, distancing their practices from the liberal traditions of photo-documentary and calling unequivocally for a socialist art practice. Other seminal texts from this period include ‘On the invention of photographic meaning’ (1975) and ‘The traffic in photographs’ (1981). Informed by Marxism as well as the theoretical writings of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) and Roland Barthes (1915–1980), these early essays established his thinking on photography’s problematic semiotics and contested the notion that photography is a universal language. These and other essays collected in his first book, *Photography against the grain: essays and photoworks 1973–1983* (1984) significantly altered the way in which the documentary function of photography was conceptualised.

Sekula was attracted to photography by what he sees as its [indexical relationship](#) with reality, its unavoidable [social referentiality](#). What unites his theory and photographic practice is the concern with photography as a ‘social practice’. He was disappointed with modernism’s failure to engage with what he saw as the crucial realities of the age:

... at that time photography seemed to me to afford an alternative to the overly specialised, esoteric, and self-referential discourse of late modernism, which had, to offer only one crude example, nothing much to say about the Vietnam War.<sup>4</sup>

Sekula’s early photographic practice reflected his interest in interrogating systems of representation and in political and social engagement. Works such as the collective happening *Body bags* 1970, conceived in response to the Vietnam War; his sound installation *Gallery voice montage* 1970, which examined the

systems of art itself; *Meat mass* 1972, in which he interrupted the capitalist circulation of luxury goods through theft and waste, throwing stolen pieces of high-grade steak onto a busy expressway; and *This ain't China* 1974, focusing on the working conditions in a restaurant where he worked, each investigate themes which would continue to preoccupy him throughout his career.

From his earliest works Sekula has used narrative and photographic sequence. His interest in the ensemble, as opposed to the single 'heroic' image, avoids the pictorialism of early documentary photography and invites a social and dialectic reading. The combination of words with groupings of images in Sekula's work was informed by his interest in the possibilities for provoking political dialogue in the fields of theatre and film. He sought to shift photography towards this potential shared ground and away from the focus on the creation of a single image characteristic of painting and printmaking. Through his use of [seriality](#), Sekula sought to explore and illuminate the competing interests and representations within particular situations.

It is important for Sekula that political dialogue with his work begins with his own class and family background. *Aerospace folktales* 1973 explores issues of class, labour and gender through the personal story of his father who had lost his job in the arms industry due to redundancies in the post-Vietnam era. The work is a document of the relationship between the personal and political, incorporating his anger at his father's fate, his understanding that this fate is tied to the arms economy of advanced capitalism, his suspicions of the machinations employed by corporate science, and his reflections on the social conditions of his own family.

One of his most ambitious and comprehensive photographic projects is *Fish story* 1993. Conceived as both an exhibition and a book, *Fish story* is an extraordinary tale of the worldwide transformation of seaports, maritime military and economic enterprises, and maritime labour over the last 300 years. The result of extensive research and travel over six years, this work comprises a sequence of more than 900 colour photographs, slide installations and texts examining the impact of globalisation on people and communities in countries such as Korea, Scotland and Poland through the depiction of automation and of the often lonely, isolated, anonymous and hidden work of the international shipping industry.

The shipping container, the multicoloured and anonymous rectangular steel box in which goods are loaded and stacked on ships, is identified by Sekula as the key to globalisation.

Concealing its contents in an apt allegory of the shiny surfaces of the hyper-capitalist world that it services, the container allows ships to become floating warehouses continually criss-crossing the seas in a never ending flow of goods from one part of the globe to another. Spanish dockers in Barcelona laugh at the irony of loading weapons for the Iraqis in the forward hold, weapons for the Iranians in the aft hold.<sup>5</sup> Global commerce is no longer located in one particular city such as London, but is mobile and flexible, facilitating the continual search for rock-bottom labour costs and prices of goods.

Sekula observes that contemporary elites have become blind to this continual and slow, physical movement of goods, dazzled as they are by the immediacy of electronic commerce and communication. They imagine a world without workers. Goods miraculously appear when summoned, but the mechanisms of the process remain invisible. This perplexing abstraction of commerce, concealing the human element of globalised trade, is challenged through the specificity of Sekula's photography. *Fish story* counters the myth of instantaneous contact over great distances, reclaiming the unseen and forgotten physical space of the sea.

In 2010 Sekula collaborated with Noel Burch to produce, *The forgotten space*, a film project based on *Fish story*, which explores the idea of this forgotten physical space through a mixture of interviews, documentary, archival photographs and footage from old movies. The film won the Orizzonti jury prize at the Venice Film Festival in 2010.

The sea is a recurring motif in Sekula's practice, expressing as it does [liminality](#) and [flux](#) while providing a fertile space within which to explore the conditions of late capitalism. The sequence of images *Large and small disasters (Islas Cies and Bueu 12/20/02)*, is taken from Sekula's series *Black tide/Marea negra* 2002–03 which responds to the environmental disaster on the Galician coast in northwest Spain in 2002. A crippled tanker carrying 75 million litres of oil split in half, causing massive environmental and economic damage. In December 2002, at the invitation of the Barcelona newspaper *La Vanguardia*, Sekula travelled to Galicia to document the crisis. He produced a sequence of documentary photographs which are more meditative than typical photo-journalism. The photographs focus on the beleaguered coastal topography, the physical properties of the invading oil, and the [Sisyphean labours](#) of the volunteers who battled the 'black tide'.

The heroism of the human chain of volunteers struggling against the monstrous, deluge of tarry oil contrasts with the callous

indifference to the disaster from the Spanish government at the time, the corrupt right-wing Partido Popular. The images suggest hope, an allegory of the people's cooperative and stubborn resistance to corruption, consumption and waste. As Sekula described it:

... the oil rolls in on the tide, and people work and work again, often without even the simplest of tools, their thumbs and fingers glued together into crude trowels... people worked with a resignation that was angry rather than submissive. And in time, that anger, fueled by even more official lies, brought down a government.<sup>6</sup>

The photographs are accompanied by a text, 'Black tide: fragments for an opera'. This incomplete libretto for an imaginary opera combines Galician folktales with Greek tragedy and recalls Sekula's beginnings as a performance artist in the late 1960s.

*Mother and premature baby*, Kassel 2006–07 is part of the series *Shipwrecks and workers* which was presented as large-scale billboards in a vast outdoor installation for dOCUMENTA XII, 2007 in Kassel. The starting point for the series was a single photograph made in Istanbul in 1999 which resulted in a portable monument to labour which Sekula continued to add to and change. In Kassel, the series was enlarged with deliberate reference to life and death and those who both create and care for new life.

The composition and pose of this contemporary Madonna recalls the iconography of her historical predecessor, though her child is born through the miraculous intervention of science, rather than God. The image poignantly suggests the fragility of life and the dangers encountered in breaching the threshold of the maternal body. The mother's hands, tenderly cradling her child's tiny feet, are disproportionately large in comparison, emphasising its vulnerability and tenuous existence.

Giving birth is the most fundamental and ancient of all human 'labour', yet the technological systems alluded to by the tubes suggest the industrialisation of birth itself. Perhaps through Sekula's Marxist analysis the giving of life could be read as the reproduction of the working class. The circumstances of this birth inevitably recall the brutal realities and inequalities of life and death according to geography and social and economic status. The financial resources necessary to ensure the birth of a very premature child are only available to privileged elites.

#### Notes

1. Allan Sekula, 'Photography between labour and capital' in Benjamin HD Buchloh and Robert Wilkie (eds), *Mining photographs and other pictures: a selection from the negative archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton, 1948–1968*, Nova Scotia Art and Design Press, Halifax, 1983, p 193.
2. Allan Sekula, 'Notes for an exhibition project', for Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 1992, unpublished manuscript (xerox), p 1.
3. Allan Sekula, *Photography against the grain: essays and photoworks 1973–1983*, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, 1984, p x.
4. *Photography against the grain* ..., p ix.
5. Allan Sekula, *Fish story*, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and Richter Verlag, Rotterdam and Dusseldorf, 1995, p 32.
6. Edward Dimendberg, 'Allan Sekula interviewed by Edward Dimendberg,' *BOMB Magazine*, issue 92, summer 2005, accessed 2 February 2011 at <http://bombsite.com/issues/92/articles/2754> 21.1.12

# ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

## Is giving birth a form of work?

Look at the photograph *Mother and premature baby*, Kassel, 2006–07. Can you identify similarities with images of motherhood from the history of art? Create a visual timeline and compare the symbolic and representational references to the subject of mother and child.

Consider the place that work or 'labour' has in human life. How does this image relate to Sekula's interest in depicting labour and work conditions? Is a baby an economic resource? In what ways has the process of birth been industrialised in the modern capitalist world? Discuss these ideas in class.

How is scale employed in this work? Think about the scale of the work itself and the relationship between elements such as the baby's feet and mother's hands. This work is part of a series created as a monument to 'labour' and was originally exhibited outdoors on a billboard as part of an installation. How would you interpret it differently in such a setting?

## What is the relationship between Sekula's photographic practice and photo-journalism?

Look at *Large and small disasters (Islas Cies and Bueu 12/20/02)* 2002–03 and describe what you see. Notice scale, colour, composition, media and subject matter. This work is part of a larger series called *Black tide/Marea negra* 2002–03 made in response to a massive oil spill from a tanker off the Spanish coast in 2002. How does the work communicate the scale of the environmental disaster? What are the large and small disasters referred to in the title?

'Landscapes, heads and naked women are called artistic photography while photographs of current events are called press photography.'

Alexander Rodchenko, 'The paths of modern photography' in Charles Traub and Steven Heller (eds) *The education of a photographer*, Allworth Press, New York, 2006, p 4

Consider the quote above. How does Sekula's depiction of current events differ from images we may see in a newspaper or on the evening television news? Is his work art or photojournalism? What is the difference? Debate these ideas in class.

## Sekula reveals the hidden human element of globalisation through his photographs.

Research Sekula's project *Fish story* 1993. How is the medium of photography suited to Sekula's project? Why does Sekula employ sequence and seriality in preference to the 'heroic moment' of single-image documentary?

Consider the response to globalisation by contemporary artists. Choose an artist such as Andreas Gursky, Simryn Gill or Fiona Hall from the Gallery's collection and compare their approach to Sekula's art practice. Investigate their choice of subject matter, materials and processes and reflect on the different stories told by these artists.

## Allan Sekula is a photographer and theorist who believes that art has a socio-political role.

Research Sekula's early engagement with conceptual and performance art practices in the 1970s. His ideas and photographic practice radically challenged established photographic traditions. Investigate the social and political events and forces which influenced Sekula's development as a photographer.

What is the purpose of art? Should it make us think about social and economic conditions and face up to difficult realities in our world? How much social responsibility does an artist have? Look at examples of other artists such as Ricky Maynard and Dadang Christanto whose art practices call us to account for inequalities and injustices. Formulate a position on these questions and argue it through writing, speech or your art-making practice.



## GLOSSARY

**seriality** refers to the production of multiple objects (photographs, paintings, sculptures etc) in sets or series as opposed to an artwork which comprises a singular or unique object

**indexical relationship** is the belief that photographs accurately depict reality based upon the idea that there is a physical relationship between the object photographed and the resulting image, that an image 'indicates' an existing object.

**social referentiality** refers to lived experience and social realities.

**liminality** is a term which derives from psychology and anthropology and refers to a state of being on a threshold or between two states of being.

**flux** is a state of uncertainty and change.

**Sisyphean labour** is a phrase suggesting an arduous task which has no possible endpoint. Based on the myth of Sisyphus, a king who was condemned to push a boulder uphill only to see it repeatedly roll down again.

## RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Edward Dimendberg, 'Allan Sekula interviewed by Edward Dimendberg', *BOMB*, Summer, number 92, 2005

Allan Sekula, *Dismal Science: Photo Works 1972–1996*, University Galleries, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois (distribution DAP, New York), 1999. Accompanying interview by Debra Risberg

Allan Sekula, *Fish story*, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and Richter Verlag, Rotterdam and Dusseldorf, 1995

Allan Sekula, *Photography against the grain: essays and photoworks 1973–1983*, The Nova Scotia series: source materials of the contemporary arts, vol XVI, edited by Benjamin HD Buchloh and Robert Wilkie, Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, 1984

Allan Sekula, 'The body and the archive', October 39, Winter 1986, pp 3–64, reprinted in R Bolton (ed), *The contest of meaning: critical histories of photography*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1986

Allan Sekula, 'Photography between labour and capital', in Benjamin HD Buchloh and Robert Wilkie (eds), *Mining photographs and other pictures: a selection from the negative archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton, 1948–1968*, Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, 1983

Allan Sekula, 'Dismantling modernism, reinventing documentary (Notes on the politics of representation)', *The Massachusetts Review*, 19:4, December 1978, pp 859–83

Allan Sekula, 'On the invention of photographic meaning', *Artforum*, 13:5, January 1975, pp 36–45

### Website

*The forgotten space* [www.theforgottenspace.net](http://www.theforgottenspace.net)

## Acknowledgments

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