

Allan Sekula : Photography at Work

b.

28 June – 29 September 2017



Allan Sekula, *Fish Saché* from *Titanic's Wake*, 1998-2000. Courtesy of the Allan Sekula Studio LLC and Galerie Michel Rein, Paris/Brussels.

BEIRUT ART CENTER
مركز بيروت للفن

Beirut Art Center is pleased to announce its upcoming exhibition, *Photography at Work*, which will show the work of the late American artist Allan Sekula. Sekula, who died in 2013, was an influential photographer, writer, filmmaker, theorist and critic whose works have been a unique reference in debates and conversations about photography, art and politics for over 40 years.

Photography at Work will feature over fifty photographic works, slide shows and videos selected from the breadth of Allan Sekula's artistic practice, and revisited through a set of questions that has informed his work and that continue to be relevant today: *What can photography do and what is at work with this specific medium? How does photography serve to legitimize and normalize existing power relationships? What havens and temporary escapes from the realm of necessity are provided by photographic means? What resistances are encouraged and strengthened? How is historical and social memory preserved, transformed, restricted and obliterated by photographs? What futures are promised; what futures are forgotten? As Sekula himself contended, these questions concern in the broadest sense «the ways in which photography constructs an imaginary economy.»*¹

Sekula formulated these questions, amongst many others, in the earliest stages of his artistic life. Acknowledging the photographic medium as a tool for power in our contemporary context, Sekula reminds us that the photographic project has been identified from the beginning with «the establishment of global archives and repositories according to models provided by libraries, encyclopedias, zoological and botanical gardens, museums, police files and banks; and that those in their very archival purpose embody the power inherent in accumulation, collection and hoarding as well as the power inherent in the lexicon and rules of a language».²

These issues formed the theoretical basis for the now seminal *Photography Against the Grain*, a collection of texts and photographs that has recently been reprinted.³ His entire art stems from these discussions. Sekula's approach to documentary photography, grounded in strong historical and critical insights, acknowledges conflicts of meaning, plurality of visions and a constant redefinition of the medium. These questions will be addressed in the context of Lebanon today, renewing Allan Sekula's crucial voice, addressing today's political tensions, from a different temporality and from another shore.

This exhibition will identify echoes and genealogies within Sekula's photographic, textual and filmic work in order to highlight the ways in which the long-term vision of his research and obsessions make his work highly pertinent today. The beginning of the show will display the early artistic gestures that marked the artist's transformation from documenting some of his own performances to investigating the context he was living in. Sekula began exploring the American middle-class of the West Coast (San Diego, where he attended classes taught by Baldessari, Antin, Marcuse and Marin) at the time of late modernism and in its wake. He built his practice of photography by documenting «within concrete life situations, situations within which there was either an overt or active clash of interests and representations». Turning his camera to his own surroundings allowed him to discover the world he was living in, and assess that staging reality critically was the best way to document it.

The show continues with two versions of *Untitled Slide Sequence*, where Sekula documents workers

1. Sekula, A. (1983), "Reading An Archive: Photography Between Labor and Capital" in *Mining Photographs and other pictures, 1968-1948*; Buchloh, B. H. D. and Wilkie, R. (eds); Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Press.

2. *ibid.*

3. Mack Books have published a facsimile of *Photography Against the Grain* in October 2016. This edition is currently available at the Beirut Art Center bookshop.

4. Sekula, A. (1984), *Photography Against the Grain, Essays and Photo Works, 1983-1973*; Nova Scotia series: source materials of the contemporary arts; Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Press.

going out of a factory at the time of the beginning of unemployment in California industries linked to the Vietnam war, which will be shown here at two different speeds from 1972 to 2011. With *School is a Factory*, an insightful series of images - some performative, some documentary - along with drawings and texts, where Sekula identifies the way in which a society builds its own future through education.

Three chapters of *Fish Story* and a selection from *Titanic's Wake* will show how Sekula's observation of his surroundings and time was strongly connected to the global and the long-term, while he was travelling on the sea and out of his country and documenting the collateral damage brought about by new economic configurations.

The show ends with a series of photographs made during the Seattle demonstrations in 1999, *Waiting for Tear Gas*, and *Europa*, a photograph from 2011. The figures draw out both dreams and nightmares of the globalized world, whilst the titles evokes foreclosed political spaces. These two works open onto some of the main issues of today.



Attempt to correlate social class with elevation above main harbor channel ,San Pedro, July 1975



Allan Sekula. *Fish Story: Walking on Water* (Chapter 9), detail of the slide show, 1990.



Allan Sekula. *Fish Story: Seventy and Seven* (Chapter 4) - The LNG carrier Hyundai Utopia designed to transport liquefied natural gas from Indonesia to South Korea, nearing completion; Hyundai Heavy Industries shipyard (September 1993).

About Allan Sekula

Allan Sekula (January 15, 1951 – August 10, 2013) was an American photographer, writer, filmmaker, theorist and critic. Born in 1951 in Erie, Pennsylvania, of Polish and English descent, he moved with his family to San Pedro, California in the early 1960s. He graduated with his MFA from the University of California, San Diego, in 1974, after having obtained his BA in biology from the same institution. He began making art in the early 1970s, staging performances, building installations, and producing photo series. He published in 1983 a seminal collection of essays and photographs that transformed the conception of photography and established him as a renowned figure in contemporary photography. Since his death, his work has experienced a surge in institutional acquisition, interest and exposure, generating a series of international exhibitions.

From 1985 until his death in 2013, Sekula taught at California Institute of the Arts (Calarts). His work frequently focused on large economic systems, or “the imaginary and material geographies of the advanced capitalist world.” He received fellowships and grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, Getty Research Institute, Deutsche Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), Atelier Calder[3] and was named a 2007 USA Broad Fellow.

Allan Sekula’s recent solo exhibitions include, *Allan Sekula: Aerospace Folktales and Other Stories*, 2017, Columbus Museum of Art ; *Allan Sekula – OKEANOS*, 2017, TBA21–Augarten, Vienna; *Fish Story*, to be continued at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, Gillman Barracks, Singapore (2015); Dockers’ Museum, Johan Jacobs Museum, Zürich, Switzerland (2014); *Meditations on a Tritpych*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands (2013); *Allan Sekula: Disassembled Movies*, Akbank Sanat, Istanbul, (2012) ; *Ship of Fools*, Ludwig Museum, Budapest, Hungary (2010), *Performance Under Working Conditions*; Buchloh, B. H. D, Dietrich K. and Breitwieser S. (eds); Generali Foundation, (2003).

Selected group exhibitions include the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (2015); LealRios Foundation, Lisbon, Portugal (2015); Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2014); Victoria & Albert Museum, London, England (2014); MAXXI National Museum of XXI Century Arts, Rome, Italy (2014); 55th Venice Biennale, Catalan pavilion (2013); 29th Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil (2010); and Documenta XII and XI, Kassel, Germany (2007 and 2002); Centre Pompidou (2006, 1996), Whitney Museum (2006, 2002, 1993, 1976); Generali Foundation, Vienna (2010, 2007, 2006, 2003), MACBA, Barcelone (2004, 2001, 2012); Winterthur Foto Museum (2001); Foto Institute Rotterdam (2001, 1997).

His work is in the collections of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Museo de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Tate, London, UK; Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna, Austria; Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, San Diego, CA; and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, among others

About the curator

Marie Muracciole is an art critic and curator based in Beirut and Paris. From 2005 to 2011 she was director of the Cultural Department of Jeu de Paume, Paris. From 2012 to 2016, she has taught Film Theory at the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Bordeaux. Since 2014 she is the director of Beirut Art Center, Beirut. As a curator she worked with Allan Sekula, Yto Barrada, Claude Closky, among many others, and published extensively with Greyroom, JRP Ringier, Editions de l’ENSBA, Electa, Editions Jeu de Paume, Les Presses Du Reel, and Texte zur Kunst.