“Disassembled” Images
Allan Sekula and Contemporary Art

Edited by Alexander Streitberger and Hilde Van Gelder

Leuven University Press

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Introduction

Alexander Streitberger and Hilde Van Gelder

> I go back to a portrait made back in 1994. A Greek ship is carrying parts of a disassembled American steel mill to China. The electrician aboard, Marek, a Pole from Warsaw, shares his profession with the then-president of Poland, hero of the Gdansk shipyard. Marek has no clue where the ship is going after the stop in China, since it is an unscheduled tramp steamer, picking up cargo charters as opportunities arise. He is very curious about the exchange rate for the dollar, a curiosity he no doubt shares with the ship's owners. (Sekula, 2009: 62)

These enigmatic lines figure in Allan Sekula's autobiographical essay "Polonia and Other Fables 2007–2009." Sekula inserts them toward the end of a section entitled "**'PRELIMINARY NOTES' (Or How Not To Get a Grant From the NEA)**" [original emphasis]. He refers to a particular photograph he most likely made while working on *Fish Story* (1989–1995). As mentioned elsewhere in the same text, this image is now part of "the chaos of [his] non-archive." (Sekula, 2009: 57) He dryly points out that he managed to locate it amidst the enormous quantity of pictures produced over the years. Yet instead of sharing the photograph, he only provides the above-quoted short description. The reader understands it to be a portrait of a Polish seafarer aboard a cargo ship sailing under Greek flag. It is unclear whether or not the photograph shows parts of the disassembled steel mill in the ship's hold.

Sekula was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1951. At that time this city—located on the likewise named Lake and as such a perfect place for industrial activity—was still considered a beating heart of American steel manufacturing. Although his parents moved West when Sekula was still a child, the artist remained mildly attached to his native region. As he outlines in the same text from which the above quotation is taken, his paternal grandparents—immigrants from Polish Galicia—lie buried in nearby DuBois, PA. In our view, this seemingly random excerpt from an essay by Allan Sekula well exemplifies his working method. Central to his body of work, we believe, is the idea of disassembling items or elements in order to reassemble some of them in a varied or alternative constellation. He engages in this very operation, however, only to disassemble a few (other) elements once again. To characterize this process, Sekula fondly referred to "poor Jerry Lewis"

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as protagonist of the movie *The Disorderly Orderly* (1964), in whom he recognized a role model, perhaps for his way of wreaking havoc in a hospital that turns the established order of things and hierarchies upside down. (Sekula, 2009: 58)

For this book we propose to take Sekula's vaguely identified photograph as motto. We did not put any effort in trying to find the photograph. Our motto refers to an invisible and as of yet slightly mysterious object. It is quite possible that one day this particular image will be recovered from his archive, now preserved at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. Sekula explicitly wished his oeuvre to be as complex as the worldly reality he kept relentlessly investigating. Deliberately creating such blind spots was an integral part of the artistic game he played. In the introductory note to an early work, *Aerospace Folktales* (1973), he explained that he originally conceived of its installation in terms of a "disassembled movie." (Sekula, [1984] 2016: 106) By this he meant that he brought together in the same space the "separate narrative elements" of spoken sound, images, and written commentary—if in a rather unexpected and unpredictable way. (106)

He would further develop and sustain this strategy throughout his career, as much later he clarified in an interview with Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans. Referring to both Bertolt Brecht's concept of the "*Lehrstück*" and to Samuel Beckett's theatrical pieces, he indicated that it was possible to understand some of his works in terms of a "philosophical play." (Ruchel-Stockmans, 2006: 141) What he had in mind was actually a very specific idea of atypical play. The "cast of characters" was intended to remain "offstage." (141) As an example, Sekula referred to the two panels he produced for an outdoor placement at the STUK theater in Leuven, part of *Shipwreck and Workers* (2005–07). Constantin Meunier and Alberto Giacometti, two artists Sekula was fond of, were invited on stage by means of two "sculptures of the human body" (*The Puddler* and *The Hand*). (141) The other photographic panels from *Shipwreck and Workers* with which they interacted were positioned "elsewhere in (or, rather 'on') the building and its immediate environs." (141) For Sekula, this way of proceeding with the installation amounted to a form of "exploded or disassembled play." (141)

As an artist, Sekula challenged his audience to make a major investment in order really to engage with his work. One among many possible explanations for his fondness of playing the hide-and-seek game with his public is that he felt this to be the only way to make them feel the absurdity of how on a worldwide scale human life became organized in the post-Cold War era. Elsewhere in his writings he described this mechanism as that of the "Collective Sisyphus." (Sekula, 2003: 324) An American steel mill in parts is moved to China, Sekula informs us, where it is likely to be rebuilt for the purpose of being restarted with

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cheaper laborers. He portrays one of the workers performing this dismal operation. Then he decides not to publish the picture, while still making a quick reference to Lech Walesa, then-president of Poland and a recurrent protagonist in Sekula's body of work.

About the Gdansk Solidarity Union he concludes sharply in the same text that it was

> the workers' movement to end all workers' movements, in the gleeful private fantasies of Margaret Thatcher and company, who paid an immediate visit to an obsequious Lech Walesa, who, for all his valor, may be said to have had no idea what he was getting into, that Poland was about to endure a version of the "shock therapy" that had been visited on Chile by Friedman's "Chicago Boys." (Sekula, 2009: 63; original typesetting)

From the 1950s on, members of the Chicago School developed the clear mission to liberate the market from unwelcome interferences such as fixed prices, minimum wages, and access to public education systems. What is contemporary visual art to do in the light of the omnipresent reality of a neoliberal market "purism" that feeds as a drip the "disaster capitalism complex," as Naomi Klein calls it? (Klein, 2007: 53 and 281) How can visual art relevantly contribute to creating radical democratic awareness and provoke humane thought? These were fundamental questions that preoccupied Allan Sekula during his entire career.

The present volume is the published outcome of a conference that took Allan Sekula's last project, entitled *Ship of Fools | The Dockers' Museum* (2010–2013), as its point of departure. At the very end of his life, Sekula produced this unfinished, multifaceted, and variously installable work of art—which contains some 1250 objects—as a means to pay tribute to all the joint efforts of human labor now irretrievably lost in history. With *Ship of Fools | The Dockers' Museum* Sekula wanted to send out a message of hope. When he died in the summer of 2013 he was leaving behind this vast "disassembled" set of images and objects all focusing on the lifeworld of dockworkers and seafarers. The project was his final contribution to a life-long search for imagining possible forms of solidarity in a globalized economy evermore confronted with its own limitations.

By encouraging others to try to make sense of *Ship of Fools | The Dockers' Museum after* him, Sekula expressed the wish that his own efforts would not have been completely in vain, or "Sisyphean," as he would put it. (Sekula, 2003: 324) *"Disassembled Images": Contemporary*

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Art After Allan Sekula took up this challenge. (figs. 1–3) Organized by the Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography, Art and Visual Culture (KU Leuven-Université catholique de Louvain), together with M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, the conference was held in Antwerp on March 2–4, 2017. It was an intense meeting of researchers, artists, and curators keen to discuss ways and methods for relevantly developing, in the words of Sekula, an "active resistance … aimed ultimately at … the transformation of society." ([1984] 2016: 74–75)

The event was organized around three thematic clusters, entitled "Collecting Folly," "Maritime Failures and Imaginaries," and "Critical Realism in Dialogue." This way of structuring the debate allowed us first to come to terms with today's meaning and significance of compulsively collecting "objects of interest," as Allan Sekula called them. From there on, the talks developed into various directions, all reflecting on the role of contemporary visual art in our society. We also rely on the three sections as a structural framework for this book. "Collecting Folly" departs from Sekula's representation of the universe and imaginary of dockworkers in *Ship of Fools / The Dockers' Museum*. Far from being a pastime, this unfinished project is the culmination of long-term research into the lives and maritime labors that have been exploited in order for global capitalism to strive and create its seamless flow and circulation of goods. The act of collecting the metonymical objects that compose Sekula's museum was largely carried out by the artist through online platforms such as eBay, thus ironically and virtually simulating and retracing on a miniature scale the processes his very collection puts into question.

The section on "Collecting Folly" intends to capture a twofold inquiry exploring the act of collecting through the lens of folly and madness, as well as the 'collection' of actual representations of fools and madness. From the perspective of contemporary art, the section centers on the following questions: which particular strategies and intuitions do contemporary artists mobilize in their collections, and how do they differ from those of private and public collections? How is collecting transformed into a tool for contemporary artists, and toward who or what is it directed? What is the critical potential of representations of folly and madness in contemporary art? Do they destabilize normative understandings of production, including artistic production?

W.J.T. Mitchell's keynote essay immediately precedes this section to open its discussion, as well as to set the parameters of the concerns of this volume as a whole. As such his argument offers a subtle and insightful reflection on the "Ship of Fools" as a metaphor for what he calls the "Planetary Madness" of the global system of deregulated capitalism. Sekula's *Ship of Fools / The Dockers' Museum*, he argues, has to be understood as a critical project that explores maritime space

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Figs. 1–3

Conference poster *"Disassembled Images": Contemporary Art After Allan Sekula*, Antwerp, 2–4 March 2017. Page design Thomas Desmet. © Allan Sekula Studio. Courtesy M HKA, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen. Courtesy Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography, Art and Visual Culture.

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as a major concern in the light of the destruction of our planet in the wake of neoliberal processes of globalization. Proposing "a provisional *Bilderatlas* of planetary madness," Mitchell describes Sekula's project as an "exhibitionary archive from below," an open constellation that invites us "to make sense of it."

Next, the section on "Collecting Folly" opens with Bart De Baere and Anja Isabel Schneider's thoughtful discussion of *The Dockers' Museum* from a curatorial perspective. According to the authors, Sekula's project takes the form of the "Double Helix of an Activist Stance and of Curating." Oscillating between a socio-political critical approach and a propensity for concrete narratives, *The Dockers' Museum* aims at the creation of what Sekula himself called "a sort of imaginary or phantasmatic collective lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*)." As an activist Sekula takes into account the mediatized outcomes of his activities in order to address public opinion, while his curatorial approach leads him to include his "objects of interest" in the structural set-up of the gallery space. De Baere and Schneider conclude their essay with the observation that it is precisely this double move between the positions of the activist and the curator that defines Sekula's approach as a "practice of transformative worldmaking."

Likewise, Stefanie Diekmann's essay focuses on the transformative aspects of a collection of objects. Departing from considerations on the classical collection of material, individualized objects, of which Sekula's *The Dockers' Museum* would be an example, Diekmann wonders if there "is a way to pay homage to objects while not holding on to them?" Chris Larson's *Land Speed Record* (2016), she suggests, could provide an answer to this question. Conceived as a "temporary showcase," as an assemblage of obsolete objects passing by the eyes of the spectator, Larson's sound-video work stages not the objects themselves but their state of "moving on towards oblivion." This sharply contrasts with both early cinema's staging of objects and the art collection's insistence on the material or emotional value of the individual artifact.

Ronnie Close uses Sekula's term "objects of interest" as a springboard for his own considerations on visual image politics in today's Egypt. Close examines two sets of photographs that represent different forms of censorship: his own collection of photographic artbooks bought in Cairo bookstores and a series of female fashion images from a message board website operated by conservative Islamic women. While in the first example, reflecting a case of state censorship, the images of photo-books are doctored with the purpose of concealing the erotic effect of the body, the second set of images represent a form of auto-censorship in which fashion photographs from Western culture are Photoshopped in order to adapt them to a conservative Islamic audience. Close critically links these forms of censorial practices to the

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history of Orientalism, revealing the complexity and the contradictions at play when Western image culture encounters conservative Middle-East contexts. As parts of an archive of censorship, the photographs examined in this article become "objects of interest" for how they represent and mediate the image politics in many countries in the Middle East.

Departing from reflections on media archaeology as both a theoretical approach and a practice, Edwin Carels zooms in on the private collection of analogue audio-visual equipment of Samuel Verstraete, which resulted in an exhibition project shown in Ghent and Eeklo in 2016 and 2017. After the death of Verstraete, who was called "Vava" (meaning "grandpa" in Flemish-Dutch), a VHS tape was found among his belongings on which he had recorded all the old analogue equipment he collected—radios, televisions, amplifiers, tape recorders, antennas, and all kind of electronic devices—thus producing both a visual archive of the analogue world and a narrative of the collector and his private domain. This doubling of the assembled objects through the video tape, Carels argues, reveals the collection's character as an "archive of intensities," a term he borrows from Georges Didi-Huberman's study on Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*.

In the final essay of the section, Barbara Baert also draws on Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* when she defines *The Dockers' Museum* as an empathic collection driven by pulsations of desire and sensuality while at the same time constituting a dynamic thought-space (*Denkraum*). Using an original hermeneutical approach, Baert suggests to understand Sekula's archival project less in terms of rational knowledge than in terms of sensorial experiences. Associating *The Dockers' Museum* with notions of empathy and *Besonnenheit* (temperance, thoughtfulness), Baert certainly meets Mitchell's considerations on the openness of Sekula's "archive from below" and, referring to the latter as a "radical descent into the world of the wound," gives it both a visceral and instinctive turn.

At least since *Fish Story* (1989–1995), Allan Sekula has conceptualized, through his art and writings, the maritime sphere as a way to explore novel epistemological questions with regard to the increasingly opaque nature of globalized capital. Following his cue, the section on "Maritime Failures and Imaginaries" looks at the myriad of ways in which artists have recently explored the imaginaries and materialities of the maritime as a space of disaster and failure. It investigates the possibilities of artists confronting ecological disasters, unbridled supply chain capitalism, violence and death related to migratory crossings, and the fraught histories of imperialism and colonialism. The essays in this section are equally interested in these various forms of solidarity and agency connected to the world of maritime labor: mutinies,

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piracies, and waterfront insurrections that, although failed, offer alternative models of rupture and contestation for our present predicament.

"Maritime Failures and Imaginaries" opens with a portfolio by Berlin-based artist Marco Poloni. The text begins with a description of the artist's multi-media installation *The Majorana Experience* (2008–2010) as an exploration of the intriguing disappearance at sea of Italian physician Ettore Majorana. By insisting on his interest in the sea "as a space intersected by geopolitical processes," Poloni clearly situates his work in the wake of Sekula. Claiming a politics of representation, Poloni wonders about the possibility of understanding the Mediterranean Sea not as object but as subject. This non-anthropocentric perspective leads him to Timothy Morton's concept of "hyperobjects," entities of extremely long duration or enormous scale which exceed human capacities of comprehension. In the second part of his paper Poloni develops four possible categories of a post-anthropocentric cinema—Scale, Movement, Fragmentation and Suture, and Perspective—and shows how some of them are adapted in his film *Una Cuba mediterranea* (2017).

Next, Clara Masnatta discusses two recent films about the maritime world, Lois Patiño's *Costa da Morte* [Coast of Death] (2013) and *Leviathan* (2012) by Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor. For their overt rejection of linearity and traditional point of view, both films are related to Sekula's disassembled photo-texts. Masnatta argues that *Costa da Morte* and *Leviathan* represent two ways of "an amphibian cinema of senses at sea," in which a sensual experience of maritime space is created by different means and diverging approaches. On the one hand, *Leviathan* immerses the viewer completely into a tangible experience triggered by surround sound and the proximity of changing cameras simulating the sea's perspectives in a post-human stance. In *Costa da Morte*, on the other hand, sound is used to make the perceptual distance between image and sound palpable. *Leviathan's* voiceless "simulacral plenitude" is rejected in favor of a multitude of interwoven historical, mythological, and vernacular voices in order to activate the viewer's imagination.

Jonathan Stafford provides a thought-provoking analysis of the role of the container in Sekula's *Fish Story* (and other "sea works") regarding maritime labor in the context of global capitalism. Citing Mark Fisher, Stafford, like Mitchell, denounces "the illusion of a 'dematerialized' capitalism." While the capitalist system obfuscates its concrete reality by making it disappear from people's visual field by means of automated container shipping, Sekula's critical project emphasizes the materiality of maritime logistics eliciting thus "an aesthetic charge antithetical to the ideology of 'friction-free capitalism.'" The ship, Stafford further argues against Philip Steinberg, stands for a crisis of capitalism, for it represents capital's contradictions and complexity. In particular

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the widespread phenomenon of ghost ships or zombie ships, carrying containers full of commodities that are nowhere unloaded, well symbolizes capitalism's inertia and absurdity. Sekula's *Shipwreck and Workers*, finally, features the shipwreck, as a metaphor for the crisis of capital's flow and shifts the perspective to the human, social, and personal narratives of the dockers and sea workers.

The fourth contribution to this section comprises an interview by Hilde Van Gelder with Carles Guerra, conducted at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in 2016. Based on Guerra's experience of the fieldtrip he made with Sekula to the Galician shore shortly after the *Prestige* oil spill, the interview provides an account of the genesis of the work *Black Tide*/Marea negra (2002–2003), which the artist conceived as a response to the disaster. In the course of the interview, Sekula's *Black Tide*/Marea negra is described as an example of deconstruction of journalistic and documentary practices. Similar to Stafford, Guerra hints at the contradictory structure of capital and its representation when he establishes an analogy between the flow of the capital stopped by shipwreck and photography's endless circulation arrested by the decisive moment. The interview concludes with some considerations on the predictive character of Sekula's work and its particular, often subtle sense of humor.

The final section, "Critical Realism in Dialogue," departs from Benjamin H.D. Buchloh's productive description of Allan Sekula's artistic approach in terms of "critical realism." (Buchloh, 1995: 191) Realism, when understood this way, is not necessarily an artistic style. It rather points to the research methods of a reflective artistic practice, including—among other elements—high-profile theoretical and essayistic writing, photography, and essay film. Foundational for such a methodology is the dialogue and participatory observation pursued by the artist with workers, activists, and scholars to explore existing and potential models of collaboration (e.g., with ITF trade unionists on the *Global Mariner* ship or with activist organizations during the 1999 WTF protests in Seattle). In the contributions to this section, the authors explore different possibilities for bringing about such critically realist art practices and how they may be changing the stakes within the field of contemporary art production. They address concerns such as the role of skill and/or deskilling as well as the re-distribution of labor in contemporary art, challenges to conventional forms of visual pleasure within contemporary art, and the consequences of selecting the worker as a key visual motif within an artistic practice. Does such "sympathetic materialism," as Sekula called it (Sekula, 2001: 10), perhaps bring about new social agencies among people and new insights with regard to our world's future? How, in other words, as Sekula once defined the problem of critical realism, "do we find the interval within which the idea of freedom resides?" (Sekula, 1998: 26)

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In his essay, Alexander Streitberger relates this question to a historical moment of the 1970s when Marxist-oriented artists such as Sekula, Martha Rosler, and Victor Burgin referred to Brecht and Benjamin in order to seek creative freedom in the interval between theory and practice. Based on a thorough comparison of the writings with the artistic practice of these artist-theoreticians, Streitberger shows that each of them subscribes to the socialist project of "cultural work as a *praxis*" in a different way. While Burgin's meta-textual work *VI* (1973) deconstructs advertising photographs by means of an "aesthetics of fragments and cracks" and Sekula's *Aerospace Folktales* of the same year integrates critical and biographical narratives into a "disassembled movie," Rosler's "poetry of drunkenness" resists the classical stance of the documentary genre in favor of a critical practice oscillating between the "possibility of negation and metacommentary."

Stephanie Schwartz takes Sekula's phrasing "the face of protest" as a starting-point to show how the artist undermines the common photojournalistic practice of monumentalizing and isolating a particularly expressive face or gesture in order to produce a pathetic effect on the audience. In *Waiting for Tear Gas*, Schwartz argues, Sekula adopts an alternative perspective that takes into account the fact that protest is always a concern of "multiple faces" located within the space of the relationship between the public and the private. Schwartz points out that Sekula started to use the form of the photo-essay at the very moment of its crisis in the early 1970s caused by the fact that Americans increasingly relied on television rather than newspapers and magazines. Within the context of today's neoliberal media practices, which are largely based on social media accounts and individually customized media platforms, Sekula "re-invented" the photojournalistic essay as a "meta-critical" tool to examine and to counter the way media operate.

Anthony Abiragi shares with Schwartz the insight that a critical realism should not merely be concerned with *what* happens but also with the question of *how* events are mediated and subjected to the logic of visibility and invisibility. "Photography in an Age of Asymmetry" is a stimulating reflection on the *Global Mariner*, an activist ship identified by Sekula as a "*metaship*." (Sekula, 2002: 31; original emphasis) This ship functions as a "contested allegory" that invites us to read the world rather in terms of context than in terms of objects. To reveal Sekula's traffic with abstraction Abiragi further refers to the *Global Mariner* as an exemplar. The exemplar only becomes readable when connected with other sectors of reality. For the exemplar has to be enacted within a given social order. Abiragi finally suggests to understand Sekula's allegorical abstractions as perlocutionary performatives: as "non-sovereign signs," which derive their authority as acts of judgment

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not through established institutions but through their enactment "in a new, adjacent context."

The volume concludes with Benjamin Young's considerations on "Realism and Humanism in Photography of Israel-Palestine." Referring to the event "Decolonize This Place," organized on May 7, 2016 by activists at the Brooklyn Museum to protest against the exhibition *This Place*, Young argues that the humanist stance of the curators, conceiving their exhibition as an exploration of the human condition in Palestine, was doomed to fail because its essentialist humanism based on the aestheticization of apartheid and settler colonialism excluded and dehumanized Palestinians. Through a subtle analysis of the various works and the exhibition display, Young shows that the claims to universal humanism were sapped by the curators' emphasis on the formal autonomy of the pictures and their aesthetic presentation. This would also explain why the activists were unable to appreciate such highly critical work as Fazal Sheikh's *Desert Bloom*, representing a kind of forensic aesthetics identified by Young as "one of the most important inheritors of Sekula's critique of photographic humanism."

From this we may conclude that Sekula's appeal for a critical realism in terms of "a truly critical social documentary that will frame the crime, the trial, and the system of justice and its official myths" doesn't end with the work's realization. (Sekula, [1984] 2016: 57) It has to be tested over and over again, each time when it is presented within a particular situation and for a specific purpose and public.

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