Editors' Introduction: Allan Sekula and the Traffic in Photographs

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In 1975 Allan Sekula published in *Artforum* a series of essays on the history of photography that responded critically to the emerging art photography boom of the 1970s and 1980s.[1] Addressing key figures such as Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen in the developing canon of art photography—specifically as it was being formulated at the Museum of Modern Art—Sekula examined the way the selective construction of a modernist aesthetic tradition in photography served to legitimate the medium as a fine art, thereby securing its entry into the market and the museum. In his writing over the following decade, Sekula continually pointed out the exclusions on which this canon and its formalist criteria for entry were based, opening the charmed circle of modernist auteurs to a comparative analysis with other photographic modes: the aerial view in military photography, corporate advertising, paparazzi celebrity photography, commercial portraiture, industrial photography, police photography, and, crucially, documentary photography. The introduction to Sekula's first book of collected essays, *Photography against the Grain*, summarizes this project as "a materialist social history of photography, a history that takes the interplay of economic and technological considerations into account."[2] Sekula argued for a history of what he called "the traffic in photographs," which denotes not just the material and discursive networks in and through which photographs are produced, circulated, and received, but also "the incessant oscillation between . . . the 'antinomies of bourgeois thought'" that structures such circulation, especially between science and art, instrumental images and aesthetic ones, and realism and formalism.[3] This form of history writing played a central role in the so-called photography debates of the 1980s and involved practitioners, critics, and historians such as Victor Burgin, Steve Edwards, Molly Nesbit, Martha Rosler, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Sally Stein, and John Tagg.[4] And the effort met stiff resistance, to some even threatening the very existence of art (or photography-as-art) itself. In an early skirmish in what became the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, Hilton Kramer misconstrued Sekula's essay on Steichen as "a bitter attack . . .

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on the making, exhibiting and marketing of photographs as works of art."[5]

However, Sekula had been making photographs since late in 1971, while training as an artist. In an alternate version of Jean-Luc Godard's quip about "the children of Marx and Coca-Cola," Sekula studied with both Herbert Marcuse and John Baldessari as an undergraduate at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). Staying at UCSD to complete a master of fine arts degree from 1972 to 1974, Sekula collaborated with colleagues Fred Lonidier, Rosler, and Phil (later Phel) Steinmetz to link criticism of the high-modernist canon to a renewed practice of documentary cultural work. In the 1976 manifesto "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary," Sekula calls for "a political economy, a sociology, and a non-formalist semiotics of media" that provides the framework for "a critical representational art, an art that points openly to the social world and to possibilities of concrete social transformation."[6] Such an art would be called documentary only insofar as it threw into question the myth of photographic truth, of the document as transparent record of fact; it would be realist only insofar as both its reflexivity about the medium and its social engagement contradicted the purportedly neutral objectivity of realism. This reinvented documentary would break with the aesthetics of liberal social documentary, which at best was tied to a politically suspect reformism or philanthropy and at worst supplanted understanding and action with only compassion, pity, or the aestheticization of suffering. As an artistic praxis, it would attend to the semiotic and formal complexity of realist and documentary modes even as it sought to both portray and indict what was seen as the impoverishment of daily life under capitalism.

Formally, Sekula and his colleagues experimented with combining images and language; with the multi-image formats of slide shows, photo-and-text installations, and video; and with the occasional recourse to theatricality or fiction in order to call attention to the place of the single, still image in larger networks of discourse and power. Thus *Photography against the Grain* also collected many of Sekula's early photo-works, including *Untitled Slide Sequence* (1972), a black-and-white slide show that depicts a stream of workers leaving the Convair aerospace factory; *Aerospace Folktales* (1973), a sequence of photographs, text, and audio that documents the family of an unemployed engineer; and *This Ain't China: A Photonovel* (1974), which consists of photographs and text booklets chronicling the routines and dreams of workers at a pizza joint. As the introduction emphasizes, it is "a book *about* photography and a book *of* photography, a book that speaks within and alongside and through photography."[7]

Although by the 1980s and early 1990s Sekula's historical writing was better known than his artistic practice, this balance was altered by the

appearance of the long-term, investigative photography-and-text piece *Fish Story* (1989–1995), which was realized as both an exhibition and a book.[8] Accompanied in the book version by a richly allusive cultural history of seafaring in modernity, *Fish Story* investigates maritime space, ranging from a derelict shipyard in Los Angeles to Rotterdam's automated docks to fishing villages, workers' housing, and industrial shipyards in Korea, among many other sites. *Fish Story* was followed over the next two decades by a constellation of related photography-based works, essays, and, later, videos and films that explore the sea as the often neglected material condition for the contemporary economy, countering the rhetoric of instantaneous, digital connectivity by attentively recording a world of manual labor, of the construction of vast new spaces and vehicles of industrial production, and of the slow, ponderous movement of material goods.[9] This body of work has, perhaps more than that of any other contemporary artist, both contested and expanded the picture-language of globalization.

This special issue of *Grey Room* grows out of a conference held last June in Paris and explores the stakes of both reading and looking at Sekula's works today.[10] We had hoped Sekula would be able to attend the Paris conference, but his illness with cancer prevented his travel and took his life later that summer. The essays included here thus form more of an interrupted conversation than an attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the double legacy of Sekula's historical-critical writing and his artistic practice.[11] And in the spirit of dialogue that animated Sekula's work, we include here two earlier essays by him that anticipate or respond to the contributions. Because the conference was held on the occasion of Marie Muracciole's translation into French of *Photography against Grain* nearly thirty years after its initial publication, many of the essays respond to Sekula's critical texts.[12] The reception of Sekula's artistic practice still deserves greater elaboration. Preceding and standing apart from both the image-appropriations common in postmodern photography and the painting-like tableaux of pictorial photography, Sekula and his San Diego colleagues in the 1970s played an early, important role in opening photography onto an "expanded field" that enabled the proliferation of photography-, film-, and video-based works in the 1990s.[13] So, too, their rethinking of documentary practices needs to be considered as an important precedent for much of the so-called documentary turn of the last decade.[14] The essays included here focus primarily on two major issues raised by Sekula's writing and artistic practice: one, the contested status of photographs as documents, and therefore the nature and legacy of documentary and realist cultural practices; and two, how the traffic in photographs, in its global reach, raises again the question of the human and humanism.

For Sekula, a materialist account of the traffic in photographs shows that the myth of photography as a universal language finds its material conditions in the development of the capitalist world order, a global system of commodity production and exchange.[15] Thus, in "The Traffic in Photographs," Sekula shows how the liberal humanism of Edward Steichen's 1955 exhibition and book *The Family of Man*—which employed photography as a purportedly universal language in order to capture, through documentary views, an allegedly universal human experience—is advanced only through a conflicting set of political and economic forces. The exhibition was employed in the promotion of corporate capitalism and the exercise of American economic and political hegemony, when, after first being shown at the Museum of Modern Art, it was sent on tours to many locations across the globe through the museum's International Council, with support from the U.S. Information Agency and corporations such as Coca-Cola. Following Eva Cockroft's earlier formulation about similar tours arranged for American abstract painting, the exhibition could be seen as a "weapon of the Cold War."[16] Furthermore, the sequencing and captioning of the photographs themselves celebrated individual and ethnic differences only to subsume them within an overarching, abstract human essence that naturalized as eternal the necessarily historical, contingent, and conflictual conditions of work, celebrating human life within the framework of the patriarchal, nuclear family.

In the context of the recent reexamination of the exhibition by a large number of critics, Tamar Garb engages Sekula's ongoing criticism of *The Family of Man*, to which Sekula returns in later essays.[17] By examining the exhibition's travels to South Africa, Garb shows the extent to which the exhibition's humanism was contested: on one hand, the exhibition's view of the human "family" seemed compatible with the racial hierarchies and patriarchal, white-supremacist views of the ruling European settler class; on the other hand, the appeal to a universal category of humanity was received by other viewers, whether white, mixed, or black, as an implicit rebuke to a social order premised on brutal, state-based segregation that treated the majority of the population as less than fully human. As Garb points out, while Sekula does not consider the potentially antiracist reception of *The Family of Man* in his discussion of its South African tour, he does return to the context of South African apartheid in the conclusion to "The Body and the Archive." There Sekula ends with a discussion of Ernest Cole's *House of Bondage* (1967), a book of photographs that documents the abuse and resistance of blacks living under apartheid. For Sekula, Cole's book is a realist photographic practice that counters the instrumentalizing use of photographic archives by state power. By cataloguing with unflinching

specificity and directness what Sekula calls "the 'microphysics' of barbarism," Cole's photographs also concretely contradict the ideological universality—the positive vision of human connectedness—advanced by Steichen's exhibition.[18] Yet Garb's essay raises the question to what extent the political, evidentiary documentary work in which Cole was engaged, and which Sekula celebrates, may also entail a counterpoetics of the human or even a critical or oppositional humanism. Rather than simply rejecting the universal category of the human as a fiction or falsely naturalizing myth, criticism of humanist photography may involve the reinscription of this universality within a conflictual field of power and exclusion—a question of thinking humanism in the negative, or the human under erasure, especially in the context of decolonizing aesthetics.

In dialogue with Garb's essay, we include a lesser-known text by Sekula that returns again to *The Family of Man*—and, specifically, Roland Barthes's celebrated, earlier criticism of the exhibition—to reexamine the status of labor and work in the history of photography. In "An Eternal Esthetics of Laborious Gestures," Sekula takes up Barthes's comment about the indispensability of the human hand to examine the sequencing through which the exhibition naturalizes historical conditions of work. Sekula concludes by rereading one of the earliest records entered into the photographic archive: Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's view of the Boulevard du Temple (ca. 1838). Often presented as the first photograph of a human figure, and implicitly the earliest photographic portrait, the picture also turns out to be a scene of labor and economic exchange. Sekula points out that the daguerreotype depicts not just one figure—a male, bourgeois subject—having his shoes shined, as commonly held, but at least two, if the bootblack doing the shining is included. In making this point, Sekula does not just recover from the archive the historical specificity of the social relations and material conditions that make the photograph possible. Because the often unseen bootblack is registered as a blur on the photographic plate, he remains anonymous and his individual face is lost to history. The blur from the figure's motion can then be seen as a concrete abstraction, as a cipher of abstract labor power—and another version of the human under erasure.

By tracing the developing account of "instrumental realism" across a number of Sekula's critical texts, Thomas Keenan examines "Sekula's patient exploration of the relationship between photography, evidence, and humanism—and with it, the politics of human rights." Reconstructing Sekula's epistemology of photography, Keenan underlines the irreducibly rhetorical and tendentious aspect of every document, photographs included. In the process of considering photography's evidentiary function, Keenan points out that Sekula coins the term "counter-forensics" in a short essay

(also included in this issue of *Grey Room*) on Susan Meiselas's photographic and archival work in Kurdistan. For Keenan, counter-forensics puts forth an alternate account of the photographic archive, one hinted at but undeveloped in Sekula's other texts, especially "The Body and the Archive."[19] Like Garb, Keenan maintains it is not a question of simply dispelling the myth of humanism as a vaporous illusion. Rather than a call to smash or somehow to evade the archival apparatus, counter-forensics engages photographic archives not only as sites of abstract equivalence, leveling, or containment but as sites of struggle.

Shifting from Sekula's critical texts to his artistic practice, Benjamin J. Young explores how Sekula's ongoing criticism of liberal social documentary and of the disciplinary power exercised on the body through the photographic archive nonetheless does not lead to the exclusion of the human figure from his own photographic practice. Moving between *Fish Story* and two of Sekula's earliest photographic works, *Untitled Slide Sequence* (1972) and *Aerospace Folktales* (1973), Young analyzes their use of "sequential montage," specifically the ways in which this photographic editing engages the genre of the group portrait and reconfigures existing images of labor and everyday social life. By attending as much to unemployment and unwaged work as they do to industrial labor, Sekula's photo-works develop a politics of human figures depicted in both their subjection and their possible freedom.

Benjamin H.D. Buchloh also engages with Sekula's early artistic practice, and that of his UCSD colleagues, to argue that the group's renewed engagement with documentary practices involves dialectically overturning the existing conventions of conceptual art. At the same time, Buchloh sees Sekula and his colleagues as engaging in a "dual historical recovery": first, recovering the centrality of photography to the pre–World War II avant-gardes, including Soviet factography and, especially, John Heartfield's politicized montage; and second, recovering a tradition of twentieth-century realism that had been lost or ignored even in the midst of the embrace of photography by the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s. Thus, for Buchloh, even more than the document or documentary, the historical dialectic of *realism* within modernism is key to understanding Sekula's practice. In the context of this recovery of realism and the systematic inversion of the premises of conceptual art, Buchloh discerns in Sekula's early works such as *Untitled Slide Sequence, Aerospace Folktales*, and *Performance under Working Conditions* (1973) not only the "labor of representation and the representation of labor" but an "embodiment of representation" concerned with the social constitution of subjectivity and behavior.

In an interview with Carles Guerra excerpted here, Sekula discusses some of the formal dimensions of his photo-works, positioning his work in

relation to contemporary pictorial photography and seeking to broaden existing conceptions of artistic modernism. Ranging across both early works and more recent ones such as *Black Tide/Marea negra* (2002–2003), which depicts a volunteer-led cleanup of the 2002 oil spill on the coast of Spain after the wreck of the tanker *Prestige*, Guerra and Sekula explore Sekula's reasons for turning to the maritime space of ports, dockyards, and container ships for much of his work since 1989. As Hilde Van Gelder's presentation of Sekula's final work *Ship of Fools/The Dockers' Museum* (2010–2013) also reminds us, Sekula's maritime works track the sea as the constitutive, if often neglected, matrix of the contemporary economic and political order. That is, the sea is *The Forgotten Space*, as it was summarized in the title of the 2010 feature-length essay film Sekula directed with Noël Burch, and which is the culmination of Sekula's turn to video- and filmmaking over the past decade. Photo-works from *Fish Story* to *Deep Six/Passer au bleu* (1996–1998) to *TITANIC's wake* (1998/2000) record the latest developments in the rationalization and automation of production and transport: the standardized shipping container; the system of intermodal transport between ship, truck, and train it engenders; and the new global geography of production and distribution they enable. The works track the new material spaces and legal vehicles that emerge—from the new supersized container ships, ports, and warehouses required to handle the growing flow of goods; to the flag of convenience system of paper sovereignty that governs the shipping industry, one of the innovative legal maneuvers created by capital to maximize profit, evade regulation, and shift labor costs and environmental risks elsewhere.

At the same time, Sekula attends not only to the movement of capital and the way it reshapes the world but also to the humdrum drudgery and manual labor still required to keep the system moving. As Van Gelder explains, *The Dockers' Museum* is a kind of monument to this labor, although one created not as a grandiose structure but as a collection of found objects, one built out of the material traces of this history. *Fish Story* and the works that follow it are thus partly dedicated to recording the disappearance of the old ports and ways of the sailor that were once part of the modern city, at the moment the dockyard workforce is shrunken through technology and the new "super ports" decamp to suburban and exurban sites. These works seek to register a proletarian cosmopolitanism of the sea, one that has at least partly vanished. However, the invocation in *Fish Story*, for instance, of a history of naval mutinies stretching back to the French Revolution is not simply a left-melancholic lament for an insurrectionary past. Rather, in addition to the polemical attack on the abstract humanism of Steichen's exhibition in his critical texts, Sekula also actively documents what he sees

as an effort to "re-float" *The Family of Man*: the circumnavigation of *The Global Mariner* and her crew, a container ship refitted by a confederation of maritime and transportation unions as a traveling exhibition on the legal, economic, and working conditions of global shipping. Beyond this union of transport workers, Sekula also seeks to document more provisional moments of association, whether of the volunteers laboriously cleaning by hand, almost speck by speck, oil spilled from a sunken tanker on the shoreline in Spain in *Black Tide/Marea negra*, or of the demonstrators gathered on the streets of Seattle as they attempt to intervene in the negotiations of the global financial elite in *Waiting for Tear Gas [White Globe to Black]* (1999–2000). Alongside the counter-archival work and "humanism of mournful reindividuation" Sekula detects in Meiselas's Kurdistan project or the realist documentation of abuse and injustice practiced by Cole, Sekula's work is engaged in the partly fictive, projective, or anticipatory construction of a new international—which, given the arguments advanced in this issue, can be seen as rethinking and repicturing the human on a global scale. The "vexing puzzle of labor and value," as Sekula describes it in "An Eternal Esthetics," remains central not only to the traffic in photographs but to the symbolic and material traffic that produces and is produced by today's globalized world.

—Benjamin J. Young, for the guest editors

Notes

We thank Sally Stein for her support of this issue at the most difficult of times and for allowing us to reproduce the images and texts by Sekula included here—only she knows how much they are touched by her hand as well. Ina Steiner and Katie Shapiro provided indispensable and unflagging help with images and questions, for which we are grateful. We also thank the Centre Georges Pompidou for hosting the conference out of which this special issue grew, and the Terra Foundation for American Art for generously providing travel assistance.

1. Allan Sekula, "The Invention of Photographic Meaning," *Artforum* 13, no. 5 (January 1975): 36–45; Sekula, review of Ron Gallela, *Jaqueline*, *Artforum* 13, no. 8 (April 1975): 70–72; and Sekula, "The Instrumental Image: Steichen at War," *Artforum* 14, no. 4 (December 1975): 26–35.

2. Allan Sekula, introduction to *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), xiv. In addition to the *Artforum* essays, this volume also includes the critical essays "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)" and "The Traffic in Photographs."

3. Sekula, introduction to *Photography against the Grain*, xv.

4. Along with *Photography against the Grain*, two other key essays by Sekula also appeared in the mid-1980s: Allan Sekula, "Photography between Labor and Capital," in *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures 1948–1968*, ed. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), 193–268; and Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3–64.

5. This may have partly been score settling, given Sekula's cursory dismissal of Kramer in the Steichen text, but it took place in the context of Kramer's larger fusillade against the editorial line of *Artforum*, which he denounced as "a tendentious sociopolitical analysis of all artistic events." Hilton Kramer, "Muddled Marxism Replaces Criticism at Artforum," *New York Times*, 21 December 1975. A year later, *Artforum* publisher Charles Cowles, acknowledging the influence of the Kramer article, publicly expressed dissatisfaction with the magazine's editorial direction and did not renew the contract of editor-in-chief John Coplans. In turn, executive editor Max Kozloff resigned. Editors Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss had already left the magazine to form *October*. See Grace Glueck, "Art People," *New York Times*, 31 December 1976.

6. Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary," in *Dismal Science: Photo Works 1972–1996* (Normal: Illinois State University, 1999), 120. The other key text that articulates many of the concerns of the group is Martha Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)" (1981), in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; New York: International Center of Photography, 2004), 151–206.

7. Sekula, introduction to *Photography against the Grain*, ix.

8. Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Rotterdam: Witte de With; Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1995).

9. Books published include Allan Sekula, *Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); Allan Sekula, *Dead Letter Office* (Rotterdam: Netherlands Foto Instituut, 1997); Allan Sekula, *Dismal Science: Photo Works 1972–1996* (Normal: Illinois State University, 1999); Allan Sekula, *Calais vu par Allan Sekula: Deep Six/Passer au bleu* (Calais: Musée des Beaux Arts et de la Dentelle, 2001); Allan Sekula, *TITANIC's wake* (Paris:

Le Point du Jour Éditeurs, 2003); *Allan Sekula: Performance under Working Conditions*, ed. Sabine Breitwieser (Vienna: Generali Foundation; Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2003); and Allan Sekula, *Polonia and Other Fables* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago; Warsaw: Zachęta National Gallery of Art, 2009).

10. Colloque Allan Sekula: La photographie au travail, organized by Marie Muracciole, Centre Georges Pompidou, 28 June 2013.

11. Excellent overviews of his vita include Edward Dimendberg, "Remembering Allan Sekula (1951–2013)," *Texte zur Kunst* 92 (December 2013): 251–254; Steve Edwards, "Socialism and the Sea: Allan Sekula, 1951–2013," *Radical Philosophy* 182 (November/December 2013): 61–65; and Terry Smith, "Allan Sekula," *Critical Inquiry: In the Moment* [blog], http://critinq.wordpress.com/2013/08/15/allan-sekula/.

12. Allan Sekula, *Écrits sur la photographie 1974–1986*, ed. and trans. Marie Muracciole (Paris: Beaux-Arts de Paris, 2013).

13. Although Sekula is cited as a historian, neither he nor his UCSD colleagues are mentioned by George Baker as practitioners who figure among James Coleman, Jeff Wall, and Cindy Sherman, "the great triumvirate [*sic*] of postmodern 'photographers' in the late 1970s" who staked out photography's expanded field. George Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field," *October* 114 (Fall 2005): 132.

14. In addition to the watershed exhibition Documenta 11 (2002), at which *Fish Story* was exhibited, see Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl, eds., *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art* (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008); and T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). See also the related artistic turn to the archive discussed in Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 3–22; and Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Photography*, exh. cat. (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2008); and a critical response to this trend in John Tagg, "The Archiving Machine; or, The Camera and the Filing Cabinet," *Grey Room* 47 (Spring 2012): 24–37.

15. Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," *Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 16.

16. Eva Cockroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* 12, no. 10 (June 1974): 39–41.

17. *The Family of Man* is first discussed in "The Traffic in Photographs"; it recurs again in "An Eternal Esthetics of Laborious Gestures," published in this issue of *Grey Room*, and in Allan Sekula, "Between the Net and the Deep Blue Sea (Rethinking the Traffic in Photographs)," *October* 102 (Fall 2002): 3–34.

18. Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 64. It is Garb, not Sekula, who links Cole's work back to *The Family of Man*.

19. Compare also John Tagg's recent invocation of Meiselas's Kurdistan project as an example of counter-archival work. Although Tagg draws on arguments he and Sekula had made earlier about the archive, he does not explicitly engage the question of counter-forensics. Instead, he voices skepticism about recent returns to the archive in art and warns against art practices that mine photographic archives for material while leaving unexamined the power relations that assemble, order, and govern those archives, as well as the instrumental uses to which those archives are put. Tagg, "The Archiving Machine."