



REINVENTING DOCUMENTARY: THE ART OF ALLAN SEKULA

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In place of a class struggle founded on the need that inspires “a humanism of need, as the direct hold of every man on all men,” as happens today, there was a time when value was conferred by work—real, intelligent, skillful work.

—Jean-Paul Sartre quoting himself, 1961

More than anything else, Allan Sekula was an artist who understood himself to be a laborer. Photography was the special site of his conflicted self-understanding—“Photographers are detail workers when they are not artists,” is how he put it at one point, “and thus it is not unreasonable . . . to label photographers the ‘proletarians of creation.’”¹ The surreptitious slippage in his phrasing that takes us from a stark opposition between artists-as-free-agents and workers-as-dependent-cogs to their nebulous union in the photographer-cum-proletarian points to the mettle and substance of his life’s work. His goal, in a nutshell, was to artfully introduce into the bourgeois domain of fine art the suffering, insight, and demands of proletarian life that are uniquely available to documentary as a particular form of non-art. He reinvented documentary, in other words, by taking its most base and vulnerable realization—an insight that Marx famously memorialized with the righteous *cri de coeur* “I am nothing but I should be everything”—and making it into the foundation for a program of art.

Sekula was furtive about his aim, because such a project asks a lot from us. In order for our understanding of art to open itself outward to the richness of the larger world made available to us by documentary, it requires two fundamental changes in how we experience ourselves as artists and art appreciators.

First, we have to sensitize ourselves to the fears and desires we all harbor that are non-bourgeois, that are not those we flaunt when we think of ourselves as the “creative class” setting the stage for urban life but instead are born of that part of us that toils in order to survive. Sekula was able to do this himself by simply facing up to his own place as a teacher in the art economy. In an essay accompanying his 1978–80 work *School Is a Factory*, for example, he wrote that, while the education system still bears the residue of its foundational aim to realize the heroic humanist ideals of the Enlightenment, more and more it has been rejiggered to conform to the ignoble drives of the capitalist economy: “art departments,” he insisted, have become “industrial parks in which the creative spirit, like cosmetic shrubbery or Muzak, still ‘lives.’ Photographic education is largely directed at people who will become detail workers in one sense or another.”² Teacher and student alike, he lamented, are interlocking cogs in a machine not of their own making and beyond their control.

Second, we have to understand our roles as workers in the education, museum, design, computer, entertainment, or whatever industries—our airy “creative class” roles, that is, now brought to earth as those of workaday “proletarians of creation”—to be in conflict with that truly higher part of ourselves that dreams of art in its best sense, that part that reaches for the autonomy and personhood of being bourgeois. Opening art out onto the fullness of the world it inhabits is only available, Sekula argued, by working “from within concrete life situations, situations within which there [is] either an overt or active clash of interests and representations.”³ Experiencing the conflict between art’s real promise of free personhood and its real reality of cog-like dependency is itself a form of enlightenment, Sekula’s work tells us, because it allows us to experience ourselves as proletarians in a bourgeois dream and bourgeois in a proletarian reality. Such experience “gives you a bitter sense that all the promissory notes of the American Dream are rarely cashed in,” he said not too long ago. “You see failure and blockages all around you.”⁴ When we sensitize ourselves sufficiently to this reality, we are able

to experience the promise of art as neither a jaded reflection of our powerlessness nor an overweening sense of our precious difference or autonomy but instead as a desperate form of faith or hope or charity frustrated by a routinely unjust world.

Modern art has always yearned for that faith, hope, or charity—in the name of free personhood, justice, or collective self-determination—but the logistics of how it might be realized are almost always less clear. We get a sense of one approach from the title for the heroic final song of the opera that Sekula imagined would complement his 2002 work *Black Tide*, “The Song of Society Against the State.” The same approach was there in the old phenomenological contest between system and lifeworld that he first turned to in *School Is a Factory*, something that governed the self-portraiture at play in all of his subsequent work: “a way of talking, with words and images about both the system and *our* lives within the system.”⁵

His critique, in other words, aimed first and foremost for Sartre’s “humanism of need” with its “direct hold of every man on all men,” its way of understanding “*our* lives” as independent from and in a state of tension with their mediation by systems. But such immediacy of need was always only ever half the story:

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.⁶

Tending our own little gardens, understanding our own little needs, experiencing “*our* lives within the system,” Sekula’s work tells us, is not only a genuine form of truth and empowerment, it is also an ignominious form of blindness and suffering. The real struggle is to experience the immediacy of need in concert with its potential to be realized through the mediating systems that govern it.

Documentary at its most direct is brute, factual evidence of such woeful need. The examples are legion, but call to mind almost any of the photographs by Jacob Riis—his *Basement of a Pub in Mulberry-Bend at 3:00 am* will do. Art distinguishes itself from documentary by taking the brute facticity of human suffering and making it into a value and a shared will, by standing up for the “ism” in humanism as a righteous protest of conscience against that need. All modern art worth its salt took on this higher-order feeling in one way or another, but we might take Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* as its zenith. The problem, however, is that art’s *Guernica*-like protest is almost always as powerless as documentary’s base recognition. At its best, it is a raised fist or a bleeding heart, a righteous and indignant protest addressed to a parentlike authority. In this sense Picasso’s oft-touted insight about art seeking to be childlike was indeed right.

However, if we want to change the world and have those needs realized, art’s step up from documentary is not enough; its humanism of need has to be complemented by the old humanism of work that Sartre reminds us of. The basis for this higher version of humanism’s “ism”—the value conferred by “real, intelligent, skillful work”—is suggested everywhere in Sekula’s oeuvre. As the pictures in this exhibition attest, he turns again and again to the nobility of the production and reproduction of our world through labor. We can see it in his titles alone: *Unloading frozen fish from the Malvinas*; *Sorting octopus. Puerto Pesquero*; *Dockers Looking*; *Dockers Listening*; *Self Portrait as Sculptor/Painter/Photographer*; *Waiting for Tear Gas*. These words and their corresponding images bear the weight of society on their shoulders—the burden of the logistics, mechanics, and perspiration necessary to provide for need—much more than they document or empathize with that need itself. There are no pictures of Spanish war victims or New York slum dwellers, for example, and no request that we share in their suffering; instead there are only images of people struggling to do things. In this sense these pictures reach upward in a simple progression of

becoming human—from machinelike recognition of another’s need (documentary) to childlike identification with that need (art) to adultlike collaboration in order to do something about it (work).

The great gift of Sekula’s legacy, in other words, is that it takes us a good way up this chain of being. As documentary-cum-art it sets the terms more than it performs the requisite labor, of course, but that is already leagues ahead of what we get anywhere else. Invitations to regress to the impotent experience of our own need or to piously identify with the wretched need of others are everywhere in the world we inhabit, not the least so in our art. Sekula’s resolute reply from another time reminds us that the only way to truly honor that need is to let go of the infantilizing immediacy that comes with its mere recognition and turn to its humanizing, self-actualizing, world-making mediation through work.

Blake Stimson

Blake Stimson teaches at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He is the author of *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation* and *Citizen Warhol*, among other publications.

Notes

¹ Allan Sekula quoting Bernard Edelman in “Reading an Archive: Photography Between Labour and Capital,” in Liz Wells, ed., *The Photography Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), 444.

² Sekula, “On the Politics of Education and the Traffic in Photographs,” *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 228.

³ Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain*, x.

⁴ Sukhdev Sandhu, “Allan Sekula: filming the forgotten resistance at sea,” *Guardian*, April 20, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/apr/20/allan-sekula-resistance-at-sea> (accessed December 21, 2014).

⁵ Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain*, 234.

⁶ Sekula speaking at “Forgotten Spaces,” a conversation with Benjamin Buchloh, David Harvey, and Allan Sekula, at a screening of *The Forgotten Space*, the 2010 film by Sekula and Noël Burch, at the Cooper Union, New York, May 2011, filmed by Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen, Roberto Meza, and Park McArthur. <http://vimeo.com/24394711> (accessed December 21, 2014).



Ronna and Eric Hoffman
Gallery of Contemporary Art
Lewis & Clark College
0615 S.W. Palatine Hill Road
Portland, Oregon 97219

