REINVENTING DOCUMENTARY:  
THE ART OF ALLAN SEKULA

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More than anything else, Allan Sekula was an artist who understood himself to be a labourer. 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.’” 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.
the promissory notes of the American Dream are rarely cashed in,” he argued, by working “from within concrete life situations, situations within art out onto the fullness of the world it inhabits is only available, Sekula reach for the autonomy and personhood of being bourgeois. Opening part of ourselves that dreams of art in its best sense, that part that workaday “proletarians of creation”—to be in conflict with that truly higher form to the ignoble drives of the capitalist economy: “art departments,” idears of the Enlightenment, more and more it has been rejiggered to con- form to the ignoble drives of the capitalist economy: “art departments,” to the mediating systems that govern it. The great gift of Sekula’s legacy, in other words, is that it takes us experience the promise of art as neither a jaded reflection of our lives within the system,” Sekula’s work tells us, is not only a genuine form of both truth and empowerment. It is also an igneous form of binary 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 each word we speak. The examples we give are not an irredeemable loss for the photographs by Jacob Riis—the Basement of a Pub in Mulberry Bend at 3:00 am we will do. Art distinguishes itself from documentary by taking the brute facility 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 provides for need—much more than they document or empathize with; instead there are only images of people struggling to do things. The value conferred by “real, intelligent, skillful work”—is suggested by 3:00 am–like protest is almost always as powerless as Guernica. These words and their corresponding images bear the weight of society on their shoulders—of the brute facticity of human suffering and making it into a value and a...
First, we have to set aside our own lives and do all we can to help others. But are those times when we think of ourselves as the "creative class" setting the stage for urban lifefeverishness or an irreversible march of some of our precious difference or autonomy but instead as a desperate form of faith or hope or charity promised by a routinized unjust world. Modern art has always seemed to have 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 work of the 20th Century: "The Song of Society Against the State." The same documentary’s base recognition. At its best, it is a raised fist or a bleeding heart, a righteous and indignant protest addressed to a part of us that toils in order to survive. Sekula laments 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 woeful need. The examples are legion, but call to mind almost any of the photographs by Jacob Riis—his The Song of Society Against the State.

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