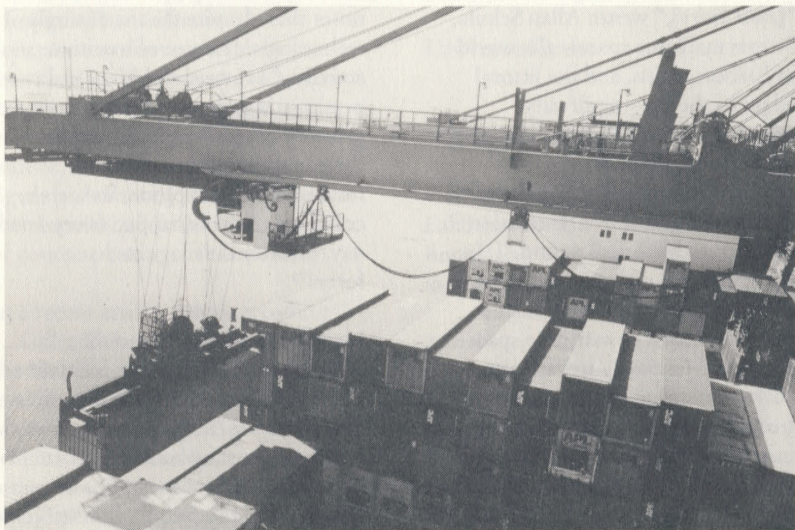


Allan Sekula
MATRIX/BERKELEY 162

University Art Museum /
Pacific Film Archive
mid January - late March 1994

*Hammerhead crane..., San Pedro, California,
from Fish Story (version 4), 1992-93*



This MATRIX exhibition, *Fish Story* (work in progress), is an excerpt from Allan Sekula's large-scale project *Fish Story* which is scheduled to open in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, in 1995. Presented here are the two segments, *Fish Story* (version 4) and *Loaves and Fishes* (version 2), which incorporate color photographs, captions, and text labels.

"[*Fish Story*]," writes Allan Sekula, "treats maritime space—the world of harbors, ships, and the littoral edges of the sea—as already encoded within a long history of literary and pictorial representations and as the site of radical and global transformation in the present historical period."¹ In particular, Sekula's current work explores the uneasy relationship that has existed in maritime space between a tendency toward anti-authoritarianism or imaginative freedom and the influence of instruments of power and control: economic, military, and political.

"*Fish Story* is the third in a cycle of works on the imaginary and material geographies of the advanced capitalist world," writes Sekula. "All these works [besides *Fish Story*, these include *Sketch for a Geography Lesson* (1983) and *Canadian Notes* (1986)] are extended meditations on landscape and constitute a turn in my own work toward a rethinking of the problem of romanticism."² For Sekula, the indelible influence of romanticism has been to impart an idealized perception of harbors, ships, and seafarers as suffused with adventure, unpredictability, and nascent political rebellion. In today's increasingly monolithic society, homogenized by regional

and global trade agreements and the socio-military concept of the "New World Order," this romantic perspective seems somewhat outdated; nevertheless, Sekula proposes, it may contain a germ of truth. Photographing in harbors as various as Los Angeles, New York, Gdansk, and Rotterdam, for example, Sekula exposes the degree to which development of industry and trade globally is proceeding at radically differing paces. He also notes that, despite the increasingly technological nature of maritime activity, "a certain stubborn and pessimistic insistence on the primacy of material forces is part of the common culture of harbor residents. Ships explode, leak, sink, collide. Accidents happen every day. Gravity is recognized as a force."³

Identifying his interest in the "critical and socially transformative side of romanticism," Sekula writes that salvaging this perspective "may require a constant movement between modes of metaphor or allegory and modes of description..."⁴ Towards this end, *Fish Story* presents apparently straightforward documentary elements such as photographs, captions, and "explanatory" labels, arranged in such a way as to perform a didactic function while simultaneously opening space for the viewer's imaginative involvement. These openings are achieved both literally, through the spatial gaps between images and their captions, and figuratively, through the juxtaposition of images which may suggest broader meanings than those explicitly conveyed. Both stylistically and thematically, Sekula's current work echoes Sergei Eisenstein's classic film, *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925, in

which a montage of images combines narrative and poetic approaches to tell the story of a naval insurrection during the Russian Revolution.

It has been an important point in Sekula's theoretical writing that the experience of art be "anchored in concrete social relations, rather than as a mystified, vaporous, and a historical realm of purely affective expression and experience."⁵ However, his insistence on concreteness does not exclude an attention to those aspects of human experience that are irrational or beyond scientific prediction. Indeed, disorder and the imaginary figure prominently as underlying themes within Sekula's presentation of contemporary maritime space.

In a recent article, Sekula wrote: "...Gilles Deleuze has argued that the Melvillean ship constitutes the meeting point of order and disorder, of control and chaos. Viewed schematically, the ship is a model of order, of containment. Viewed phenomenologically, it is a labyrinth, threatening madness, claustrophobia, blindness, drowning. The first vantage is that of the captain, the second is that of the crew. And yet the captain is human, and prone, like Ahab, to descend into chaos, just as the crew is capable, in the hopes of both [C.L.R.] James and [Sergei] Eisenstein before him, of rising to the level of autonomous collective command. The ship, then, can be said to be both a 'heterotopia,' that is 'a space without a place that is... closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea' (Foucault), and a great contested instrument of power, the very model of the war machine."⁶

Maritime space—a space which once filled the cultures of the world with its smells, sounds, sights and legends—has become marginal, almost to the point of invisibility. Sekula's *Fish Story* asks us to take a new look at the potency of the sea and its traffic, and to wonder what surprises it may hold for the future.

Allan Sekula was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1951 and currently lives in Los Angeles.

Lawrence Rinder

Notes

1. Allan Sekula, "Notes for an Exhibition Project" (for Witte de With, Rotterdam), 1992, unpublished manuscript (xerox), p. 1.
2. Ibid.
3. Allan Sekula, "Fish Story," *A Dialogue About Recent American and European Photography* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991), p. 32.
4. Allan Sekula, "Dismal Science," slide lecture, 1992, unpublished manuscript (xerox), p. 4.
5. Allan Sekula, quoted in Ann Goldstein, "Dialogues and Accidence," *A Dialogue About Recent American and European Photography* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991), p. 7.
6. Allan Sekula, "War Without Bodies," *Artforum*, Nov. '91, p. 107.

Works in MATRIX (all works are lent by the artist):

Two sequences from *Fish Story* (work in progress):

Fish Story (version 4), 1992-93, eighteen Cibachrome prints (nine 32 x 22 1/2" each; nine 24 x 32 1/2" each); three text panels, black-and-white photographic prints (introductory panel 40 x 28"; two caption panels, 32 x 22 1/2" each).

Loaves and Fishes (version 2), 1992, eight Cibachrome prints (three 32 x 22 1/2" each; five 24 x 30 1/2" each); three text panels, black-and-white photographic prints (introductory panel and epigram, 40 x 28" each; caption panel 32 x 22 1/2").

Selected one-person exhibitions:

The Kitchen, NYC '75; Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany '84; Werkstatt für Fotografie, Berlin, Germany '84; The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston '86; Forum Stadtpark, Graz, Austria '87; P.S. 1 Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Long Island City, NY '87; Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia '91.

Selected group exhibitions:

Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, *New American Filmmakers Series: Connell, Sekula and Torres* '76; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, *American Narrative/Story Art 1967-1977* '77 (traveled, catalog); Film in the Cities, St. Paul, *Susan Meiselos and Allan Sekula* '83; The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC, *Art & Ideology* '84 (catalog); Galerie Perspektief, Rotterdam, *Vormen von Documentaire Fotografie in de jaren '80 '87* (catalog); Dia Art

Foundation, NYC, *If You Lived Here: Home Front* (catalog); The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, *A Dialogue about Recent American and European Photography* '91 (catalog); Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA, *Proof: Los Angeles Art and the Photograph, 1960-1980* '92 (traveled, catalog); Museet for Fotokunst, Odense, Denmark, *Real Stories* '92 (traveled, catalog); Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, *Whitney Biennial '93* (catalog); New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC, *Trade Routes* '93.

Selected bibliography (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

Sekula, Allan. *A Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983*. (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, '84).

-----, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter '86), pp. 3-64.

Edwards, Steve. "The Conditions of Photographic Culture," *Art History* 9 (Dec. '86).

Rugoff, Ralph. "The Big Picture," (interview), *L.A. Weekly*, (Sept. 16-22, '88).

Liss, Andrea. "Doom with a View," *Asterimage*, vol. 18, no. 5 (Dec. '90), pp. 19-20.

Werneberg, Brigitte. "Seemanidgärn, abgewickelt," *Die Tageszeitung* (Sept. 4 '92).

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