

Allan Sekula's ports of call



A still of an empty cargo ship from Allan Sekula and Noel Burch's film...

The late artist and activist Allan Sekula's exhibition resonates with Singapore's identity as a port city

SINGAPORE – As Singapore marches towards its 50th anniversary celebrations, many art-related showcases have looked at various facets of the Republic's identity. Not much, however, has been said of its roots as a port city. Here, the NTU Centre For Contemporary Art (NTU CCA) Singapore has jumped into the ongoing conversation, albeit in an indirect way.

While the late American photographer and activist Allan Sekula did not visit Singapore, an exhibition of his works, collectively called *Fish Story, To Be Continued*, resonates in the Singaporean context. Sekula, who passed away in 2013 at 62, had been preoccupied with the global maritime industry and the stories behind the world's ports and harbours. The exhibition offers a glimpse into these, comprising selections of photographs from his five-year project from the late 1980s and early 1990s titled *Fish Story*, as well as two slightly more current video works titled *Lottery Of The Sea* and *The Forgotten Space*.

It is an intriguing world, to be sure. In his oldest project *Fish Story*, which was also published as a book, Sekula travelled to different ports, including those in Los Angeles, New York, Rotterdam, South Korea and Hong Kong. The photographs reveal many of these places in various states of decline and abandonment as a result of a rapidly-changing globalised world.

Sekula's photography work — coupled with his critical writings — have been instrumental in highlighting photography as an important social tool, said Anca Rujoiu, the exhibition's co-curator along with NTU CCA director Ute Meta Bauer. But not, she emphasised, in the direction of photojournalism, which treasured objectivity and the so-called truths. It was subjectivity of a more progressive kind.

This is seen in Sekula's gritty portrayal of the maritime industry. While ports and harbours in Asia boomed thanks to brisk industrialisation, the traditional functions of many of the ports in the Western world disappeared and were replaced by tourism, said Rujoiu. One of the most famous examples was the so-called Bilbao Effect, where the famous Spanish port city transitioned into a cultural hub thanks to the construction of the Guggenheim Museum there, which effectively changed its image and identity. In the exhibition, one photo of a port in Los Angeles also alludes to its transformation into a site where Hollywood movies were shot.

Elsewhere, Sekula refers to the so-called triangular slave trade route between Europe, Africa and the New World (aka the Americas), which is still pretty much in use today. "Maritime trade is an important part of colonial history and, in fact, started it," said Rujoiu.

There is nothing abstract about Sekula's interests in the seas — his works highlight the plight of peoples that have become invisible. For example, in one photograph, a sign in Thai is found in one of the ports in the United States, a subtle commentary on the global network of workers whose livelihoods are tied to ships. Elsewhere, this global labour force surfaces, from Filipinos working in ships or as maids in Hong Kong to Korean labourers working in shipyards. Questions arise, too, of human labour being pushed aside in the name of progress, with technology taking over the role of workers.

But there are also timely reminders of how this supposedly faceless masses are powerful agents of change: One part of *Fish Story* focuses on Poland, where the anti-Communist Solidarity freedom movement had sprung up in a shipyard — and, its leader (and future Polish President) Lech Walesa had, in fact, been an electrician working there.

While Singapore's own port may be less exciting, it is still undoubtedly part of this global network of trade routes and you can definitely find certain issues in Sekula's exhibition resonating close to home: Singapore's new arts-and-entertainment hub image looks suspiciously like the Bilbao Effect taking place and, in the broader region, the geopolitical bickering among China, Vietnam, the Philippines and the United States revolving around who controls the seas is, no doubt, related to issues of maritime trade.

You could also say the exhibition has a direct connection to Singapore arts too as Sekula's original *Fish Story* had been exhibited at the prestigious Documenta contemporary art event in 2002, where Singaporean artist Charles Lim had also exhibited under his collective *tsunami.net*. Lim, of course, is one of the few local artists whose practice expounds on Singapore's relationship with the sea. This was evident in his work *SEA STATE*, which was presented at this year's Venice Biennale and of which a new version is reportedly coming to NTU CCA in April next year.

It would certainly have been interesting to see both exhibitions side by side, but in themselves, Sekula's works already offer much food for thought. After all, while 90 per cent of the world's goods reportedly pass through the world's seas and oceans (many of which pass through Singapore), these are still fairly uncharted territories in the public imagination compared to how anything related to the skies easily grabs headlines.

Bauer pointed out that ships would sink frequently and, barring oil spill incidents, such news would barely cause a ripple in conversations — a stark contrast to the buzz generated by every aeroplane accident. "The air is favoured over the oceans," she said.

In this light, Sekula's fishy tale remains relevant as it brings the unknown to the surface.