

Allan Sekula is one of the most outstanding contemporary American artists working in the medium of photography. He usually groups his works in series and employs various formats, from urban-space billboards to small prints. His subjects include politics and history, social relations, ecology and climate change—in his words, the “imaginary and material geographies of the advanced capitalist world.” He also is an author of important critical texts about photography. Sekula’s work is not so much an extension of modernist social documentary practices as it is an interrogation of and reflection on those practices. Just as it acknowledges the necessity of social documentary, it questions its viability in the face of sociopolitical ideology, invisible but omnipresent.

The essays featured in this publication describe Sekula’s work as a “photographic-essayistic-poetic investigation” or as “pieces of a puzzle” including elements ranging from geopolitics to autobiography. Importantly, his project is not to simply take on the world, but also to link the self to the world. Given that the Sekula clan hails from Poland, this position of artist-*cum*-observer brought him to the Gdansk shipyard during the rise of Solidarity. He returned to Poland and visited Chicago, home of the largest community of Polish immigrants in the United States, several times over the period of 2007–2009 to develop *Polonia and Other Fables*, presented at The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago in Fall 2009 and at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw in Winter 2009–2010.

The forty photographs and accompanying texts that make up *Polonia and Other Fables* are memory exercises made by a American artist of Polish origins evoking family history and observations on Polish-US relations. Sekula shares his particular sensitivity to Polish-related themes with many other American artists and intellectuals. It is thanks to them that Poland, despite its geographical distance and the language barrier, remains present in contemporary American culture.

The Zachęta National Gallery thanks the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage for supporting their presentation of this important exhibition with a special grant. We are particularly grateful to the authors of the texts featured in the exhibition catalogue, Hilde Van Gelder, Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans, and Hamza Walker, and to the Zachęta’s curator, Karolina Lewandowska, as well as to all those in Chicago and Warsaw who helped the artist bring this project to fruition. Meeting and working with Allan Sekula has been a rewarding and important experience for both The Renaissance Society and the Zachęta, for which we thank him greatly.

Susanne Ghez

Director, The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago

Agnieszka Morawińska

Director, Zachęta National Gallery of Art

The Unbearable Heaviness of Myth¹

Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans

"A normal Pole thinks of emigration at least once in their life."

"A normal Pole, you know, thinks of emigration at least once a week. I believe that thinking of emigration as often as you can is a criterion of being both normal and a Pole."

Jerzy Pilch, *Marsz Polonia*, Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2008, p. 120

(conversation between the narrator and Benjamin Bezetny)

Great and small emigrations of all kinds, from wanderings and exiles through political, economic, transatlantic, and inner emigrations, both voluntary and forced, to prolonged voyages and returns from them, or yearning for such returns, are a constant feature of Polish literature and the Polish imagination. So perhaps migrations, whether resulting from human movement or, conversely, from shifts in national borders, belong inextricably to Polishness. Hence Jerzy Pilch's ironic idea that thinking about emigration is a criterion of both normalness and Polishness, articulated by his character Benjamin Bezetny in the novel *Marsz Polonia*, appears less subversive than it might seem at first sight. The very term 'Polonia' carries two different meanings: an early allegory of state and the Polish community abroad.² In both cases Polonia is ultimately a kind of myth or an imaginary construct that discloses what the nation craves to be rather than what it actually is. The Polonia constructed by Allan Sekula is denounced already in the title of his work, where it is labeled a fable, an unreal entity, which moreover will be accompanied by other phantasms. The title heralds a hybrid and multilayered work, balancing between word and image, and between photographic realism and literary-filmic vision. Photography merges with essay, causing image to become a text that needs to be read and text to become image that needs to be looked at. Mixing and blurring boundaries is not only Sekula's artistic strategy; it is also a phenomenon whose manifestations he constantly tracks down. That is why *Polonia and Other Fables* can be read and viewed in many different ways, adopting the perspective of either the Polish American community or of those living in Poland, seeing it as a personal search for the artist's roots, or as a reflection on national symbols and nationalistic ideology, or on present-day Polish-USA relations, economic conditions, and effects of the free-market economy, or, finally, on the boundaries and loops of the photographic tradition.

Freeing oneself of Poland. Well aware of the paradoxes of being a Pole in exile, novelist Witold Gombrowicz persuaded his compatriots "wistfully sighing for lost homeland": "Don't be cry babies, I'm telling you. Don't forget that when you lived in Poland, none of you cared for Poland at all, because it was the daily reality. Today you no longer live in Poland, but in return Poland lives more strongly in you."³ The Poland that is a place to live and the Poland that lives in those who have left it: these are the two opposite ends of the photographic-essayistic investigations of Allan Sekula, who shares with Gombrowicz an aversion to wistful sighs and all forms of sentimentalism. A lot of the work involved in preparing this exhibition consisted in travelling to, and discovering, places connected with the notion of 'Polonia'. What takes place here is a personal journey of a Polish American who, like many before him, visits the land of his paternal grandfathers. But it is also a journey into the past, into history, made by an artist who, to use Andrzej Bobkowski's description, is a "specimen of a human being of a very complex chemical

composition.⁴ There is little cry-babying here: what Sekula is interested in is tracking down and confronting the myths of the past, including national myths, and their visual representations. His working method involves a search—always multidirectional, bifurcated, and open to associations—for relationships and correlations between economy and culture in all its diverse manifestations. This strategy is analogous to genealogical investigation, in itself inevitably marked by sentimentalism.

Investigating family genealogy, practiced widely in the United States, a country of immigrants *par excellence*, may be partly a personal need for Sekula, but in his work he treats it above all as a pretext for playing out the relationship between words and images. In one of the photographs we see the artist's father with a list of people, several of whom are rabbis, whose last name was Sekula. This picture introduces a theme that returns several times in the text accompanying the exhibition, a text that is a cross between a script of a movie never made and a delirious stream of consciousness. Among other things, it evokes an image of the family gravestone whereon the Polish-sounding name Sekula loses the 'i', become Sekula, the dropped slash an adaptation to the English-speaking world. The alleged Latin provenance of the name, derived perhaps from the biblical *in saecula saeculorum*,⁵ allows Sekula to produce a humorous litany of various pronunciations and phonetic transcriptions of his last name. Alongside these almost poetic variations on his own appellation are shreds of memories of visits to Poland and the conversations he had there, featuring themes of both anti-Semitism and the omnipresent Catholicism. The artist's private micro-history becomes an opportunity to reflect on the past and present of Polish-American relations. The national mythology, handed down to the artist by his father, dominated by Sienkiewiczian post-Romantic militarism and Sarmatian dreams of power, becomes at once material and point of departure for investigations and analyses of both artistic and social issues.

New meat slides. Norman Davies quotes a popular 1970s/1980s joke in which the Polish word *mit* ('myth') and the English 'meat' are not only pronounced similarly, but also have the same meaning.⁶ This translator's joke aptly conveys the reality of the shortage-economy era, where the unavailability of basic consumer goods provoked creative self-irony. Another example is Andrzej Krauze's 1977 caricature titled *New Meat Slides! (Large Selection—Natural Colours)*.⁷ It shows the era's characteristic image of a butcher's shop with rows of empty hooks on the wall. Yet the shopkeeper offers a charming substitute: slide boxes have been arranged on the counter and next to them stands a projector so that images of meats can be projected on the wall in, as the ad promises, natural colors. Both meat jokes—the textual one and the visual—can serve as leitmotifs in understanding Sekula's *Polonia*, since he uses photography to track down meat myths in the post-socialist reality on both sides of the Atlantic. Although it seems that supply shortages are gone for good, the irony of these old jokes may not be completely outdated.

Sekula finds traces and fragments of 'meat stories' in ordinary, often banal and unexpected, places. The Polish penchant for an unbearably heavy meat-based diet manifests itself not only during a Polish culture festival in Chicago, where all kinds of meat snacks are served, but also

in the symbolic sphere, reappearing on the invariably white-and-red T-shirts with bawdy inscriptions, sold by street vendors. It might seem that, inasmuch as *kielbasa* (sausage) is one of the trademarks of Polish culture in America, so too would be Polish-produced and exported pork, a primary ingredient. Sekula, however, documents a different exchange. The largest American pork producer, Smithfield Foods, has relocated some of its production to Poland. 'Pork factories' such as those operated by Smithfield have been criticized not only for the cruel conditions in which the animals are bred and kept, but also for their environmental pollution and the resulting health hazards. This part of the exhibition brings to mind the committed practices of early 20th-century American documentary photography. What social-reformer photographers like Lewis Hine or Jacob Riis produced was photographic evidence, on the situation of child laborers or immigrants, for instance, which could then be used to advocate change. Well versed in the history and theory of photography, Sekula is aware of the limitations imposed on him not only by the visual language of the photographic medium, but also by the different social reality in which he functions. Meat shops are no longer empty today, but animal breeding and meat production technologies have lost their former transparency. In this context, the metaphor in Andrzej Krauze's cartoon is given a twist, the punch line becoming verbal rather than visual. Though Sekula went to Więckowice in western Poland to visit a Smithfield factory farm, he was refused access to the premises. Industrial corporations have been sued enough times since the onset of photography to realize that images can be lethal. So there are no meat slides showing industrial pork breeding, only an aerial view of the plant, a landscape shot of an innocent-looking cornfield, and the portrait of a boy who may be one of the first victims of the environmental pollution caused by Smithfield Foods.

This attempt to confront the meat myth allows us to observe Allan Sekula's work method. The visual and textual game he plays takes place on two levels. On the one hand, photography is presented so as to reveal the limitations of the medium, stretched between documentary and art photography. On the other, Sekula does not give up showing the real world and its social, cultural, and economic issues, even if all he can afford are allusions and suggestive substitutes. If criticism of the medium is a means of overcoming the naiveté of the realist's position, then Sekula's emphasis on showing ties between artistic productions and the economy aims to point out the grandiloquence of drawing a line between (highbrow) culture and the rest of social life.

There are, of course, more spaces of exchange and mutual influence between Poland and America. If images of the Mazury lake district inevitably bring to mind Krzysztof Komeda's jazz melodies from *Knife in the Water*—thus alluding to Polish-American musical and cinematographic dialogues⁸—the actual lake photographed by Sekula introduces the theme of intergovernmental relations on quite a different level. The hardly joyful knowledge of Poland's involvement in the US-led "war on terror" and the controversial issue of Poland's purchase of F-16 fighter jets serve as background for a series of photographs of military facilities. The picture of a sign reading "No Entry" in four languages in the middle of a lake is very telling here. Sekula's unique sensitivity to the humorous absurdity

of the detail is harnessed to the process of reading the surrounding world and deciphering its signs. At the same time, these pictures feature themes that run through much of Sekula's work. The motif of water, the sea and the lake, explored in the *Fish Story* project, reappears here to indicate evolution in the tactics of limiting access to and visibility of military-purpose areas. A sign forbidding entry to a lake that hardly looks like a military area is also an indication of a growing subsumption of public lands to military/government use.

Polish symbolic transformation. Allan Sekula searches for new visual and textual formulas in order to build an image of the world that eludes easy categorization. His practice is marked by an opposition to existing models of representing reality, dominated by sharp divisions between the aesthetic and the common, the highbrow and the lowbrow. Combining recurrent themes from the fields of politics, social commitment, art, and photography, with quintessentially Polish issues, both historical and contemporary, Sekula performs an apparently slight, but nevertheless significant, semantic shift in the national mythology. If there is anything of the traditional allegorical representation of Polonia here—once personified by a woman, or, better, a mother, and, ideally, the Mother of God—its traces are found in atypical and seemingly unconnected places and in people met on the street. And so there is a young woman here with a baby holding the Polish and USA flags, photographed at a Polish festival in Chicago. There is a member of the

Ladies Auxiliary Polish Army Veterans of WWII, dressed for parade, presenting her quasi-military costume in a somewhat theatrical gesture. There is further a handmade, and held upside down, Polish flag in the hands of the artist's little nephew in a family Christmas photo. There is even Holy Mary, but already processed, in the logo of the infamous Radio Maryja, noticed in a small poster pasted onto a bus shelter somewhere in the middle of nowhere in provincial Poland. The mobility and migration of Polish symbols, their ability to appear at different times and in different places, seems to be a function of what Zygmunt Bauman once defined as a fundamental instability of contemporary identity.⁹

Positioning himself between Polishness and Americanness, but also between the literalness of the image and the suggestiveness of the word, Sekula constructs a dystopian space, from the perspective of which he manages to transform the intellectual categories and seemingly obvious notions that shape our experience. This may mean, to again borrow a metaphor from Jerzy Pilch's *Marsz Polonia*, that in the football game between Noah's Ark and Babel Tower, he sides with the latter team, full of mongrels and cosmopolitans. But it is precisely by virtue of this that, perhaps involuntarily, *Polonia and Other Fables* contributes to what Maria Janion calls the Polish symbolic transformation.¹⁰

"A normal Pole doesn't return to Poland at least once in their life."

Jerzy Pilch, *Marsz Polonia*, p. 189

1 I would like to thank Joanna Czyż, Barbara Mirecki and Marta Wójcik for sharing with me their knowledge about the Polish American community, Małgorzata Ruchel for her valuable comments about this text and Hilde Van Gelder for inspirations and her incessant enthusiasm.

2 *Marsz Polonia*, the title of a patriotic émigré song, a version of *Dąbrowski's Mazurka* transplanted to America, reflects this terminological ambiguity of the term 'Polonia' as an allegorical, abstract idea of the Polish nation that eventually comes to denote the Polish community abroad.

3 Cf. W. Gombrowicz, *Dziennik (1953-1956)* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1982), 81-82.

4 "Biografia wielkiego Kosmopolaka", in *Kosmopolityzm i sarmatyzm. Antologia powojennego eseju polskiego* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 2003), 152-163.

5 It may also derive from the name of a neighbourhood in the city of Siedlce, mentioned in, among other places, Stefan Żeromski's *Przedwiośnie*. Interestingly for Allan Sekula's personal artistic mythology, "sekula" becomes in Żeromski's novel a synonym of the pond and the Polish landscape, remembered by the artist's emigrant mother.

6 N. Davies, "Polska mitologia narodowa", in *Smok wawelski nad Tamizą* (Cracow: Znak, 2001), http://www.davies.pl/t_polska_mn.php, accessed 21 November 2009.

7 Krauze's drawing was banned by the censors in 1977 and published only in 1981 in the *Kultura* weekly. It was featured in a recent Muzeum Karykatury publication: *Smaczki i zapachy PRL-u. Karykatura z lat 1944-1989* (Warsaw: Muzeum Karykatury, 2008), 125. I hereby thank Ms Grażyna Godziejewska, curator of the Muzeum Karykatury, for making materials available to me and providing me with information on the subject.

8 A recent Cracow exhibition called *American Dream* (organized to commemorate the 90th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Poland and the United States) documented various—chiefly musical and visual—dialogues. It is worth remembering, however, that not only jazz inspired Polish musicians organizing the first, half-legal jazz concerts in the Stalinist 1950s, but also Polish artists gained recognition in America. Opening this line of influence is Roman Polański's *Knife in Water* which, according to Polish critics, went too far in glorifying the consumerist lifestyle, a criticism that contributed to the director's decision to leave Poland. Ultimately, the decision put both him and Krzysztof Komeda on a path towards international career. Allan Sekula mentions both artists in his *Polonia and Other Fables* essay, thus effecting another stage in the history of Polish-American concatenations.

9 Z. Bauman, "Tourists and Vagabonds: the Heroes and Victims of Postmodernity", in *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 83-94.

10 Looking into the evolution of Polonia's representations in Polish culture, Maria Janion called for new forms of national remembering, which would avoid the repetition of romantic conventions. Although there are many attempts at creating a new image of Polonia in recent art, the awaited symbolic transformation after 1989 still belongs to the future. M. Janion, "Polonia powielona," in *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006), 257-299.

Polonia and Other Fables: Reading the Artist in the Work¹

Hilde Van Gelder

The majority of the photographs in Allan Sekula's *Polonia and Other Fables*—an indoor installation of a set of forty photographs, a text booklet, and wall-mounted quotations, and slides projection from 1990—are large format, square images made by the artist between 2007 and 2009 in Chicago (USA) and throughout Poland with an old 6x6 square format, single lens, reflex camera from the 1970s. When compared to Sekula's earlier installations, this is a striking artistic choice. That is not so much a matter of the pictures' large size; he has been working in recent years on even larger outdoor billboard installations such as *Shipwreck and Workers* (2005–2007) or *Edit Nine* (2008). Instead it is the square itself that catches the eye, as it opens up a wide range of debates on the level of form and on the content of these images.

This essay aims to shed light on some of these issues. But we can begin with a detour to a few, well-chosen, rectangular pictures from *Polonia and Other Fables*. Two among these are especially peculiar: each consists of four photographs depicting a group of spectators who had come to observe the fleeting shadow of a hammer and sickle cast at high noon on May 1, 2008, by Virginio Ferrari's sculpture *Dialogo* (1971). This outdoor sculpture is installed on the University of Chicago campus, at a location very near The Renaissance Society where Sekula first exhibited *Polonia and Other Fables* in the fall of 2009.

Sekula decided to print these two pictures in such way that the viewer is offered an explicit insight into how they came about, namely in one continuous succession of shots. He includes the five consecutive frame numbers on the film border in the final print. The visual outcome is that both pictures occupy a middle ground between a sequence of motion picture frames and a pseudo-panorama.

Over the years, Sekula has experimented with photographic formats as a way of variably substantiating the communicative message of the image. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh writes how Sekula sees "the panorama as the quintessentially anti-modernist conception of a representation whose manifest function is the maximization of visual information."² The panorama has also been and still is frequently used by totalitarian—communist or other—regimes for its ability to display large masses of people in a single, united picture frame. Particularly interested in this aspect of the panorama's function in real political life, Sekula researches its transformational possibilities for critical art making.

In *Spectators observing shadow of hammer and sickle cast at high noon on May 1 by Virginio Ferrari's sculpture Dialogo (1971)*. *University of Chicago, 1 May 2008*, [ill. 7A | 7B] Sekula has chosen to depict a group of young people, perhaps mostly students, by means of analog photography. All of the other images that are part of *Polonia and Other Fables* are analog photos as well. It can be said that the artist urges the viewers of his pictures to launch a debate over the quality of the new—i.e. digital photography—versus the older, analog film technique. Sekula does not deny that this tension is present in his work.³

At the same time, he has underlined that opting for analog photography is in the first place a practical decision. Given that Sekula



© Allan Sekula, from **Aerospace Folktales**, 1973
gelatin silver print 6 x 9 inches, coll. Generali Foundation, Vienna

is profoundly familiar with traditional photographic techniques and skills, he believes that contrast control in his images—i.e. the rendition of highlights or sharpness of details—can be better managed while holding on to the transparency and negative film instead of switching to a digital camera. Sekula specifies that he has always been very fond of the tactility and manageability of the darkroom process and its resulting paper print—the blue-collar aspect of photographic labor, one could say.

From a technological perspective, it can be objected that Sekula is thus making a nostalgic statement. Yet, this is not what the artist has in mind. In conversation, he argues that, in principle, it would not matter if his images were taken with a digital camera or not. What he is after when he is out taking pictures is the “lived time” of the situation he intends to concretize.⁴ Crucial is how the image is handled, the context in which it is made public, and the expectations it thus creates in the viewer on a semantic level but also, and more importantly, on a pragmatic level of knowledge and interpretation. As long as post-exposure manipulation does not imply that one significantly alters or recomposes the image through computer technology and then hides this intervention from the viewer in the final print, there is no problem using digital techniques, the artist emphasizes.⁵

Sekula has long asserted that “photographs are physical traces of their objects.”⁶ He says that a photograph should unambiguously indicate to its viewers that it was materially generated from the physical world, by the intermediary of light. The photograph is reality’s manifest remnant. For Sekula, it is in this way that the photographic image contains the potential to communicate a meaningful message about the world. *Pace* Roland Barthes, Sekula grants that a photo comes to stand in as a replacement for a reality that now no longer exists. Yet, at the same time, he stresses that a photograph is much more than a mere denotation or simple trace of the reality that it depicts.

For him, the photograph is not reality’s “uninvested analogue” that has a “primitive core of meaning, devoid of all cultural determination.”⁷

What disturbs Allan Sekula most about photography’s supposed purely denotative function is that it “generates a mythic aura of neutrality around the image.” “Any meaningful encounter with a photograph must necessarily occur at the level of connotation,” he concludes. For the artist-photographer it is a matter of steering these possible connotations of meaning in the direction he or she wishes. Thus, the presentation of the pictures and the relationship they have to the textual details is crucial. “A photograph,” says Sekula, “communicates via its association with a hidden or implicitly present text; it is this text, or the system of hidden linguistic propositions that tips the photograph over into the domain of readability.”⁸

The concept of *Polonia*, wherever that might be—“heaven or purgatory,” as Sekula writes—offers an encompassing perspective for what Sekula also indicates on the basis of his own autobiography. From the experience of his parental grandparents, who were both Polish and continued to speak the language at home with their children, and of his father, who continued to cherish his knowledge of Polish but did not succeed in passing it on to his children, Sekula knows what it is to gradually have to give up your native language and to live between languages. Speaking a language forges the ties to the culture that is related to it. Therefore, language contains an ideologically-loaded dimension. Losing one’s language through the progression of younger generations that no longer feel affiliated to its associated culture goes hand in hand with constructing a proto-mythical, utopian vision of a lost origin, forever longed for but irreversibly out of reach. Photography, or the visual document, gradually comes to be a means of resistance against that nostalgic feeling related to the loss of a native language. Already in *Aerospace Folktales*, the artist included a picture of his father, the intermediary figure between the fully Polish grandparents and the completely assimilated grandson, holding a camera, quite in admiration of it.

In his 2009 essay *Polonia and Other Fables* which—as a text booklet—forms an integral part of the larger work of the same title, Sekula explains how his father, Ignacy, kept lists, composed from the Brooklyn phone directory, of all persons living in that area named Sekula. Several turned out to be rabbis. In 1979, the artist photographed his father holding his list. [ill. 33] In 2009, he decided to integrate this image into the photo-textual collection of elements now under discussion, which overtly addresses his own Polish immigrant and Catholic family background. Thus, more than just being an analogon of reality—“this is the artist’s father”—this image also tells us about what that reality, his father, means to the artist today, in the now of one’s looking at his picture. It reveals how he has profoundly influenced the shaping of Sekula’s identity, his very first cultural horizon, in short, his earliest way of thinking, writing, and art making. This is confirmed by another picture of his father, dating from 1998, included in *Polonia and Other Fables*, which shows him sitting in front of his own bookshelf. [ill. 20] Ignacy Sekula holds two objects in his hands—wrapping paper and a wooden walking stick such as might be carried by a mountaineer from the Tatra mountains, which he has just received as a Christmas present from the artist’s brother, a woodworker, who is sitting next to him. These objects

function to shift the viewer's attention, pointing from Ignacy's left hand towards Janson's *History of Art*. In the midst of it all, the artist's nephew is holding his handmade Polish flag upside down.

The rectangle is and remains the traditional photographic format par excellence. In *Polonia and Other Fables*, Sekula uses it in order to include these two older, family-related pictures, thus recalling the amateur tradition of family snapshots, an issue this essay returns to. There is another rectangular image, which appears to be of key importance, given the central position Sekula accorded to it at The Renaissance Society where the visitor entered the exhibition by walking directly towards it. It is Sekula's *Art student working in the commodity futures exchange. Mercantile Exchange, Chicago, August 2007*. [ill. 1] The picture's large size instantly calls to mind various images by the Becher-Schüler, who are fond of monumental rectangles. From a formal or stylistic perspective, the interaction between sharpness and detail in this picture is striking. One recalls Thomas Ruff's multiple recent experiments with digital portraiture and landscape imaging, which have a pronounced impressionistic effect. Andreas Gursky, by contrast, is known for his sharply detailed pictures. With *Art student*, Sekula is visibly opening up a double photographic dialogue with these artists' work.

How he positions his work with regard to Ruff's or Gursky's current approach to photography can further be grasped from his vertiginous capture, in a square photograph, of a dramatic detail from Stanislaw Batowski's history painting *Pulaski at Savannah* (1932). [ill. 25] Given the long-standing rivalry between photography and painting, taking a photograph of a traditionally composed painting is never a neutral affair. The 6x6 camera allows for a highly detailed and richly colored photographic image. The artist might be suggesting that debates on the potential transparency or, rather, opaqueness, of the photograph's surface in comparison to the readability of the painting's skin are still very much alive today—perhaps even more alive than ever, in the era of digital picture composition and of the so-called *tableau* picture. In a public conversation with the artist on September 20, 2009, at The Renaissance Society in Chicago, Hamza Walker asked if *Polonia and Other Fables* should be understood as a mannerist irony, particularly with regard to the history of photography as art on the one hand, and the Modernist tradition in painting and its idolatry of the grid on the other hand. Sekula's response to this reading did not seem to be completely unfavorable, especially regarding images such as the one of the F-16 pilot [ill. 24] or the airport farmer. [ill. 5]

However, Sekula's photograph of Batowski's *Pulaski at Savannah* not only addresses changes in art but also in contemporary society. Nowadays, the cavalry has been replaced by the air force. It is therefore no coincidence that Sekula decided to also include photographs of F-16 planes on the tarmac of an Air Force base in Poland. Strikingly, the picture's caption reveals that the jet fighter was made at a Lockheed-Martin factory. One cannot but wonder if it might have been made at the aerospace factory in the USA where the artist's father used to work, an issue he addressed in his very early work, *Untitled Slide Sequence* (1972), and in *Aerospace Folktales* (1973). Even if this was not the case,

the coincidence transcends the mere family anecdote. It raises issues for debate about current military and economic relations between Poland and the USA and the impact of this on the viability of globalized utopia, particularly with regard to environmental and health-related issues.

Returning our focus to art, an interesting comparison can be made. In his *Against the synthetic portrait, for the snapshot* of 1928, Alexander Rodchenko insisted that the photograph should present a "precise moment, documentarily," and never a sum total.⁹ Four years earlier, in 1924, in an essay entitled *Photomontage*, Gustav Klucis, also a vehement defender of analytic photographic montage in a vernacular style, argued that photography should not try to imitate painterly compositions but should instead discover its "own possibilities for montage."¹⁰ Thus, already within the avant-garde, a tendency existed that worked with fragmented montage practices in order to distinguish itself strongly from traditionally composed painting. The major difference between the afore-mentioned avant-garde artists and Sekula is that his body of work, although clearly intended to be situated in the wake of their legacy, is definitely not anti-pictorial.¹¹ It rather operates in opposition to current forms of post-conceptual photography that often reinvent the tableau composition through digital means.

Take once more as an example *Spectators observing shadow of hammer and sickle cast at high noon on May 1 by Virginio Ferrari's sculpture Dialogo* (1971). *University of Chicago, 1 May 2008*. Given the quiet, almost silent conversations that seem to be ongoing between the characters, this work brings to mind early Italian *sacra conversazione* paintings, the so-called sacred conversations. Each picture engages in a visual discussion with its viewers as is beautifully suggested by the pink, almost invisible T-shirt of a young woman in one of its images. Stronger yet, the frieze-like format of both panels also recalls the iconography of the twelve apostles. Sekula has emphasized in conversation the long-standing influence that Flemish painting has exercised on his conception of artistic composition, particularly with regard to its depiction of figures in groups.

Sekula's loose method of assembling pictorial elements is part of a larger critical project to which he has subjected his art. His work can be situated in the historical lineage of those photographers that freely chose not to compose their pictures in the way Pictorialists such as Henry Peach Robinson, for example, did. Crucial historical photographers like Walker Evans, Lee Friedlander, or Robert Adams found positive value in continuing to just 'take' their pictures, in black and white. Sekula, it has been argued, adds color to his images, while otherwise following their approach. *Meditations on a Triptych*, a work Sekula realized in 1973, in this respect needs to be recalled as a key work. It shows three square color photographs—two of Sekula's parents and one of his mother and two younger sisters—and is accompanied by a text written by the artist. The main subject appears to be his mother, who wears the same red dress on all three occasions. Like other photographers during that time, such as Joel Sternfeld and William Eggleston, Sekula sought a way out of the over-connoted black-and-white legacy of documentary style in photography, especially with respect to its then no longer tenable truth-claims of

constituting objective evidence of a situation as it had actually happened. Although *Meditations on a Triptych* is obviously situated in the wake of conceptual photography's banalization of Modernist Art, it is at the same time an early example of documentary color photography, in the line of Harry Callahan.

In the already-mentioned public conversation with Hamza Walker at The Renaissance Society in Chicago, Sekula asserted that *Meditations on a Triptych* meant to apply the documentary legacy in art, traditionally linked to the working and lowest classes in society, to the American middle class instead. With this work, he thus made an act of appropriation art *avant la lettre*. At the same time, the piece reflects on the vernacular uses of color photography in the service of family snapshots, which was widespread by the 1970s. According to the artist's mother, the images were not staged. She recalls that they were dressed up for Easter Sunday, as the accompanying text also reveals. They were simply asked to position themselves in front of the house's garage and other locations, as would be the case in typical amateur family snapshots. They were not consciously aware that these images would be turned into the artwork we now know.¹² Sekula however has argued that the whole point of the accompanying text is to consider these images as "staged" in the most profound sense.¹³ He specifies: "I made two of the pictures, but more or less at my father's direction. (I was 14 or 15 at the time.) He was the modernist, especially someone who was not of afraid of red, yellow, blue." For example, the sharp contrast between the red dress, the blue uniform, and the white garage door in one of the three images is striking. Yet, it can be argued that then already Sekula turned a formal pictorial concern for primary colors into a vernacular, functional element of social critique. In the *Meditations on a Triptych* text, he writes: "A fastidious Polish taste for primary colors, for red and white."¹⁴ These color contrasts amply return in various pictures from *Polonia and Other Fables*. It is not a coincidence that Sekula plays with red, white, and blue: red and white are the colors of the Polish flag; red, white, and blue those of the American flag.

© Allan Sekula, from *Edit Nine*, 2008, *Oiko nomos—Koreatown*
ink jet on polyvinyl print 48 x 68.5 inches



Addressing once more the crucial photograph *Art student futures trader. Mercantile Exchange. Chicago, August 2007*, a striking phrase from the essay *Polonia and Other Fables* catches the eye. Sekula writes: "What Thomas Struth does not show us about the collector's household. Someone has to manage all that stuff: *oiko nomos*." *Oiko nomos—Koreatown* is also the title of a picture from the sequence *Edit Nine* (2008), which has been exhibited as a monumental outdoor billboard. It depicts the artist's wife, the art historian Sally Stein, standing by the porch of their home, dressed and equipped as if she has just finished a big house-cleaning task. She has been managing or ruling the household (i.e. the literal meaning of *oiko nomos*). The large format of the image and theme of a lady of the house who is photographed in her own environment is highly reminiscent of Struth's *Family Portraits*. Sekula's piece, however, is hilarious and provocative with regard to Struth's carefully composed pictures. This lady of the house's outfit could not contrast more with Struth's carefully dressed and made-up patronesses. Moreover, it is placed outdoors as a billboard, subject to all weathers, in the gardens of the Huntington Library, the former estate of one of the California railroad barons.

The traditionally rich theme of the artist portraying his wife together with the monumental portrait of the female art student in *Polonia and Other Fables* encourages a discussion of the representation of femininity in Allan Sekula's work. It is striking that in both of these portraits the subject is depicted in clothes that do not particularly flatter them. This seems to be a recurrent element in Sekula's approach of depicting women. A remarkable picture in this respect is the image that Sekula chose as the front and back cover of his book *Performance Under Working Conditions* (2003). It is part of *Black Tide* (2002/03) and shows a young woman in a dirty white protection suit, taking a break from cleaning up an oil spill along the coast of Galicia (Spain). The sequence includes another shot of her, laughing. Sekula deliberately presents such female laborers as desirable. A constant element in his female iconography appears to be his preference for depicting women after the work is done. He wants to catch their beauty in their tiredness, as if making a bow to their attractiveness when working, an aspect he admires highly in women. As an artist, he thus clearly testifies to a different, non-clichéd kind of male desire, for a non-objectified but instead fully subjective, working woman who is alluring even when required to wear a costume that does not become her at all.

When asked about this specific aspect of his oeuvre, Sekula mentions his photographic sequence *Waiting for Tear Gas* (1999), which testifies to an erotic fascination for women who stand and fight for their revolutionary ideals, to the point of walking around naked or almost naked on the streets.¹⁵ Sekula brings up Norman Mailer's writings on this subject, pointing out their similarity of age at respectively the October 1967 anti-Vietnam War Pentagon March and the November 1999 Seattle protests surrounding the WTO Ministerial Conference. Whereas Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (1968) tended to disregard women as protesters and instead focused on young men (and the author's relative impotence—he was then 47—compared to them), Sekula explicitly wished to address the particular courage of women in those situations.¹⁶ Looking at some of the Seattle



© Allan Sekula, from **Black Tide**, 2002–2003, **Volunteer watching, Volunteer smiling (Isla de Ons, 19.12.2002)**, horizontal diptych, silver dye bleach print 21 x 63 inches

images, Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) also vividly comes to mind. The similar pose of his wife in *Oikos nomos—Koreatown* to Delacroix's personification of Liberty, heightens the impression of the artist being keen to celebrate a woman ready to go to revolution.

In *Polonia and Other Fables*, Sekula's portrayal of the female figure culminates in his monumental depiction of the mother figure. The artist's mother, recently widowed, is portrayed in front of the now-abandoned house she had shared with her husband. Originally from an Anglican background, but converted to Catholicism by marriage, she takes a pose that is reminiscent of the Mater Dolorosa, the Sorrowful Mother, who encounters in the priest—whose depiction forms a diptych to her image—a person of confidence and solace. Stronger even, she appears as the Virgin of Mercy or the so-called Madonna della Misericordia, who opens her arms in a protective way, as if still willing to include all her children under her cloak and much more. She seems to be carrying all the weight of the world: her earring resembles a globe. The Catholic religion has greatly determined Polish cultural identity, and this is attested to by Sekula's echoing of such Catholic iconography. Also, although the artist's mother is still beautiful, one cannot help but recall her youthful glow in the joyful fire of the red dress in *Meditations on a Triptych* and conclude that, in 2009, the artist has made a *Vanitas* portrait as a means to mourn the loss of time and the youth of his mother.

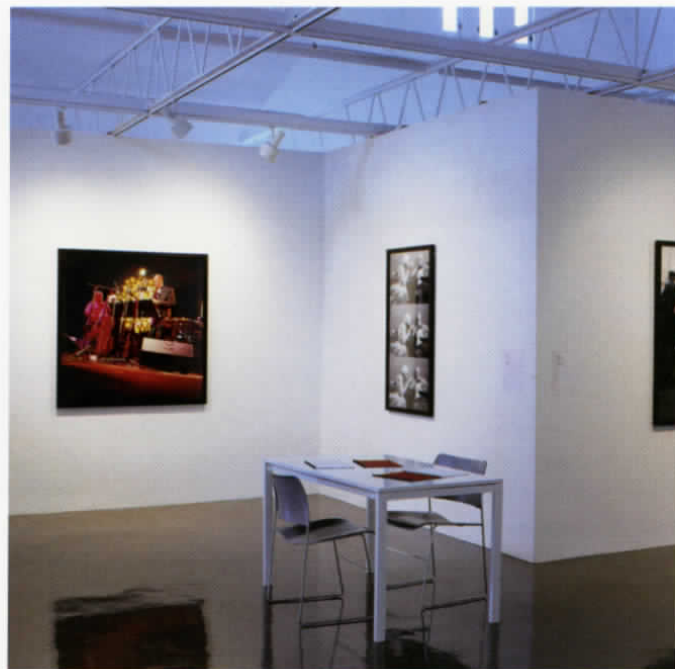
Sekula's grandfather was a blacksmith, a very ancient trade, and this has been a recurrent theme in his more recent photographic work, including his film *A Short Film for Laos* (2006). Various images in *Polonia and Other Fables* address blacksmithing, not only on the level of autobiography but also in relation to the history of photography. This is, for example, the case in *Blacksmith's work, Ochojno, Poland, July 2009*, [ill. 18] an image purposefully reminiscent of Albert Renger-Patsch's New Objectivity pictures of similar tools, of whose overt aestheticism Walter Benjamin was highly critical.¹⁷ This series of blacksmith pictures accords a universal dimension to the story of *Polonia and Other Fables*. It opens

up a temporal register that diachronically embraces many centuries and synchronically expands in space, transgressing the boundaries of Poland and the USA towards an emblemized Polonia.

Polonia is abstractly elsewhere. But, in *Polonia and Other Fables*, Chicago specifically comes to incarnate a concrete dimension of a utopian refuge. It does not only have that reputation in Poland. Aspects of its mythology resonate with city gangs all over the world. Brussels, for example, has a legendary tumultuous neighborhood in the centre of town named Chicago. One no less than Tintin himself was fascinated by the attraction of Chicago as the penultimate incarnation of the American dream. The surreal and bizarre character of the city that Hergé made so visibly tangible in his comic is also movingly captured in Sekula's portrayal of an aging metalhead at the "Taste of Polonia" festival [ill. 15] or the Ladies Auxillary Polish Army Veterans of World War II in Polish Constitution Day parade, [ill. 23] all in the tradition of street photography the city has become so well-known for.

In *Polonia and Other Fables* Sekula mentions his fascination with the Billy Goat Tavern, as the "mausoleum of the tough guy journalist, right-wing cop-loving pseudo-proletarian realism." Situated deep down below North Michigan Avenue, it now has become "a shrine to the bygone days when journalism was closer to a blue-collar trade."¹⁸ Nevertheless, it still is a place that offers insight into the manner by which the veneer of the central city conceals the toil of workers and migrants. It spatially induces a feeling of how the lower levels support and carry the upper levels, as much on a literal as on a metaphorical level. To Sekula, this bar is like a Mike Kelley piece in real life.¹⁹ But it is also the ultimate symbol of Chicago's remarkable, historic blue-collar hospitality. Sekula decided not to photographically include the fable of the Billy Goat Tavern. Instead, he turned to Poland once more and found a group of veteran boat builders from the Gdansk shipyard and Solidarity at a shelter for homeless men, who are combining their now useless skills in order to build a boat with which they hope soon to circumnavigate the world. [ill. 37]

Michel Foucault famously called the ship the 'heterotopia *par excellence*' because it creates a place that is completely reliant unto itself without actually being bound to any other specific place.²⁰ In Foucault's understanding, a heterotopia is a place where several sites that are in themselves incompatible are juxtaposed. A fable does exactly that: it allows imagining a place or places that do not and cannot exist as such, but that human beings can aspire to, or work towards. In *Polonia and Other Fables*, the square format appears to have a central function to this aim. Sekula asserts that, within the square, he has developed a fondness for oblique angles due to their potential for making the transfer from formal to functional concerns in one and the same artwork.²¹ In the already-mentioned public conversation with Hamza Walker, he specifies: "The square format [photograph] for me really links Chicago to Warsaw. They are both square format cities, to the max. Shanghai, Beijing, they are panorama cities. It is the market/Stalinist return to panoramas that shows the collective. Chinese used to love panoramas because they showed all the workers returning from the factory, but now they love them because they show all the real estate. The square is very forgiving, and it frees you up to tilt and do diagonals in a different way. It is closer to the natural coverage of the lens."²² The diagonal has a formally disruptive potential inside of a single square picture. Much more than Rodchenko, who was also fond of it, Sekula uses that uprooting potential of the oblique line in order to open up a critical debate on the political function of his pictures with regard to their underlying themes. In the text booklet of *Polonia and Other Fables* he concludes about the square format: "no built-in motif-based pseudo-genre. Landscape or portrait? Chicken or pasta?"



Installation view, **Polonia and Other Fables** at The Renaissance Society, Chicago, September-December 2009. Photo A. Sekula

1 This essay has benefited from fruitful exchanges with Allan Sekula, Sally Stein, Carles Guerra, Victor Burgin, Daniel Palmer, Michelle Sekula, Evelyn Sekula and Barbara Baert. The author wishes to express her gratitude to all, as well as to Karolina Lewandowska, who assigned this text, and to Suzanne Ghez, who generously allowed her to spend as much time as needed in the exhibition room at The Renaissance Society, while *Polonia and Other Fables* was still under construction.

2 B.H.D. Buchloh, "Allan Sekula: Photography Between Discourse and Document," in *Fish Story: Allan Sekula* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1995), 196 n. 10.

3 Conversation between Allan Sekula and the author, Chicago, Sept. 22, 2009.

4 P. Beausse, "The Critical Realism of Allan Sekula," *Art Press* 240 (November 1998): 26.

5 Conversation between Allan Sekula and the author, Chicago, Sept. 23, 2009.

6 A. Sekula, "Photography Between Labour and Capital," in B. H.D. Buchloh and R. Wilkie (eds.), *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures 1948-1968: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shelden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the University College of Cape Breton Press, 1983), 218.

7 A. Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning (1975)," in Id., *Photography Against the Grain. Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 5. Until otherwise mentioned, all further quotations from this essay are on the same page.

8 Sekula 1984: 4.

9 A. Rodchenko, 'Against the Synthetic Portrait (1928),' in Ch. Phillips (ed.), *Photography in the Modern Era. European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Aperture, 1989), 239.

10 G. Klucis, 'Photomontage (1924),' in Phillips 1989: 211.

11 This issue is elaborated in H. Van Gelder, 'The Shape of the Pictorial in Contemporary Photography,' *Image [R] Narrative* 10: 1 (2009): http://www.imageandnarrative.be/Images_de_l_invisible/Vangelder.htm, accessed 21.11.09.

12 This information was insistently provided by the artist's mother, Evelyn Sekula, in Chicago, on Sept. 20, 2009.

13 Allan Sekula, email to the author, Oct. 31, 2009. The following quotation is from the same message.

14 S. Breitwieser (ed.), *Allan Sekula. Performance under Working Conditions* (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2003), 171.

15 See also K. Silverman, 'Disassembled Movies,' in *Testimonies between fiction and reality* (Athens: National Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003), 193.

16 Conversation between Allan Sekula and the author, Chicago, Sept. 22, 2009, and subsequent email correspondence on Oct. 30, 2009.

17 W. Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer,' in Jennings, Michael W., Doherty, Brigid, and Levin, Thomas Y. (eds.) *Walter Benjamin. The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, transl. by Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 86-87.

18 Allan Sekula, email to the author, Oct. 31, 2009.

19 Conversation between Allan Sekula and the author, Chicago, Sept. 22, 2009.

20 M. Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces,' *Diacritics*, XVI: 1 (Spring 1986), as quoted and commented upon in V. Burgin, *The Remembered Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 10.

21 Conversation between Allan Sekula and the author, Chicago, Sept. 22, 2009.

22 Allan Sekula, quoting from the transcript of the conversation in an email to the author on Oct. 31, 2009.

Mówimy po polsku

Hamza Walker

Not a story in any conventional sense, *Polonia and Other Fables* is a collection of highly disparate puzzle pieces. It consists of motifs recurring throughout Sekula's successive and overlapping bodies of work. These range from geopolitics to autobiography. Its subject matter runs the gamut from the humble to the monumental. Subjects include: a polka player and an aging metal-head; a fruited plain and a crowded Warsaw thoroughfare; a labor rally and a blacksmith shop; students and fighter jets; a young female commodities trader and a mother; a priest and a smoker; and last but not least, some pigs.

Polonia and Other Fables' subjects can be grouped into several overarching themes. These include the realpolitik of post-communist Polish/American relations; dubious corporate machinations in Chicago and Poland; and Chicago Polonia's maintenance of national identity. They are portrayed using a variety of photographic tropes ranging from clandestine snapshots to formal portraiture, from serial to aerial photography, and from street photography to ethnography in the vein of Walker Evans' FSA work.

One of the grander themes is Poland's current geopolitical situation, which Sekula depicts through a trio of images featuring training activities at a Polish airforce base. Poland's militarization is directly connected to its inclusion in NATO, an event further marking the end of the Cold War. Poland, however, was all too eager to prove itself an ally to the U.S. when it aided and abetted the highly controversial practice of extraordinary rendition, generally referred to as "torture by proxy." Two of Sekula's images are of alleged "black sites," where prisoners from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were illegally transferred to states outside U.S. jurisdiction for the purpose of being tortured.

Poland's efforts to distance itself from its communist past by embracing free enterprise has resulted in its susceptibility to the high crimes and misdemeanors of multinational corporations such as Smithfield Foods Company. Sekula photographed a Smithfield plant in the Wielkopolska province. As the biggest producer of pork in Poland, their method of industrial hog-raising is cited by activists and governmental agencies as amongst the most cruel and inhumane in the world. In addition to the animals' deplorable living conditions, gross environmental hazards are created through the storage of vast amounts of manure. This creates toxic gases and pathogens that seep into natural water basins.

Sekula photographed Smithfield both aerially and on the ground. What looks like a beautiful wheat field was planted as a barrier to the Smithfield grounds. In addition to the factory environs, Sekula also photographed a young boy from a nearby town reporting their children's illnesses are directly related to Smithfield's presence. Notably, Smithfield's pigsties are hidden from view, negating photography's ability to furnish proof. In its stead, Sekula photographed the three hogs belonging to a family farmer. This is Sekula's way of questioning that which we are allowed to see versus that which we are not.

A wariness of photographic representation is a mainstay of Sekula's critique of documentary. The limits of photographic representation become apparent as his subjects are raised *to*, yet circumscribed *by*,

visuality, which is the case in the photos of Warsaw passersby. These subjects are a typology of individuals captured during their quotidian commutes. There is a fashionable young couple; an intellectual whose status is not only betrayed by the fact that he is reading while walking but by the socks and shorts combo; and a middle-aged woman whose floral print dress is a staple of Eastern European fashion. Whatever we might conjecture about them is through strictly visual social codes (dress, comportment, age).

Sekula took an interest in photography during his undergraduate studies at the University of California, San Diego from 1968 to 1972. At that time, photography existed, as he said, "in a triangulated space bound by literature, film and painting." This meant photography's narrative capacity was being challenged by other media. Sekula restates this dilemma as a question; "What can a photograph in and of itself tell us?" Sekula would foreground this problem through his use of text, which is an integral component of all his major projects to date. These texts, which occupy a prominent space in his exhibitions, are a means of complimenting while challenging a strictly visual medium. An upshot of Sekula's combination of text and image is a proto-cinema in which the photos become storyboards and the text a kind of voiceover script. It is hardly surprising that one critic compared an early autobiographical work, *Aerospace Folktales* (1973), to *An American Family*, a 1973 PBS documentary chronicling a nuclear family. This was not only because both works shared the same subject matter, but because of the narrative quality introduced through the inclusion of text in *Aerospace Folktales*.

Sekula's decision to include autobiography as part of his practice acknowledges social documentary's ideological parameters as a means of thinking through rather than excluding the self, beginning with the most basic social unit, the family. Autobiography recurs in varying degrees of subtlety throughout his work. It is particularly evident in *Polonia and Other Fables* as Sekula is of Polish heritage. The autobiographical works in *Polonia and Other Fables* consist of four photographs: a portrait of his mother; a portrait of the priest who delivered his father's last rites; an image of Sekula's father, brother and nephew; and the 1979 photo of the artist's father reading a list of four other Sekulas, two of whom are rabbis. Although raised Catholic, Sekula's religious heritage, like that of many Poles is up for question. This is hardly surprising given that Poland was home to Europe's most significant Jewish population before the outbreak of World War II.

Nationalism certainly played no small part in what many debate as Poland's complicity in the Holocaust. This strain of nationalism, however, has its roots in the rise and fall of Poland as a once powerful kingdom subsequently conquered and partitioned amongst the surrounding powers of Austria, Prussia, and Russia. Poles became a regional diaspora harboring a centuries-long desire to become a nation state. Arguably, Polonia defines national identity more than the country itself, which was not founded until after World War I, only to be invaded and occupied by Nazi Germany, and after World War II incorporated into the Eastern Bloc. As home to the largest Polish population in the U.S., Chicago is an historic repository of Polish nationalist sentiments whose connection

with contemporary Poland is partly real and partly romantic, as recent immigrants find themselves amongst an older wave of immigrants and their children, two or three generations removed from the Old World. This is the subject of two of the Chicago photographs both taken at different Polish festivals.

As an examination of the links between Chicago and Poland, *Polonia and Other Fables* doubles as a reflection on the historic intertwining of labor struggles and immigration. This is signified through a pair of images, one of a woman and young boy marching in the 2009 May Day parade, the other an image of the crowded foyer of Republic Windows and Doors. In December of 2008, this factory was the site of a sit-in staged by its workers protesting senior management's decision to close the factory on short notice, terminating their health care benefits and denying them pay for accrued vacation days. This tale of post-Fordism cum post-fraudism was picked up by the national media because it confirmed negative public opinion regarding distribution of "bailout" funds. (Bank of America cut off Republic's line of credit shortly after receiving \$25 billion dollars in TARP funds.) In response to the media attention, Sekula has downplayed the event, relegating it to a single image featuring an Hispanic gentleman peering out from behind a column. Wide-eyed under a blaring bank of fluorescent lights, he is wedged in a tight spot by the photograph's composition.

One of the hallmarks of Sekula's work is its humility. He tends not to spectacularize his subject. (Compare his images to the work of, say, Sebastião Salgado or Edward Burtynsky.) It is not a question of what story his images tell but if they tell a story at all. Sekula's photos are not narratives in themselves but merely an index to a larger narrative. Visual fact as captured in Sekula's photographs is subject to an interrogation not for the sake of questioning the truth of what is depicted but the truth of the story to which the photograph alludes. Contrary to our instinctive belief in photography as truth, photographs, as an index to a story, must also be considered potential sites of myth.

The trading pit at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange has been the subject of iconic photographs by Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky. Their photographs were taken during the heyday of the pit's mayhem, before the onset of electronic trading. Struth and Gursky's frantic scenes of hundreds of traders in action, portray capitalism as its own form of labor in the most literal sense, as if its being raised to visuality makes it tangible fact, which is contrary to why it's called the invisible hand.

Nothing could be further from the pit's testosterone-fueled mania than Sekula's portrait of an extremely slight female trader. She stands, arms at her side, in front of a confetti-strewn background, an announcement that the party is over. Printed at a scale larger than usual for Sekula, this image was of particular interest to him since it turns out the woman is also an artist. Her dual profession recalls *School is a Factory* (1979/1980), a project in which Sekula addressed the confluences and discrepancies between higher education and the demand for workforce training. Although artist and commodities trader might seem antithetical professions, one need only think of Jeff Koons for a reappraisal of that idea.

The larger question raised by Sekula's photograph of the trader is how does one illustrate a master narrative such as capitalism. A master narrative is a totalizing and global framework for explaining forces shaping aspects of self, society and history. A master narrative does not simply explain the social fabric; it is the social fabric, inextricably woven into reality at every level. All encompassing, it becomes ideology, which by its very nature is invisible, making a return to traditional documentary all but impossible. However noble and necessary the task of exposing various injustices, traditional documentary sidesteps the larger question as to how, and if, capitalism as a master narrative can achieve representation through "what used to be called documentary," to quote Sekula. In his work, such a master narrative can only be grasped in the form of traces, which paradoxically belie a narrative's ability to achieve "mythic" status.

Yet, the basis of claims to grasp directly (rather than abstractly) an era spanning from the industrial revolution to a latter-day globalization remains the province of social documentary—this, despite its marginalization from a history of photography as narrated through the fine arts. Rather than being accountable to a history of styles, social documentary is accountable to history itself. Needless to say, modernity's global evolution continues to furnish documentary a wealth of subject matter. As Sekula's work attests, any critique of documentary at once requires the urgency of practice and an engagement with the genre as a discourse speaking to history's unfolding.

Stories...¹

Karolina Lewandowska

"... the more one was lost in unfamiliar quarters of distant cities, the more one understood the other cities he had crossed to arrive there..."

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, San Diego and New York: Harvest Books, 1978, p. 28

So where did this wild trip through places, memories, book quotations, and pieces of political news that we find in *Polonia and Other Fables* begin? With the vision of a tramway marked "Polonia" on Marszałkowska Street in Warsaw (Polonia the football club or Polonia the theatre since Krzysztof Warlikowski's drama *(A)Polonia* had not yet been staged)? With the artist's first visit to Poland, during the memorable 1990 presidential campaign? With the artist's father, who had never visited Poland and yet was complimented on his beautiful command of the Polish language? With a chunk of Polish ham, tastily pink and with those little veins of fat, on the Easter table? With the artist's grandfather, a blacksmith from the village of Grybów and an immigrant to America? With a fascination with Joseph Conrad?

In my case, it began with a fascination with the artist's texts. How is it possible to write about photography so interestingly, to combine so intriguingly and revealingly the history of a photographic studio or the most famous of photographic exhibitions with complex social and political issues, as Allan Sekula does? I saw his major retrospective at the Generali Foundation in Vienna virtually by accident (although there are no accidents, of course. Had it not been for my friend, Luiza Nader, who studies conceptualism and for whom visiting an exhibition of a former pupil of John Baldessari's was a must during our trip to Vienna, I might have missed that show. Had I not been in the eighth month of pregnancy, Luiza would have not gone with me. Had I...) Despite the exhibition's visual suggestiveness, it proved rather hermetic for me. So, for me, it was first the texts, and only then the photographs and films: demanding, forcing the viewer to immediately mobilize a committed social position.

Allan Sekula and I first met to discuss the project four years ago. Then nothing happened for a long time. Then came a summer—a streetcar, the view from Konstytucji Square, and the first idea: Warsaw and Chicago—where Sekula had just started working on a project for The Renaissance Society—share a similar urban pattern, both being developed along East-West and North-South axes.

"Traveling, you realize that differences are lost: each city takes to resembling all cities, places exchange their form, order, distances, a shapeless dust cloud invades the continents."²

Shortly thereafter, a decision: the square. A traditional camera, the Hasselblad, the 6x6 cm format, perhaps even black-and-white film? As for the subjects—the photographic market at the Stodoła, a blacksmith, perhaps? And then, again, nothing for a long time. But the notebooks had already been set up—black Moleskins, marked "Poland" in white ink. They began to fill gradually, sketches were made, white-and-red flags, heaven/hell, Brzezinski's geopolitics, *chłodnik* with egg.

And suddenly an explosion—a list of subjects that went beyond the wildest expectations. A traditional blacksmith, an F-16 airbase, the CIA “black sites,” a family-owned pig farm, a farmer with a horse-drawn plough, an industrial pig farm owned by the US corporation Smithfield Foods (necessarily an aerial view to show the huge manure spill), a missile defense base, a Mel Gibson movie about King Jan III Sobieski, an empty Stodoła club in Warsaw.

Everything can be done, but... A foreigner wishing to visit military bases in Poland needs to be vetted by the military counterintelligence. The procedure takes a couple of weeks. A few days before the project's planned start, a negative reply arrives. There is an error in Mr. Sekula's passport—the birthplace is incorrect. If it is a US official's mistake, the US Embassy in Warsaw will issue a corrected passport overnight. The issue is explained—the artist stated his place of residence as his place of birth. The mistake is his; the corrected passport won't be issued. There will be no juxtaposition of Sobieski's winged knights, the cavalry, and fighter jet pilots to whom the lower rank hand the helmets, like the squire once offered the stirrup. But the determination of Hanna Wróblewska, the Zachęta deputy director, the kindness of the Polish Air Force spokesperson—and it happens! Here they are—Pułaski spurring his horse and an F-16 taking off.

It begins—a trip as if towards “invisible cities,” during which the traveler is constantly confronted with his or her own memories, expectations, tastes.

“Arriving at each new city, the traveler finds again a past of his that he did not know he had ...”³

The first subject photographed is a former military airfield in Szymany in northern Poland, where CIA planes landed, carrying, it is suspected, top-level terrorist suspects. The airfield, today owned by an Israeli businessman, has been temporarily leased to a local farmer. It is the haying season and slick, modern-looking German tractors are mowing hectares of grass. The farmer invites us for lunch to his elegant B&B. The next stop is Kiejkuty, one of the places where the CIA may have operated its “black sites.” We stop to ask for directions and the man we ask laughs: a military intelligence training base has become a tourist attraction! But you need to watch out: the road is patrolled and whoever stops is asked to present an ID. We look around, park the car, start walking towards the barbed-wire fence—and it is just seconds before an off-road Nissan navigates between the trees, riding towards us. Sekula hides the tripod, the camera, and the telephoto, huge as a cannon barrel, in the bushes. There are plenty of wild strawberries around; we pretend to be picking them. We need to look for another place. On the next road, I fail to notice the sign and we end up right in front of the entry gate. We back out, park far away, and sneak up close to the entrance through a field. We hide in the bushes, Sekula crawls as close as he can, you can hear every noise, a car is leaving. The old Hasselblad is really noisy and the telephoto is really huge. A car stops—again a farmer, explaining there is no entry here. We go back to the car, our hands shaking with adrenalin. The third try—from a fishing jetty. This time it is quiet—Sekula snaps the warning

sign, the entanglements at the far end of the lake, the fishermen, a cat turns up to see whether we have caught some fish. A patrol. They ask for documents and take down our details. Our explanations that this is an artistic project, for the national gallery, sound rather improbable. They tell us to pull the film out of the camera. But the rolls with the best pictures have already been hidden safely.

That is how the Polish part of *Polonia and Other Fables* began.

The series, like most of Allan Sekula's work of the last twenty years, was created in the course of, and as a result of, travels. Sekula travels tirelessly around the globe, tracing the thin threads of the huge, if invisible for most people, network of global trade and politics. He scrupulously examines its fibres and knots and takes samples. He is like Marco Polo from the Italo Calvino novel, bringing back from his voyages objects that are material fragments of places, but also their metaphors, using them to construct a narrative. These places, although described in detail, remained distant for the Khan. Still, they form an image of his great empire. It is not only in *Polonia and Other Fables*, but also in *Fish Story* or the more local *Canadian Notes*, that Sekula juxtaposes small-scale, often deliberately marginalized phenomena and stories with global mechanisms. Through his sophisticated photographs, which dialogue with the American and European visual codes, and which are stripped of their assumed innocence by the texts and captions accompanying them, Sekula presents us with a story about the world we live in, but also about himself and about us.

“Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveler recognizes the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have.”⁴

Analysing the relationship between the particular and the universal and linking it to the issue of identity, Ernesto Laclau writes, “The universal is incommensurable with the particular, but cannot, however, exist without the latter.”⁵ Both moments of social life manifest themselves, according to the philosopher, in moments of differentiation and lack: “[t]he universal is the symbol of a missing fullness, and the particular exists only in the contradictory movement of asserting a differential identity and simultaneously cancelling it through its subsumption into a non-differential medium.”⁶ *Polonia and Other Fables*, which combines private narratives with global ones, is a statement, a picture, a story, that fills the space between the antagonistic elements and demonstrates the superficiality of their contradiction.

1 I thank Allan Sekula greatly for being able to participate in this project. I also thank Krzysztof Pijarski and Anna Tomczak for their participation in bringing it about.

2 I. Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. W. Weaver (San Diego and New York: Harvest Books, 1978), 137.

3 *Ibid.*, 28.

4 *Ibid.*, 29.

5 E. Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London and New York: Verso 2007), 35.

6 *Ibid.*, 28.