

REMEMBERING ALLAN SEKULA (1951–2013)



Allan Sekula, Self-Portrait (Lendo, 12/22/02). From "Black Tide/Marea Negra," 2002–03, film still

Allan Sekula – artist, photographer, filmmaker, teacher, scholar, critic, public intellectual, and activist – died in Los Angeles on August 10, 2013, the only person I have known who could juggle as many roles with style and comfort. Most artists and scholars find one topic or problem and spend their lives exploring it. The truly lucky might discover two. Allan found many, and over the arc of his astonishingly productive career he systematically explored their interconnections, such that by the time of his death he had made significant contributions to the theorization of photography, the reconceptualization of documentary, the his-

tory of physiognomy and surveillance practices, the visual analysis of Southern California, and the study of the sea, shipping, and ports in the contemporary global economy.

Making art, photographs, and films informed the research that generated his theoretical investigations, just as writing was central to his politically committed art. Today as many artists opt for these forms of engagement, albeit rarely with Allan's piercing wit, erudition, and artistic talent, it is instructive to recall the lasting impact of his earliest writings. The three articles that he published in *Artforum* in 1975, when he was a mere

24, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning”, “Paparazzo Notes”, and “The Instrumental Image: Steichen at War”, catalyzed study in the United States of the political and social implications of photography and galvanized a generation of artists, teachers, and students.

Appearing in the years following the journal *Afterimage*, founded by photographer Nathan Lyons in 1972, and the 1973 publication by Susan Sontag of her book “On Photography”, these writings fused his deep knowledge of earlier modernisms (the films of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein; the photographers of the Weimar German *Neue Sachlichkeit*; the writings of Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Roland Barthes; New Deal era photography and films) into a distinctive critical voice, at once minutely aware of earlier histories, yet suffused by a smoldering analytical rage and a dry humor quite unlike anything else one could encounter at the time (or frequently since) when reading about photography.

Pierre Bourdieu suggested that cultural and intellectual fields be studied as shifting interactions between what he called stances, intellectual or theoretical belief systems; and positions, the social or economic capital that accrue to their proponents. Debates about the aesthetics of photography appear early in the history of the medium, yet Allan was among the first to map such stances in relation to institutional, curatorial, and critical positions – the grubby world of money, museums, galleries, and reputation making – and demonstrate how the construction of art photography as an object entailed a systematic disavowal of political realities and alternative practices of image making. When in 1975 art critic Hilton Kramer published a take-no-prisoners critique of *Artforum* in *The New York Times*, he singled

out Allan’s article on Steichen for particular opprobrium.

Allan lived in remarkable times and places alongside equally remarkable people, beginning with his childhood in the port town of San Pedro, California, where he developed his fascination with the sea and became acquainted with Stan Weir, a labor activist and blue collar intellectual. He studied at the University of California, San Diego, where he received his MFA in 1974, at a high point in the public higher education system of the University of California, of which he was a product. The faculty at UCSD included David and Eleanor Antin, Newton Harrison, Manny Farber, Herbert Marcuse, and Arthur Danto. Allan’s colleagues were the artists Martha Rosler, Fred Lonidier, and Phel Steinmetz.

Teaching briefly in the Department of Cinema Studies at New York University, he participated in the New York art community in the late 1970s when it still was centered in Soho and the reception of structuralism and semiotics was in full swing. While in New York, Allan met Sally Stein, a photographer and scholar of photography, who became his collaborator, wife, and most significant interlocutor for four decades. From 1980 to 1985, he taught at Ohio State University, where he met film scholar Noël Burch, with whom he later would make the film “The Forgotten Space” (2010). When Allan wore a Ronald Reagan mask on campus, the university administrators were not amused, and in 1985 he moved to Los Angeles and joined the faculty of the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, where his colleagues included John Baldessari, Michael Asher, Hartmut Bitomsky, Lorraine Wild, James Benning, Thom Andersen, Thomas Lawson, and Catherine Lord.

The time during the early 1980s that Allan

and Sally spent at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, alongside Hans Haacke and many of the liveliest and most politically engaged artists and scholars of the period, culminated in Allan's 1984 book, "Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983", published in the influential Source Materials of the Contemporary Arts series edited by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. Elegantly dissecting the pretense of the photograph as an objective record and notions of artistic signature and liberal humanist reveries of universal communication, the essays in the book, especially the 1981 "The Traffic in Photographs", transformed understandings of documentary, as his best-known text "The Body and the Archive" (1986) would later spur research into photographic documentation of deviance as an instrument of state power and control.

Allan's lifelong commitment to Marxist political economy (in matters of strategy he leaned more toward anarchism) was evident in his theoretical argumentation that related photography to the commodity form and in his photo works that focused upon him and his family, now living in San Diego, where his father worked as an engineer at a ship plant. The five photo works in the book, the best known of which are "Aerospace Folktales" and "This Ain't China: A Photonovel", studied labor and the fabric of everyday life in Southern California.

They were laboratories in which to explore relations between texts and images and Allan's conception of photographic meaning as context dependent and heavily inflected by verbal language. Refusing to understand photography as thoroughly severed from the world, Allan sought to remake realism, and the interplay of photographs, captions, narratives, quotations,

and found graphics in these projects expanded the connections of any single image to the world, frequently by introducing references to other photographs and artworks.

Central to these photo works was the investigation of sequentiality and temporality. Many were exhibited in gallery spaces through the use of dual slide projectors, a strategy that suggests cinema as a connecting thread throughout Allan's work, the medium that perhaps most inspired his own response to Walter Benjamin's dictum to introduce the montage principle into history. Wary of what he memorably phrased "the dictatorship of the projector", Allan made films whose narrative progression and logic disrupted expectations and carved out a distinctive space between the genres of documentary and the essay film. "Tsukiji", a 2005 study of the Tokyo Fish Market, would prefigure two other explorations in moving images of global maritime space, "The Lottery of the Sea" (2006) and "The Forgotten Space" (2010).

Some of Allan's most memorable images appeared in his epic 2002 "Fish Story", whose title underscores the wry humor and self-deprecating manner that permeated his work. The cargo container, a linchpin of the global economy that he was among the first to document in photography and film, was perhaps his greatest trouvaille as an artist. Simultaneously real in its movements, yet abstract in its geometric form and solid colors, it provided a perfect means with which to make global capital visible. Frank Gehry's architecture, in which Allan discerned the apotheosis of a tendency toward spectacle and deflecting an honest engagement with social, political, and urban conditions, furnished another key subject matter for him; one that he and fellow Los Angeles art-

ists would explore in the 2005 “Facing the Music” exhibition that he curated in the Cal Arts Redcat Gallery located in Gehry’s Disney Concert Hall.

I first met Allan and Sally when I moved to Los Angeles in 1990. Over the next 23 years their friendship inspired and delighted me. To view a film or an exhibition with them meant plunging into an impassioned discussion from which it was impossible not to learn. Sending Allan an email about the study by C.L.R. James on “Moby Dick” and receiving his impassioned recommendation of it was nearly as much fun as making him a gift of an obscure book about the seamen’s union photographed by a member of the Photo League. His intellectual curiosity and appetite for ideas, art, and politics were as limitless as his capacity to enjoy life and converse with anyone about anything.

Attending the recent memorial event for Allan after his death from gastric-esophageal cancer, I was struck by the dozens of students, colleagues, and friends from around the world who spoke for four and a half hours about his kindness and the difference he made in their lives and their art.¹ He had become much more than California artist and was an active participant in cultural and political struggles that spanned the globe, especially admired in Europe, where a network of collaborators, curators, museums, gallerists, critics, film festivals, and foundations supported his work.

Visiting New York in September, I was moved to see “Fish Story” installed in an exhibition of recent acquisitions in the Museum of Modern Art. After years of criticizing the canons of the Department of Photography of the Museum, Allan had finally arrived in the belly of the whale, Jonah in the inner sanctum of modernism. The receptivity

of the Museum to a wider range of photography than at earlier moments in its history, some of which today includes investigations of labor and globalization, surely must have pleased Allan as much as the realization that his own life and work played a key role in bringing this change about.

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Note

- ¹ The memorial can be viewed online at: <http://new.livestream.com/calartsofficial/AllanSekula>.