



Photography Against the Grain

The re-release of Allan Sekula's seminal book critiquing the bond between capitalism and representations of material culture

BY LAURIE TAYLOR

Photography has always been characterized by a vacillation between extremes: between subjectivity and objectivity, truth and artifice, information and aesthetic. More than any other, photography is a medium of contrasting forces and it was this oppositional nature that so interested the American photographer, writer, filmmaker and critic Allan Sekula, whose seminal, but long out-of-print collection, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983*, has recently been reconstructed and re-issued by MACK.



Allan Sekula, from the series 'Aerospace Folktales', 1973. Courtesy: MACK © Allan Sekula 2016

Originally published in 1984 by an independent art school publisher, Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, the first edition was unsurprisingly small and sold out quickly. A second edition had always been intended, but Sekula's numerous other exhibitions, essays and books (in addition to teaching at California Institute of the Arts), got in the way and he died in 2013 without ever seeing the re-release of one of his most well-known publications.

An important voice in photography's postmodern discourse, Sekula combined photography with conceptualism and Marxist commentary to create his own brand of critically engaged art and writing, much of which features in this new collection. The book's first half is devoted to his early written works and included are texts such as, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning' (1974) and 'The Traffic in Photographs' (1981). The former compares the styles of social documentarians like Lewis Hine with anti-utilitarian, aesthetes like Alfred Stieglitz, while the latter concerns itself with the literal traffic of photography's production, consumption and circulation – essential reading for anyone interested in photographic history and theory.



Allan Sekula, from the series 'School is a Factory', 1980. Courtesy: MACK © Allan Sekula 2016

Sekula's early photographic projects make up the book's second half. The pioneering work, 'Aerospace Folktales' (1973) was the first in which the artist employed his characteristic format of photographic sequences with accompanying texts. When it was first exhibited at University of California at San Diego, this 'dismantled film' included a spoken sound track, 142 photographic prints and a written narrative about the American aerospace company, Lockheed. However, as reproduced for the page, the original sound track has been abridged and turned into text and many photographic sequences have been shortened. Other photo projects such as 'This Ain't China: A Photonovel' (1974) and 'School is a Factory' (1980) have suffered similar fates. Like 'Aerospace Folktales', these works were also originally staged as exhibitions and have been modified in the move from gallery wall to printed publication. Although an introductory note attempts to assure readers that all original integrity has been maintained, without seeing the exhibitions, it is impossible to know how these alterations may have affected meaning. Despite this minor criticism, what the photo works do reveal is Sekula's interest in photography's ability to function in ensemble and to be read as narrative. Individual photographs are often underwhelming – a factory exterior, an engineer working by lamplight, a classroom of computing students – but when taken together and combined with the explanatory texts, these black and white images become powerful social critiques on the economic machinations at work in capitalist societies.



Allan Sekula, from the series 'School is a Factory', 1980. Courtesy: MACK © Allan Sekula 2016

Sekula's photo works do not sit comfortably in photography's fine art tradition where the sanctity and aesthetic authority of the singular 'fine print' rule, but nor do they accurately reflect the documentary tradition where the best photographs speak without words. By presenting individual prints in series and introducing language into a visual medium, Sekula harnessed the power of oppositional forces and created a photography that truly moved, as the book's title suggests, against the grain.

Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973–1983* is published by MACK
<<http://www.mackbooks.co.uk>>

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