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Allan Sekula
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By Daniel Marcus

THE SEA, THE SEA

Allan Sekula's *Fish Story*

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Allan Sekula, *U.S. Army VIIth Corps en route from Stuttgart to the Persian Gulf. Prins Johan Frisohaven. Rotterdam, the Netherlands. December 1990.*, Cibachrome print, 20 × 30". From *Fish Story*, 1988–95.

THIS PAST SUMMER, as the world followed the grisly saga of the OceanGate *Titan* submersible, which vanished in the deep ocean while descending to visit the *Titanic*, I thought of Allan Sekula. "The sea returns, often in a gothic guise, remembered and forgotten at the same time, always linked to death, but in a strangely disembodied way," he wrote at the turn of this century, during the first wave of *Titanic* mania. He meant this in the Freudian sense: a return of the repressed. Sekula marveled at the "lugubrious arrogance" of James Cameron's 1997 blockbuster, which took obsessive pains to resurrect its doomed subject, constructing the ultimate screen image of Gilded Age hubris and horror. Similarly cathected, OceanGate founder

Stockton Rush sought to brand the trip to the *Titanic* as an elite bonding rite, while refusing safety inspections of the *Titan*'s bargain-rate hull. Predestined for failure, the vessel imploded catastrophically, killing all five crew members, Rush included. In the abyssal zone, repression gets you only so far.

A decade after his death, Sekula's work has returned in its own right: His magnum opus, *Fish Story*, 1988–95, is currently on view in full at Minneapolis's Walker Art Center, its first complete exhibition in the US in more than two decades. For Sekula, who grew up overlooking the Port of Los Angeles in San Pedro, California, the neoliberal dream of a frictionless, lag-free economy obscured an enduring—yet disavowed—reliance on the sea. This was the argument of *Fish Story*, a photographic research project developed in the aftermath of the Cold War, during a period of capitalist reconstruction driven by the expansion oftransoceanic shipping. Presented in dual formats, as an exhibition of photographs, texts, and slides and as a long-form publication, *Fish Story* carries the viewer on a journey across more than a dozen sites, from the shipyards of South Korea to the port cities of Rotterdam, Hong Kong, Veracruz, Barcelona, and Gda□sk, returning intermittently to Los Angeles. More than a simple tour of trade routes, the project explores the survival of low-tech, low-speed transport at the center of the world economy, proceeding from the thesis that a "society of accelerated flows is also in certain key aspects a society of deliberately slow movement."

Although crucial to the digital economy, undergirding the seemingly instantaneous transmission of retail goods, the sea constitutes what Sekula calls a "forgotten space"—that is, a blind spot, out of sight and beyond representation. In a scene that is emblematic of this lacuna, *Fish Story* opens on the Staten Island Ferry, where a young boy stands before a pair of coin-operated binoculars; facing away from the water, he seems unsure how to look or where to aim the device. Answering his uncertainty, the earliest photographs included in the project seem to have been captured by a Chomskyan private eye; taken snapshot style with an unsteady hand, they reveal the massing forces

Allan Sekula, ***Boy looking at his mother. Staten Island Ferry. New York harbor. February 1990.***, Cibachrome print, 30 × 20″. From *Fish Story*, 1988–95.

of American military and economic power, often in tight coordination. For example, in a photograph shot in Rotterdam during the lead-up to Operation Desert Storm, we spy a convoy of armored trucks belonging to the US VII Army Corps aboard the deck of a merchant ship en route from Stuttgart to the Persian Gulf. Like Freud, Sekula regarded forgetting as a motivated act; in this case, the myth of a new blitzkrieg—war delivered at the press of a button—obscured the deployment of a vast naval apparatus, America's hard leverage in an era of soft power.

Blinkered vision emerges as a major theme of *Fish Story*. "In the past," Sekula recalls, "harbor residents were deluded by their senses into thinking that a global economy could be seen and heard and smelled. The wealth of nations would slide by in the channel." The advent of the container ship permitted this wealth to travel incognito, packed into opaque metal boxes and transported in orderly stacks, like "slightly elongated banknotes." Extending the writ of opacity to the ship itself, freighters frequently operate under so-called flags of convenience, legal devices allowing companies to register craft in favorable regulatory jurisdictions, thus securing access to choice labor markets. Today, a ship might be owned by a Japanese leasing company but formally operated from Taiwan, managed by an agent in Dubai, and staffed by Indian officers and crew, all while flying the flag of Panama, Liberia, or the Marshall Islands (these three low-regulation jurisdictions account for more than 40 percent of the world's merchant fleet). As documented by scholar Laleh Khalili, who contributed a preface to a recent reissue of *Fish Story*, mariners staffing these vessels face disproportionate odds of being abandoned, cut adrift by absent employers, turned away by coast guards, and "left at sea with no fuel, electricity or potable water."

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If the ocean flickers at the edge of visibility—"remembered and forgotten at the same time, always linked to death," per Sekula—so does the maritime proletariat. Seafarers and dockers emerge as a collective protagonist of *Fish Story*, portrayed in the throes of a generational struggle against automation, port closures, eroding union density, and other occupational hazards.Traveling to Barcelona in November 1990, for example, the artist met with members of La Coordinadora, a longshoremen's cooperative that had short-circuited a seniority-based hierarchy by devising a lottery system for distributing jobs to its membership, ensuring that all would receive a modicum of pay. A photographic close-up isolates the implements of the workers' lottery: wooden tokens, each bearing the number of a corresponding longshoreman, and a humble gourd to draw them from. This DIY system formed part of longer history: During the revolutionary upheavals of the early twentieth century, anarchist syndicalists had envisioned a "vast stateless association of seafaring and waterfront proletarians of all nations, described as 'an industrial republic of the ocean,' or, alternatively, as a workers' 'dictatorship of the seven seas,'" Sekula notes. Informed by this older tradition of labor militancy, his photograph of La Coordinadora captures the longshoremen's refusal—and reversal—of capitalist abstraction, figuring their solidarity as a democratic aggregate.

Allan Sekula, ***Filling lifeboat with water equivalent to weight of crew to test the movement of the boat falls before departure. Port Elizabeth, New Jersey. November 1993.***, Cibachrome print, 30 × 20″. From *Fish Story*, 1988–95.

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In other episodes, *Fish Story* tells a tale of proletarian malaise—especially the chapter titled "Middle Passage," a chronicle of Sekula's 1993 voyage aboard the M/V *Sea-Land Quality*, a container ship bound from Port Elizabeth, New Jersey, to Rotterdam. This was the first time the ship's US-based officers and crew had made port at Rotterdam's newly completed ECT/Sea-Land Terminal, an automated dock serviced by robotic gantry cranes and driverless shuttles whose movements were controlled by computer. Aboard the *Sea-Land Quality*, Sekula registered the workers' apprehensive mood, noting a "general spirit of . . . mournful and weary anticipation of unemployment" as the vise grip of the shipping industry steadily tightened. A handwritten note posted in the engine room voiced the crew's anxiety in a wry verse: "Question? / De-flagging. / Is it true / Sea-Land will / use Russian officers / with Vietnamese crew? / . . . They couldn't beat us / so they'll unemploy us! / God bless corporate America."

Its title invoking the blood-soaked origins of racial capitalism, "Middle Passage" recasts the container ship as a floating penitentiary, where resistance is a choice between escape and mutiny. In a photograph taken from within the Gigeresque cleft between container bays, for instance, we spy the chief mate clambering up a rain-slicked row of shipping containers like an inmate scaling a prison wall. The next image shows a soiled white boiler suit discarded on the floor before an open door, as if its wearer had been raptured away. Later in this sequence, a photograph taken in the ship's engine room isolates a view of a worker's ear protection, to which an embossed slogan has been added: "I CAN NOT BE FIRED / SLAVES ARE SOLD." Sekula pairs this image with another close-up from the engine room: a shot of a Klingon figurine from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Brandishing a war club, the toy serves as a warning on the crew's behalf, promising blow-for-blow retribution against the corporate overlord. The chapter leaves us to ponder this symbol of a one-man war against the bosses: a rebel without a chance.

Allan Sekula, *Lottery determining equitable distribution of work. "La Coordinadora" dockers' union dispatch hall. Barcelona, Spain. November 1990.*, Cibachrome print, 20 × 30″. From *Fish Story*, 1988–95.

If the container ship is a prison—"one of the last unequivocal bastions of absolutism," per Sekula—then how might its captives get free? This question seems to have preoccupied Sekula as *Fish Story* progressed. He reports a conversation with unemployed Mexican dockworkers in Veracruz, one of the whom jested that they should enlist the Zapatistas, members of an Indigenous insurgency underway in neighboring Chiapas, to conduct "'fiscal audits' of the port." The meaning of this proposal is left hazy—we can only guess how the Zapatista auditors would have handled the port's ledgers. Pointedly, no photograph corresponds to this episode, which remains spectral in *Fish Story*, too improbable to visualize.

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Allan Sekula, *Waiting for Tear Gas [white globe to black]* (detail), 1999–2000, wall text, slide projection of eighty-one 35-mm slides, color, silent, 13 minutes 30 seconds.

Although the Zapatistas never arrived at the Port of Veracruz, their rebellion proved fateful in other ways, anticipating a global wave of anti-capitalist demonstrations in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the precursors to Occupy Wall Street. Sekula became a participant-observer in this movement, which he documented in several projects, including his color slide installation *Waiting for Tear Gas [white globe to black]*, 1999–2000, a group portrait of demonstrators gathered to protest the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference at the infamous "Battle of Seattle." Here, finally, were capitalism's self-appointed auditors, braving truncheons and gas grenades in militarized streets and plazas, their slogans loosely adapted from the movement in Chiapas. Sekula died prematurely in August 2013, a few weeks after the mass protests following the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George

Zimmerman. Had he lived longer, he might have been cheered to witness the longshoremen's strike on Juneteenth, 2020, which shut down twenty-nine US ports in solidarity with the George Floyd rebellion. Intricately enmeshed, capitalism and empire remain an opaque enterprise, surrounded by steel and silence. Even so, a phantom democracy—anarchism's "dictatorship of the seven seas"—still clamors to be born.

"Allan Sekula: Fish Story," organized by William Hernández Luege, is on view at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, through January 21, 2024.

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