INTERVIEW

Interview with Allan Sekula

Los Angeles, California,
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Introduction

Still reeling from 9/11, I had been working in and about lower Manhattan nonstop until this trip. It was great to be far away in the smog-filtered Los Angeles sun, if even only for a day. I met Allan Sekula in his Echo Park work studio, a nondescript corner storefront filled with files of his photographs and boxes of exhibition prints just a stone's throw from Koreatown.

This is also my first chance to return to my book project on port cultures. I had been focusing on rethinking the history of New York City up until containerization and interviewing Allan gave me a chance to understand his contemporary sea and port projects. Exploring the apparent differences of our locations, my focus on NYC's history and relations to Asia and his focus on LA's present and links to Europe framed this interview.

Allan teaches at CIA, the California Institute of the Arts. The *Fish Story* exhibit and book represent seven plus years of work from 1989–95, yet the maritime work continues in various projects.

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Jack Tchen: Since this is an audience that might not be familiar with your photographs, could you take us through *Fish Story* to begin?

Allan Sekula: Structurally, *Fish Story* is a very long, extended sequence of photographs and texts that that takes two main forms: A book version and an exhibition version; the two overlap, but each contains elements not present in the other. The book includes a very long essay which is a kind of cultural history of representations of the sea, so in some ways it follows on things I've done earlier, like a very long essay on the history of the representation of mining. As with the mining book, one of my preoccupations consists of looking at the maritime world as a space of class conflict and to try to somehow see indications of class conflict in the various pictorial regimes that have appeared in the history of, I

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should say, "western" representations of the sea, beginning more or less with the high Dutch maritime painting of the seventeenth century. So the book includes this cultural/political or political/cultural reading, a kind of long, discursive reading, and it also includes a series of chapters which are a combination of image and text. Each one is a novella, you could say: a pictorial, textual novella, leading in a kind of relay from one to the next. There is a principle of montage that carries us through almost 100 photographs, broken into seven chapters. The exhibition also includes two slide projectors, each containing eighty photographs. Eighty transparencies are projected continuously, but have a clear beginning and end. Each image is accompanied by its own text, so again, the exhibition is both more and less than the book and the book is both more and less than the exhibition.

The structure of the sequencing of the photographs is in some senses geographic. I begin with two images of the port of New York, made aboard the Staten Island Ferry, and move to the port of Los Angeles, making a very quick transition from North American Atlantic space to North American Pacific space. Then, in the first chapter, I move to the port of Rotterdam, so there is a very curious return here to the Atlantic. The second chapter gets even crazier, because the images are from Gdánsk (Poland) and even from non-port cities like Warsaw, but again there is a return to Rotterdam at the end of the second chapter. The third chapter, which is called "Middle Passage," charts an Atlantic crossing between Rotterdam and New York aboard an American container ship built in Korea. The fourth chapter takes us to a shipyard very much like the one in which this container ship was built in South Korea: the Hyundai Heavy Industry Shipyard in Ulsan. The fifth chapter takes us then to Spain and the sixth chapter to Mexico. There is a circuit that comments on the underdevelopment of Franco-era Spain but then loops back to the conquest, which is made even more explicitly in the sixth chapter, which takes us to the Mexican port of Veracruz. The seventh chapter is a return to the port of Los Angeles, but this time not by way of New York or Rotterdam, but by way of Hong Kong, so there is a return to the other side of the Pacific at the conclusion of the work.

The actual making of the work included multiple journeys, multiple trips over a period of roughly seven years. I began seriously working on it in 1989, and finished in 1995; it was first shown in early 1995. Many of the choices were either whimsical or just opportunities that emerged out of invitations I'd had to places and I took the occasion to try to do some work. None of the work was sponsored until 1993, so I was working pretty much on a shoestring when I could get away. In 1993 I got support from the De Witt Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, and that allowed me to finish the work, make the book, and realize the exhibition.

JT: Why is Rotterdam such an important beginning point?

AS: Rotterdam is the biggest port in the world, or it usually is. The figures vary: Rotterdam, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Los Angeles tend to always be up there in the top four. I think the actual physical space of the port of Rotterdam is one

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of the most extraordinary in the world, given the extension of the harbor works. When you reach the outer periphery of the Port of Rotterdam and see the signs that say "Harbor 10,000" you realize, if you hadn't already, that you're dealing with something of epic proportions. And of course the outer port along the river Mosel is entirely built on landfill, so we're confusing a classic version of the second nature, a kind of manufactured environment. I was interested in the fact that many of the institutions associated with seafaring, historically, like the culture of bars and brothels that rob seafarers of their wages were actually perfected by the Dutch, even if these institutions have passed from the maritime world because of the nature of speed-up and rationalization of ships' time in port. So the deep legacy of Dutch seafaring is in some ways obscured by the hyper-rationalization of Dutch maritime space, which is exemplary of changes that have occurred globally.

JT: How is it that you became interested in this particular topic? It clearly represents some deep and sustained need you have to analyze a long historical period, but to also visualize something that is otherwise a part of historical narrative. You also have a global scope that is unusual.

AS: My work going back to the early 1970s was always based on economic themes. I found myself drawn to these topics, initially the aerospace industry in which my father worked. I spent a brief time myself working as a chemical technician for a company that subcontracted to the big aerospace companies. I saw a lot of this close-up in 1969–1970 as a young artist. I very much read the social and political crisis of the Vietnam war through a kind of embeddedness in the whole milieu of military Keynesianism, the kind of southern California war industry, permanent arms economy environment. Jumping ahead quite a bit, by about 1983 in the context of the reheated cold war of Ronald Reagan's first term, I got very into geopolitics and thinking about the flashpoints of global contestation between superpowers. Oddly enough, from that I began to think of Canada and the US as two allied countries with a border that Margaret Atwood once described as "the longest undefended one-way mirror in the world." I began a series of works on the East German/West German border and the flashpoints of the folded gap. Then I did a work called "Canadian Notes" on the US/Canadian conundrums and the relationship between finance capital and extractive industries in the Canada/US relation, looking at nickel mining, and the way that the Bank of Canada, an equivalent of the US Federal Reserve, had undergone an architectural upgrade under the auspices of the Vancouver architect Arthus Erikson. The bank itself was interesting to me semiotically as a bank that described itself as a productive natural landscape, almost as if it were a kind of garden or mine. At the same time I discovered that in Sudbury, one of the main nickel-mining centers of the world, the landscape had begun to masquerade as a bank, with giant coins erected over abandoned hard-rock mines.

I became interested in that play, and then very quickly in the whole appearance of border art—a lot of which was quite interesting, particularly the work that appeared at the San Diego/Tijuana border, with groups like the Bor-

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der Arts Workshop. I began to feel that there was a kind of binarism at work, and while I am very interested in dialectical maneuvers, I began to ask myself: what are the places where it is impossible to speak of this side and that one, and quite quickly the port appeared to me. Ports are interstitial, but in a kind of potential way with all other like spaces, so that any port can be networked to virtually any other. It occurred to me further that the periodizatons of modernity and postmodernity began to fall apart when one looked at port cities. Many of the characteristics of port cities contained elements of hybridity; all the buzzwords of postmodernity could be found activated in historic and even in ancient maritime space. Ostia Antica was one hell of a postmodern scene, as were any of the Mediterranean ports of the classical age. The challenge to reductive or dogmatic periodizations of modernity or postmodernism interested me; this seemed like a way to get at that.

Also, by 1989 the cold war was clearly resulting in some sort of provisional victory for the American side of the game, and it seemed like a way of rethinking political contestation and questions of sovereignity; the extraterritoriality of the sea appealed to me. I discovered a note in my copy of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* which I read in 1975 about cargo containers having a kind of disciplining effect in terms of dock labor, so I clearly had already had this insight to some extent. Much of this was available to me because I'd grown up near the Port of Los Angeles, so I think by the time the mid-1980s rolled around I was able to return to spaces I'd known as a young person, and think about the puzzles we hadn't been able to solve at the time, hadn't even begun to imagine were puzzles. I basically grew up during the period of spatial transformation of ports and the productive transformation of labor through the coming of the cargo container; I saw it all happen. I went to school with kids whose parents worked on the docks, and in fishing, and in industries that were affected deeply by these changes in port space. It wasn't until the 1980s, twenty years later, that I was actually able to get a handle on it, and I think it came by thinking of other industries, thinking about historical capitalism and contemporary class relations and capital movement in other industries like mining and aerospace—those interact in a way.

JT: I live in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, where the Bush Terminals are, and docks used to stretch form Red Hook and the Brooklyn Naval Yard all the way to the Bush Terminals. The neighborhood I live in consisted of Scandinavians working in shipping and receiving, and now it has been replaced by a Chinese population. So this is a resonant discussion, though I've not experienced the process of going to school with these people.

There is an amazing juxtaposition of images in the first chapter of *Fish Story,* but there are three that strike me in particular. One is described as "Remnants of a movie set, abandoned shipyard, Los Angeles Harbor Terminal, Alameda, California, January 1993," and there is this reproduction of a painting and it is in some kind of a building, but clearly there is a stage-set quality to it. There is also an image portraying a burning storefront in Koreatown—from Sa I Gu (literally April 29, referring to the L.A. riot in 1992). The third is an image

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of an abandoned shipyard on Terminal Island used by a Marine Corps expeditionary force for "counter-terrorist exercises," dated November 1992. Could you talk about these images? They're fascinating, and could be anywhere in some ways, but Terminal Island is significant for me, obviously because of its history, being associated with the settlement of Japanese American and other Asian American groups.

AS: In fact the texts at the end of the book return to Terminal Island as I talk about the importance of the Japanese-American fishing boats as they reenter the Angel's Gate, the entrance to the port of Los Angeles, on the morning of December 7, 1941 with the FBI and the US Navy taking the crews into custody at machine-gun-point, assuming them to be spies for the Japanese Imperial Navy. One of the things I wanted to do in the first chapter was to introduce the confusion of maritime and terrestrial space, the sea and the land, the idea that houses are becoming ship-like and ships are becoming house-like seemed like something to lay out in the first chapter. There you have the bulk of the Exxon Valdez, in some senses a ship in name only when we think about the classical contours of the seafaring vessel, a huge container for oil that is more box-like than knife-like, and then we have houses moving through the streets, being transplanted from one part of the city to another. In the pictures you mentioned it struck me that you had these derelict shipbuilding spaces in the port of Los Angeles that had become regular sets for filmmaking: San Pedro, Terminal Island, and less so Wilmington. The port district of Los Angeles has had probably more films made there than almost anywhere; it can pass for New York and various other parts of America.

What I'm photographing in that first photograph you mentioned is a boatworks that had been abandoned for some time and it had film sets built into it, but there are other elements in the scene that may or may not be part of the decor of the film, it may well be squatters who had been there for some time; I have no way of knowing, and I found that interesting. Here you have this seizure of derelict industrial spaces by Hollywood filmmaking, but then you also have, a few months later, the US Marine Corps using the space for urban combat training, because it could pass for Mogadishu, Somalia; Karachi, Pakistan; or any number of potential targets of the American security campaign. So the idea that these spaces could be taken over by these various narratives and scenarios interested me. I suppose it is also a way of taking a position about the role of staging in contemporary photography: If in fact the given material world is subject to appropriation of various apparatuses of fiction that are more powerful than I am as an independent photographer and writer, this becomes a part of the field of documentary; there are these apparatuses that take over. This is another kind of work that is done in the space, when you have the film crews and troops come in. So in a way that whole first chapter is about breaking open any nostalgic certainties about the sea and literally bringing it home, bringing the house-form into play.

JT: Why Koreatown?

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AS: The other thing I'm trying to get at in the first chapter is a sense of social crisis born out of economic dislocation, movement of capital, deindustrialization, and the like. I live in Koreatown in Los Angeles, and the one photograph that is made within a few blocks of where I live is the photograph of Koreatown, April 1992, in the middle of the riots. I'm showing a small camera shop burning in the riots at a time when there were no policemen on the streets—only exhausted fire crews trying to deal with the arson fires that had spread significantly, and for me it was the image of a kind of social calamity, which is something we can explain in economic terms. I also wanted to introduce the question to an astute viewer: Why this photo in this context? What does that have to do with this purported theme? Then, of course, later Korea appears and brings up questions regarding the relationship between the United States and Korea. The Koreatown photograph is actually juxtaposed with one of low-wage immigrant workers cleaning up a chemical spill in a harbor-area refinery, so I'm really registering two kinds of calamity, I suppose.

JT: And this is the point of departure into the sea lanes?

AS: *Fish Story* begins with a kind of portrait of Los Angeles. Thinking on it now, I suppose it interested me to approach the image of the sea and the problem of the representation of the sea through a series of images that almost refused to give the opening up into the panorama, into the wide-open infinitude of the maritime horizon. I was interested in the images of the house, of hearth, even the wrench on the welding table has this kind of glow as if there were a fire somewhere providing illumination. There is a predominant color to each chapter. The first chapter has these stunning reds and yellows. I almost wanted to figure, through the visual properties of the photographs, a sense of a kind of domestic space from which one departs and for which one longs, in the experience of maritime journeys. So the first chapter is the chapter in which I establish the idea of departure.

JT: There is also a sense of the domestic space that is no longer there—it feels abandoned—the shadow of the wrench, the table, the broken glass; it is no longer the same. So is it analogous to a rust-belt deindustrialization? What is your intention here in the port?

AS: I also wanted to develop a sense of time in the first chapter. The idea of photographing a shipyard two years after its closing and finding this kind of negative shadow of the dust-trace, the area under the wrench that had been shielded from dust—it struck me as an almost Duchampian joke: you take the tool, you turn it, and you discover this surface that is several shades lighter than the surrounding area. So it is a very quiet beginning, but for the workers building the tuna-fishing boat. One thing that may be a bit hard to make out is that you've got African American and Korean American workers working alongside each other in their incredibly claustrophobic engine-room space, fitting it out. I was hoping that there might be a resonance for people, moving from that image to the Koreatown image. Though that perception may have faded, there was a strong sense at the time that African Americans and Korean Americans were just at each other's throats, and there was no sense of a world in which these peo-

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ple might actually be working side-by-side. I happened to discover this in the shipyard in San Diego and was very impressed. There were also Mexicans working there who had migrated, who had worked in the shipyards of Veracruz, so it was an extremely polyglot workforce, very concentrated, employing hundreds. This is an image of the work that is still going on.

JT: One particularly interesting element is the sign of the building now being used for security exercises. I assume it was placed there for purposes of those security exercises?

AS: I think so; what is strange about it is that it's Thai. It's a proper name in Thai: "Singora," and I have no idea if a Thai American marine volunteered; they said "we need a generic third-world name for this facade." One thing you notice is that this facade is covered with this material which is almost a kind of wallpaper, faux-brick, material, which probably was not the doing of the marines but rather the doing of the film crew that built the scene you see in the prior image. Probably a more likely guess is that this "Singora" sign was made for a film in which this passed for some shop-front in Thailand or some general Southeast Asian site. All of this is next to the remains of fish harbor, which is the lowest level of the fishing economy of the Port of Los Angeles, and all of which is in deep receivership and trouble. But this is where the itinerant Vietnamese or Korean boats might tie up for a day or two as they work their way up and down the coast, and it's near where the large canneries that were once one of the main arteries of the port existed.

In general what one sees in port cities is a kind of hyperspecialization; if you think about it, there are maybe five key industrial functions that one finds in ports. There is cargo handling: stevedoring, longshoreing, cargo movement, petroleum products transfers, all of that. The second function would be fishing; the third would be shipbuilding. The fourth would be all the various leisure industries associated with the sea, from private pleasure boating to cruise ships, and I suppose those could be separated. The fifth would be all the various military and naval functions. One of the things one sees in modern seaports is that there is a tendency in the bigger ports for cargo-handling to evict all of these other functions. The Port of Los Angeles once had a significant fishing and canning industry: it was the biggest fishing port in America in the 1920s. It was the first port where tuna was canned, and had a massive tuna-canning industry that employed a very large workforce. These canneries left in the 1970s for the western Pacific, partly following the tuna, which mysteriously moved across the ocean, but also following low wages, so if you look at tuna now, much of it is imported from Thailand or American Samoa. These spaces that I'm photographing here that have been taken over by the military for their occasional drills and by the film industry, their car chases and drug-smuggling intrigues; these are the former spaces of that. These evictions of the 1960s were precedented by the great eviction of the Japanese in 1941. What had been a Croatian, Sicilian, and Japanese-immigrant coastal fishery and long-range tuna fishery became Croatian and Sicilian only with the eviction of the Japanese and their loss of a livelihood; only a few returned to fish-

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ing after the Second World War. So these are spaces of multiple evictions, and of course, if you keep going back, the first eviction is that of the Gabrieleno people, who had a very concentrated population along the coast here. This was all initially estuarial space for the Los Angeles River and it was rich hunting and gathering ground for the Gabrielenos. They were also a maritime people; they had plank canoes that they would build from driftwood and seal with tar they would gather from the tar pits. They would sail to Catalina Island, gather abalone, and so on. One of the big evictions in the conquest of California was the eviction of the coastal villages along what is now the Port of Los Angeles as people were sequestered and brought into the "*rancho*" cattle-raising, mission economies. That's not something I expressly address in *Fish Story.* I think about it in a later work which, oddly enough, makes a link between Liverpool and Los Angeles, but I suppose my sense of Los Angeles was of this space of multiple evictions. I was always really impressed by the point Carey McWilliams makes in his book *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Los Angeles, 1994). The earlier, turn-of-the-century shellfish fishing industry was entirely Asian, and it wasn't until Anglos ate shellfish and decided that abalone tasted pretty good that the then primarily Chinese fisheries were driven out. There was a kind of pogrom, so what happened to the Japanese in 1941 had precedents even further back. I think this picture of multiple evictions is a kind of a rejoinder to Jeff Wall's "Eviction Struggle" (1988) being rehearsed in advance. The US Marines are preparing to evict someone somewhere, and this is related to a whole history of prior evictions, evictions in the name of counterterrorism.

JT: The shipbuilding industry is historically most often associated not so much with the West Coast, but the Northeast, with masts coming from the straight pines growing in Maine. The incredible shipbuilding that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is seen as a great moment of white manhood, involving immigrants from Europe.

AS: Scots, for example, like E.O. Mathieson's characterizations of the Scottish shipbuilder McKay.

JT: Yes, white men, white citizens, whereas clearly this other America of evictions, exclusions, displacements, is seen as one of non-white immigrants, often with a very loose relationship to American citizenship.

AS: Richard Henry Dana is absolutely extraordinary on this count with his descriptions of the hide-tanning operation on the shore at San Diego, where you have Kanakas and Portuguese and Yankees working the hide operations, and his observations of the degradation of the lives of the Diegueno Indians in the hands of the mission system. One really gets from Dana a sense of that informal republic of the sea, up against a space which is one of colonial control. But this is why it is interesting now to me that there are Gabrielenos who have begun to restore the canoes and are working on reviving the coastal seafaring tradition of the native peoples of this region, and that's very touching, I think, and very important, culturally.

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JT: How would you describe the Americas fitting into this process? We have a Pacific world and an Atlantic world—the Americas, North, South, Central, and the Caribbean, is in between.

AS: The one Caribbean port I document is Veracruz, and there is a chapter where I look at not only the neoliberalism of President Carlos Salinas, the breaking of the dockworkers' union in Mexico under the Salinas program in 1991, but also the legacy of Hernando Cortés, the fortress of San Juan de Ulúa in Veracruz. There is a funny link to Vigo Bay in Spain, even though Vigo was not a point of departure for the conquest; through Jules Verne you get the idea in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* that all of Captain Nemo's wealth comes from these sunken galleons on the floor of Vigo bay. Very often I make a link through fiction. One of the nice things about being able to write these prose/poem or short story/essay texts that intermittently appear in the book is that I can be playful; I can say things like, well, if ships were made of gold, Cortés would never have needed to sail, and they would never rust, and this kind of thing. I can just play with sets of associations and engage in this sort of metaphoric game, even if my resources had been limitless I would have included places like Valparaiso, Chile, which was kind of a gateway to the Pacific prior to the Panama Canal. I would have been very keen to visit Panama, but I just wasn't able to. Also I wanted very strongly, perhaps more strongly than anywhere else, to work in Dakar, Senegal, and that became impossible.

JT: Why Dakar?

AS: Dakar was interesting to me in multiple ways. I was very taken by Ousmane Sembène's book *The Black Docker,* and I was interested in the fact that African liberation movements had been influenced strongly by the roles of railway and dock workers in countries like Kenya and also Senegal. I was very struck as well by an Aaron Siskind photograph that appears in *Twelve Million Black Voices,* the book that Richard Wright made with Edwin Roskin using the archives of the Farm Security Administration and also some photos from the Film and Photograph League, including some from Siskind's documentation of Harlem. One of these photos is an overhead shot, rather like some of the photos Siskind made at the Apollo Theater, but in this case what he's showing you are black dockworkers moving cotton. This struck me as a really compelling image, because what Siskind had seen and what Richard Wright had seen in choosing and editing this photo along with Roskin, his collaborator, was a transitional image. The narrative trajectory of *Twelve Million Black Voices* is very classically Marxist insofar as it is about the formation out of a black agricultural, tenant labor force, through migration to the north, of a black proletariat which had the potential to be a revolutionary vanguard. That's the Marxist core of this book from 1941, when Wright was still committed to this analytic framework. So the black docker, hauling cotton, is the figure of transition between agricultural, tenant or sharecropping labor, and industrial labor. The transport worker becomes a kind of metaphysical link between these two worlds, and so I was thinking of trying

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to make some loop between that image, which might have been played out in the essay text of the book, and the reality of dockwork today in Dakar where one of the main export products is cotton. Very often I would think of chapters that way; I would think: I'm interested in Ousmane Sembène, but I'm also interested in Richard Wright, and maybe along the way I'm interested in Langston Hughes and his first voyage to Africa when he threw all his books over the stern. I was thinking of black American writers, black African workers, the Marxism of both, and that led me to comment that this whole project feels like a juggling act, a triple funeral for painting, Socialism, and the sea. And so Richard Wright, Ousmane Sembène, and Langston Hughes, they're all there as figures of what for me is an important radical culture also connected with ideas of population density and social justice.

I regret that I never got to Africa; the reasons I didn't were complicated, Veracruz was my fallback. I could manage to get there, but I'd managed to get hurt in the earthquake that happened here in Los Angeles in 1994 and after about June of 1994 I wasn't very mobile, so I finished the work. In the last photos I made in Los Angeles in which I'm going down into the hold of a ship hauling steel to China I'm just getting back on my feet and am walking rather slowly. Part of the problem in Africa was the seasonal nature of the work. I had to be there at a certain time of year to get dockwork, so I never made it, and I regret that because I think that in some ways Africa is assumed to be off the map of globalization. There is an economic triage in which Africa is forgotten, and yet, of course, there is all this trade that goes on in Africa—at, of course, enormous disadvantage to the Africans—but one could easily approach these thematics from a wholly African perspective if one so chose.

JT: Benjamin Bucklow talks about your investment in critical realism and also certain ways in which your material is perhaps out of step with more avant-garde approaches to art and photography. In *Fish Story* you're clearly focusing on labor, circuits of capital, flows of people. You're incredibly well-read; you're making all these connections that literary scholars don't necessarily make. In some ways your photography is just part of the art that you're doing, because your essays and the associations you're making with captions, montages, and everything else is another layer of your larger project.

AS: I first encountered photography while working in a library. As an undergraduate I worked in what was the art and music library at the University of California at San Diego. It was great; I wasn't a very efficient library worker but I was learning all the time. I was timed with a stopwatch shelving books and I think I set the record for being the slowest. They would come find me reading John Cage's *Silence* or something in the stacks. I encountered photography through books; it was difficult on the West Coast in 1970 to see a lot of photographic exhibitions. I became interested in the photographic book as a form. I suppose the other interest was film, so for me photography has always been in a sort of triangulated space, bounded by literature, film, and painting.

I would say that, institutionally, the valorization of photography in the art

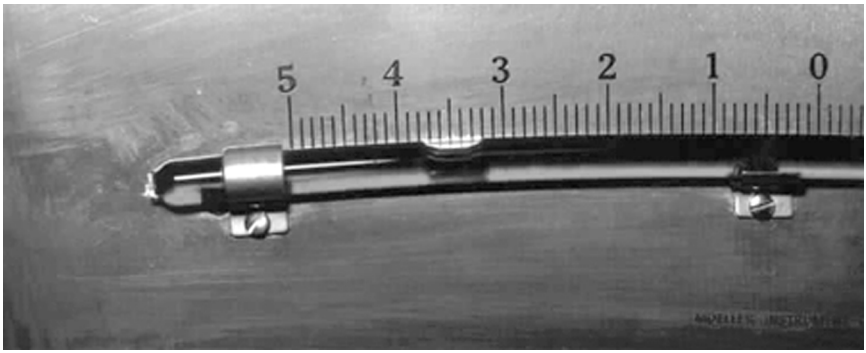
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system has been entirely about the painting apex, so the more there can be an imaginary affiliation of photography with painting, the more authenticated and well-underwritten the investment in the photographic as fine art is. So the appeal to the literary and the cinematic cultures is to assent a counterveiling force, and to me that's important. I also think we can go back and find very reputable figures to bolster that kind of argument. Clement Greenberg spoke about the value of photography being its literary properties, which led him to Walker Evans over Edward Weston for example. I think the other issue is my interest in narrative or in essayistic discursive argumentation, the idea that the photograph could appear in a kind of ensemble in some way that something like a prose essay was being played out, that in fact you could use prose elements.

I know we see a lot of artwork that uses text, but I think in general the art world favors the list, iterative forms, simple propositional structures; I think that had a lot to do in the 1970s with the prestige of logical positivism and "analytic" philosophy, a sense that one was approaching language in a severely analytical and structurally rigorous way. I was drawn from an early point to the Russian sociological critics, people like Mikhail Bahktin and Valentin Voloshinov, and the novelistic, I suppose; the idea that the photograph can become a kind of experimental novel in which the image becomes very present, well-produced, and well-made. This allowed me to think of photography in a way more like a shot within a film. The other thing is that the photos can seem rather straightforwardly descriptive, though perhaps on second or third description you discover that there's something trickier going on. But one of the problems is that the prestige of staging in the photography of the 1980s and 1990s has made documentary photographs seem like they're overcoded, like they're unreadable in a way, which is something Benjamin Bucklow struggles with in his essay, what he calls "the illegibility of my work." So, for example, in an earlier piece of mine I called "Aerospace Folktales" in which I'm talking about my father as an unemployed aerospace engineer, I have a photograph of my father and mother, my father wearing a white shirt and tie, my mother wearing a kind of cotton dress with a headscarf, looking like a housewife, which is in fact what she was, and still is in her eighties now. They're up against a clapboard wall like the tenant farmers in Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* This is deliberate on my part; it was in fact the wall of the garage in the housing complex where they lived, but the allegorical move doesn't somehow come across because it's not imagined that this photo could be playing with the idea that you could photograph white-collar workers as if they were standing in the place of tenant farmers.

JT: What is difficult for people is you are dealing with issues of labor and materialism and really a kind of Marxist analysis of how these circuits operate in terms of production and manipulation, but the way in which you do it appears very experimental; you've read more and thought more about these subjects than critics have, so I would imagine they don't necessarily catch all the references. We're very much in a world where people are so specialized that they think and know what their specialization is, but they have a hard time thinking

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1. Detail. Inclinometer. Mid-Atlantic. © Allan Sekula, 1993.

across these specializations. You use a larger personal-political imagination to think these things through, so you're kind of an interesting mix. Clearly, in a very non-Marxist, neoliberal time, you're dealing with realism.

AS: *October* recently did this issue on obsolescence; there is a double sense of obsolescence that we have to contend with. One is the supposition that certain signifying practices are obsolete, such as realist practices, and the second is that certain lifeworlds are obsolete. You could say *Fish Story* is a double affront to the notion that both realism and the sea are obsolete. On the side of the signified, the sea for me is absolutely a space of contemporaneity, and it seems to me that the myth of the sea's obsolescence requires a reductive overcoding of maritime meaning, a kind of willful, healing flight into the disembrianing machine. And similarly for realism.

I find that, at my school, many of the students in the art program have not developed a photographic culture, so they don't know that there are a plethora of strategies, but beyond that there is a kind of structural limitation. Very few people have the kind of insight that Roman Jakobsen had in 1919 in his short essay on realism. Realism is always a recoding of a prior realism and a game with existing conventions. Certainly the realism of "Die Neue Sachlichket" (The "New Objectivity" of the Weimar Republic) is very different from the realism of the Barbizon school, to take two wildly different examples. So there is a straw-man realism that is being pummeled in the art world because in fact what the art world requires is an antirealist compact; realism is needed as a kind of bad object.

I also think that this is related to notions of history in that the more art aspires to be in a museum, the more that becomes its primary condition of being—to historicize itself within the trajectories of modernism, and the more it has al-

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2. Panorama. Mid-Atlantic. © Allan Sekula, 1993.

ready doomed itself to an antiquarian status. The museum is in effect the institutionalization of the logic of the antique. Even the contemporary becomes the antique once it has entered the museum; in effect it is already antique by virtue of wanting to be in the museum. It seems to me that the work of art should resist the museum. That doesn't mean the museum isn't where it will end up, but it should spiral out in some way. Maybe it seems like I'm exaggerating about this, but an exhibition like "The Museum as Muse" (MoMA, 1999) is entirely about a teleology that is both about before and after the work of art. The institutional narcissism of this is just extraordinary—that curators could have so inflated the grandiosity of their role that they find themselves to be both muse and final repository. Of course, they find a self-confirming set of objects, and artists are readily enlisted into this celebration; it's just absurd.

But that often means that I'm relating to photography in a polyvalent way. There will be references to a range of different practices, and oddly enough that takes me back to painting in a funny way. That was the other challenge of doing a work about the sea. I gave myself the problem of thinking about everyone from Sergei Eisenstein to J.M.W. Turner, and that was a hell of a lot of fun. I could delineate five or six years where pretty much everything I looked at was in that range, novels I read, things I reread, etc.

JT: Could you talk about the socialist aspect of "the funeral"? Part of what you're focusing on is giving visibility and reminding people of what was there. Labor history itself, with socialism, is often seen as an artifact of the past, no

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longer relevant or important in terms of the "clean" information economy. Garment factory lofts are now being emptied and swept clean, and dot-com start-up and media companies are being brought in to much higher square-footage rates. Would you consider yourself a Marxist, for example, or how would you work with that definition?

AS: That's very much the intellectual tradition that interests me. I think the strains of Marxism that have been most compelling to me have been the ones that have been dissident within Marxism. I can remember early on as a student; around the same time that I was reading art and language, avant garde magazines and working papers in cultural studies, coming across the Scottish journal *Critique,* reading about the ports on strike in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and being very intrigued by this kind of dissident reading of the history of the left. I think the analytical tools of Marxism are still quite compelling. There are other methods and other philosophical paradigms, but for me it is still a question of a materialist reading of history. One thing that interested me about the social legacy of seafaring is the way that seafarers, roughly between the French Revolution and the Kronstadt uprising of 1921, exercised certain radical republican ideas in a brilliant form in their revolts. This took place whether they were merchant seafarers of naval crews. You can map this trajectory from the Nore and Spithead mutinies in the British fleet to Kronstadt, and I think the history of democracy is very much a history of those struggles. It is, as Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh have pointed out in their recent book *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2001), that the Atlantic world produced this kind of floating proletarian consciousness that was crucial to absolutism and to early democratic movements. We forget at our own peril that those struggles were absolutely crucial. The women of Barcelonetta in Spain in 1919, the Seattle general strike of 1919, the West Coast waterfront strike of 1934—these have been key democratic struggles. What happens when you automate port labor, when you casualize the jobs that remain, when you break dock unions, when you return truck drivers to this kind of rent-servitude of mortgaged truck ownership and pseudo-owner-operated status. If you talk with people who perform dock labor around the world, they know what the social consequences are; they can see it in their neighborhoods with the coming of heroin addiction and the lumpenization of young people who previously had some chance for the security of steady work.

I think there are still key struggles here. I think it is no accident that some of the key fights against globalization have been struggles of transport workers, whether railway workers in France, dockworkers in Santos, Brazil, Chilean dockworkers in Santiago, United Parcel Service (UPS) delivery drivers in the US, Australian dockworkers, or dockworkers in Liverpool, UK. We're now seeing a massive confrontation here on the West Coast around issues of automation, the security of technologically-based labor, and around issues of Taylorism and speed-up, really. I think it is still a site of very intense and very important struggle; the difference is that there used to be the classical Marxist idea of the massive labor force on the waterfront, maybe 30 or 40 thousand people and more

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3. Bo'sun driving the forward winch. Mooring at ECT/Sea-Land Terminal. Maasvlakte. Port of Rotterdam. © Allan Sekula, 1993.

working in a shipyard, and now we're talking about a much smaller workforce, maybe 10 thousand regular dockworkers on the entire West Coast in something like twenty-nine significant ports. These 10 thousand are crucial to the movement of a very large portion of the American and global economy. I think Ronald Reagan understood this when he broke the air traffic controllers' union; he had an intuitive grasp of the actual material importance of transport labor. He was willing to destroy a union that had in fact supported him in order to make this point to his global constituency. This is why I'm very interested in the campaign of the International Transport Workers Federation which I think have taken more interesting forms, because they actually look at transport labor in a global perspective. They in themselves are not very powerful, but are kind of an umbrella organization, almost like an NGO (non-governmental organization), with their affiliated member unions. They have no control over these unions, but they are able to mount campaigns, and that is why I was interested in their taking a cargo vessel and turning it into a kind of agitprop exhibition.

JT: *Fish Story* is very much about the submersion of awareness of the importance of the sea and the trade and maritime industries, but it also about US citizens today and their lack of connections to the waterfront in general. In the *October* piece you claim that this repression is bubbling up in an almost subconscious way. The fascination, therefore, that some people still have with it is displaced and fetishized.

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AS: *Fish Story* was composed in 1995, and over the second half of the 1990s one saw increasing attention to what was beginning to be called globalizaton, which I think indirectly reintroduced the theme of the sea and maritime trade, but perhaps only in a kind of shadowed way. Then you had this weird cultural eruption of things like the movie *Titanic,* the Guggenheim Bilbao museum with its fish-like, ship-like restoration of what had been shipping and transport space on the river in that Basque city. There was the sense that these derelict spaces could be redeemed imaginatively in a kind of neobaroque excess; another example is Bill Gates buying Winslow Homer's "Lost on the Grand Banks" for more money than anyone had ever paid for an American painting. All of this seemed to me symptomatic of, if nothing else, the return of the repressed, to follow your point.

At the same time there was a sort of afterlife of *Fish Story;* I'd shown it four times in Europe: Rotterdam, Stockholm, Glasgow, and Calais, and it then it came to Santa Monica in the US and was in storage in my studio and I was invited to show it in the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, which is the museum of the University of Washington. The context that emerged through a collaboration with the curator there at the time, Sheryl Conkelton, and a political scientist named Margaret Levi, who was at that time the Harry Bridges Chair of Labor Studies at the Labor Studies Center of the University of Washington, the only chair I know of that's actually endowed by a trade union (though there may be something similar at Wayne State University, I'm not sure).

What emerged was probably the only instance of a major museum exhibition actually supported by a union to the point where there were dockworkers and retired dockworkers acting as guides to the exhibition, giving talks about the work and so on. *Fish Story* became the center of a whole series of discussions about working-class responses to globalization, about whether or not the strike weapon is a useful one in the new context, how do we deal with runaway shops, international organizing, and the organizing of casualized workers—these kinds of questions.

The actual occasion was the commemoration both of the 1919 general strike, its ninetieth anniversary, and the anniversary of the 1934 West Coast waterfront strike that formed the rather different form of social unionism that prevails in the West Coast ports. All of this was occurring in February and March of 1999, and what I think people weren't fully aware of in Seattle at the time was that a momentum was gathering at those and other events in the city leading to the protests against the World Trade Organization in November, 1999. In those protests the dockworkers took a key role; they shut down all the West-Coast ports for what would have been the opening day of the World Trade Organization meeting. They were also very committed on the streets to blocking the meeting; they were among the more radical of the unions involved.

Out of that work in Seattle I developed two new projects. One was my swimming visit to Bill Gates; I wrote him a letter asking him about his purchase of the Winslow Homer painting. I also made a slide piece about the WTO protests in Seattle. I was up there for four days and I just worked continuously, moving with the people in the crowd. It was an amazing experience; I met a sig-

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nificant number of people in the crowd who had seen my exhibition. They would ask me who I was photographing for and I would explain that I was working with the dockworkers and had done this exhibition, and they would say "Oh, you're the guy . . ." It was a very new concept for me; I really felt that the work had entered a world where other things were being played out. At the same time I was making connections with the international transport workers federation, who were taking a ship around the world, a refitted 1970s British-built cargo vessel containing an exhibition about working conditions and the sea. I got to know them here in Los Angeles and ended up sailing with them from San Francisco to Portland, and meeting them again in Seattle, where a number of people from the crew came to see my show. I remained in contact with them via email and met them again in Liverpool, where I'd been doing a project with Liverpool dockworkers who'd been sacked in 1995. I ended up flying down to Durban, South Africa, from London, meeting the ship again, and then sailing to Capetown. Four days after the Seattle protests at the end of 1999 I flew to Cyprus and sailed with them to Novorossysk, Constanta (Romania), Istanbul, and back around to Koper in Slovenia; I spent about a month with the ship at that time.

I was very interested in this campaign against the "flag of convenience" system of ship registry, which is a longstanding campaign which has won some gains for third-world, mostly Filipino, Chinese, and Indonesian seafarers, but also increasingly for seafarers from former East Bloc countries: Romanians, Bulgarians, and Russians. Many of them are sailing on ships that are returning to the conditions of eighteenth-century seafaring slavery. That campaign, which I think is a very interesting labor rights and human rights campaign, is a very important one, and it is largely unknown in the United States because the merchant marine in this country has dwindled to very small numbers. So we know, from the current situation on the West Coast docks, for example, that people may be vaguely aware that dockworkers are working under the imposition of the Taft-Hartley Act. They may not understand what that means; that it is an extremely tense and potentially very draconian license for company efforts to speed the work up and increase the danger of working conditions. The thing that is perhaps not glimpsed at all is that those lines of ships that stretch down from the Port of Los Angeles to Huntington Beach, or that fill Puget Sound outside of the ports of Tacoma and Seattle, there are all these crews who are stuck; who are no longer mobile, who can no longer get visas to come ashore. I have no idea what policy changes have been made in the landing rights for Indonesian Seafarers, but I do know from gleaning something from a recent story in, I think, the *Los Angeles Times,* that the cruise ship companies who have been hiring large numbers of Indonesians and Balinese stopped immediately after the bombing in Bali. So, the effects of post-September 11 counterterrorist restrictions on this seafaring proletariat are significant; they're becoming more and more sequestered, more and more blocked from certain kinds of jobs, regarded as suspect in a sensitive industry which is vulnerable to attack. We should be asking questions about this.

I was fortunate that David Montgomery got a look at *Fish Story* in Rotter-

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dam and I think let some people know about it and subsequently through David's urging I was invited to a conference on maritime history at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut. By and large there is excellent work being done on this early history of radical seafaring traditions, but the closer we get to the present the more difficult it is for historians to get a handle on things. David obviously is an exception because he's a social activist and sees things in a very contemporaneous way, and this is true of Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh as well, but it struck me that here we were in Mystic Seaport in the shadow of the great nuclear submarine industry of New London, and yet nobody was talking about that. It is a very difficult and vexing problem. Subsequently I've had conversations with French nuclear submarine workers in Cherbourg, who are all members of the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travaille). It is very interesting to have a philosophical discussion with them about the work they do, their feelings about it, the social struggles they've been engaged in, and to me the ground that could be broken there is something we need to approach here. It is to go to the center of the war machine and talk about what people's lifeworld is, their work experience, the struggles they're engaged in, and then also to be able to somehow reach out to this transnational working-class that people see only fleetingly in airports. People probably don't realize this, and you become sensitive to it if you get to know the maritime world, but there are ship's crews moving around on airplanes; there are crew rotations and transfers, and you can make them out, you can tell who they are. A group of Russians, a group of Ukranians wearing inexpensive leather jackets, carrying certain kinds of articles . . . There are social markings of this invisible working-class that's moving around the world, flying on bargain tickets, purchased by a manning agency that could be in Zurich for all we know, and it's going to fly them to Rotterdam or Lima, Seoul, or Hong Kong or another port; they pick up a ship, they go to sea.

One very interesting thing about the ITF is that there are very smart activists there who now have both experience with Greenpeace-style environmental questions and with labor organizing. Many of them are lifelong seafarers, some of them are dockworkers, and there are some very interesting, thoughtful people who are trying to figure out how to deal with globalization. I think it would be very interesting to get their perspectives on the "war on terror," because these are in fact the people who make up airline flight crews; they are people who are working in very sensitive sectors of the economy.

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