

Remembering Allan Sekula (1951–2013)*

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Having just recently returned from a rare visit to Los Angeles, and wondering about the city's loss of Michael Asher and Allan Sekula in the past year and a half, I was suddenly struck by the idea that these artists must have made gargantuan efforts in that environment on a daily—if not hourly—basis to sustain their conviction in the viability of their practices. After all, the near-total erasure of any remnant of conventional structures of subjectivity and the dissolution of even the last residual spatial forms of the public sphere could hardly reach a more decisive state.

That visit also made me realize for the first time that Sekula's commitment to critical realism, embodied in his photographic practices as much as in his theoretical and historical reflections on photography's pasts, had not just insisted on innovating radical post-documentary forms after Conceptual art. It had also sought to embody a form of melancholic retrospection on the imminent, if not already manifest, obsolescence of photography itself. For Sekula, the medium had acquired the status of a vanishing disciplinary formation that had once promised a critical realism and been invested with a new political agency, one fundamentally more democratic and activating than all the other practices of modernism. With hindsight it now appears that Sekula wanted to salvage this radical historical nucleus of photographic realism as the subject's and the collective's originary access to self-representation—to have his work transpose photography's archaisms and archaeology like a memento into the present moment of globalized technocratic and proto-totalitarian media regimes.

That he knew how desperate such a project must be is evident in these very early photographs that his wife, Sally Stein, kindly offered to us for a commemoration of Allan. That one of the performances opens onto a fragment of symbolic criminality (or criminal symbolism) only confirms that Sekula anticipated earlier than most the forces that would eventually be necessary to voice even the most elementary forms of opposition to the totalizing corporate control and destruction of experience and environments.¹

* My more extensive text commemorating Allan was published in *Artforum* (January 2014).

1. The selection of images that follows—early, lesser-known, but no less brilliant because of it—was made by David Joselit, Sally Stein, and Ina Steiner.

In view of these conditions, it is perhaps less surprising that Sekula's work was once again omitted from a recent exhibition that made the claim to represent the history of the primarily photography-based artistic practices of the 1980s.² Neither his obvious generational affiliation nor his even more compelling local geopolitical presence as the most important artist deploying photography in Los Angeles after Douglas Huebler and Ed Ruscha seem to have convinced the curators to include him in their attempts at collecting and comprehending the artistic practices of that decade.³

Short of assuming phobias among younger generations of American curators for leftist cultural projects not mediated by seduction or assimilation to spectacle, one is compelled to search for other explanations for these repeated systematic omissions. After all, Sekula, like almost all the other artists of his generation, emerged from the critical dialogues he developed in response to the usages of photography in Pop Art and Conceptualism. Yet he did not take it for granted that photography had long since traded its originary referentiality for a mere simulational semiology, an artistic strategy that provided an apparently seamless transition from the citational relations to photography of Warhol and Ruscha to the work of Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince, Louise Lawler and Sherrie Levine. Sekula, moreover, refrained from accepting either the orders of media culture or the discursive and institutional frameworks of the museum as his primary and singular set of references.

And equally hard, if not in fact even harder, to comprehend was Sekula's strategy of actually investigating photography's own discursive history and its proper social mediations as documentary and to incorporate these reflections within the work itself. Rather than taking photography as a more or less integral—and therefore almost invisible—element of mass-cultural production, Sekula pursued a project of critical realism that first and foremost analyzed photography itself in terms of its proper historical functions and sociopolitical parameters. One such task was precisely the one most manifestly absent from the work of his artistic peers of the '80s: that of representing labor and the everyday life of the collective in the history of modernity.

The imminent, if not already accomplished, disappearance of analog photography as a fundamentally referential medium, now accompanied by the departure of one of photography's greatest activist artists and historians, will hardly free us from the seemingly insurmountable and intricate difficulties involved in the labor of representation, and even less so from those of the representation of labor's perfectly concealed totalities.

2. Anne Ellgood's and Joanna Burton's *Take it or Leave it*, at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, 2014.

3. Sekula was equally absent from a much more carefully conceived and curated exhibition about that same generation of artists at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2009, *The Pictures Generation 1974–1984*, organized by Douglas Eklund.

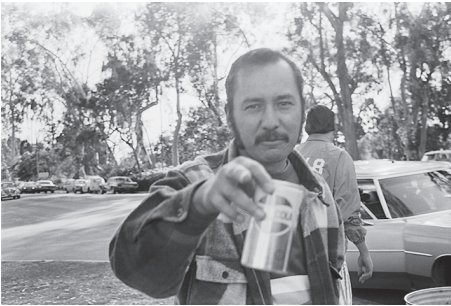


Allan Sekula. *From Attempt to Correlate.*
1975–2011. All images
© The Estate of Allan Sekula.





Sekula. From Guns and Butter. 1975–2011.



Sekula. From Red Squad (San Diego, 20 January 1973). 1973.



Meat Mass

Over a period of several weeks, expensive cuts of meat were stolen from a supermarket and stored in a freezer. The thawed steaks were thrown beneath the wheels of freeway traffic.

January 1972



Sekula. From Meat Mass. 1972.



