Message in a Bottle

In his photographic project "Fish Story," Allan Sekula explores a vast but nearly invisible social space—the sea. His current traveling exhibition and book place maritime trade and its changing representations within a complex historical tradition.

BY ROBERT SIMON

ost sea stories are allegories of authority. In this sense alone politics is never far away." So writes Allan Sekula, referring to the maritime narratives that populate his traveling exhibition of photographs, "Fish Story," and the book of the same name that extends the purview of the show. "Fish Story," parts of which were included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, is organized around Sekula's six-year transoceanic exploration of port cities and the shipping trade. His statement—which appears on one of the exhibition's 26 text panels, themselves distributed among 105 large-format color photographs and two continuously running slide projections—might equally introduce the complexities of his own enterprise.

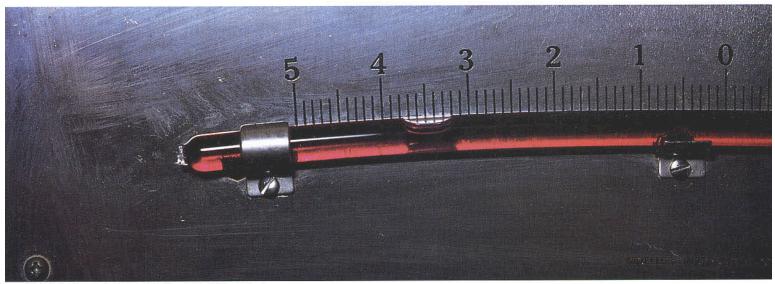
The photographs are grouped in loosely organized sequences that cor-

respond to one or more maritime locales linked by geography or commerce; these include Los Angeles, San Diego, Rotterdam, Gdansk, Warsaw, Seoul, Vigo (Spain), Veracruz, Hong Kong and a cargo ship in Atlantic transit. The rhythms and distances between the pictures ask—demand—that readers and viewers construct their own stories, which will then be revised, though not necessarily resolved, in light of Sekula's written commentaries.

"Fish Story" extends Sekula's longstanding investigation of what he calls "the imaginary and material geographies of the advanced capitalist world" as well as his concern, over the course of 20 years as a critic, historian and photographer, with the production and organization of



Allan Sekula: Panorama. Mid-Atlantic, 1991, 16 by 32 inches. All photographs this article are Cibachrome prints from "Fish Story," courtesy the artist.



Detail. Inclinometer. Mid-Atlantic, 1991, 12 by 32 inches.

photographic fact and knowledge.² In pictures microscopically attentive to visual detail and largely devoid of didactic, ethical or exhortatory content, "Fish Story" positions itself both within and in opposition to the traditions of realist documentary photography and photojournalism. Sekula's saga of ships, shipyards, sailors, welders, scavengers, dockers and fish-market women takes shape in the play between individual moments of "mere" visual description and a larger, associative web of image sequences, captions, site names, anecdotes and historical exposition.

An example of his method can be seen in a sequence titled "Message in a Bottle," shot in the Spanish fishing port of Vigo. In one image we see a stout dock laborer, leaning slightly back, his weight firmly planted, who stands before a pallet piled high with small, uniform boxes. He is wearing an apron and a hint of a smile; one gloved hand holds a rope, and a short wooden rod is borne aloft in the other. His figure and gesture call to mind an operatic tenor or an orchestra conductor; the caption informs us that he is unloading frozen fish from Argentina. The succeeding pictures in the group show a crowd of workers at the waterfront in the aftermath of a general strike protesting cuts in unemployment benefits, and a grim-faced fisherman pulling mightily on a net. Here we read: "Unsuccessful fishing for sardines off the Portuguese coast."

The text accompanying "Message in a Bottle" complicates this glimpse of a vexed seaport economy. The floor of Vigo Bay, Sekula tells us, figures in Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* as the site of sunken Spanish treasure galleons that are the source of Captain Nemo's wealth. The invisibility of this treasure, which is never described in Verne's novel, becomes a metaphor for the "hidden" history of the gold and silver that were once extracted from South American mines and transported to Spain at the height of that nation's power. Sekula's views of present-day Vigo suggest a city drained of its former colonial wealth, reduced to a way station for less glamorous South American cargo. The effect is to restore this Spanish port, albeit elliptically, to a legible historical narrative.

The unifying theme that emerges in Sekula's long essay "Dismal Science," contained in the book *Fish Story*, is the worldwide transformation of seaports, maritime military and economic enterprises, and ocean-related labor from the 17th to the 20th century. As his commentary traverses examples taken from painting, film, photography, literature, politics and naval history, we follow an uneven ebb and flow of capital, shipboard mutinies and visual mediums. If "Fish Story" has a dramatic aspect, perhaps the villain of the piece is the shipping contain-

er, the blank, standardized box introduced by U.S. shipping companies in the 1950s. Vehicle of displaced human labor, the rationalized container ship is, for Sekula, the metaphoric antithesis of the ship filled with rebellious sailors, of which Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* provides a famous model.

A fish story is, of course, a tall tale, and Sekula's story implicitly questions the authority of its own representations. This is rendered most vividly in the tension between the "panorama" and the "detail," a pair of terms explored as a historical theme in the essay "Dismal Science," and which also provide a principle that structures *Fish Story*'s visual and textual elements.

Consider a signal instance, a photograph taken from a high, commanding viewpoint on a ship crossing the Atlantic. We look out past tightly packed rows of cargo containers, over the bow and the wave breaking beneath it, then to a sweeping horizon, where a low, intermittently broken layer of clouds meets the sea. This picture appears on the front cover of *Fish Story*. On the book's back cover is an extreme close-up of a thin, curved glass tube bracketed to a scuffed steel surface; this level contains a red liquid and a single bubble. Echoing the first photograph, the latter suggests a partial view of a ship, but subjected to a vast shift of scale; here the ship's form is miniaturized, turned horizontally and immobilized. The captions tell us, "Panorama. Mid-Atlantic," and "Detail. Inclinometer. Mid-Atlantic."

Referring to Dutch maritime painting of the 17th century, Sekula writes: "When it was initially seized by the imaginary and made pictorial as a coherent and integrated space rather than a loose emblematic array of boats and fish and waves, maritime space became panoramic." But, he points out,

the panorama is paradoxical: topographically "complete" while still signalling an acknowledgement of and desire for a greater extension beyond the frame. . . . The tension is especially apparent in marine panoramas, for the sea always exceeds the limits of the frame.³

Sekula goes on to argue that "modernity dissolves the edifying unity of the classical maritime panorama... and entails a maritime victory of the detail over the panorama." Taking the military sphere as a major impetus for this transformation, he examines late 19th-century naval strategy and finds that the classical panoramic "space of naval maneuver and engagement . . . eminently picturable, and legible to a knowledgeable viewer," is supplanted by more abstract systems of representation and measurement: "details became the analytic fragments that had to be

Fish-market women at the close of the morning auction, Puerto Pesquero, 1992, 16 by 24 inches; from a group of photos taken in Vigo, Spain.



Dockers unloading shipload of frozen fish from Argentina, Vigo, Spain, 1992, 16 by 24 inches.

entered into a vast statistico-taxonomic grid, a grid that compared and weighed the fleets of the world."5

Sekula does not ascribe simple oppositional values to the panorama and the detail. Indeed, in his account the terms, in their visual, historical and theoretical manifestations, cannot really be separated. In "Fish Story," panorama and detail ultimately serve as metaphors for the predominant modes-cognitive, linguistic, visual-in which instances of knowledge or accounts of the world have taken form. "Fish Story" may then be read, on one level, as an unorthodox history of these metaphors—a history whose own mode of narration is caught up in the same tropes.

elancholy Adventures of the Detail and the Panorama" could serve as an only partly ironic subtitle for Sekula's maritime saga. Toward the end of "Dismal Science," he asks:

Are there, even today, forms of human agency in maritime environments that seek to build a logical sequence of details, a synoptic interpretation of events? Is it possible to construct such knowledge from below, or is this only the purview of elites? Can these questions even be approached in the present tense, in the face of an automated, accelerated, computer-driven, and increasingly monolithic maritime world?6

"Fish Story" continues Sekula's longstanding investigation of what he calls "the imaginary and material geographies of the advanced capitalist world."

What sort of response does "Fish Story" offer these questions? In an essay in the book Fish Story, Benjamin Buchloh suggests that we see Sekula's work as "an allegorical (re)construction of the possibility of understanding history in the age of electronic media: the seemingly outmoded practices of still photography correspond to the outmoded and disappearing sites of the mythical world of harbors and the romanticized notions of a seafaring proletariat."7 But Sekula's project arrives at a moment in which at least one "possibility of understanding history"from the independent left perspective with which he has long been identified—appears also in danger of disappearing. "Fish Story" might somehow more directly have addressed this prospect, to which a fragmented and demoralized left has proved unable to respond.

"Fish Story" seems suspended between practices of political/esthetic critique that are themselves "seemingly outmoded" and vexed confidence in the importance of such work. This is merely to say that Sekula questions, at least implicitly, the prospects for critical art-making at the end of the 20th century. The most influential adversarial American art of recent years has typically been directed to the problematics of identity politics (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality), or the commodification of

Jewelry store. Ruá Príncipe, Vigo, Spain, 1992, 24 by 16 inches.

