

A sorrowful fish tale

By Sarah Milroy
Friday, December 3, 2004 - Page R26

Since his emergence on the art scene in the 1970s, California artist Allan Sekula has had an esteemed place in contemporary art, revered as an unabashed, dyed-in-the-wool lefty of the first order and distinguished for his intellectually relentless observations of the workings of the world expressed through still photography and writing. Thus, the Canadian premiere of a new work by the artist is a special event. Until Jan. 15, V Tape Video Salon in Toronto is showing Sekula's 2001 video *Tsukiji*, the artist's first moving-image work. Forty-three minutes long, it takes us through a day in the life of the Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo, from pearly dawn to rush-hour frenzy, documenting with often painful clarity the lives of the workers and the mass annihilation of the fish whose commodified lives terminate right here, before the camera lens.

Capitalism, labour alienation and globalization have long been Sekula's leading themes, and he has made photographs on such subjects as the 1993 oil spill off the coast of Galicia (*Black Tide*); the structural analysis of the Inco smelter in Sudbury, the Bank of Canada offices in Ottawa and the design of Canadian bank notes (*Geography Lesson; Canadian Notes, from 1986*); the Tijuana set for the epic Hollywood blockbuster film *Titanic* (including images of the faux shipwreck rearing and diving into the sand); and the 1999 Battle of Seattle (*Waiting for Tear Gas*).

His best known work, however, deals with the sea, which he describes as the "forgotten space of modernity." His magnum opus *Fish Story*, which he worked on from 1987 to 1995 (and which was a star attraction of the last Documenta exhibition in Kassel, Germany), documents with images and words his observations of the impact of global capitalism on the life of harbour towns, which have been irrevocably altered by the advancement of containerized shipping. (Sekula grew up in the working port of San Pedro, near Los Angeles, so he observed this phenomenon first-hand.) This shift in industrial scale has rendered obsolete many of the world's ancient harbours, where the heavy lifting of the global economy can no longer be managed.

In making *Fish Story*, Sekula visited Fulton Fish Market in New York, as well as markets in Spain, and Korea, but he knew Tsukiji would be the main event. On an invitation from the Yokohama Triennial, he made a research visit there in 2001. Immediately, he was struck by the elaborate and frenetically complex choreography of bodies in this social space, and he decided that he wanted to document it through the use of the moving image.

Tsukiji, thus, was a risk for the established artist, who chose to depart from photography for the distant shores of video, a challenge that he rose to magnificently. The pacing of the video is spellbinding, with a masterful interplay between composed establishing shots and painfully intimate close-ups of fish gasping in their dying moments (some of them already without their bodies, whisked away by the swift knives of the fileters), or the lonely and vacant faces of the workers making their rounds. Sekula has a spectacular eye for visual detail, and there are many arresting moments here -- from the band-saw dissection of enormous frozen tuna carcasses like chunks of birch wood, their heads stacked like cordwood in bins, or the

filleting of live eels by chatting workers, or the horrific descaling of a living fish, its still-gasping mouth smeared with blood. Sekula has spoken of his work in relation to the traditions of still-life painting, and you can see why. These images -- wet, sloppy with blood, scales and slime -- are outrageously sensual, seducing us even as they elicit repulsion.

This work was risky, too, in the elegiac emotional tone that the artist allowed himself. In an interview with the American critic Benjamin Buchloh, Sekula has noted that "fishing is the last large-scale human enterprise that still gathers wild food, and thus is connected not only to pre-industrial, but also to pre-agricultural practices. At the same time," he adds, "the industrialization of fishing methods . . . has turned fishing into an omnivorous extractive industry more like strip-mining."

In Tsukiji market, you see this process of industrialization enacted, and one senses a deeply sorrowful note in Sekula's revelations of nature and man locked in destructive synergy. It is a new note for the artist, whose work was, at least initially, notable mostly for its intellectual acuity and clinical sang-froid. In this new work, there are clearly two forms of death going on, and both are mourned: the death of the living sea and the magnificent bestiary of creatures within it, and the death of human agency and volition, in the deadened eyes of the workers who go about their business here, satisfying the relentless and indifferent demands of resource extraction. On both accounts, we see the life force squandered in the service of capitalism.

It is the most we can hope for that time will make us wiser, mellowing our earlier astringency. What Sekula might once have documented with disciplined analytical detachment, he now infuses with restrained but palpable emotion, and the work is very much the richer for it.

Allan Sekula's Tsukiji is on view at V Tape to Jan. 15. 401 Richmond St. W., Suite 452, 416-351-1317.