

In strolling through the exhibition halls of the Generali Foundation where a selection of work by Allan Sekula was on view, I was struck by the realization that the work of this artist tends to produce a global vision of the social realities of our times and the relations of force that determine them.

At the end of the day, it's no surprise that such an impressive critique of the conditions of production in advanced capitalist society should be made by an artist who lives in Southern California, a region where all industry seems to have become a distant memory, or at least to have been outsourced to less clement climes. In the course of his 30 years of activity, it could be said that Sekula has considered all aspects of contemporary everyday life.

Sometimes it's a portrait of a middle-class American family, supposedly the bedrock of the whole system, suddenly faced with unemployment. Sometimes it's in the form of a visual novel, a glimpse of working conditions in the fast food industry. Or factory workers coming off shift in the afternoon, a series of portraits of ordinary salesmen in the pursuit of their professions, or a futureless skill being hammered into the heads of trade school students.

The mid-1980s seem to have marked a turning point in Sekula's production. With *Fish Story*—a suite that does not appear in this exhibition, probably because it has already been shown in various port cities in Europe, including Calais, his work seemed to look to broader horizons, leaving

behind the analysis of strictly American phenomena and turning to the wider world. In that project he fixed his gaze on the sea, always by definition a place of exchanges and conflicts and now even more so with the acceleration of the process of globalization since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This shift was followed by a series of very powerful pieces like *War without Bodies* (1991-96), visually linking the fetishism of arms and the remasculinization of public discourse on the occasion of the Gulf War, and then *Freeway to China (Version 2, for Liverpool)*, (1998-99) on the revolution in the relations of production and exchange brought about by the advent of shipping containers; *Black Tide/Marea Negra* (2002-03), on the Erika oil spill disaster; *Wait-*

ing for Tear Gas (1999-2000), a kind of anti-photoreportage, shot without a zoom lens or sophisticated camera and no sensationalistic images, a looped projection of 81 color slides showing crowds of antiglobalization demonstrators in the streets of Seattle; and finally, the extraordinary *Tsukiji* (2001), a 45 minute DVD showing Japanese workers processing still-living fish for later consumption, where the passage from nature to culture takes place under primitive working conditions that are as perfectly regimented as they are coldly brutal.

From one project to the next Sekula never treats the relationship between text and image in the same way. As we've seen, his work can take the form of a photo novel or a photo text. Or the visual can be the object of a parallel discourse, a written commentary that can be read separately. It is not a caption referencing a particular image. Further, the images are not isolated. They form a concatenation that strips them of any aura. The viewer's interpretation is based on the accompanying commentary or the counterpoint of a text that comes after. In short, in Sekula's practice the medium of photography turns back from the fatal slope down which the individual photo image seems to be slipping, toward a substitute for painting and an object of contemplation in itself.

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Allan Sekula.
Série «Black Tide / Marea Negra».
2002-2003



Allan Sekula. «Tsukiji». 2001.
Vidéo