



Daniela Zyman and Cory Scozzari (eds), *Allan Sekula: Okeanos*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017. ISBN 978-3-95679-337-0 (paper)

The cover of *Okeanos*, a monograph about the writer and photographer Allan Sekula, is fitting. Its metallic gold and corrugated rectangular shape plainly suggests a shipping container – which for Sekula, is both an actuality and metonymy of marine capitalism, and the central subject he pursued over the last three decades of his life.¹ Solemnly, the cover also shimmers as a kind of coffin, giving *Okeanos* a definitiveness in another sense (Sekula died of esophageal cancer in 2013). And then there is a third formal feature: the book Sternberg Press has made available for purchase. Sekula probably would have found the gesture of enclosing his life and life-pursuits inside the commodity-form fittingly ironic. After all, he once proposed an interrelation between the three (containers, commodities, and coffins) with a verve that remains singular:

If there is a single object that can be said to embody the disavowal implicit in the transnational bourgeoisie's fantasy of a world of wealth without workers, a world of uninhibited flows, it is this: the container, the very coffin of remote labor-power. And like the table in Marx's explanation of commodity fetishism, the coffin has learned to dance. (Sekula 1995: 137)

But *Okeanos* contains multitudes. Generously-edited by Daniela Zyman and Cory Scozzari, the book presents a wonderful introduction to a long and distinguished career visualizing, writing, teaching, and critiquing the contemporary world. Focusing on Sekula's well-known engagements with marine capitalism, *Okeanos* pairs personal writings, photographs, and notebook entries with

¹ See <http://www.sternberg-press.com/index.php?pageId=1761&l=en&bookId=654> (last accessed 5 December 2017).



essays from geographers, art theorists, historians, and commentary from Sekula's partner, Sally Stein.

As Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters (2015) note, geography has historically been a land-locked and terra-centric discipline, routinely forgetting the oceans and the social relations buried inside sea-borne objects. Capitalism likes to imagine the ocean as a denatured plane of coordinates across which work can be effected with minimal resistance; it makes sense, then, that geographers willing to turn their gaze to the sea would find all sorts of uneven, lumpy, hollow, entangled spaces there—and many in recent times have (Gluck 2015; Lehman 2016; Peters 2012). But arguably, Sekula did more to imagine what a “critical ocean geography” might look like than any geographer before him. His magnum opus, *Fish Story* (1995), makes clear the fact that globalization would not be possible without the deregulated movement of ships and containers. This achievement is hardly a *fait accompli*, however. *Fish Story* circumnavigates the globe to profile militant seafarers, mutineers, community associations, and longshoremen's unions—communities which compound with the sea's own “crude materiality” to enforce drags upon capitalism's dream of unfettered movement. At one point in the book, Sekula finds structural similarities between multicolored stacks of portside containers, children's building blocks, and the inside of a gangster's suitcase. It's a brilliant observation, and one of the many that allowed Sekula to tie “the Box” to the histories of corporate graft, statecraft, and social reproduction that have historically accompanied its spread (Levinson 2006).

Each of these themes are captured in *Okeanos*. The book's strong opening sequence—images of Asian seafarers, at various stages of activity, discussion, and momentary repose—locates Sekula firmly in the tradition of Marxist social historian Raymond Williams (1975). Much like the working landscapes of *The Country and the City* (1975), Sekula's ocean is a space of labor—a space defined by the imprints of global capitalism and “the primacy of material forces” (Sekula 1995: 12). *Fish Story* read the social status of ocean – increasingly neglected, abstracted, forgotten – through the discontinuities of economic globalization. *The Forgotten*

Space (2010), Sekula's documentary-film with Noël Burch, offers a 15-year update. The news is not good. Automation, and containerization have been augmented by steroid injections of logistics-based financialization. The abrasions of commodity logics on organized labor, cultural difference, landscapes and waterways are more severe. Sea and land are "rationalized by increasingly sophisticated industrial methods" (Sekula 1995: 25), while social relations and used parts are discarded more rapidly than ever before.

But Sekula was not an arch Marxist pessimist, declaring defeat before the game begins. Alongside the panorama of capital vs labor, he pursued a range of interesting tributaries, some of which are addressed in the first essay in *Okeanos* by Daniela Zyman. She focuses on Sekula's lesser known pieces—*Black Tide / Marea negra* (a photo-essay from 2002/03 addressing oil spills and the general degradation of the hydrosphere), *Lottery of the Sea* (a 2006 documentary), and *Tsukji* (a lovely filmic ode from 2001 to the largest fish-market in the world, in working-class Tokyo). In this latter work, Sekula's visual engagements with cutting and slicing—between layers of fish, as well as realist and modernist art-forms—open up rich discussion about labor history and representational aesthetics. The images are the most interesting in the book: hands flaying fish flesh, close ups of close cuts, stacks of torpedo-like torsos in uneasy pyramids on factory floors. As Keller Easterling's essay on port logistics makes clear: the maritime mystique has given way to proliferation of abbreviated "non-places" (Auge 1995) whose very banality is an effect of power. For Sekula, moments inside the fishing factory serve as reminders of the active bodies routinely made invisible by commodity fetishism.

Sekula's political conviction, well-displayed in his copious writings on visual aesthetics, identifies him as belonging to influential generation of photographic thinkers. Victor Burgin (1982), Rosalind Krauss (1985) and John Tagg (1988) made it their project to trouble photography's caricature as "an unmediated copy of nature" (Sekula 1987). For them as for Sekula, the photograph is a historical, socially constructed product, and, as such, a diagram of power. Prior to his maritime works, Sekula was well-known for his research investigating the

photographic archives 19th century American criminologists used to consolidate dominant racial ideologies. A deep understanding of photography's social history informed his skepticism toward photography's truth-claims. As Gabriele Mackert explains in an essay focused on *Black Tide*: "Sekula was dialectically convinced that social relations are in a sense invisible to ordinary empiricism. They can be understood only through recourse to abstraction, through an upward movement from the concrete to the abstract and back down to the concrete" (p.154). If not for its truth-telling capacity, Sekula saw photography (and documentary film) as an opportunity for storytelling, art-making, and myth-busting; accessible media for critical public discourse.

And yet for all their social and theoretical concern with maritime capitalism (well displayed the many color fonts *Okeanos* offers), Sekula's photos appear curiously dehydrated at times. As Zyman notes: "If the sea is not seen as a flat surface, but as a three dimensional, wet, fluid, and 'tidalectic' space of movement" (p.29), then new relationships, processes, and natures must be illuminated. One example of a photographer moving along these lines is the Norwegian HC Gilje, whose 2015 film *Barents (Mare Incognitum)* used a custom-built orbital camera to model the shifting borders and thresholds of marine space—its constant *inconstancy*. Steinberg's essay in *Okeanos*, a generative critique of Sekula and Burch's justly-lauded *The Forgotten Space* (see Brett Story's [2012] review in *Antipode*), argues that Sekula's sea is anything but dynamic. For Steinberg, the filmmakers' strategies for representing ocean space "inadvertently dematerialize" it by displacing any sense of the frictions that exist between the component parts (see also Steinberg 2015). Steinberg's point also speaks to the growing efforts critical geographers have made to broaden the ambit of marine political critique. The works of Lehman (2016), Peters (2012), and Steinberg (2013) himself resound precisely in their volumetric aspect—their attention to the deep-sea observatories, shifting material forms, and changing currents that operate below, within, and around the shipping economy. Sekula's engagement with the marine is never superficial, but throughout its permutations, it remains *surficial*—preoccupied with networked movements of boats, seafarers, and the topologies of coastal culture. Since the mid

2000s, shipping activities have become closely inter-linked with subsurface risk economies—as my own work into ocean noise (published here in *Antipode*; Ritts 2017) seeks to establish – and shipping’s desired appearance as a conveyor of sustainable marine capitalism has been renovated accordingly. The lack of necessary correspondence between the scenic and the structurally significant makes a critical maritime aesthetic a challenging proposition, and one demanding constant refinement in our representational strategies as well.

One of the most effective essays in the collection, Laleh Khalili’s “Carceral Seas”, reminds us that the sea-surface remains a dynamic space worthy of attention too. Khalili considers the phenomenon of marine captivity, including prison ships which elide sovereignty restrictions by functioning as unmoored islands. Khalili notes that captivity has been extra-territorialized from regulatory oversight, with legal regimes paying lip service to abiding principles of accountability and transparency. The territorialization of the ocean is determined by the rules and regulatory apparatuses established by both capital and the US Navy, she argues. Military legal regimes harmonize with lax labor laws and the flags of convenience designation. Thus, “[c]aptivity at sea has been both a means of producing value [e.g. slave labor in ships], and wielding coercive power across the surface of the globe, and sometimes both at once” (p.51).

Moving from the inmate to the intimate, Stein’s contribution focuses on the copious notebooks and personal journal writings Sekula produced across his career. Far more than “personal” insights, Stein asserts that Sekula’s writings and drawings reveal “ideas in formation”. In her careful hands, the notebooks themselves are geographical documents, showing how Sekula’s abiding interests and concerns responded to different contexts, and were shaped by them in turn. Marx’s concern with the destruction of the workers’ body is acknowledged here, too (as Sekula narrates in *Black Tide*: “The hands, once capable of grasping delicately at suffering crustaceans, are now crude shovels, stabbing bluntly into the viscous folds of fuel”). Sekula underscores the mercantilist rationale of neoliberalism across port cultures—the way “seafarers” become “transport workers”, for instance. Drawings of gantry cranes are

complemented with quotes from long-dead literary giants and contemporary business boosters. Hidden puns are searched for in the anonymous names of container stacks—Hanjin, Maersk, Evergreen. Sometimes the searched-for analogies fail: beneath a drawing tagged “container”, Sekula writes: “Cellular approach to the ship: analytic”. Next to it, under a drawing marked “aqua lung”: “Analogic approach to the human body: the ‘gill prosthetic’ supplement” (p.79). “He expresses considerable ambivalence whether issues become clearer when presented in pictures or words”, Stein notes (p.80), and both his successful works and failed analogies seem to bear this out. Indeed, one might see this theme faithfully reproduced in *Okeanos* itself, whose array of differently-designed pages repeats the generative tension of Sekula: how to communicate the realities of marine capitalism—words, pictures, film, or all together?

Okeanos is a generous, accessible book; a portrait of an underappreciated social critic. Its constant traffic between textual and visual registers invites rich theoretical departures regarding space and place, fixity and flow, determinedness and contingency—making it a consummately teachable text as well. One quibble, however. The book proposes to read Sekula’s legacy from an “ecocentric” perspective, i.e. “a perspective in which the social field and its respective environments are seen as complex and inseparable assemblages” (p.24). It does not fully deliver on this claim. Sekula’s portraits of oil-smearred clean-up workers off the coast of Galicia are plain-enough as indices of oil and ecological contamination, but neither they nor any other of the works presented here amounts to a close engagement with the *interconnectedness* of ecological and social relations. Sekula’s approach is anthropocentric, concerned with human labor and capitalist abstraction. In *Okeanos*, the pull of concepts like the Anthropocene and the non-human appear intermittent at best. The books’ final trio of ecological essays—Celina Jeffery’s thoughtful meditation on marine dead zones; Nabil Ahmed’s discussion of art organizations and environmental justice in the Pacific Rim; and Filipa Ramos’ conversation with Cory Scozzari—are best read as departure points. Conversely, Jegan Vincent de Paul’s discussion of East Asian trade and imperialism in the South Pacific Islands works precisely by resituating Sekula’s

important archival critique as its focus. Still, if the lack of a fully eco-centric Sekula is a charge we can take to this beautiful book, it is also an opportunity to carry on its rich conversations.

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