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Special Issue

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Allan Sekula. *This Ain't China: A Photonovel*, 1974. Twenty-nine black-and-white photographs and one color photograph in eight frames, nine color photographs in single frames, text booklets, two chairs. Courtesy the Estate of Allan Sekula.



Allan Sekula, or What Is Photography?

BENJAMIN H.D. BUCHLOH

I deliberately pose the question as a citation, absurd as it is, almost grandiloquent, by calling up the title of Jean-Paul Sartre's series of essays "What Is Literature," published in six installments in *Les temps modernes* in 1947. Sartre conceived at that moment of two types of literature, and he constructed them as utterly distinct spheres. One would be the sphere of autonomous poetry, the other that of engaged literature. They were not to be confused either by aesthetic judgment, historically comparative evaluation, or any of the avant-garde typologies that had identified until recently, for example, the mutually exclusive practices of surrealism and constructivism, or of abstraction and socialist realism.

Rather, Sartre defined the new functions of a type of reportage literature as a politically motivated form of literary or representational practice, a conflicted proposition of returning to a type of realism, one that he seemed to resurrect at that time without knowing or without acknowledging either the multiple predecessors of critical realist and politically motivated reportage representations, or by referring to the previously fought battles, debates, and theorizations of realism; rather, Sartre asked what type of realism would be possible at that historical moment.

Its utter opposite was to be a poetical form of writing, which Sartre exempted from any kind of responsibility toward the representational functions he had assigned to literary reportage. That this naive division, while historically prefigured in various configurations, emerged at that moment in French literary theory is all the more surprising: one could be schematic and suggest that Sartre's proposed division was his belated answer to the dual specters of surrealism and Stalinist socialist realism, both of which had haunted him since the 1930s. And in order to formulate this answer, he unknowingly mobilized one of surrealism's most fervent historical opponents, Soviet productivist and factographic writings and the various political claims with which these had been associated (even though, from all evidence, the Soviet productivist debates had remained relatively unknown in France throughout the 1930s and 1940s, with the exception of film theories and one of its rare Western discussions as formulated by Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Author as Producer," presented at the Institute for the Study

of Fascism in Paris in 1934 but unpublished during Benjamin's lifetime). Yet by the mid-to-late 1940s, productivist and factographic models had become utterly unknown in Western Europe and the United States, and remained unfathomable for most readers at least until the late 1960s.

Yet the history of literary or artistic theorizations does not work in such logical evolutionary trajectories and oppositions, and Sartre's text would soon thereafter be severely criticized by a number of polemically dissenting voices driven by profoundly different motivations. On French territory, the writers of the *nouveau roman* would be the first to feel the provocation of Sartre's claims. Shortly thereafter, the emerging semiologists (e.g., Roland Barthes) would discredit the denotative and referential potential of literary representation once and for all—or so it appeared by the 1960s and long after.

The time seemed to have come to finally dismiss that utterly antiquated project of any realistic representation, especially since it now carried the additional spell of latent, if not manifest, associations with the most discredited historical versions of so-called social or socialist realisms; in particular, those that had come out of the Soviet Union, and precisely those forms such as productivist factography and workers' photography that—unbeknownst to most—had initially articulated intensely contingent and collectively oriented practices of representing social and political forms of everyday life experience in labor and leisure. Yet those models had rapidly declined into authoritarian state-controlled forms of realism. As a result, those practices would now be banned from memory in a wholesale prohibition by what appears with hindsight to have resulted from that typical Cold War misreading of all forms of realism.

Precisely this dual opposition to Sartre's model of reportage writing, the *nouveau roman* and an emerging structuralist semiology and deconstruction of images, would contribute in a major way to a reformulation of American formalism of the post-Greenberg era. Both semiology and *nouveau roman* were at the center of the artistic and theoretical debates that laid the foundations for American minimalism and conceptual art in the late 1960s (one could easily trace that impact in the writings of Sol Lewitt or find it corroborated by Mel Bochner's and Dan Graham's ostentatious claims for Michel Butor and Alain Robbe-Grillet as theoretical models for the formulation of emerging conceptualist artistic practices).

Yet at least one other, major critique of Sartre's literary theory came from a fundamentally different position, one that was neither protostructuralist, nor driven by the compulsive and repressive positivism of the *nouveau roman* but that equally assumed that the critical reduction of writing to the most minute facets and figures of writerly writing would actually enhance both readerly and writerly precision. Equally, it would aim to accomplish

the ideal of a critical self-reflexivity and self-referentiality that would dialectically oppose artistic and literary production to all forms of ideology and myth, the two most abhorred legacies of representational cultures in the immediate post-WWII period and, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, doubly dreaded because of the renewed rise in the emerging powers of American cultural industrial production, which was beginning to dominate European culture after fascism and totalitarian state socialism.

The most important origin for that other critique of realism is the writings of Theodor W. Adorno, who attacked Sartre (with as much fervor as he denounced Bertolt Brecht at the same moment) for even sustaining the slightest representational dimension within the literary or artistic structure. Accusing realistic representation of inducing and sustaining not only an infinite range of desublimatory and degrading manipulations of readerly and spectatorial experience, Adorno argued that even the most minute facets of figuration and narrative constituted first of all a breach of contract with the reader's rightful claim to an utter authority of self-determination (and for that to be achieved, a total prohibition of any and all kinds of narrative legibility and iconic recognizability—in short, all sorts of figuration—had to be rigorously enforced).

More problematic yet, in Adorno's verdict the very fact of representation itself constituted multiple acts of historical treason: most of all, treason against the victims of the twentieth century, who should now be recognized and remembered in silence, in an ethics negating representation, acknowledging that the century's traumata constituted in fact historically, psychologically, and aesthetically the condition of unrepresentability. Therefore, representation needed to be interdicted, or so it seemed at the time of Adorno's return to Frankfurt from Santa Monica in 1949, the very year when Bernard Frechtman's American translation of Sartre's *What Is Literature?* appeared in New York.

As absurd as promising a definition of literature was in 1948, to claim a systematic definition of photography's functions and aesthetic principles in 2013 would be even more preposterous. As anybody having even briefly studied the history of photography will know by now, the mechanical technology of producing still images as a discursive, cognitive, and epistemological field is probably more contradictory than even the fields of painting and sculpture have ever been. Again and again throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (and increasingly so in the latter), photography appeared as the originary opponent of painting and sculpture, which it aimed (and at times succeeded to some degree) to displace. Such had been the case in the turn from dadaist photomontage to the political montage work of John Heartfield, for example, or in the transition from László

Moholy-Nagy's or Alexander Rodchenko's new vision photography to productivist worker's photography; it would even become evident in the rise of surrealist photography, whose technology seemed to fulfill more credibly the surrealist promises to represent collective forms of unconscious desire in a deeper and more precise way than painting's surrogate representations.

Early on, since the mid-to-late 1960s, Allan Sekula had been increasingly involved in studying the photographic practices and debates of the 1920s and 1930s, the period in which Siegfried Kracauer, writing in 1927, had called photography the *va banque* (or, *go-for-broke*) *game* of history. Sekula's knowledge of photographic history comprised U.S. Farm Security Administration (FSA) documentary just as much as Heartfield's photomontages (at a moment when hardly anybody in the United States considered either as models for photographic practices in the present), whether it was the deeply problematic industrialization of photography in the hands of Americans such as Edward Steichen, the factographic photography of the Soviet Union, or Weimar culture's photographic climax in August Sander's *Antlitz der Zeit* (1929), the first entry in his long-term project *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Sekula often mentioned Sander and had planned to devote a monographic essay to him, a work that, unfortunately, we will never be able to read).

While Sekula knew well that different historical interests and conflicts were now at stake in the recovery of these photographic histories and paradigms (ranging from photography as critical documentary to purely ideological apparatus) Sekula—like photography's critics and practitioners of the 1920s and 1930s—aimed to reinstate the medium's centrality in the processes of critically reflecting and representing the conditions of collective experience. Now collective experience was however situated merely in the remnants of what had once been the bourgeois public sphere. At the same time, as it had been central to the ambitions of the post-1968 generation, Sekula attempted the complex reconstruction of the first sights of an emerging proletarian sphere from the 1920s and 1930s, one that was never to occur again in the second half of the twentieth century.

Among the avant-garde photographic practices of the post-WWII reconstruction period, neither the history of factography nor the history of political photomontage was properly understood. When the cultural centrality of the photographic image resurfaced in post-WWII American art for the first time in the work of Robert Rauschenberg in the late 1950s, for example, the montage principle had suffered all the features of a paradigmatic import that lacked all historical specificity. Least of all, as is so often the case, did the neo-avant-garde use of montage reflect on the precise conditions of its proper adaptation of a paradigm that, by the time it was reintroduced, had

not only lost all historically specific applications but had ignored the particular changes to which photomontage itself had been subjected in the aftermath of its avant-garde adoption in 1919 (the most important example being Heartfield's answer to the dadaists in Berlin).

To the eclectic accumulations of photographic images in Rauschenberg's early work, and to its naive citations of a misunderstood or incomprehensible montage aesthetic, at least two different responses will be developed in the early 1960s, that have not been sufficiently examined: one is the dual strategy of singularization and serialization with which Andy Warhol would dismantle Rauschenberg's *neo-montage* operations. Suddenly, the single iconic image, either uniquely framed, or serially repeated, required a totally different form of reading. And while I would not argue that Warhol reintroduced a model of realist referentiality, his work certainly entailed an increased focus on the actual potential of the photographic image (rather than its mere aleatory constellations in multiple and random encounters, the model that could be defined as foregrounding the semiosis of the photographic image rather than its referentiality).

But an equally marked distantiation separates Sekula from Rauschenberg and Warhol, in the same manner that it distinguishes him from those Los Angeles artists such as Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, and Douglas Huebler, who, after Warhol's impact, had returned the photographic medium to further artistic, even though not to any critical or political, reflection. And furthermore, what distinguished Sekula's aesthetic from his now famous artistic peers in the mid-to-late 1970s' moment of postconceptual photographic projects (say, Cindy Sherman or Jeff Wall) was first of all the desire to reconstruct photography's innate dialectical tension between discursive and documentary dimensions. His resolve to resurrect photography's historically inherent referentiality not only ran counter to all the rules that had been formulated in the 1960s by both poststructuralist (e.g., Roland Barthes) and post-Duchampian practices (e.g., conceptual photography), but it also brushed "photography against the grain," the Benjaminian title Sekula gave to his first book of writings and works published in 1984 by the Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

Thus the trajectory that I want to trace could be defined as that of a slow process of a dual historical recovery. One recovery was the recognition that the photographic image and photographic culture at large had been an integral (although not foundational) set of practices that had been inextricably bound up with the history of the pre-WWII avant-gardes. Mysteriously excised from that history after WWII, this photographic culture had also been banned from the discourses of the neo-avant-gardes in both New York and Europe during the first ten years of reconstruction.

The second, more challenging aspect of the recovery project concerns the criteria defining the historical dimension and potential functions of a renewed photographic realism, a discussion that had been entirely absent from the initial phases of photographic recovery. What I am trying to understand in this irresponsibly brief sketch are the motivations and preconditions under which the photographic image and photographic technology were rediscovered and reintroduced into artistic discourses in the 1960s. Sekula's project expanded this archaeology of photography—or rather, the process of performing the archaeology of the recovery itself—in both his writings and in his actual work. What made Sekula's work particularly difficult to read and receive at the moment when conceptual practices were being introduced in the late 1960s to early 1970s was precisely the systematicity and careful phasing and phrasing of that archaeological recovery.

Sekula's work formulated one of the junctions between the politics of representation and the representation of politics, as Victor Burgin once defined that opposition in the late 1960s.

What questions did Sekula ask at the beginning of the 1970s, when he entered the field as both a historian and practitioner of photography? The following epistemological questions were posed, along with proposed changes, of the field of photography and its history and practice not just by Sekula but equally by Martha Rosler (Sekula's companion at the time) and by Fred Lonidier, the third figure in the San Diego group of anti-conceptualists:

1. Why had photography in the context of conceptual art proffered an increasingly limited arsenal of photographic means (repetition, seriality, deskilling, decontextualization, self-reflexivity, to name but a few), strategies that had led to the construction of a discursive history of photography that had erased most if not all of its referential and representational resources?

2. The formal procedures and structural orders that had taken the place of these referential and representational resources were a number of eternally repeated, often self-deprecating jocular structures posing as advanced semiological critiques of representation, bordering on mere patriarchal mannerisms of photography imitating the long-lost narratives of painting. If these were not driven by a cynical contempt for the conflicts inherent in any attempt at representation, then at least they revealed an apparently complete ignorance of photography's historical past and present potential: how to record and to represent collective and individual social experiences in modernity with greater egalitarian detail and clarity and a more differentiated range than painting had ever achieved?

3. Did conceptualist photography now offer, by contrast, a photography merely determined by the desire to vary some of the key aspects of the Duchampian legacies: anonymity, deskilling, random order, connotation versus denotation, structural self-referentiality versus denotative representation, open cumulative series versus structured narratives?

An early, striking example of the type of dialogic and dialectical reversal initiated by the San Diego four (if we include Phil Steinmetz in the group) in their responses to the conceptualists is Fred Lonidier's *29 Arrests* (1972). This work is situated not only explicitly in an oppositional citationality to Ed Ruscha's oeuvre of books enumerating photographic readymades, beginning with *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* in 1963. Lonidier also demarcates the start of a post-pop art and protoconceptualist photography, reclaiming a space of political agency and agitation at a moment when that discursive space had become both aesthetically more accessible and politically more urgent. Yet the programmatic nature of this confrontation forces us to recapitulate in greater detail what was actually at stake in this dialogic response, to ask about the subjects and structures of revision and inversion at that moment.

Another comparison—one perhaps more productive than the dialogue between Ruscha and Lonidier—could be made between Huebler's *Variable Piece #70* (begun 1971), and one of Sekula's first major works, *Aerospace Folktales* (1973). Here the principles and the structural conception of photography are fully inverted in a dialectical movement by Sekula, diametrically opposing conceptual photography on all accounts. By comparing these two works, my intention is not to develop a judgment but to identify and differentiate with greater clarity the actual changes that occur within the definition of photographic practices in that historical and dialogical confrontation. I thus hope to assist with the slow dismantling of the attitudes of haughty dismissal and repressive rejection that greeted Sekula's project of a critical realism during the first forty years of its production.

Particularly remarkable about Huebler's approach were the formal and structural operations that had made his work foundational to conceptualist photographic practices, especially the opening up of the representational field to a sheer infinity of aleatory constellations. This opening up in particular meant that Huebler followed an earlier assault on photographic conventions formulated by Rauschenberg when the latter announced in the late 1950s that he would initiate a project of photographing every square foot of earth for the remaining time of his artistic activities. Huebler counteracted this vast project of cognitive mapping with an even more radical proposition in the early 1970s, when he stated an intention to spend the remaining

time of his artistic career photographing every living human being on earth. This new recognition, at least by Huebler, of social totality as an inevitable and necessary horizon of a universal audience address demanded not only that all readers and spectators should be equally placed in the reception process but the very fact that a conception of a universally structured non-hierarchical society should govern the increasingly infinite, aleatory, and open forms of representation as well.

The concept of an aleatory infinity not only followed Duchamp's ready-made principles, but it also had tremendous political and social implications. After all, the concept operated like an expanded manifesto of one of photography's earliest egalitarian promises: to provide to all members of all classes access to political and iconic representation—one of the most provocative potentials unleashed by photography on the traditionally hierarchical and exclusionary politics of the image. Yet these formal operations recognized at the same time that the actually existing social totality was utterly anomic and unstructured, and that the work—very much in the vein of Warhol's adaptation of the Duchampian principle of indifference—could not, or would not, even attempt to contribute to a critical redefinition of the laconic and ultimately indifferent pessimism or melancholic cynicism inherent in that approach. But even the very concern for the potential participation of an anonymous mass audience in the production and reception of cultural representations was, in and of itself, astonishing enough. After all—at least until the advent of minimalism in the mid-1960s—the conditions of social collectivity and class had not exactly been considered as central determinations of cultural production by American artists in the post-1945 period.

This assault on hierarchical structures of iconicity and photographic representation—in fact, the full implementation of photography's mad archival impulse—would now find a radical and total reversal in Sekula's *Untitled Slide Sequence* (1972) and even more of a theoretical and epistemological challenge in *Aerospace Folktales*.

In this comparison we can comprehend, step by step, the reversal from structuralist principles that had governed conceptualism to a fundamentally different theory of photographic representation. We can trace the reconstruction of the representational functions in Sekula's project, the very functions that would guarantee, paradoxically, that Sekula's work would remain mostly illegible and unacceptable for forty years (evident in the fact, for example, that Sekula has never had an exhibition in a commercial gallery in New York or a solo exhibition in a major American museum, although his work has over the past few years finally received some attention in Europe).

Against Huebler's abstract universality of a potential photographic subject, Sekula poses its uttermost opposite: the seeming privacy of the family. Many of the images in *Aerospace Folktales* are pictures of Sekula's own family. Thus his project in 1973 not only seems to resurrect the social reality of labor and everyday life but to implement these reconsiderations by resurrecting the biographic and the biographeme at the very moment when both had been totally discredited from any possible account of representation or the writing of history.

Almost more irritating, if not shocking, at this moment in the early 1970s—with conceptualism's apparent radicality of an aesthetic of administration and its stylized semiology of a cool culture of the style of the office verging at all times on advertisement—Sekula confronts us with the space of the domestic, the seemingly petty and utterly unheroic, nonartistic details of an American middle-class family and all its accoutrements, banal and everyday. These family details are neither embellished by the stylization of pop nor by the expressive sentiments of the documentarian's semblance of compassion (as, for example, in the photographs of the FSA, which undoubtedly had served as one of the many historical references which Sekula and Rosler had questioned when searching for new modes of documentary photography, what the documentary could and should consist of, and whether it was even conceivable in an age of rapidly advancing cultural industrial production).

Could any member of the audiences in 1973 stand to see an artist documenting and reflecting on the conditions of a white, middle-class family in California whose paterfamilias, an engineer until recently working for a major American aerospace corporation, was now out of work, fixing lamps and household items at home? Undoubtedly not. The shame and social embarrassment in such a confrontational staging of the biographical as one dimension of contemporary practice would have been (and possibly continues to be) too great. (Can we imagine Donald Judd or Richard Serra publically speaking about their fathers and mothers as crucial constitutional factors in the conception and execution of their work?) Precisely in order to maintain the myth of the parthenogenesis of the patriarchal artist and as the producer of an abstraction of a higher order, any such biographisms would have been totally banished from the dominant discursive formations of that time.

Another dimension of an utterly unacceptable restructuring of photographic representation at the moment of the late 1960s and early 1970s would have been the most difficult aspect of Sekula's propositions: that photography would return again to a critical reflection and representation of the conditions of labor and the social production of everyday life, a

subject that photography had neither been permitted nor dared to engage with since the work of Lewis Hine in the United States in the 1930s, or the Soviet—and Weimar—worker's photography of the 1920s.

Sekula's embodiment of representation (I use this deliberately awkward term in order to trace the awkwardness and discomfort Sekula's work engendered when first encountered in the 1970s and still encounters for the most part in the present), therefore consists of three dimensions. First, Sekula's work foregrounds the private sphere of the family and the biographic dimension of artistic experience, perceived and presented as an actual trace of public and political transformations, the field where these changes can best be analyzed and observed.

Second, in these works the body and its behavior is always defined by multiple relations of daily social interactions, as the social fabric where the impact of economic and political and ideological demands can be made fully transparent. Thus the biographical dimension never acquires the status of a privileged form of explanatory power of artistic subjectivity, but quite the opposite. The biographical becomes transparent as the locus where all the institutional, economical, and ideological interests intersect most prominently to situate the subject. Yet, to the same degree that Sekula's focus on the family and the domestic introduce the biographical as yet one more dimension of critical analysis, they dismantle the abstract claims with which almost all postwar American art had banned the private and the biographical in a powerful gesture of abstraction and prohibition not only from any horizon of art's potential legibility and interpretability but from any further investigation of the actual conditions of cultural experiences within larger social and political frameworks.

Third, concerning Sekula's reconstitution of what he calls a critical realism, the last issue remaining for us to address is the most difficult of all: whether and how actual situations of labor are represented in Sekula's work, considered as a response to the photographic conditions of conceptualism.

This issue may be traced in Sekula's *Untitled Slide Sequence* and *Aerospace Folktales*, as well as a third, quite different project, *Performance under Working Conditions*, a video work from 1973. All three works are distinguished by the fact that they address labor explicitly but do not actually depict it. *Untitled Slide Sequence* searches out the precise time and space between labor and leisure, the very duality between which the dialectical halves of advanced forms of alienation are instituted. (Paradoxically, the space and the time of transit depicted in the work allow for a brief and temporary perception of a possible hiatus between the two.)

In a similar manner, the study of Sekula's father focuses on the condition of a subject who has actually been laid off work, who is *out of work* not *at*

work, and who therefore finds himself in a strange zone of suspension between the two domains of leisure and labor, with neither appearing as a humanly acceptable condition for defining the subject's experience.

In *Performance under Working Conditions*, labor at first appears to be actually represented. Yet it is neither heroicized as in a Stakhanovite depiction of productivity or as collectively enforced Taylorism, nor does the representation of labor perform the voyeuristic and implicitly condescending act of false compassion for the victimized laboring subject, one of the most problematic fallacies of all realistic representations of labor throughout the history of modernism from Maximilien Luce to Sebastião Salgado.

Rather, Sekula presents the inextricable unity of extreme forms of alienated production and alienated consumption in a slapstick performance. Two pizza chefs (one of them the artist himself) struggle in a vaudeville performance of mad commands and mad gestures that range from Chaplinesque slapstick to an almost brutal exaggeration and utterly absurdist climax to the post-Cagean concept of *task performance* that had produced an entirely new performance and dance aesthetic in the mid-to-late 1960s.

Here speech and action, body and gesture, obedience and commands issued by the orders of production and consumption appear as grotesque comical inflictions to which only organized forms of opposition can give the proper response.

Thus the embodiment of labor and the incorporation of the representation of the everyday as suggested by Sekula in 1972 and 1973 seems to have been both too radical and too conventional to be acceptable to the artistic and cultural, as well as theoretical, formations ruling both the spheres of film and photography, on the one hand, and the spheres of postminimal and conceptual art, on the other.

Yet paradoxically—and this might have made his work even more illegible—Sekula took many of the clues about the body and the task-oriented performance that recent and then contemporary art history had given him and repurposed or reperformed them to the very audiences who had just become acquainted and identified with the seemingly most radical strategies of structural



Allan Sekula.
*Performance under Working
Conditions*, 1973. Video stills.

analysis and semiological deconstruction of representation in the work of the most advanced filmmakers and artists of the mid-to-late 1960s.

Referentiality itself, however, was always thought by Sekula in dialectical terms. To reestablish and renegotiate photography's innate bonds with material and social reality was both a promise and a plight, since it implied the need first of all to reconstruct photography's initial project of producing visual evidence of the social participatory processes within which subjects are formed through class, labor, and production as much as through linguistic representation and perceptual genres and conventions (undoubtedly one of the reasons Sander's works remained particularly attractive to Sekula). Even when Sekula rethought photography's initial promise to serve as a tool, and at times even a weapon, of emancipation and self-constitution—reclaiming the agency and activism of the traditions of social documentary—he always counteracted that utopian radicality with the realist's pessimism of the intellect. In his precise analyses of what actually had come of photography's originary enlightenment claims (e.g., when writing on Oliver Wendell Holmes or Edward Steichen), he reminded us that from the beginning photography had provided as many—if not more—new means of surveillance and seduction than it had actually enabled representations of actual or potential agency. Sekula had learned from Michel Foucault that photography, like language, was the very system within which subjects are both constituted as subjects and within which they are subjected to ideology, economic exploitation, and control.

That insight was also another response to conceptualism's linguistic optimism, a countermove in which Sekula restituted material and social visibility to artistic production and representation. Yet rather than selling off large-scale photographs as quaint pictorial stories compensating for the loss of painting's narrative and representational functions, proffering the myths of a recovered realist representation on the cheap and the spectacular side simultaneously, he imbued even photography's precarious status with a modus of critical self-reflection that led to the formation of an initially unlikely but increasingly deep friendship with the late Michael Asher.

But Sekula's optimism of the will always held on to his initial strategies of focusing on the representations of labor and the labor of representation (those of the social collective as much as those of his own role and place as an artist) as one of his central subjects and objects in which precarious self-constitution and enforced alienation are always dialectically at work. Sekula seems to have understood early on that simulated *détournement* and the bliss and mess of free-floating signifiers had had their historical play and had lost the game; therefore, he refused to follow the directions neoliberalism gave to its cultural producers in the present. Instead, Sekula

focused increasingly on the conditions of production under globalization, mostly concealed from or disavowed by the comforts of Westernized consumption. His (and Noël Burch's) chef d'oeuvre, *The Forgotten Space* (2010), not only reestablishes some of the originary solidarity that documentary filmmakers and photographers had always attempted to sustain with those condemned to extreme forms of globalized alienated labor, but it also irreversibly dismantles the delusions that artistic practices in the present can still credibly claim to provide brief moments of compensatory reprieve or even amusement, let alone perceptual or cognitive enlightenment, unless they themselves engage in processes of laborious construction in which the actual complexity with which ideological deception operates in the present is deconstructed with the necessary attention to context, detail, and theoretical and critical illumination that alone can counteract the monolithic myths of deception.

Notes

This text is a slightly revised version of a talk given at Colloque Allan Sekula: La photographie au travail, Centre Georges Pompidou, June 28, 2013.