



Allan Sekula
Polonia and Other Fables
September 20 – December 13, 2009

The Renaissance Society
at The University of Chicago

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at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
4th floor
Chicago, IL 60637

Museum Hours
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Opening Reception: Sunday, September 20, 4:00–7:00pm
Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00- 6:00pm

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Phone: (773)702-8670

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Mòwimy po Polsku

In 1950, Hans Namuth documented Jackson Pollock in what are now iconic photographs. One features a pensive Pollock crouched amongst abraded weeds in front of a weathered Model T Ford. The jalopy suggests the photo was taken by the likes of Dorothea Lange. At the same time, his demeanor and nearness to the earth make Pollock a poster boy for rugged individualism. One would think the photo was taken in Pollock’s native hometown of Cody, Wyoming rather than at his East Hampton studio. Through the image of Pollock, abstraction is celebrated as native to the soil. Indeed, its emphasis on freedom and the primacy of the individual make abstraction an expression of America’s post-WWII triumphalism and by extension the values of neo-liberalism. Proclaimed as the art of the modern era, abstraction’s preeminence casts ours as an age beyond conventional forms of representation.

Nothing could be more antithetical to abstract painting than documentary photography. Given that photographs of people, places, things, and events qualify as documents, documentary photography has been part of the medium since its inception. There are, however, different kinds of reality to document—visual, social, psychological—making documentary photography a highly heterogeneous genre. This heterogeneity, combined with the ebb and flow of progressive politics, accounts for paradigmatic shifts in documentary photography’s journey from muckraking to museum. A trenchant example is the pendulum swing from social documentary’s golden era during the Great Depression to its vilification during the Cold War. (The Photo League, the leading champion of social documentary, had to disband in 1951 after being blacklisted due to one of its founders’ documentation of labor unions.) Another example is the demarcation of fine art photography from a social documentary practice wed to the moral purpose of social change. This was facilitated through the success of exhibitions such as *New Documents*, mounted at The Museum of Modern Art in 1967. It included Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Gary Winogrand. Their subjective approach gained favor with critics, curators, and collectors over more objective documentation of social conditions. This distinction was even more pronounced with the alignment of staged photography and the rhetoric of postmodernism, which expressed skepticism over photography’s capacity to portray a social reality. By the mid 1970s, documentary photography seeking to critique social relations, let alone pursue social justice, found itself between the Scylla of abstraction and the Charybdis of a burgeoning postmodern irony.

Polonia and Other Fables is a new project by photographer Allan Sekula (b. 1951). A joint commission between The Society and The Zacheta National Gallery in Warsaw, *Polonia and Other Fables* was executed over a three-year period and is comprised of 40 photographs accompanied by related text. The majority of the photographs were taken in Chicago and various locations throughout Poland. “Polonia” refers to Poles residing outside Poland. Chicago’s Polonia deeply links the City with that nation. *Polonia and Other Fables* exploits the specificity of locations from the University of Chicago campus to rural villages in Poland.

Not a story in any conventional sense, *Polonia and Other Fables* is a collection of highly disparate puzzle pieces. It consists of motifs recurring throughout Sekula’s successive and overlapping bodies of work. These range from geopolitics to autobiography. Its subject matter runs the gamut from the humble to the monumental. Subjects include: a polka player and an aging metal-head; a fruited plain and a crowded Warsaw thoroughfare; a labor rally and a black-smith shop; students and fighter jets; a young female commodities trader and a mother; a priest and a smoker; and last but not least, some pigs.

Polonia and Other Fables’ subjects can be grouped into several overarching themes. These include the realpolitik of post-communist Polish/American relations; dubious corporate machinations in Chicago and Poland; and Chicago Polonia’s maintenance of national identity. These subjects are portrayed using a

variety of photographic tropes ranging from clandestine snapshots to formal portraiture, from serial to aerial photography, and from street photography to ethnography in the vein of Walker Evans’ FSA work.

One of the grander themes is Poland’s current geopolitical situation, which Sekula depicts through a trio of images featuring training activities at a Polish airforce base. Poland’s militarization is directly connected to its inclusion in NATO, an event further marking the end of the Cold War. Poland, however, was all too eager to prove itself an ally to the U.S. when it aided and abetted the highly controversial practice of extraordinary rendition, generally referred to as “torture by proxy.” Two of Sekula’s images are of alleged “black sites,” where prisoners from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were illegally transferred to states outside U.S. jurisdiction for the purpose of being tortured.

Poland’s efforts to distance itself from its communist past by embracing free enterprise has resulted in its susceptibility to the high crimes and misdemeanors of multinational corporations such as Smithfield Foods Company. Sekula photographed a Smithfield plant in the southeastern province of Lubelski. As the biggest producer of pork in Poland, their method of industrial hog-raising is cited by activists and governmental agencies as amongst the most cruel and inhumane in the world. In addition to the animals’ deplorable living conditions, gross environmental hazards are created through the storage of vast amounts of manure. This creates toxic gases and pathogens that seep into natural water basins.

Sekula photographed Smithfield both aerially and on the ground. What looks like a beautiful wheat field was planted as a barrier to the Smithfield grounds. In addition to the factory environs, Sekula also photographed a young boy from a nearby town reporting their childrens’ illnesses are directly related to Smithfield’s presence. Notably, Smithfield’s pigsties are hidden from view, negating photography’s ability to furnish proof. In its stead, Sekula photographed the three hogs belonging to a family farmer. This is Sekula’s way of questioning that which we are allowed to see versus that which we are not.

A wariness of photographic representation is a mainstay of Sekula’s critique of documentary. The limits of photographic representation become apparent as his subjects are raised to, yet circumscribed *by*, visually, which is the case in the photos of Warsaw passersby. These subjects are a typology of individuals captured during their quotidian commutes. There is a fashionable young couple; an intellectual whose status is not only betrayed by the fact that he is reading while walking, but the socks and shorts combo; and a middle-aged woman whose floral print dress is a staple of Eastern European fashion. Whatever we might conjecture about them is through strictly visual social codes (dress, comporment, age).

Sekula took an interest in photography during his undergraduate studies at the University of California, San Diego from 1968 to 1972. At that time, photography existed, as he said, “in a triangulated space bound by literature, film and painting.” This meant photography’s narrative capacity was being challenged by other media. Sekula restates this dilemma as a question; “What can a photograph in and of itself tell us?” Sekula would foreground this problem through his use of text, which is an integral component of all his major projects to date. These texts, which occupy a prominent space in his exhibitions, are a means of complimenting while challenging a strictly visual medium. An upshot of Sekula’s combination of text and image is a proto-cinema in which the photos become story-boards and the text a kind of voiceover script. It is hardly surprising that one critic compared an early autobiographical work, *Aerospace Folktales* (1973), to *An American Family*, a 1973 PBS documentary chronicling a nuclear family. This was not only because both works shared the same subject matter, but because of the narrative quality introduced through the inclusion of text in *Aerospace Folktales*.

Sekula’s decision to include autobiography as part of his practice acknowledges social documentary’s ideological parameters as a

means of thinking through rather than excluding the self, beginning with the most basic social unit, the family. Autobiography recurs in varying degrees of subtlety throughout his work. It is particularly evident in *Polonia and Other Fables* as Sekula is of Polish heritage. The autobiographical works in *Polonia and Other Fables* consist of four photographs: a portrait of his mother; a portrait of the priest who delivered his father’s last rites; an image of Sekula’s father, brother and nephew; and the photograph on the other side of this poster, which features a 1979 photo of the artist’s father reading a list of four other Sekulas, two of whom are rabbis. Although raised catholic, Sekula’s religious heritage, like that of many Poles is up for question. This is hardly surprising given that Poland was home to Europe’s most significant Jewish population before the outbreak of World War II.

Nationalism certainly played no small part in what many debate as Poland’s complicity in the Holocaust. This strain of nationalism, however, has its roots in the rise and fall of Poland as a once powerful kingdom subsequently conquered and partitioned amongst the surrounding powers of Austria, Prussia, and Russia. Poles became a regional diaspora harboring a centuries-long desire to become a nation state. Arguably, Polonia define national identity more than the country itself, which was not founded until after World War I, only to be invaded and occupied by Nazi Germany, and after World War II incorporated into the Eastern Bloc. As home to the largest Polish population in the U.S., Chicago is an historic repository of Polish nationalist sentiments whose connection with contemporary Poland is partly real and partly romantic, as recent immigrants find themselves amongst an older wave of immigrants and their children, two or three generations removed from the Old World. This is the subject of two of the Chicago photographs both taken at different Polish festivals.

As an examination of the links between Chicago and Poland, *Polonia and Other Fables* doubles as a reflection on the historic intertwining of labor struggles and immigration. This is signified through a pair of images, one of a woman and young boy marching in the 2009 May Day parade, the other an image of the crowded foyer of Republic Windows and Doors. In December of 2008, this factory was the site of a sit-in staged by its workers protesting senior management’s decision to close the factory on short notice, terminating their health care benefits and denying them pay for accrued vacation days. This tale of post-Fordism *cum* post-fraudism was picked up by the national media because it confirmed negative public opinion regarding distribution of “bailout” funds. (Bank of America cut off Republic’s line of credit shortly after receiving \$25 billion dollars in TARP funds.) In response to the media attention, Sekula has downplayed the event, relegating it to a single image featuring an Hispanic gentleman peering out from behind a column. Wide-eyed under a blaring bank of fluorescent lights, he is wedged in a tight spot by the photograph’s composition.

One of the hallmarks of Sekula’s work is its humility. He tends not to spectacularize his subject. (Compare his images to the work of, say, Sebastiao Salgado or Edward Burtynsky.) It is not a question of what story his images tell but if they tell a story at all. Sekula’s photos are not narratives in themselves but merely an index to a larger narrative. Visual fact as captured in Sekula’s photographs is subject to an interrogation not for the sake of questioning the truth of what is depicted but the truth of the story to which the photograph alludes. Contrary to our instinctive belief in photography as truth, photographs, as an index to a story, must also be considered potential sites of myth.

The trading pit at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange has been the subject of iconic photographs by Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky. Their photographs were taken during the heyday of the pit’s mayhem, before the onset of electronic trading. Struth and Gursky’s frantic scenes of hundreds of traders in action, portray capitalism as its own form of labor in the most literal sense, as if its being raised to visibility makes it tangible fact, which is contrary to why it’s called the invisible hand.

Nothing could be further from the pit’s testosterone-fueled mania than Sekula’s portrait of an extremely slight female trader. She stands, arms at her side, in front of a confetti-strewn background, an announcement that the party is over. Printed at a scale larger than usual for Sekula, this image was of particular interest to him since it turns out the woman is also an artist. Her dual profession recalls *School is a Factory* (1979/1980), a project in which Sekula addressed the confluences and discrepancies between higher education and the demand for workforce training. Although artist and commodities trader might seem antithetical professions, one need only think of Jeff Koons for a reappraisal of that idea.

The larger question raised by Sekula’s photo-graph of the trader is how does one illustrate a master narrative such as capitalism. A master narrative is a totalizing and global framework for explaining forces shaping aspects of self, society and history. A master narrative does not simply explain the social fabric; *it is* the social fabric, inextricably woven into reality at every level. All-encompassing, it becomes ideology, which by its very nature is invisible, making a return to traditional documentary all but impossible. However noble and necessary the task of exposing various injustices, traditional documentary sidesteps the larger question as to how, and if, capitalism as a master narrative can achieve representation through “what used to be called documentary,” to quote Sekula. In his work, such a master narrative can only be grasped in the form of traces, which paradoxically belie a narrative’s ability to achieve “mythic” status.

Yet, the basis of claims to grasp directly (rather than abstractly) an era spanning from the industrial revolution to a latter-day globalization remains the province of social documentary—this, despite its marginalization from a history of photography as narrated through the fine arts. Rather than being accountable to a history of styles, social documentary is accountable to history itself. Needless to say, modernity’s global evolution continues to furnish documentary a wealth of subject matter. As Sekula’s work attests, any critique of documentary at once requires the urgency of practice and an engagement with the genre as a discourse speaking to history’s unfolding.

Related Events

OPENING RECEPTION
Sunday, September 20, 4:00–7:00pm
Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00 to 6:00 pm. This event will take place in Cobb Hall room 307 (directly below the gallery). FREE

CONCERT
Wednesday, November 4, 8:00 pm
Hans Koch, clarinetist
This event will take place in Bond Chapel, 1050 East 59th Street, which is directly east of Cobb Hall. FREE.

CONCERT
Monday, November 9, 8:00pm
Joe McPhee’s Survival Unit
Joe McPhee, saxophone
Fred Lonberg-Holm, cello
Michael Zerang, percussion
This event will take place in Bond Chapel, 1050 East 59th Street, which is directly east of Cobb Hall. FREE.

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Allan Sekula: Polonia and Other Fables which inaugurates The Society’s 94th season and its 30th in the Bergman Gallery, is dedicated to the memory of Edwin Bergman. Through his commitment to new and provocative art, Ed championed all The Society stands for. We remain grateful for his outstanding example, friendship, service and support.

This exhibition has been made possible with funding from Alphawood Foundation; the CityArts Program of The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, a municipal agency; Christie’s; The Danielson Foundation; The John R. Halligan Charitable Fund, the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; Nuveen Investments, the Provost’s Discretionary Fund at The University of Chicago; Pritzker Foundation; The Siragusa Foundation; and our membership.

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Allan Sekula
from *Polonia and Other Fables*, 2009

Essay by Hanna Walker. Layout by the J&K Graphic Design, Chicago.