

Sisyphus's Prestige  
On Allan Sekula's *Marea negra*:  
*fragmentos para una ópera*

Gabriele Mackert

When the curator Carles Guerra Rojas and the Barcelona newspaper *La Vanguardia* invited Allan Sekula in November 2002 to document the largest oil spill to date in Spain and Portugal—caused by the sinking of the oil tanker *Prestige*—he presented not only twenty images but also an accompanying text under the title “Marea negra: fragmentos para una ópera” (Black Tide: Fragments for an Opera).<sup>1</sup> In this title, which is more programmatic than it may appear at first glance, Sekula very precisely addressed the broad horizon of his artistic commentary on one of the largest maritime disasters in Europe during that period as well as his practice of social analysis. His project *Black Tide/Marea negra* (2002–03) is not just a perceptive documentation of a natural disaster but an associative speculation on the conditions of living and working in uncertainty. In it Sekula mirrors the traditions of photography and writing, moving between realism and abstraction, art and politics, aesthetics and activism and drawing on modern literature and rhetoric to create his own playful riddle of times and facts.

The subtitle “fragmentos para una ópera” indicates that the images are also fragments for an opera, as is the text. This might be more obvious to the Spanish- and Galician-speaking public, which is well aware of the Latin roots of the word *opera*, with its nexus between musical drama and work.<sup>2</sup> Sekula calls his text a libretto, which is more than a small book and distinct from a script or a plot summary, in that it contains not only text but also stage directions. This highlights the origins within classical drama. But a libretto is less a work of its own than an accessory. The controversy over whether text or music is more important is notorious. Instead of a musical score Sekula provides images, thus highlighting the importance of textual and visual information in constructing an imaginary reality.

Sekula's subtitle refers to the custom of calling an artwork simply a “work.” In this case it is a work that he declares is unfinished, a fragment. And he gives no immediate indication of who will, should, or need to complete it. That might also refer to his actual work assignment of documenting the oil spill or his focus on the labor of cleaning water and coast, a task that from the beginning seemed to be a losing battle.

In his text Sekula refers to Sisyphus as he describes the labor of the volunteers. His photographs portray some of the activists who tried to curtail the effects of the oil spill.<sup>3</sup> Not only do their white Tyvek protection suits link them to the Italian antiglobalization and social movement *Tute Bianche*, whose name means “white overalls,” but their self-assignment, engagement, and empowerment, which was communicated through networks, also seems comparable. All in all, Sekula focused more on these workers and their impact than on the effects of 81,000 tons of oil. These white Tyvek suits compose the chorus in Sekula's libretto, declaiming the dirge of “Sisyphus's prestige.”<sup>4</sup> Likely he enjoyed this wordplay. Sisyphus is well known for having to start over and over again, as a representation of a life made meaningless because it consists of bare labor and futile repetition. It is a metaphor for the ongoing deconstruction as endless procedure and desire.

Sekula photographed the actual work in different locations: the lorries; their traces in wet, oily soil; the commitment of the volunteers even on Christmas, evident in the title *Percebeiros (Shellfishers) working, army preparing (Touriñán, 12/24/02)*; the oil deposits in *Disposal Pit (Lendo, 12/23/02)*; and the people doing various jobs. All in all, the environmental degradation is not the focus. Sekula zooms in more on labor, work “more primitive and less industrial than that of the engine room stokers and chorus hall dancers of the age of coal,” and the way it fatigues the workers, uniforms them; their hands, “once capable

of grasping delicately at suffering crustaceans, are now crude shovels, stabbing bluntly into the viscous folds of fuel.<sup>5</sup> Their labor produces no visible product, besides tired volunteers returning on boats from their mission, as in *Exhausted Volunteers (en route from Isla de Ons 12/19/02)*.

This effect is even more pointed in the video segments that he produced in parallel and presented in *Lottery of the Sea* (2006). Here medium shots isolate figures in white suits, showing their efforts to scoop gloppy muck from the waves. These "boring" images aim to become emblems of the individual struggle against global economic forces, carried out on a beach or a rock. Sekula's use of seemingly irrelevant and banal details provokes a discussion of their function. If not for their aesthetic quality, the images would remain in the vast no-man's-land between art and research: too much effort to be truly forthcoming or too eager for the aura of the real to find a unique form. This practice should remind us of the constructed nature of all representation. 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.<sup>6</sup> He saw photography as (working) process and social practice. His faith in the individual produced some highly auratic images, which convey a fundamental political credo.

His photographs of the *Prestige's* drama also present the coastal topography. They include panoramic views from far away, recalling a building or mining lot. Sekula mentions an airplane crash or a terror bombing and, in his title *Percebeiros (Shellfishers) working, army preparing (Tourañán, 12/24/02)*, associates the operation with a military mission. This documentary approach seems more informal and less dramatic or conventionally scandalizing than typical photojournalism, which he called deceptive because of its optimistic illusion.<sup>7</sup> Sekula aimed to provoke a contradiction to media coverage, presenting details distinguishable from commercial imagery and the media's landscapes of information. Obviously he was not interested in shocking pictures such as the all-too-familiar icon of an oil-soaked bird trying to flap its wings. Sekula's black crab within the triptych of *Large and small disasters (Islas Cíes and Bueu, 12/20/02)* hasn't the same capacity to elicit compassion. All in all, his attitude seems not to follow any forensic aim. His map, drawn on a kind of decorative stone, recalls a treasure map rather than one of evidence. One wonders about its function. The lines and numbers recall currents. Insiders may spot the red star indicating "Illaunacrog," which seems to be the site of a past shipwreck.

Sekula presents his photographs in sequences and in black frames. This method is connected to his idea of photography as part of a triad with cinema and literature,<sup>8</sup> produced in between a reading room and a projection room. Rather than an abundance of motifs, he offers a concentrated selection. His clustering negates the singularity of the iconic photographic image and also refuses the filmic sensation of immersion. He divided his panoramic views to create triptychs or diptychs, disaggregated in different frames to go beyond the scope.

In contrast, *Volunteer's Soup (Isla de Ons, 12/19/02)*, presents a pair of images arranged vertically in a single frame: a photograph of a person eating soup is placed above a somehow abstract close-up of an oily seawater surface. This associative arrangement of soup and sea, soup and oil, spoils one's appetite, adding personal disgust to the shocking news of ecocide. It also alludes to the fact that the now toxic sea used to feed people in the region. Sekula's montage juxtaposes two images and brings them into a dialectical relation-

ship that culminates with imaginary fissures between them. The man standing in a sea of oil, infused by it, exemplifies how a human-made disaster turns a once nurturing environment hostile.

Some of the photos even share the informality of snapshots. The diptych *Volunteer watching. volunteer smiling (Isla de Ons, 12/19/02)* documents the artist's communication with an anonymous volunteer. She is first seen leaning on a balustrade, introspective, and then, in the second image, smiling after she has noticed the photographer. Sekula doesn't reveal the names of these volunteers, but nevertheless this contact exudes sympathy and empathy, exactly because of its randomness, which implies photographic truth, rhetorically highlighted.

*Dripping Black Trapezoid (Lendo, 12/22/02)* evokes artistic practice. The viscous materiality of fuel oil is presented in a form that recalls a monochrome painting hanging on a wall. Sekula's subject is in fact a haphazardly coated truck door found at a disposal pit. In exhibitions, this picture should be hung next to the smaller *Self-portrait (Lendo, 12/22/02)*, taken with a camera held just below and behind the dripping veil of oil that jeopardizes even the lens and with it the view and the witness, who is actually also the center of this image, Allan Sekula, embodying "the artist as witness to the seemingly insignificant details of disastrous events, one who both looks through and makes surfaces."<sup>9</sup> He seems to be behind a menacing curtain, one that is not easy to draw back, as the volunteers have experienced. Basically the disaster's oil has been used as a prop for a reflexive self-portrait through a semifluid layer. The oil becomes the framing matrix of a late modern personality, recalling Zygmunt Bauman's characterization of the present moment as one of "liquid modernity," in which individuals have to struggle with the dicta of maximum profit and the survival of the fittest.<sup>10</sup>

*Black Tide/Marea negra*, like many other artworks by Sekula, is made up of both writing and photography. The context of a newspaper, in which text is generally emphasized over images, may have forced his interdisciplinary approach. As a teacher and theorist he published numerous influential texts on photography, but he also assembled texts and quotations as accompaniments to his images in exhibitions, to be read not at home but in the space together with his images, less as additional information than as resonance. It seems that he set his texts against the discursive force of photography and prevented common archival reflexes of accumulated images. While his photos often recall an atmosphere of contingency, his texts present allusive complexity. The readers of *Culturas*, the weekly magazine supplement of Catalonia's most widely read newspaper, might be accustomed to experimental "essays." Sekula's fragmentary libretto addresses the construction of experience and memory in dialogue with the reader-viewer. This is all the more necessary as the arrangement invents an open form of drifting and the juxtaposed text does not describe the images or draw a conclusion. Even the status of the text is precarious, falling between instructions for a prospective action and a retrospective collection of quotations, impressions, and events.

The libretto—obviously inspired by Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*<sup>11</sup> and his theory of alienation based on a rhetoric of fragmentation, contrast, and even contradiction, as well as Erwin Piscator's theory of epic theater—combines different sources, like Galician folktales, Greek tragedy, and revue-like songs. It demonstrates once more Sekula's broad cultural knowledge and shows his interest in the theatrical, which acts as a foil, a counterbalance to the documentary, infusing it with irony and humor, questions and utopian satire.

The opera genre was a significant part of the wider revival of antiquity, a characteristic form of the Renaissance, and an attempt to revive classical drama, which included thirty character types. In itself, opera was from the beginning an extremely regulated variety of courtly entertainment with stock characters referring to archetypal roles, clichés, and known techniques of parody. To characterize the inevitable official response to an oil spill within the canon of a musical revue degrades the formalistic appearance. Thus Sekula's text functions first as a discussion of how to produce knowledge regarding society's political osmosis and opinion making. Jacques Rancière has described the importance of seeing and knowing as the "distribution of the sensible."<sup>12</sup> He argues that an aesthetic dimension is inherent in politics and locates it in how regimes enable certain visibilities or articulations and disable others. Thus the political importance of documentary forms does not reside primarily in their subject matter but in the ways in which they are organized, that is, in the specific distributions of the sensible. It is a set of implicit rules and conventions, which determine the distribution of roles in a community and the forms of exclusion that operate within it, which Sekula's opera focuses on.

With this allegorical strategy, knowing about potential representations and agencies of photography, the text takes on a pressing political theme: the profound gap between political elites and the chorus of volunteers and "people of the sea" who were actually confronted with the disaster. Those anonymous volunteers, introduced as "astronauts" doing the dirty work, have to participate in the drama as a chorus. As a homogeneous, unindividualized group of performers and singers, the chorus represents the general public, in contrast to the individual heroes or "gods," and it also comments on or expresses hidden fears and secrets with a collective voice.

Sekula quotes phrases of appeasement from officials—"At that frigid depth, the oil will congeal to the consistency of heavy tar ... the pressure of the deep will thwart the buoyancy of oil ... the beaches are immaculate ... that the black tide is not a national emergency, but a minor mishap"<sup>13</sup>—which are associated with the ruling Spanish conservative party and Mariano Rajoy, then interior minister, now Spain's prime minister. This verbiage leads to the chorus's comment: the "Song of the Necessity of Oil" and the "Song of the Last Fascist." Both are presented by title only. The readers are to imagine or invent the possible lyrics. As slogans, the titles function as announcements or visual captions that interrupt and summarize and imply a whole cosmos of certainly well-known (historical) references. But this is not the only hint that Sekula purposely left his text unfinished. Fragments are not self-sufficient. They urge totality toward reality's edges and stimulate more intellectual production.

Sekula even addresses the audience directly (on stage this would be to break the fourth wall, with all its implications of anti-illusionism), asking for understanding of his putative inability as a dramatist and requesting the reader's cooperation in further composing his text. This is nothing more than a charming imperative for involvement, a request for intervention if not an elegant admonition to be responsible and to do something—at least talk about the disaster, take a position. Sekula's unfinished libretto avoids the fundamental condition of normalizing continuity and, hence, of legitimation, using this void rhetorically.

In a passage comparable to Brecht's popular line from *The Threepenny Opera* "First comes a full stomach, then comes ethics," Sekula indicates reasons for the shipwreck, namely in "The Song of the Ship Inspector": "Money travels at the speed of light until winter comes and the sea reminds us" that "after twenty-five years huge tankers are fatigue machines."<sup>14</sup> This suggests that the

disaster would have been avoidable if decisions were based on criteria other than efficiency. The opera ends with "The Song of Society against the State," which again needs only a title to trigger one's imagination and to evoke a very tangible understanding that the principle of representative democracy is becoming increasingly problematic. As an isolated phrase it is a prompt to act because of "the entropic problem of the structurally determined incompetence of elites."<sup>15</sup>

In his fragmented text Sekula sketches an imaginary (re-)staging of recent events thirty years in the future. The subtitle says: "to be performed in the village of Muxia, in the Galician language, on the 19th of November, 2032, a date imagined by many dwellers of that rocky coast to be set in a distant future free from the ravages of the black tide."<sup>16</sup> To foresee a need for thirty years of recovery is in itself an indication of the tremendous shock. It was not imaginable that this black tide would be long overcome and that there would not be any need for politicians to visit in thirty years. Ilsa de Ons, one of the places Sekula visited, belongs to the Atlantic Islands of Galicia National Park today and is again vividly promoted as a tourist destination. No trace of the disaster is to be found, either on the website or on the beaches. It seems like it never happened.

Even if the programmatic title *La Vanguardia* alone provoked Sekula to refer to avant-garde stylistics to address what he once called "the 'forgotten space' of modernity," which comes to the fore only in "stories of disaster, war, and exodus,"<sup>17</sup> the contrast of actual horror, historical reference, and prospective event dissociates the current narrative in order to reflect on it. Sekula's proposal to revisit his imaginary script thirty years later is a mandate to update it. It is less depressive, agitated melancholia than perspective. It illuminates the importance of taking action with foresight. To premiere the opera decades later would mean to take a look at what it might mean then, and it provokes the question of whether we want to review comparable disasters again and again, like Sisyphus, and what we want to hand down to future generations. The libretto of the unfinished opera describes a possibility—namely to blend truth and fiction to form a critique. It imagines a kind of future forum: to not only mourn now but to act consequentially, to work on this future. If art cannot solve the current problems, can it even set out to prevent those of 2032?

Sekula's futurological libretto expresses a paradoxical belief that art can avoid ending up as an "antiquarian future" in which it is condemned only to become a museum's relics. Documentarism as knowledge production shifts images into social, historical, and political discourses: What is to be remembered? What can be discerned from the pictures? Enmeshed in a discourse, these images assemble the present so that it might be conceived differently, in a speculative way, to invent other futures.

Sekula mirrors ideas that were becoming popular during the 1980s and 1990s through sociologists such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck,<sup>18</sup> who analyzed contemporary modernity as a shift to a risk society, which, unlike any preceding culture, lives in the future rather than in the past.<sup>19</sup> Risks had become the primary product of human activity, not just an unpleasant, manageable side effect of industrial society. Namely, Beck saw ways of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself. He argued that it is possible to assess the level of risk that is being produced or that is about to be produced. This sort of reflexive introspection could in turn alter activities. Beck may not have foreseen the massive, unpredictable, and irreversible changes in earth systems caused by humans that we sub-

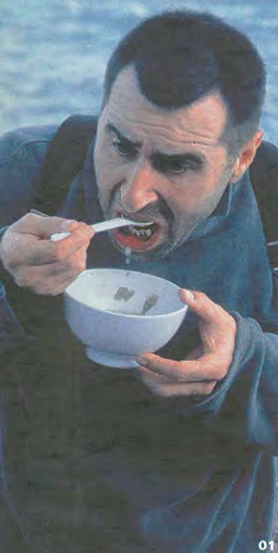
idea that a society examines and in turn changes in the process is widespread in its discourse, which practices the empowerment of reflexivity as an alternative narrative to apocalyptic extinction. The historian of science Jürgen Renn postulates that the Anthropocene is a process that must contemplate itself.<sup>20</sup> It has to invent narratives out of fiction and fact, projected and experienced, virtual, and modeled threats.

Sekula's anachronism of a possible future event, effectively staged or not, in which we are invited to imagine ourselves looking back on yet unknown relics of a calamity, inherits the melancholy of ruins but also the belief that documentarism was never a self-evident practice. Its contemporaneity comes from the future to the present rather than from the safe harbor of the past—even though the sea, constantly stirred by currents and waves, seems to erase any trace of the past.

## Notes

- 1 Allan Sekula, "Marea negra: fragmentos para una ópera," *Culturas*, no. 34, weekly magazine supplement to *La Vanguardia* (Barcelona), February 12, 2003, 2–7; subsequently *Black Tide/Marea negra, 2002–2003*, 20 photographs in 10 frames, sold separately in edition of 5, and video footage within *Lottery of the Sea*, 2006.
- 2 For the English-speaking public, the words *opus* and *opera* have different meanings.
- 3 Tute Bianche was an Italian social movement active from 1994 to 2001. Its members covered their bodies with padding to protect themselves from the police during demonstrations.
- 4 Allan Sekula, "Black Tide/Marea negra, 2002/3 Fragments for an Opera, Schwarze Flut, Fragmente für eine Oper," in *Allan Sekula: Performance under Working Conditions*, ed. Sabine Breitwieser (Vienna: Generali, 2003), 324.
- 5 Sekula, "Black Tide," 324.
- 6 Allan Sekula, "On 'Fish Story': The Coffin Learns to Dance," *Camera Austria*, no. 59–60 (1997): 49.
- 7 Sekula, "Black Tide," 322.
- 8 Sekula called *Titanic's Wake* a novelistic fantasy in: *Allan Sekula. Titanic's Wake* (Graz: Edition Camera Austria, 2003), 107, 110; *Aerospace Folktales* (1973), a "disassembled movie" as metafiction, in: Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973–1983* (Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 106.
- 9 Allan Sekula, "Found Painting, Disassembled Movies, World Images: Allan Sekula Speaks with Carles Guerra Rojas," *Grey Room*, no. 55 (Spring 2014): 132.
- 10 See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).
- 11 Brecht's *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*), 1928, was adapted from the German dramatist Elisabeth Hauptmann's translation of John Gay's eighteenth-century English ballad opera *The Beggar's Opera*, with music by Kurt Weill and interpolated lyrics by François Villon and Rudyard Kipling.
- 12 See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).
- 13 Sekula, "Black Tide," 329, 331.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Sekula, "Found Painting, Disassembled Movies," 140.
- 16 Sekula, "Black Tide," 322.
- 17 See Allan Sekula, "Conversation between Allan Sekula and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh," in Breitwieser, ed., *Allan Sekula*, 44; and Sekula, *Fish Story* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2002), 53.
- 18 See Anthony Giddens, "Risk and Responsibility," *Modern Law Review* 62, no.1 (1999): 1–10; and Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992).
- 19 Anthony Giddens and Christopher Pierson, *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 94.
- 20 Jürgen Renn and Malcolm D. Hyman, "Survey: The Globalization of Modern Science," in *The Globalization of Knowledge in History*, ed. J. Renn (Berlin: Max Planck Research Library for the History and Development of Knowledge, 2012), 501.





**01** Voluntario comiendo sopa (Isla de Ons, 19/XII/2002)

**02** Marea negra (Isla de Ons, 19/XII/2002)

**03** Tríptico de Touriñán ("percebeiros" trabajando y el Ejército preparado, 24/XII/2002)

**04** Voluntario observando (Isla de Ons, 19/XII/2002)

**05** Voluntario en la orilla (Islas Cies, 20/XII/2002)



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El fotógrafo y ensayista norteamericano Allan Sekula pasó las Navidades en las Rías Baixas y la Costa da Morte. Éste es el retrato que ha realizado para "Cultura/s" de la tragedia ocasionada por el "Prestige"



04

# Marea negra: fragmentos para una ópera

ALLAN SEKULA



02



05



FOTOGRAFÍAS CORTESÍA DE CHRISTOPHER GRIMES GALLERY, SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA



01



02



03

Para representar en Muxía, en gallego, el 19 de noviembre del 2002, fecha perteneciente a un lejano futuro que muchos habitantes de esa rocosa costa imaginan libre de los estragos de la marea negra.

**E**mpezamos con una fábula gallega. Una vaca cruza el escenario con un fanal colgando de los cuernos. La iluminación se apaga hasta que sólo resulta visible el fanal, como mecido por las olas. El viento se levanta. Un vigía observa atentamente desde una cofa, a la izquierda del escenario, y desciende un título en una vela hinchada:

¿TIERRA O MAR?

El Coro viste de blanco: monos Tyvek impermeables y transpirables, con capucha y las muñecas selladas con cinta de empaquetar transparente. Los integrantes del Coro se sellan unos a otros las mangas, agachándose para romper la cinta con los dientes. La operación se realiza con solemnidad ritual, en silencio. Entra un Pescador, por la derecha, y gesticula en dirección al Coro:

“Éstos son los astronautas.”

Al principio la escena parece un accidente de aviación o un atentado terrorista, una matanza vista desde cierta distancia, desde el otro lado de una barrera de cinta amarilla. Se levantan voces con el viento: el creciente canto fúnebre, amortiguado por las máscaras, de un Sísifo colectivo, el Coro recorriendo cansinamente la oscura playa, formando una hilera desigual, pasando de mano en mano la desagradable carga hasta la abrupta pendiente del inclinado escenario.

LA CANCIÓN DEL SÍSIFO COLECTIVO

El estribillo es un canto en gallego:

*O prestixio do Sísifo,  
 nunca máis,  
 unha vez máis,  
 nunca máis,  
 unha vez máis (1)*

Los portrechos son escasos. El trabajo que vemos aquí es más primitivo y menos industrial que el de los fogoneros de las salas de máquinas de la era del carbón. Las fotos de la prensa son engañosas. Esas imágenes, producto de la irreflexiva pasión de la fotografía por los uniformes y la uniformidad, nos ofrecen la optimista ilusión de una ingeniosa serie de disciplinados cuerpos industrializados en plena acción coordinada, vistos desde los asientos más altos de la platea. O un martirio barroco de cuerpos individuales, aislados por los anteojos de teatro, retorcidos y enlodados en poses trágicas.

Son uniformados homínuclos del desastre, en lucha contra la entropía. Todas las diferencias —entre soldados y civiles, entre quienes trabajan de forma gratuita y quienes lo hacen por un pequeño salario, entre “xente do mar” y voluntarios residentes en la costa— están amortajadas por los fantasmales monos blancos. A lo largo de la representación, los monos se oscurecen y manchan, hasta el punto de que sus portadores acaban pareciendo mamíferos marinos pringados de un petróleo más antiguo que su propia grasa. Las manos, capaxas antes de atrapar cangrejos con delicadeza, son ahora rudimentarias palas que se hunden rudamente en los viscosos pliegues del chapapote.

Aparece el Rey, por la derecha del escenario, rodeado por su séquito y una >



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**04** Recogiendo  
fuel (Salida de la  
ría de Pontevedra,  
19/XII/2002)

**05** Reconociendo  
los daños (Museo  
Aleman, Carmelle,  
22/XII/2002)



05



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> nube de fotógrafos. El Coro prosigue con su sifística tarea, ajeno en gran medida a la comitiva real. El Rey se vuelve de pronto, en equilibrio poco elegante sobre un solo pie, para inspeccionarse la suela del zapato. Los fotógrafos retroceden todos al mismo tiempo ante ese gesto prohibido.

#### CANCIÓN DE LOS PINGÜINOS EN EL ZOO DE SAN FRANCISCO

*"El fotógrafo,  
descendiente de augures y  
arúspices..."*

*"Nadan sin parar hacia ninguna  
parte..." (2)*

Desciende una pancarta:

#### UN MES MÁS TARDE

El Presidente del Gobierno y su comitiva entran, por la izquierda del escenario, a una bien equipada torre de vigilancia que ha sustituido al endeblo mástil del vigía. Los fotógrafos abandonan al Rey y corren hasta la base de la torre. El Presidente observa el Coro con unos anteojos de teatro. Aparece un cortesano y lee un comunicado de prensa:

*"A esa gélida profundidad, el fuel se congelará y adquirirá la consistencia del adoquín."*

*"Además, la presión de las profundidades, aunque se ejerce por igual sobre toda la materia, impedirá milagrosamente la flotación del petróleo."*

*"Y, si estas predicciones resultan equivocadas, podemos prometer sin temor a error que el barco dejará de tener filtraciones el 15 de enero del 2003."*

El Presidente del Gobierno es distraído por un alboroto en la esquina más alejada del escenario. Unos viajeros de tez oscura desembarcan de un bote de remos. Los oficiales se consultan y envían a una cuadrilla de marineros para detener a los intrusos.

El cortesano prosigue:

*"Esperábamos poder remolcar el barco hacia el sur... hasta quitarlo de en medio."*

Aparece una carta náutica con detalles de la costa francesa, española, portuguesa y de África occidental.

#### LA CANCIÓN DE EUROPA (3)

Se proyecta una fotografía periodística. El Secretario de Defensa estadounidense en una conferencia de prensa, absurdamente visto desde un ángulo situado



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bajo de la punta de los zapatos. Desde fuera del escenario, una voz con acento tejan repite la frase "Nunca más" al compás de un acompañamiento musical de western, que se funde con el ruido de los motores diésel de los barcos y luego con el rugido de unos potentes reactores. El estribillo es retomado con más convicción por el Coro y luego desciende hasta conducir a:

#### LA CANCIÓN DE LA NECESIDAD DE PETRÓLEO (4)

Cualquiera que sea la letra de esta canción, es importante que empiece o acabe con una frase de "Los viajes de Gulliver":

*"La vergonzosa materia sea retirada en carretillas."*

Aparece el Presidente Autonómico, acompañado del Ministro del Interior y el Ministro de Defensa. Con estudiada indiferencia, el Presidente hace caso omiso de los trabajos del Coro y procede a inaugurar ceremoniosamente un nuevo tramo de autopista. Un creciente coro de motores de coches sigue al corte de la cinta.

El Ministro del Interior anuncia que la marea negra no es una emergencia nacional, sino un contratiempo menor que recae bajo la jurisdicción del Ministerio de Fomento. (5)

El Ministro de Defensa, que ha estado pasando revista al Coro, anuncia que



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las playas están esplendorosas (6). Llega un ayudante con una tumbona, una sombrilla y una bebida tropical. La mitad del Coro continúa en posición de firmes, mientras la otra mitad trabaja.

Aquí concluyen las notas, pero, como suele decirse, no acaba la historia... El autor agradecería la ayuda de los lectores con las siguientes canciones:

#### LA CANCIÓN DEL ÚLTIMO FASCISTA TRADICIONAL (7)

#### LA CANCIÓN DEL INSPECTOR DEL BARCO

*"El dinero viaja a la velocidad de la luz,  
hasta que llega el invierno  
y el mar nos recuerda..."*

*"Tras veinticinco años  
estos petroleros gigantes  
son máquinas agotadas..."*

*"No se envían postales desde el fondo del mar."*

LA CANCIÓN DE LA SOCIEDAD CONTRA EL ESTADO, que el Coro cantará al final de la ópera y que debería incluir, en algún lugar, un pasaje de "El mito de Sísifo" de Camus:

*"Pero tras haber visto de nuevo el rostro de este mundo,  
degustado el agua y el sol,  
las piedras cálidas y el mar,  
ya no quisgo volver a la sombra infernal."*

Galicia - Los Ángeles  
Diciembre 2002 - enero 2003 (8)

TRADUCCIÓN: JUAN GABRIEL LÓPEZ GUIX  
FOTOS, TEXTO Y MAQUETA: ALLAN SEKULA

(1) Aquí el autor, llevado por su poco razonable deseo de seguir el espíritu de los "Poemas gallegos" de Lorca y dado que sólo es un fotógrafo y no un libretista, sin talento para la poesía en castellano o en su inglés nativo, agradecerá sugerencias de los lectores. Las propuestas deben dirigirse a [culturaa@lavanguardia.es](mailto:culturaa@lavanguardia.es).

(2) "Los Angeles Times", 21 enero 2003.

(3) Véase la nota 1.

(4) "El País", 24 diciembre 2002.

(5) "La Vanguardia", 25-26 diciembre 2002.

(6) Para algunos comentarios útiles, véase Gustavo Luca de Tena, "Fraga, retrato de un fascista", traducción del gallego de Anta Milde Carballera, Anglet, Miatzen, 2001.

(7) Gracias a Carles Guerra, Manuel Sendón, Orla Sendón, Clara Sendón, Gustavo Luca de Tena, Franc Herbelo y Sally Stein, así como a la Christopher Grimes Gallery.

# Tras los pasos de Evans y Agee

**CARLES GUERRA**

La última Documenta de Kassel reconoció el trabajo de Allan Sekula (Erie, Pennsylvania, 1951) con una exposición monográfica. Sus ensayos fotográficos resucitan la tradición de Walker Evans y James Agee. Sekula visitó Galicia en el mes de diciembre. En plena marea negra documentó los estragos causados por el "Prestige". A medida que recorriamos Rías Baixas y Costa da Morte, la imagen que más le oí nombrar se refería a una gran coreografía. A veces espontánea, otras dirigida: pescadores recogiendo fuel con sus botes, voluntarios organizándose por su cuenta y jóvenes del ejército desfilando por las playas. O más tarde, el 22 de enero, cuando 45.000 escolares formaron una cadena humana entre Laxe y Muxia. Un argumento de extraña continuidad surgía del encuentro de esos grupos -movidos por un objetivo común, pero con formas de organización distintas. Enfundados en el mono blanco, su aspecto aún aportaba más coherencia a la historia. De cerca, los ademanes y exabruptos de cada uno les distin-



guían. ¿Es posible representar en un mismo plano el papel de los políticos, sus percepciones absurdas del desastre, y los miles de cuerpos entregados a la limpieza? Sólo la ópera puede añadir algo a la marea informativa. Es el único registro que puede evitar la inercia de los medios. Han sido tantas las imágenes de trabajo penoso que no quedan ángulos desde los que cubrir el suceso.

Sekula ha renovado el género documental. Allí donde los medios parecen haber agotado su presencia, él ha encontrado su razón de estar. "La hipervisibilidad -afirma Sekula- es el complemento de la ignorancia". "Fish story" (1988-1995), su proyecto más conocido y divulgado, ha creado una geografía alternativa. Desde el océano, la globalización no es una historia de "e-mails" instantáneos, sino de barcos de carga pesada, leyes inexistentes y condiciones laborales humillantes. Para este proyecto ya recaló en Galicia en 1992. Allí fotografió la crisis del sector pesquero. La ópera que ahora presenta en estas páginas convierte las imágenes de Galicia en fragmentos de una gran producción que nunca llegará a la Scala de Milán. La gran producción a la que se refiere Sekula responde a un escenario global. "Marea negra" es la ópera que caricaturiza la incapacidad de los políticos para representar un poder que se juega en el mar. Éste será, seguramente, el capítulo de un nuevo trabajo de Sekula. En él se vislumbra una soberanía marítima que, como demuestra el "Prestige", desafía a los reyezuelos de tierra. |



05



06



07

**04** Autorretrato con chapapote (Lendo, 22/XII/2002)

**05, 06 y 07** Tríptico conmemorativo (islas Cles y Bueu, 20/XII/2002)

El trabajo de Allan Sekula que se presenta en estas páginas se podrá ver el próximo mes de julio en una exposición en el Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB)

# Black Tide: Fragments for an Opera

Allan Sekula

*Black Tide: Fragments for an Opera* first appeared in Spanish as "Marea negra: fragmentos para una ópera," in *Culturas*, no. 34, the weekly magazine supplement of *La Vanguardia* (Barcelona), February 12, 2003. It is reprinted here with the permission of the Allan Sekula Studio.

To be performed in the village of Muxia, in the Galician language, on November 19, 2032, a date imagined by many dwellers of that rocky coast to be set in a distant future free from the ravages of the black tide.<sup>1</sup>

We begin with a Galician fable. A milk cow crosses the stage, a lantern suspended from its horns. Lights dim until only the lantern is visible, bobbing as if cast upon the waves. The wind rises. A lookout peers intently from a precarious crow's nest on stage left and a title descends on a billowing canvas sail:

#### LAND OR SEA?

The chorus is dressed in white: hooded in waterproof, sweat-retaining Tyvek suits, taped at the cuffs with transparent package tape. They seal each other into their suits, stooping to bite at the tape with their teeth. This preparation is performed with ritual solemnity, in silence. A Fisherman, enters, stage right, and gestures toward the chorus:

*"These are the astronauts."*

At first the scene has the look of an airplane crash or a terror bombing, the carnage viewed from a distance, from behind a barrier of yellow tape. Voices rise with the wind: the swelling mask-muffled dirge of a collective Sisyphus, the chorus trailing across the dark beach in a ragged line, passing unwelcome cargo from hand to hand up the steep slope of the raking stage.

#### THE SONG OF THE COLLECTIVE SISYPHUS

The refrain is a chant in Gallego:

*O prestixio do Sisifo  
nunca máis  
unha vez máis  
nunca máis  
unha vez máis.<sup>2</sup>*

Implements are scarce. The work we see here is more primitive and less industrial than that of the engine room stokers and chorus hall dancers of the age of coal. Publicity photographs are deceptive. These pictures, the product of photography's witless passion for uniforms and uniformity, give us the optimistic illusion of an artful array of disciplined, industrialized bodies in coordinated action, seen from the highest seats in the balcony. Or they give us the baroque agony of single bodies, isolated by the opera glass, twisted and mired in tragic poses.



These are uniformed homunculi of disaster, battling entropy itself. All distinctions—between soldiers and civilians, between those working for free and those working for a low wage, between *xente do mar* and sympathetic dwellers of the shore—are shrouded by the ghostly white suits. These darken and stain over the course of the performance, until the wearers come to resemble befouled sea mammals, greasy with oil more ancient than their own fat. The hands, once capable of grasping delicately at suffering crustaceans, are now crude shovels, stabbing bluntly into the viscous folds of fuel.

The King appears, stage right, surrounded by his retainers and a clutch of photographers. The chorus continues its Sisyphean labor, largely oblivious to the royal retinue. The King suddenly twists backward, awkwardly balanced on one leg to inspect the bottom of his shoe. The photographers turn away in unison from this forbidden gesture.

#### SONG OF THE PENGUINS AT THE SAN FRANCISCO ZOO

*"The photographer  
descendent of the augurs and haruspices ..."*<sup>13</sup>

*"It's endless swimming to nowhere ..."*<sup>14</sup>

A banner descends:

#### ONE MONTH LATER.

The Prime Minister and his retinue enter, stage left, in a well-appointed rolling watchtower that has replaced the flimsy mast of the lookout. The photographers abandon the King and rush to the base of the tower. The Prime Minister observes the chorus through opera glasses. A courtier appears and reads a press release:

*"At that frigid depth, the oil will congeal to the consistency of heavy tar."*

*"Furthermore, the pressure of the deep, although equally exerted on all matter, will miraculously thwart the buoyancy of oil."*

*"Should these predictions prove wrong, we can promise without fear of error that the ship will stop leaking on the 15th of January, 2003."*

The Prime Minister is distracted by a disturbance at the far corner of the stage. Dark-complexioned travelers are disembarking from a rowboat. Officials confer and a squad of sailors is dispatched to arrest the interlopers.

The courtier continues:

*"We had hoped that the ship could have been towed south ... out of harm's way."*

A nautical map appears with details of the French, Spanish, Portuguese, and West African coasts.

#### THE EUROPA SONG<sup>5</sup>

A news photograph is projected. The Secretary of Defense of the United States at a press briefing, viewed inconspicuously from a camera position just below the tip of his shoe. An offstage Texas-accented voice repeats the phrase "*Nunca más*" to appropriately upbeat and "Western" musical accompaniment, mingled with the rumble of marine diesels followed by the roar of high performance jet engines. The refrain is taken up more convincingly by the chorus and then dropped, leading to:

#### SONG OF NECESSITY OF OIL<sup>6</sup>

Whatever else might become of the lyrics of this song, it is important that it begin or end with a line from *Gulliver's Travels*:

*"... the offensive Matter should be carried off in wheelbarrows."*

The Premier of the Province appears, accompanied by the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Defense. The Premier studiously ignores the labors of the chorus, and proceeds to ceremoniously dedicate a new section of *autopista*. A rising chorus of automobile engines follows the cutting of the ribbon.

The Interior Minister announces that the black tide is not a national emergency, but a minor mishap falling under the jurisdiction of the Department of Public Works.<sup>7</sup>

The Minister of Defense, who has been inspecting the chorus, announces that the beaches are immaculate.<sup>8</sup> An adjutant arrives with a beach chair, an umbrella, and a tropical drink. Half of the chorus continues to stand at attention, while the other half digs in the muck.

Here the notes trail off but, as the saying goes, the story isn't over ...

The author would appreciate readers' further assistance  
with the following songs:

THE SONG OF THE LAST OLD-TIME FASCIST<sup>9</sup>  
THE SONG OF THE SHIP INSPECTOR

*"Money travels at the speed of light  
until winter comes  
and the sea reminds us ..."*

*"After twenty-five years  
Those huge tankers  
Are fatigue machines ..."*<sup>10</sup>

*"You can't send a postcard from the bottom of the sea."*<sup>11</sup>

THE SONG OF SOCIETY AGAINST THE STATE

to be performed at the end of the opera, by the chorus,  
and which should include, somewhere, a passage from  
Albert Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*:

*"But when he had again seen the face of this world,  
enjoyed water and sun,  
warm stones and the sea,  
he no longer wanted to go back to infernal darkness."*

Allan Sekula  
Galicia and Los Angeles  
December 2002–January 2003<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

- 1 *BlackTide* was commissioned by, conceived, designed for, and first published in *Culturas*, the weekly magazine supplement of the Barcelona newspaper *La Vanguardia*, February 12, 2003. The project was cocommissioned by the Centre de Cultura Contemporània, Barcelona.
- 2 Here the author, despite his unreasonable desire to proceed in the spirit of Federico Garcia Lorca's *Six Galician Poems*, being only a photographer and not a librettist, unsuited for poetry in Spanish or his native English, would welcome further suggestions from the readers. Address all submissions to [culturas@lavanguardia.es](mailto:culturas@lavanguardia.es).
- 3 Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," [1931] in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1970), 256.
- 4 *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 2003.
- 5 See note 2.
- 6 See note 2.
- 7 *El País*, December 24, 2002.
- 8 *La Vanguardia*, December 25–26, 2002.
- 9 For helpful hints, see Gustavo Luca de Tena, *Fraga, retrato de un fascista*, trans. from *Galego* by Antia Milde Carballeira (Anglet: Miatzen, 2001).
- 10 Ignace Sekula, retired aerospace engineer, in conversation with the author, February 2003.
- 11 Bert Kanter, ship inspector for the International Transport Workers' Federation, in conversation with the author, Rotterdam, October 1999.
- 12 Thanks to Carles Guerra Rojas, Manuel Sendón, Olaia Sendón, Clara Ogando, Gustavo Luca de Tena, Frank Herbelo, and Sally Stein.

Allan Sekula  
OKEANOS

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