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# Documentary Practice as Praxis: A Direct Appeal to the Realization of the Social Act

**Abstract:** The essential preoccupation of this paper is *documentary practice* as (social) *praxis*, the voice of the photography as a direct mode of transmission and not only the discovery or mediation of reality. Allan Sekula's photographic discourse is taken as a case study, a practice that directly engages the subject – the position of *the worker* within *the working class*, critically representing the reality that is usually masked by spectacle. The hypotheses assume that the methodology of contextualization and discursivization of documentary photography (*Untitled Slide Sequence*, 1972) leads to a conscious perception of a historical and social reality. Using a cross-methodology of the author's theory and practice, referring to the author's critical point of view, Marxist and post-Marxist theories, this paper indicates that Sekula develops a specific *photo-graphology* concerned with the directness of expression, the literalness of meaning, and the unmasking of iconic signs captured by capitalist signifiers. The arguments underline that the use of documentary photography as a direct appeal can encourage the realization of a social act. The conclusion implies that the use of the author's voice in the direction of changing the movement of aesthetic production and reception leads to actualization, towards awakening of the passive component – confrontation with social stratification under capitalist order.

**Keywords:** documentary practice; social praxis; critical position; Allan Sekula; contextualization; discursivization; photo-graphology; realization of the social act.

## Introduction

The approach to documentary photography as a *praxis* – a work in a specific social and historical context excludes the objective existence independent of the subject.<sup>1</sup> By building narratives around crisis situations and the discovery of marginal spaces, unemployment, and workplace struggle, Allan Sekula (1951–2013) applies a non-formalist approach to media – a critical art with an open indication of the social

<sup>1</sup> For “praxis” see Christoph Menke, *Force: A Fundamental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology*, trans. Gerrit Jackson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 13–29. Cf. Christian Lotz, “Representing Capital: Mimesis, Realism, and Contemporary Photography,” in *The Social Ontology of Capitalism*, eds. Daniel Krier and Mark P. Worrell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 187.

world.<sup>2</sup> Assuming that the purpose and effect of documentary practices is to reveal the truth, critical framework could raise certain questions.<sup>3</sup> And if art that aims at social transformation is treated as speech, then it could also point to something outside of art. Representation based on critical deconstruction and a rhetorical approach to the disposal of camera evidence, together with the affective character of documentary photography, could contribute to a more critical understanding of the social world.<sup>4</sup>

The hypotheses assume that the methodology of contextualization and discursivization of documentary photography (*Untitled Slide Sequence*, 1972) leads to a conscious perception of historical and social reality. The author's position takes an explicitly political stance within the ongoing debate about unemployment and the resistance that "cannot place itself in" as "an external relation to capitalism"<sup>5</sup>. Registering the "ubiquity in everyday social life", he posits meaning at the "beginning of the code", taking the "code of connotation" as "historical"<sup>6</sup>. Seen from a present distance, Sekula's photographs produced in 1972 are a "spatial (or temporal) continuum" of fragments of social reality; they "preserve the given" by converting it into a post-processual meaning "related to their true content"<sup>7</sup>. We can assume that the reading of a photographic context today could be understood as a continuous message, as an active maneuver (that lasts) in the discursive field, as an intervention in pointing (that needs to be decoded).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marie Muracciole and Benjamin J. Young, "Editors' Introduction: Allan Sekula and the Traffic in Photographs," *Grey Room* 55 (Spring 2014): 6–15; Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," in *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 56–70.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Renov, ed., "Toward a Poetics of Documentary," in *Theorizing Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary," 53–57.

<sup>5</sup> Pascal Beausse, "Allan Sekula, *Untitled Slide Sequence*, 1972: Interview Vidéo De Pascal Beausse, Responsable De La Collection Photographie, Cnap," in *The Centre national des arts plastiques supports contemporary art since 1791*, acc. April 20, 2020, <https://www.cnap.fr/allan-sekula-untitled-slide-sequence-1972>; Allan Sekula, "Aerospace Folktales," in *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 105–64; Steve Edwards, "White-Collar Blues: Allan Sekula Casts an Eye Over the Professional-Managerial Class," *Nonsite.org*, 37, 2021; Nick Srnicek, "Capitalism and the Non-Philosophical Subject," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Melbourne: Re-Press, 2011), 175.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), 201.

<sup>7</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *The Past's Threshold: Essays on Photography*, ed. Philippe Despoix and Maria Zinfert, trans. Conor Joyce (Zurich-Berlin: Diaphanes, 2014), 31.

<sup>8</sup> Ana Peraica, "Fotografija kao dokaz: Primjena tehnološkijske definicije fotografije na raspravu u estetici i teoriji fotografije" (PhD diss., Zagreb: Multimedijski institut, 2018), 118–23; Roland Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, ed. and intr. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 196.

## Positioning the critique

The artistic practice of Allan Sekula shows that he explored the freedom and possibility of photographic discourse, combining criticism, documentary genres, and conceptual art. Considered “one of the most critical artists of our time”<sup>9</sup>, “an artist/critic”<sup>10</sup>, he worked from an explicitly critical and Marxist standpoint.<sup>11</sup> Underlined by “critical realism”, his practice attempts to make invisible capital visible.<sup>12</sup> Believing that critical art would justify its documentary position only if it exposed the “myth of photographic truth,” he emphasized the “transparency” of the record and opposed the “alleged neutral objectivity,” taking into account formal complexities of genre convergence.<sup>13</sup> His series of documentary photographs, *Untitled Slide Sequence* exemplifies the shift of discourse from the domain of the imaginative mastery of the camera to transcending the logic of commodity forms and the “abstraction of exchange” vis-à-vis the logic of the capitalist culture.<sup>14</sup>

Critic and artist coalesce in his authorial personality. By pointing out that a more encompassing *praxis* is needed, his writing deals with photography as *social practice*.<sup>15</sup> Considering that “the photographer is already a social actor, never a completely innocent or objective bystander”, the act of “self-expression” should avoid the “megalomania of the signifier”, he points out.<sup>16</sup> He develops a specific *photo-graphology*<sup>17</sup> concerned with the directness of expression, the literalness of meaning, and the unmasking of iconic signs captured by capitalist signifiers – precisely by pointing

<sup>9</sup> Lotz, “Representing Capital: Mimesis, Realism, and Contemporary Photography,” 176.

<sup>10</sup> Hilde Van Gelder, “A Matter of Cleaning up: Treating History in the Work of Allan Sekula and Jeff Wall,” *History of Photography* 31, 1 (2007): 73.

<sup>11</sup> For an example of the use of the “universal equivalent” reference see Allan Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” in *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 77–101; Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, intr. Ernest Mandel, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin and London: New Left Review, 1976; 1979; Penguin Classics, 1982), 181.

<sup>12</sup> Lotz, “Representing Capital: Mimesis, Realism, and Contemporary Photography,” 192; Imre Szeman and Maria Whiteman, “Oil Imag(e)inaries: Critical Realism and the Oil Sands,” *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* 3, 2 (2012): 46–67; Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Allan Sekula: Photography Between Discourse and Document,” in *Allan Sekula: Fish Story* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1995), 191.

<sup>13</sup> Muracciole and Young, “Editors’ Introduction: Allan Sekula and the Traffic in Photographs,” 6–15.

<sup>14</sup> Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” 78–80.

<sup>15</sup> See for example his works: *Aerospace Folktales*, *Fish Story*, *This Ain’t China*, *School Is a Factory*, *Sketch for a Geography Lesson*. Allan Sekula, “Introduction,” to *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), ix; Benjamin James Young, “Sympathetic Materialism: Allan Sekula’s Photo-Works, 1971–2000” (Ph.D. diss., Berkeley: University of California, 2018), 4–10.

<sup>16</sup> Sekula, “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary,” 58–75. Cf. Sekula, “Introduction,” to *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983*, xi.

<sup>17</sup> The coinage of *photo-graphology* derives from Sekula’s dialectical attitude of critical reflection on a theoretical and practical level as a methodology of interference that merges and moves from theory to practice and vice versa.

them out. Taking into account the already present, “pre-photographic” stage,<sup>18</sup> he constructs a direct relationship between the Althusserian concept of “alienation of man under capitalism”, the reality of social class, and the Marxist-theoretical concept of “mode of production” (produktionsweise). Working on both a practical and a theoretical level, Sekula tries to move conceptual and documentary photography into the domain of social practices, to produce a “social effect” that does not correspond to the logic of the ideological system of representations.

### **Documentary practice as praxis (*Untitled Slide Sequence, 1972*)**

Aware of the possible transformative pitfalls of photography as a work of art, Sekula highlights the possibility of photography being assimilated into the fine arts market, driven by romantic and post-romantic aspirations.<sup>19</sup> He does not insist on photography as art; on the contrary, he questions it becoming art through various developmental stages of institutionalization, production, aestheticization, and instrumentalization, trying to place documentary photography at the level of a *social gesture*.<sup>20</sup> His series of photographs, *Untitled Slide Sequence*<sup>21</sup> encourages an interactive reading not only of the extracted as recognizable potential meaning but also of the latent, that which cannot speak for itself. The act of direct call means re-discursivization of the voice of the worker, articulated through the author’s utterance.<sup>22</sup>

The series of black-and-white photographs comprises successive sequences of a scene of workers leaving their workplace (context given: Convair aerospace factory<sup>23</sup>). The first twenty-one photographs are mostly shot from a static position; the last three photographs are shot from a slightly different position, since Sekula lowers his camera when warned by a guard. A stream of workers climbs up a set of stairs; some of them unexpectedly face the author’s camera only for a moment (subsequently some of these workers get terminated). They are not caught in a work process, but in a moment

<sup>18</sup> Victor Burgin, ed., “Photographic Practice and Art Theory,” in *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 47.

<sup>19</sup> Allan Sekula, “Photography Between Labour and Capital,” in *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton, 1948–1968*, eds. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), 199–200.

<sup>20</sup> Young, “Sympathetic Materialism: Allan Sekula’s Photo-Works, 1971–2000,” 1; Sekula, “Photography Between Labour and Capital,” 200.

<sup>21</sup> A time-lapse slide show of three compositional sets of twenty-five black-and-white 35-mm transparencies, recently shown in the exhibition “The Uses of Photography: Art, Politics, and the Reinvention of a Medium,” curated by Jill Dawsey, MCASD, 28 June–29 September 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Algirdas Julien Greimas, *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory* (Theory and History of Literature; v. 38), trans. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins, forew. Frederic Jameson, intr. Paul J. Perron (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 71.

<sup>23</sup> Captioned: “End of Day Shift, General Dynamics Convair Aerospace Factory, San Diego, California, 17 February 1972.” Convair was military-industrial complex, a General Dynamics company that worked for development of aeronautics during the Cold War. Young, “Sympathetic Materialism: Allan Sekula’s Photo-Works, 1971–2000,” 90–104.

that separates work from their free time and their repetitive everyday lives. But the everyday is not the main stage – capitalism, which inhibits the worker’s inability to create practical resistance because he is conditioned and economically dependent – the everyday is the *mise-en-scène* of that main stage. Comparing clothing that these workers wear, we can conclude that they belong to different working strata within the working class.<sup>24</sup> Some are managers, some are plain workers, all hired by the employer for profit and market economy. The images are similar in an iconographic sense, but the individuals photographed are different; their lives are different, even though they all belong to the working class and perform the goals of the capitalist economy.

Sekula groups the photographs, using an “ensemble” method to incorporate a political dialogue characteristic of both theater and cinema.<sup>25</sup> Using “sequential montage” (Benjamin J. Young) and reworking the possibilities of portrait as a genre, he connects individual figures, presenting their aporetic dimension as a collective of separation. He used the analogy between space and time in each photographic frame and the distributed time of wage labor in conceptualizing slide projection, that is, the clicking of slides passing through the projector and the time of the factory clock.<sup>26</sup> The *mode of production* seems to be transposed into the *act of representation*, as a dialectical position that allows us *to see*. In that sense, the series of photographs projected in slide sequences,<sup>27</sup> do not just map the field of vision but also the time necessary for the viewer to confront each photograph individually, to think and focus on what is literally offered – the *reality*. These photographs are shot over a short period of time and projected as slides with an interval that allows the viewer to confront each of these sequences more directly. What lies beneath the surface of the visual is not a mere representation of reality, but a hidden ideology, that takes into account both the individual and collective ideologies of the working class.<sup>28</sup>

Sekula’s work, according to Steve Edwards, could not be considered in its entirety if one does not take into account what is recognized as “PMC” (the Professional-Managerial Class). The condition that Sekula perceives, analyzes, and interprets occurs precisely in the working class and internal “antagonistic” fraction, with characteristics that diverge from ideas of social reform to technocratic allegiance to the capitalist system, separation of the working class into upper and lower strata, the impossibility of forming an anti-capitalist block, and, on the other hand, resistance to

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<sup>24</sup> For the diversity of the workforce and the fragmentation of social relations, referring to Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach, “das Ensemble,” see Young, “Sympathetic Materialism: Allan Sekula’s Photo-Works, 1971–2000,” 90–115.

<sup>25</sup> Sekula, “Introduction,” to *Photography against the Grain*, x–xi.

<sup>26</sup> Young, “Sympathetic Materialism: Allan Sekula’s Photo-Works, 1971–2000,” 90–116.

<sup>27</sup> A slide projection of similar iconographic sequences gives the impression of a stopped-motion, unfolded film strip. In his art practice, Sekula combined texts, photography, and film expanding the boundaries of art-media.

<sup>28</sup> Young, “Sympathetic Materialism: Allan Sekula’s Photo-Works, 1971–2000,” 7–8. For reading the archives from below see Sekula, “Photography Between Labour and Capital,” 202.

capitalist control.<sup>29</sup> As it is noted, Sekula expressed opposition to the Vietnam War, the supply of military resources produced by the working class, but also the mistrust of the New Left, which often drew personnel resources from the working class (those who belonged to the PMC).<sup>30</sup>

Sekula's series of photographs of Los Angeles industrial workers leaving a factory is a return to Louis Lumière's late 19<sup>th</sup> century documentary genre (1895) – *Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory in Lyon (La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon)*.<sup>31</sup> They also evoke the discourse of August Sander and his photograph *Unemployed* (1928), a continuity of preoccupation that allows us to think about documentary photograph as a mark of its politics, or politics as a possibility for all languages.<sup>32</sup> Analyzing the photographs of Lewis Hine or Alfred Stieglitz (“a need for Hine or Stieglitz”<sup>33</sup>), a Marxist critique of “abstract objectivism”, Sekula explores the need to consider photography differently. His photography speaks as “just one voice,” appealing to the wider social agora as the arena of opposition and resistance, hoping that dialogue will “transcend current institutional boundaries”<sup>34</sup>.

### Contextualization, discursivization

Photographs are silent (in a phonetic sense) and immobile (in a kinetic sense). They do not have the characteristics of film, but this does not mean that they do not have a voice of their own<sup>35</sup> or that they do not speak something in a way determined by the author's *contextualization*. The author's voice in *Untitled Slide Sequence* conveys a social point of view, regarding the subject and according to the organization of the materials and its presentation.<sup>36</sup> Here, there is no voice as in documentaries, a means that directs the narrative suggestion (linear or non-linear), but the voice of the author is sensed, standing for the social class that itself has lost the ability to speak about its disadvantaged position in the given political contexts of rebellion, resistance, and autonomy, immersing itself in the so-called petty-bourgeois logic of the economy.

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<sup>29</sup> About PMC as a distinct class in monopolist capitalist society, see Edwards, “White-Collar Blues: Allan Sekula Casts an Eye Over the Professional-Managerial Class”.

<sup>30</sup> Young, “Sympathetic Materialism: Allan Sekula's Photo-Works, 1971–2000,” 7–8. And Sekula himself points out that the archive has to be read from a position of solidarity with those displaced, deformed, silenced, or made invisible by the machinery of profit and progress. Cf. Sekula, “Photography Between Labour and Capital,” 202.

<sup>31</sup> Jorge Ribalta, *Universal Archive: The Condition of the Document and the Modern Photographic Utopia* (catalogue) (Barcelona: MACBA, 2008), 99.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy and Economy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 40. Cf. Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, 209.

<sup>33</sup> Sekula, “Introduction,” to *Photography against the Grain*, xii.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, x–xv.

<sup>35</sup> Bill Nichols, ed., “How Have Documentaries Addressed Social and Political Issues?” in *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 214.

<sup>36</sup> Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 36, 3 (1983): 17–30.

Believing that photography's potential can contribute to the awakening of class consciousness<sup>37</sup> and consequently influence general perception, Sekula redirects the purely aesthetic function into a more direct message, considering that there is always another side to its implications.<sup>38</sup> His essay from 1981, "The Traffic in Photographs", discusses forms of ideology; the legitimization of great political and economic powers; the authorization of institutional power; material and symbolic power; and the inseparable connection of language and power.<sup>39</sup> Sekula believed that a discourse situation was possible in which photographs would be enveloped by spoken language.<sup>40</sup>

The visual codes in *Untitled Slide Sequence* allow us to read aloud the failure of the revolutionary idea of Rousseau's "social contract" –people themselves as sovereign, people treated as social beings. Reality is represented not as spectacle,<sup>41</sup> the place of illusion and false consciousness, but in the direction of something that should be unveiled, or, as Walter Benn Michaels claims, the appeal of the literal is ongoing.<sup>42</sup> When Benjamin addressed the specificity of photography, he noted that it is impossible to say anything about the split second when a person starts walking.<sup>43</sup> From a technological-visual point of view when mimicking reality this may be so, but in social reality the workers included in *Untitled Slide Sequence* walk towards what Marx identifies as the "relative surplus population", towards unemployment, which is good for profit, good for capitalism itself, an useful inequality.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

Sekula theorized about "the photographer as monteur", applying a dialectical approach independent of the technique but making the technique operative.<sup>45</sup> If we underline Benjamin's hypothesis that the revolutionary nature of the political stance is based on a sense of solidarity in the attitudes, then the realization of the social act could be identified by the position of the author – *his* position in the process of production.<sup>46</sup> Resurfacing the question of authority; instead of prioritizing the image to

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Borland, "Class Consciousness," in *Encyclopedia of Social Problems: 1&2*, ed. Vincent N. Parrillo (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2008), 134.

<sup>38</sup> Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 68.

<sup>39</sup> Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," 77–78.

<sup>40</sup> Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 4.

<sup>41</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 199.

<sup>42</sup> Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy and Economy*, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Screen* 13, 1 (Spring 1972), 5–26.

<sup>44</sup> Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy and Economy*, 38; Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, 785–89.

<sup>45</sup> Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 60. Cf. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in Benjamin, *Selected Writings, vol. 2, part 2, 1931–1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eliand, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 770.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 773.

speak for itself, he is placing the right of the historical truth to be unveiled *with* the message itself, so that the link that connects the image and its exposed truth transposes into a *message*. The applied discursive procedures in *Untitled Slide Sequence* show that he uses “autobiographical” sources but keeps the “distance” by activating the point of view through the voice of the “third character” to establish the critical stance that he tries through the personal story to encompass a wider social field as an object of discursivization.<sup>47</sup> The use of direct images as a visualized author’s speech, fractionated the prism of the storyteller – the narrator in the first or third person (overlapped or crossed) – memorizes the story, both personal and general – the story that couldn’t be told by the ones who were silenced – the workers (the capitalist’s most indispensable means of production<sup>48</sup>).<sup>49</sup>

Young notes that photographs such as *Untitled Slide Sequence* encourage what he calls “désœuvrement,” clarifying that it is not about “capitalist unemployment” but about the “aesthetic potential of unemployment.”<sup>50</sup> What Sekula tries to extract from the photograph is its “dialogic social origin” by unraveling the “mute resistance to language” and its suppressed position. His source is everyday life – his own class and family background, situations already equipped with signs that he transforms into message.<sup>51</sup> Herein, the gesture of *discursivization* of documentary evidence<sup>52</sup> lies in the “context of utterance” as attached to the discourse,<sup>53</sup> the *contextualization* that supports and directs the meaning and the semantic destination intended to be read directly.<sup>54</sup> It is the photographic *utterance* that redirects one-s message from a general discourse of possible and limited meanings to a more precise connotation. It is *connotation* that constructs the orthogonals of perception by directing them to the center of projection, the constructed perspective, not to the illusion of reality, but to

<sup>47</sup> Idem.

<sup>48</sup> Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, 718.

<sup>49</sup> For what cannot be silenced, see Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 276.

<sup>50</sup> Young, “Sympathetic Materialism: Allan Sekula’s Photo-Works, 1971–2000,” 114; 7. About unemployment, see Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy and Economy*, 38–152.

<sup>51</sup> Sekula, “Introduction,” to *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983*, x–xi.

<sup>52</sup> Victor Burgin, ed., “Introduction,” to *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 2. Jean-Luc Nancy proposes the concept of “coming-to-presence,” referring to the term “evidence” as a possibility for the anticipation of some kind of meaning in the process of “cutting off” that reality from the world. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Evidence of Film: Abbas Kiarostami* (Brussels: Yves Gevaert, 2001), 42. For the interpretation of the term “evidence” and maintaining the connection with the original referent, see Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés, *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, trans. L. Crist, D. Patte, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 110. We can draw an analogy with the poetic mode in documentaries that use the historical world for their raw material. Bill Nichols, “How Can We Differentiate among Documentaries? Categories, Models, and the Expository and Poetic Modes of Documentary Film,” in *Introduction to Documentary*, Second Edition (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 162–64.

<sup>53</sup> Greimas and Courtés, *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, 81–85.

<sup>54</sup> Sekula, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” 4–8.



reality itself as a *social* condition. Taking into account that the photograph as an utterance carries, or is, a message in itself, the conditioning of its readability (treated as a *text* instead of an *icon*) is based on contextualization, i.e., culturally determined codes of perception, which are not purely universal. As Sekula points out, photography is a “way of *knowing*” and a “way of *feeling*”, knowing the world “directly” from the inside and with all its contradictions.<sup>55</sup>

Sekula’s pivotal (critical) point lays bare the non-resistance of the working class working in the Convair factory or anywhere else in the world in the service of war, technological superiority, and capitalism, forcing us not only to look but to *see* better, not only to listen to the *mute speech* of these photographs but to *hear* better.

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 85; Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” 95; Edwards, “White-Collar Blues: Allan Sekula Casts an Eye Over the Professional-Managerial Class”.

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Article received: May 13, 2024  
Article accepted: July 15, 2024  
Original scholarly paper