

ALLAN SEKULA: TITANIC's wake

Opening: Friday, April 1, 2005

Duration: April 2 – May 22, 2005

Location: CAMERA AUSTRIA, Kunsthhaus Graz

Allan Sekula: *Dead Letter Office*

Los Angeles, September 1997

Those who identify, consciously or not, with the white adventurers who seized the northern part of California from Mexican cattle-ranchers in the 1840s continue to regard the long peninsula of Baja California as a kind of vestigial organ, a primeval, reptilian tail. Here, in the place of escape, drunkenness and dreams, it is permissible to vomit without shame.

The dream-work performed by the "white system imagines "Baja", a lower space, as a utopia of childhood freedoms, a space in which lobsters can be devoured ravenously, vehicles driven with reckless abandon. The fugitives in Hollywood films invariably seek the border, as if no laws held beyond.

And now Hollywood itself is fugitive, crossing the triple fence to stage its own expensive retelling of the story of modernity's encounter with the primordial abyss.

Extras float and shiver among the dummy corpses, failing about and gagging on command, a veritable reserve army of the drowned. Eighty miles north, hapless immigrants stumble upon another narrative, a dress rehearsal for an amphibious landing. A California congressman, the architect of the triple fence, worries about Chinese nuclear weapons smuggled across the border in cargo containers. A former secretary of defense writes an illiterate scenario for an invasion of Mexico. The United States Marines investigate having their tank transporters built in Tijuana by a Korean conglomerate. A North American actor, reading the voice-over to a promotional film for the same Korean conglomerate, slips and speaks of the "artesian" traditions of Mexico labor.

A paranoid truth at the end of the twentieth century may be closer to this: the industrialized northern border of Mexico is the prototype of a grim Taylorist future. The re-floated *Titanic* is the belated harbinger of the runaway assembly-line. A reservoir of cheap labor is contained and channeled by the hydraulic action of an apartheid machine. The machine is increasingly indifferent to democracy on either side of the border, but not indifferent to culture, to the pouring of oil upon troubled waters.

The photographs were made between August 1996 and June 1997.

Allan Sekula: *Dead Letter Office*

Berlin, July 1997

This project is commissioned for the "sitespecific" exhibition "InSite 97", scheduled for the fall of 1997 in the adjacent border cities of San Diego, California and Tijuana, Baja California. Here the metropolitan first world and the metropolitan third world meet, in a tense North American version of apartheid.

My photographs [were] exhibited on the Mexican side of the line, and constitute a sequel of sorts to *Fish Story*, particularly to the chapter on Veracruz. It is worth noting that Tijuana is now a major site for the production of cargo containers, a large factory having been built in the industrial district of El Florido by the Korean conglomerate Hyundai following the closure of a smaller factory in the port of Los Angeles.

The written elements of the work may share certain features with science fiction writing or speculative military fiction, such as the novels of Tom Clancy. I am also interested in several novels, travel books, and films about San Diego and Baja California, particularly in the writer Max Miller, whose early 1930s novel *I Cover the Waterfront* was made into a hit film shortly after its publication. Throughout his writing, Miller evokes an earlier metaphysic of the California coast as *terra nova*, a metaphysic found, for example, in the 1840s writings of Richard Henry Dana. But for Miller, whose racial views are a big step backward from Dana's, the maritime space of Baja California is a repository of a primeval past that has been lost above the border. One can chart linkages between Miller's texts and certain B-movies about the California coast as a space of melancholic beach-bum indolence on the verge of Cold War geopolitical intrigue, notably *Shack out on 101*.

Those who identify, consciously or not, with the white adventurers who seized the northern part of California from the Mexicans in the 1840s continue to regard the long peninsula of Baja California as a kind of vestigial organ. a primeval, reptilian tail: as a place of escape, drunkenness and dreams. The truth at the end of the twentieth century may be closer to this: the industrialized northern border of Mexico offers an image of a grim Taylorist future. Thus the hand of the slave extends a fun-house mirror to the Janus-face of the pleasure and profit-seeking master.

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