Allan Sekula. *Collective Sisyphus* draws a straight line between *Fish Story* (1989–95), one of his better-known photographic essays, and his last work project *Ship of Fools / The Dockers’ Museum* (2010–13). Along this trajectory, we find *Deep Six / Passer au bleu* (1996/98) and the film *Lottery of the Sea* (2006). In all of them Sekula laments the loss of the sea due to a global economy that favors a connected world. Sekula’s work will be remembered as one of modern photography’s biggest efforts to erect a monument – a far from grandiloquent one – to the cosmopolitan proletariat.
**Fish Story, 1989–95**

**Chapter 1**

1. Growing up in a harbor predisposes one to retain quaint ideas about matter and thought. I’m speaking only for myself here, although I suspect that a certain stubborn and pessimistic insistence on the primacy of material forces is part of a common culture of harbor residents. This crude materialism is underwritten by disaster. Ships explode, leak, sink, collide. Accidents happen every day. Gravity is recognized as a force. By contrast, airline companies encourage the omnipotence of thought. This is the reason why the commissioner of airports for the city of Los Angeles is paid much more than the commissioner of harbors. The airport commissioner has to think very hard, day and night, to keep all the planes in the air.

2. In the past, harbor residents were deluded by their senses into thinking that a global economy could be seen and heard and smelled. The wealth of nations would slide by in the channel. One learned a biased national physiognomy of vessels: Norwegian ships are neat and Greek ships are grimy. Things are more confused now. A scratchy recording of the Norwegian national anthem blares out from a loudspeaker at the Sailors’ Church on the bluff above the channel. The container ship being greeted flies a Bahamian flag of convenience. It was built by Koreans laboring long hours in the giant shipyards of Ulsan. The crew, underpaid and overworked, could be Honduran or Filipino. Only the captain hears a familiar melody.

3. What one sees in a harbor is the concrete movement of goods. This movement can be explained in its totality only through recourse to abstraction. Marx tells us this, even if no one is listening anymore. If the stock market is the site in which the abstract character of money rules, the harbor is the site in which material goods appear in bulk, in the very flux of exchange. Use values slide by in the channel. One learned a biased national physiognomy of vessels: Norwegian ships are neat and Greek ships are grimy. Things are more confused now. A scratchy recording of the Norwegian national anthem blares out from a loudspeaker at the Sailors’ Church on the bluff above the channel. The container ship being greeted flies a Bahamian flag of convenience. It was built by Koreans laboring long hours in the giant shipyards of Ulsan. The crew, underpaid and overworked, could be Honduran or Filipino. Only the captain hears a familiar melody.

4. Space is transformed. The ocean floor is wired for sound. Fishing boats disappear in the Irish Sea, dragged to the bottom by submarines. Businessmen on airplanes read exciting novels about sonar. Water-front brothels are demolished or remodeled as condominiums. Shipyards are converted into movie sets. Harbors are now less heavens (as they were for the Dutch) than accelerated turning-basins for supertankers and container ships. The old harbor front, its links to a common culture shattered by unemployment, is now reclaimed for a bourgeois reverie on the mercantilist past. Heavy metals accumulate in the silt. Busboys fight over scarce spoons in front of a plate-glass window overlooking the harbor. The backwater becomes a frontwater. Everyone wants a glimpse of the sea.
A German friend wrote me early in January 1991, just before the war in the Persian Gulf: “You should try to photograph over determined ports, like Haifa and Basra.” Her insight, that some ports are fulcrums of history, the levers many, and the results unpredictable, was written in the abstract shorthand of an intellectual. But she shares the materialist curiosity of people who work in and between ports, such as the Danish sailors who discovered that Israel was secretly shipping American weapons to Iran in the 1980s. A crate breaks, spilling its contents. But that’s too easy an image of sudden disclosure, at once archaic and cinematic, given that sailors rarely see the thrice-packaged cargo they carry nowadays. A ship is mysteriously renamed. Someone crosschecks cargo manifests, notices a pattern in erratic offshore movements, and begins to construct a story, a suspicious sequence of events, where before there were only lists and voyages, a repetitive and routine industrial series.

Sailors and dockers are in a position to see the global patterns of intrigue hidden in the mundane details of commerce. Sometimes the evidence is in fact bizarrely close at hand: Weapons for the Iraqis in the forward hold. Weapons for the Iranians in the aft hold. Spanish dockers in Barcelona laugh at the irony of loading cargo with antagonistic destinations. For a moment the global supply network is comically localized, as pictorially condensed as a good political cartoon. Better to scuttle the ship at the dock. But limpet mines are tools of governments, not of workers.

At the very least, governments find it necessary to dispute the testimony of maritime workers. Ronald Reagan, the symbolic Archimedes of a new world of uninhibited capital flows, worried about the stories being told in 1986. The Great Anecdotalist presumably had a good ear for yarns: these “quite exciting” reports “attributed to Danish sailors” about shipload after shipload of weapons moving from the Israeli Red Sea port of Eilat to the Iranian Persian Gulf port of Bandar Abbas were best countered with an almost royalist affirmation of presidential authority: “Well now you’re going to hear the facts from a White House source, and you know my name.”

This was not the first time that Reagan had worried about the maritime trades. As he launched his political career in the 1960s, Reagan recalled his experience as a conservative trade unionist in Hollywood in the late 1940s, and claimed that the secret Communist labor strategy at the time had been to bring the Hollywood unions under the control of the West Coast longshoremen. The longshoremen were led by Australian-born Harry Bridges, who, in Reagan’s words, had been “often accused but never convicted of Communist membership.” The future president concluded with a sly aside: “The only item which was unclear to me—then and now—was how longshoremen could make movies.”

We know now that actors can make politics. The next question to be asked is this: How do governments—and the actors who speak for governments—move cargo? How do they do it without stories being told by those who do the work? Could the desire for the fully automated movement of goods also be a desire for silence, for the tyranny of a single anecdote?
Fish Story, 1989–95
Chapter 3

–1994 | 22 Cibachrome prints and 4 text panels | Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Collection, Vienna

29. Chief mate checking temperatures of refrigerated containers. Mid-Atlantic.
30. Filling a lifeboat with water equivalent to the weight of the disabled and drifting sailboat Happy Ending. Mid-Atlantic.
32. Bosun driving the forward winch. Mooring at ECT/Sea-Land Terminal, Port of Rotterdam.
33. Voyage 167 of the container ship M/V Sea-Land Quality from Elizabeth, New Jersey, to Rotterdam, November 1993.
34. The Sea-Land Quality dockside at automated ECT/Sea-Land Terminal, Port of Rotterdam.
35. The disabled and drifting sailboat Happy Ending.
40. David Brown telephones his wife in Jacksonville from ECT/Sea-Land Terminal, Port of Rotterdam.
41. The Sea-Land Quality departing Rotterdam for Bremerhaven.
42. Notice engraved on steel plate bolted to stateroom bulkhead, Sea-Land Quality.
43. The Sea-Land Quality dockside at automated ECT/Sea-Land Terminal, Port of Rotterdam.
44. The Sea-Land Quality departing Rotterdam for Bremerhaven.
45. The Sea-Land Quality dockside at automated ECT/Sea-Land Terminal, Port of Rotterdam.
46. The Sea-Land Quality departing Rotterdam for Bremerhaven.
47. The Sea-Land Quality departing Rotterdam for Bremerhaven.
48. The Sea-Land Quality departing Rotterdam for Bremerhaven.

The disabled and drifting sailboat Happy Ending, Gerald Hardesty, mort selon lui depuis un an, à bord d’un voilier à la dérive en mer anglaise le 1er novembre à destination de l’Irlande avec à son bord le propriétaire du bateau, Gerald Hardesty et son épouse Carol, âgée de 60 ans. Un membre d’équipage d’un porte-conteneur américain, le “Sealand Quality”, a pu monter sur le voilier repéré à la défonce vendredi par un cargos norvégien et voir le corps du propriétaire du bateau, Gerald Hardesty, mort selon lui depuis deux ou trois jours.

Enlarged photocopy of clipping from unidentified Cherbourg newspaper brought aboard by the North Sea pilot and posted by the captain without translation in the officers’ and crew’s mess rooms, Sea-Land Quality.

As the crew filed back into the house from the main deck after the memorial service for the two Americans, the usually taciturn captain announced to no one in particular and everyone in general: “Well, that should put an end to all the ghost stories that have been going around.”

FIRE AND EMERGENCY
Muster at boat station
ABANDON SHIP
Muster at boat station
NUCLEAR, BIOLOGICAL, CHEMICAL WARFARE
Remain in stateroom

Note: the exhibition selection has more photographs (48) than in the Fish Story official catalogue (44), and numbering therefore differs.

THE BOSUN’S STORY
“Black-and-white photos tell the truth. That’s why insurance companies use them.”

Launched in 1984, the Sea-Land Quality was one of the first ships built at the Daewoo shipyard on the island of Keoje off the southeast coast of South Korea, and one of a series of “econ-ships” commissioned by the now-defunct United States Lines of Malcolm McLean, the trucking executive who initiated containerized cargo movement in 1956. These were the biggest container ships built to date, deliberately slow: exercises in economy of scale, cheap construction, and conservative fuel use. When an American crew picked up the first of these ships from the Daewoo dockyard, completed the sea trials, and began the voyage back across the Pacific, they discovered in the nooks and crannies of the new ship a curious inventory of discarded tools used in the building of the vessel: crude hammers made by welding a heavy bolt onto the end of a length of pipe, wrenches cut roughly by torch from scraps of deck plate. Awed by this evidence of an improvisatory iron-age approach to ship building, which corresponded to their earlier impressions of the often-lethal brutality of Korean industrial methods, they gathered the tools into a small display in the crew’s lounge, christening it “The Korean Workers’ Museum.”

American elites have cultivated a fantastic fear of superior Asian intelligence; in doing so they obscure their own continued cleverness. For their part, American workers fear the mythic Asian brain and something else: an imagined capacity for limitless overwork under miserable condi-
tions. The first assistant engineer, once a Navy commando in Vietnam, fears being replaced by former enemies. Veering abruptly from the right-wing paranoia of the politician Ross Perot to the left-wing paranoia of filmmaker Oliver Stone, his diatribe is less farfetched than it seems. Shipping companies increasingly turn to flag-of-conveni-
ency registry, a legal loophole that allows for the hiring of cheaper, usually Asian, crews. American ship-owners have long favored Liberia and Panama, two notoriously independent nations, for these registry services, services which require an infrastructure roughly equivalent to that needed for commemorative stamp issues. Now Sea-Land threatens to turn to the newest bastion of paper sovereignty, the Marshall Islands, otherwise renowned as a cluster of irradiated coral atolls devastated by American thermonuclear testing in the 1950s.

And thus the general spirit of the ship was one of mournful and weary anticipation of unemploy-
ment, heightened by a pervasive insomnia caused by the vibration of the low-speed Hyundai-Sulzer diesel running at 100 RPM, the speed of an amphet-
amine-driven human heart.

WALKING IN CIRCLES

Port Elizabeth-Norfolk-Rotterdam-Bremerhaven-
Felixstowe-Le Havre-Boston-Port Elizabeth. While crisscrossing the North Atlantic, David Brown works twelve hours a day for a month at a time, putting in an extra watch of work on deck from 0800 to noon, chipping and painting, standing watch at the wheel from noon to 1600, then back at the wheel from midnight to 0400. The extra watch at overtime pay allows him to earn “just enough to make the trip worthwhile,” considering his family in Jacksonville and the fact that despite his years as a merchant sailor, the scarcity of American-flag ships means that he usually works for only six to nine months out of twelve.

A day before landfall, nearing the end of his watch and restless from standing in one place for four hours, Brown leaves the wheel on autopilot and begins to describe Ethiopian dockworkers unloading a cargo of grain, gaunt and wiry men walking in circles carrying huge sacks on their backs. Brown stoops and begins to pantomime a precise memory of their movement, pacing a repeti-
tions circle in front of the navigation computer, bent over in the ancient stance of the stevedore, assuming the burdened posture found in the monochromatic floor mosaics still visible amid the ru-

ins of the Roman port of Ostia Antica, called into life wherever there were or are no machines to lift the weight of cargo.

Haunted by this image of sheer Sisyphean toil, Brown turns abruptly to the case of a hypothetical worker who loses his job to automation: “First he lose his sanity, then his car, then his house.” The circle narrows and one world falls into the vortex of the other.

“SIBERIA”

For the crew, this crossing is the first to make port at the new robot terminal built on the ever-expand-
ing landfill at the outer reaches of the River Maas. The Dutch engineer responsible for designing the system of automated cranes and trucks that gives the ECT/Sea-Land Terminal an eerie depopulated aspect even in pleasant weather remarked that the new method is “much more comfortable than when you have a lot of individuals under the crane. They say hello to each other, they talk to each other.” He warned me away from the path of the robot trucks: “Watch out, they don’t see you!”

In winter, the outer dike wall does little to shield the ship and the dock from the North Sea wind. A freezing forty-five-minute hike through the conta-
tainer stacks and across the sandy soil leads to the solitary truckers’ bar nestled up against the dike at the foot of a row of roaring windmills. Beyond that, it’s a half-hour van drive to the nearest store, a duty-free shop surrounded by oil tanks in the Botlek, where Russian and Filipino sailors remind Americans what it means to comb the shelves for bargains. But the nickname for this new port of call—barren, cold, and far from everything regarded as interesting and human—had stuck earlier, in the middle of the Atlantic, as someone recalled a farewell visit a month earlier to a familiar neighbor-
hood bar just outside the old terminal twenty-five kilometers upriver toward Rotterdam. It is no longer possible, as it was three centuries ago on the River Maas, to infer the warmth of a still life from a picture of a wooden ship full of whale blubber.
For Jules Verne, there is no place that cannot be illuminated. Moonlight cuts through the waves and gives the ocean floor the pale luminosity of a romantic ruin. When moonlight fails, electricity cuts in. But the sunken galleons on the floor of Vigo Bay, the secret source of Captain Nemo’s mysterious insurrectionary wealth, are never described within Verne’s text, although they are pictured in two of the illustrations to the first French edition of Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea. Within the written narrative, which is elsewhere replete with such scenes, there is no underwater tableau, no landscape, no town on the shore.

Nemo’s sunken treasury remains both invisible and frozen in its connection to historic plunder, to the process of what Marx called “primitive accumulation.” For Verne, this lost fraction of the wealth that came to fuel the emergence of modern Europe is confiscated by a magical fable of inheritance: “It was for him and him alone America had given up her precious metals. He was heir direct, without anyone to share, in those treasures torn from the Incas and from the conquered of Ferdinand Cortez.”

Nemo’s wealth, despite his patronage of revolutionary movements, remains liable to the charge of barrenness. His project is blocked on the one side by aristocratic nostalgia and on the other by an abstract and futuristic motto of perpetual flux within flux: mobilitas in mobili. The Galician writer Ferrin has grasped the irony of Nemo’s scavenging in the waters off Vigo. Wealth always leaves Vigo, whether in the form of fish, granite, or sheer emigrant labor power. Nemo, no exception to this rule, is for Ferrin quite simply a “nihilist,” another external, destructive demiurge.

For all his genius as a naval engineer, Nemo is also a philosophical idealist. Matter is always subordinated to will and to thought. Nemo embodies the secret idealism of all science fiction. He can flaunt the laws of economics because his relation to wealth is consistently magical. Verne’s narrator observes that Nemo’s voluminous library aboard the Nautilus contained “not one single work on political economy; that subject appeared to be strictly proscribed.” Nemo’s answer to the misery of the land lies in the imaginary preindustrial plentitude of the sea.

If Nemo has no respect for terrestrial economies, the booksellers and readers of Vigo have either too little or too much respect for Nemo. In the outdoor stalls that are set up from time to time on the Praza de Compostela one can buy inexpensive paperback editions in Spanish, but not in Galician, of most of Verne’s novels. Among them, Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea is nowhere to be found. I am tempted to think that here, under the canvas tarp and the swinging electric light two blocks from the waterfront, amongst the used volumes devoted to Velázquez and the several translations of the American inspirational writer Dale Carnegie, the indifference of Verne and his hero Nemo is reciprocated. And this reciprocated indifference is a function of an economic attitude: the distrust borne toward submarines by those who work the surface of the sea.
Passer au bleu

J'avais tout juste un peu plus de seize ans, aucune expérience, le goût de l'aventure et l'esprit enfiévré et la passion de l'héroïsme faitice d'un maître d'école qui avait servi dans la marine, quand j'entrevis de sculpter ma destinée, et m'embarqua sur un navire corsaire, le Terrible du capitaine La Mort. Thomas Paine, Les Droits de l'homme.

J'allaïs souvent nager dans le golfe du Mexique, près de Corpus Christi, parcourant trois ou quatre kilomètres à l'heure, puis, après avoir été décapité, je sentais sous moi la mer redoutable et toute la vie secrète qu'elle abritait. Je me disais que j'allaïs mourir de frayeur avant de pouvoir regagner la terre ferme. [...] J'étais aussi terrifiée que si on m'avait laissée brusquement parmi les marins de l'armée de Jean de Valois, en tremblant de peur. Katherine Ann Porter à Caroline Gordon, le 28 août 1931.

L'idée, ce serait de réaliser des éditions fictives des Droits de l'homme de Thomas Paine (1791-1792) et de La Nef des fous de Katherine Ann Porter (1962), illustrées chacune par un ensemble de photographies en hors-texte. Les deux livres seraient présentés sous un même étui, associés l'un à l'autre en lieu et place des ouvrages antérieurs auxquels on les rattache habituellement.

Le roman de Katherine Porter remplacerait ainsi les Réflexions sur la Révolution française d'Edmund Burke (1790), le plaidoyer royaliste qui avait provoqué la riposte républicaine de Thomas Paine. De son côté, le livre de Thomas Paine remplacerait l'incunable xylographique dont s'est inspirée Katherine Porter, Le Nef des fous, ou Dés Nœuds, de Sébastien Brant (1494). (Dans la satire de Sébastien Brant, le premier fous sur la fameuse nef est le collectionneur de livres.)

Thomas Paine et Katherine Porter appartiennent respectivement à la première et à la dernière génération d'auteurs américains dont l'écriture s'est nourrie des traversées au long cours. Tous deux ont acquis une sorte de matérielisme affectueux, conséquence du mal de mer.

Thomas Paine a un rapport très concret avec la navigation. Sa connaissance intime de l'univers des marins élimine de son imagination littéraire toutes les métaphores nantiques. Il préfère comparer la politique aux effets de trompe-l'œil de la peinture et du théâtre.

Pour Katherine Porter, qui voyage et observe finement les autres, le bateau est avant tout un théâtre métaphorique de la politique, de la tyrannie et de la promiscuité, où se donne en spectacle une nature humaine moins bonne que ne le pensait Thomas Paine.
Passer au bleu, 1er volet. Les Droits de l’homme
Une grande majorité de l’humanité se trouve rejetée bas- ment à l’arrière-plan de la réalité humaine, pour mieux mettre en avant et faire reluire les marionnettes de l’État et de l’aristocratie.

Les Droits de l’homme.

Deep Six, 2e volet. La Nef des fous
Il savait bien quelle lie du genre humain son navire, comme tous les navires, transportait d’escale en escale à travers le monde : des flambeurs, des vo- leurs, des trafiquants, des espions, des expulsés et des réfugiés politiques, des clandestins, des dealers, toute cette faune misérable de l’entrepon qui va d’un pays à l’autre, tels les rats porteurs de la peste, qui grouillent, rôdent et ébranlent la belle ordonnance des cultures et civilisations du monde entier.

La Nef des fous.

Deep Six
... little more than sixteen years of age, raw and ad- venturous, and heated with the false heroism of a [school]master who had served in a man-of-war, I began the carver of my own fortune, and entered on board the Terrible privateer, Captain Death.


I used to swim about two miles out in the Gulf of Mexico near Corpus Christi, and whole schools of porpoises used to dive by, parting and sweeping around me and out to sea, and suddenly I would feel under me the awful waters and the unknowable life in them, and it seemed I would surely die of terror before I could get back to land... It was as dreadful as if you might be set down suddenly in a preglacial age in a wilderness of monsters... I love the sea, but as an old-fashioned Christian loved God—with fear and trembling.

Katherine Ann Porter to Caroline Gordon, August 28, 1931.

This is the idea: imaginary editions of The Rights of Man by Thomas Paine (1791–92) and Ship of Fools (1962) by Katherine Ann Porter, each illustrated by a set of photographs that would be kept separate from the text. The two books would be slipcased together, thus changing the usual association of each of these books with another prior book.

Porter’s novel would replace Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), the royalist polemic that had prompted Paine’s republi- can response. And Paine’s book would in turn sub- stitute for the woodcut-illustrated book that had inspired Porter, Sebastian Brant’s Narrenschiff of 1494. (In Brant’s book, the first fool on the ship of fools is the collector of books.)

Paine and Porter belong, respectively, to the first and last generations of American writers to have been formed by the long duration of sea travel. They shared a sympathetic materialism, born of seasickness.

Paine thought practically about ships. His sailor’s familiarity with the maritime world purged nautical metaphors from his literary imagination. His fa- vored metaphors for politics were drawn instead from the illusionism of painting and theatre.

For Porter—swimmer, passenger and astute physiognomist—ships were above all else metaphor- ic stages for politics, for autocracy and contested intimacy, and for the drama of a human nature less good than that imagined by Paine.

Deep Six, Part 1: The Rights of Man
A vast mass of mankind are degradedly thrown into the background of the human picture, to bring for- ward, with greater glare, the puppet-show of state and aristocracy.

The Rights of Man.

Deep Six, Part 2: Ship of Fools
He knew well what human trash his ship—all ships—carried to and from all ports of the world: gamblers, thieves, smugglers, spies, political depor- tees and refugees, stowaways, drug peddlers, all the gutter stuff of the steerage moving like plague rats from one country to another, swarming and ravening and undermining the hard-won order of the cultures and civilizations of the whole world.

Ship of Fools.

Captions in brackets are given for descriptive purposes only and are not part of the titles of the indi- vidual photographs. The complete title listed as Sea France Renoir en route between Dover and Calais is Sea France Renoir en route between Dover and Calais.
Ship of Fools / The Dockers’ Museum

Selection of 17 framed chromogenic prints mounted on alu-dibond | Collection M HKA, Antwerp / Collection Flemish Community

1–10.

11.

12–13.

14.

15.

16.

17.
Near Collision (Koper) (2000/2010)

18.
Ship Lesson (Durban) (1999/2010)

19.
Waiting for Work (Santos) (2010)

20.
Not Working (Santos) (2010)

21.
Working (Santos) (2010)

The Dockers’ Museum (2010–2013)

A selection of ‘Objects of interest,’ elements from Allan Sekula, The Dockers’ Museum | Collection M HKA, Antwerp / Collection Flemish Community | At allansekula.ensembles.org (scan the QR code) you will find more information on the research and the display of Ship of Fools / The Dockers’ Museum (2010–13)

[...]: the ship was the brainchild of a group of German and British seafarer activists who also happened to be disaffected veterans of Greenpeace, interested in the problem of an international linkage of labor and environmental struggles. Their primary concern was the system of flag of convenience shipping, a lawyerly ruse invented by American shippers in the 1940s that allows wealthy ship owners to register their vessels in poor nations offering what is often termed paper sovereignty: a flag for a fee. The system is rife with abuses, and indeed its very purpose is abuse: shielding exploitative labor conditions and substandard vessels behind a bewildering legal maze.

[...]: since 1995 key working class resistances to neoliberal policies – reduced social security, casualization of work in the name of “flexibility,” union busting, and privatization of public infrastructure – have come from workers in the transport sector: railway workers in France, dockers in Australia, Chile and Brazil, bus drivers and airline crews in Mexico, delivery drivers in the United States. These battles against the doctrine of the untrammeled market predate Seattle.

[...]: The calculated amnesia of the world of international shipping offers a lesson to those who celebrate the postmodern flux of identity. One of the stranger stories of this common practice: in mid passage a captain receives a telex noting that the ship has been sold and must be renamed. The captain politely asks the new name and is told to send a crewman over the side – risky business when underway – to paint out every other letter of the old name. What would Mallarmé make of this? The concrete poetry of the contemporary maritime world, the nominative magic worked out between the telex machine and the paint locker.

[...]: The Global Mariner had to be a real ship functioning in an exemplary way, to be the Good Ship that social justice demanded other ships should and could be, but it was also an empty vessel carrying nothing but ballast and a message.

[...]: This was the anti-Titanic. The Glaswegian quartermaster aboard the Global Mariner, a wiry veteran seafarer by the name of Jimmy McCauley, made the point very succinctly, referring to the steady aggregate loss of life at sea, crews of twenty at a time on bulk ore carriers that mysteriously break in half, sometimes in calm seas, or the myriad Filipino passengers crammed onto decrepit ferries that capsize or burn in the Sulu Sea: “A Titanic happens every year, but no one hears about it.”
Lottery of the Sea

2006 | 180 minutes, colour, sound | English, Spanish, Galician, with Spanish subtitles | Direction, camera, narration: Allan Sekula | Editing: Elizabeth Hesik

An American submarine collides with a Japanese trawler. What does this suggest about the division of labour in the Pacific? How do we remember the old emperor? As a general mounted on his horse? Or as a marine biologist looking through his microscope?

Panama decides whether to increase the width of its canal, over which it now exerts a moderate degree of sovereignty. How come a diver is better prepared to question this huge swath cutting through the jungle?

Galicia receives an unwanted gift of crude oil, which provokes subsequent and important questions about the monomania of governments incapable of conceptualising danger in more than one dimension. What can we learn from people’s ability to self-organise in the face of disaster and government indifference? What can the fishermen of Bueu, smeared in oil, tell us about it?

Once again, Barcelona returns to its seafront, creating a pseudo-public sphere: in the north, property prices rise, while in the south even greater maritime logistics efficiency is achieved. What do the irresistible port workers of the city have to say about democracy from their self-defined position as a ‘ghetto’?

And in the middle of it all we visit blizzards and demonstrations in New York, prehistoric mastodons drifting in Los Angeles, militant percussionists and bewildered construction workers in Lisbon, millionaires or millionaire clones (who can tell them apart?) in Amsterdam and street dogs in Athens, all with the idea of considering in detail an image of the sea, the market and democracy.

Allan Sekula
November 2004