

DISMAL SCIENCE Photo Works 1972-1996



ALLAN SEKULA



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O N E

A man and a woman are standing. They are posed in a deliberate way for the making of a photograph. The shadow of a head falls on the scene, obscuring the tip of the man's right shoe. This negative trace points back to the photographer, who stands, as usual, outside the frame. The photographer stares down at a reversed reflection of the scene, and in trying not to shake the camera, fails to notice the intruding shadow. In presenting themselves as a couple, the man and the woman share their space with the mark of an unseen and unskilled accomplice. This is unfortunate. The man appears to be standing on the photographer's head. Because of this flaw, this photograph is valued less than others taken on the same day. The picture remains in the processing envelope.

Years later, the photograph reappears in an almost archeological light. What meanings were once constructed here? What ideas and desires directed this project? Who spoke, who listened, who spoke with a voice not their own? I want to give what was once familiar an exemplary strangeness.

Since this is a still photograph, the man and the woman are still standing. They look to be in their mid-forties. The man could be older. We assume they're married. Is this a photograph of a man and his wife? Or is it a photograph of a woman and her husband? At this angle the man appears much larger than the woman. Of course this impression is only the result of his being closer to the camera, which faces the couple from an oblique angle. The camera has a wide-angle lens as well, allowing relatives and loved ones to occupy the same frame as monuments and scenic vistas. Perspective is exaggerated. The man tends, slightly, to belong to the foreground. The woman begins to belong to the background. This might be merely an unmotivated optical effect. Or it could be an overdetermined effect of several causes. Perhaps this lack of symmetry was intended. Perhaps it crept into the frame, unthought of. Perhaps social habit drives us to find it in the scene. Women are often in attendance. They attend to male companions within the picture. They attend to unseen male viewers. Thus we might be more inclined to say "She is standing at his side" than to say "He is standing at her side." There is nothing natural or innocent about this conclusion.

The man has directed the photographer to a point-of-view, mentioning forty-five degree angles and the avoidance of excessive shade. He has told the woman and the photographer of his desires. He has asked the woman to strike a pose. He has adjusted the angle of her stance. Her *mantilla* has been adjusted to reveal her face. He has drawn himself up, waiting. Instructions have been given. He has failed to notice the juxtaposition of the photographer's shadow and his shoe.

Lockheed today is a broadly based industrial complex, adding constantly to our skills in translating discoveries of science into advanced products, systems, and services for human progress and national defense. Our productive abilities are rooted in decades of experience. In the words of chairman Dan Haughton: "We'd rather be advancing the state of the art than standing still. Our competence has kept us in the forefront of the industry.... I know that at Lockheed our own eyes are on the future, and our efforts are in large part directed toward realizing it fully."

Days of Trial and Triumph: A Pictorial History of Lockheed, 1969

photography unequivocally to the status of high art by transforming the photographic print into a privileged commodity, and the photographer, regardless of working context, into an autonomous *auteur* with a capacity for genius, have the effect of restoring the “aura,” to use Walter Benjamin’s term, to a mass-communications technology. At the same time, the camera hobbyist, the consumer of leisure technology, is invited to participate in a delimited and therefore illusory and pathetic creativity, in an advertising induced fantasy of self-authorship fed by power over the image machine, and through it, over its prey.

The crisis of contemporary art involves more than a lack of “unifying” meta-critical thought, nor can it be resolved by expensive “interdisciplinary” organ transplants. The problems of art are refractions of a larger cultural and ideological crisis, stemming from the declining legitimacy of the liberal capitalist worldview. Putting it bluntly, these crises are rooted in the materially dictated inequalities of advanced capitalism and will only be resolved *practically*, by the struggle for an authentic socialism.

Artists and writers who move toward an openly political cultural practice need to educate themselves out of their own professional elitism and narrowness of concern. A theoretical grasp of modernism and its pitfalls might be useful in this regard. The problem of modernist closure—of an “immanent critique” which, failing to overcome logically the paradigm within which it begins, ultimately reduces every practice to a formalism—is larger than any one intellectual discipline and yet infects them all.¹ Modernist practice is organized professionally and shielded by a bogus ideology of neutrality. (Even academic thuggeries like Dr. Milton Friedman’s overtly instrumentalist “free market” economics employ the neutrality gambit.) In political-economic terms, modernism stems from the fundamental division of “mental” and “manual” labor under advanced capitalism. The former is further specialized and accorded certain privileges, as well as a managerial relation to the latter, which is fragmented and degraded. A ideology of separation, of petty-bourgeois upward aspiration, induces the intellectual worker to view the “working class” with superiority, cynicism, contempt, and glimmers of fear. Artists, despite their romanticism and propensity for slumming, are no exception.

The ideological confusions of current art, euphemistically labeled a “healthy pluralism” by art promoters, stem from the collapsed authority of the modernist paradigm. “Pure” artistic modernism collapses because it is ultimately a self-annihilating project, narrowing the field of art’s concerns with scientific rigor, dead-ending in alternating appeals to taste, science and metaphysics. Over the past five years, a rather cynical and self-referential mannerism, partially based on Pop Art, has rolled out of this cul-de-sac. Some people call this phenomenon “postmodernism.” (Already, a so-called “political art” has been used as an end-game modernist bludgeon, as a chic vanguardism, by artists who suffer from a very real isolation from larger social issues. This would be bad enough if it were not for the fact that the art-promotional system converts everything it handles into “fashion,” while dishing out a good quantity of liberal obfuscation.) These

1. For the definition of modernism as immanent critique, see Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Arts Yearbook*, No. 4, 1961, p. 103.

ONE

Suppose we regard art as a mode of human communication, as a discourse anchored in concrete social relations, rather than as a mystified, vaporous, and ahistorical realm of purely affective expression and experience. Art, like speech, is both symbolic exchange and material practice, involving the production of both meaning and physical presence. Meaning, as an understanding of that presence, emerges from an interpretive act. Interpretation is ideologically constrained. Our readings of past culture are subject to the covert demands of the historical present. Mystified interpretation universalizes the act of reading, lifting it above history.

The meaning of an artwork ought to be regarded, then, as *contingent*, rather than as immanent, universally given, or fixed. The Kantian separation of cognitive and affective faculties, which provided the philosophical basis for Romanticism, must likewise be critically superseded. This argument, then, calls for a fundamental break with idealist esthetics, a break with the notion of genius both in its original form and in its debased neo-romantic appearance at the center of the mythology of mass culture, where "genius" assumes the trappings of a charismatic stardom.

I am not suggesting that we ignore or suppress the creative, affective, and expressive aspects of cultural activity—to do so would be to play into the hands of the ongoing technocratic obliteration of human creativity. What I am arguing is that we understand the extent to which art *redeems* a repressive social order by offering a wholly imaginary transcendence, a false harmony, to docile and isolated spectators. The cult of private experience, of the entirely affective relation to culture demanded by a consumerist economy, serves to obliterate momentarily, on weekends, knowledge of the fragmentation, boredom, and routinization of labor, knowledge of the self as a commodity.

In capitalist society, artists are represented as possessing a privileged subjectivity, gifted with an uncommon unity of self and labor. Artists are the bearers of an autonomy that is systematically and covertly denied the economically objectified mass spectator, the waged worker and the woman who works without wages in the home. Even the apparatus of mass culture itself can be bent to this elitist logic. "Artists" are the people who stare out, accusingly and seductively, from billboards and magazine advertisements. A glamorous young couple can be seen lounging in what looks like a SoHo loft; they tell us of the secret of white rum, effortlessly gleaned from Liza Minelli at an Andy Warhol party. Richard Avedon is offered to us as an almost impossible ideal: bohemian as well as his "own Guggenheim Foundation." Artist and patron coalesce in a petty-bourgeois dream fleshed-out in the realm of a self-valorizing mass culture. Further, the recent efforts to elevate



Student welders.

photographers. Treated by the vigorous new art history of photography to an expanding pantheon of independent *auteurs*, we forget that most photographers are detail workers, makers of fragmentary and indeterminate visual statements. These photographs take on a more determinate meaning as they pass through a bureaucratically organized and directed process of assembly. The picture magazine is a case in point. Even the curated fine art exhibition, such as John Szarkowski's "definitive" *Mirrors and Windows* at the Museum of Modern Art, may be another. A bureaucratized high culture needs to celebrate the independent creative spirit while functionally eroding the autonomy of the artist.

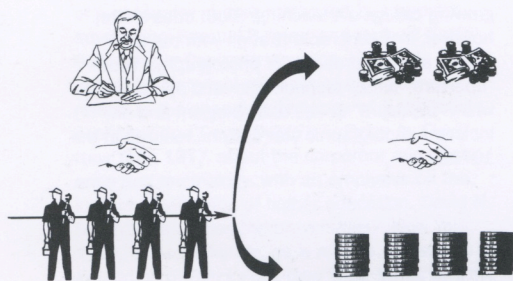
If school is a factory, art departments are industrial parks in which the creative spirit, like cosmetic shrubbery or Muzak, still "lives." Photographic education is largely directed at people who will become detail workers in one sense or another. Only the most elite art schools and university art departments regularly produce graduates who will compete for recognition as fine artists. Nonetheless, the ideology of *auteurism* dominates the teaching of the medium's history at all levels of higher education, even in the community colleges. This *auteurism* actually oscillates in and out of view, sharing prominence with its opposite, technological determinism. Students learn that photographic history is driven by technical progress, except in some cases, when history is the elevated product of especially gifted artists, who are to be admired and emulated. Very few teachers acknowledge the constraints placed on their would-be *auteurs* by a system of educational tracking based on class, race, and sex.

Thus, most of us who teach, or make art, or go to school with a desire to do these things, are forced to accept that a winner's game requires losers. One can either embrace this proposition with a social-Darwinist steeling of the nerves, or pretend that it is not true while trying to survive anyway. Otherwise we might begin to work for a method of education and a culture based on a struggle for social equality.

T W O

Between 1976 and 1979 I was employed as a part-time junior college instructor in one of the largest photography departments in the United States, teaching the history of photography to night students. Two-year "community" colleges constitute the lowest level of higher education in the United States, serving as training camps for technical, service, and lower-level administrative workers, and as "holding tanks" for high school graduates who would otherwise flood the labor market. These institutions have developed since the end of the second world war.

Most of my students worked: as technicians, as postal clerks, electronics assemblers, fast-food workers, welders, social workers, high-school teachers, and as housewives and mothers. A few retired people took courses. Many students had an amateur interest in the medium. Some night students would jokingly rate the classroom events against what they had



missed on television. A good number of the younger students entertained serious thoughts about a career in photography, although many were confused, uncertain about the path to take, knowing that a community college education was not enough. Generally, the committed photography students felt a certain vague pride, believing that the reputations their instructors claimed made this department a better one than most in two-year colleges. Since a number of faculty members exhibited locally and nationally, this suggested that perhaps the students, too, were on the right track. For the most part, though, the students were learning to become image technicians. Their art historical education was icing on a cake made of nuts and bolts. I tried to teach a different history of photography, one that called attention to the historical roots of this contradiction. *School Is a Factory* emerges from the problems I encountered in teaching.

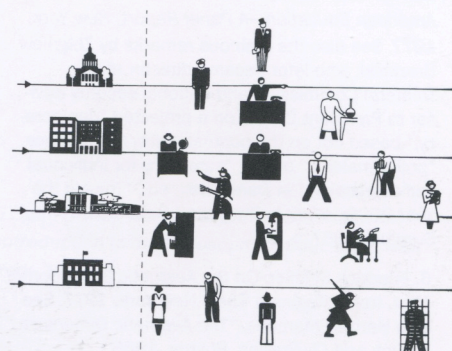
I was asked to exhibit some of my photographs in a gallery run by the students. The space intrigued me not for formal reasons, but because of its dual uses, mixing both an esthetic and a technical pedagogy, while also serving as a convenient student hang-out. The work of reputable art photographers hung on the walls, almost all of it in the fine-print tradition of photography. The gallery also served as a foyer to the student darkrooms, the spaces in which purely technical concerns prevailed. I decided that the appropriate thing to do in such a space was a kind of internal critique—a questioning, fragmentary at best—moving outward from photographic education, to community college education, to the larger political economy which motivated the educational system, and then moving back to the immediate environment in which the students were situated.

I substituted a tape for the top-40 radio that normally played in the gallery/darkroom area. The sound track provided a background of anti-Muzak, beginning with mechanically seductive disco music and ending with the flat, deadened rebelliousness of a new wave version of “Summertime Blues” recorded by the Flying Lizards (a very specific irony in the coastal regions of Orange County in southern California). The intermediary material on the tape was vocal, punctuated with the loud ticking of a darkroom timer. A monotonous monologue goes on about a “sanitary landscape,” about “factories disguised as parks,” while shifting suddenly to the authoritarian, double-binding voice of the institution itself: “Learn to earn, work, don’t work, play, don’t play. Everyone is looking at you, no one is looking at you....”

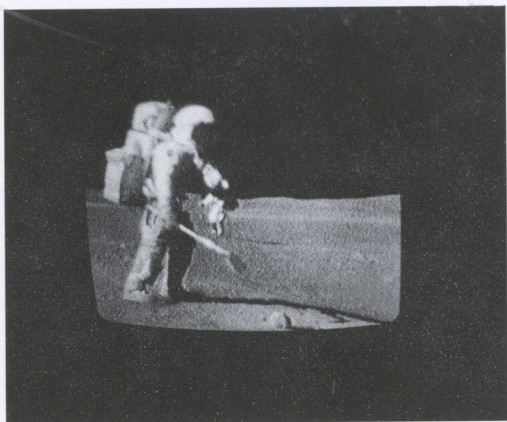
My photographs were intended to work against the typical lyricism of college catalogue photography, with its celebration of joyful encounters between individuated students and the environment, objects, instruments and agents of knowledge: manicured and shaded lawns, dissected frogs, microscopes, and gesticulating professors. So I adopted the hard flash light and the single point perspective appropriate to a rationalized, bureaucratically administered environment which is trying to pass itself off as the site of collegial pleasures and self-discovery. But it seemed important also to work against the prevailing formalism and otherworldliness of art photography, the hegemonic mannerism of a professionalized avant-garde



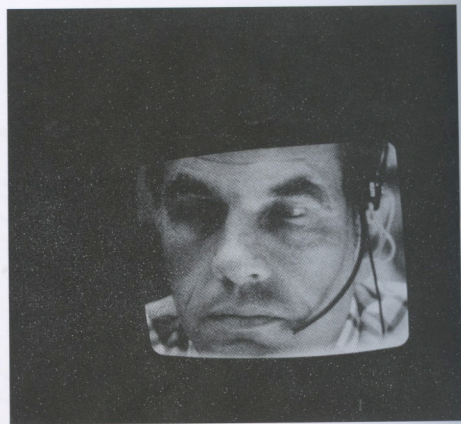
Biology student and teacher.







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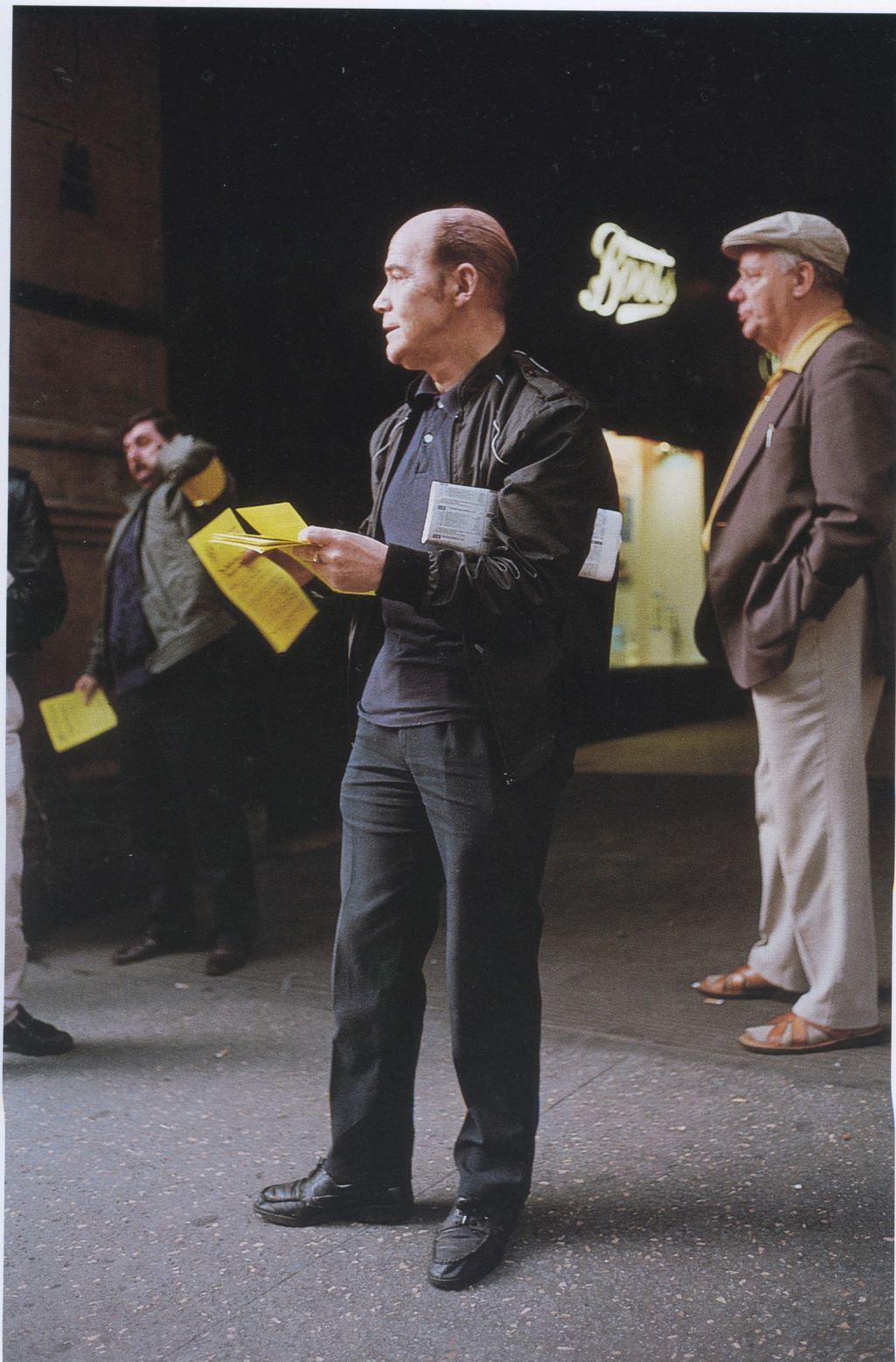


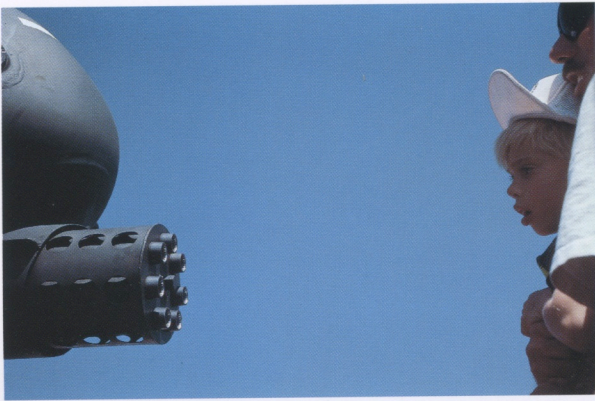
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1. This interview was conducted by email over the month of November 1998. Unless otherwise noted, all installation photographs are by Allan Sekula.

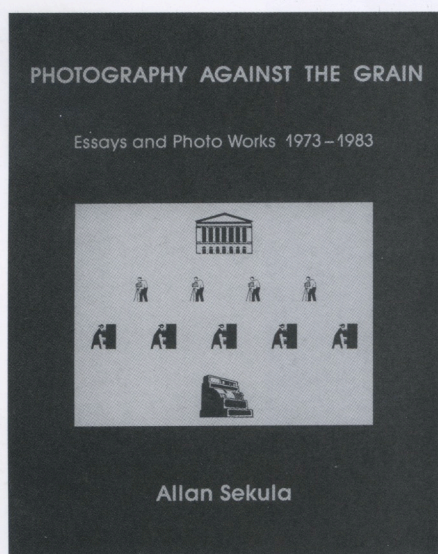


Figure 1. Front cover, *Photography against the Grain*, 1984.

INTRODUCTION

On the surface, our society looks much different than it did when Allan Sekula began writing criticism and making photographic works. In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was an identifiable counterculture, struggling, for example, to end the war in Vietnam. By contrast, today's social fabric seems both less tattered and more opaque. We can no longer identify a specific "enemy" as a tangible force that can be grasped or pictured, and perhaps it is even harder now to recognize our own complicity.

What drew me to Allan Sekula's work in the first place was his ability to explore the social matrix from the top down, the bottom up, the inside out. His words and pictures begin to unravel conceptually the knots that bind us to family life, the workplace, educational institutions, and the culture industry. In doing this, his work challenges traditions of documentary photography and questions still-powerful romantic notions of the artist's role in society.¹

Debra Risberg

DEBRA RISBERG: You gained prominence as both artist and critic with your 1984 book *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983*, published by the Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. From the beginning the book was hard to find, and it has been out of print now for over ten years. My experience was probably like that of a lot of people: encountering your work in graduate school—through bootleg photocopies—which cast a dark shadow over the prevailing philosophy of art photography. How is this exhibition and book a revival of that earlier project, and how is it different? Can you explain your title, *Dismal Science*? I know you've borrowed it from Thomas Carlyle, the nineteenth century Scottish essayist and historian. You've used the same title twice in your work on the maritime world, *Fish Story* (1995), both for a long essay and for a sequence of slides that takes us to the abandoned waterfronts of Glasgow, but how does it now provide a unified context for your projects over the last twenty-five years?

ALLAN SEKULA: I'll start with "dismal science." Carlyle coined the phrase, his sardonic label for political economy, in a bizarre semi-satirical essay with an evil title: "The Nigger Question" (1849). This purported to be the text of an anonymous rant criticizing both the statistical blindness of proponents of *laissez-faire* capitalism and the naive philanthropy of advocates of slave emancipation. I say "semi-satirical" because these were, in large measure, Carlyle's views at the time. He was afraid that unregulated

emancipation would produce an impoverished "Black Ireland" in the West Indies.

Carlyle is unread and virtually unreadable today, even though he invented terminology—"industrialism," "cash nexus," "dismal science,"—that pervades the language of economic life. Indeed, the absorption of these terms into economic discourse obscures the critical character of their first usage. As Raymond Williams has argued, Carlyle was really the first romantic anti-capitalist, and certainly the first to develop a sustained critique of industrial society.

My mother read Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* along with *Moby-Dick* as an English major at a small Lutheran college in western Pennsylvania in 1941. Her generation is probably the last with this list of undergraduate readings. And yet if we read Carlyle's essay "Chartism" (1839), written in the year of photography's public emergence, there is much that seems, in meaning if not in style, strikingly contemporary. When I wrote the text for the Glasgow slide sequence, and spoke of capital as a "protean force, pushing people this way and that and leaving them to stew or rot or boil over," I was echoing Carlyle. His remarks on the "hurling asunder" of "whole multitudes of workmen" could be recommended cautionary reading for the more enthusiastic postmodern celebrants of nomadism and diaspora.

What interested me in particular about "dismal science" is that Carlyle explicitly defined it as the negative of poetry, the "gay science." This opposition—economics vs. poetry—seems to me to replicate the institutional contradictions of photography, perpetually stranded as it is between the "necessity" of documentation and the "freedom" of art.

DEBRA RISBERG: So "Dismal Science" refers also to the "grey area" occupied by documentary within the world of fine art photography? Documentary photographers may set themselves apart from photojournalists by assuming the freedom of the fine arts, but ultimately they must struggle with issues of accountability.

ALLAN SEKULA: One reason social documentary is such a necessary bad object for contemporary art is because it seems implicitly or explicitly to challenge the prevailing dogma of art's fundamental "irresponsibility." Consider the way in which the very existence of the economic is being conjured away in contemporary art criticism. In his book *Air Guitar*, critic Dave Hickey repeatedly reminds his readers of his nitty-gritty experience as an art dealer while offering up the reassuring homily that "art and money never touch." This is a pastoral fantasy, since it reduces the complexity of art-world interactions to barter exchange between connoisseurs. In this sort of intellectual environment, simply to insist that social or economic life can or should in any way be represented now seems like an ethical reproach, as welcome as dragging in a dead cat.

DEBRA RISBERG: Perhaps that's one aspect of what makes your work



Figure 2. Weekly World News, 2 September 1998.

UNTITLED SLIDE SEQUENCE, 1972

75 black and white 35mm transparencies (three duplicate sets of 25) projected at 13 second intervals, total duration 17 minutes 20 seconds. Projection size: minimum 4 x 6 feet, maximum 6 x 9 feet. Caption: dye-cut transfer text applied to external wall of projection room. Edition of 10. Collection of the artist.

AEROSPACE FOLKTALES, 1973

51 black and white photographs in 23 frames, 22 x 28.5 inches each. 3 red canvas director's chairs. 3 audiocassette players and speakers. 3 simultaneous, unsynchronized audiotape recordings: duration 17 minutes, 21 minutes, and 23 minutes. Edition of 2. Collection of the artist.

MEDITATIONS ON A TRIPTYCH, 1973/1978

3 color photographs in single frame, 26 x 59 inches. Text booklet. Reading table and chair. Unique original produced 1973/78, in private collection. Exhibition version in edition of 3, produced 1996. Collection of the artist.

SCHOOL IS A FACTORY, 1978/80

2 graphics panels excerpted from larger work: black and white photographic prints mounted on aluminum, 40 x 28 inches each. Collection of the artist.

SKETCH FOR A GEOGRAPHY LESSON, 1983

9 color photographs at 11 x 14 inches each, 2 black and white photographs at 20 x 24 inches each, 6 text pages at 11 x 8.5 inches each, with tipped-in color photocopies. Five frames, various dimensions. Edition of 2. Collection of the artist.

DISMAL SCIENCE, 1989/92

80 color 35mm transparencies projected at 13 second intervals, total duration 17 minutes 20 seconds. Projection size: minimum 4 x 6 feet, maximum 6 x 9 feet. Text booklet, reading booth, overhead reading light and chair. Graphic panel with map, black and white photographic print mounted on aluminum, 40 x 28 inches, installed outside projection room. Edition of 10. Collection of the artist.

WAR WITHOUT BODIES, 1991/96

9 color photographs mounted on aluminum and framed at 20 x 30 inches each, dye-cut text applied to wall, 2 copies of text booklet with illustrated covers, US Army field bed. Edition of 3. Collection of the artist.

At University Galleries, Illinois State University and at the Palmer Museum, Pennsylvania State University, the exhibition also included *Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes*, 1986, lent by the Vancouver Art Gallery. This work is fully documented in a book of the same title, published in 1997 by MIT Press and the Vancouver Art Gallery.

At the Nederlands Foto Instituut and at the Kunstverein München, the exhibition also included *Dead Letter Office*, 1997. This work is documented in a book of the same title, published 1997 by the Nederlands Foto Instituut.

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EXHIBITION ITINERARY

October 8 - November 17, 1996
University Galleries, Illinois State University
Normal, Illinois

January 14 - March 16, 1997
Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania

August 2 - September 7, 1997
daadgalerie
Berlin, Germany

October 16 - November 30, 1997
Cameracont
London, England

December 13, 1997 - January 25, 1998
Nederlands Foto Instituut
Rotterdam, Netherlands

February 4 - March 29, 1998
Kunstverein München
Munich, Germany

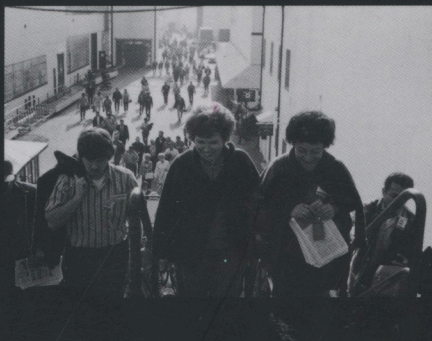
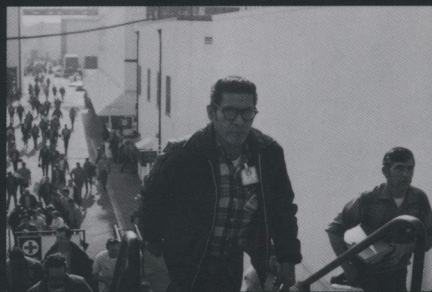
May 27 - July 7, 1998
John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University of Technology
Perth, Australia

October 9 - November 29, 1998
Atlanta College of Art Gallery
Atlanta, Georgia

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