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***The Forgotten Space***  
**An Essay Film by Allan Sekula and Noël Burch**  
**January 21 to March 15, 2015**

*Midstream.*  
*A muddy estuary near a port.*  
*Forgotten space, out of sight, out of mind.*  
*Upstream: the hinterland, a greedy continent.*  
*Downstream: other ports, great harbour cities...*  
*... oceans.*  
*100,000 invisible ships.*  
*One and a half million invisible seafarers...*  
*... binding the world together through trade.*

So begins *The Forgotten Space*, an essay film which won the Special Orizzonti Jury Prize at the 2010 *Venice Film Festival*, and which opens with the voice and words of Allan Sekula. *The Forgotten Space* is the sea, that immense space through which nearly ninety percent of the world's cargo now passes. At the heart of this reality is the container, invented in the 1950s, which has become the most important means of maritime transportation in the decades since then. *The Forgotten Space* reveals the economic, ecological and social impact of this use of containers.

Most of us have a romantic vision of the seas and oceans, with their boundless horizons, and are intrigued by these spaces. [Allan Sekula](#) and [Noël Burch](#) have an entirely different view of the sea: for them, it is the forgotten space of our modernity. "Ocean shipping," says Sekula, "was the first industry to be globalized. ... Nowhere else is the disorientation, violence and alienation of contemporary capitalism more manifest. Improvement in cargo logistics has now taken on world historic importance. The cargo container, a standardized metal box, capable of being quickly transferred from ship to highway lorry to railroad train, has radically transformed the space and time of port cities and ocean passages."<sup>1</sup>

*The Forgotten Space* follows the ships' movements across the seas and introduces us to those whom this efficient system has marginalized, displaced or isolated: exploited workers, the long-term unemployed. The film takes us to three of the largest port cities in the world—Rotterdam, Los Angeles and Hong Kong—and the fading port of Bilbao, where Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum, built on the site of the old shipyards, is offering a new tourism future to the capital of one of the world's oldest seafaring cultures.

*If there's a building that refuses to be a box, this is it. ...  
... The Guggenheim is a building which has captured  
the imagination of the city and, above all, that of the outside world.*

Photographer, writer, filmmaker and art theorist, Allan Sekula was born in 1951 in Erie, Pennsylvania; he died in August 2013 in Los Angeles, where he had lived and taught at the California Institute of the Arts for some thirty years. As a young science student at the University of San Diego, he took classes with Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse and conceptual artist John Baldessari. His education, informed by Marxist thought and Duchamp, led him toward social analysis in a critical approach to the mechanisms of capitalism. His practice in the early

1970s was based on staging performances in tension with the system. Like many other artists, he used photography to document his actions. Soon, however, he became more interested in the photographic document than in the action of performance itself.

Sekula then began to develop a theory and history of photography. In one of his earliest writings, he probed the discursive split between art and documentary: "I wanted to explore the myth of Alfred Stieglitz against the myth of Lewis Hine. ... I was trying to defend a critical social realism."<sup>2</sup> "For Sekula, a 'critical representational art that points openly to ... possibilities of social transformation' remains the only art worthy of an oppositional politics, as well as the necessary counter to a situation in which 'the old myth that photographs tell the truth has been replaced by the myth that they lie.'<sup>3</sup> Sekula's theoretical essays made a major contribution to photographic culture. He published extensively, including *Photography Against the Grain*, 1984; *Fish Story*, 1995; *Dismal Science*, 1999; *Performance under Working Conditions*, 2003; *Titanic's Wake*, 2003; and *Polonia and Other Fables*, 2009.

*Fish Story*, a wide-ranging investigation of the global maritime world conducted from 1989 to 1995, forms the basis of the essay film *The Forgotten Space*. Originally conceived as an exhibition, *Fish Story* is made up of photographs and texts, as well as a book. It was initially shown, in part, at the *Rotterdam Foto Biennial* in 1992. But it was the exhibition at the 1993 *Whitney Biennial* in New York that focused international attention<sup>4</sup> on this sustained exploration of the maritime world, which expressed a shift from a postmodern culture to a globalization of the contemporary maritime economy. A number of museums, beginning with the Witte de With in Rotterdam, Moderna Museet in Stockholm and Tramway in Glasgow, devoted exhibitions to this vast investigative effort, in which Sekula examines and reveals the social impact of this globalization. In 2002, 105 photographs and 26 texts were presented at *Documenta 11* in Cassel.

*The Forgotten Space*, a synthesis of this work, was co-directed with fellow American Noël Burch. Born in San Francisco in 1932, Burch has lived and worked in France since 1951, and has translated some of Sekula's texts into French. Together, in 1984, they made the video *Reagan Tape*. Burch is known for his numerous theoretical writings on film, compiled in books such as *Praxis du cinéma*, 1969, published in English as *The Theory of Film Practice* in 1973; *La lucarne de l'infini*, 1971; *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*, 1979; and *Life to Those Shadows*,

with Ben Brewster, 1990. In the 1960s, he proposed the concept of essay film, in contrast to the documentary. As he put it, “an essay film was about getting across ideas ... about inventing complex forms, structured ambiguities, about getting away from a certain linearity. ... Essential to the notion was the admixture of materials and stylistic approaches, fictional footage mingling with *cinéma-vérité*, library shots, hidden-camera work, etc.”<sup>5</sup>

And that is precisely how Allan Sekula and Noël Burch put together *The Forgotten Space*, a remarkable panoramic portrait of a massive historic change, conjuring up one and a half million invisible seafarers.

*The last gift to remain safely in Pandora's box ...  
... after evils have been unleashed upon the world ...  
... is hope.*

## **LOUISE SIMARD**

Head of Multimedia

1. Allan Sekula and Noël Burch, “Notes on The Forgotten Space,” part two: “Notes for a Film,” 2010, [www.theforgottenspace.net/static/notes.html](http://www.theforgottenspace.net/static/notes.html)
2. Allan Sekula, in an interview with Sukhdev Sandhu, *The Guardian* (April 20, 2012), [www.theforgottenspace.net/static/reviews.html](http://www.theforgottenspace.net/static/reviews.html)
3. Bill Roberts, “Production in View: Allan Sekula’s Fish Story and the Thawing of Postmodernism,” *Tate Papers* 18 (October 23, 2012), [www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/production-view-allan-sekulas-fish-story-and-thawing-postmodernism](http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/production-view-allan-sekulas-fish-story-and-thawing-postmodernism) [n.p., cf. note 43 in the published article], citing Allan Sekula, “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation),” in Debra Risberg, ed., *Allan Sekula/Dismal Science: Photo Works 1972-1996*, exhibition catalogue (Chicago: University Galleries, Illinois State University, 1999).
4. Roberts, *ibid.*
5. Noël Burch, “Essay Film,” part one of the text cited in Note 1.

### *The Forgotten Space*

Directed by Allan Sekula and Noël Burch

Netherlands, 2010

English, Dutch, Spanish, Korean, Bahasa Indonesia, Chinese

Subtitles: English, Italian, Dutch, German

Narration: Allan Sekula

Running time: 112 min

Courtesy Icarus Films