

## Sekula, Allan, **Reading an Archive:** photography between labour and capital

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Using as his example the archive of photographer Leslie Shedden in the industrial and mining area of Cape Breton between 1948 and 1968, Allan Sekula gives as the aim of his paper: "to try to understand something of the relationship between photographic culture and economic life".

Posing several important questions (eg: "How does photography serve to legitimate and normalise existing power relationships? How does it serve as the voice of authority, while simultaneously claiming to constitute a token of exchange between equal partners? .... How is historical and social memory preserved, transformed, restricted and obliterated by photographs? .....) he proceeds to argue that photographic meaning depends on context.

"photographs in themselves, are fragmentary and incomplete utterances". Meaning is always directed by layout, captions, text, and site and mode of presentation." (p.184)

A photographic image is therefore never a neutral reproduction of reality.

In the archive, meaning according to Sekula, is suspended, or rather is liable to change over time. What is an item of news today will be seen as a historical document at a future time. More importantly, from his decidedly political point of view, he points to the fact that archives themselves are not neutral: "they embody the power inherent in accumulation, collection, and hoarding as well as that power inherent in the command of the lexicon and rules of a language." (p. 184)

The archive, then, is fundamentally an instrument of capitalism - flowing out of the bourgeois culture of acquisition, bureaucratically organised - foreign to the functioning of the working class.

He illustrates this by showing us the different uses of Shedden's photography. His major client, the coal mining company, commissioned photographs to be used in the annual reports and were meant to help generate more capital for the company, whereas family photographs would be carried in wallets or be framed and hung in working class homes and carry predominantly emotional value.

By assembling these very different kinds of pictures from the archive of the photographer in a book both the - mutually exclusive - underlying financial and the emotional reasons for having these photographs taken, get ignored. The "new" meaning created by the archive, appears to be either historical or aesthetic.

Sekula asserts that archives are never neutral, but often blur the fact that the photographs they contain are an interpretation rather than a representation of reality.

One of the author's important arguments concerns the "need to understand how photography works within everyday life in advanced industrial societies: the problem is one of materialist cultural history rather than art history. .... Leslie Shedden's photographs would seem to allow for an exemplary insight into the diverse and contradictory ways in which photography affects the lives of working people" (p. 191)

Sekula makes us aware that there is a political dimension to photography which is rarely addressed. Even if we allow for the fact that the text was written over 30 years ago and the fact that the meaning of a photograph is dependent on the context in which it is shown might be far more widely accepted nowadays, being made aware that in the interpretation of photography, and of archives in particular, are helpful and the kind of searching political questions Sekula poses are not to be disregarded.

Sekula's political argumentation links to ethical questions as well as class issues. Photographs of disadvantaged people, who have no possibility to resist having their photograph taken and published (poor people in third world contexts, disabled people, demented people etc.) abound in documentary photography, in photojournalism and in art photography.

Sekula's left wing angle to the discussion of photography has made me aware of a kind of naïveté with which I have so far regarded photography. Challenging the disregarding of political issues within seemingly "innocent" archives -( I am thinking of the collection of photographs that constitute Andrea Garbald's posthumously created archive) is something I want to become aware of, as a necessary perspective rather than just another interesting way to discuss photographic practice.