Documentation as Dialogue: Allan Sekula

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Allan Sekula is known as a docu-
mentary artist and photographer,
but also as one of the most inspiring
critics of historical and contemporary
photography. In 1975, he published
his well-known essay "On the Inven-
tion of Photographic Meaning" in
Artforum. The essay was reprinted
in 1984, in *Photography Against the
Grain*, edited by Robert Wilkie und
Benjamin Buchloh. While with the
original publication the author
distinguished himself as a leading
intellectual of historically grounded,
critical reflection of photography, the
book was indeed "against the grain."
A first part—a series of theoretical
and historical texts—is followed by
a series of socially engaged photo
documentations, a photo book.

The text compares two photographs
devoted to emigration from Europe to
the United States—a quintessentially
modernist photograph, Alfred Stieg-
litz's *The Steerage* (1907) is contrasted
with a photograph by Lewis Hine, a
paradigm of socially engaged docu-
mentation. Sekula demonstrates that
by basing an analysis on stylistic qual-
ities, or on narrative dramaturgy, his
judgment remained arbitrary. He could
appraise the pictures only after having
a look at contexts such as the strate-
gic goals of the journals in which the
photographs were published: primarily
artistic in the case of Stieglitz, primar-
ily social activist in the case of Hine.

The essay identifies dialogue as
a central, ethical-political characteris-
tic of documentary photography,
according to Sekula. However, dialogue
is made a keyword only in 1984, in the
"Introduction" to *Photography Against
the Grain*. In a meta-reading of his
earlier texts, the artist realizes that
socially engaged art has to be produced

from a perspective of participation. He made this point only after having read a book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* written in 1927–28 (and published in English in London in 1973) by the linguist Valentin Voloshinov who had been a member of Mikhail Bakhtin's circle in St. Petersburg in the nineteen-twenties. Voloshinov inquires into the means by which another person's discourse can be integrated into a speaker's own statements—from quotation to indirect discourse and other types of reported speech. He presents participation and dialogue by no means as idyllic ideas based on fictions of equality, but as strategies to grant the other a place within one's own speech (or imagination).

In 1976, Sekula dismisses the idea that photography is a "natural" medium of representation, totally *transparent* (in Louis Marin's sense) toward its subject, regardless of the "discourse" it is or was part of. To understand a discourse instead of merely acting within it, Sekula thought that it had to be envisioned from the *outside*. In 1984, he turned away from this structuralist approach. Now he is convinced that documenting social life means that the photographer and the persons he shows are always involved in a common situation. Since this turn, he aims at retrieving the dialogical aspect of the medium instead of objectifying or aestheticizing "life worlds." In modern sociological terms: a praxeological observation of "fields" of action or impact now supersedes any attempt at objectively reconstructing situations as thoroughly transparent systems or subsystems. As a critic, Sekula bases his judgment on how a photographic oeuvre integrates material such as text to refer to complex social experience, and on its dialogical qualities, on how it allows for the people represented to stage themselves instead of merely being staged. While Martha Rosler stands for these qualities, he dares to criticize Diane Arbus, universally acclaimed after her suicide in 1971, for having projected her own psychic torment onto the people she photographed.

Sekula's work as a photo artist is linked to his criticism. His first series, reprinted in *Photography Against the Grain*, is devoted to his own middle-class family; to the struggle for his parents' social survival seen as an "art." "This art here is about other people's art," he once stated, describing his endeavor. Having initiated his dialogical work by disclosing his own offspring and habitus, he would continue it after the late eighties by focusing on the objectified constraints of the global circulation of goods— symbolized by the container—and confronting it with people speaking of their lives within and along global circuits. In a period marked by a constraint to aestheticize and market the self (as the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz sees it), "art about other people's art" remains a necessary utopia.

On the Invention of Photographic Meaning

Allan Sekula

excerpted, from *Artforum*, January 1975

I

The meaning of a photograph, like that of any other entity, is inevitably subject to cultural definition. The task here is to define and engage critically something we might call the "photographic discourse." A discourse can be defined as an arena of information exchange, that is, as a system of relations between parties engaged in communicative activity. In a very important sense, the notion of discourse is a notion of limits. That is, the overall discourse relation could be regarded as a limiting function, one that establishes a bounded arena of shared expectations as to meaning. It is this limiting function that determines the very possibility of meaning. To raise the issue of limits, of the closure effected from within any given discourse situation, is to situate oneself *outside*, in a fundamentally metacritical relation to the criticism sanctioned by the logic of the discourse....

All communication is, to a greater or lesser extent, tendentious; all messages are manifestations of interest.... With this notion of tendentiousness in mind, we can speak of a message as an embodiment of an argument. In other words, we can speak of a rhetorical function. A discourse, then, can be defined in rather formal terms as the set of relations governing the rhetoric of related utterances. The discourse is, in the most general sense, the context of the utterance, the conditions that constrain and support its meaning, that determine its semantic target.

This general definition implies, of course, that a photograph is an utterance of some sort, that it carries, or is, a message. However, the definition also implies that the photograph is an "incomplete" utterance, a message that depends on some external matrix of conditions and presuppositions for its readability. That is, the meaning of any photographic message is necessarily context determined. We might formulate this position as follows: a photograph communicates by means of its association with some hidden, or implicit text; it is this text, a system of hidden linguistic propositions, that carries the photograph into the domain of readability....

Photographic "literacy" is learned. And yet, in the real world, the image itself appears "natural" and appropriate, appears to manifest an illusory independence from the matrix of suppositions that determines its readability.... Implicit in this argument is the quasi-formalist notion that the

photograph derives its semantic properties from conditions that reside within the image itself. But if we accept the fundamental premise that information is the outcome of a culturally determined relationship, then we can no longer ascribe an intrinsic universal meaning to the photographic image.

But this particularly obstinate bit of bourgeois folklore—the claim for the intrinsic significance of the photograph—lies at the center of the established myth of photographic truth. Put simply, the photograph is seen as a re-presentation of nature itself, as an unmediated copy of the real world. The medium itself is considered transparent....

The photograph is imagined to have a primitive core of meaning, devoid of all cultural determination. It is this uninvested analogue that Roland Barthes refers to as the denotative function of the photograph. He distinguishes a second level of invested, culturally determined meaning, a level of connotation. In the real world no such separation is possible. Any meaningful encounter with a photograph must necessarily occur at the level of connotation. The power of this folklore of pure denotation is considerable. It elevates the photograph to the legal status of document and testimonial. It generates a mythic aura of neutrality around the image.... Every photographic image is a sign, above all, of someone's investment in the sending of a message. Every photographic message is characterized by a tendentious rhetoric. At the same time, the most generalized terms of the photographic discourse constitute a denial of the rhetorical function and a validation of the "truth value" of the myriad propositions made within the system. As we have seen, and shall see again, the most general terms of the discourse are a kind of disclaimer, an assertion of neutrality; in short, the overall function of photographic discourse is to render itself transparent. But however the discourse may deny and obscure its own terms, it cannot escape them.

The problem at hand is one of *sign emergence*; only by developing a historical understanding of the emergence of photographic sign systems can we apprehend the truly *conventional* nature of photographic communication. We need a historically grounded sociology of the image, both in the valorized realm of high art and in the culture at large. What follows is an attempt to define, in historical terms, the relationship between photography and high art....

II

I would like to consider two photographs, one made by Lewis Hine in 1905, the other by Alfred Stieglitz in 1907. The Hine photo has been captioned *Immigrants going down gangplank, New York*; the Stieglitz photo

is titled *The Steerage*. I am going to assume a naive relation to these two photos, forgetting for the moment the monumental reputation of the Stieglitz.... Viewed together, the two photographs seem to occupy a rather narrow iconographic terrain. Gangplanks and immigrants in middle-European dress figure significantly in both. In the Hine photo, a gangplank extends horizontally across the frame, angling outward, toward the camera. A man, almost a silhouette, appears ready to step up onto the gangplank. He carries a bundle; his body is bounded by the left edge of the photo. Two women precede the man across the gangplank. Both are dressed in long skirts; the woman on the right, who is in the lead, carries a large suitcase. Given this information, it would be some-what difficult to identify either the gangplank or the immigrant status of the three figures without the aid of the legend. In the Stieglitz photo, a gangplank, broken by the left border, extends across an open hold and intersects an upper deck. Both this upper deck and the one below are crowded with people: women in shawls, Slavic-looking women in black scarves holding babies, men in collarless shirts and worker's caps. Some of the people are sitting, some appear to be engaged in conversation. One man on the upper deck attracts my eye, perhaps because his boater hat is a highly reflective ellipse in a shadowy area, or perhaps because his hat seems atypical in this milieu. The overall impression is one of a crowded and impoverished seagoing domesticity. There is no need even to attempt a "comprehensive" reading at this level. Although rather deadpan, this is hardly an innocent reading of the two photographs. I have constructed a scenario within which both images appear to occupy one end of a discourse situation in common, as though they were stills from the same movie, a documentary on immigration perhaps. But suppose I asserted the autonomy of each image instead. For the moment, I decide that both images are art and that a meaningful engagement with the two photographs will result in their placement, relative to each other, on some scale of "quality." Clearly, such a decision forces an investment in some theory of "quality photography;" already the possibility of any-thing approaching a neutral reading seems to have vanished.

Undeterred, I decide that quality in photography is a question of design, that the photograph is a figurative arrangement of tones in a two-dimensional, bounded field. I find the Hine attractive (or unat-tractive) in its mindless straightforwardness, in the casual and repetitive disposition of figures across the frame, in the suggestion of a single vector. And I find the Stieglitz attractive (or unattractive) for its complex array of converging and diverging lines, as though it were a profound attempt at something that looked like Cubism. On the other hand,

Lewis Hine, *Immigrants going down gangplank, New York*, 1905

suppose I decide that quality in photographic art resides in the capacity for narrative. On what grounds do I establish a judgment of narrative quality in relation to these two artifacts, the Hine and the Stieglitz? I like/dislike, am moved/unmoved by the absolute banality of the event suggested by the Hine; I like/ dislike, am moved/unmoved by the suggestion of epic squalor in the Stieglitz. The problem I am confronted with is that every move I could possibly make within these reading systems devolves almost immediately into a literary invention with a trivial relation to the artifacts at hand. The image is appropriated as the object of a secondary artwork, a literary artwork with the illusory status of "criticism." Again, we find ourselves in the middle of a discourse situation that refuses to acknowledge its boundaries; photographs appear as messages in the void of nature. We are forced, finally, to acknowledge what Barthes calls the "polysemic" character of the photographic image, the existence of a "floating chain of significance, underlying the signifier." In other words, the photograph, as it stands alone, presents merely the *possibility* of meaning. Only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic outcome. Any given photograph is conceivably open to appropriation by a range of "texts," each new discourse situation generating its own set of messages....

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Through *Camera Work* Stieglitz established a genre where there had been none; the magazine outlined the terms under which photography could be considered art, and stands as an implicit text, as scripture, behind every photograph that aspires to the status of high art. *Camera Work* treated the photograph as a central object of the discourse, while inventing, more thoroughly than any other source, the myth of the semantic autonomy of the photographic image. In this sense, *Camera Work* necessarily denied its own intrinsic role, as text, in the valorization of the photograph....

In 1942, a portion of Stieglitz's memoirs was published in Dorothy Norman's journal *Twice-A-Year*, including a short text called "How The Steerage Happened":

> Early in June, 1907, my small family and I sailed for Europe. My Wife insisted upon going on the "Kaiser Wilhelm II"—the fashionable ship of the North German Lloyd at the time.... How I hated the atmosphere of the first class on the ship. One couldn't escape the nouveaux riches....
>
> On the third day I finally couldn't stand it any longer: I had to get away from that company. I went as far forward on deck as I could....

Alfred Stieglitz,
The Steerage, 1907

As I came to the end of the deck I stood alone, looking down. There were men and women and children on the lower deck of the steerage. There was a narrow stairway leading up to the upper deck of the steerage, a small deck right at the bow of the steamer.

To the left was an inclining funnel and from the upper steerage deck there was fastened a gangway bridge which was glistening in its freshly painted state. It was rather long, white, and during the trip remained untouched by anyone.

On the upper deck, looking over the railing, there was a young man with a straw hat. The shape of the hat was round. He was watching the men and women and children on the lower steerage deck. Only men were on the upper deck. The whole scene fascinated me. I longed to escape from my surroundings and join these people....

I saw shapes related to each other. I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that of the feeling I had about life. And as I was deciding, should I try to put down this seemingly new vision that held me—people, the common people, the feeling of ship and ocean and sky and the feeling of release that I was away from the mob called the rich—Rembrandt came into my mind and I wondered would he have felt as I was feeling....

I had but one plate holder with one unexposed plate. Would I get what I saw, what I felt? Finally, I released the shutter: My heart thumping. I had never heard my heart thump before. Had I gotten my picture? I knew if I had, another milestone in photography would have been reached, related to the milestone of my "Car Horses" made in 1892, and my "Hand of Man" made in 1902, which had opened up a new era of photography, of seeing. In a sense it would go beyond them, *for here would be a picture based on related shapes and on the deepest human feeling, a step in my own evolution, a spontaneous discovery.*

I took my camera to my stateroom and as I returned to my steamer chair my wife said, "I had sent a steward to look for you...." I told her where I had been.

She said, "you speak as you were far away in a distant world," and I said I was.

"How you seem to hate these people in the first class." No, I didn't hate them, but I merely felt completely out of place.

As I see it, this text is pure symbolist autobiography.... An ideological division is made; Stieglitz proposes two worlds: a world that entraps and a world that liberates. The first world is populated by his wife and the nouveaux-riches, the second by "the common people." The photograph

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is taken at the intersection of the two worlds, looking out, as it were. The gangplank stands as a barrier between Stieglitz and the scene. The photographer marks a young man in a straw hat as a spectator, suggesting this figure as an embodiment of Stieglitz as Subject. The possibility of escape resides in a mystical identification with the Other: "I longed to escape from my surroundings and join these people." ... the final Symbolist hideout is in the Imagination, and in the fetishized products of the Imagination. Stieglitz comes back to his wife with a glass negative from the other world. For Stieglitz, *The Steerage* is a highly valued illustration of this autobiography. More than an illustration, it is an embodiment; that is, the photograph is imagined to contain the autobiography. The photograph is invested with a complex metonymic power, a power that transcends the perceptual and passes into the realm of affect. The photograph is believed to encode the totality of an experience, to stand as a phenomenological equivalent of Stieglitz-being-in-that-place. And yet this metonymy is so attenuated that it passes into metaphor. That is to say, Stieglitz's reductivist compulsion is so extreme, his faith in the power of the image so intense, that he denies the iconic level of the image and makes his claim for meaning at the level of abstraction. Instead of the possible metonymic equation: common people = my

Lewis Hine, *Neil Gallagher*, New York, 1909

alienation, we have the reduced, metaphorical equation: shapes = my alienation. Finally, by a process of semantic diffusion we are left with the trivial and absurd assertion: shapes = feelings....

Hine stands clearly outside the discourse situation represented by *Camera Work*.... While *The Steerage* is denied any social meaning from *within*, that is, is enveloped in a reductivist and mystical intentionality from the beginning, the Hine photograph can only be appropriated or "lifted" into such an arena of denial. The original discourse situation around Hine is hardly esthetic, but political. In other words, the Hine discourse displays a manifest politics and only an implicit esthetics, while the Stieglitz discourse displays a manifest esthetics and only an implicit politics....

A photograph like *Immigrants going down gangplank* is embedded in a complex political argument about the influx of aliens, cheap labor, ghetto housing and sanitation, the teaching of English, and so on ... characteristic of liberal reform.... *Neil Gallagher* is standing next to the steps of what looks like an office building. His right hand rests on a concrete pedestal, his left leans on the crutch that supports the stump of his left leg. About fifteen, he wears a suit, a cap and a tie. He confronts the camera directly from the center of the frame. Now I would argue that this photograph and its caption have the status of legal document. The photograph and text are submitted as evidence in an attempt to effect legislation. The caption anchors the image, giving it an empirical validity, marking the abuse in its specificity. At the same time, *Neil Gallagher* stands as a metonymic representation of a class of victimized child laborers. But the photograph has another level of meaning, a secondary connotation. *Neil Gallagher* is named in the caption, granted something more than a mere statistical anonymity, more than the status of "injured child." Hine was capable of photographing child workers as adults, which may be one of the mysteries of his style of interaction with his subject, or it may be that these laborers do not often display "childish" characteristics. The squareness with which Gallagher takes his stance, both on the street and in the frame, suggests a triumph over his status as victim. And yet the overall context is reform; in a political sense, everyone of Hine's subjects is restored to the role of victim. What is connoted finally on this secondary level is "the dignity of the oppressed." Neil Gallagher, then, functions as two metonymic levels. The legend functions at both levels, is both an assertion of legal fact and a dispensation of dignity to the person represented. Once anchored by the caption, the photograph itself stands, in its typicality, for a legally verifiable class of injuries and for the "humanity" of a class of wage laborers. What I am suggesting is

that we can separate a level of *report*, of empirically grounded rhetoric, and a level of "spiritual" rhetoric.

Introduction

Allan Sekula

from *Photography Against the Grain*, 1984

I
This is a book about photography. This is also a book of photographs, a book that speaks within and alongside and through photographs. Here is one way in which this book brushes photography against the grain: normally separated tasks—of writer and photographer, of "critic" and "visual artist"—are here allowed to coexist, perhaps uneasily, between the covers of a single volume....

What unites these tasks, what lends this book its "unitary" character as a text, is a concern with photography as a *social practice*. Thirteen years ago, when I first began making photographs with any seriousness, the medium's paramount attraction was, for me, its unavoidable social referentiality, its way of describing—albeit in enigmatic, misleading, reductive, and often superficial terms—a world of social institutions, gestures, manners, relationships. And the problematic character of this descriptive power is itself compelling, compounded by the fact that the life world that beckons is one in which the photographer is already a social actor, never a completely innocent or objective bystander. At that time photography seemed to me to afford an alternative to the overly specialized, esoteric, and self-referential discourse of late modernism, which had, to offer only one crude example, nothing much to say about the Vietnam War.

So, somewhat naively perhaps, I began to try combining words and groupings of photographs in ways that sought to incorporate and to invite a political dialogue. Such dialogue seemed possible in theatre and cinema, especially in the work of Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Luc Godard, and Peter Weiss, but more difficult to imagine for the nonliterary visual arts, which are dialogical only in the very important sense that one work might "answer" or respond to another. One attraction and challenge of photography was its dumb resistance to language, its way of suppressing in a static moment its often dialogical social origins....

I wanted to construct works from *within* concrete life situations, situations within which there was either a covert or active clash of interests and representations. Any interest I had in artifice and constructed dialogue was part of a search for a certain "realism," a realism not of appearances or social facts but of everyday experience in and against the grip of advanced capitalism. This realism sought to brush traditional realism against the grain. Against the photo-essayistic promise of "life" caught by the camera, I sought to work from within a world already replete with signs....

II

My interest in the history and theory of photography emerged from and closely paralleled problems encountered in practice. Having begun to photograph as a way out of a late modernist cul-de-sac, I also realized that photography was in the process of being assigned a new position within the late modernist system of the arts. This was enough to spark both caution and historical curiosity.

Perhaps it is significant that I began, innocently enough, by looking at published photographs, and not at museologically preserved specimens. Thus I was more quickly impressed than might otherwise have been the case by the extreme degree to which photographic meaning was dependent on context. Here was a visual art for which, unlike cinema, discontinuity and incompletion seemed fundamental, despite attempts to construct reassuring notions of organic unity and coherence at the level of the single image. Thus the problem of reception, the problem of what Walter Benjamin termed the "afterlife" of the work of art, becomes especially important for photography. And thus also the category of the author is especially fragile and subject to editorial revision.

When one encounters the photographs of Lewis Hine in the *Survey*, and those of Alfred Stieglitz in *Camera Work*, it becomes difficult to sustain the belief that their differences are primarily stylistic, for those two historically coincident journals constituted such radically different discursive contexts: one devoted to a developing politics and professionalism of social welfare and the other to a vehemently anti-utilitarian avant-garde. Could the photographs of Hine and Stieglitz be understood independently of their mode and context of address? And could either photographer be considered an "artist" independently of his affiliation with these discourses? These were the questions that I set out to answer in "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning." Beyond this, my primary aim was to sketch out the limits of a discursive field using

their works and reputations as exemplars, to examine the way in which the twentieth century discourse of photography oscillates between the need for "Hine"—the model of liberal-utilitarian realism, and a need for "Stieglitz"—the model of autonomous esthetic endeavor....

My early critical interests, then, were antagonistic to the formalist closure inherent in the American modernist project, a closure that would regard Hine and Stieglitz as authorial embodiments of stylistically opposed tendencies in photographic history. And, on a more theoretical level, while I was clearly indebted to structuralism, and particularly to Roland Barthes's early essays on photography, the isolation of an abstract language system from social language, from language use, seemed to have produced a related kind of closure, more "scientific" perhaps than that effected by modernist criticism, but closure nonetheless. Walter Benjamin's emphasis on the historical specificity of the "age of mechanical reproducibility" was an important counter to the tendency to think of photography in overly synchronic or ahistorical terms. It was impossible to think about photography without recognizing the importance of historical shifts in the meaning, function and cultural status of photographic representation. Furthermore, in 1975, I discovered the very early Marxist critique of the "abstract objectivism" of Soviet literary scholars and semiologists: V. N. Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929). The aim of M. M. Bachtin and his associates was to establish a sociology of literature based on a recognition of the "heteroglossia" of "living language," on a recognition of discourse as an arena of ideological and social difference and conflict. Voloshinov sought to supersede not only the abstract objectivism of Saussurian linguistics, but also the "individualistic subjectivism" of linguistic theories ... which stressed the individual creativity inherent in the speech act....

If we look at contemporary cultural studies in the United States, we discover a curious echo of the reverberations between Voloshinov's "two trends in the philosophy of language." On the one hand, structuralist and post-structuralist models asserts the autonomous determining force of language, its priority over human subjects. On the other hand, a more conservative and institutionally entrenched "humanist" paradigm claims to defend the autonomy of the creative subject. For those of us who are involved in photography, the polarities of this debate are quite evident, both in theory and in practice....