

CONTEMPORARY ART & PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTIONS

Allan Sekula

Shipwreck and Worker, Istanbul

1998–2000

Silver dye bleach print (Cibachrome)

34 × 50 in. (86.4 × 127 cm)

Museum purchase, gift of Michael A. Singer

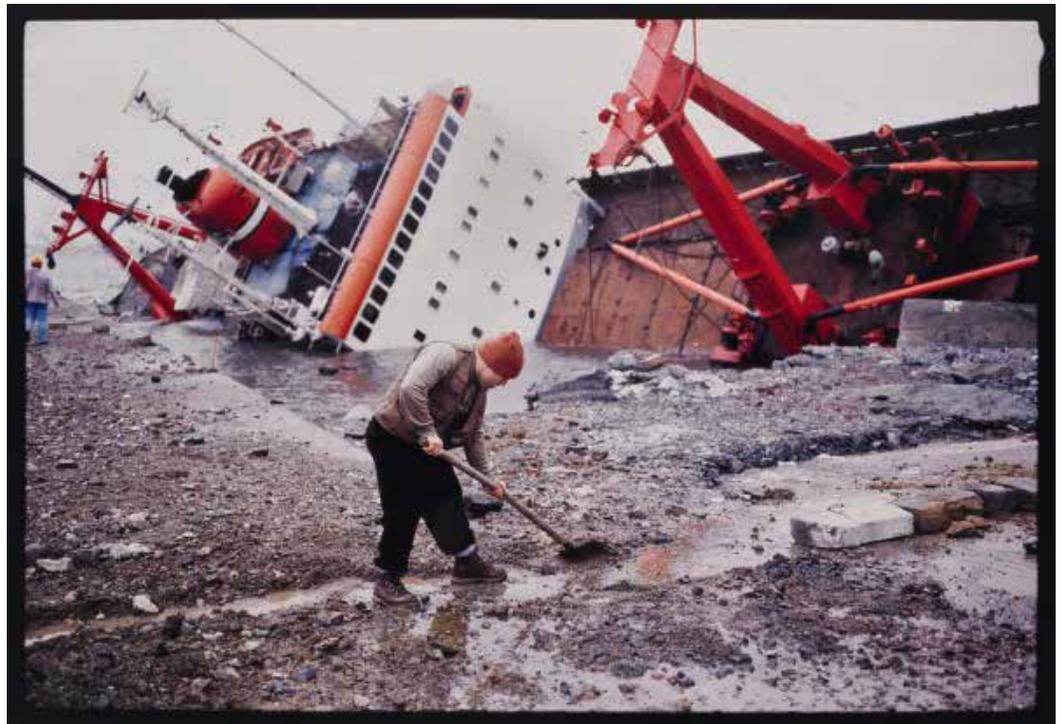
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Allan Sekula is a photographer, filmmaker, historian, and theoretician. Early in his career, he turned away from painting to explore the formal and conceptual limits of documentary photography. Sekula has emerged as an advocate of a “critical realism” that calls for engagement in and critical reflection on present socioeconomic realities. In particular, he has focused on the world’s oceans as a way to map and examine the mechanisms and consequences of globalization.

For Sekula, the sea is a forgotten site of global exchange. Indispensable to global transport, the cargo ship has evolved into a locus of illicit labor practices. Working conditions are exploitative, dangerous, and unregulated, while accountability is elided by dubious ownership and sham sovereignty. Sekula sees the cargo ship as a paradigm for the excesses of capitalism.

Shipwreck and Worker, Istanbul was photographed beside the Sea of Marmara during the artist’s travels to world seaports and along the ocean’s commercial corridors. In the photograph, a worker shovels debris against the

background of a shipwreck, a relic and symbol of the innovation, ambition, and ultimate failure of capitalism. The hulk of the ship looms in disproportionate scale to the mud and stones the worker clears away, persistent in his task of cleaning up. In this and other work, Sekula concentrates on the dignity and respect due to the everyday life of working people.



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Sekula's work is created in interrelated series, juxtaposing image and text in hybrid combinations that examine history, politics, and aesthetics. *Shipwreck and Worker, Istanbul* is part of the series *TITANIC's wake* (1998/2000). The series title refers to the initial maritime disaster, a metaphor for the technological hubris and excesses of nineteenth-century industrialism. But it refers as well to the recent film shot in Popotla, a Mexican fishing village on the Baja coast that suffered environmental and economic devastation as a result of the Hollywood enterprise. "Titanic" also refers to capitalism and to the wreckage left in the path of globalization. In addition, the title plays with the word "wake" to evoke the trace of a passing ship, a ceremony to mourn, and an awakening from apathy and unawareness.

Shipwreck and Worker, Istanbul was the point of origin for another series, *Shipwreck and Workers*, which Sekula featured at the international exhibition Documenta XII in Kassel, Germany, in 2007. Devoted to the laborer of many kinds, this series still emerges out of Sekula's interrogation of the sea as a metaphor for contemporary economic and social reality and as the inspiration for a critically engaged art.

