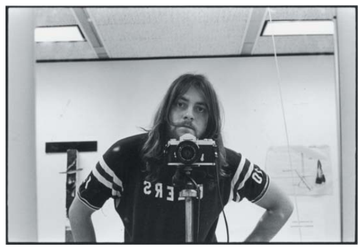
REINVENTING DOCUMENTARY:
THE ART OF ALLAN SEKULA

January 22 to March 15, 2015

Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art
Lewis & Clark College
Portland, Oregon

FROM THE DIRECTOR



Self Portrait as Sculptor/Painter/Photographer 1972
3 black-and-white photographs in a single frame

I had the great good fortune to know Allan Sekula (1951–2013) in the early 1980s, when we were both at The Ohio State University. Allan was a young and brash new faculty member in The Film Studies Program; I was completing my MA in the history of art. He gained a certain notoriety and maybe even a bit of academic celeb status for taking part in a protest with his friend and eventual collaborator, Noël Burch, a film critic and fellow faculty member. The demonstration was against US involvement in Central America; both men wore Ronald Reagan masks. When a student reporter asked the masked Sekula to identify himself, he tore off his mask; the resulting pic landed in the OSU student newspaper. It was pretty funny, except not so much to the OSU administration. There were some real and unpleasant consequences. For all that Sekula's work comprises—compelling imagery, penetrating criticism, biting political and social commentary, fearless polemics, daring performance, and rapier wit—perhaps he hoped most that his work would engender real consequences that would positively affect the world.

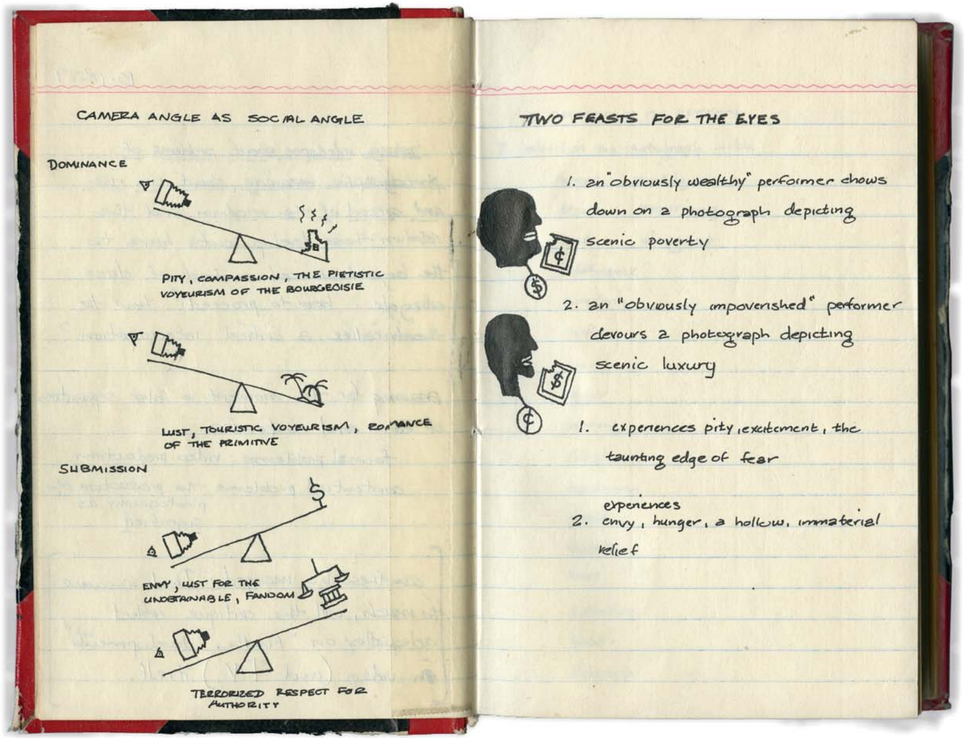
Co-curator Joel W. Fisher and I hoped to bring to the Lewis & Clark community an introduction to Sekula's work that might be especially meaningful to students. To this goal, we assembled a brief survey of Sekula's oeuvre, including works spanning thirty years, from his earliest self-portraits through complicated international projects. The Hoffman Gallery has been transformed into a kind of art lab setting, in which visitors can flip through rare books and ephemera at a reading table. I am especially thrilled that the exhibition includes such treasures as some of Sekula's sketchbooks and notebooks, intimate glimpses into his thinking process and further evidence of his extraordinarily broad creative output. It is a unique privilege to view an arc of Sekula's work in a single gallery setting.

PHOTOGRAPH BY WERNER KALIGOFSKY. GENERALI FOUNDATION, VIENNA

War Without Bodies
Military air show and Gulf War victory celebration, El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, Santa Ana, California, 28 April 1991
1991/1996

Reinventing Documentary: The Art of Allan Sekula would not have been imagined or realized without the generosity, support, and guidance of Sekula's wife, Sally Stein. Our partnership with Sally, along with the hard work and dedication of studio managers Ina Steiner and Karolina Karlic, made the exhibition and catalogue possible. Our gratitude goes as well to Christopher Grimes and Stacie Martinez from Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, for their support in the exhibition preparation. It was a great pleasure to curate this exhibition with Joel W. Fisher, assistant professor of art and studio head of photography at Lewis & Clark. His wise instincts, paired with a deep knowledge about contemporary photography, were invaluable. And, a special thank you to Blake Stimson, professor of art and art history at the University of Illinois, Chicago, for his thoughtful insights on Sekula's work in his essay, "Toward a Humanism of Work."

Linda Tesner
Director
Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art
Lewis & Clark College



Notebook 1977

Waiting for Tear Gas 1999–2000
Slide projection of 81 35 mm transparencies

FOREWORD

Dear Bill Gates 1999
Cibachrome photographs and typewritten letter

On November 30, 1999, a month before the rather anticlimactic and virtually nonexistent Y2K computer meltdown, the photographer, filmmaker, writer, theorist, historian, educator, and occasioned humorist Allan Sekula wrote an open letter to Bill Gates. Dated the day of the launch of the protests against the conference in Seattle of the World Trade Organization, Sekula's typewritten letter to Microsoft's cofounder expressed a desire to drop by and "take a look" at *Lost on the Grand Banks*, a Winslow Homer painting of two fishermen in a small boat presumably lost at sea in stormy twilight, which Gates had acquired a year earlier for thirty million dollars. In an attempt to view the painting, Sekula swam out into Lake Washington close to Gates's home in Medina, Washington. Despite his aquatic ambitions, Sekula was sensibly fearful of triggering the rumored underwater sensors and remained a good distance away from the Gates compound shoreline.

Rather than breaching security, Sekula made a few just-above-water photographs out in the lake, three of which are exhibited in *Reinventing Documentary: The Art of Allan Sekula* as a triptych adorned with a version of the open letter, which together make up the piece *Dear Bill Gates*. Looking at the triptych from left to right, in the first photograph the Gates home floats on the horizon, silhouetted in a coolness of blue late day (or early morning) light. The home is illuminated from within so that the interior details, Homer painting included, blend together and are indistinguishable from the boxes of warm, incandescent, window-framed light. In the middle photograph to the right of the home, a swimmer's head (Sekula's) bobs with an off-kilter buoyancy, one eye winking at and close to the camera. The cool blue-green context complements the warmth of the scattered lights in the background, the swimmer's skin, and his red swim cap. Sekula's mouth cut off by the watery horizon and his wink back to the viewer beg for further contemplation of this ambiguous slice of time. In the third photograph to the right, two figures are in a leisure-craft

Winslow Homer
Lost on the Grand Banks 1885
Oil on canvas
32 x 50 inches
Private collection

motorboat between the distance of the swimmer in the middle panel and the Gates estate on the left. One figure steers or drives the boat while the other stands at the bow looking as though he or she is about to cast a line, a nod back to the Homer seascape.

Among the complexities of the multilayered piece, *Dear Bill Gates* reveals a systemic (blue-chip) art-world problem of value and accessibility. Sekula pokes at the overpayment for the Homer painting and prods at Gates's desire for acquisition of visual culture, while drawing an analogy between the fishermen's being lost and the Microsoft cofounder's himself being caught up in the Internet's mechanized global economy, in which he not only runs (or ran) one of the most profitable communications companies in history but also stakes a claim on visual media through his licensing company, *Corbis*. As in the chapter *Message in a Bottle* from *A Fish Story* and the series *Black Tide* and *Freeway to China* also in the exhibition at the Hoffman Gallery, Sekula utilizes water and the sea as a backdrop for questionable global and economic practices.

Reinventing Documentary: The Art of Allan Sekula presents a small yet considerable survey of Sekula's prolific and important career. There are few artists today armed with such an advanced and comprehensive understanding of the theoretical, aesthetic, and cultural traditions underlying photography with writing, and writing with photography, as an art form. The selection of work for the Hoffman Gallery spans thirty years that underscore and highlight the significance of Sekula's practice and career. In a liberal-arts context, it is important to us that we be able to represent the trajectory of Sekula's career and offer students and the Lewis & Clark community a space to engage with his work from different time periods in a variety of ways.

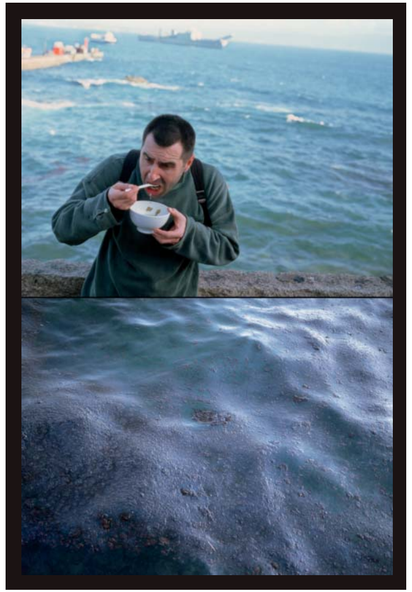
Joel W. Fisher
Assistant Professor of Art
Lewis & Clark College

***Message in a Bottle* (Version 1, from *Fish Story*)** May 1992
Fishing for sardines off the Portuguese coast.

Untitled Slide Sequence 1972
75 black-and-white, 35 mm transparencies

Freeway to China **(Version 2, for Liverpool)** 1998–99
Queen of the Pirates

Large and small disasters (Islas Cies and Bueu, 12/20/02)



Volunteer's soup (Isla de Ons, 12/19/02)

Exhausted volunteers (en route from Isla de Ons, 12/19/02)

Black Tide 2002–3
20 Cibachrome prints in 10 frames, text

In place of a class struggle founded on the need that inspires "a humanism of need, as the direct hold of every man on all men," as happens today, there was a time when value was conferred by work—real, intelligent, skillful work.

—Jean-Paul Sartre quoting himself, 1961

TOWARD A HUMANISM OF WORK

Blake Stimson

More than anything else, Allan Sekula was an artist who understood himself to be a laborer. Photography was the special site of his conflicted self-understanding—"Photographers are detail workers when they are not artists," is how he put it at one point, "and thus it is not unreasonable . . . to label photographers the 'proletarians of creation.'"[1] The surreptitious slippage in his phrasing that takes us from a stark opposition between artists-as-free-agents and workers-as-dependent-cogs to their nebulous union in the photographer-cum-proletarian points to the mettle and substance of his life's work. His goal, in a nutshell, was to artfully introduce into the bourgeois domain of fine art the suffering, insight, and demands of proletarian life that are uniquely available to documentary as a particular form of non-art. He reinvented documentary, in other words, by taking its most base and vulnerable realization—an insight that Marx famously memorialized with the righteous cri de coeur "I am nothing but I should be everything"—and making it into the foundation for a program of art.

Sekula was furtive about his aim, because such a project asks a lot from us. In order for our understanding of art to open itself outward to the richness of the larger world made available to us by documentary, it requires two fundamental changes in how we experience ourselves as artists and art appreciators.

First, we have to sensitize ourselves to the fears and desires we all harbor that are non-bourgeois, that are not those we flaunt when we think of ourselves as the "creative class" setting the stage for urban life but instead are born of that part of us that toils in order to survive. Sekula was able to do this himself by simply facing up to his own place as a teacher in the art economy. In an essay accompanying his 1978–80 work *School Is a Factory*, for example, he wrote that, while the education system still bears the residue of its foundational aim to realize the heroic humanist ideals of the Enlightenment, more and more it has been rejiggered to conform to the ignoble drives of the capitalist economy: "art departments," he insisted, have become "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."[2] Teacher and student alike, he lamented, are interlocking cogs in a machine not of their own making and beyond their control.

Second, we have to understand our roles as workers in the education, museum, design, computer, entertainment, or whatever industries—our airy "creative class" roles, that is, now brought to earth as those of workaday "proletarians of creation"—to be in conflict with that truly higher part of ourselves that dreams of art in its best sense, that part that reaches for the autonomy and personhood of being bourgeois. Opening art out onto the fullness of the world it inhabits is only available, Sekula argued, by working "from within concrete life situations, situations within which there [is] either an overt or active clash of interests and representations."[3] Experiencing the conflict between art's real promise of free personhood and its real reality of cog-like dependency is itself a form of enlightenment, Sekula's work tells us, because it allows us to experience ourselves as proletarians in a bourgeois dream and bourgeois in a proletarian reality. Such experience "gives you a bitter sense that all the promissory notes of the American Dream are rarely cashed in," he said not too long ago. "You see failure and blockages all around you."[4] When we sensitize ourselves sufficiently to this reality, we are able to experience the promise of art as neither a jaded reflection of our powerlessness nor an overweening sense of our precious difference or autonomy but instead as a desperate form of faith or hope or charity frustrated by a routinely unjust world.

Modern art has always yearned for that faith, hope, or charity—in the name of free personhood, justice, or collective self-determination—but the logistics of how it might be realized are almost always less clear. We get a sense of one approach from the title for the heroic final song of the opera that Sekula imagined would complement his 2002 work *Black Tide*, "The Song of Society Against the State." The same approach was there in the old phenomenological contest between system and lifeworld that he first turned to in *School Is a Factory*, something that governed the self-portraiture at play in all of his subsequent work: "a way of talking, with words and images about both the system and *our* lives within the system."[5]

His critique, in other words, aimed first and foremost for Sartre's "humanism of need" with its "direct hold of every man on all men," its way of understanding "*our* lives" as independent from and in a state of tension with their mediation by systems. But such immediacy of need was always only ever half the story:

> What we're struggling with here is the big story, and no one thinks they can tell the big story anymore, everyone's given up; they're feeling hopeless about their ability to . . . tell this story. Maybe in economics it's similar to the turn to microeconomics, away from macroeconomics, you know, tending your own little garden while the whole earth is trembling.[6]

Tending our own little gardens, understanding our own little needs, experiencing "*our* lives within the system," Sekula's work tells us, is not only a genuine form of truth and empowerment, it is also an ignominious form of blindness and suffering. The real struggle is to experience the immediacy of need in concert with its potential to be realized through the mediating systems that govern it.

Documentary at its most direct is brute, factual evidence of such woeful need. The examples are legion, but call to mind almost any of the photographs by Jacob Riis—his *Basement of a Pub in Mulberry-Bend at 3:00 am* will do. Art distinguishes itself from documentary by taking the brute facticity of human suffering and making it into a value and a shared will, by standing up for the "ism" in humanism as a righteous protest of conscience against that need. All modern art worth its salt took on this higher-order feeling in one way or another, but we might take Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* as its zenith. The problem, however, is that art's *Guernica*-like protest is almost always as powerless as documentary's base recognition. At its best, it is a raised fist or a bleeding heart, a righteous and indignant protest addressed to a parentlike authority. In this sense Picasso's oft-touted insight about art seeking to be childlike was indeed right.

However, if we want to change the world and have those needs realized, art's step up from documentary is not enough; its humanism of need has to be complemented by the old humanism of work that Sartre reminds us of. The basis for this higher version of humanism's "ism"—the value conferred by "real, intelligent, skillful work"—is suggested everywhere in Sekula's oeuvre. As the pictures in this exhibition attest, he turns again and again to the nobility of the production and reproduction of our world through labor. We can see it in his titles alone: Unloading frozen fish from the Malvinas; Sorting octopus. Puerto Pesquero; Dockers Looking; Dockers Listening; *Self Portrait as Sculptor/Painter/Photographer*; *Waiting for Tear Gas*. These words and their corresponding images bear the weight of society on their shoulders—the burden of the logistics, mechanics, and perspiration necessary to provide for need—much more than they document or empathize with that need itself. There are no pictures of Spanish war victims or New York slum dwellers, for example, and no request that we share in their suffering; instead there are only images of people struggling to do things. In this sense these pictures reach upward in a simple progression of becoming human—from machinelike recognition of another's need (documentary) to childlike identification with that need (art) to adultlike collaboration in order to do something about it (work).

The great gift of Sekula's legacy, in other words, is that it takes us a good way up this chain of being. As documentary-cum-art it sets the terms more than it performs the requisite labor, of course, but that is already leagues ahead of what we get anywhere else. Invitations to regress to the impotent experience of our own need or to piously identify with the wretched need of others are everywhere in the world we inhabit, not the least so in our art. Sekula's resolute reply from another time reminds us that the only way to truly honor that need is to let go of the infantilizing immediacy that comes with its mere recognition and turn to its humanizing, self-actualizing, world-making mediation through work.

Blake Stimson

Blake Stimson teaches at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He is the author of *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation* and *Citizen Warhol*, among other publications.

Notes

[1] Allan Sekula quoting Bernard Edelman in "Reading an Archive: Photography Between Labour and Capital," in Liz Wells, ed., *The Photography Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), 444.

[2] Sekula, "On the Politics of Education and the Traffic in Photographs," *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art ad Design, 1984), 228.

[3] Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain*, x.

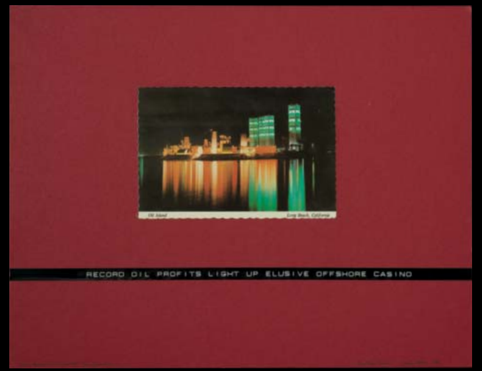
[4] Sukhdev Sandhu, "Allan Sekula: filming the forgotten resistance at sea," *Guardian*, April 20, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/apr/20/allan-sekula-resistance-at-sea (accessed December 21, 2014).

[5] Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain*, 234.

[6] Sekula speaking at "Forgotten Spaces," a conversation with Benjamin Buchloh, David Harvey, and Allan Sekula, at a screening of *The Forgotten Space*, the 2010 film by Sekula and Noël Burch, at the Cooper Union, New York, May 2011, filmed by Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen, Roberto Meza, and Park McArthur. http://vimeo.com/24394711 (accessed December 21, 2014).

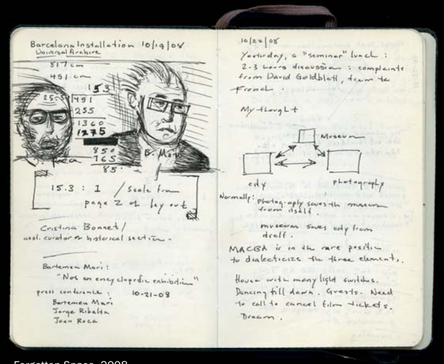
WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works are by Allan Sekula (1951–2013)
All works are courtesy of the Estate of Allan Sekula
and Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica



Long Beach Notes 1980
Cardboard box with 4 postcard collages

Red Squad 1973



Forgotten Space, 2008

Black Tide
2002–3
20 Cibachrome prints in 10 frames, text

1. Volunteer's soup (Isla de Ons, 12/19/02)
57 x 38.25 inches (framed)

2. Volunteer watching /Volunteer smiling
(Isla de Ons, 12/19/02)
26.5 x 67.75 inches (framed)

3. Dripping black trapezoid (Lendo, 12/22/02)
47 x 33 inches (framed)

4. Self-portrait (Lendo, 12/22/02)
17.5 x 23 inches (framed)

5. Volunteer on the edge ((Islas Cies, 12/20/02)
30 x 40.5 inches (framed)

6. Fishing for fuel, surveying the damage
(Ria da Pontevedra, 12/19/02)
44.5 x 33.5 inches (framed)

7. Shellfishers working, army preparing
(Touriñán, 12/24/02)
16 x 75.75 inches (framed)

8. Exhausted volunteers (en route from Isla
de Ons, 12/19/02)
66.75 x 34.75 inches (framed)

9. Disposal pit (Lendo, 12/23/02)
20.5 x 49.5 inches (framed)

10. Large and small disasters (Islas Cies
and Bueu, 12/20/02)
50.75 x 27.25 inches (framed)

Waiting for Tear Gas
1999–2000
Slide projection of 81 35 mm transparencies
14:00 minutes

Dear Bill Gates
1999
Triptych of 3 Cibachrome photographs
and typewritten letter
Overall dimensions variable
Triptych, 29 x 106.5 inches framed
Letter, 11.75 x 9 inches framed

***Freeway to China* (Version 2, for Liverpool)**
1998–99
23 color photographs in 18 frames

1. Blockade 1
Single color photograph
15.25 x 20.75 inches (framed)

2. Blockade 2
Vertical diptych, color photograph
68.75 x 29 inches (framed)

3. Freeway to China 1
Single color photograph
29.5 x 40.25 inches (framed)

4. Freeway to China 2 (Portrait 1)
Single color photograph
29.5 x 40.25 inches (framed)

5. Freeway to China 3
Single color photograph
29.5 x 40.25 inches (framed)

6. Freeway to China 4
Single color photograph
19.25 x 40.25 inches (framed)

7. Freeway to China 5
Single color photograph
23.25 x 40.25 inches (framed)

8. Freeway to China 6
Single color photograph
29.5 x 40.25 inches (framed)

9. Under the Hook
Horizontal triptych, color photograph
20 x 77.75 inches (framed)

10. Portrait 2
Single color photograph
29.5 x 40.25 inches (framed)

11. One Thousand Trucks
Single color photograph
29.5 x 40.25 inches (framed)

12. Invisible Port
Horizontal diptych, color photograph
25.5 x 67 inches (framed)

13. Dockers Looking
Horizontal diptych, color photograph
30 x 72 inches (framed)

14. Shipspotter
Single color photograph
29.5 x 40.25 inches (framed)

15. Dockers Listening
Single color photograph
29.5 x 40.25 inches (framed)

16. Speak Here
Single color photograph
29.5 x 40.25 inches (framed)

17. Portrait 3
Single color photograph
16.75 x 20.75 inches (framed)

18. Queen of the Pirates
Single color photograph
44 x 71.75 inches (framed)

Message in a Bottle
(Version 1, from *Fish Story*)
Vigo, May 1992
Cibachrome prints and text panels
4 images, 23 x 33 inches
4 images, 33 x 23 inches
1 title panel, 32 x 23 inches
1 text panel, 40 x 29 inches

1. Jewelry store. Rua Principe.

2. Shop occupied by women clerks for eighteen months. Rua Principe.

3. Fishing for sardines off the Portuguese coast.

4. Unloading frozen fish from the Malvinas.

5. Wholesale fish auction. Puerto Pesquero.

6. Sorting octopus. Puerto Pesquero.

7. Fire. Puerto Pesquero.

8. Fountain. Playa Samil.

War Without Bodies
Military air show and Gulf War victory
celebration, El Toro Marine Corps Air Station,
Santa Ana, California, 28 April 1991
1991/1996
9 color photographs mounted on
aluminum and framed
2 copies of text booklet with illustrated covers
US Army field bed
Each photograph 20 x 30 inches (framed)

Long Beach Notes
1980
Cardboard box with 4 postcard collages
Postcards and DYMO tape
11 x 14 inches

Red Squad
San Diego, 20 January 1973
1973
Chromogenic print diptych
Each panel 26 x 99 inches (framed)

Self Portrait as Sculptor/Painter/Photographer
1972
3 black-and-white photographs in a single frame
Each photograph 8 x 10 inches; overall dimension
31.5 x 21.75 inches framed

Two, three, many . . . (terrorism)
1972
6 black-and-white photographs in a single frame
Each photograph 6.5 x 9 inches; overall
dimension 32 x 51.5 inches framed

Untitled Slide Sequence
1972
75 black-and-white, 35 mm transparencies
(3 duplicate sets of 25), projected at 13-second in-
tervals; text panel
17:20 minutes

Notebooks and Sketchbooks
1. 1977
6.5 x 4.25 inches

2. 2005
5.5 x 3.5 inches

3. Forgotten Space, 2009
5.25 x 8.25 inches

4. 2012
5.5 x 3.5 inches

5. Forgotten Space, 2008
5.5 x 3.5 inches

6. 2009
8.25 x 5.75 inches

7. 2010
4 x 6 inches

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