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Polonia and other Fables: Allan Sekula in search of identity/Polishness

“My grandparents lived in Galicia. My Grandfather was a blacksmith, illiterate. My Grandmother cooked for an Austro-Hungarian officer. At the beginning of the 20th century they emigrated to the United States” (KENIG 2009). This is the beginning of one of the interviews with Allan Sekula promoting his exhibition *Polonia and other Fables* presented at the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw from the 12th of December to the 28th of February, 2010¹. The project, commissioned by Zachęta and the gallery of The Renaissance Society in Chicago was at the same time the first individual presentation of Allan Sekula’s works in Poland. And, as the author declares in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition:

The exhibition is neither a sociologically-grounded documentary nor an autobiography, but rather another attempt to make something with photographs, video, graphics and text that functions like a historical novel gone crazy or a fiction film with erratic epic scope, stopping once or twice too often to linger on the details, as is often the case with photographs.

(SEKULA 2009 : 59)

Two motives meander through the exhibition: social involvement and a search for regions in which the private and personal merges with the universal and global. The private is the search for roots and identity – the universal, on the other hand, is formulating questions on the essence of Polishness

1 The exhibition was later presented at the Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art in Budapest (8 July- 19 September, 2010) and planned to be shown at Belfast Exposed, Belfast (end of 2010 – beginning of 2011).

in the contemporary and globalized world. Therefore, the project maps the territories between Mickiewicz's "Lithuania, my fatherland ..." and "Poland is the fifty-first state of the United States". "Poland in which one lives and Poland which lives in those who have left her – two opposites of the photographic, essayistic and poetical inquiries of Allan Sekula" (RUCHEL-STOCKMANS 2009 : 104).

Sekula's esthetics grows out of the conceptual tradition where the viewer/participant generates his/her own representations and images. It is a form of hopscotch (*à la* Cortazar), a puzzle, or as I would coin it, a two-warp tapestry of two distinct colors penetrating one another, where the color of the design on one side is the background for an identical design on the other. The effect is achieved thanks to two warps and two wefts. In the exhibition, thus, the autobiography is the warp and geopolitics is the weft. "Therefore *Polonia and Other Fables* may be read and viewed in many ways adopting as the center of gravity the condition of American emigration, Polish reality, personal quest for roots, reflection on national symbols and nationalistic ideology but also contemporary Polish-American relations, economic conditions, and the effects of a capitalistic economy ..." (RUCHEL-STOCKMANS 2009 : 104). "Read and view". The artist proposes "a hybrid work, multi-layered, oscillating between the image and the word, photographic realism and literary-film vision. Photography blends here with the essay through which image becomes a text and the text becomes the image which has to be viewed" (RUCHEL-STOCKMANS 2009 : 104). According to Sekula, it is "the text, or the arrangement of covert linguistic allusions which brings about the legibility of a photograph" (SIENKIEWICZ 2010).

A fusion of photographs with text is typical of Sekula's creativity. To the questions: "Aren't photographs sufficient?" – Sekula answers: "Photography never had a stable position in the system of art. According to me, it operates on the triangulated field between literature, film and painting. Photography is on a voyage between these three ports never really harboring in any of them" (KENIG 2009). In such aesthetics, at the foundation of Sekula's works are photographs, however they are supplemented by text: notes, observations, geopolitical speculations. Most recently he also utilizes video images.

The text accompanying the exhibition "which is something between a screenplay never realized and a deliric stream of consciousness" (RUCHEL-STOCKMANS 2009 : 105), begins with:

A few helpful epigrams

As to the action which is about to begin,
it takes place in Poland—that is to say,
nowhere.²

Did you hear about the Polish Admiral who wanted to be
buried at sea when he died? Five sailors died digging
his grave.³

Beside any old secondhand sea.⁴

and *A partial script for an exhibition* where Sekula writes:

Let's set the scene, as if for a silent film, or for a passion play of the Stations of the Cross: Near dusk, low light from the west cutting across the north-south axis. On the left, the Chicago elevated, southbound above Wabash. On the right, a northbound tram on Warsaw's Marszałkowska Street. Both give the same destination: *Polonia*.

If these were two photographs, they would be titled *Celestial Railroad*.

(SEKULA 2009 : 57)

“In this project I talk about my roots, identity, religion” (KENIG 2009). Questions such as “Who am I?” and the provocative “Was Popeye a Pole?” interweave throughout the literary and photographic material of the exhibition.

Sekula's case may be a classic example of the effects of the Hansen's Law, first presented in the essay *The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant* which states that “What the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember” (HANSEN 1937). This thesis was further confirmed by Oskar Handlin in his classical work *The Uprooted* (1951)⁵, where he maintains that when any immigrant group reaches the third generation stage in its develop-

2 “Preface” spoken by Alfred Jarry before the curtain at the first performance of *Ubu Roi* at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, Paris, 10 December, 1896.

3 A Polack joke.

4 Nelson Algren, *Chicago: City on the Make*, 1951.

5 Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, New York, 1951, especially chapters VI, IX, and X for elaboration of this theme.

ment, a spontaneous and almost irresistible impulse arises which forces the thoughts of many people of different professions, different positions in life, and different points of view to interest themselves in that one factor which they have in common: heritage and family roots.

Let us look more closely at one of the many carriers of identity. Family name, its pronunciation and graphic form is in a considerable degree a determinant, and at the same time a transmitter of identity as well as the national and cultural identity of an individual. With the change or alteration of the original form of the name, the link with the heritage of one's ancestors often weakens or even disappears completely. Immigration clerks in the "posts of entry" (Ellis Island was the most significant port, operating between 1892 and 1954 and through which over 12 million immigrants entered the United States) often altered or changed the family names of arriving immigrants.

I would like to present a family case. When my great-grandparents Stanisław and Anna Lewkowicz arrived at Ellis Island on the 30th of March, 1910 aboard the ship *Pisa* sailing from Hamburg⁶, their last name was altered into Lefkovic (with a diacritic mark over c). Next, on the baptism record of my grandmother, issued by St. Casimir's Church in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania (December 22nd, 1905), the surname Lełkowska is inscribed. Luckily, my great-grandparents together with my grandmother returned to their home village in Podlasie and by doing so, regained their original name/identity.

One more case: a few years ago I was asked by an American family of the surname "White" to assist them in finding and possibly locating their family roots which, according to their knowledge, should be in the area of Janów in Podlasie. "White" from a village near Janów? Impossible! After an investigation "à la Sherlock Holmes", it turned out that an Ellis Island clerk, probably of Slavic origin, encountering the name "Mleczewski", considered it too complicated for American reality and changed it to "White". Mleczewski – milk – White! Due to my investigation and discovery, the family regained its name/identity.

Sekula is also on a quest for the roots of his name. Let us return to the *Partial script for an exhibition*:

Two graves, side by side. Autumn or early winter, frost on the bare branches of trees, here in the former coal country of central Pennsylvania. Focus on the gravestones only, otherwise indefinite widening circles of confusion. Here

6 Passenger Records Search and Original Ship Manifest is available through The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. at <http://www.ellisland.org>

lie Wiktor and Pawel, the artist's grandparents, with a small difference is the spelling of the shared surname cut into the modest granite slabs. A slash crosses the "l" for Pawel and then doesn't for Wiktor. It is as if the second stonemason was a typesetter in a language without diacritical marks. Die later, die elsewhere and the sound of your name changes forever.

(SEKULA 2009 : 57)

And further:

... in the chaos of my non-archive, made on a visit to the graves in the winter of 1997. It is my uncle's headstone that drops the slash that softens the "l" to a "w". The stone bears the incongruous American familiarity of his nickname: "Fox".

(SEKULA 2009 : 57)

Then, "Sekula" or Sekula? Or maybe "suck-culo" – "Dracula, Tarantula, Sekula" (SEKULA 2009 : 70). The name issue triggers a stream of consciousness flow of associations:

A "painting": phonetic variations on a surname. Lettered in a style reminiscent of the Hairy Who:

So Kool ahh see cue là c'est cul là suck culo sew culo
 sec culo say Cola say culo see Cola say ku wa
 sek yula say kula say Q La Sek ya la suh coo le
 suk koo le suck Cola sek Q le sek Q la sec que lè
 sea Kool Ah SeaKool LA See cool a su culo
 su Cola su qui la Say koo Wa soy culo soy Cola
 suh kula suh kuwa sea kuwa sea kula sek ulla
 suck ola sock ul la sock Cool ahhh sek yool ah
 sek yoo la
 sec yoo la seck yoola C Kool LA sea coo la SEA Cool uh
 Suh Kool uh See Q luh

(SEKULA 2009 : 67)

Therefore, is it possible to be Polish having lost the "P"? According to the author – yes.

The previously quoted interview for *Gazeta Wyborcza* in its video version starts with the topic of Polish Jokes. In an introduction to one of the jokes, with a certain dose of self-irony, he states: "I have to get it right. Being Polish I don't think very quickly" [Smile] (KENIG 2009).

Sekula seems to embrace the whole concept of Polack jokes as something natural and neutral; he does not get emotional but perceives the phenomenon from a cool distance. He visibly does not support the idea that "... such jokes stereotype an ethnic group and perpetuate a negative image" (SILVERNAM 2000 : 85). For Sekula, an artist, "being Polish" does not imply the "elbow rubbing" experienced by working class immigrants competing with other ethnic minorities where poking fun and scapegoating was one of the forms of establishing an economic position and was a form of dominance. For Sekula, it does not bring about shame and embarrassment as it probably would for first or second generation Polish immigrants.

Besides the name, the exhibition is also an attempt by the author to come to terms with his family roots and memories. Six out of thirty-seven photographs are connected with Allan Sekula's family: item 16 *Replica of door to blacksmith's shed, Ochojno, Poland, July 2009*; item 17 *Blacksmith (hammering sickle.) Ochojno, Poland, July 2009*; item 18 *Blacksmith's work, Ochojno, Poland, July 2009*; item 20 *My father, brother and nephew. Sacramento, December 1998*; item 33 *My father with his list. Sacramento, December 1979*; item 34 *Father Andrzej, who gave last rites to my father. Sacramento, December 2008* and finally, item 35 *My mother outside the empty house. Sacramento, December 2008*.

In the text, first Sekula concentrates on his grandfather: "Blacksmith. Sudden overwhelming memory of the shed in my grandfather's backyard. My brother and me at the bellows" (SEKULA 2009 : 65).

In this he (Lech Wałęsa) reminds me of my grandfather, an illiterate but clever blacksmith from the southern Polish region of Galicia. In 1909, Pavel Sekula sailed third class to New York aboard the *Kronprinzessin Cecilie*, built by Poles at the German shipyard Vulkan in Stettin (now Szczecin), identical sister to the "fashionable ship of the North German Lloyd," the *Kaiser Wilhelm 11*, aboard which, two years earlier and travelling in the opposite direction, Alfred Stieglitz made his famous photograph, *The Steerage*.

(SEKULA 2009 : 99)

The grandfather, who was a blacksmith, is also recalled in three "still life" photographs taken in a blacksmith's shop in Ochojno. All three are black-and-white close-up images. The first, the door to a blacksmith's shed, depicts, engraved on wooden planks, the shapes of tools (a sickle, axes, hoes, hammers and other tools); these probably being shape models of the tools produced by this particular craftsman. The second, presents the blacksmith

in action, hammering a sickle. The anvil is in focus; however, the sickle is out of focus: we are witnessing the action of hammering and with a little imagination we may even hear the rhythmical blows and the metallic sound. And finally, the third image presents a collection of the final products of the blacksmith. This mini-series demonstrates the process of planning, work in progress, and the results of hard work. "A blacksmith works with words. Words and phrases fly from the anvil as the hammer hits the soft red steel: 'hammer and tongs,' 'strike while the iron is hot,' 'mind-forged manacles'" (SEKULA 2009 : 60).

Next, Sekula pays tribute to his mother, first in the text:

My mother,
 who converted to Roman Catholicism
 and learned to cook goląbki
 from her mother-in-law

(SEKULA 2009 : 65)

and through one of the photographs, where she is presented in a black-and-white image: an old, deeply wrinkled lady. This hyper-realistic portrait does not attempt to hide in any way the cruelty of aging.

However, it is the father, who is the focus of Allan Sekula's attention and has a considerable place in both the visual and textual part of the exhibition. Sekula, the son, reveals numerous tensions haunting his father who was trapped between two worlds: Polish and American. Being a second generation Polish-American, he was the one who was obliged to demonstrate his acculturation to American society. Probably his father, the blacksmith from Galicia, balanced between two worlds: the "old world" he left behind and the "new world" to which he had to adjust, going through a painful process of adaptation. Allan's father, on the other hand, grew up in an American reality, knowing the language so as to become a "true" citizen by achieving the position of an army officer. Though an American by birth, he did not discard his Polish roots and nationalistic traditions:

I was told by my father, only half-jokingly, that we were probably the descendents of Tatars or Mongols. This was, in fact, a shopworn *szlachta* country-aristocratic fantasy that he must have picked up through reading, rather than through family lore, and is consistent with the romantic nationalism of Poland's first "national" poet, Adam Mickiewicz

Thus in my father's version of the national family romance, he is no longer the descendant of Galician peasants, but has moved up to the petty nobility.

(SEKULA 2009 : 60)

By cultivating the Polish language and culture through extensive reading ("Czeslaw Milosz complements my father for his refined Polish. A language nurtured in solitude" (SEKULA 2009 : 60)). He was able to function in two worlds: the American and the "mythical" Polish reality. Zbigniew Brzeziński, mentioned several times in the text, is an ideal example of this adaptation. Although he left Poland at the age of 10, he retained both the Polish language and ties with Poland. The father is also presented on one of the photographs reading a list of rabbis of the name Sekula: "Am I Polish or Jewish?":

The line between Jew and non-Jew is often indistinct. The slander of secret Jewishness is always on standby, ready for activation. Walesa campaigned for president against Mazowiecki in 1990 as a "real Pole." Where do Polish Jews, living and dead, figure in the long-running drama of national identity and nationlessness? Was the Zion of the first Zionists invented as a mirror image of Polonia?

Because of the destruction by the Nazis of a European Jewry that lived most numerous in Poland, it has often said that Poland has remained the headquarters of a peculiar "anti-Semitism without Jews".

(SEKULA 2009 : 60–61)

Sekula's sister is another, very frequent case among hyphenated Americans, who completely discarded her ethnic roots: "My sister has the sensitive soul of a Nietzsche. She drives a truck for FedEx, and being a good mother, is more interested in her son's American heritage than his Polishness. Dark skin can be a liability in America. She's got more to worry about than the Battle of Vienna" (SEKULA 2009 : 58).

But, one might ask, where exactly is Sekula's Poland geographically? Maybe in the same area as the homeland of Adam Mickiewicz, "who was the archetypal resident of Polonia, having never lived in Poland" (SEKULA 2009 : 60).

Sekula notes:

I think I've always been interested in these various imaginary constructions of nationality, the fantasmatic idea of the nation and Polonia's history is

particularly charged with the idea wherever there is a Pole there is Polish soil, wherever a drop of Polish blood falls...”

(KENIG 2009)

Therefore,

Polonia is the imaginary Poland that exists wherever there is a Pole. Rousseau imagined this as a collective internal remedy for Polish subservience to powerful neighbors. Polonia is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, likely to pop up without warning in Warsaw or in Chicago, just as it has popped up in the Crimea and Anaheim (well before Disneyland), and then give way to more forceful specters of “America” or “Europe,” or “Asia.” Or even “Africa,” as it has in the writings of the great Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski.

(SEKULA2009 : 59)

Sekula being a Pole/non-Pole, who to a question addressed to him in Warsaw in 1990: “And your wife, what is she?”, answers: “American, from New York City.” The answer does not satisfy the interlocutor: “No, what is her background?”, he replies: “We mongrels. Every one” [sic!] (SEKULA 2009 : 60). Being “a mongrel”, gives him the license to be an objective observer of the Polish reality from the outside, envisioning the country in a fresh, novel light, often with an ironic tint. In the process, he possesses the power to “settle accounts with national myths and their visual representations” (RUCHEL-STOCKMANS 2009 : 104).

Warsaw
1944 Uprising Museum
insane nationalist propaganda
incessantly thumping heartbeats
Wajda’s *Kanal* of the kiddies

“This way to the sewers, ladies and gentlemen”.

(SEKULA 2009 : 65)

And earlier:

Despite ecumenical claims for a common Judeo-Christian project, touristic Warsaw reminds me of a farmer’s corn maze in the Midwest, with one entrance for Polish-American Catholic visitors, and another for the descendants of

Polish Jews: "This way to the memories of the uprising, ladies and gentlemen"
(SEKULA2009 : 62)

It is a heroic attempt to transform and "shift the meanings of national mythology" (RUCHEL-STOCKMANS 2009 : 105). And so, we have the Virgin Mary, but in the form of the Radio Maria logo (item 30), "Polish squadron of Lockheed-Martin F-16s as a repetition of Jan Sobieski's winged knights repelling the Sultan's janissaries outside the walls of a besieged Vienna" (SEKULA 2009 : 62) (item 27) and the Kosciuszko Festival held in Chicago with "heavy metal, girl rockers, *kielbasa*, *piwo*, families, accordian players, lots of Mexicans and Central Americans. "*La fiesta de los Polacos.*" *Piwo=cerveza* (SEKULA 2009 : 63).

"Polonia is riven closer to home by anxiety over religious and ethnic purity." (SEKULA 2009 : 60) – writes Sekula. Unfortunately, it is difficult to retain the "religious and ethnic purity" in a situation when Poland is entangled in inner political conflicts and is drawn into the global bloodstream, both political and economical. Sekula detects and visualizes these entanglements: the American Smithfield Foods company – the largest producer of pork meat in Poland, NATO air bases, sites for CIA transport and interrogation of prisoners. One might echo the question: "Is Poland the fifty-first state of the United States"?

The exhibition, a project for discovering Poland and Polonia in a global context, is at the same time the symbolic and very personal journey of an American artist of Polish descent to the country of his ancestors. In his quest, the identity of Allan Sekula reveals itself as an entity not anchored in any concrete national or geographical reality but, rather, fluid, unstable, hybrid – very distant from the romantic, nationalistic, Sienkiewicz-type of imagery which resonates in the religious song "Boże coś Polskę" and which is prevalent in today's public discourse (one of the recurring questions being: who is a "real Pole"?). I consider Sekula's project, the personal view of an outsider, an important voice in search of new forms of memory and identity both here in Poland and among Poles living abroad.

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