

Press Release
August 14, 1996

Sonja Sekula 1918-1963

- Exhibition:** **Sonja Sekula 1918-1963**
Curator: Dieter Schwarz, Winterthur Museum, Switzerland
Dates: September 12 through October 26, 1996
Opening: Thursday, September 12, 6 to 8 PM
- Panel Discussion:** Saturday, September 14, at 3 PM
with curator Dieter Schwarz, Ann Eden Gibson (SUNY), Walter Robinson (*Art in America*), Martica Sawin (author of *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, MIT Press 1995), and Sekula friend and artist Richard Lippold.
- Reading:** Saturday, September 14, at 4:30 PM
Selected prose texts by the artist, introduced by Roger Perret, her biographer.
- Gallery hours:** Tuesday through Saturday, 11 AM to 6 PM
Address: The Swiss Institute
495 Broadway, 3rd floor (between Broome & Spring Streets)
-

Swiss-born Sonja Sekula was at the center of New York's art world in the forties and fifties, an artist who exhibited with the city's best galleries—Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century, and for years with Betty Parsons. She was a friend and collaborator of some of the most important artists of the Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist circles, Max Ernst, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Motherwell among them. Sekula designed costumes for dancer Merce Cunningham, for a brief period shared an apartment with André Breton, wrote texts that were published in the Surrealist magazine VVV, and was represented in the Whitney Museum's Annual Exhibition of 1956.

The Swiss Institute is proud to present the first retrospective in over twenty-five years of this significant artist. Long overlooked in favor of the work of her male contemporaries, Sekula's paintings and writings have recently become the subject of a wave of interest in Europe. In large part the resurrection of this artist's reputation is due to a small literary publication in Switzerland, *Die Affenschaukel* (The Monkey's Swing) that published a special issue on the artist in 1992, as well as to the Winterthur/Switzerland retrospective this past summer. The show at the Swiss Institute is a concentrated version of the Winterthur exhibition, curated by Dr. Dieter Schwarz, director of the Winterthur Museum. It brings together over fifty drawings and paintings, original photographs, correspondence, and tiny match box sculptures by Sonja Sekula. An extensive English German catalogue with texts by John Cage, Morton Feldman, Robert Motherwell, Betty Parsons, Roger Perret, Dieter Schwarz and others accompanies the exhibition.



Reception at Henry Seyrig's house in honor of Aimé Césaire, New York, 1943.
Standing from left to right: Matta, Yves Tanguy, Aimé Césaire, Henry Seyrig, André Breton, Nicolas Calas; *seated behind from left to right:* Suzanne Césaire, Denis de Rougement, Marcel Duchamp, Esteban Frances; *seated in front:* Elisa Breton, Sonja Sekula, Jacqueline Matisse, Patricia Matta, Alexina Matisse, Elisa Calas.

Sonja Sekula was born in 1918 in Lucerne, of a Swiss mother and a Hungarian father. Béla Sekula had settled in Switzerland years earlier, a successful philatelist who moved his family to New York in 1936. Encouraged by her parents, Sekula attended painting classes given by George Grosz, a friend of the family. Later she studied art, philosophy and literature at Sarah Lawrence College, and in 1941 she enrolled at the Art Students League, taking classes with Morris Kantor and Raphael Soyer. While in America, Sekula experienced extreme depression. She was forced to spend several months in 1939 in a psychiatric clinic in White Plains, and returned to it later many times.

The Sekulas kept an open house in their Park Avenue apartment, receiving many artists and intellectuals. In 1942, Sonja Sekula got to know André Breton's circle of Surrealists living in American exile, among them Roberto Matta, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, and Kurt Seligmann, as well as two Americans close to Surrealism, Robert Motherwell and David Hare. A year later, her work was featured in a group show at Peggy Guggenheim's New York gallery, Art of This Century, where she had her first one person show in 1946. During a trip to Mexico, she met Frida Kahlo and Gordon Onslow Ford, back in New York she became friends with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, Richard Lippold, and Morton Feldman. In May 1948, Sekula had her first one person show with Betty Parsons, with whom she would show from then on. In a letter to her mother of 1947, Sekula summarizes her feelings: "As I write to you looking out of my window I think of all the contemporary American poets and artists who represent their outlook on this strange country and I find myself beginning to believe that I shall be one of them. I shall be an American painter."

There couldn't be a greater difference between this letter and one written almost ten years later in St. Moritz, Switzerland: "I am these days unable to paint and no doctor can help me to bring back the necessary confidence. Not one person to ever show my work to—and I feel so far away from the Swiss character that I cannot get in touch with them. I hate their language and their fat selfassured looks they preach morals in each word + am so tired of being an outcast in a country I never felt close to."

Between these two letters lay many sojourns at psychiatric hospitals, initially in New York, later in Switzerland, usually combined with "shock treatments." In 1958, her illness forced Sekula to move back to Switzerland where hospitals stays were less costly. A growing sense of social isolation, enhanced by an environment hostile to her homosexuality, was matched by her distance to New York's art world. In 1960, Betty Parsons, who could no longer provide the desired moral and financial support, returned all the paintings to the artist. After being jilted by a woman she was in love with, Sekula committed suicide in 1963 in Zurich.

Sekula's work follows an oddly independent, almost erratic trajectory, touching upon the artistic streams around her. Surrealist automatism, very much a presence in New York through Breton and incorporated by Sekula friends Motherwell and Pollock in their own way, met her desire for an independent way of working, unconstrained by any stylistic considerations. In fairly large canvases and in smaller drawings, Sekula put forth abstract three dimensional spaces, densely layered with grids of color and delicate brush strokes that shimmer with light and depth.

Several of her sketchbooks, some from the Museum of Modern Art's collection, will be presented in this exhibition for the first time. In these books, Sekula developed a unique way of blending narrative and pictorial elements, combining free verbal association with images and shapes. Initially mainly biographical mirrors, the books acquired a status of their own. In the late forties, many of Sekula's principal drawings resulted from these books. Sekula's texts are poetic impressionistic essays, short poems, haiku-like bits of mysterious wisdom. In her later years, the artist would increasingly trust her literary output. Some of the original haikus will also be exhibited in the exhibition.

Two trips to New Mexico in the mid-forties left a deep impression on Sekula. Her works subsequently gained in ardor and clarity. The delicate lines are replaced by bold figurative elements that incorporate native motifs and predate Motherwell's by several years. Sekula also experimented with different materials, sprinkling flakes of crushed glass over the canvases to achieve a sparkling effect.

Dr. Dieter Schwarz, the curator of this exhibition, has been director of the Winterthur Kunstmuseum since 1990. He has curated major retrospectives of Marcel Duchamp, Richard Hamilton, Roni Horn, Agnes Martin, and many others, and is the author of books on Camille Graeser, André Thomkins and Zoltan Kemeny. In 1989, he published the catalogue raisonné of Lawrence Weiner's books.

On Saturday, September 14, at 3 PM, Dieter Schwarz will moderate a **panel discussion** about Sekula. Among the participants are Ann Eden Gibson (author of *Toward a Cultural History of Abstract Expressionism*, 1996), Walter Robinson (*Art in America*), Martica Sawin (author of *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*, 1995) and artist Richard Lippold. It will be followed at 4:30 PM by a reading of selected prose texts of the artist by Roger Perret, the editor of the collected writings of Sonja Sekula.

For further information, please call Carin Kuoni at (212) 925-2035.

*The exhibition has been supported, in part, by Pro Helvetia, the Arts Council of Switzerland.
The opening reception has graciously been sponsored by
The Hungarian Consulate General and W.J. Deutsch & Sons, Ltd.*

* * *

Concurrently with the exhibition on Sonja Sekula, the Swiss Institute inaugurates LIBRARY WORKS, a series of library exhibitions on the book arts. The first exhibition, opening on September 12 and running through December 1996, is dedicated to Swiss book artist Warja Lavater. The creator of poetic pictorial alphabets, Lavater's versions of well-known fairytales have been published by the Museum of Modern Art and Adrian Maeght.

The next gallery exhibition will be "Red River Crossings. Contemporary Artists Respond to Peter Rindisbacher (1806-1834)," opening on November 1, 1996. Native American artists, among them Arthur Amiotte, James Luna, Alan Michelson and Jolene Rickard, will respond to Rindisbacher, one of the first European artists to document the indigenous peoples of North America.