

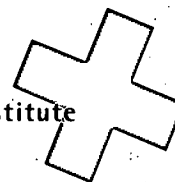
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Sonja Sekula 1918-1963

The Swiss Institute



New York

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

Sonja Sekula was born in 1918 in Lucerne, to 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 classes given by George Grosz, a family friend. Later she studied art and philosophy at Sarah Lawrence College, and in 1941 she enrolled at the Art Students League, taking classes with Morris Kantor and Raphael Soyer. 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 European 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. During a trip to Mexico, she met Frida Kahlo and Gordon Onslow Ford; back in New York she became friends with John Cage, Richard Lippold, and Morton Feldman.

In a 1947 letter to her mother, 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 often of several weeks or months' length at psychiatric hospitals, initially in New York, later in Switzerland. In 1958, her illness forced Sekula to move back to Switzerland where hospitals stays were less costly. A growing sense of social

isolation was matched by her distance from New York's art world. In 1960, Betty Parsons, who could no longer provide the desired moral and financial support, returned all the artist's paintings. After being jilted by a woman she was in love with, Sekula committed suicide in 1963.

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—was incorporated by Sekula friends Motherwell and Pollock in their own way, and it met her desire for an independent way of working, unconstrained by any stylistic considerations. In 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.

In her sketchbooks, 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 are also exhibited here.

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 American motifs and predate Motherwell's similar work by several years. Sekula also experimented with different materials, sprinkling flakes of crushed glass over the canvases to achieve a sparkling effect.

Panel Discussion: Saturday, September 14, at 3 PM

With curator Dieter Schwarz and Ann Eden Gibson, Brian O'Doherty, Walter Robinson, Martica Sawin, and artist and Sekula friend Richard Lippold.

Followed by a reading of selected prose texts of the artist by Roger Perret, the editor of the collected writings of Sonja Sekula.

The exhibition has been organized by the Winterthur Museum of Art, Switzerland.

It 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.