

The Abstraction of Commerce: From Halley to Sekula

A.

Think of the children's picture puzzle: Once we see the old waited hag emerge from the drawing of a beautiful princess, we can never stop seeing it. The drawing is forever, to the enlightened, an old waited hag. What, then, do we see in this painting of 80's neo-abstractionist Peter Halley? At first glance one is reminded of Mondrian, perhaps of Malevich. Transcendent geometric abstraction at its finest. Clear colors, clean lines, pleasing proportion. We are struck by the scale: body-sized, like a Rothko. Thick. Then by the colors: Day-Glo neon, variations of caution orange, reflective vest yellows and greens. Rectangles. An order attained on canvas which is impossible elsewhere. Yet maybe the title tips us off: "Six Prisons."¹ Six fields of color striped with bars. Six separate cells, cordoned off with black. Now we see them. Prisons. Cells. Sinister mechanisms embedded in a pleasing, abstract geometric system. Some diagrammatic meaning embedded in its pretense of geometric abstraction. The hag in the princess. And we cannot go back to our innocent way of seeing.

Innocent—and, Halley would say, naive. Peter Halley is an 80's art star, educated at Yale where he now teaches, and founding editor of New York's influential Index Magazine. With his paintings, through his painterly explorations of the functionality of geometric abstraction, Halley attempts to uncover hidden societal structures. He writes, "The cell is a reminder of the apartment house, the hospital bed, the school desk—the isolated endpoints of industrial infrastructure. The paintings are a critique of idealist modernism. In the 'color field' is placed a jail. The misty space of Rothko is walled up."²

Halley criticizes the naivete of ostensibly transcendental art (the quasi-religious Abstract Expressionists, the overly idealistic Constructivists) in a world so obviously based upon, inundated with a rigorous and practical brand of abstraction: that of overwhelming infrastructure. Utility grids of sewer, gas, steam, electric; disciplinary networks of police, prisons, government; pyramidal bureaucracy; tangles of highways, homes, strip malls; patterns of commerce, movements of goods and dollars—all meticulous, all planned, all useful, all concrete—yet by virtue of their sheer size and complexity, all hopelessly abstract in their overall import.

Abstraction in this sense can be a tool for managing our world. But one cannot ignore its pernicious side: the tendency of abstraction to depersonalize, to lump individuals together into manageable groups at the expense of their humanity. This is what happens to workers when we discuss the large-scale systems their labor makes possible. Discussions of global commerce, for example, even when specific modes of transportation enter in, seldom include the drivers, pilots, and ship's crews that run the global economy on the lowest level. An abstraction of this sort is ultimately hierarchical: the strong abstracting the weak, depriving them of their voice, even to the point of damaging the human connections necessary for healthy communities.

When Halley makes a painting like "Six Prisons," he does his audience both a service and a disservice. At least in an art-theoretical sense, the layers obscuring the nature of society have been peeled away. Here is a geometric abstraction—no more at first glance. Fields of color, pleasing proportion. Yet there are traces of figuration, hints of diagram and schema. The blocks and bars take on their penitentiary order, the logic and proportion of prison cells.

Upon closer inspection, one notices the asphalt-like texture of Halley's signature material, Roll-a-Tex, a commercially available additive that gives texture to house paint, suggestive not of

transcendental abstract art, but of crass industrial or suburban application. Halley calls it "a reminiscence of hotel ceilings."³ These plotted shapes emerging from artifice, these cells and prisons—these, and not some abstract escape, are the raw stuff of our world.

Other paintings suggest microchips, or simply "cells": ambiguous technological forms at once abstractly pleasing, coldly beautiful, yet insistent reminders of their practical referents. These plotted shapes emerging from artifice, these cells and prisons—these, and not some abstract escape, are the raw stuff of our world.

The disservice is that Halley abandons his audience at an unsatisfactory point. Halley's is ultimately a pessimistic art. He writes, "I decided to take the fact of geometry's omnipresence in the social landscape as a given."⁴ This is a limited view—in effect, a diagnosis made from a safe distance.

In a theoretical sense, Halley's painting can be a tool. Makiko Matake writes in her essay "Painting as Sociogram," ". . . the process of decoding [Halley's] painting becomes a medium through which we decode our social life."⁵ In short, we can use the same way of seeing to reveal the prison in the abstract painting, or to uncover the geometry of bureaucracy, academia, popular culture. It's a useful visual abridgement of Foucault, the contemporary philosopher who first discussed disciplinary networks such as prisons, schools, or the military in terms of the same overarching geometric hierarchy. A Halley painting is high social theory outlined on canvas—yet this is where it stays. As an innovative painter and art world figure, Halley has made a brilliant career of dismantling supposedly transcendent abstract art to reveal its basis in commercial systems. Yet for all its diagrammatic sense, Halley's work remains suspended in the immaterial, theoretical art world. His knowing brand of abstract painting is in many ways bound to the same high-art conceits as that of Rothko.

We have seen the prisons; we have seen the materialism and bureaucracy inherent in the high rhetoric of abstraction. Yet here Halley seems content. Compare "Six Prisons" (2004) to his first mature work "Freudian Painting" (1981); twenty-three years has made little difference.⁶ He has pointed out the futility of art for art's sake; the naivete of abstract expressionism; he has diagrammed our entanglement within structure, technology, commerce. Now he sits back and cranks out paintings.

As John Miller puts it, his is an art of dystopian resignation.⁷ Halley writes, "Insofar as I am interested in geometry and urban organization, I'm concerned with the techniques that [a] managerial and intellectual culture utilizes to try to control and determine the direction of the culture."⁸ To Halley, commerce takes place in a world abstract and clean, made only of dollars and branching diagrams. Halley never offers an alternative, makes no appeals, or even seems to think there's anything wrong with this workerless view.

B.

It's understood that abstraction, geometric or otherwise, is essential to our grasp on our world. Without it, we simply don't have the capability to conceive of large systems in all their detail. Photographer and essayist Allan Sekula points out that the maritime movement of goods in particular, the overall overwhelming system of global commerce "can be explained in its entirety only through recourse to abstraction."⁹ You can't imagine the tremendous flow of goods across the globe, with all its intricacies (supply stations, warehouses, modes of transport, traders, manufacturers, consumers, workers) except as an abstraction: a diagram, a flow chart, a concept. And the more reductive the model, the easier

its use. An elite concerned with profit would naturally find it easier to manage this complicated system with its human element omitted; indeed, Sekula does not shy from stating that "contemporary elites imagine a world of wealth without workers."¹⁰

Your average consumer, in turn, imagines a world of goods without ships. Our concept of commerce, of the movement of goods in the internet age, seldom includes the sea. We imagine anything heavier than an email traveling by plane: people, packages, consumer goods. Bulky and unsophisticated products move in trucks: food, construction supplies, bifurcated mobile homes strapped to flatbeds; or in trains: coal, oil, wood. Even when container ships and tankers do enter the public eye, such as in times of environmental catastrophe, only leaking oil is revealed. Shipping containers, uniform, colorful, abstract, keep their contents secret. As Sekula puts it, "The cargo container has become the very emblem of capitalist disavowal."¹¹

These images are from Sekula's book *Fish Story*, published in 1995. Through a sophisticated combination and sequencing of texts and photographs, Sekula maps the blurred realm of maritime commerce, relegated to workerless abstraction by technology. Sekula is a Yale graduate, a radically materialist artist-intellectual, engaged in an idiosyncratic and iconoclastic art practice cum political critique. He is located in a lineage of economically conscious intelligentsia, and he waves this flag proudly. For example, *Fish Story's* centerpiece essay "Dismal Science," this title itself a knowingly ironic term for economics coined by historian-philosopher Thomas Carlyle, opens with a famous passage. Friedrich Engels observes the London slums from the deck of a ship on the Thames. Soon comes the steamer, then the large mechanized cargo ship. Very quickly the romance of the sea disappears into the haze of technological progress; soon we are left with the container port, where most of *Fish Story* takes place. The book works to pin down the modern industrialized version of shipping, and its still-

present human element—the neglect of which in the public consciousness is emblemized by the modern standardized shipping container, displaced minimalist prisms populating the decks and wharfs.

While *Fish Story* hints at the contents of these prone monoliths, their contents is ultimately unknowable, one container ultimately indistinguishable from the next. Where the book succeeds is in repopulating the forgotten industrial realm of the sea. In the opening chapter, Sekula presents photographs of engine rooms, living quarters, situations quotidian to his subjects yet exotic anachronisms to an audience that conceives of commerce in terms of instantaneous electronic transactions.

Both Halley and Sekula understand and seek to reveal the role of abstraction in commerce. Indeed, they are both materialists, albeit with different aims. Both seek to dispel the idealistic notions of abstraction represented by Rothko and company. Yet Sekula doesn't stop with paintings—indeed, he's a photographer and an essayist, but one pioneering a unique form of political documentary, a genre that incorporates both reportage and images without being redundant, not merely illustrating his texts but generating meaning through their interaction with the photographs. And while his rigorously academic multimedia works resist both popular frenzy and art-world commodification, Sekula has become recognized in the past decade as an art star in his own right. His is an art devoted to not only broadly diagramming the problems in capitalist society but to combing through often convoluted details in search of solutions—an antithesis to Halley's "dystopian resignation."

Sekula combats the mystifying abstraction of commerce—a confusion that functions to smooth over, omit, obscure, conceal the human element of globalized trade—through the literalness, the specificity of photography. Sekula's photographs and texts are proof that these

supposedly antiquated methods of movement are still in use. But more than this, Sekula's photos and texts argue that not only is global commerce still built on shipping, but shipping is in turn still built on history, and still built on the laboring class. Maritime trade did not evaporate with the advent of digital technology; nor did the conflicts accompanying maritime labor.

Obvious as it may seem, Sekula shows what many would like to forget: that ships still have crews. Sekula writes in the essay "Dismal Science," "My argument here runs against the commonly held view that the computer and telecommunications are the sole engines of the third industrial revolution. In effect, I am arguing for the continued importance of maritime space in order to counter the exaggerated importance attached to that largely metaphysical construct, 'cyberspace,' and the corollary myth of 'instantaneous' contact between distant spaces."¹²

Looming in the background all the while: shipping containers, pioneered by a United States trucking executive in 1956 and a world standard by the 1960s. The standardization of cargo was the last great time-saving innovation of the shipping industry. As Sekula points out, the predictable loading and unloading of goods homogenized sea routes in the same way as trucking or locomotive travel. Distinctions between land and sea movement dissolved; an abstract network of straight lines and timetables became possible.

"Containerization obscures more than the physical heterogeneity of cargoes," writes Sekula, "but also serves to make ports less visible and more remote from metropolitan consciousness..."¹³

So too did the human factor melt into this abstracted flow of goods. Here, from the first section in *Fish Story*: a prototype robotic truck being tested at a container port in the Netherlands. This, it would seem, is the vision of the modern port, clean, efficient, a world without workers. A haze of abstraction. As Halley puts it, the "misty space of Rothko"—here

applied to the mammoth global system of cargo transport—conceals the workings of the economy—indeed, renders abstract, docile, manageable the ongoing struggles of labor. Containerization has succeeded remarkably in removing human associations from products. A pile of jeans at a dock in Indonesia, for example, might bring to mind sweatshops; a stack of rifles headed for the Middle East might suggest war. Yet couched in corrugated steel, anonymous cargos move unquestioned to their destinations. Sekula notes how dockers in Barcelona might chuckle as they read the manifest: "Weapons for the Iraqis in the forward hold. Weapons for the Iranians in the aft hold."¹⁴ Such tragicomic juxtapositions occur regularly on the stage of global commerce, courtesy of containerized, abstracted shipping.

Sekula reminds us of the estranged maritime realm, "the sea, the forgotten space."¹⁵ Photographs provide current documentation; texts outline a history. The reinstatement of maritime history and its contingent concerns, namely labor, is the goal of Sekula's project. Take, for instance, a late section in *Fish Story* titled "True Cross," documenting Veracruz, Mexico in 1994. The piece consists of four paragraphs of text, followed by thirteen color photographs. Each photograph is marked with its plate number and accompanied by a brief descriptive caption at the end: "Tugboat dock. Malecon." or "Waterfront vendor and docker in container storage area."¹⁶ The story Sekula outlines in the text at the beginning of the chapter is that of the conquistador fortress San Juan de Ulua, built in Veracruz by Hernan Cortes. Finding no wood or stone, the soldiers used white coral cut from the reef—the sea. He traces movement of material: the coral of the fortress, the port built around it for the handling of cement, and what has become "the largest container terminal in Mexico."¹⁷ "Two new cranes have been added to two already in place," writes Sekula, "in anticipation of an increased flow of goods resulting from the North American Free Trade Agreement." He also quotes a recent

history of Veracruz, which describes the fortress as "immersed in the modern cargo port, and its architecture has lost its monumentality." The port is a container port now; the maritime space of colonial exploitation seems to have disappeared. But Sekula reminds us: "Today, Mexican schoolchildren, gasping and then whispering, are trooped by their teachers through these dank and salty colonial dungeons. Other children, not in school, cast nets for small fish swimming in the moat." Though over four centuries separate the construction of the port and Sekula's visit in March of 1994, the coral fortress built by Cortes is still a symbol of exploitation. Where before the military power of the conquistadors subdued through imprisonment and torture, today the mechanized and standardized container port subdues by eliminating the jobs of dock workers, by keeping wealth overseas, by keeping locals impoverished and uneducated.

The viewer is left to do the work of connecting the text to the photographs. Some connections come easily. The caption to this image reads, "Drilling core samples from the coral walls of the fortress. San Juan de Ulua"—a worker checking the coral. But here, "Waterfront vendors living in containers." That communities have sprung up in the container storage areas around Veracruz is not stated in the text, but rather is implicit in the photographs and captions. The viewer is left with the unsettling import of the space between the story of San Juan de Ulua and the destitution of the residents of Veracruz apparent in the photographs. The story is that of commerce and exploitation, and that of neglect made possible through abstraction.

Sekula renders these mysterious containers startlingly concrete. Here, again from "True Cross," discarded containers are used to control shifting sand dunes. And here, in the same location, "Truckload of Volkswagens from factory in Puebla awaiting arrival of car-

carrier ship for export."¹⁸ Meanwhile, impoverished children catch small fish in the moat of a nearby colonial fortress.

Through his unique brand of abstract painting, as if he has stolen and reproduced the blueprints, Halley depicts the controlling abstract geometry of commercial systems from the top down. Sekula examines the same systems from the bottom up by presenting the viewpoint of the economic base, the dock worker and the ship mechanic. Sekula returns the realm of the sea, shipping, and its laborers to the narrative history of commerce, from the first gold hunters in the New World to the modern sweatshops of the Pacific Rim. Halley bases his paintings in history as well—but it's *art* history, the history of theory, tangential to the concrete struggles depicted in Sekula's book. Sekula doesn't paint a cryptic conclusion; he makes an argument; he presents evidence. He doesn't merely point out the transcendental abstract haze; he returns what it obscures to the realm of the concrete. *Fish Story* dispels the same idealist myths as Halley's *Six Prisons* in favor of a realistic understanding of materiality, of the movement of information and goods. Yet Sekula goes on to make an explicit demand: nothing less than the acknowledgement of the continued exploitation of labor in the internet age.

- ¹ Peter Halley, Six Prisons. Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, 2004.
- ² Halley, "Notes on the Paintings," Collected Essays 1981-1987 (Zurich: Bruno Bischofberger Gallery, 1989) 22-23.
- ³ Halley 23.
- ⁴ Halley, Maintain Speed (New York: Art Publishers Inc, 2000) 19.
- ⁵ Makiko Mataka, "Painting as Sociogram," trans. Tim Cross and Midori Nishizawa, Maintain Speed 50.
- ⁶ Halley, Freudian Painting. 1981.
- ⁷ John Miller, "Peter Halley's 'Geometric And The Social,'" Artscribe March/April 1989 65.
- ⁸ Halley, "Deployment of the Geometric," Collected Essays 1981-1987 127-130.
- ⁹ Allan Sekula, Fish Story (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1995) 12.
- ¹⁰ Sekula, Interview with Debra Risberg, Dismal Science: Photo Works. 1972-,1996 (Normal, IL: University Galleries, Illinois SU, 1999)248.
- ¹¹ Sekula 248.
- ¹² Sekula, "Dismal Science," Fish Story 50.
- ¹³ Sekula 49.
- ¹⁴ Sekula, "Loaves and Fishes," Fish Story 32.
- ¹⁵ Sekula, "Dismal Science," 50.
- ¹⁶ Sekula, "True Cross," Fish Story 164.
- ¹⁷ Sekula 150.
- ¹⁸ Sekula 164.