



Sekula, Sonja (1918-1963)

by Richard G. Mann

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The Swiss-born artist Sonja Sekula created small-scale abstract images with profound emotional power. As an "out" lesbian active in the New York art world during the 1940s and early 1950s, she confronted severe homophobia, which intensified the anxieties that plagued her throughout her adult life. Despite her emotional turmoil, Sekula created a distinctive, varied, and original body of work. Her achievements only recently have begun to receive the critical and scholarly attention they deserve.

Background and Education

Sonja Sekula was born in Lucerne on April 8, 1918 to Béla Sekula (1881-1966), a Hungarian who had emigrated to Switzerland in 1913, and Berta Huguenin (1896-1980), a Swiss woman. An internationally prominent stamp dealer, Béla Sekula was determined to provide his daughter an outstanding education. Between the ages of seven to sixteen (1925-1934), she attended prestigious boarding schools in the Swiss communities of Lucerne, Zuov, and Ftan.

By 1934, Sekula had decided that she wanted to become a professional artist, and she, therefore, studied painting in Budapest and Florence in 1934 and 1935. In 1935, at the age of seventeen, she met and fell deeply in love with Annemarie Schwarzenbach, a highly respected Swiss photojournalist. Following an impassioned correspondence with Schwarzenbach, Sekula spent several weeks at her home in Engardin in 1936.

This relationship was cut short in September 1936 when Béla Sekula moved both his family and his business from Lucerne to New York. Settling first in suburban Douglastown, Long Island, the Sekulas then moved into a luxurious apartment building on Park Avenue in 1938. By 1939, the society columns of the *New York Times* recorded the activities of the entire Sekula family.

Determined to pursue her artistic ambitions, Sonja took private painting lessons in 1937 from George Grosz, the German artist who was then living in exile in New York. Most commentators have assumed that Grosz's caustic political images had little impact on Sekula's artistic development. However, his bold use of line may have influenced her skillful employment of thin, tautly stretched lines to evoke emotional states in her mature abstract paintings.

In September 1937, Sekula enrolled in Sarah Lawrence College to study art and literature.

Nervous Breakdowns and Treatments

After a trip to Europe in the summer of 1938, Sekula made her first attempt at suicide. Following this incident, her family placed her in psychiatric treatment at New York Hospital, White Plains, where she remained until 1941. Throughout the rest of her life, Sekula continued to suffer from nervous breakdowns, which led to further periods of confinement in sanitariums both in the United States (New York Hospital, White Plains, 1951-52; Brooke [now Hall-Brooke] Psychiatric Clinic, Westport, Conn., 1954-55) and Europe

(Bellvue Sanatorium, Kreuzlingen, 1952-53, 1956; Psychiatric Clinic, Hohenegg, 1958-59, 1963; Münchenbuchsee Psychiatric Clinic, 1961, 1962). In March 1955, unable to afford the high costs of medical treatment in the United States, the Sekula family returned permanently to Switzerland.

During her stays in clinics, Sekula was subjected to a harsh regimen of treatments, including frequent shock therapy, injections with various mind-altering drugs, and wet-sheet wraps. From the 1930s through the 1950s, many leading psychologists considered lesbianism a symptom of profound mental disorder. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that her doctors repeatedly sought to "cure" her sexual orientation, which they regarded as a debilitating manifestation of schizophrenia.

In a moving notation in her diaries in 1960, Sekula revealed that her belief in the integrity of her sexual desire was undiminished by these efforts: "Let homosexuality be forgiven . . . for most often she did not sin against nature but tried to be true to the law of her own--To feel guilt about having loved a being of your own kind body and soul is hopeless."

Life and Career, 1941-1955

Despite her personal difficulties, Sekula pursued both artistic endeavors and friendships with remarkable dedication and enthusiasm. After leaving New York Hospital in 1941, she lived with her family and took painting lessons from Morris Kantor at the Art Students' League. Although best known as a realist, Kantor was experimenting with Cubism, Futurism, and other modernist styles during the period in which he taught Sekula.

However, Sekula's artistic goals were more profoundly influenced by André Breton, Max Ernst, and other prominent Surrealists, who frequented the salons held at her parents' Park Avenue apartment, beginning in 1942. Regarding art as an expression of the unconscious and striving to free themselves from any sort of rational control that might limit their creativity, the Surrealists regarded Sekula's experiences with mental turmoil as indications of her unique talents, and they welcomed her into their group.

Many commentators have maintained that the Surrealists probably encouraged Sekula's emotional instability. However, this theory is belied by the fact that Sekula enjoyed a prolonged period of mental health from 1941 to 1951, precisely the period in which she associated most closely with the Surrealists.

Sekula developed an intimate friendship with Breton and lived in his apartment during 1945. Through Breton, she became acquainted with the French painter, Alice Rahon, with whom she had a passionate affair for several months during 1945. After Rahon, who was married to artist Wolfgang Paalen, ended their relationship, Sekula wrote to her about her efforts to transform her frustrated desire into paintings.

Discouraged by her experience with Rahon, Sekula became cynical about the possibility of developing a partnership with another woman. Nevertheless, in 1949, she fell in love with Manina Thoenen, whom she met while vacationing in Saint Tropez.

During the 1940s, Sekula developed close friendships with artists associated with the emerging Abstract Expressionist movement, including the painters Robert Motherwell and Roberto Matta and the sculptor David Hare. Although allied with the Surrealists in the early 1940s, the Abstract Expressionists sought to achieve even greater expressive freedom by eliminating all vestiges of representation from their work. Encouraged by David Hare, Sekula published the poem *Womb* and a related drawing in the March 1943 issue of *VVV*, a journal of poetry and art, which Hare founded and edited between 1942 and 1944. Although Sekula produced an extensive body of creative writing, *Womb* was the only piece to be published during her lifetime.

In 1947, Sekula moved into a building at 346 Monroe Street, where composer John Cage and dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham lived. She quickly became close friends with these gay men. Although

Cunningham generally preferred to design his own costumes, he commissioned her to create the costume for his performance of *Dromenon* in December 1947. To insure that her design would complement the shape of Cunningham's body, Sekula painted brightly colored abstract forms onto his tights and leotard while Cunningham was wearing them. A little of the design has come off each time that the costume has been used.

In 1943, paintings by Sekula were included in *31 Women Artists*, a group show at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery. In 1946, Guggenheim gave Sekula her first solo exhibition. Reviewers warmly praised this appearance of a new talent. The reviewer for the *New York Times*, for example, noted the appeal of her color and "richly diversified surface patterns."

In 1948, Sekula switched to Betty Parsons Gallery, which had replaced Art of This Century as the leading avant-garde venue in New York. By the late 1940s, Parsons exhibited most of the artists associated with Abstract Expressionism. Notably tolerant of erratic behavior, Parsons was an ideal representative for Sekula, who suffered a nervous breakdown shortly after the successful opening of a major solo exhibition in April 1951. Despite Sekula's diminishing level of production during her stays in clinics in the early and mid-1950s, Parsons continued to serve as her agent until 1957.

Sekula never achieved the degree of professional recognition and success that seemed to be presaged by the reviews of her first exhibition. Classifying Sekula as an Abstract Expressionist, reviewers increasingly compared her work unfavorably to paintings by the leading male exponents of that style.

Sekula never created works with the gigantic proportions favored by Motherwell and other prominent Abstract Expressionist painters. Preferring to work on a small scale, she seldom created paintings that measured more than fourteen by ten inches. Furthermore, she generally applied paint delicately and avoided the bold, thick strokes and splashes utilized by other Abstract Expressionists.

The most prominent Abstract Expressionist painters, such as Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell, devised signature styles, which they employed in countless works. In the context of the American art world of the late 1940s and 1950s, Sekula's perceived inability to devise an immediately recognizable autograph style led to increasingly harsh criticism of her paintings.

In a 1957 entry in her journals, Sekula expressed puzzlement at this response to her work: "The reproach I often received at not following one definite line I cannot understand. For I am many and I reflect the left and the right and attempt to stand up and lie down wall-lessly in the shadow and in the light of my hands, soul, and heart."

Sources and Styles from the Early 1940s to the Mid-1950s

Although it diminished her reputation during her lifetime, Sekula's adventurous investigation of many possible means of expression now seems one of the strengths of her art. Several of her early paintings of the 1940s are innovative variations of pieces by Constructivist artists active in the early twentieth century. For example, in *Awakening* (1943, Galerie Wiebenga, Lausanne), the dynamic arrangement of geometric shapes, which seem to hover above the surface of the canvas, recalls Kazimir Malevich's *Suprematism* (1915, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam).

Throughout the 1940s, Sekula also sought inspiration in cultures outside the Western mainstream. For instance, she evoked the colors and patterns of African textiles in the aptly titled *African Moonsun* (1945, Kunstmuseum, Lucerne). However, she avoided simplistic imitation of African sources through her notably witty and playful use of line, which recalls the prominent early twentieth-century Swiss artist, Paul Klee.

In many of her small abstract paintings of the early and mid-1940s, Sekula incorporated totemic elements, appropriated from Northwest Coast Native American art. In *Untitled* (before 1945, Mr. and Mrs. Sekula de

Renard Collection), these devices are elegantly displayed within a shape that recalls butterfly wings. In *Presence of Illumination* (1945, private collection, New York), the totemic devices are interwoven in a dynamic, elongated composition. Bright colors alleviate the sense of tension, evoked by the dense compacting of elements.

Although her interest in Native American culture was shared by many Abstract Expressionists, including Jackson Pollock, she seems to have investigated native sources more systematically and intensely than most of her colleagues. In 1946, she and Natica Waterbury (with whom she previously had shared a house at Asharoken Beach Northport, Long Island) moved to New Mexico in order to study Native American art and culture. The following year, she spent several months traveling in Mexico with her mother in order to study Pre-Columbian art.

Sekula's paintings of the late 1940s and early 1950s continued to reveal her fascination with Native American art, but at this period she interpreted totemic devices in a considerably more stylized fashion. For example, in *Private Totem* (1948, Collection Kukri Imre, Spreitenbach, Switzerland), the original Native American sources are only vaguely recollected in the pictographic elements, which are spread over the canvas in an even-textured composition, characteristic of Abstract Expressionism in general.

In numerous paintings of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Sekula utilized what Cassandra Langer aptly characterized as "closeted symbolism," evocative of her situation as a lesbian in an intensely homophobic era. Arranged in horizontal rows in *The Rains* (1949, private collection, New York), the densely layered biomorphic shapes and vaguely calligraphic markings seem to constitute a pictographic language, intended to produce some sort of indecipherable text. Misty grays and blues enhance the sense of mystery conveyed by this piece.

However, not of all Sekula's paintings can be related to her personal life. For example, she often sought to express the dynamism and boldness of New York, which she regarded as the archetypal American city. With her stylized pictorial language, she managed to celebrate the impressive architecture of New York without recording its actual appearance. The semicircular arcs that dominate the canvas *Williamsburg Bridge* (1948, Urs & Barbara Brunner Collection, Switzerland) evoke the splendor of the span that connects Manhattan and Brooklyn.

Similarly, the towering, wiry constructions in *City of the Poor* (1951, private collection, New York) reflect New York's high-rise buildings. Occasional splotches of bright color and shimmering light serves to endow this painting with an uplifting mood. Further, vaguely human, biomorphic shapes scattered throughout the painting evoke the vitality of the ordinary individuals referenced in the title. In a letter of 1960 to Parsons, Sekula recalled the painting with amazement: "'The City of the Poor' is really rich isn't it? I didn't even know that when I painted it."

Later Years

By the late 1950s, Sekula had fallen into obscurity, and she realized that her art was unlikely to be received favorably in her lifetime. Determined to continue working without regard for the art establishment, she declared in a journal entry of 1961: "No more reading of art magazines . . . I am as good as bad as all of them, even though I am ignored . . . I go on."

The scope and diversity of her artistic achievements in the later years of her life seem especially remarkable, when one considers that she was unable to produce art during most of the time that she was confined in sanitariums. Further, because of her family's diminished economic resources, she had to work at a variety of jobs (for instance, as a bookkeeper in a food processing plant) in order to support herself.

In sketchbooks from the late 1950s and early 1960s, Sekula innovatively blended haiku poems with various abstract forms. Freed from the need to conform to mainstream expectations, she sometimes alluded

directly to her love for other women in the texts in the sketch books. Interspersed throughout the pages of these books are biomorphic shapes that strongly evoke women's breasts and genitalia.

Sekula also continued to produce a significant body of independent paintings during her later years. The combination of words and brightly colored, biomorphic shapes in *Read Look* (1956, private collection, New York) foreshadows the development of Pop Art. In two paintings of 1963, *Les Amies* and *Les Lesbiennes* (1963, both in private collections), she explicitly celebrated her sexuality. Both these paintings show stylized images of women, whose bodies seem almost to be fused together.

Despite the joy conveyed by these late paintings, Sekula experienced great mental anguish during 1963, the final year of her life. On April 25, she hanged herself in her studio in Zurich. As requested in her suicide note, she was buried in Saint Moritz.

Following her death, her work was virtually forgotten until 1971, when Finch College in Manhattan held a small but noteworthy exhibition of some of the most important paintings of her New York years.

In 1996, the Kunstmuseum in Winterthur, Switzerland mounted a major exhibition, which covered the entire span of her career and included many previously unexhibited works, such as her late sketchbooks. Later in the same year, a smaller version of this exhibition was held at the Swiss Institute, New York. These shows demonstrated the richness and importance of Sekula's work.

Sekula is now regarded in her native Switzerland as one of the most important artists of the twentieth century, although her work still is not widely known elsewhere. Irene Schweizer, a prominent Swiss pianist and composer, recently wrote a jazz symphony, *Many and One Direction* (2004), in tribute to Sekula.

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