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Between the Net and the Deep Blue Sea (Rethinking the Traffic in Photographs)

ALLAN SEKULA

Part 1: Dear Bill

My subtitle recalls an essay I wrote more than twenty years ago, in an effort to understand the long-held belief that photography is a “universal language,” a language legible, as one enthusiastic early American press report on the daguerreotype put it, “in the courts of civilization and the hut of the savage.”¹ The wording here was quaint, even for its time, as the white-settler republic drove relentlessly westward, indifferent to the way a renegade Seminole, hiding out in the swamps of Florida, might have responded to the grim-faced daguerreotype portrait of the aged Indian-fighter Andrew Jackson. With the advent of neocolonialism, the language became less quaint, but the naive optimism persisted unabashed. Edward Steichen recalled the “rapt attention” with which Guatemalan peasants gazed at his traveling exhibition *The Family of Man*, not long after the 1954 CIA-backed coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz: “The people in the audience looked at the pictures and the people in the pictures looked back at them. They recognized each other.”²

This conceit, that the globalized pictorial archive benignly conscripts subjects as members of a metaphoric “human family,” now seems quaint in its turn. It is hard (for many Americans, at least) not to look at *The Family of Man* today without a tinge of nostalgia for an exhausted liberalism. And yet isn’t this notion of mutual recognition, of global connectedness and legibility, at the heart of the promise of the Internet? This promise gives a humanist gloss to the archival collecting of demographic data, much as Carl Sandburg did when he described *The Family of Man* as a “multiplication table of living breathing human faces.”³ Communications technologies—photographic reproduction, linked computers—provide strong tools for the instrumental channeling of human desire. This

1. Allan Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” in *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), pp. 76–101. Originally published in *Art Journal*, Spring 1981.
2. Edward Steichen, *A Life in Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), n.p.
3. Carl Sandburg, “Prologue,” in *The Family of Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p. 3.

OCTOBER 102, Fall 2002, pp. 3–34. © 2002 Allan Sekula.

instrumentalism can and indeed must be disguised as a benign expansion of the field of human intimacy. This is more true of communication technologies than it is of other technical forces, since, prenatal maternity excepted, contact between humans begins with the exchange of signs.

In the age of the Internet, the liberalism of Steichen's humanist credo—however flawed and compromised at the time—has been deleted, but a socially atomized version of the old idea remains. As middle-class American teenagers of the mid-1960s might have sat around sipping cheap jug wine and listening to Joan Baez records while perusing the photographs of love, childbirth, and peasants in the best-selling photographic book of all time, so today they retreat, usually in solitude, to their bedrooms, and log on to the World Wide Web, or to whatever virtual microcosm elicits their curiosity.

This brings me up against my title. Recently I wrote a letter to a man who embodies the new paradigm of the global archivist, the facilitator of the new virtual and disembodied *family of man*. He's no Steichen, since he refuses the role of the grand paternalistic editor, preferring in a more veiled manner to manage the global archive and retrieval system from which any number of pictorial statements might be constructed. In effect, he allows his clients to play in the privacy of their homes the role of mini-Steichen, perusing vast quantities of images from around the world, culling freely—but for a price—with meaning in mind.

I made a point of typing the letter on an old manual typewriter, and of sending it anonymously: both neo-Luddite gestures of sorts. The first gesture befits a world of slower communications. *In the old days*, messages contended with the weather, with "rain and snow and heat" as the old slogan of the U.S. Post Office would have it. As you can see, my old-fashioned letter is appended to a documented action that pushes to an extreme this idea of meteorological resistance to communication:

November 30, 1999

Dear Bill Gates,

I swam past your dream house the other day, but didn't stop to knock. Frankly, your underwater sensors had me worried. I would have liked to take a look at Winslow Homer's Lost on the Grand Banks. It's a great painting, but, speaking as a friend and fellow citizen, at \$30 million you paid too much.

HIGHEST PRICE EVER PAID FOR AN AMERICAN PAINTING!!!

So why are you so interested in a picture of two poor lost dory fishermen, momentarily high on a swell, peering into a wall of fog? They are about as high as they're ever going to be, unless the sea gets uglier. They are going to die, you know, and it won't be a pretty death.

And as for you, Bill, when you're on the Net, are you lost? Or found?

And the rest of us—lost or found—are we on it, or in it?

Your friend



Allan Sekula. Dear Bill Gates (triptych). 1999. All images © Allan Sekula unless otherwise attributed.

The date of the letter, possibly suspect in light of evidence yet to be introduced, underscores the neo-Luddite resort to the manual typewriter, since it marks the very day of show-stopping mass protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, the hometown and current residence of Mr. Bill Gates.

A befuddled and slightly hysterical *New York Times* tried to minimize the significance of this new movement of resistance to corporate globalization, suggesting that the WTO talks themselves were inconsequential. The article had a revealing title, “Shipwreck in Seattle”:

The administration chose a spectacularly bad moment to pick this particular fight. With the exception of agriculture, few American industries have a clear agenda for trade talks now, and many no longer believe that these long, endless “rounds” of negotiations are useful anymore. They involve too many countries, rich and poor, with radically different interests. *In an age of e-mail, they move like an aging cargo ship.* The co-chairman of the Seattle host committee for the talks, Bill Gates, barely even showed up—and his office is only 12 miles away. [emphasis added]⁴

In other words, the smart people, who also happen to be the rich people from the richest country, sailed safely just outside the proverbial *twelve mile limit*, unperturbed by the rusting hulk that had slammed unexpectedly into the Seattle waterfront.

Throughout that week, many among the disobedient crowds in the streets, indulging in this fool’s theater of maritime anachronism, sought to protect their eyes from tear gas with swim goggles like those worn by the anonymous swimmer in the photograph. As someone observed, it was a veritable fashion show, a parade of rain gear, a liquid circus.

4. David E. Sanger, “Shipwreck in Seattle,” *New York Times*, December 5, 1999.



Sekula. From *Waiting for Tear Gas* (slide projection). 1999–2000.

In an age that denies the very existence of society, to insist on the scandal of the world's increasingly grotesque "connectedness," the hidden merciless grinding away beneath the slick superficial liquidity of markets, is akin to putting oneself in the position of the ocean swimmer, timing one's strokes to the swell, turning one's submerged ear with every breath to the deep rumble of stones rolling on the bottom far below. To insist on the social is simply to practice purposeful immersion.

The resort to tear gas serves not only to "control the crowd," that is, to prevent the radical redefinition of the use-value of city streets, but also to produce through chemical means the exaggerated liquid symptoms of human empathy and grief. This chemically induced parody of extreme human emotion is in itself an assertion of robotic power. The harsh discipline of tears, mucus, sudden asthma leads the citizenry back to the dry regimen of the everyday. Only the markets are allowed to be fluid.

Meanwhile, *while all this is going on*, the "citizen and friend" is either on the verge of drowning or about to descend for a desperate commando attack, treading water with a good kick in the cold dusk a couple of hundred yards from a guarded shore, waiting for an answer from the captain of disembodied industry. A brief self-portrait of the swimmer: a chilled Kilroy winks at the winking semisubmerged eye of the camera.

Inside the gigantic Big House on the shore, it is dry, *watertight*, befitting a highly computerized environment, invisibly robotic in the efficiency of its hospitality. There is no need to greet the guest at the door. The butler now resides in the data bank, programmed for the visitor's taste in music and drink, turning off the lights in the guest's wake, like the grandmotherly attendants in dank Romanian museums. Our host, the Disembodied Industrialist, waits offstage, a misanthrope or recluse either theatrically timing or neurotically delaying his appearance, like Captain Nemo.

This time, leaving Jules Verne behind in the old leather-bound library of industrialism, it's no longer a matter of the submarine as the fully appointed home of an exiled band of rebels, but of the private mansion as submarine: the *villa-Nautilus*. Verne imagined the submarine as rogue vessel, but the submarine now offers itself as one potential conference center for the powerful plotters who have been driven from the cities by the angry citizens of the shore. The plotters lurk like pirates just beyond and below the horizon. What minimum safe distance will these officials from the rich nations take from the *polis*? Twenty thousand leagues? Remote orbit? Perhaps, as they were forced to do in Genoa, they resort to less drastic measures and retire to a luxury cruise ship anchored in a barricaded port, protected from the eyes and shouts of the citizenry behind hastily erected walls of cargo containers. Nothing could be more instructive than this improvised metal barrier, for it is these mundane and omni-mobile boxes that make the global factory possible. The esoteric logos of the shipping companies painted on the corrugated steel bespeak a hidden history of disguised extraterritorial ownership and bogus national sovereignty, the very prototype for contemporary

capitalism in general. Behind the metal curtain, frogmen inspect hulls for improbable limpet mines, and police provocateurs prepare their costumes. This stage business clears the way for the unfolding of the drama of repression: the use of lethal weapons against protestors, illegal searches and confiscations, brutal beatings. At this juncture, Jules Verne yields to Joseph Conrad. It's *The Secret Agent* we should be reading.

Power is now defined as the ability to contain real and imagined terror.⁵ Even discursive challenges to power are reducible to the model of the terrorist threat. If the stealth of submarines has served the military, it can also serve the police, especially as the line blurs between the two. An expert in terror, Nemo sailed outside the network of communication, signaling to the world only through violent collision. The sophisticated modern submarine is always tuned to low-frequency radio signals from underground terrestrial command centers, gifted with the remote eyes of satellites and drones, ever poised to launch cruise missiles against rogue cities, down the factory chimney, into the hotel lobby. *Out of sight, but in touch and in the know*: the very model of the secret agent. *Smart*, not at all the mere mechanical equivalent of a vengeful whale. That key difference aside, the old rebellious submarine and the new villa-*Nautilus* are both refuges from the often angry surface of the sea.

The well-heeled guests, taking a cruise off Hawaii, are lulled into complacency by the smooth and silent underwater functioning of the machine. Awed by the impressive display of *their tax dollars at work*, they are shocked by the violence of the breaking of the surface, the brutal and sudden encounter with boats, swimmers, denizens of the upper waters, and the dwellers of the shore. Society—*the family of man*—suddenly exists again, *on the beach*, in all its fragility. The anguished commander confesses to his laxity at the periscope: “Oh my God. We’ve hit—we’ve hit some kids.” Elaborate and careful and heartfelt apologies must be made, *especially to our friends and allies*, all this without compromising the exonerating function of official inquiries.⁶

Accidents are the price of preparedness. In compensation, our friends, *who were once our enemies*, receive special invitations to the premiere of the next big military spectacle film, which weaves an insipid romantic triangle around their long-ago surprise attack on our navy. A few months later the same entertainment company will, in further compensation, open a second amusement park in their country, this one devoted to the romance of the sea:

Japan, long infatuated with American culture and Hollywood, is *ground zero* for the globalization of the theme park industry . . . [emphasis added] Disney chose to build its first sea-theme park because of the Japanese affinity for the ocean and marine life, and the site is surrounded by water.⁷

5. This essay was completed in late August 2001.

6. “Collision at Sea: The Commander Speaks,” *Dateline*, NBC News, April 23, 2001.

7. Richard Verrier and Mark Magnier, “DisneySea Is Joining Wave of Theme Parks Rolling Abroad,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 2001.

Anyone who has witnessed the final scene of Shohei Imamura's 1998 film *Kanzo Sensei (Dr. Akagi)* will understand something different about this unthinking connection between "ground zero" and the "affinity for the ocean." *I will be polite enough not to give away the details.*

Meanwhile, off *Pearl Harbor*, the relatives of the victims are ferried by the solicitous Americans to the site of the sinking. They peer disconsolately into the blue tropical water, their grief photographed at a "respectful" distance with telephoto lenses. All of this official concern is consistent with a geopolitical objective, the lifting of constitutional restrictions on the former enemy's discreet but powerful war machine. While apologizing, don't fail to remind the Japanese that for now *their security is in our hands*. But in the long term, Japan will function yet again as a military power in the Pacific, against the vast new-old Chinese enemy to the East. A not-so-secret key to this diplomacy is that neither ally feels compelled to apologize for the atrocities committed in the last war, neither for Nanjing nor for Hiroshima.

And the submarines of the other more recent old enemy, *do they still lurk?* (The newest and most advanced Russian model has proven to be disastrously unreliable. Here also, grieving relatives are photographed peering down into the waves, a colder and darker arctic sea this time, the photographers close and intrusive, *like family*.) Are most of their submarines merely rotting radioactive hulks, maybe rented out from time to time by cash-starved officers for the filming of pornographic movies? Or, even more frightening for the Americans, are unemployed Russian naval architects secretly working for criminal cartels, building an underwater drug-smuggling fleet, as suggested by a strange discovery in a nondescript warehouse outside of Bogotá? Refusing to divulge the top-secret answers to these questions, *upon which so much congressional funding depends*, an American sonar specialist laments, "I loved the Cold War. I didn't want it to end."

Far from the sea and underground, the documents accumulate. The overwhelming desire for dryness extends to the Disembodied Industrialist's recent acquisition of a salt mine in Pennsylvania to function as repository for all the world's *important photographs*, a category that includes, for a few months at least, the pictures of the grieving relatives. There, deep inside a mountain, is the new tomb for older and less popular photographs of anonymous citizens of the last two centuries, photographs that, not having been deemed worthy of digital rescue from the moldy or brittle materiality of paper, are not offered for downloadable sale on the Internet. The selection proceeds slowly and parsimoniously, according to a logic of fame, celebrity, scandal, and greatest hits. Some pictures sell, and others don't. A picture may be important enough to preserve, but that doesn't mean anyone gets to see it.

This much can be said of some of the photographs that can be conjured up electronically, the 2.1 million of the larger inert archive of 65 million. Many depict submarines and submarine actions, including a surprising number of pictures of torpedoed ships taken through periscopes. But overall, the submarine archive is weak on history; there is a reproduction of one of Leonardo's drawings (attributed

to “da Vinci”) and a few pictures of nineteenth-century prototypes and early U-boats. The bulk of the material is taken from the copious files of contemporary military-industrial stock photographers. Under “transportation,” the subcategory “most popular” offers a low-aerial head-on view of an American nuclear submarine breaking the surface of the sea. This picture can be purchased for “personal use” and sent as an electronic greeting card to friends, which suggests something of the moral economy of military Keynesianism. Pictures of whales are also popular. This may be no more than an apparent antithesis, since the archive is, by its very nature, undialectical. As the web page advises, with cheerful techno-economic optimism: “jump start your creativity with pictures.”

The orders pour in from the website, resurrecting over and over the jolly submarines that leap like happy fish and the scanned picture of mighty swinging Babe Ruth launching only one of his many home runs. Other gestures, workaday gestures of less famous individuals, the anonymous history of the times, are salted away in filing cabinets in the dimly lit corridors of the mine, tended by a skeleton crew. These pictures wait like slabs of dried cod for the revivifying water of the gaze, for the laser beam of the scanner. Their rediscovery is unlikely. Researchers are forbidden to enter. Specialists in conservation applaud the care and thoroughness of the operation.

And yet, during a long drought in the usually rainy Pacific Northwest, the Disembodied Industrialist and his family and household retainers are—one hopes—embarrassed by reports in the local press that their water consumption exceeds that of any other household in the state of Washington. It is hard to escape the liquid requirements of the human organism. And indeed it is hard, in the city of Seattle, taking a taxi from the airport for example, not to hear stories from ex-gamblers who have taken their chances on the go-for-broke halibut boats, or aboard monster trawlers in the Bering Sea. In the lull of a traffic jam, one hand gestures with mock indifference at the fishhook scar in the palm of the other.

Does a memory of this remote everyday world, this *salty Seattle*, surfacing from the *good old days* when he used to take taxis, come to the Disembodied Industrialist as he communicates with his curators on the floor of the auction house?

Part 2: Irrational Exuberance

Thinking back to the landscapes and seascapes of a century ago, with Winslow Homer we see a profound American turn toward the sea, consistent with a burgeoning imperial project, but also with American restlessness and idealism, with the earlier literary examples of Herman Melville and Richard Henry Dana.⁸ Consider D. H. Lawrence’s assessment from 1923, looking back at those two seafarer writers of the “American renaissance” of the 1840s and ’50s. For Lawrence, American writing lacked any tradition-bound sense of blood and soil, thus avoiding

8. An earlier version of this section was first presented as part of the Third Annual Ian Burn Memorial Lecture, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, May 1998.

the oppressive legacy of feudal land rights and the mire of European nationalism. (Having chosen writers whose major works were written before the slaughter of the Civil War, Lawrence avoided contrary evidence, though his argument allowed implicitly for an American capacity to go to war over abstract principles.) Lawrence's insight into American writing and the sea was echoed later by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who spoke of the sea's offering of a *line of flight* to Melville, just as Lawrence, a romantic of an earlier late-romantic generation, saw in the passion for the sea an expression of democratic idealism, a utopian longing for a perfect world.⁹ Lawrence, a secret aristocrat, mocked Dana's outrage at the flogging of seafarers. It took another American writer, the poet Charles Olson, to come up with a counter-reading of the sea's connection to American business civilization, and to see Melville as the critical prophet of that connection:

So if you want to know why Melville nailed us in *Moby-Dick*, consider whaling. Consider whaling as FRONTIER, and INDUSTRY. A product wanted, men got it: big business. The Pacific as sweatshop.¹⁰

This was Olson writing in 1947, looking back a century to revive Melville's radicalism with a renewed prescience, for the capitalist line of progress had not yet been traced from the Pacific sweatshops of the whale ship and copra plantation to the assembly lines of the computer and apparel and toy industries, or the modernized indentured servitude aboard the containerized vessels that bring these products to market.

But what can Winslow Homer's modern but not yet modernist painting mean for Mr. Bill Gates of Microsoft, and for the faceless virtual power that he extols? The whole point of the *information highway* is that one is never lost. Technical command requires constant orientation within the global matrix of information flows. Through his Corbis agency, founded in 1989, Gates wants to collect, through reproduction, all of the images in the world. This is a proprietary and profit-hungry ambition; he wants to control the traffic in images, and for this rights to reproductions are sufficient. He wants to own certain images as originals, however. What is the status of these select paintings, with their aura of uniqueness, their direct connection to the artist's hand, to the larger archive of this cyber-iconographic omnivore?

A recent visit to the Corbis website, searching under the heading "Winslow Homer," yielded the following results: fifty-three pictures for "personal use" and ninety-seven for "professional" or licensed use. The majority are marine paintings. For \$3.95, the home customer can download a watercolor, *West Indian Divers*, say,

9. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* [1923] (New York: Penguin, 1977). Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), pp. 186–89.

10. Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* [1947] in *Collected Prose of Charles Olson*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 26.

for use as a greeting card, a pictorial gift for the friend about to embark on a Caribbean cruise. Indeed, the entire area of the website devoted to personal picture-shopping treats the consumerist work of purchasing and downloading images as if it were a seaside vacation, a fishing trip, or boating excursion:

Choose your dream yacht and experience the joy of sailing all-year-round. . . . Reel in one of our favorite fishing prints. . . . Transport yourself with a colorful, calming print of one of our scenic lakes.¹¹

The archive, with its presumably watertight bulkheads between iconic categories, is offered up as a space of vicarious liquid immersion, dry-land two-dimensional *thalassa therapy*.

For all that, *Lost on the Grand Banks* is nowhere to be found. Despite the communitarian promises of the Web—*the archive of everything for everybody*—unalienable private property asserts itself in the last instance. Rodchenko's revolutionary call "Soviet citizens, photograph and be photographed!" can now be updated: "Everyone a picture researcher, but keep off the grass!"

But the Seattle cabdriver with the fishhook-scarred hand is never far away. And the semantic bulkheads leak, seriously, especially if one is careless about limiting the terms of one's search. A look under the heading "Jackson Pollock" in the professional archives yields over five thousand results. There are over two hundred pictures of Andrew Jackson, including the daguerreotype by Matthew Brady with which we began our story (IH 024498). The image trail leads yet again to a nuclear submarine, the USS *Andrew Jackson*, missile-launch technicians poised at the controls (RK 001223). There are 744 pictures of Michael Jackson, before and after his remarkable change of face, and a whole host of other Jacksons from the worlds of sports, entertainment, politics. For all the global pretensions, the selection has a parochial American flavor, more or less like a file of picture clippings from high school history textbooks and *People* magazine. A mere twelve are reproductions or installation views of paintings by Jackson Pollock, six are depictions of the actor Ed Harris, who portrayed Pollock in a recent film, two are images of two very different fishes, *pollachius pollachius* and *gadus pollachius*, and a full forty-nine make up a bracing reportage on factory trawlers fishing in the Bering Sea for one of the two, commonly known as *pollack*, the not-so-secret raw material for what the seafood industry labels as "imitation crab." The website visitor is assured by the digital archivists at Corbis that the Seattle cabdriver's former comrades, clad in bright orange rough-weather gear—the better to be spotted should they be swept overboard in icy waters—have all signed model releases, thus allowing them to grace the pages of corporate reports or advertisements for sundry commodities likely to be associated with the rigors of fishing on the high seas.

Every image appears on the computer screen overlaid with the antitheft protection of the Corbis "watermark," which resembles nothing so much as a

11. <http://www.corbis.com>

satellite-radar view of a hurricane. We are entering the territory of Borgesian delirium here, and it is only the narrow instrumentalism of the picture researcher, targeted like a cruise missile on this or that category, that prevents a dive through the eye of the storm into the abyss, *the deep, full fathom five*.

Winslow Homer was working on a specific sequence of images on the North Atlantic fishery of the late nineteenth century, paintings about work. In an exhibition originating at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, Nicolai Cikovsky and Franklin Kelly reconstruct a narrative sequence, moving from the inshore herring fleet to the deep-sea halibut and cod fisheries on the treacherous Grand Banks of Newfoundland, and from tranquil, productive waters to looming disaster on the high seas.¹²

The three pictures, *The Herring Net*, *The Fog Warning*, and *Lost on the Grand Banks* were all painted at the same size in 1885, and they were shown together at the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. You can see the matching of the volume occupied by the dories, despite their shifting orientation on the waves. The implicit triptych is a taxonomic series—the omnivorous and pleasing seriality of the fish market, with herring displayed here, flounder over there, and at the next stall, big green codfish, jaws agape, waiting for the baking pan: the pseudo-disclosure of the agora. But it is also at the same time a narrative sequence, in which the hidden brutality of work on and against the sea is revealed. The narrative of doomed work tugs tragically downward on at the buoyant illustrative productivism of the series.

12. Nicolai Cikovsky and Franklin Kelly, *Winslow Homer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 226–30.



Winslow Homer. *Lost on the Grand Banks*. 1885.

Being lost in a dory on the Grand Banks was the dangerous outcome of specific organization of extractive industry in hazardous waters. The lostness depicted becomes purely metaphysical in its passage into Gates's possession. He finds the painting in order to lose its specificity; the depiction of lostness stands now as the antithesis of his instrumental program of total global connectedness. This is the otherness, and nonidentity, that makes the painting into a privileged aesthetic object in Gates's hands, into truly *private* property. If I were tempted to connect this to a larger self-consciousness of contemporary elites, the finding of the painting of lostness in order to aesthetically isolate lostness from the tyrannical imperative of connectedness is consistent with a number of ways in which the sea returns, in both romantic and gothic guise, to late modernity. The promotion of cruise ships, the making of films like *Waterworld* (1995) and *Titanic* (1997), Bill Gates's purchase of *Lost on the Grand Banks*: these are all related. We are all invited to *lose ourselves* at sea. For most of us, this amounts to chump change in the supermarket of imaginary danger. But my guess is that members of financial elites, especially those investing in the intangibles of the "new economy," imagine themselves in a special way to be venturing forth on stormy seas, lifted high by the *irrational exuberance* of the swells, only to risk being dashed down, disastrously, beneath the waves. In their bunkered isolation from the rest of us, the image of the solo sailor is paramount. And to the extent that broad sectors of the middle classes are being asked to partake on a lesser scale in the same risks, that image of the *isolato* is paradoxically rationed out for mass consumption. Market Ideology demands that everyone sail alone.

This much can be said about the visual field of the ocean swimmer, or the rower in a small boat upon the open sea: in moderate to heavy seas, one is either low in the trough of the wave, or high on the bank of the swell. On the moving, folding surface then, fluctuating conditions of seeing, vertiginous, then enveloped, closed in by a shifting, sliding slope of water. Winslow Homer gives us this vantage point: not omnisciently above the waves, but high on the swell, as if sitting in another dory like the one we see in the foreground, better able to see what the fishermen in the boats depicted are straining to see, the moving haven of the schooner in the fog-shrouded distance. Nonetheless, we see effortlessly, in a state of temporal suspension, what they see only fleetingly, what will be obscured momentarily. We see their danger. And it is theirs, not ours, since they are at sea, and we are looking at a painting with our feet planted on the ground. The sympathetic bond imagined is one of civic concern, a queasy, morally troubling challenge to gustatory automatism.

There is a line, then, that connects Homer's painting with the social documentary photography of Lewis Hine, two decades later, and even with contemporary documentary writers like Sebastian Junger, whose book *The Perfect Storm* (1997) narrates the contemporary working-class world of a New England fishing port and the loss with all hands of the swordfishing boat *Andrea Gail* on the same Grand Banks in 1991. Junger appropriately begins his tale with an epigram from Walter Scott: "It's no fish ye're buying, it's men's lives."

When I wrote these lines, Junger's book had not yet been translated into a turgid and overwrought cinematic parable on the crisis of male identity, directed by *Ubootmeister* Wolfgang Petersen. To understand something of the way the sea "returns" as pure media simulation, listen to this recollection by John Seale, the film's director of photography:

I decided that we would probably go to Cape Town, South Africa, grab a couple of look-a-like long-liners, wrap the cameras in garbage bags and get out there amongst it. They looked at me like I was on drugs and said, "No, my boy—think Stage 16 at Warner Brothers."¹³

So instead of renting out the frighteningly decrepit Chinese fishing boats that can be seen taking on provisions next to Cape Town's perversely gentrified waterfront, one of the world's largest soundstage filming tanks had to be excavated in the Burbank studio floor. Above the tank, a vertical bluescreen allowed for superimposition of the digital storm. This Oz-like curtain of *deep digital blue* was larger than a football field. Despite the DP's rueful lament for lost low-budget opportunities in the notorious seas off the Cape of Good Hope, expensive artifice is discussed in the film industry press as if it were an autochthonous triumph of the technological sublime, unrelated to nature as such. As the DP's story tells us, Hollywood isn't really interested in pursuing the challenge posed by fiction films actually shot on rough seas, such as Pierre Schoendoerffer's lament for French imperialism, *Le Crabe Tambour* (1976), photographed by Raoul Coutard. And yet it's not as if brilliant films about the sea have not been shot entirely on soundstages: think of Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944). But the simple claustrophobic fraudulence of Hitchcock's approach is also beyond the comprehension of today's mega-directors.

The Perfect Storm is symptomatic in more ways than one, and like a hypochondriac, it borrows its symptoms from other films. The blueprint for its expensive simulation of the sea is taken from James Cameron's remake of the *Titanic* story, a film of narrative triviality and dry fraudulence bolstered not only by the painstaking auction-house authenticity of Edwardian conspicuous consumption, but the director's heroic *descent to the wreck* in a hired Russian submersible. The point-of-view of the film is ultimately that of the treasure hunt, cleverly disavowed in the film's final gesture of tossing the world's biggest diamond back into the deep. Thus *Titanic* is about nothing but the bracing discipline of the *box-office*, which bespeaks the desperate institutional narcissism of the entertainment industry, its inability to speak of anything but the economic conditions of its own existence, in what amounts to an unconscious parody of modernist self-referentiality. Love, rebellion, death, and the sea are mere pretexts. The sea is emptied of meaning. Or is it?

13. Quoted in Pauline Rogers, "Hell and High Water," *International Cinematographers Guild Magazine*, July 2000, p. 21.

Part 3: TITANIC's wake

Early in 1997, I photographed the Mexican film set for *Titanic*, as part of an earlier project called *Dead Letter Office* (1998), a title owed obliquely to Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853). Bartleby's mysterious refusal to work may have begun with the psychic trauma of his job as a post-office clerk sorting undeliverable mail. Rereading the story, I suddenly imagined that it was difficult and even spiritually challenging to send a simple letter the short distance from Tijuana to San Diego, even if Hollywood movie-making, a much more expensive way of sending a message, had already crossed the border.

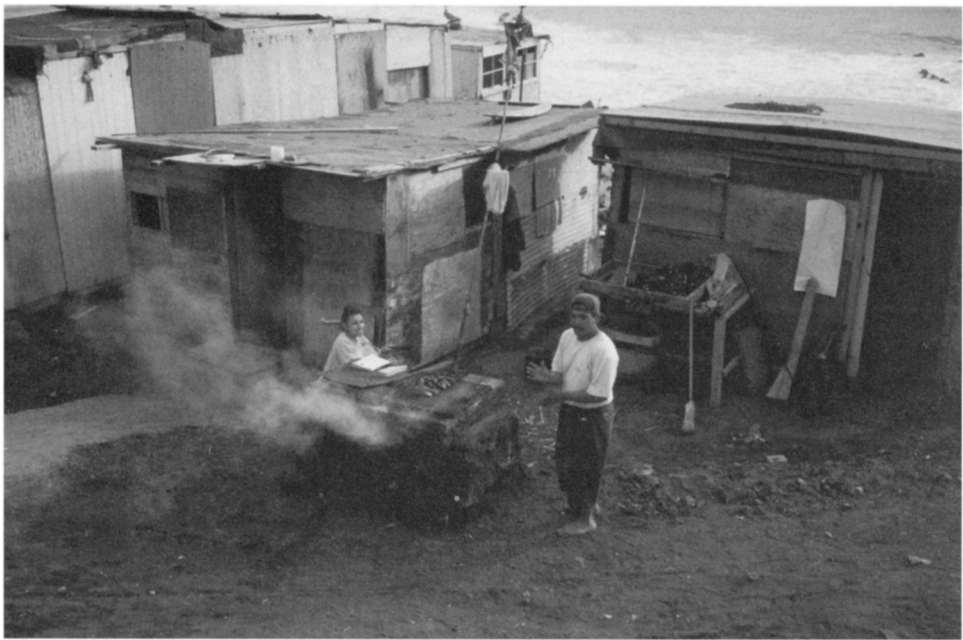


Seeking to profit from lower Mexican wages, Twentieth Century Fox built the set next to the poor fishing village of Popotla, on the Baja California coast about forty miles south of the U.S. border. This explains the long list of Mexican names that rolls rapidly by in small type during the film's final credits. The production facility featured the largest freshwater filming tank in the world, bigger even than the one built later in Burbank to film *The Perfect Storm*. Mexican extras floated for many hours in the chilly coastal winter, playing the parts of anonymous passengers on their way to an icy grave. The neighboring village, just to the south of the walls and guard towers of the set, has no running water. Efflux from the filming tanks lowered the salinity of the coastal tide pools, damaging the traditional mussel-gathering livelihood of the villagers, and giving rise to vociferous and sustained protests by

Above and right: Sekula. Titanic set and mussel gatherers, Popotla (diptych). From Dead Letter Office. 1997.

the fishermen and their families. A portion of the set has now been converted into a theme park devoted to the making of the *Titanic* story. I haven't visited, but presumably the walls between the set and the fishing village are still topped with shards of broken glass.

The lugubrious arrogance of *Titanic* intrigues me. Is it a symptom of something larger? We peer morbidly into the vortex of industrialism's early nosedive into the abyss. The film absolves us of any obligation to remember the disasters that followed. Quick as a wink, cartoon-like, the angel of history is flattened between a wall of steel and a wall of ice. It's an easy, premature way to mourn a bloody century.



Or maybe, more innocently, the movie is a bellwether of good-hearted American neoliberalism. When James Cameron accepted the first of his Academy Awards for the film, he thrust his Oscar statuette into the overheated air above the podium and bellowed out a line from the film: "King of the world." (Later, looking slightly abashed after receiving what seemed to be a scathing glance from his wife, he asked for a moment of silence for the long-dead passengers and crew.) Curiously, Cameron borrowed his triumphal line from Benjamin Britten's 1951 opera based on Melville's novella *Billy Budd*. Budd innocently exults, even as he is shanghaied and set upon a path that leads to the yardarm. Could it be that Cameron secretly wanted to remake *Billy Budd*, or that he thinks of himself as the "handsome sailor" even more than he identifies with the cocky young artist played by Leonardo



Above and right: Sekula. Bilbao (diptych).
From TITANIC's wake. 1998–1999.

DiCaprio? It's a strange thought: Melville's (and Britten's) bleak, womenless, and covertly homoerotic parable—a tale of goodness flawed, evil intractable, a guilt-ridden captain—reworked to attract a repeat audience of prepubescent girls.

Five or ten years ago, I was confident that the sea had disappeared from the cognitive horizon of contemporary elites.¹⁴ Now I'm not so sure. The sea returns, often in gothic guise, remembered and forgotten at the same time, always linked to death, but in a strangely disembodied way. One can no longer be as direct as Jules Michelet was in his 1861 book *La Mer*, which begins with a blunt recognition of the sea's hostility, its essential being for humans as the “element of asphyxia.” And yet Bill Gates buys Winslow Homer's morbid *Lost on the Grand Banks* for more money than anyone has ever paid for an American painting. Frank Gehry builds a glistening titanium museum that resembles both a fish and a ship on the derelict site of a shipyard driven into bankruptcy by Spanish government policy, launching a new touristic future in the capital of one of the world's oldest maritime cultures. It was the Basques, after all, who probably discovered America, but they preferred to keep a secret and return without competition to the rich cod-fishing grounds of the North Atlantic.

14. See Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1995).



Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum for Bilbao is a Los Angeles export product, a leviathan of California postmodernity beached on the derelict riverfront of the economically depressed maritime-industrial capital of the Basques. As such, it marks the first move in a projected campaign of economic "revitalization," tied, as one might expect, to land speculation and tourist promotion. Kurt Forster, who is Gehry's biggest defender, and who has stressed the protean, vitalist aspect of the architect's fish-buildings, has gone to some length to exempt Gehry's project from these sorts of vulgar and dismal economic associations:

[Beginning] with his buildings of the 1980s Frank Gehry returned to an architecture possessed of powerful corporeal qualities. He does not think of the volumes of his buildings within the confines of abstract space (which is also the space of economics); rather, he engages these volumes in intimate relationships with one another.¹⁵

The bad objects here are legion: abstraction, economics, and by implication, bureaucracy and modernism. The crypto-baroque promise of redemptive

15. Kurt Forster, "The Museum as Civic Catalyst," in *Frank O. Gehry: Museo Guggenheim Bilbao* (Stuttgart: Edition Axel Menges, 1998), p. 10.

embodiment—“corporeal qualities” and “intimate relationships”—is not unlike that offered by the virtual world of the Internet.

One can of course travel a short distance along the Bilbao riverfront to the big city fish market, and see there evidence of the prodigious Spanish appetite for the creatures of the sea. Here the corporeal qualities of the fish that inspire Gehry are depressingly linked to the abstract space of economics: boxes of *merluza*, previously caught in great quantity off the Iberian coast, now imported from Namibia.

But like James Cameron making sure that the diamond is tossed back into the drink, Forster wants to disavow and affirm the economic at the same time: Gehry “and his collaborators made use of programs that were originally developed for the design of airplane fuselages.”¹⁶ The fish is also an airplane, as the frequent references found throughout recent writing on Gehry to titanium as an “aerospace material” attest. The implied association of titanium cladding with the skin of advanced aircraft is somewhat inaccurate, since titanium is typically used internally, alloyed with steel for jet-turbine blades that must both be lightweight and capable of withstanding high temperatures. In fact, the most radical innovations in aircraft skin design have come through plastic-polymer composites, which are crucial to so-called “stealth” technology. In fact, titanium has become a *metametal*, a metal that *refers* to high technology metallurgy, especially in luxury consumer products like German-designed, high-end autofocus cameras.

For Forster, as for Gehry, the main breakthrough at the level of architectural practice is the collapse of the laborious mediation between drawing and executed design. On this point, Forster waxes utopian: “The age-old distinction between the hands that design and the instruments that execute has been overcome.”¹⁷ I would be delighted to see him deliver this argument with a straight face to the construction engineers and iron workers who painstakingly translate the plan into the skewed geometry of the steel structure that is ultimately obscured beneath the glistening convoluted surface. Forster concludes by lauding the Guggenheim Bilbao as “a monument to the productive capacities that are now at our disposal.”¹⁸ In other words: a monument to the absolute hegemony of intellectual labor afforded by computer-based manufacturing.

Having photographed Gehry’s building, I want to venture another sort of reading. For all of its acclaimed “vitalism,” its primal links to the doomed carp swimming in Gehry’s grandmother’s bathtub in Toronto, the Guggenheim Bilbao is more accurately likened to a gigantic light modulator. It introduces a new level of specular reflectivity into a rather drab cityscape previously restricted to tertiary hues. In effect, what it imports to Bilbao is an aesthetically controlled, prismatically concentrated version of the high specularity characteristic of the Los Angeles cityscape, the random and ubiquitous presence of shiny surfaces, glass and metal ricocheting sunlight in an inhuman, migraine-inducing glare. For this benign and

16. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

restrained version of American aerospace enlightenment, for this lighthouse and control tower far upriver from the sea, the Basques, who pay all the bills for the museum, are entitled to feel grateful. Thus far, there are no Guggenheims planned for Hanoi, Belgrade, Baghdad, or Basra. For insights into the less-restrained version of American aerospace enlightenment, I advise the reader to see Hartmut Bitomsky's new film *B-52* (2001), about the venerable gray workhorse of the Pentagon.

By coincidence, one notices a certain corrosive potential. In the container transfer terminal on the downriver flank of the museum sit large cylinders of hydrofluoric acid, the extremely nasty agent used to dissolve and etch titanium and its alloys. This powerful oxidant is always a handy chemical for the aerospace industry, since it can eat away at metal without causing the heat fatigue associated with traditional machining. The touristic postcard is smudged somewhat by this reminder of Bilbao's lingering industrial kinship with Seveso and Bhopal. But there is no need to entertain apocalyptic scenarios: much to the architect's dismay, the Guggenheim's titanium cladding is already beginning to stain and darken from exposure to the relentless marine atmosphere of the Bay of Biscay. Up close, the building is beginning to resemble the wreck of an old bomber, stained with the greasy residue of burnt kerosene fuel.

Given this protean litany of resemblances, we can revise another old slogan, this one from a staple of 1950s American children's television: "It's a bird, it's a plane, it's . . . Supermuseum!"

Part 4: Refloating The Family of Man

So maybe we should be looking back, not to *The Family of Man*, but to Edward Steichen's earlier wartime project for the U.S. Navy, *Power in the Pacific*, with its intense concentration on the cacophonous battle-platform of the aircraft carrier. Given what has already been suggested about the military-Keynesian proclivities of the Corbis collection, this would make sense. A serious reminder of the wartime work also brushes against the current tendency to resurrect Steichen as a celebrity and fashion photographer, which subordinates his global humanism and his patriotic propaganda to a more contemporary and "fashionable" idea of the proper mission of aesthetically ambitious photography. This fashion idea is pervasive in the art world, and indeed can blithely take in even the most cutthroat and covert forms of military expertise, as evidenced by Vanessa Beecroft's recent performance pieces featuring U.S. Navy SEAL commandos standing at attention in their dress whites.

Nonetheless, *The Family of Man* is more germane, since its humanism provides a prototype for the new post-Cold War "human rights" rationale for military intervention. The exhibition, with its claims to globality, its liberal humanism, its utopian aspirations for world peace through world law, can be reread now in the context of the contemporary discourse of "globalization," the discourse being advanced by the promoters of an integrated global capitalist economic system. The

official American perspective on this system is that it requires the continued vigilance and command of a single global politico-military superpower, which always acts in the healthy interests of the system at large and is thus itself more or less exempt from any overarching concept of world law. In effect, the American state claims for itself the same operational freedom in world affairs as that demanded by multinational corporations. This is an inherently unstable and even illogical discourse. For example, the old Dutch corporate doctrine of the “freedom of the seas,” so crucial to the development of mercantile capitalism, is quickly invoked by U.S. State and Defense Department planners when the supposed threat of the Chinese navy is being countered, even though the low-wage Chinese economy is crucial to the global factory system, and much of Chinese export production is capitalized through Taiwan, considered to be the principal target of the Chinese threat. A scenario in which American carrier battle groups, assisted by the Japanese, protect Chinese-crewed container ships bearing Chinese-made goods from torpedoes launched by Chinese submarines—a perverse replay of the Battle of the North Atlantic—would strain the imagination of a Tom Clancy, but I confess to not being up on my reading of that prolific and wildly imaginative writer of geopolitical airport novels.

Speaking only of the discursive level, it is clear that economic questions are now paramount in the way that political questions were paramount in the 1950s. When I wrote about *The Family of Man* twenty years ago, my overall aim was to locate universal language claims for photography within the historical context of universalized commodity exchange. Indeed, the homology between the function of the photograph as a universally exchangeable “abstract equivalent” of its worldly referent and the circulation function of paper currency had already been recognized in the 1850s by Oliver Wendell Holmes. Today, the all-encompassing regime of the market, the global imperium of the *dismal science*, seems all the more pertinent to the discussion of archives and culture. As Margaret Thatcher so cynically and triumphantly put it, “There is no alternative.”

On looking back again at *The Family of Man*, I was reminded that I had seen and noted but not yet fully comprehended that the exhibition and book are rife with images of aquatic immersion: “The final photograph in the book is quite literally a depiction of the oceanic state, a picture . . . of churning surf.” But at the same time an image is offered of a world territorialized and exploited on strictly terrestrial lines. *The Family of Man* gives us an earthbound workaday world, so that even fishermen are depicted not as voyagers upon the high seas but as peasants afloat, seemingly never far from the littoral spaces of the shore. For example, consider the striking absence of the remarkable work of the French photographer Anita Conti, an absence as striking as the fact of its current rediscovery by African scholars. There is no comparison between the rigor and intimacy and sensitivity to violence of her views of Senegalese shark fishermen, or of French cod fishers working the Newfoundland Banks, and the easy Alfred Eisenstaedt photo of Gold Coast boatmen chosen by Steichen. The key to her best



Detail of frontispiece
photo by Pat English
for *The Family of Man*. 1955.

work is her discovery of a point-of-view closer to the fish than to the fishermen. By contrast, *The Family of Man* reserves the image of immersion for *homo ludens* and for the ultimate utopian *telos* of the story of humanity.¹⁹

The exhibition toured the world, thanks to sponsorship by the United States Information Agency and corporate cosponsors such as Coca-Cola. For all its globe-trotting, *The Family of Man* failed to register the actual diasporic movement of populations—largely via crowded maritime transport—in the decade after the end of World War II. Think of the mass migration of former British colonial subjects from India and the Caribbean to Britain in search of livelihood. The invisibility of these migrants is all the more startling when one realizes that the *sea of humanity* depicted on the endpapers of the deluxe clothbound edition of the book is in fact an apparently all-white, all-English crowd witnessing the coronation of Elizabeth II, a ritual not exactly linked to human progress or to concepts of citizenship. This is the *family of man*, not the *rights of man*. The invisible short people in this crowd, floating beneath the surface of this sea, could be immigrant children. But how can we know? All we can see are their handmade periscopes, searching for a submarine view of the young queen.

Leo Lionni's abstract design for the cloth cover of the same edition bespeaks an even more programmatic adherence to earthly and racial boundaries: a more or less constructivist maplike array of embossed metallic pigmentation samples, ranging from black to silver white through an intermediary zone of coppers, golds, and grays, all floating in a sea of blue, as if the world were one contiguous continental landmass, and each race its own nation, stepping forth into the global marketplace of neocolonialism with its own coinage. Lionni gives us the prototype of the postliterate, universally legible transnational corporate logos that would emerge

19. See *Anita Conti: La dame de la mer*, with texts by Anita Conti and Laurent Cojeun (Paris: Éditions Revue Noire, 2001).

more than twenty years later. It is no accident that Lionni was the chief graphic designer for *Fortune* magazine in the 1950s, where precisely this fusion of de-radicalized constructivism and the businessman's imperative had a lineage stretching back to the 1930s. His array of rectangles and trapezoids also gives us an abstracted image of the mode of installation of the exhibition itself, of the comparative and contiguous visual ensemble derived from a process of archival selection. By implication, the archive itself is treated as a kind of earthly, mineral resource, to be mined for meaning, pointing the way to the Corbis salt mine in the mountains of Pennsylvania.

The hidden *telos* of *The Family of Man* is to escape the dry compartmentalization of the archive, to imagine an erotic and utopian return to the sea, a solitary quest conducted in the name of humanity. The model for this can be found in Alfred Stieglitz's retrospective remark on that monument of photographic modernism *The*



Re-installation of The Family of Man, Château de Clervaux, Luxembourg. 2000.

Steerage (1907), a photograph that has come to stand out from all the rest as the very exemplar of the *antiarchival* image. Mixing tropes of modernism, the pastoral, oceanic rapture, and bourgeois self-loathing, Stieglitz's spoke of his "new vision . . . of people, the common people, the feeling of ship and ocean and sky, and the feeling of release that I was away from the mob called the rich."²⁰

In *The Family of Man*, a small flotilla of images breaks loose from the filing cabinets on the shore. Gary Winogrand gives us a photo of lovers frolicking among bathers in the shallows, Steichen himself offers a god's-eye view of a naked child belly-flopping with a joyful splash, and Ewing Kainin portrays a blond naiad bursting to the surface, her ecstatic smile and closed eyes half-visible through a

20. Alfred Stieglitz, "Four Happenings," *Twice a Year*, nos. 8–9 (1942), p. 128.

cascading veil of water. And there is the large photograph by Nell Dorr of a Venus emerging from the waves, garlanded with hibiscus flowers. The regressive longing for immersion comes at us recurrently as we move through the exhibition. It is perhaps consistent with the pan-denominational religiosity of *The Family of Man*, reinforced by text editor Dorothy Norman's predilection for pithy shards of timeless wisdom extracted from a wide range of sacred texts. Or as Steichen himself put it, "Photographs concerned with the religious rather than religions."

The notion of the "oceanic feeling"—of an undifferentiated ego restored to a primal sense of oneness with the world—enters psychoanalytic discourse in the late 1920s, in an exchange of letters between Romaine Rolland and Sigmund Freud. Freud recapitulates the exchange in the first chapter of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, crediting Rolland with the idea, but demurring at Rolland's suggestion, provoked by reading *The Future of an Illusion*, that *la sensation oceanique* lay at the origin of all religious sentiment. Deeply engaged in the study of the Indian nineteenth-century mystic saint Ramakrishna, Rolland was certainly familiar with a range of metaphors for immersion and dissolution of the self, particularly those centered on the mother-goddess Kali, creator and destroyer of life. Freud's intellectual bias toward the psychic logic of monotheism led him to a different notion of religious origins. Religious faith followed from the ego's encounter with a hostile world, and religion was the search for a protective, "enormously exalted" father. Steichen's overhead photograph of the diving naked child can be said to be poised between these two contrary views of religion: one monotheistic and the other polytheistic and "oceanic." The photographer-editor is the "exalted father," but he longs to become again the child merging with the liquid element. (In Lacanian terms, Rolland's "oceanic feeling" corresponds to the domain of the imaginary, while Freud's "exalted father" stands on the side of the symbolic.)²¹

Freud's earthbound predilections made him skeptical about transcendent claims for oceanic immersion. He concludes the first chapter of *Civilization and Its Discontents* with a line from Friedrich Schiller's early romantic poem "Der Taucher" ("The Diver," 1797). The poem is based on the fable of a Sicilian king who, offering his daughter as a prize, commands a youth to make a second dive into the abyss. Having triumphed once over the terrors of the deep, the diver laments before his second, fatal plunge: "Let him rejoice who lives up here in roseate light." Freud, like Jules Michelet, understood that the sea, before it was anything else, was "the element of asphyxia," the archetype of the hostile world, although Michelet was more sensitive to the nurture provided by the oceans. Freud's meditation on the oceanic feeling led him, yet again, to the death instinct, already explored in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

But this intellectual ground had also been traversed by Freud's disciple Sandor Ferenczi, in a remarkable book called *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, published in

21. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* [1930], trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), pp. 11–20. See also J. Moussaieff Masson, *The Oceanic Feeling: The Origins of Religious Sentiment in Ancient India* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1980).

1923 but dating back to interrupted speculations developed during his service as an army doctor during World War I, speculations with which Freud was familiar. Ferenczi's basic argument derives primarily from the biologist Ernst Haeckel's erroneous theory that ontogeny—the development of the individual organism from the germ cell—is a recapitulation of phylogeny—or evolutionary history. Secondly, Ferenczi, like Freud, draws from the thermodynamic concept of entropy. From these source ideas the psychoanalyst, seeking the key to the formation of genital drives, intuits that the intrauterine *experience* of land mammals recapitulates their aquatic evolutionary prehistory. For male mammals, coitus is the expression of a regressive longing for an entropic return not only to the inert floating passivity of the prenatal state, but to the liquid origins of the species. The last sentence of the book sums it up, although along the way Ferenczi is forced by his own logic to admit that female psyche and sexuality are more complex, less “primitive” than that of the male:

The male member and its function appears as the organic *symbol* of the restoration—albeit only partial—of the fetal-infantile state of union with the mother and at the same time with the geological prototype thereof, existence in the sea. [Emphasis in original]²²

Thus can be discovered a key to the Schillerian “infant bliss” at the heart of *The Family of Man*. As I put it long ago without having fully developed the argument, “the exhibition moves from the celebration of patriarchal authority—which finds its highest embodiment in the United Nations—to the final construction of an imaginary utopia that resembles nothing so much as a protracted state of infantile, pre-Oedipal bliss.” This infantilism is consistent with the demise of political subjects in the classical enlightenment sense, and the emergence of new consumer subjects. For this reason, *The Family of Man* was received with great interest on Madison Avenue, even though it portrayed a world in which Fordist consumerism was largely invisible. The ecstatic bathers of *The Family of Man* were recruited as shills for menthol cigarettes and beer. The path that opened here has led fifty years later to Corbis.com and the nonjudgmental fun of *shopping for pictures* and *taking a cruise* without an “enormously exalted father” leading the way.

Part 5: Anti-Titanic

Titanic, *Waterworld*, and *The Perfect Storm* tell an old story: men sacrifice themselves at sea so that women can nurture civilized values, or even revive civilization itself. The instincts, which are assigned no gender by psychoanalytic theory, are

22. Sandor Ferenczi, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality* (London: Karnac, 1989), p. 107. See also Christopher L. Connery, “The Oceanic Feeling and the Regional Imaginary,” in Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, eds., *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 284–311. Responding to “Pacific Rim discourse,” Connery has developed a compelling argument linking Charles Olson’s idea of the Pacific as “world ocean,” Anglo-American imperial ambitions, and a Ferenczian psychoanalytic reading of the cult of swimming.

subordinated in these films to the traditional sexual division of labor. (This traditionalism cuts deeper than the superficial feminism found in *Titanic* and *Perfect Storm*, which allows bourgeois women to seek love freely and to be outspoken and prophetic patrons of the avant-garde and permits working-class women to be fishing-boat skippers.) These melodramas pretend that the “male” death instinct serves the “female” life instinct, as if in optimistic rejoinder to Freud’s pessimistic conclusion to *Civilization and Its Discontents*. It goes almost without saying that this traditional view, which can never be honest about the fact that its “morality” instrumentalizes the instinctual level of the psyche, has served as one of the principal ideological justifications for war, for organized aggression on a grand scale. Consider the motley crew of “smokers” in *Waterworld*, ensconced as postapocalyptic galley slaves and pirates aboard the rotting hulk of the *Exxon Valdez* under the command of a maniacal Dennis Hopper. On the one hand, we can be sure that this is an intentionally self-parodic projection onto the *lumpen proletariat* of the petroleum-consumption patterns of your average successful SUV-driving Hollywood screenwriter. But the smokers also epitomize the bad habits that qualify a society for *rogue nation* status, for elevation to the target list for the next barrage of cruise missiles. In the film the “bad” death instinct of the smokers can only be thwarted (or, more precisely, gratified) by the “good” death instinct of the *thalassally regressed* mutant fish-man Kevin Costner, who is by virtue of his enhanced swimming ability a kind of human torpedo. It would be absurd for me to say that these are “militarist” films, but their therapeutic and homeostatic approach to the problem of human destructive energies puts them in line with the new rhetoric of state violence, which is always violence exercised in the interest of abstract human rights, or, more concretely, *for the future of the children*.

Not long ago I was able to see the recently restored traveling exhibition version of *The Family of Man* at its permanent home, the Château de Clervaux in Luxembourg, near the site of the Battle of the Ardennes. An old U.S. Army Sherman tank, presumably a relic of that battle, welcomes the visitor at the entrance to the castle. What was most striking about the meticulous reconstruction undertaken by Steichen’s natal country is that now one can see how *modest* and *slow-paced* the spectacle-culture of the 1950s was by contrast with the Hollywood blockbusters, mega-exhibitions, and digital image-streams of today. By current standards, the scale of the photographs is far from superhuman, and I saw a group of German high school students slipping into a kind of solemn, attentive reverie as they moved patiently among the monochromatic panels, as if this were very different from their experience of going to the movies, playing a computer game, or clicking on a web link. Perhaps this is the ultimate museological destiny of *The Family of Man*: to become the immobilized relic of a global road show that provided the model for the traveling museum blockbusters of today. Does the very *obsolescence* of *The Family of Man* open up a plethora of possibilities?

Just for a moment, imagine that the restored *Family of Man* had been installed instead aboard a ship, and that the ship sailed around the world, visiting all the port

cities that had originally taken the exhibition, from New York to Cape Town to Jakarta, and maybe a few others that weren't on the original itinerary. In some cities, a rich menu of competing cultural choices combined with general urban indifference to the waterfront would bring few visitors: maybe no more than fifty people in New York, despite the free admission. In others cities, maybe in Karachi, the ship would be so swamped with visitors that it would almost heel over and capsize at the dock: an audience of thirty thousand in one day. In the richer countries, caps and T-shirts would be sold; in poor countries these would give way to free souvenirs. It would be a simple no-frills cargo ship, so there would be none of the connotations of protected luxury that accrue to a *château* or to the cruise vessel commandeered in Genoa by the frightened leaders of the rich nations. In many cities, dissident and human-rights groups would be invited to convene public forums in a conference room built into one of the holds. These same groups would provide hospitality for the crew. A website would track the vessel's progress. The ship would fly the flag of landlocked Luxembourg, or maybe that of the United Nations, or perhaps an unrecognizable flag, unrelated to any known sovereign entity, perhaps bearing a portrait of Steichen's mother holding a freshly baked apple pie. It would not fly the flag of the United States, nor would it display the ensign of the Museum of Modern Art, and there would be no Sherman tank lashed to the hatch covers.

This would be the ghost ship imagined by the *New York Times*: *the aging cargo ship in the age of e-mail*. What I am describing here, taking only modest license, is the 1998–2000 circumnavigation of the *Global Mariner*, an 18,000-deadweight-ton general cargo vessel carrying in its converted holds a remarkable exhibition about working conditions at sea, and—in a broader sense—about the hidden social costs and probable consequences of corporate globalization. Sponsored by the International Transport Workers Federation, a London-based umbrella organization of over 450 transport-workers' unions around the world, the ship was actually the brainchild of a group of German and British seafarer activists who also happened to be disaffected veterans of Greenpeace, interested in the problem of an international linkage of labor and environmental struggles. Their primary concern was the system of *flag of convenience* shipping, a lawyerly ruse invented by American shippers in the mid-1940s that allows wealthy ship owners to register their vessels in poor nations offering what is often termed *paper sovereignty*: a flag for a fee. The system is rife with abuses, and indeed its very purpose is abuse: shielding exploitative labor conditions and substandard vessels behind a bewildering legal maze. The ITF has been waging a campaign against this system for fifty years, trying to enforce minimum standards of pay and safety for seafarers.

The solution of the ITF activists was to connect this venerable and not always very successful fight to the broader campaign against corporate globalization. Here it is worth noting that since 1995 key working-class resistances to neoliberal policies—reduced social security, casualization of work in the name of “flexibility,” union-busting, and privatization of public infrastructure—have come from workers in the transport sector: railway workers in France, dockers in Australia,

Chile, and Brazil, bus drivers and airline crews in Mexico, and delivery drivers in the United States. These battles against the doctrine of the untrammelled market predate Seattle.

The Global Mariner was a floating version of the *agit-train*, reconceived in the context of an eclectic and decidedly post-Bolshevik left-wing politics. (The ITF had its origins in solidarity actions linking Dutch and British dockers and seafarers at the end of the nineteenth century, and remained close to the traditions of the old socialist Second International for much of its history.) The quixotic *agit-ship* was nonetheless indebted to the experiments of radical productivist art in the young Soviet Union, and also to the photomontages of John Heartfield and the workers' theater of Erwin Piscator. Remember that Steichen had already borrowed from the big-scale presentational techniques of Russian designers and photographers of the 1920s for his thematic photo exhibitions of the 1940s and '50s: there are ghostly shadows of El Lissitzky and Rodchenko in *The Family of Man*. Having witnessed the absorption of these once-radical devices into the tool kit of corporate liberalism and advertising, one could say that now the *Global Mariner* has reappropriated this tradition to forge a new-old weapon against the neoliberalism of the twenty-first century.

But before the exhibition, with its big computer-generated photomurals and its eerie post-Stockhausen soundtrack, there is the fact of the *ship and the voyage* in and of themselves, readymade-like in the subtlety of their ambiguous status as *already existing but transformed* object and context.

The *Lady Rebecca* (as "she" had been christened two decades before on the North Sea coast of Britain), had gone through five names, a series of superimposed reinscriptions of bow and stern, each prior name an increasingly obscure trace beneath the bright white paint announcing the new identity. The calculated amnesia of the world of international shipping offers a lesson to those who celebrate the postmodern flux of identity. One of the stranger stories of this common practice: in mid-passage a captain receives a telex noting that the ship has been sold and must be renamed. The captain politely asks the new name and is told to send a crewman over the side—risky business when under way—to paint out every other letter of the old name. What would Mallarmé make of this? The concrete poetry of the contemporary maritime world, the nominative magic worked out between the telex machine and the paint locker: here we return to Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1856), but confront not the ambiguities of insurrection and mutiny but a mastery that disguises itself. Whose ship? Which ship? A palimpsest of disguises and deceptions, a deliberate muddying of the waters.

Nearing the end of its/her working life, the ship formerly known as the *Lady Rebecca* entered a state of dangerous decrepitude, owned by a Hong Kong shipping company, flagged, I believe, to Panama, crewed by Filipinos, and finally—at the literal end of her ropes—moored at offshore anchorage in the bustling port of Pusan, on the southeast coast of Korea, waiting. For what? A shady buyer willing to squeeze out the last bit of profit from the laborious and plodding and dangerous journeys of an

aging vessel, a *death ship* in the making. Or, the owner makes the final blunt decision, almost that of a farmer in its frank brutality, though less intimate than one based on veterinary observation, since this is a decision made at a distance—in Hong Kong or London or Zurich—without poking at the rust breeding on the ladders and the hatch coaming, or poking at the cracks in the hull, or reading the engine room log with its depressing catalogue of failing valves and pumps. From the pasture of the anchorage, the ship embarks on the long voyage to the rendering plant. Send “her” to the gently sloping beaches of India, to be run ashore at high tide by a skeleton crew: engines full ahead onto the oily sand, to be broken by the sledges and cutting torches of vast crews of gaunt laborers, the *abattoir* of the maritime world, the ship remanned for the last time by the last toiling victims in the cycle of oceanic exploitation.

Then miraculously—although here other metaphors, those of rescue and redemption, are also to be used as if this were fiction—the ship was purchased by the International Transport Workers Federation in the summer of 1998, reflagged to Britain, and arduously refitted at the Mipo dockyards of Hyundai, just north of Pusan, and then sailed by a Croatian crew to the German port of Bremerhaven, where it was further fitted out with the exhibition, and then, only a few months after the initial purchase—all this was done at breakneck pace—it embarked with a new name on a twenty-month circumnavigation, setting out to visit eighty-three cities around the world. The crew was a polyglot mix: English, German, Icelandic, Filipino, Burmese, Scottish, Croatian, New Zealander, Ukrainian, Russian, Japanese, Dutch, and Irish.

Depending on the political situation of the local unions who invited the ship, the visits could be militant and combative. For example, the crew joined the dockers of Valparaiso in their fight against Chilean government plans for port privatization, demonstrated alongside exiled Burmese seafarers and other democracy campaigners outside the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok, and staged a protest in support of striking American shipyard workers in New Orleans. Two fast launches were stowed on top of the rear hatch cover, and these allowed for rapid, Greenpeace-style actions. In other instances, the ship was isolated from public contact by unsympathetic governments, as happened in Hong Kong, a city whose crypto-“market-Stalinist” chief executive happens to be the former head of an international container-shipment line. An invitation to Greece scheduled for the very last day of the millennium was rescinded at the eleventh hour by a seafarers’ union unwilling to challenge powerful Greek shipowners. Faraway political events could change the tenor of the ship’s reception, as happened in Istanbul a few weeks after the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization. For the first time, the ship was greeted at the dock by workers bearing banners specifically denouncing globalization. And indeed the ship’s visit to Seattle in the spring of 1999 had been one of a number of local events leading up to the November protests.²³

23. The visit of the *Global Mariner* to Seattle was sponsored by the West Coast dockworkers’ union, the ILWU, and by a number of other maritime unions. The ILWU also cosponsored the Seattle exhibition

*International
Transport Workers
Federation. Postcard
of the Global
Mariner. 1998.*



If, as Michel Foucault has suggested, ships are the very exemplar of heterotopias (real spaces that call other spaces into question), the *Global Mariner* was the heterotopia of heterotopias. Or if you want, this was a *metaship*, representing and figuring within itself, within the exhibition that was its only cargo, all the other invisible, ignored, and silent ships of the world. The *Global Mariner* had to be a real ship functioning in an exemplary way, to be the Good Ship that social justice demanded other ships should and could be, but it was also an *empty vessel* carrying nothing but ballast and a message. This “emptiness” may have provoked the hostile captain of one substandard vessel targeted by the ITF to refer to the *Global Mariner* as a *toy ship*, as if it had been de-realized by the absence of heavy cargo. And yet this was a vessel of old-fashioned self-sufficiency, equipped with onboard cranes that allowed it to load and discharge cargo at terminals without dockside equipment, the sort of vessel commonly seen trading in more remote third-world ports. The *Global Mariner* functioned in marked contrast to the specialized container and bulk ships of today’s shipping world, which only work by being integrated into a larger machine ensemble of dockside cranes and conveyors. Its functional autonomy and versatility allowed the *Global Mariner* to become a large mobile art space that could efficiently install, transport, and display its exhibition.

of my project *Fish Story* at the Henry Art Gallery, in conjunction with the Labor Studies Center at the University of Washington, an unusual occurrence in American museum practice, given the hegemony of corporate patronage. Between February and May of 1999, *Fish Story* became a focal point for a series of meetings and events—including the *Global Mariner’s* visit—addressing Seattle’s militant labor history and problems of working-class responses to globalization. The ILWU shut down all ports on the West Coast and in Hawaii during the subsequent WTO meetings, and rank-and-file dockworkers—men and women—took a big role in the street demonstrations, thus earning the scorn of apologists for globalization, such as Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*. I first visited the *Global Mariner* when it made port in Los Angeles on its way up the Pacific coast, and subsequently sailed with it from San Francisco to Portland, from Durban to Cape Town, and from the Mediterranean up through the Black Sea and back down to the Adriatic. On the Seattle protests, see Alexander Cockburn, Jeffrey St. Clair, and Allan Sekula, *Five Days that Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond* (London: Verso, 2000).

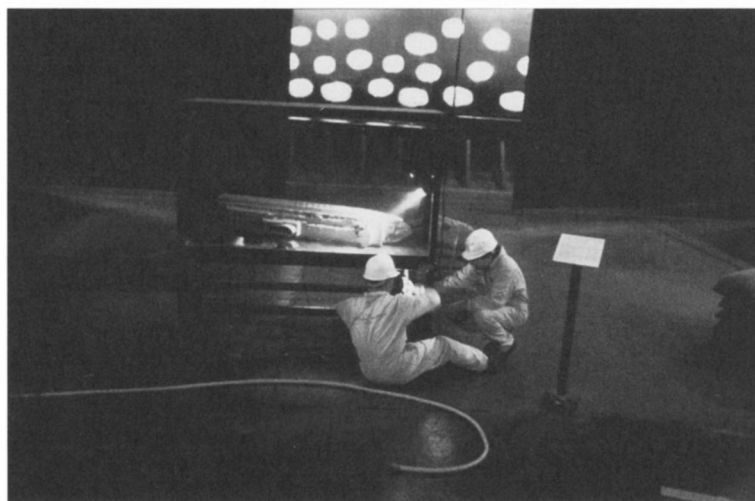
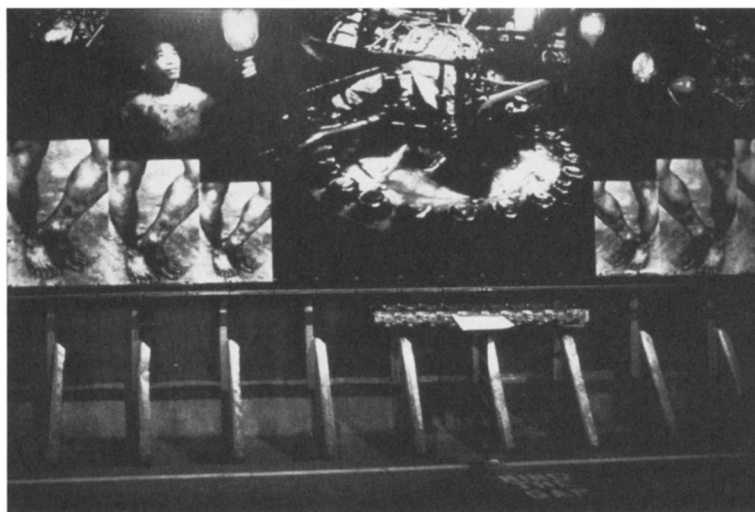
The *Global Mariner* was also embarked on what can only be seen as an ironic counterenactment of an older project dating back to the very origins of modern imperial dominion, namely the first circumnavigation of the globe by Magellan. This was *Magellan in reverse*. Indeed, the ritual significance of circumnavigation cannot be under-emphasized. These epochal voyages were first reenacted in the epoch of high imperialism, serving as theatrical assertions of a naval power's emergence on the world stage, as was the case with the circumnavigation of Admiral Dewey's "White Fleet" after the decisive American victory over Spain in Manila Bay in 1898. In the American case, the grand, global naval parade, *showing the flag*, in naval parlance, put the muscle behind the geostrategic ambition expressed by the naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan.

In the later twentieth century, the solo circumnavigator ritually revitalizes the individualist underpinnings of the capitalist spirit of adventure, while simultaneously obscuring—through the drama of solitary endeavor and extreme self-sufficiency—the industrial and social dimension of the world-spanning project. The fascination with such voyages, manifested in the tragically ill-fated work of Bas Jan Ader, or more recently in a number of intriguing projects by Tacita Dean, is entirely consistent with a return to a seemingly exhausted romanticism, and an effort to divorce adventure from its historical linkage with plunder and conquest. That romanticism should only seek its survival in oceanic immersion, hypersolitude, and the extreme extraterritoriality of the middle passage is a sign of the desperation encountered in its rescue from generalized cultural debasement. Today this postmodern, quasiromantic "return" to the sea must be understood as fundamentally different from its Byronic precedent, since it contends with a sea that is both depleted of resources and sublimely threatening in a new way with the advent of global warming, a sea that kills and is being killed, a sea that is also subject—in the developed world—to a ubiquitous variety of hyper-real representations, from aquatic theme parks to the species-rich aquariums that have become a fixture of every urban waterfront leisure complex.

The *Global Mariner* insisted, on the contrary, in its plodding *ordinary way* on the return to social questions. Speaking with the caution of a Cold War liberal, Steichen had claimed that *The Family of Man* was about "human consciousness, not social consciousness."²⁴ The great strength of the *Global Mariner* experiment was to raise the question of society from the very space that is imagined to be beyond society. Nothing special: a ship like many others, so ordinary that one Seattle resident, seeing the ship being ceremoniously welcomed by the fireboats of that strong union city, wondered what the fuss was all about. In other words, here was the sort of welcome one would expect for an aircraft carrier or the *QE2*, but not for an old *'tween decker*, presumably carrying coffee or pulp paper, or some other anonymous bulk commodity.

It is all the more profound that this ship should seek to represent the workings of empire at a time when the global economy is assumed to be entirely virtual in its connectedness, magically independent of the slow maritime movement of heavy

24. Edward Steichen, "Introduction," *The Family of Man*, p. 5.



*Installation views
of the lower holds of
the Global
Mariner. 1999.*

things. The arrogant conceit of the cyber-economy, for that matter of the very idea of the *postindustrial era*, is that we disavow our dim but nagging awareness that nearly all energy—whether converted to electricity or derived from direct combustion—comes from oil or other hydrocarbon fossil fuels, or from fissionable uranium refined from yellow-cake ore: solids, liquids, and gases that are extracted from the earth and transported in bulk. The very slowness of the *Global Mariner's* voyage, the twenty months of its circumnavigation, reminds us of the duration of early-modern seafaring under sail, and also of the contemporary persistence of slow, heavy transport flows.

This was the anti-*Titanic*. The Glaswegian quartermaster aboard the *Global Mariner*, a wiry veteran seafarer by the name of Jimmy McCauley, made the point very succinctly, referring to the steady aggregate loss of life at sea, crews of twenty at a time on bulk ore carriers that mysteriously break in half, sometimes in calm seas, or the myriad Filipino passengers crammed onto decrepit ferries that capsizes or burn in the Sulu Sea: “A *Titanic* happens every year, but no one hears

about it.” The exhibition itself brought this home with a narrative program that took the visitor from a happy and optimistic view of seafaring—a mix of shipping industry propaganda and tourist fantasy—to an increasingly dark and dismal view of calamities and dangers at sea, culminating in a meticulous model of the ill-fated Swedish ferry *Estonia* underwater in a fish-tank vitrine. This last amounted to a morbid seafarers’ joke on the display techniques of maritime museums. As one descended from upper to lower holds, and moved forward toward the bow of the ship, the use of archival images—depicting injured seafarers and atrocious living conditions, depicting shipwrecks, fires, and oil spills—became more and more insistent, until one climbed to the upper hold dedicated to public discussion and debate. Many of the photographs used were taken by the ITF’s ship inspectors in ports around the world, who are themselves dockers and seafarers. This documentary imperative brings openness to an industry traditionally veiled in secrecy. In fact, the current tendency to extend forensic investigations to nonmilitary shipwrecks, using deep submersibles when necessary, is largely traceable to precedents set by the ITF.

Miren del Olmo, chief mate aboard the *Global Mariner*, told me a story. A Basque from a poor fishing village on the outskirts of Bilbao, daughter of a retired shipyard worker, she recalled having crossed the Nervión River on her way to English class one Saturday in the late 1980s, preparing for the lingua franca of a life at sea. Hearing commotion in the distance, she glanced back at the bridge, just next to the soon-to-be-closed shipyard that would ten years later provide the site for Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim. The roadway and pylons suddenly disappeared in a fog of tear gas. Displaced welders and shipwrights—her father’s comrades—were battling with the riot squads of the National Police. She told the story as she stood watch late one December night on another sort of bridge, as the *Global Mariner* made its way west across the Black Sea. It occurred to me that we were doubtless crossing the course taken almost a century earlier by the mutinous battleship *Potemkin*, as it zigzagged from Odessa to Constanza seeking shelter from the czarist fleet.

The ship shuddered through heavy winter swells, seemingly going nowhere. After a long silence, broken only by the intermittent crackle of radio voices speaking the terse and variably accented English of the sea lanes, Miren remarked that she had yet to spend enough time at home in Bilbao to be able to visit the new museum. But in her unprofessional opinion, speaking frankly to an American, it looked like it had been built “from every can of Coke drunk in Bilbao.”

As Melville’s *Bartleby*, broken by the post office, put it to his boss: “I would prefer not to.” On August 3, 2000, having completed its mission as a good ship, an exemplary ship, a ship representing all the other invisible ships of the world, the *Global Mariner*, bearing a cargo of steel coil, was rammed and sunk at the mouth of the Orinoco River in Venezuela, not far from the fictional refuge of Robinson Crusoe, a shipwrecked *isolato* from an earlier mercantile era. Thanks to Bill Gates and his minions, I received this news by e-mail, but not in writing. Instead, without warning, a startling picture rolled downward on the screen of my computer: a ship I knew well, sinking, photographed from a lifeboat by one of the crew.