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Sonja Sekula and “Art of the Mentally Ill”

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In the early-to-mid-twentieth century, modernist artists were fascinated by what was then called “art of the mentally ill.” There are three nodal points in this history. First, in 1890, the pioneering German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin began to collect artwork by patients with severe mental illness at the Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic. Hans Prinzhorn published some of that collection as *Bildneri der Geisteskranken* (*Artistry of the Mentally Ill*) in 1922, and many well-known artists, such as Paul Klee, were inspired by the book.¹ Second, the sequel to the Museum of Modern Art’s landmark exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*

(1936) was *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (also 1936), which included examples of art of the “insane.”² Third, beginning in 1945, the French artist Jean Dubuffet began to collect what he termed *art brut* (raw art), uncultured and purportedly pure art by outsiders, including people with mental illness. The collection was on view in the home of the artist Alfonso Ossorio in East Hampton, New York, from 1951 to 1962, when it returned to Paris and was established as the Compagnie de l’art brut. It lives on today as the Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland.³

As different as these moments were, they largely shared a psychoanalytic perspective—initially more Freudian, and later, more Jungian.⁴ The art historian Hal Foster has characterized this long-standing interest in “art of the mentally ill” as a successor to artists’ interest in “primitive” and children’s art: “most modernists saw the art of the mentally ill according to their own ends only—as expressive of an aesthetic essence, revelatory of an innocent vision, or defiant of all convention—and for the most part it was none of these things. . . . [Yet they] bespeak modernist fantasies either of a pure origin of art or an absolute alterity to culture.”⁵ Clearly the modernist investment in “art of the mentally ill”—what today we would call art by people with mental illness—was deep and sustained, however self-interested.⁶ What this interest, on the part of artists, and assessment, on the part of historians, fails to address, however, is modernist art by practicing artists who themselves had mental illnesses. Indeed, art historians have exerted much effort in separating art by formally trained professional artists from art produced by those who suffer from mental illness. The curator Alfred H. Barr Jr., for example, included art by the mentally ill in *Fantastic Art*, but it was deemed “non-art” in comparison with art by “normal” artists assumed to have no mental health conditions.⁷ Later, Michel Thévoz, a historian of Art Brut, lamented that patients in psychiatric facilities were becoming increasingly aware of artistic trends and gaining rudimentary artistic training, which, in his view, spoiled their supposedly unfiltered access to the truth. He writes, for instance, “Institutes for



Sonja Sekula, *The Town of the Poor*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 66 × 90 in. Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, N.Y. Courtesy the Sonja Sekula Estate and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, N.Y.

the ‘psychopathology of expression’ are designed to neutralize the *living utterance* which madness can be.”⁸ In other words, those who produce “art of the mentally ill” may produce pure art but should be kept as far from “culture” as possible.

What is lost by not considering the mental illness of practicing artists? Are there moments in which the modernist fantasy of madness coincides with actual mental illness, and, if so, do the imagined and real match up, or do their differences teach us something about art and/or mental illness? Meret Oppenheim, for example, suffered from depression for nearly two decades; what were its characteristics, how did it impact her art or life, and who knew about it?⁹ Leonora Carrington purportedly had a harrowing experience in a mental institution following a psychotic break in Spain early in her career. In a typically modernist idealization of mental illness, André Breton, the founder of Surrealism, encouraged her to write a memoir about her experiences. How Carrington’s actual institutionalization and Breton’s (and possibly her own) romanticization of mental illness intersect remains to be explored.¹⁰ Nancy Princenthal’s recent biography of Agnes Martin deals sensitively with the artist’s schizophrenia. She theorizes that “the sense of hyper-connectedness that is a feature of paranoia may also be seen in Martin’s formal choices, the grid in particular.” Yet on the following page she opines “it would be a gross error to see in her work symptoms of illness.”¹¹ Art historians still shrink before the suggestion of links between the work of recognized artists and their mental illnesses. There are clearly issues of privacy and pathologization, but I suggest that stigma is the real culprit.

Exceptions exist to this split, and one suspects that their subjects are typically male and so secure in the canon that exploring their illness could not damage their reputation; indeed, it might add to their image as “tortured artist.” The quintessential example is Vincent van Gogh. In the twentieth century, the obvious counterpart is Jackson Pollock, whose alcoholism led him to a mental institution in the summer of 1938 before it finally killed him in 1956. Michael Leja has carefully traced how Pollock’s developing interest in Jungian psychoanalysis corresponded with the artist’s need to find a psychological solution to his own problems.¹² What Leja does not address, however, is how far Jungian analysis strays from the psychiatric practice Pollock likely encountered in the hospital, where medicalized psychiatry, augmented by occupational therapy, was superseding psychoanalysis at this time.¹³ What might we learn by investigating this artist’s lived experience?

And what of others, especially those with less secure reputations and a greater need for prolonged psychiatric treatment? The category of “art of the mentally ill” may have originated in Kraepelin’s psychiatric hospital, but artists’ frequent idealization of the patients’ art (or art of the unconscious, in Pollock’s case) became increasingly separated from psychiatry, the medical treatment of mental illness. Thus, many modernists fantasized about madness while many artists who truly experienced mental illness found themselves in uncharted territory: sometimes their illness was idealized, sometimes it forced them into months or years of experimental psychiatric treatment, sometimes it was manageable, and sometimes it caused suffering far beyond what any romantic view of it could comprehend.

Stigma still warns us against revising “art of the mentally ill” to “art by people with mental illness” and including practicing artists in that category. The tendency is to lump “art of the mentally ill” with outsider and self-taught art—with the exception of work by the occasional tortured genius—but “art by people with mental illness” critically blurs boundaries between inside and outside. I will in this essay point toward what such a reassessment of categories could reveal. The subject is Sonja Sekula (1918–1963), a Swiss-American artist who bridged Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism in New York from 1936 to 1955. She was included in major exhibitions at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century, starting with *Exhibition by 31 Women* in 1943, and was given her first solo show at the gallery in 1946. After Sekula and other Abstract Expressionists moved to

Betty Parsons's gallery in 1947, she enjoyed five solo shows there over the next decade.¹⁴ Such a record of group and solo shows should have secured her a place in the history of midcentury modernism, yet references to her, let alone accolades, are rare today.

Sekula is little-known in part, no doubt, to the misogyny and homophobia (she was a lesbian) of the period.¹⁵ My argument, however, is that her mental illness ultimately destroyed her career. Art historians occasionally allude to her illness and suicide, if they mention her at all, but Sekula is neither romanticized nor stigmatized, presumably because she is not of the stature of an Oppenheim, Carrington, or Martin, let alone a Pollock. One must look closely at her mental health record to see how it affected her career and critical reception—specifically, how she disappeared from the art historical record. Contemporary critics do not appear to have been aware of her condition. Her illness did not affect her artwork in any obvious way, although future scholarship may show otherwise. It did slow production during periods of intense suffering.¹⁶ Yet extended hospital stays with various treatments appear to have helped her, and support networks large and small—and their failings—impacted her life and production profoundly. Some fellow artists appear to have seen Sekula's illness poetically, sometimes with dire consequences. She had other artist friends and acquaintances who helped her in times of need, and gallerist Parsons supported

her through thick and thin. With all of these factors in mind, it is my contention that Sekula's return to Switzerland for affordable treatment ruined her career; as the move's result, her personal and professional base fractured and her exhibiting career in the United States came to an abrupt end. As art historian Griselda Pollock has speculated, "Exile by coming 'home' broke the thread of what might have become a more recognized and sustained American career, even if punctuated by recurrent illness."¹⁷ Sekula's case reminds us of how critical a supportive environment and a community of like-minded people are for the production and reception of art. Considering Sekula's work in the category of "art by people with mental illness" also helps us understand how someone of such promise, grace, and provisional success could virtually disappear from the history of art.¹⁸

Originally from Lucerne, Sekula traveled as a child to Hungary (her father's homeland), Paris, and Florence, where, at age sixteen, she took lessons in painting and art history. After the family immigrated to the United States in 1936, they lived in Douglaston, on Long Island, near the painter George Grosz, and Sekula studied with him briefly. In fall 1937, she entered Sarah Lawrence College, where she studied art, philosophy, and literature.¹⁹

All was not well, however; Sekula tried to take her life at the age of twenty. In March of 1939 she suffered a complete breakdown, necessitating her admission to New York Hospital–Westchester Division, White Plains, where she stayed until the spring of 1941.²⁰ Details of her hospital stay are

- 1 Sonja Sekula at André Breton's apartment, summer 1945. Reproduced from Dieter Schwarz, *Sonja Sekula 1918–1963* (Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 1996), 24. Photo: Karen Hueftle-Worley



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impossible to ascertain, but treatment methodologies cited in annual reports of the institution offer a window into a patient's slow convalescence. Emphasis on family relationships at admission suggests a continuing adherence to some psychoanalytic principles, while medicalized psychiatry was on the rise. For example, the report of 1940 reads: "Careful somatic studies are essential for the understanding and treatment of psychiatric disorders." Insulin was used, and the stimulant metrazol was introduced to induce seizures (a precursor of electroshock therapy). In 1941, it is reported that electroencephalography (EEG) was "used increasingly."²¹ Exactly what treatment Sekula received is unknown, but in this era of psychiatric experimentation, it was likely a range of methods. It had to be a time of struggle, not revelatory vision, as some modernist mythology would have it.

However hard this two-year episode was for Sekula, she emerged from it with renewed strength—and was fortunate not to suffer another mental collapse for a decade. Later in 1941, she studied with the painter Morris Kantor, who called her work "much more creative and moving than most [students]."²² Perhaps more importantly for her career, in 1942 Sekula met Breton, who provided essential if ambivalent support, both romanticizing Sekula and affording her access to exhibiting venues. Breton wrote her in 1944, for example, "I hope you will continue to talk to me in that scintillating manner which is your very own." He joined the writer Charles Duits, who characterized her in the following way: "An invisible cloud enveloped Sonja, lending her movements gentleness and slowness. She was caught in a transparency, isolating her from the world."²³ The sculptor David Hare later theorized that "The Surrealists liked the way she talked and the poetic ideas she had."²⁴

Many authors have problematized the Surrealist idealization of women; one wonders in Sekula's case if the romanticization Breton and Duits exhibit and that Hare encapsulated was also due to her experience with mental illness, which they also revered in others and sometimes themselves. There were limits to this reverence, to be sure. The art historian Roger Cardinal argues, for example, that Surrealist writer Antonin Artaud's own "clinical interventions . . . carried him to that point of total shipwreck whence the majority of surrealists understandably recoiled."²⁵ Yet, as mentioned above, Breton reputedly encouraged Carrington to write about her own breakdown, because, in the historian Marina Warner's estimation, "from his point of view, the English artist, wild muse, *femme-enfant*, had realized one of the most desirable ambitions of surrealism, the katabasis of the modern age, the voyage to the other side of reason." Further, "She had truly experienced the derangement Breton and poet Paul Éluard had only been able to simulate in *L'Immaculate Conception* in 1930."²⁶ Breton and Éluard had imagined it but she had lived it (or so they imagined), and it was too perfect that she was a woman, because female madness was especially venerated. Consider Breton's novel *Nadja* (1928), in which the title character goes insane.²⁷ Whether Breton's and others' fascination extended to the appreciation of Sekula, whose own actual psychiatric experience was in all likelihood not so picturesque, and her art, cannot be verified, but it is clear that she and Breton developed a certain closeness. In a photograph from the summer of 1945 taken in Breton's apartment, she exudes a comfortableness in the space that comes only with friendship (see fig. 1).

Breton's "modernist fantasy" of Sekula's illness was likely not detrimental to her—unlike another case we will encounter—and it was, in any event, combined productively with his practical acumen for building her career. In January 1943 Breton was on the jury that selected participants for the *Exhibition by 31 Women* at Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery. There Sekula mixed with Surrealists Carrington, Oppenheim, and Frida Kahlo, as well as the emergent Abstract Expressionists Hedda Sterne, I. Rice Pereira, and Buffie Johnson, placing her well within the leading movements of the day.²⁸ This showing led to others. One, *The Women* (1945), reprised the theme of the earlier exhibit and focused on gender for the first time in Sekula's career. On the one hand, she built supportive



2 Sonja Sekula, *African Moonsun*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 24 × 29 7/10 in. Kunstmuseum Luzern. Courtesy the Sonja Sekula Estate and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo © Andri Stadler, Lucerne

friendships with other women artists. On the other, their work was read in gendered terms—not always negatively, it must be said.²⁹ Which of Sekula’s artworks were included in *The Women* is unknown, but she figured prominently in a review in *ARTnews*: “The women who[m] Peggy Guggenheim has picked for her string have definitely something on the ball. The most surprising trait here is an almost masculine vigor of ideas—in connection with Kay Sage and Hedda Sterne, with Sonia Sekula and Helen Phillips in particular.” The anonymous reviewer goes on to call the show “refreshingly unladylike.” Given the hypermasculinity of the period, such gendering was a high mark of approval.³⁰ One wonders if Sekula’s majestic *African Moonsun* (fig. 2) was part of the group that solicited such a response. In it, bold yet somber tones reinforce the impact of strength that might, at the time, have been called masculine. The resulting figures of varying size yet equal weight lead to an almost “allover” impression.

However approving these gendered readings may have been, others were less positive. Writing about Sekula’s first show at Parsons’s gallery in 1948, one reviewer referred to her “airy abstract trifles,” and another claimed her work showed “too much reliance on the manners of others.”³¹ “Trifles” is likely code for “feminine,” and a dependence on others



signals derivativeness, also a trope of femininity, instead of (masculine) originality. This is no surprise; Abstract Expressionism was by and large a misogynist movement. What is pertinent here is that these attacks did not adversely affect Sekula's career: Parsons continued to show her work, and the sexist, negative reviews ended immediately. Indeed, as much as misogyny reigned during the period, Sekula saw herself as belonging to a new era of gender possibilities. In an interview for *The League*, the publication of the Art Students League, she stated:

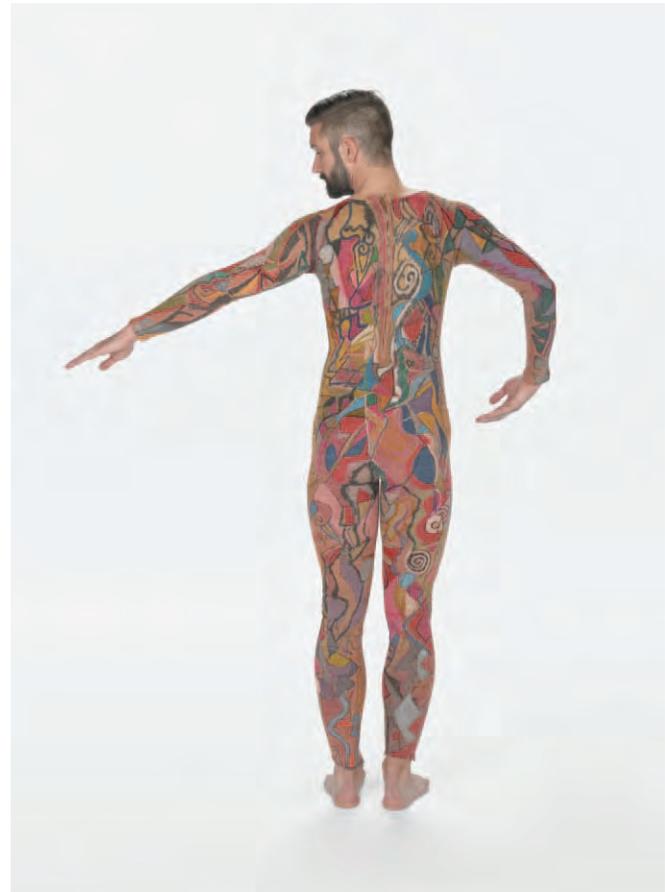
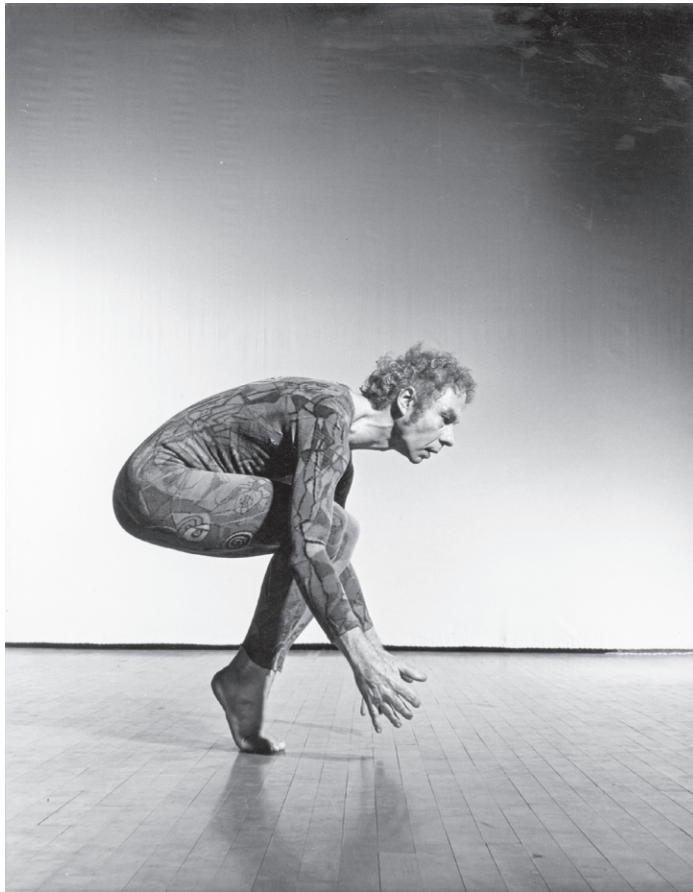
It is the women's era too, they are at last coming forward, painting pictures of sensitivity, emotion, worth. Modern times have demanded that man be more scientific, deductive. Women have always been more instinctive and emotional. Today the feminine and masculine element in painting have been completely eliminated. Women are doing creative work that is completely accepted by the public as good art.³²

Sekula may have been overly optimistic about postgendered art or reception, but gender does not appear to have hindered her. In fact, she benefited from strong friendships, many with women. In September 1945, Sekula traveled with the poet Alice Rahon—her lover at the time—to New Mexico and Mexico. There she met Surrealist artists Carrington, Remedios Varo, and Kahlo, with whom she became close and to whom she lent moral support.³³ Sekula's letters to Kahlo,

3 Max Ernst, André Breton, Kurt Seligmann, Roberto Matta, Marcel Duchamp, and Sonja Sekula, *Dessin successif*, ca. 1943. *VVV*, March 1943, 2–3. Photo: University of Iowa Libraries, Special Collections

who suffered enormous physical pain and emotional anguish related to injuries from a bus accident in her youth, flow with warmth and goodwill. Sekula wrote Kahlo, “I would like to tell you so much I hope for for [*sic*] you. I believe in your courage[,] in your strength[,] in everything that you are.”³⁴ She also gave practical advice: “Please Darling tell Cristina to keep people away from you for 2–3 days. I give you this advise because you will only get well if you have mental rest and are able to be quiet as much as possible.”³⁵

Indeed, Sekula's artistic friendships, stretching back to Breton, yielded opportunities for collaboration as well. In the spring of 1943, Sekula contributed to a game of “successive drawing” with Max Ernst, Breton, Kurt Seligmann, Roberto Matta, and Marcel Duchamp (fig. 3).³⁶ Here she features as an equal participant among major, male figures. A bird shooting a bow and arrow appears successively in each artist's drawing. Ernst's figure is oddly disconnected, while Matta's bird grips the bow and arrow securely. In Sekula's drawing, which closes the sequence, bird and bow are simplified and bonded together, while another rectangular bow is added (a target?) and the arrow is dropped. Each artist's rendition is unique; all share in artistic community.



4 Merce Cunningham dances in costume for *Dromenon* painted by Sonja Sekula, 1947. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Courtesy the Sonja Sekula Estate and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo © Jack Mitchell

5 Sonja Sekula, *Costume for Dromenon*, 1947. Painted wool bodysuit, variable dimensions. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Merce Cunningham Dance Company Collection, Gift of Jay F. Ecklund, the Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation, Agnes Gund, Russell Cowles and Josine Peters, the Hayes Fund of HRK Foundation, Dorothy Lichtenstein, MAHADH Fund of HRK Foundation, Goodale Family Foundation, Marion Stroud Swingle, David Teiger, Kathleen Fluegel, Barbara G. Pine, and the T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2011. Courtesy the Sonja Sekula Estate and Peter Blum Gallery, New York

A more intimate collaboration occurred in May 1947, after Sekula moved into an apartment across from that of the composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham. Years later, Sekula recalled: “With John Cage at Monroe Street in New York in my youth, I still felt a natural joy in life, there I could forget the surroundings I had been born into and become absorbed in the understanding of immediate communication. I miss the silent understandings of the conversations and the cheerful company.”³⁷ This was a sympathetic environment. One artifact of their friendship is Cunningham’s costume for the dance *Dromenon* (figs. 4, 5), for which Cage provided the music. The entire bodysuit is covered with abstract, biomorphic, and angular motifs in earth tones, painted by Sekula, apparently while on Cunningham’s body—a practical solution for providing a firm surface on which to paint and, at the same time, an extremely intimate one, as she coursed down and around every curve. It was a remarkable example of aesthetic collaboration and empathy.

Professional and collegial relationships—and Sekula’s artistic experiments—coalesced such that Guggenheim gave Sekula her first solo exhibit in May 1946. The show was well received. The *New York Times* critic identified two types of works: “Color in richly diversified surface patterns makes up the primary appeal of the abstract and non-objective paintings by Sonja Sekula at Art of This Century Gallery. One dark group called ‘night paintings’ contrasts sharply with the other group in bright, clear, intense values.”³⁸ The reviewer for *ARTnews* wrote, “She has been lately experimenting with blacks, attempting to capture in pure abstraction the feeling and the colors of a cloudless, starry night.”³⁹ The small, playful ink and gouache *Untitled* (fig. 6)



6 Sonja Sekula, *Untitled*, 1946. Ink and gouache on paper, 14 × 17 in. Grinnell College Art Collection, Grinnell, Iowa. Courtesy the Sonja Sekula Estate and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo: Peter Blum Gallery

may have been among the first group. Except for the lack of handwriting in this particular artwork, the reviewer might have been alluding to it: “Her small intricate forms within forms, plus miniscule handwriting, are placed into a machine-like system of composition.”⁴⁰ Sekula’s high-keyed, biomorphic forms spread across the page; at the same time they adhere to transversals that undergird the composition. The arresting work is at once free-flowing and tightly organized.

As this circle of friends coalesced, another site of connection for Sekula unfortunately disappeared: Guggenheim closed her gallery and decamped for Venice at the end of May 1947. Luckily for Sekula, Parsons had opened another venue the previous year and became a great supporter, sales agent, and friend, giving Sekula five solo shows, the first in May 1948.⁴¹ It was a time of great self-assurance for Sekula. A letter to her mother reads: “As I write to you looking out my window I think of all the contemporary American poets and artists who represent their outlook on this strange country and I find myself beginning to realize that I shall be one of them, I shall be an American painter.”⁴² Sekula felt at home in the United States and was emboldened to claim her place among artists of her generation. Secure of Parsons’s backing, Sekula felt comfortable enough to expand her repertory. Her first Parsons show included a range of linear creations: bold, broad strokes in a series of totemic figures as well as feathery, thin structures emerging from transparent

- 7 Sonja Sekula, *The Arrival of the Gods*, 1949. Watercolor on paper, 29 ½ × 21 ⅝ in. Brooklyn Museum, Dick S. Ramsay Fund, 51.92. Courtesy the Sonja Sekula Estate and Peter Blum Gallery, New York



wash.⁴³ Yet despite Parsons's vote of confidence, such experiments were not well received. Whereas gender had not impinged negatively on Sekula's reception before, it did, to some extent, now; these were the works the *New York Times* critic had described as "trifles."

Parsons's faith in Sekula allowed the artist to pursue her development unabated. She continued with these architectural paintings, which became at times more ethereal, at others more structural. Parsons gave Sekula her second solo exhibit in early 1949.⁴⁴ *The Arrival of the Gods*, a large watercolor on paper (fig. 7), may be representative of the work shown. Its title is inscribed at center left, adding a literally calligraphic element to the calligraphic line. Temples and skyscrapers appear and disappear behind the gorgeous mist. The *New York Times* appreciated the works, calling them "a small, highly individual group of abstract, gossamer-fine drawings and gouaches."⁴⁵

- 8 Sonja Sekula, *Nightselves*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 23 ⁸/₁₀ × 23 ³/₄ in. Collection John Matheson, Meilen, Switzerland. Courtesy the Sonja Sekula Estate and Peter Blum Gallery, New York, in Dieter Schwarz, *Sonja Sekula 1918–1963* (Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 1996), no. 60. Photo: Karen Hueftle-Worley
- 9 Sonja Sekula, *Silence*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 57 ⁹/₁₀ × 39 ³/₄ in. Kunsthau Zürich, Donated by the Artist's Mother, 1966. Courtesy the Sonja Sekula Estate and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo: Kunsthau Zürich



Sekula had established herself in the United States, an accomplishment that a nearly two-year trip to Europe in 1949–50 could not spoil.⁴⁶ The artist was back in New York in 1951, and Parsons positioned her squarely within Abstract Expressionism. In April, Sekula shared equal billing at Parsons's gallery with Mark Rothko.⁴⁷ Sekula's reviewers recognized her enhanced stature. One noted she "has a third solo show with free, calligraphic abstractions that seem to owe as much to [Mark] Tobey and Pollock as they do to André Breton's program."⁴⁸ Far from calling her work derivative, reviewers hailed its originality. Stuart Preston wrote for the *New York Times*:

*There is a dazzling display of ingenuity in Sonia Sekula's pictures at the Betty Parsons Gallery. This whole column could be devoted to cataloguing the impulsive patterns; to the tiny explosions of color on one; to the furious calligraphic scribbles on another; or to the carpet of color medallions on a third. It may just be said that her color is sensitive and surprising and her ideas neither dull nor obvious. She is the abstract Paganini.*⁴⁹

One wishes Preston had identified specific pictures, but it is clear that Sekula produced a richly varied collection, and that he considered her a virtuoso, in the company of the great violinist. Two extraordinary examples from 1951 may have been among the works exhibited. In *Nightselves* (fig. 8), fine calligraphic line has moved to the surface, leaving a dreamy deep blue to flow behind it. The alternately bodily, architectural, or whimsical notation spreads evenly across the plane. Such playful mystery is nothing like *Silence* (fig. 9), although it, too, has line that skims the surface. Yet in this work, which Sekula dedicated to Cage, the lines

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are like threads of rain, gently and silently dropping to the dew below.⁵⁰ Strange symbols begin to emerge, but they are not ready to share their secrets. This expression of silence shares Cage's depth of feeling and is also wholly her own.⁵¹

Tragically, however, one sees the peace of *Silence* and asks what befell Sekula, for she suffered her second psychotic break the day after this solo exhibition opened. Her artist friends Manina Thoren and Joseph Glasco drove her to the hospital in White Plains, where she had stayed a decade before. Despairing upon arrival at the hospital, Sekula reputedly said, "I don't cry for myself, I cry for the others."⁵² Some sense of the importance of community stayed with her, even at this moment of mental collapse.

Despite the extreme dislocation accompanying a journey into psychosis and hospital admission—Sekula was again diagnosed with schizophrenia—her description of the clinic after a few months of recovery is sanguine:

Life here consists of sitting a lot ... in a little yard with 3 beautiful trees ... and as one moves on to new, better Halls, the lawns get bigger + you can smoke more cigarettes + put on new shoes. The doctors go by twice a day ... the patients say "good morning" or "good evening sir, how are you?" ... we are fine ... a big consoling, doll like U.S.A. smile etc. etc. few tub-baths with prolonged hours, a few injections ... or a "pack" (of bedsheets) to "calm down" occupational therapy ... (I make bright potholders to calm the imagination) + thru all that slowly we all get well + find the white Road that leads back to Reality + eternal Bliss—such as being creative or meditative in New York City ... (For the moment Creation means something else to me) as yet I still, maybe thru the many shocktreatments (patients call it "electrocutions" for fun), we forget a lot of things or names.⁵³

Sekula does not describe mystical visions or a revelation of the unconscious, that is to say, modernists' fantasies of mental illness. Rather, she describes the slow process of rehabilitation in a mental hospital circa 1950. Long baths were standard fare. Sekula's "injections" are not securely identifiable, but they could have been insulin. Electroshock therapy was widely used at the White Plains hospital beginning at this time.⁵⁴

It is unknown how her friends responded to her condition and her location, though surviving clues are not encouraging. Idealization, once relatively harmless, appears here to have been hurtful. For example, Cage glorified Sekula's mental illness, claiming "when she was about to have a breakdown she would begin to speak in religious terms. She had deep insights of truth—a sense of identifying with everything. It was as though she was perceiving on a higher plane."⁵⁵ Compare her plaintive letter to him from the hospital in White Plains:

Dear John ... I miss you, and wonder why I don't hear from you.. would like to see you again sometime or have a word how you feel .. and work—live—Maybe we can get together sometimes from 4–8. I can go to Whiteplains now. One of these days they'll even let me "visit" New York. But days are still pretty long, a timeless existence like mine is really music-less too ... Hope to see you soon. Love Sonja.⁵⁶

It is not known whether this appeal to the composer—including the reference to sorrowful music-lessness—elicited a visit or not. But it seems clear that for some time Sekula was left very much alone with, or without, the insights Cage attributed to her.⁵⁷ Cage may have idealized her illness as a source of her creativity, but he abandoned her to loneliness, a far cry from the empathy they had experienced as neighbors. He appears to have understood little or nothing of her current experience. Social support has been shown to be a protective factor for people with schizophrenia, so the tear in this social fabric was likely painful for her.⁵⁸

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Parsons, for her part, does not appear to have visited Sekula in White Plains, but she did inaugurate a correspondence that would be supportive in the years to come. Following Sekula's spring solo show, Parsons wrote that she took down Sekula's paintings "with deep regret," having "enjoyed them every minute while they were on the walls." She thought the *Times's* "abstract Paganini" reference was "very good!" and reported two sales "with possibilities of others." Parsons declared she "would love to hear" from Sekula and closed with "Much love."⁵⁹ In the letter, Parsons conveys both professional respect and personal concern in a warm and natural manner.

Bolstered in part by the gallerist, Sekula persevered. Released from the hospital near the end of 1951, she set to work right away on what would be her largest work, *The Town of the Poor* (frontispiece). Hospitalization—not psychotic visions—clearly helped return her to her full creative powers. This painting would be the centerpiece of Sekula's fourth solo show at Parsons's gallery in March 1952.⁶⁰ The critic Dore Ashton provides a perceptive and moving review:

Throughout her work there is a sustained mood of mystery, wonder, and irony inspired it seems by the city.

An exceptional oil, City of the Poor [Town of the Poor], epitomizes Miss Sekula's facility both as technician and creator. A huge canvas, it is constructed in a complex group of interweaving planes suggesting the imaginative space of Piranesi. Luminous areas slip behind linear frontal forms, and legions of tiny figures—suggesting both human and mechanical city phenomena—move in and out of interstices.

*Frenetic or calm, billowing or tightly woven, Miss Sekula's compositions vibrate with color.*⁶¹

In the *New York Times*, Preston also referenced Piranesi's prints of architectural inventions to convey Sekula's architectural representations. He admired Sekula's "extreme refinement, both of color and technique," he recognized the vitality of the pulsations and the chiaroscuro caverns that resemble, perhaps tellingly, Piranesi's "Carceri." Preston conceded that "A first glance may only see confusion but a second should convince that this has been intellectually dictated and mastered."⁶² If "nervous" might be read pejoratively—perhaps even alluding to neurasthenia, commonly associated with women—there is no doubt of Sekula's "mastery" in the end. Further, *Town of the Poor* fulfilled two goals of Abstract Expressionism: immense size and all-over painting.⁶³ Here Sekula took her architectural abstractions and intensified them in size, intricacy, and impact.

Ashton closed with a specific allusion on an altogether different register: "The artist also shows a number of scratchboards which rival [Paul] Klee for inventive use of pigment and line."⁶⁴ *Grace* (fig. 10) is one such scratchboard. Its whimsical arrow and crescent-moon shapes, interlaced with poetic text, are indeed reminiscent of her countryman Klee—whom Sekula had long admired.⁶⁵ Lacking Klee's irony, however, Sekula voices a fervent wish, written on the canvas, below and right of center: "True artist[s] are true givers and true workers[;] please let them be happy." The poignancy of one holding onto precarious happiness and health is palpable. Luckily, Parsons was unwavering in her support; she included Sekula's work in a group show in May 1952.⁶⁶ The *New York Times* review was brief: "Good pictures for the spectator to tackle are, at Betty Parsons, those by Sterne, Stamos, Sekula, Rothko, Ossorio, Pollock, Miles and Margo."⁶⁷ By all appearances, then, Sekula's mental illness had not impeded her career thus far, even if it had caused her pain, interrupted her work, and upset some friendships.

Parsons's openness and commitment would be all the more precious to Sekula, who, traveling back to Switzerland with her mother in the fall of 1952, suffered another breakdown and had to be admitted to the Bellevue sanatorium in Kreuzlingen in October.⁶⁸



10 Sonja Sekula, *Grace*, 1952. Ink on paper, 13¼ × 11 in. Courtesy of Kaba Roessler/Margrit Schmid; and the Sonja Sekula Estate and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo ©Andri Stadler, Lucerne

The treatment she received there appears to have been a combination of “existential psychotherapy” and psychiatric treatments like those she had received in the United States.⁶⁹ The varied treatment must have been helpful, in any case, because Sekula’s parents returned her there some years later.

In 1952, despite such upheaval, Parsons still gave her continuity, demonstrating that her support system was thus far intact. In December, she addressed Sekula at the “Sanatorium Bellevue,” excusing herself for “not writing long ago.” But she reported that she was trying to sell Sekula’s works from her father’s apartment and that *Town of the Poor* was “enormously admired” at a recent show. She gushed, “I love your pictures and wish I could own at least a hundred of them.”⁷⁰ Yet again Parsons showed admiration and kindness, and demonstrated she was working in her professional capacity to promote Sekula’s work in the artist’s absence. Despite such efforts, Sekula’s first letter (after her August release) in October 1953 foreshadows problems to come. She offered to send Parsons a “batch of several very small sized watercolors,” a necessity due to limited materials and funds. Sekula’s fragility was also impacting her ability to make contacts in Switzerland: “I am unable to meet people or galleries, etc. or do much about it as my nerves seem just strong enough to even go on painting + not much more anymore.”⁷¹

Parsons was ready to redouble her efforts for Sekula. She wrote with an idea to sell the “very small sized watercolors” as Christmas cards at the Museum of Modern Art and encouraged Sekula to “Go on doing your beautiful things.” Sekula wanted more, though; she wanted to know when Parsons would offer her another show.⁷² Despite Sekula’s inconsistent presence and productivity over the last few years, Parsons intrepidly offered her a show for October 1954. Sekula returned to New York in January 1954, no doubt in anticipation of preparing the exhibition.⁷³

All was in place, then, for Sekula to work toward her next show at Parsons’s. She suffered another breakdown, however, and entered Hall-Brooke sanatorium, in Westport, Connecticut, from May to July 1954, reentering intermittently until March 1955. The director of Hall-Brooke reported to Sekula’s mother that there was “satisfactory symptomatic improvement” with “electrically-induced convulsions” each time.⁷⁴ Recovery was not fast enough, however. Her solo show had to be forsaken. Suddenly, after Sekula was released in March 1955, her parents took her home to Switzerland. Treatment in both countries was generally comparable, but as Sekula wrote to Parsons in 1956, “sanatoriums are impossible for us to pay in the USA.”⁷⁵

The move had dire consequences for Sekula and her networks. A social being, she was increasingly isolated from her friends and the art world. In one of many distraught letters, Sekula wrote in September 1957:

*I miss New York daily and a few friends, though I have no writing contact anymore and seem like on an island. . . . I am totally lost and unhappy in Switzerland, but its hard to explain the reasons—I feel cut off from all former contact and encouragement and often would need somebody else to talk to except my parents. . . . I should never have come back here—but I couldn’t choose and they couldn’t afford it to leave me there.*⁷⁶

The move had calamitous implications for her art as well. From 1955 to 1957 Sekula preferred to paint on a small scale. She knew the American market preferred larger canvases, but she could not respond to that call with a clear conscience. She also had to deal with the practicalities of living on the move. As she shared with Parsons, “I work often on paper with *oil*, small size, as that suits my heart best—Yes, I have big canvases, new, but the point does not go after *size* and American public must have bigness. O.K.

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But I stick to my own need and prefer to work small scale for outward and moral reasons.”⁷⁷ If in that account size appears as a purely personal choice, elsewhere other anxieties appear: “Would like to paint on a big canvas, in my mind I try and try to do it—but am subconsciously discouraged at having to hide it all again in some dusty storage place.”⁷⁸ Is it a withering confidence or discouragement with itinerancy or both? In any case, if Sekula had been allowed to stay in New York, she might have approached scale less cautiously, returning, perhaps, to the monumentality of *Town of the Poor*.

Parsons did her best to support her from afar, though her efforts after the artist’s move to Switzerland would prove to be in vain. The two had met up at the Venice Biennale in June 1956. (Sekula wrote, reflecting on Parsons’s ability to draw her out of depression, “it helped a lot.”⁷⁹) Discussions about a future show fill their correspondence thereafter. Sekula was able to send the new works on paper in March 1957.⁸⁰ They would be joined by two oils already in New York, including *Town of the Poor*. The reviews were generally positive but revealed an ambivalence that is telling. Sekula is introduced, for example, as “a gifted painter who has not shown for some time in New York”; her “larger oil, a faintly toned painting with characteristic deep recessions, pale figures and symbols, and a linear counterpoint dates from 1951.”⁸¹ *Town of the Poor* outshone its smaller, younger pictorial cousins, but its age was not unnoticed. Another reviewer also commented on the artist’s long absence, stating that Sekula “who has not had a one-man show here since 1952, shows small, abstract, oil-on-paper paintings.”⁸² This reviewer, Irving Sandler, would go on to lionize the masculine exploits of Abstract Expressionists such as Pollock in his book *The Triumph of American Painting*.⁸³ He describes no triumph in Sekula: “Although different styles are utilized, all of her works depict a fanciful dream state, a playful never-never land of shifting forms and colors.” Such a purportedly lighthearted lack of forcefulness, compounded by relative smallness, could never impress Sandler.⁸⁴

Parsons reported nine sales from the exhibition, but the ambivalent reviews suggest that Sekula’s American moment had passed.⁸⁵ This was the last show she would have in the United States. Her acclaim for more than a decade of shows came, it seems, to naught. Gender discrimination, potential homophobia, allusions to nervousness, unfortunate idealization—none of these had impeded her career. What seems on reflection to have caused Sekula the most professional displacement was her move to Switzerland in 1955. The move precipitated her having to paint on a smaller scale, which did not meet the needs of the American art market. But even more consequentially, if she had been able to remain in New York, her non-romanticizing friends might have nurtured her, and she and Parsons could have continued to work together to build her once promising career. Instead, her story ends catastrophically. Sekula was in and out of institutions in Switzerland, where she took her own life on April 25, 1963.

Sekula’s case has much to teach us. In April 1957, one month before her last solo exhibition at Parsons’s gallery, the artist and her mother took a trip to Paris, where they met Jean Dubuffet at an opening to his show. Sekula wrote to Parsons excitedly, “Am in Paris for a short time also trying to arrange a show for later on—met Dubuffet—we spoke about you—his new work is incredible.”⁸⁶ Sekula’s mother also wrote to Parsons: “We went to the Vernissage [opening] of Dubuffet and spoke to him to[o]. Though I never cared to[o] much for his work *many years* ago, at [Galerie] Matisse this time I was absolutely fascinated by some of his recent work.”⁸⁷

What is extraordinary about this encounter is not that Sekula and her mother were excited to meet the major French artist, but rather that Dubuffet’s obsession with “art of the mentally ill”—which, strictly speaking, Sekula produced—does not appear to have been a pressing topic of conversation, if it was one at all. Dubuffet, as mentioned

above, is famous not only for his painting but also for his enormous collection of Art Brut, a considerable amount of which is art by people with mental illness. Despite Sekula's chronic illness, however, neither she nor anyone then or now would consider her art to be "art of the mentally ill." The obviousness of that assertion—despite its illogic—requires us to reassess the flaws of this category. *Not* considering the production of practicing artists who are mentally ill as art by people with mental illness perpetuates modernist fantasies about mental illness. These misconceptions persist in the market for and scholarship about "outsider art" as well as the trope of the genius, "tortured artist." There are broader consequences as well. If the art by people with mental illness—as continually defined at places like the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne—has to remain *brut*, uneducated, uncivilized, even when it is romanticized as such, then we will undoubtedly continue to think of people with mental illness as equally *brut*. Sekula was clearly not *brut* and yet her art *is* "art by people with mental illness."

We cannot recognize the strength of Sonja Sekula's contribution until we acknowledge the role of mental illness in her career (and in bringing that career to an end). Despite her schizophrenia, she was able to produce extraordinary work for more than twenty years. The support of her non-idealizing personal and professional community was instrumental in helping her produce such exceptional art, support that her forced removal to Switzerland eviscerated—along with her career. Among the modernists, Sekula was not the only artist with mental illness, of course. Considering mental illness in the art world more broadly—welcoming professional artists with mental illness into the category "art by people with mental illness"—humanizes those with mental illness. Indeed, it helps us to contemplate a vast range of sorts and degrees of illness, as well as how they affect art, artists, and their legacies.

Notes

This essay is dedicated to Dr. Jess Fiedorowicz, who encouraged this research and fielded questions about psychiatry. I thank my research assistants, Sonja Spain and Margaret Coleman; incisive readers, Jay Clarke and Eileen Bartos; Sekula scholars Roger Perret and Dieter Schwarz Manon for sharing her memories of Sekula; Starr Figura at the Museum of Modern Art; Lena Lehmann and Laura Breitschmid at the Kunstmuseum Luzern; Simona Ciuccio and Thomas Huth at the Kunstmuseum Winterthur; Joan Rothfuss at the Walker Art Center; David Blum and Vlad Smolkin at the Peter Blum Gallery; Walter Denzler and Dr. Stefan Büchi at Sanatorium Hohenegg Meilen; and the anonymous readers and Robin Veder at *American Art*.

- 1 Hans Prinzhorn, *Bildneri der Geisteskranken: Ein Beitrag zur Psychologie und Psychopathologie der Gestaltung* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1922). See Hal Foster, "Blinded Insights: On the Modernist Reception of the Art of the Mentally Ill," *October* 97 (Summer 2001): 3–10; and on Klee and other Blaue Reiter artists, see Reinhold Heller, "Expressionism's Ancients," in Maurice
- 2 Alfred H. Barr Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936); and Barr, ed., *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936). See Donald Preziosi's trenchant analysis of *Fantastic Art* in "Art History, Museology, and the Staging of Modernity," in Tuchman and Eliel, *Parallel Visions*, 296–307.
- 3 Michel Thévoz, *Art Brut*, trans. James Emmons (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1976), 41; Sarah Wilson, "From the Asylum to the Museum: Marginal Art in Paris and New York, 1938–68," in Tuchman and Eliel, *Parallel Visions*, 136–39; and *L'Art Brut* (Paris: Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 1967).
- 4 Kraepelin was not a psychoanalyst, but early twentieth-century artists viewed Prinzhorn's book about his collection through a psychoanalytic lens.
- 5 Foster, "Blinded Insights," 3.
- 6 "Person-first" usage is currently preferred in disability studies, such that the person has a disability rather than being defined by it.
- 7 Preziosi, "Art History," 301.
- 8 Thévoz, *Art Brut*, 13.
- 9 For a brief evaluation of Oppenheim's art in relation to her depression, see Thomas McEvelley, "Basic Dichotomies in Meret Oppenheim's Work," in *Meret Oppenheim: Beyond the Teacup*, ed. Jacqueline Burckhardt and Bice Curiger (New York: Independent Curators, 1996), 49–52.
- 10 Leonora Carrington, *Down Below* (New York: New York Review Books, 2017).
- 11 Nancy Princenthal, *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 9–10.
- 12 Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), 121–202, esp. 149, 353n67.
- 13 Jackson Davidow, "Art Therapy, Occupational Therapy, and American Modernism," *American Art* 32, no. 2

- (Summer 2018): 96; and *167th Annual Report of the Society of the New York Hospital 1938* (New York: Society of the New York Hospital, 1939), 82, 85, 84, 88–89. All New York Hospital annual reports cited in this article are available at archive.org. An excellent layman's history is Jeffrey A. Lieberman with Ogi Ogas, *Shrinks: The Untold Story of Psychiatry* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015).
- 14 On Sekula's exhibition record, see Dieter Schwarz, *Sonja Sekula 1918–1963* (Winterthur: Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 1996), 268–75; Susan Davidson and Philip Rylands, eds., *Peggy Guggenheim and Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of This Century* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2004), 291–92, 296–97, 324–25, 336–37; and Lee Hall, *Betty Parsons: Artist, Dealer, Collector* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1991), 182–85.
 - 15 On misogyny and homophobia in the art world at the time, see Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1997); Gibson, "Universality and Difference in Women's Abstract Painting: Krasner, Ryan, Sekula, Piper, and Streat," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 103–32; Griselda Pollock, "The Missing Future: MoMA and Modern Women," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia H. Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 28–55; and Mary Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women: Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler: Five Painters and the Movement that Changed Modern Art* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018).
 - 16 Typically the illness is chronic, but there are cases of sporadic schizophrenia. See Courtenay M. Harding et al., "The Vermont Longitudinal Study of Persons with Severe Mental Illness, I: Methodology, Study Sample, and Overall Status 32 Years Later," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 144, no. 6 (June 1987): 718–26.
 - 17 Griselda Pollock, "Seeking 'It': Seeing Beyond; Some Thoughts on Sonja Sekula's Oeuvre," in *Sonja Sekula and Friends*, ed. Fanni Fetzer and Dominik Müller (Lucerne: Kunstmuseum Luzern, 2016), 80.
 - 18 Already in 1971 it was necessary to title an article "Who was Sonia Sekula?" Nancy Foote, "Who was Sonia Sekula?," *Art in America* 59, no. 5 (September–October 1971): 73–80. Sekula's name was misspelled frequently; the primary-source errors are reproduced as printed. A recent effort to revitalize her reputation was the Swiss exhibition *Sonja Sekula and Friends*. A New York show, *Sonja Sekula: A Survey*, followed in 2017 at the Peter Blum Gallery in New York.
 - 19 For biographical details, see Dieter Schwarz, "From New York to Zurich 1943–1963," in Schwarz, *Sonja Sekula*, 63–93; Roger Perret, "Der Ruf der Sirenen," in *Sonja Sekula: Im Zeichen der Frage, im Zeichen der Antwort; Ausgewählte Texte und Wortbilder auf deutsch, englisch und französisch (1932–1962)*, ed. Perret (Basel: Lenos, 1996), 178–235; and Perret, "Biography," in Schwarz, *Sonja Sekula*, 249–60. Although the timing of their migration suggests that they could have been escaping European anti-Semitism, other Sekula scholars with whom I have consulted do not believe that her father's Jewish heritage played a role in the move.
 - 20 A later letter confirms this was Sekula's first hospitalization. George Hughes to Bertie Sekula, March 7, 1955, Sonja Sekula chart, Sanatorium Hoheneegg, W II 91.4271, Staatsarchiv des Kantons Zürich (hereafter Sanatorium Hoheneegg). Dr. Stefan Büchi (Sanatorium Hoheneegg) has approved my use of these records in this article. Due to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), Sekula's records are not publicly available in the United States.
 - 21 *169th Annual Report of the Society of the New York Hospital, 1940* (New York: Society of the New York Hospital, 1941), 54, 74–77; and *170th Annual Report of the Society of the New York Hospital, 1941* (New York: Society of the New York Hospital, 1942), 36.
 - 22 Morris Kantor quoted in Perret, *Sonja Sekula*, 194.
 - 23 André Breton to Sonja Sekula, August 21, 1944, private collection of Roger Perret; and Charles Duits, *André Breton a-t-il dit passe?* (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1969), 102, quoted in Schwarz, "From New York to Zurich," 64–65.
 - 24 David Hare quoted in Foote, "Who was Sonia Sekula?" 79.
 - 25 Roger Cardinal, "Surrealism and the Paradigm of the Creative Subject," in Tuchman and Eliel, *Parallel Visions*, 94–119, quote at 114. See also Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli, and Gwen Raaberg, eds., *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991); and Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985).
 - 26 Marina Warner introduction to Carrington, *Down Below*, xxiii. See André Breton and Paul Éluard, *Immaculate Conception*, trans. Jon Graham (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992).
 - 27 André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (1928; New York: Grove Press, 1960).
 - 28 Schwarz, *Sonja Sekula*, 272. *Exhibition by 31 Women* ran January 5–February 6, 1943. See Davidson and Rylands, *Peggy Guggenheim*, 290–92.
 - 29 The exhibition ran June 12–July 7, 1945. Davidson and Rylands, *Peggy Guggenheim*, 324–25.
 - 30 "The Passing Shows," *ARTnews* 44, no. 9 (July 1945): 26.
 - 31 "In Brief: Exhibitions," *New York Times*, May 16, 1948, X8; and "Sonja Sekula," *ARTnews* 47, no. 3 (May 1948): 48.
 - 32 Sonja Sekula quoted in Cicely Aikman, "An Artist Speaks: Sonia Sekula," *The League* (Winter 1945–46): 2, quoted in Schwarz, "From New York to Zurich," 65.
 - 33 Perret, "Biography," 249.
 - 34 Sonja Sekula to Frida Kahlo, New York, ca. 1946, Museo Frida Kahlo, The Blue House, Mexico City. Thanks to Roger Perret for sharing these letters.
 - 35 Sonja Sekula to Frida Kahlo, summer 1946, Museo Frida Kahlo.
 - 36 Schwarz, "From New York to Zurich," 64.
 - 37 Sonja Sekula, *Untitled Sketchbook*, August 1957, Inv. Nr. 1996.40.2, Kunstmuseum Winterthur. This and all other translations are by the author, unless otherwise noted.
 - 38 H. D., "One-Man Shows: Lautrec," *New York Times*, May 19, 1946, X6. The exhibition ran May 14–June 1, 1946. Davidson and Rylands, *Peggy Guggenheim*, 336–37.
 - 39 "Sonja Sekula," *ARTnews* 45, no. 3 (May 1946): 61. The *Night Paintings* included in the exhibition were *Fountain under the Sea*, *Sleep Walker*, *Shadows (of the Moon)*, *Midnight*, *Red Night*, *Moon Dust*, *Eagle Darkness*, *Faceless Night*, *Arctic Night*, *Apparition of the Window*, *Night Animals*, *Aube*, *Frost Night*, *Projection North*, and *Self Portrait*. "Eight gouaches" are announced but only two are named in the potentially truncated version of the flyer in Sekula's archives: *Painting (Earthquake)* (1942) and *Painting (Beginning of Toys)* (1939). Their locations are all unknown, but one from the series

- can be seen in Schwarz, *Sonja Sekula*, no. 10. *Sonja Sekula: First Exhibition of Paintings* (New York: Art of This Century, 1946) in IX. Ausstellungen-Kritiken, Sonja Sekula Archive, Zurich.
- 40 “Sonja Sekula” (1946), 61.
- 41 Hall, *Betty Parsons*, 91, 182–87.
- 42 Sonja Sekula to Bertie Sekula, November 5, 1947, VII. Briefe 1934–62, Sonya Sekula Archive, Zurich.
- 43 See likely works in Schwarz, *Sonja Sekula*, nos. 21 and 23.
- 44 The show ran February 21–March 12, 1949. Hall, *Betty Parsons*, 182.
- 45 “In Brief,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1949, quoted in Schwarz, “From New York to Zurich,” 80.
- 46 Perret, “Biography,” 251–52.
- 47 The show ran April 2–21, 1951. Hall, *Betty Parsons*, 183.
- 48 T. B. H. [Thomas B. Hess], “Sonia Sekula,” *ARTnews* 50, no. 2 (April 1951): 48.
- 49 Stuart Preston, “Chiefly Abstract,” *New York Times*, April 2, 1951, 106. See also Mary Cole, “Sonia Sekula,” *Art Digest* 25, no. 13 (April 1951): 17.
- 50 Fanni Fetzter, “The Right Person at the Wrong Time in the Wrong Place: Conjectures on Sonja Sekula (1918–1963),” in Fetzter and Müller, *Sonja Sekula and Friends*, 38.
- 51 For more on Sekula, Cage, and silence, see Perret, *Sonja Sekula*, 210–12.
- 52 Conversation between Manina Jouffroy and Roger Perret, January 12, 1996, in Perret, *Sonja Sekula*, 213.
- 53 Sonja Sekula to Manina Thoeren, July 6, 1951, quoted in Perret, *Sonja Sekula*, 213–15. It is unknown if the ellipses in Perret are original to Sekula.
- 54 The hospital’s annual report emphasizes the benefits of electroshock therapy, insulin therapy, EEG, and prefrontal lobotomy, the last of which they (thankfully) performed sparingly. See *The Society of the New York Hospital: The Annual Report of the Medical Director of the New York Hospital—Westchester Division, 1951* (New York: Society of the New York Hospital, 1952), 23–24.
- 55 Cage quoted in Foote, “Who was Sonia Sekula?” 79.
- 56 Sonja Sekula to John Cage, box 20, folder 9, John Cage Archives, Music Library, Northwestern University Libraries.
- 57 Fear and stigma keep many from visiting patients in a mental hospital. Many justifications are also given. In Breton’s novel *Nadja*, whose title character is institutionalized, the narrator refuses to visit her because “My general contempt for psychiatry, its rituals and its works, is reason enough for my not yet having dared investigate what has become of Nadja.” Breton, *Nadja*, 141.
- 58 Judith Buchanan, “Social Support and Schizophrenia: A Review of the Literature,” *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* 9, no. 2 (April 1995): 68–76.
- 59 Betty Parsons to Sonja Sekula, May 4, 1951, Betty Parsons Gallery records and personal papers, ca. 1920–91, bulk 1946–83, box 16, folder 30, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (hereafter Parsons Correspondence).
- 60 The show ran March 10–29, 1952. Hall, *Betty Parsons*, 183.
- 61 D. A. [Dore Ashton], “Sonia Sekula,” *Art Digest*, March 15, 1952, 20. Ashton’s review, like many period sources, refers to the painting as *City of the Poor*. For consistency I use the Museum of Modern Art’s title, *The Town of the Poor*.
- 62 Stuart Preston, “Shahn, Hare and Others,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1952, X9; and “In Brief: Exhibitions,” X8. See also Carlyle Burrows, “Two Artists,” *New York Herald Tribune*, March 16, 1952; and Henry McBride, “By Henry McBride,” *ARTnews* 51, no. 2 (April 1952): 47.
- 63 On Abstract Expressionists’ predilection for large-scale works, see Jeffrey Wechsler, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: Other Dimensions; An Introduction to Small Scale Painterly Abstraction in America, 1940–1965* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1989).
- 64 D.A., “Sonia Sekula,” 20.
- 65 Sekula often lauds Klee in her notes about art. V. Kunstbetrachtungen, Sonya Sekula Archive, Zurich.
- 66 The show ran May 12–June 14, 1952. Hall, *Betty Parsons*, 183.
- 67 Stuart Preston, “By Groups and Singly,” *New York Times*, May 18, 1952, X8.
- 68 An inquiry to the Bellevue archives resulted in confirmation that Sekula was there four times. The correspondent wrote that the first visit was October 15, 1951–August 6, 1953, but the admission date is more likely 1952, the year Perret also gives (“Biography,” 252). Dr. Regina Keyler to the author, October 10, 2017.
- 69 See Susan Lanzoni, “An Epistemology of the Clinic: Ludwig Binswanger’s Phenomenology of the Other,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 160–86; and Sekula chart, Number 14194, Blatt 1, 1.10.58, Sanatorium Hoheneegg.
- 70 Betty Parsons to Sonja Sekula, December 24, 1952, Parsons Correspondence.
- 71 Sonja Sekula to Betty Parsons, October 14, 1953, Parsons Correspondence.
- 72 Betty Parsons to Sonja Sekula, October 22, 1953; Sekula to Parsons, November 25, 1953, both in Parsons Correspondence.
- 73 Betty Parsons to Sonja Sekula, January 9, 1954, Parsons Correspondence; and Perret, *Sonja Sekula*, 283.
- 74 Hughes to Bertie Sekula, March 7, 1955.
- 75 Sonja Sekula to Betty Parsons, October 9, 1956, Parsons Correspondence.
- 76 Sonja Sekula to Betty Parsons, September 4, 1957, Parsons Correspondence.
- 77 Sonja Sekula to Betty Parsons, January 28, 1956, Parsons Correspondence.
- 78 Sekula to Parsons, October 9, 1956, Parsons Correspondence.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Sonja Sekula to Betty Parsons, March 31, 1957, Parsons Correspondence.
- 81 Dore Ashton, “Art: Painting by Haitian Primitives,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1957, 71.
- 82 I. H. S. [Irving Sandler], “Sonia Sekula,” *ARTnews* 56, no. 4 (Summer 1957): 21.
- 83 Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger, 1970).
- 84 Sandler confirmed both his taste for large-scale works and his lack of interest in Sekula in an interview in Wechsler, *Abstract Expressionism*, 76–84.
- 85 Betty Parsons to Sonja Sekula, June 4, 1957; Sekula to Parsons, August 28, 1959; and Parsons to Sekula, May 15, 1959, and December 14, 1959, Parsons Correspondence.
- 86 Sonja Sekula to Betty Parsons, April 30, 1957, Parsons Correspondence.
- 87 Bertie Sekula to Betty Parsons, May 16, 1957, Parsons Correspondence.