

PETER BLUM GALLERY

SONJA SEKULA

Biography

BIOGRAPHY

“Le noir n’est pas si noir...”¹

1918 Sonja Sekula was born on April 8 in Lucerne, daughter of Béla Sekula (1881-1966), a Hungarian of half-Jewish decent and Berta (Bertie), née Huguenin (1896-1980), who belonged to the well-known Lucerne café and confectionary dynasty of that name. Her father had come to Switzerland in 1913 where, like his three brothers, he worked as a stamp dealer.

Her parents had married on October 9, 1916, and after Sonja’s birth they rent the Villa Sonnenhof in Lucerne, built in 1892. Also living with them are two children, Karl and Hedy, from the father’s previous marriage. The life-style is upper class, with domestic staff and a great deal of entertaining.

1919 Sonja’s father is frequently abroad on business and her mother, feeling lonely and isolated with the children, begins a diary about her young daughter, starting at the end of August. This record, in which the name of the father is never mentioned, is marked by the mother’s dotting love for her daughter: “I will make you as happy as only I can. I will give you a golden childhood – I will be your friend, your playmate, your teacher, everything, everything –”².

1920-1921 In February Sonja takes her first long trip with her parents to Italy: “Now you think we are going to your fairy-land and will see Indians, monkeys, polar bears and heavenly creatures! I teach you to say ‘Mailand’, but you put your little hands together and say ‘Lieber Heiland’ !! [‘Dear Christ’]”³.

1923-1930 Probably attends the Brun private school in Lucerne. Sonja likes to spend her free time in the countryside, reads and draws a great deal, and, like her mother, loves horse-riding.

1928 On her mother’s birthday on April 23, Sonja presents her with a poem.⁴

1930-1931 School year in Zuoz in the Engadin. Sonja starts to accompany her parents abroad on (business) trips – to Paris, where she visits the museums, and to Hungary, visiting her father’s relatives.

1932-1933 For a year and a half Sonja attends the Lucerne business school. A fellow pupil is struck by her “lovely, strange school essays”⁵. Finding business studies of little interest, she enters the Hochalpinen Töchterinstitut in Ftan on December 27, 1933, “quite isolated from the wicked world”⁶. A special programme is put together for her with languages, art history, history and sport. Of her time there she says, “So what did I learn? –smoking – stuffing myself with food – getting fat – going on diets – etc.”⁷

1934 As Sonja has problems with boarding school discipline, by the end of March she has already left again. At home in Lucerne she describes her family in notes illustrated with watercolors: “She, the unassuming one, as we shall call her, spends the greater part of the year in a little town – Sometimes she goes with her husband, who is a business man with purely commercial interests, on journeys, usually their daughter goes too – The unassuming one spends the winter in her big house in the small town, usually alone – her daughter is at boarding school and he, the all powerful one, is travelling – She has had a fairly calm existence – much calmer than she might have expected at that time – she is highly educated – an internally crystallised person who can control herself through and through, which is no small matter with her husband – / He, an upstart – with many good – but predominantly highly egoistic qualities, is greater inferior to her socially – which he makes her feel acutely through the coarseness he employs to try to cover his inferiority. But the unassuming one tolerates everything – for the good of her daughter – / [...] The unassuming one loves her only child, her daughter, more than anything in the world – for her sake she has not sought a divorce – for her sake she tolerates everything [...] / The daughter – does not appreciate these acts of kindness – she does not notice them – when she comes home from the institute she is bored to death every day in that dump which is what she always calls the town – [...] / but in fact the daughter is not nearly as bad as she seems – she is a kind person – just rather weak and dreadfully unclear about herself – She starts many things all at once – and if something does not work she drops it straight away and is deeply depressed afterwards”.⁸

Sonja spends much of the next two years in Hungary and Florence and studies languages, art and painting.

1935 At this time Sonja possibly first meets Annemarie Schwarzenbach, writer and photojournalist, who is ten years older than her and with whom she falls in love. That summer she states: “Still longing, still not finding what I desire –”⁹. In her diary she describes the furnishings of several rooms at home in words and pictures; under the name of “Jellyfish”, Sonja presents the lobby with the paternal collection of weapons and the library, “Mama’s place”, in great detail.

1936 In January she visits Annemarie Schwarzenbach at her home in Sils in the Engadin. Also there is the writer Klaus Mann, a friend of Schwarzenbach, who notes in his diary: “Attempt to politically enlighten young Sonja – who has come from Florence and has been rendered imbecilic by the Italian propaganda. [...] Talk to Miro [= Annemarie Schwarzenbach] about the fact that the generation succeeding us, (today’s 16-20 year olds) are so alarmingly unintellectual, unfocused and indifferent. As examples; Sonja [...]”.¹⁰

At the end of June the family packs up the household in Lucerne. Sonja spends the summer with her parents in Vienna, Budapest and Spain. In Budapest she meets the Hungarian writer Ottó Indig. So strong is the impression she makes on him that a few years later he publishes a novel which is almost documentary in

its portrayal of Sonja and of her close relationship with her mother.¹¹ In the novel Sonja, alias “Katja”, wants “to be a writer, a poet” and views her lesbian inclinations as “a blessing”. The narrator describes her: “Her whole being is extraordinary. The way she looks, what she says, the way she loves, the way she hates, the way she lives.”¹²

On September 23, the family sets sail for America where her father has had business contacts for some time and where Sonja has already been on visits. On the advice of their friend, the painter George Grosz, who has already emigrated, they settle in his neighbourhood, in Douglaston on Long Island not far from New York. Klaus and Erika Mann visit the Sekula family on December 6.¹³

1937 Sonja attends painting classes in George Grosz’s private school. She passes entrance examinations to three colleges and wins a competition in bareback riding. In September she begins studies in art, philosophy and literature at the well-known Sarah Lawrence College for girls in Bronxville, New York. Her teachers are the German born painter, Kurt Roesch, the Austrian emigré, René d’Harmoncourt and the writer, Horace Gregory. She has little contact with her fellow students but is referred to as a “genius” by them.

1938 Most probably the Sekula family moves to 400 Park Avenue in New York. Trip to Europe.

1939 Following a breakdown which had been heralded by a suicide attempt the year before, Sonja has to break off her studies at Sarah Lawrence College on March 8, and enter the psychiatric clinic of the New York Hospital in White Plains, close to New York, for treatment. “I am sick; sick and yet still can’t tell any doctor that, sick in the head.”¹⁴ Sonja’s parents move to Scarsdale, near White Plains.

1940 Sonja is allowed out to visit her parents from time to time. From that summer they are living in Westport, Connecticut.

1941 In spring Sonja is discharged from the clinic. At the end of the year she takes up studying art at the Art Students’ League in New York. She attends the so-called modernist classes given by the Ukrainian born painter Morris Kantor, and Russian born Raphael Soyer. She also writes, mainly in English, encouraged by her former teacher Horace Gregory. Studies the work of the avant-garde writer, Gertrude Stein, intensively; despite her enthusiasm for her, she notes: “Do not stick to the classics, stick to yourself.”¹⁵ In August stays with her parents on Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

1942 It is probably from this time on that Sonja lives with her parents in a luxury apartment at 399 Park Avenue in New York. The Sekula family keep open house receiving many well-known artists and intellectuals. Around this time Sonja gets

to know André Breton's circle of Surrealists living in American exile. Among those she frequents are Breton, his wife, Jacqueline Lamba, Roberto Matta, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Kurt Seligmann, Isabelle Waldberg, the writer, Denis de Rougemont as well as two American artists close to Surrealism, Robert Motherwell and David Hare.

1943 In January, for the first-time, one of her pictures is exhibited publicly in the group show *31 Women* at Peggy Guggenheim's New York Gallery, Art of This Century. In March there follows the first and only publication of a text by her during her lifetime in the journal *VVV*, edited by David Hare. That summer she stays in the Hampton Bays, Long Island, with David Hare, Jacqueline Lamba, Breton and his new protégé, the 17 year old budding poet Charles Duits, to whom we owe one of the rare descriptions of Sonja: "Sonja's smile was full of charm. She never laughed at people in the least but, somehow, at 'the situation'. A very young smile. It seemed to light on her lips accidentally. Her whole face smiled, so that two very fine lines formed at the sides of her mouth. / It was said that Sonja was 'strange'. One had to be careful with her, she was fragile. Her mother always looked at her with the same expression, timid, helpless and proud. / Sonja said that sometimes, if she got too 'excited', she had to spend some weeks in a 'resthome'. She seemed to be saying this mainly to explain (to excuse) her mother's attitude towards her. / She usually wore a man's jacket, too large for her, and flat shoes. So giving her masculine allure negated by her rounded forms. / She strode along with her hands in her pockets, her head pushed forward slightly. And then a magnificent woman replaced the equivocal young girl. She wore gorgonian jewelry, painted her lips, which were very full and looked as though their contours had been drawn by the brush of an oriental master. / [...] She had a white skin with a golden sheen under it; her hair cut round her face like a little girl; hair the color of September, straight, thick and full. / The beauty of a young falcon, to which her eyes, clear, green, surrounded by dark rings, protruding slightly from her face, wide open, added a hallucinatory stare. An invisible cloud enveloped Sonja, lending her movements gentleness and slowness. She was caught in transparency, isolating her from the world."¹⁶

1944 Visits Florida with her mother.

1945 Sonja falls in love with the French born painter Alice Rahon, wife of the painter Wolfgang Paalen, probably meeting her for the first time at her exhibition at Art of This Century. During the summer Sonja probably stays at Breton's apartment at 45 West 56th Street. She writes to Rahon: "But this summer has brought me real liberty, a true expression of peace and solitude... always trying to tame my desires – and to transform them into pictures –"¹⁷

A trip to Mexico in September. Through Alice Rahon she gets to know Wolfgang Paalen, the painter Frida Kahlo and various European artists living in Mexico such as Gordon Onslow Ford, Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo.

Back in New York Sonja recalls these travels with her friend: “I thought of you because the images ran through my head, images of each moment we were together – at Morelia in the morning, breakfasting on the balcony – evenings at Cuernavaca around the time of dusk the hours in the Maria Cristina or at home with you in the garden, in your room – in California, our arrival in the rain and my departure also in the rain –”¹⁸.

In November the Sekulas throw a farewell party for Breton on his departure for Haiti. Among the guests is Anaïs Nin who takes a look at Sonja’s pictures: “Her paintings are beautiful. Vivid and full of fantasy.”¹⁹

1946 In May, first solo exhibition at the Art of This Century gallery. Towards the end of that month Frida Kahlo, who is in New York for an operation on her back, probably stays a few days with the Sekulas. Sonja spends the following months in the summer house rented by the family at Asharoken Beach near Northport, Long Island, with her friend Natica Waterbury. Around this time the Hungarian born photographer André de Dienes photographs Sonja in Northport – the same photographer who had taken portraits of Marilyn Monroe in 1945 and was to continue to do so afterwards.

In October she takes herself off to New Mexico where she rents an “old and ruined house in the woods” outside Sante Fe and lives there for a time with Natica Waterbury. She takes an interest in Indian rites, witnessing a nocturnal religious dance (Yebetelai) of the Navajos, as well as an Indian religious sand-painting, made for a healing ceremony and then destroyed at dusk.²⁰

1947 In January Sonja is visited by her mother and travels with her to Mexico. After her departure in April, a lengthy stay with Gordon Onslow Ford in the village of Erongaricuaru on Lake Patzcuaro. Though devoid of any desire to paint or take part in city life, in June she returns to New York. At a party at her home she meets composer John Cage. After this, on November 5, she moves into a loft at 326 Monroe Street where Cage and the dancer Merce Cunningham live. Later, the composer Morton Feldman and the artists Richard Lippold, Ray Johnson and Joseph Glasco also move into this building, close to the Williamsburg Bridge with its great view over the East River, and join Sonja’s circle of friends. Years later she recalls the inspiring atmosphere: “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 conversations and the cheerful company. But how many indistinct roads lie inbetween.”²¹ She paints a costume for Merce Cunningham, which he wears on December 14 for the performance of his piece *Dromenon*, with music by John Cage.

1948 In May, her first exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery, to which she is now under contract. At the end of the year she notes: “But now I really know for sure that I am an artist. And that now this must always be the case, and always

was. There exists in me a perfect certainty that that was the reason for my existence.”²² Through John Cage she meets the budding painter Manina Thoenen who is impressed by Sonja’s “tremendous lightness” and “poetic humor”.²³

1949 In Spring, departure for Europe with an American passport, a stay of almost two years, starting in Paris. After a detour to St. Moritz in July, she spends the summers in St-Tropez. There she meets Manina Thoenen with whom she is very much in love. In mid-September she visits Capri with Natica Waterbury, proceeding from there to Rome in October; in the same month she visits Athens. From Rome she writes: “the ‘Alltag’ [daily life] is so difficult to accept for imaginative people. Therefore each day has to have a little bouquet of ‘surprise flower’ in it and we are the masters of our daily life and have to carefully arrange it so that each day has one moment of beauty in it...without sadness or regret, but trying to find Love and Reason in very small ways. [...] Our land and roots are the world. Our earth must be everlasting Now, our home Present – Each hour must be a root to lead back to Infinity and the friends we have the ones we live with are our garden. I have no sense of country anymore – Am also like ‘the wandering Jew–’”²⁴

Returns to Paris in November.

1950 In Paris, where she lives in the same hotel as Natica Waterbury and the writer Jane Bowles, Sonja leads a hectic social life. On January 12, she is introduced to the composer Pierre Boulez. She visits Alice Toklas to view Gertrude Stein’s art collection. She introduces Manina Thoenen to André Breton and through him meets the poet Léopold Sedar Senghor. Her plan to rent a studio in Paris falls through. Between February and March she is in London for an exhibition, with Max Ernst; in April, travels to St-Tropez with her father, returning there in the summer. July-August spent in Tangiers, probably visits the writer Paul Bowles who lives there, and makes a trip into the Spanish-Moroccan desert. Travels through Spain with the painter Joseph Glasco whom she encountered in Tangiers. They stop in Toledo for some while before returning to St-Tropez. In the middle of September she has to go to a hospital in Geneva for a few days, possibly because of psychic problems. In November she sets sail from Hamburg back to New York.

1951 In April, the day after the opening of her third exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery, she suffers a breakdown and has to be taken to the psychiatric clinic of the New York Hospital in White Plains by Manina Thoenen and Joseph Glasco. Afterwards writes to Manina Thoenen: “do still not remember exactly how you brought me here, what kind of car do you have, a foreign car? [...] Someday you must tell me a few facts as that will make me remember the immediate past better.”²⁵

She describes daily life at the clinic: “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 cigarettes + put on new shoes. The doctors go by twice a day...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 shock treatments (patients call it 'electrocutions' for fun), we forget a lot of things or names".²⁶ From hospital she also writes: "I am a rebel toward what? Toward Nothingness. Like Don Quixote, without his courage or humor, running against the stream or my own imagination –."²⁷

She is able to leave hospital towards the end of the year. She gives up the Monroe Street apartment, which is taken by Richard Lippold, and moves back to her parents on Park Avenue.

1952 That spring Sonja probably teaches at a charitable institution in New York. In May she teaches children at a private school in Covington, Louisiana: "I was very calm + happy during this month with the children + the nuns".²⁸ John Cage dedicates one of his *Seven Haiku* piano pieces to her. During the summer she is probably back at the clinic in White Plains. In the autumn she travels to Switzerland with her mother and at the end of October is admitted to the Bellevue sanatorium in Kreuzlingen.

1953 At the start of January Béla Sekula gives up the apartment on Park Avenue and put his daughter's pictures into storage. He retains his office at 22 East 29th Street for many years. In October Sonja is finally able to leave the clinic in Kreuzlingen and stays with her mother at the Pension Tiefenau in Zurich. Probably in contact with the writer Konrad Farner, an old friend of her mother from Lucerne, who is supposed to write a monograph about Sonja; this project falls through.

1954 In January Sonja is back in New York. In spring she is admitted to the Hall Brooke psychiatric clinic in Westport, Connecticut. There she notes: "Art, that is a powerful simple word. We are surrounded by the truth of being – to find it and assimilate it takes patience–."²⁹ The magazine *Mademoiselle* quotes her in its editorial when publishing a short story illustrated by Sonja: "'I love words – to me, writing is drawing' [...] now would like to bring out a book – self-illustrated, of course, with the painting 'mixed in with' the writing"³⁰. Her parents live at the Hotel Seville in New York.

1955 In March Sonja is able to leave the clinic. As her parents can no longer afford the long stays in American clinics, the family returns to Switzerland the same month, moving in to the Pension Tiefenau in Zurich again.

From the summer onwards the family lives in the Chalet Opel in St. Moritz with engineer Fritz von Opel and his wife Emita, friends of the Sekulas since meeting in New York in the 1940s. In her notes Sonja asks: "So I am a painter or a writer, or was that all a long time ago, when my faith in the unconditional seemed happier than all the walks, the constant experience of nature – so much reading of the stones and the butterflies the flowers, clouds, paths and books."³¹ In the solitude of the Engadin she begins to develop her interest in Zen-Buddhism and oriental painting and philosophy. She spends October and November with her mother in southern Spain; staying first in San Pedro Alcanbara for several weeks, then in Estepona and Barcelona. On December 1, the family moves into its own apartment in the Haus Heimat in St. Moritz-Bad. For a period of time Sonja has a studio in the house.

1956 Travels to Holland with her father for a week. From March till May she has to re-enter the Bellevue sanatorium in Kreuzlingen. Shortly before being discharged she writes: "I still was very homesick for a European way of living. And now [...] I can hardly find a friendly road in Europe again. Travelling is OK. But underneath it all, I need to 'belong' somewhere."³² To Betty Parsons she writes: "Do you know anybody in Switzerland? I live here but have no connections and go on reading the Bhagavad Gita instead and seriously think to be able in a few years to vanish completely into *India* or somewhere + lay off name etc. of the past... 'some day' when it is bright enough in my soul to realise Inaction enough so as to take *action* toward the Truth. Maybe you come too? I think we both would be happy + gay and even see Japan on the way."³³

Experiences a creative crisis in the summer. Returns to the Bellevue clinic in August. She considers the task of the artist: "I believe most artists ought to give a few hours to some other social occupation besides their canvas, their writing paper or notepads – let's try to get to know the man that Hemingway tries to write about and not only read what he writes."³⁴ She contrasts the opinions of her parents and doctors about her illness, with her own interpretation: I have enough experiences, also religious 'visions' which made my own family turn me to a sanatorium believing I was 'sick' when often all I was just being true to my own rather mystically inclined nature"³⁵.

Back in St. Moritz she feels lonelier than ever. Because of this and a lack of prospects, she gives up her studio. In the autumn meets Betty Parsons in Venice where she is visiting the Biennale and probably also sees Manina Thoren, who has been living there for some time. Spends November – December back in the Pension Tiefenau in Zurich.

1957 At the end of January Sonja has her first solo exhibition in Switzerland at the Galerie Palette in Zurich. In the middle of April she goes to Paris with her mother and meets Jean Dubuffet at an exhibition opening. She tries to interest the critic Michel Tapié in her work. Afterwards she goes to St-Tropez, staying at the von Opel villa. In May Betty Parsons gives her another exhibition; Sonja sends

new works on paper. Even though nine pieces are sold, she is realistic about her position on the art market: “my own format is usually small and slight – the picture dealers want ‘big pictures’ and strictly uniform tendencies.”³⁶ She probably spends the summer at the clinic in Kreuzlingen and works only a little.

Requests to Betty Parsons for financial assistance become increasingly urgent. October 1, travels to Ascona with her mother where she visits Hans Arp. From mid-October she stays there alone, feeling “like a ghost”. After her departure, by December at the latest, she works intensively, for “I must do what I must do and thank God few dollars are waiting where I go.”³⁷

1958 From April, lives with her parents at Steinwiesstrasse 18 in Zurich, where she sets up a studio in the basement, in which she also partly lives. In Zurich her mother attempts to continue their old social life, with all its entertaining.

Sonja meets with understanding from an old New York friend, the Zen-philosopher Alan Watts, who is lecturing that spring at the C.G. Jung-Institute in Zurich: “[Sonja] showed an eye for beauty in things and places that normal people would simply ignore. She had, alas, been abandoned by the psychotherapeutic pandits as hopelessly psychotic, but she taught me, nevertheless, to listen and enter into a conversation that was quite off the rails of orthodox sanity.”³⁸ Encouraged by this encounter, she once more starts reading works by Watts and resumes the study of psychological and philosophical texts by Jung, Suzuki, Graf Dürkheim and Eugen Herrigel, begun the previous autumn. “Discouraged? Vain? Wanting to make a name? No, not really – I feel that Zen is a good answer to my work.”³⁹ Meets the artist Adrien de Menasse.

On April 8, before her 40th birthday, she notes: “grey fear, a dull grey-yellow fear that the day is coming when a woman past 40 will not find any rainbow image of hope in the mirror, or in the expression another (opposite) – when a woman ages it is different than for a man – often more colorless – without a solution.”⁴⁰ She spends August in St. Moritz. In autumn she has to enter the psychiatric clinic Hohenegg, near Meilen at the lake of Zurich.

1959 Not till May is she able to leave the clinic. She makes friends with Manon, who is later to become an artist, and also has contact with the photographer Roland Gretler and the painter Oskar Dalvit. Travels to Munich in the autumn showing her work to various galleries without success. At the end of the year she makes a bitter reckoning: “Am faced with the complete incomprehension of myself and of the present, which is like a painfully impenetrable swamp through which I wade with great difficulty, lamenting like Job and never reaching the shore of redemption –”⁴¹

1960 The “very long stretch of negativity and almost utmost pitch of depression”⁴² at the start of the year is also due to the split that has taken place with Betty Parsons because the dealer can no longer provide the desired moral and financial support at such a distance. After Sonja receives back almost all the

pictures remaining in Parson's gallery, she writes to her in March: "But I have stopped to do anything since many months. Shall plan to work in a factory. Now anything goes – [...] Sorry for all the trouble you had with me. Should never have shown anywhere was a fool, an old fool."⁴³ In April she works in the lending library of the Zurich store, Jelmoli, for a short time. Afterwards she enters the Hohenegg clinic, then from August 8, the private clinic Wyss in Münchenbuchsee, from which she is discharged on December 20.

1961 Spends January on holiday in Längenschachen on the lake of Thun with the teacher Sylvia Mosimann, whom she had met the previous year. She lives for a while with Sonja in her studio. Sonja's plan to work, like Sylvia Mosimann, in a home for handicapped children falls through. After a visit to Oskar Dalvit in Amden she writes: "I need help – but am not without hope, for I believe in the ORIGINALity, the radiance of what I have made – and the moment of external help comes, or does not come".⁴⁴ On February 21 and 23, she attends lectures by Graf Dürckheim on Meister Eckehart and Zen at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule in Zurich; on February 24 Dürckheim visits her studio. Attends lectures given by her friend, the psychologist Jolanda Jacobi at the C.G. Jung-Institut. In February visited by Lou and Wilfredo Lam at the Hotel Kaiser in Zurich where Sonja lives for a while with Sylvia Mosimann. March-April, works concentratedly on the so-called "Meditation boxes".⁴⁵ During April she takes a rest at Muri, near Berne; from May 4 to 28, she is back in the psychiatric clinic at Münchenbuchsee.

August 1, writes to Alice Rahon: "In Zurich one is very isolated... it is the opposite of a poetic city – but I have made my studio into a magic island".⁴⁶ This is what it looks like: "In this room is the big table on stilts, so as to make it higher some goodwilled carpenter heightened the tablelegs 20 cm. / on the window sills matchboxes, odd wood pieces, candles, a selfmade ceramic cup containing just 1 incense piece... 2 big seashells from Spain... pebbles, so many pebbles out of rivers and forests. The couch... a yellow cover (it used to be covered by a Navajo rug) and a big violet cushion on it and a cover brown like teddybearfur that I used as a child... / a Book shelf containing holy beautiful poetic books that are my deep kernellove in my big heart... and these books I work with (for instance 3 vol. of Haiku by Blythe translation) Zen books... so much about the ceristman... over my bed hangs the musicsheet, black and white that John Cage gave me. I put different pictures on the stonewalls each day or hour or year... my nighttable is a big box... a wooden box... a wooden brokenup box that I love as an intimate revelation – Topped with books. [...] Near bed (nails hardly ever go into these walls) a striped across piece of beige fibre... somewhere near a violet piece of material from Mexico. Another wall near writing table has 2 meter wide and 3 meter high corkslab on which I fasten drawings or writing or just big sheets of goldlustre paper... flat yellow like a day and nightgleam, all over the goldenemptiness shining strongly on a cold stone floor./ One table just full of watercolors and disorder. 1 small table painted gray like the drawer contains just

oilcolors which I hardly ever use – another 2 tables (table room) one very high and fragile... always falling over when not well balanced on 3 self-designed legs... another too low on which to work my back hurts a lot... but since I gave in a black mood my cart away I use it to put rare canvases on... I'd like some day before I am physically too old to have a big room... with big canvases and an easel and distance, devoid of all that is unnecessary. For the moment I need all around me, also the endless huge stones on the floor that I pick up in streets and near buildings since 3 years – I have a selfdesigned big shelf with beige linen curtains, for portfolios etc, for bags and canvases and I pull them open and close them down like a curtain – Not one wall on which the light shines as I really want it to shine on a canvas. But on the two front tables I catch the light as it comes and use each drop of it. Am unable really to work much with electric lightbulbs. / Also there is a gramophone standing on a box.”⁴⁷

Receives visit from Alice Rahon. On September 15, Sonja travels to Albisola Marina to see Wifldredo Lam. Visits St-Tropez in early October. Can hardly use oil paints anymore as these cause her asthma and skin irritation.

1962 Late February, visited by the American writer William Goyen, through whom Sonja meets the writer Max Bolliger, who subsequently, after her death, does much towards the publication of some of her texts. Frequent visits to the Zurich Jazz club, Africana, to hear among others the black ‘blues’ pianist and singer Champion Jack Dupree. Life with her mother and old, almost deaf father – “Continuously locked into the chain of mother and father, since 100 years it seems.”⁴⁸ – is increasingly arduous.

“The pencils I still have, the tables and the books and the few colors. I have no interest to go and buy colors. What for? I am at the point where I am finished as an artist.”⁴⁹

Some distraction is offered in spring by employment at the egg import firm, Lüchinger. From April to July she is probably back in the Hohenegg clinic. In August she travels to St. Moritz: “Very glad to spend some days in the mountains. Stone s rolling. A stillness which can only be found in the purifying mountain altitude. Observe the stones in the river now and then. To be a stone like that. Yes, that would be enough for me.”⁵⁰ On returning to Zurich she works in a hospital laundry on an hourly basis, remaining something of an outsider to the other employees.

Notes like the following, on the themes of mother and of art, themes which had preoccupied her throughout her life, are among the last which have been preserved: “My truest and best partner in life is Mother. But the most insistent partner in life was loneliness.”⁵¹ And: “The word: Art is for me an intimidatingly massive paralysis –”⁵².

1963 Is deeply impressed by the exhibition of the Japanese Zen painter Sengai at the Zurich Kunsthau. Renewed admission to the Hohenegg clinic. On April 23, she celebrates her mother’s birthday with her parents. After a woman friend

cancels a joint visit to the Max Ernst exhibition in the Kunsthaus the following day, on April 25 she hangs herself in her studio.

She is buried in St. Moritz as she had requested in a letter to her mother: “I want to be buried some day in a little mountain cemetery maybe in the Engadin or around Zermatt or such a simple place with you and Father or alone – but not near Jones Beach places or Niagara Falls! It is important in my belief to know where that will be – Let us find a spot and write so in our last will – I am not morbid, but I hate to be ‘vague’ even for that moment. Not to have a place or piece of land or real faith in which to know one is inwardly rooted in o.k. But I want to have a pleasant spot in the End.”⁵³

Robert Perret

¹ Paul Valéry, *La jeune Parque*, 1918.

² Bertie Sekula, *Diary*, [1919-1921], entry from mid-November, 1919. The book contains the following introductory note: “This book belongs only to my daughter Sonja.” (Private collection, Weesen).

³ *Ibid.*, entry from 21.2.1921.

⁴ “Geburtstagskind”, note on the back by Bertie Sekula: “10 years old 23.4.1928 [date of the mother’s birthday]” (Private collection, Weesen).

⁵ Telephone conversation with Anne Rotzler, 19.9.1991.

⁶ Sonja Sekula, [Notes, 1933-1935], entry from 29.3.1934 (Private collection, Lausanne).

⁷ *Ibid.*, entry from 29.3.1934.

⁸ *Ibid.*, entry from 1934.

⁹ *Ibid.*, entry from 1935.

¹⁰ Klaus Mann, *Tagebücher 1936 bis 1937*. Edited by Joachim Heimannsberg, Peter Laemmle und Wilfried F. Schoeller. Munich: Edition Spangenberg, 1990, pp. 10-12.

¹¹ Ottó Indig, *Kánikula*. Budapest: Franklin-társulat, 1947 [German translation “Hochsommer” (also “Riviera Hochsommer”), Typescript, 146 pages, private collection, Zurich]. The writer Ottó Indig (1890-1969) had his greatest success in the early thirties with the comedy *Die Braut von Torozko*, also produced in Berlin and Vienna. His novel about ménage à trois with the narrator, and a woman whose original Sonja had met in Budapest in 1936, and Sonja alias Katja, as the protagonists, is set in a hotel at Cap d’Antibes in the south of France, in 1939, shortly before the outbreak of the second World War. When the woman with whom Katja is in love becomes involved with the narrator, Katja commits suicide... It is not known whether Sonja ever read this novel.

¹² Ottó Indig, *Hochsommer*, op. cit., p. 45.

¹³ Klaus Mann, *Tagebücher 1936 bis 1937*, op. cit., p. 90.

¹⁴ Untitled text, ca. 1939 (X, 2).

¹⁵ Annotation, ca. 1941-42, in Sonja Sekula’s copy of: Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America*. New York: Random House, 1935, p. 177 (Coll. Roger Perret).

¹⁶ Charles Duits, *André Breton a-t-il dit passe?* Paris: Les Lettres Nouvelles, 1969, pp. 101-102.

¹⁷ Sonja Sekula to Alice Rahon, [New York], 10.8.1945 (Estate of Alice Rahon, Mexico City).

¹⁸ Sonja Sekula to Alice Rahon [New York], 8.10.1945 (Estate of Alice Rahon, Mexico City).

¹⁹ Anaïs Nin, *The Journals of Anaïs Nin 1944-1947*. Edited and with a preface by Gunther Stuhlmann. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971, p.103.

²⁰ Sonja Sekula to Bertie Sekula, Gallup, New Mexico, Autumn 1946 (VII, 4).

²¹ Sonja Sekula, *Untitled Sketchbook*, 1957 (Kunstmuseum Winterthur).

²² “Brief an die bekannte Fremde”, 25.12.1948 (I, 6).

²³ Quoted from a telephone conversation between the author and Manina Jouffroy, Venice, 12.1.1996. Born in Vienna, Manina Jouffroy emigrated in the late 1930s with her husband the Czech scriptwriter Robert

Thoeren, going to Hollywood. They separated in 1948 and she went to New York, where she had her first exhibition in 1951. Since the mid-fifties she has lived in Venice where she married the French writer and critic Alain Jouffroy, from whom she has long been separated.

²⁴ Sonja Sekula to Bertie Sekula, Rome, 22.10.1949 (VII, 7).

²⁵ Sonja Sekula to Manina Thoeren, [White Plains], 6.7.1951 (Manina Jouffroy, Venice).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sonja Sekula to Bertie Sekula, November 1951 (VII, 9).

²⁸ Sonja Sekula to Béla Sekula, Covington, La., 23.5.1952 (Private Collection, Weesen).

²⁹ Sonja Sekula to Béla Sekula, [Westport], 19.9.1954 (Private Collection, Weesen).

³⁰ *Mademoiselle*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (July 1954), p. 8.

³¹ Untitled text, 2.9.1955 (I, 14).

³² Untitled text, May 1956 (II, 14).

³³ Sonja Sekula to Betty Parsons, [St. Moritz], 28.1.1956.

³⁴ Sonja Sekula to Bertie or Béla Sekula, Kreuzlingen, 12.8.1956 (VII, 10).

³⁵ Untitled text, Kreuzlingen, 22.8.1956 (X, 5).

³⁶ Sonja Sekula, *Ohne Titel*, Oil on paper (Private Collection).

³⁷ Sonja Sekula, *Untitled Sketchbook*, 1957 (Kunstmuseum Winterthur).

³⁸ Alan Watts, *In My Own Way: An Autobiography 1915-1965*. New York Pantheon Books, 1972, p. 336.

³⁹ Untitled text, 11.4.1958 (II, 17).

⁴⁰ Sonja Sekula, *Observations*, 1958-1961 (Private Collection, Weesen); entry ca. December 1959).

⁴¹ Sonja Sekula, *Observations*, 1958-1961 (Private Collection, Weesen); entry ca. December 1959.

⁴² Untitled text, January 1960 (I, 18).

⁴³ Sonja Sekula to Betty Parsons, [Zurich], 4.3.1960 (Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, D.C.).

⁴⁴ Sonja Sekula to Oskar Dalvit, [Zurich], 6.2.1961 (Estate of Oskar Dalvit, Zurich).

⁴⁵ These are matchboxes which Sonja Sekula inscribed, painted, decorated with tiny collages, or covered with sand. They often contain matches, little painted stones, as well as texts, her own or others, often Haikus, written on little papers.

⁴⁶ Sonja Sekula to Alice Rahon [Zurich], 1.8.1961 (Estate of Alice Rahon, Mexico City).

⁴⁷ Untitled text, 8.8.1961 (II, 22-23).

⁴⁸ Untitled text, 1.3.1962 (XI, 14).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Untitled text, 16.8.1962 (II, 28).

⁵¹ Untitled text, 1.9.1962 (II, 32).

⁵² Untitled text, 4.10.1962 (I, 26).

⁵³ Sonja Sekula to Bertie Sekula, 1952 (VII, 10).

This is a detailed biography from *Sonja Sekula, 1918-1963*, Kunstmuseum Winterthur, The Swiss Institute, New York, 1996.