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The Art of Toil

WORKERS: AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE INDUSTRIAL AGE. Sebastião Salgado. New York: Aperture, 1993. Pp. 400.

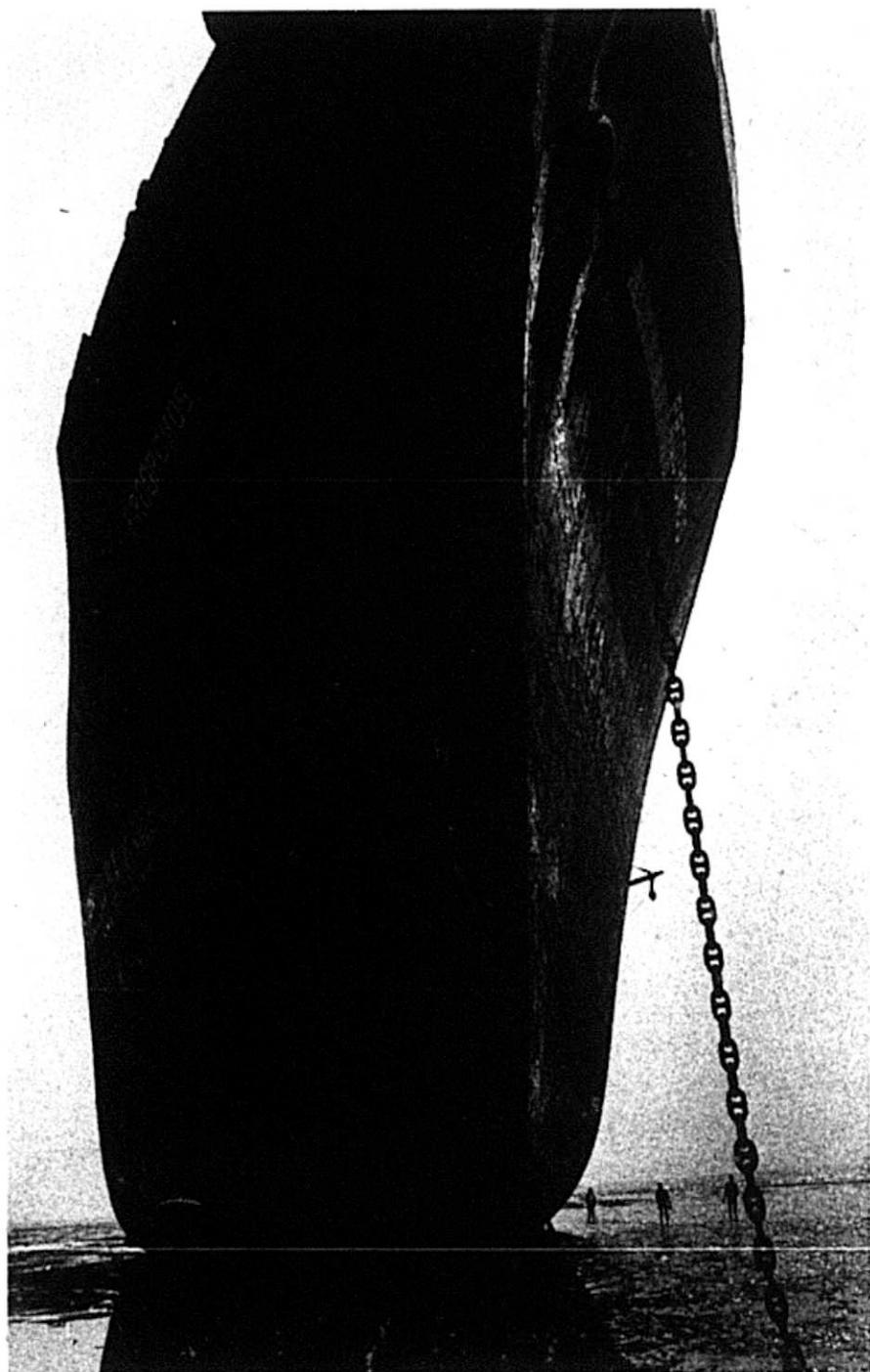
*Who're you gonna get to do the dirty work
When all the slaves are free?*

Joni Mitchell, "Passion Play,"
from *Night Ride Home* (1991)

THE HANDS of the tea picker look like the pincers of a crab. Thumb and forefinger are pressed together, left hand touching right to form symbolic arcs of infinity. The nails are smooth and grey, the skin cracked and black. Held close to the body in a gentle embrace, the leaves are ribbed and delicate. Wrists become arms that fade into sleeves of a what is probably a dress or a blouse, for many of the workers are women. A pause in the day's labour captures the moment forever. The year is 1991, the place a plantation near Cyangugu, Rwanda.

The hands of the tea picker appear in one of 350 duotone photographs adorning a collection that Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado considers a "homage to workers, a farewell to a world of manual labor that is slowly disappearing and a tribute to those men and women who still work as they have for centuries." Conceived in 1986, the year he shot his epic photographs of gold mining at Serra Pelada in Brazil, *Workers* engaged Salgado in field work across the globe for the next six years. *Workers* the book is also *Workers* the travelling exhibition, which opened at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in April 1993 and has an international touring schedule running into 1997. Perusing the book or attending the exhibit (I was fortunate to catch the show at the Biblioteca

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Shipbreaking, Bangladesh

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Nacional in Madrid this summer) affords an opportunity to contemplate images that reflect the passing of an era, for *Workers* documents the established labour practices of the twentieth century as they wither and die or are transformed into relic habits by the uncertainties of the impending millennium.

Salgado divides his project into six vast panoramas, which transport the viewer across space to distant and disparate settings. Part One examines the production of sugar, tea, tobacco, cacao (cocoa), and perfume in rural areas of Brazil, Cuba, Rwanda, and the island of Réunion. Livelihoods earned from fish and meat (Spain, Italy, and the United States) are scrutinized in Part Two. Mining and manufacturing activities constitute the bulk of Parts Three, Four, and Five, with the scene shifting from ships being built in Poland and France to ships being broken in Bangladesh. Part Six isolates humans in the process of reshaping nature, drilling the Eurotunnel between France and England, constructing dams and irrigation canals in India.

Salgado's artistic gaze is matched by an ethnographer's eye for detail, recorded in a companion text in which description is thick and an opening statement in which essence is honed. Of the great hulk laid to rest on a Chittagong beach, Salgado writes:

Facing the shores of Bangladesh, the ship blows its sharp whistle for a last time. It puts its engine on full speed and heads for the land, wailing and groaning as it reaches a speed that it would never have dared risk at sea. Its steel hull scrapes the sand, reaching into the earth from where it came. Then it stops, grounded, the end of its final charge, its last journey.

The demolition soon follows, as if this moment had not always hovered over the ship. There it is, stuck in the sand of the most faraway beach in the world, the same world that it wandered when it sliced smoothly through deep waters. Now the demolition teams use blowtorches to cut open its belly so that water can at last invade its bowels, condemning it to death. It is a *coup de grace*, a tired and dignified end that will result in new life.

Soon the ship is attacked from all sides. Blowtorches cut through its steel skin, giant hammers break up its iron and wood structure. Everything from that huge animal lying on the beach has a use. Iron and steel will be melted down and given new roles as utensils. The entire ship will be turned into what it once carried: machines, knives and forks, hoes, shovels, screws, things, bits, pieces. In time, the sea will make sure that the scar left by the ship will disappear under the sand of that beach in Bangladesh. And the ship itself will be carried away.

The huge bronze propellers that guided the ship through the secret paths of the sea will provide the most elegant of items: bracelets, earrings, necklaces, and rings, which one day will adorn the bodies of working women, as well as pots from which men will pour tea.

HUGE, inert structure dissected into smaller, animate parts is the perfect metaphor for Salgado's art. The world and the forces tearing it apart may cause worry, distress, hardship, and fear, but even in death, life ticks on. Salgado allows us to believe still in the worth of human endeavour, to keep faith and sustain hope without ever being blind to injustice and pain. His portrayals are both epitaph and annunciation, quotidian events to celebrate as much as they are historical circumstances to resist. Salgado's art, moreover, forces us to question basic issues and to reconsider the choices we make, the stands we take as individuals and as nations. How many of us, for instance, either unemployed or unhappy with our lot, would want to live and work in the world Salgado depicts? Precious few, I hazard. With the old dying and the new as yet unborn, Salgado frames the world at a turning point beyond which the human will to survive will be tested as never before.

