Review of High Regard: Words and Pictures in Tribute to Susan Sontag

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High Regard: Words and Pictures in Tribute to Susan Sontag

Barbara Ching


Susan Sontag’s death on December 28, 2004, was marked, unsurprisingly, by an immediate outpouring of thoughtful memoirs and obituaries. Turning from words to pictures, the surprising tributes came later: Annie Leibovitz’s book, A Photographer’s Life, 1990–2005, and last year’s Metropolitan Museum of Art show, On Photography: A Tribute to Susan Sontag, which ran from June 6 to September 4, 2006. Leibovitz’s book opens with a picture of Sontag, back to the camera, dwarfed by the rock walls of Petra but emerging into the white open space before the temple. Leibovitz explains that she came across the photograph while searching through her files for pictures to include in a booklet she was making for Sontag’s memorial service. Encountering the pictures she had taken in their fifteen years together, Leibovitz ended up with a book in addition to the memorial booklet. Although the book follows the time line implied by the title, with her opening picture, Leibovitz breaks chronology for Sontag’s sake. She justifies the exception by explaining that “the picture sounds the themes of death and grief that wind through the book,” but it also captures Sontag’s “appetite for experience.”

Metropolitan Museum curator Mia Fineman in turn visited Leibovitz’s studio before the book was finished and chose this same photograph to include as the last image to exhibit (fig.1). (Leibovitz donated it to the museum.) In contrast to Leibovitz’s factual caption (“Susan Sontag, Petra, Jordan, 1994”) and intimate narrative, the wall text in the Metropolitan’s exhibition gives the theory: “A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence. Like a wood fire in a room, photographs—especially those of people, of distant landscapes and faraway cities, of the vanished past—are incitements to reverie.” Quoted from Sontag’s On Photography, this wall text, like all the texts in the exhibit, was selected by curator Fineman from Sontag’s repertoire of writings on photography.
The show featured more than forty photographs drawn from the Metropolitan's collection juxtaposed with wall text. (Unfortunately, there is no exhibition catalog.) This tightly focused exhibition cleverly engages with one of Sontag's major themes: her career-spanning preoccupation with the modern relationship between words, pictures, and experience. Sontag began publishing essays about photography in the *New York Review of Books* in 1973; these essays would become 1977's seminal *On Photography*, winner of the National Book Critics Circle award for criticism. Her final book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), underscores the moral issues raised by the medium, as does one of her last published essays, a May 23, 2004, cover story on the Abu Ghraib photographs for the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. Sontag's interest in the medium, then, raises questions not only about the value of photography as an aesthetic experience but especially about the moral values and ethical obligations of looking. What should a photographer's images do? More pressing still, what *do* they do? What should a writer's words about photographs do? Can an appropriately worded caption prevent photographs from dulling the senses and blunting the capacity for outrage and indignation? “All photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions,” Sontag asserted, so in this exhibition, Sontag's own words about photography put the assertion to test.

The words on the wall command special attention not only because their illustrations are now supplied or suggested but also because they reveal or reinforce Sontag's epigrammatic and imperative prose style. The short declarative sentences repeatedly link an abstract noun (such as “photography”) with a vivid verb—“Photographs furnish evidence”—for example. No equivocations or references to outside authorities detract from Sontag's authority. The exhibition thus has no need to engage with views or voices that might intervene with Sontag's own internal debates, and early reviewers of it willingly engaged the exhibition on its own terms. Jed Perl, for example, praised it for highlighting the “enduring achievement” of *On Photography*, and Leslie Camhi's *Village Voice* review approvingly noted that “one could hardly imagine a more fitting memorial to the writer, who died two years ago, than this show.”

Designed specifically for the Gilman Gallery, a contemplative, two-room, windowless space tucked deep within the Metropolitan museum, the exhibit displays photographs that Sontag wrote about that happened to be in the museum's collection and other pictures that, in the words of curator Mia Fineman, “illustrated her ideas about photography in a more interpretive way, using
works from the collection that Sontag may or may not have known herself.”

One of the many pleasures of the exhibit is to imagine Sontag absorbing these images on a stroll through the museum. (“I am a museum rat,” she confessed in a 2001 conversation with Philip Fisher.) And, as Fineman noted, since neither of Sontag’s books on photography was illustrated, the exhibition design linked the critic’s observations to the pictures she observed. The small gallery dazzles with pictures by famed photographers such as Eugène Atget, Julia Margaret Cameron, Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Eli Lotar, Robert Mapplethorpe, Leni Riefenstahl, August Sander, Edward Steichen, Andy Warhol, and Edward Weston, alongside anonymous photo album snapshots. Fineman made a point of juxtaposing professional and amateur photography since “one of the important and appealing aspects of Sontag’s writing on photography was the fact that she treated the work of great artists and the role of photography in everyday life with equal seriousness. Although this has become the dominant mode of photographic history today, this was not often the case when Sontag was writing in the early 1970s.”

The introductory wall text situates Sontag as a “major force in New York intellectual life for more than forty years.” The first photograph in the exhibit, nineteenth-century photographer Frederick Langenheim looking at Talbotype images of himself (“Frederick Langenheim Looking at Talbotypes, 1849–51,” taken by William Langenheim), immediately places the New Yorker and her critique of photography in the largest possible contexts: “To collect photographs is to collect the world,” announces the wall text, chosen from the first page of *On Photography*. Intriguingly, the image questions the text—examining photographs of oneself differs greatly from amassing a collection—but the disconnect works brilliantly both to engage the critical faculties that Sontag hoped to instill in her readers and to create a coherent trajectory. A few photographs away, a 1975 Peter Hujar portrait of a black-clad Sontag, lying serenely on her back in a clinically blank setting, reiterates the invitation to critical examination. “Photographs instigate, confirm, seal legends. Seen through photographs, people become icons of themselves,” notes the wall text, but Sontag’s pose puts the viewer in the position of the examiner, the diagnostician (fig. 2). As she wrote in an unusually personal text about being photographed by Mapplethorpe, “I’ve never been photographed without feeling apprehensive, so I have never looked at the result . . . without feeling embarrassment. Is it that I’m too powerfully an observer myself to be comfortable being observed?” After contemplating the photographs that follow, I could readily appreciate the opening notion that two rooms full of photographs show more of the world than most mortals could have seen before the widespread use
of cameras. The exhibition viewer becomes the “powerful observer” that Sontag felt her unphotographed self to be. Likewise, I was repeatedly persuaded that Sontag’s taste and judgment in photographs could be trusted. When she wrote that “the peppers Weston photographed . . . are voluptuous in a way that his nudes rarely are,”13 readers without collections of photographs in their heads might suspend judgment on Sontag’s larger point about the way the camera aestheticizes nearly everything it lays lens on. Confronted with this statement as wall text beneath a Weston nude and a gleaming Weston pepper, you know what she means.

Although Sontag equated her love for photographs with an addict’s lawless craving, her writing about photography expresses more dismay than intoxication. In contrast, the exhibition, with its well-chosen array of shocking, intriguing, and lovely photographs, allows the viewer to experience photography’s power to excite as well as to numb. Sontag worried that photography, in its addictiveness, created a tolerance for the horrors it has so notably depicted. A dictum that does not appear on the wall (but certainly could have) expresses this duality well: “Images transfix. Images anesthetize.”14 The overtly disturbing images on display—such as Robert Capa’s oft-reproduced “The Fallen Soldier, 1946,” supposedly depicting a casualty of the Spanish civil war, and

Figure 2.
Timothy O’Sullivan’s civil war dead, frozen in agony on an otherwise becalmed battlefield at Gettysburg (“Field Where General Reynolds Fell, Gettysburg, 1863”)—seem to demonstrate how smoothly an aesthetic experience can tame indignation.

The last years of Sontag’s life coincided with the most traumatic events in recent national history, and as Sontag contemplated their attendant images, her dismay about photography’s relationship to power writ large, particularly American power, grew. (Although even in *On Photography*, Sontag looked for the specificity of American photography: the second chapter is titled “America, Seen through Photographs, Darkly.”) The exhibit deals handily with Sontag’s breezy anti-Americanism by hanging Diane Arbus’s famed “Boy with a Straw Hat, Button, and Flag in a Pro-War Parade, N.Y.C., 1967” to illustrate Sontag’s judgment that “the subjects of Arbus’s photographs are members of the same family, inhabitants of a single village. Only, as it happens, the idiot village is America.”

In the gallery, though, it’s easy to forget that when Sontag wrote those words, she was accusing Arbus of voyeuristic disdain for her fellow Americans.

Sontag often considered what it means to be an American—including the ways in which she was an American. But the Metropolitan Museum does not have photographs of Americans torturing prisoners at Abu Ghraib in its collection, and this limitation undermines the theme of the exhibit by turning viewers away from Sontag’s concerns about the proper regard for the pain of others. Such an acquisition, at least for the moment, would in fact be too uncivilized for this bastion of civilization, not because the pictures were shot by enlisted soldiers rather than embedded war photographers but because of the shock and shame they evoke. The subject of Sontag’s last essay, they brought her to a simultaneously more horrified and more hopeful vision of what photography might do in the world and how Americans, the first person plural used in her essay, might look at photographs: “Yes, it seems that one picture is worth a thousand words. And even if our leaders choose not to look at them, there will be thousands more snapshots and videos. Unstoppable,” she concluded. Earlier in the essay she proclaimed that “the photographs are us” because they show American policy at work. But by the end, the photographs are us because we must respond to them and to “our leaders” with many thousands of words of outrage. We should not be “just looking.”

Ultimately, it seems that the limitations of the museum’s collection, with its inherent propensity to collect fine art photography, cannot show us many of the photographs that Sontag (and the rest of the world) saw in less serene and less serious surroundings. For the most part, then, Fineman inconspicuously
High Regard concentrates on Sontag’s early writing on photography, particularly the first chapters of *On Photography*, and thus there is no clear sense of the evolution of Sontag’s thought. In particular, the wall texts do not come to grips with Sontag’s most explicit self-revision. Near the end of *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she deliberately retracts the last sentence in *On Photography*, “If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well.” In the 2003 book, she bluntly announces that “there isn’t going to be an ecology of images.”

“Newer technology,” she explains, “provides a nonstop feed”—she has television particularly in mind. While she once worried that photography’s ubiquity blurred the distinction between image and reality, she later denounced “society of the spectacle” theories as “a breathtaking provincialism.”

Sarajevo provides the context for this argument in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, but an onslaught of televised disasters and heavily circulated photographs since then readily floods the mind’s eye.

This exhibition, though, creates a temporary ecology from two elements, its vast collection of photographs that might otherwise never be displayed together, here floating in the air of Sontag’s words, a remarkable accomplishment in itself. It fulfills its titular promise of a tribute to Sontag as it trains the viewer’s attention on photography.

Notes
11. The text comes from Sontag’s introduction to the book in which the photograph appeared, Peter Hujar’s *Portraits in Life and Death* (New York: DaCapo, 1976), unpaginated.
15. Ibid., 47.
16. See, for example, her 1978 interview comment: "Americans tend to think that everything is possible, and that’s something I like a lot about them [laughing]. I know I’m very American, in that respect." From "Susan Sontag: The Rolling Stone Interview [with] Jonathan Cott," in Conversations with Susan Sontag, ed. Leland Poague (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 114.
17. Fineman freely acknowledges the constraint imposed by drawing only from the Metropolitan Museum’s holdings for the exhibit: “I only used quotes from which I could find powerful visual complements.” Email to author, December 20, 2006.
22. Ibid., 110.
23. Ibid., 111.