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Susan sontag on photography review

Susan Sontag's 1973 book, On Photography, is a true classic and should be read by all photographers too. On Photographers too of practical information for photographers too on Photographers too on Photographers too on Photographers too on Photography is a study of the subject endowed with wit and wisdom, intellect and intent - it is a brilliant and profound look at the very essence of photography. Every page of the book raises important questions that often challenge accepted knowledge and practice. On Photography is disruptive in the best way. It is pointless to try and recapture Sontag's words here. The book cannot be done justice through second-hand description. Yet, at the same time, I am eager to bring some of Sontag's brilliance to you here in an attempt to encourage you to read the book for yourself. Your photography will improve, and you will likely become a Sontag fan from page one. My well-worn copy of Susan Sontag's On Photography will improve, and you will likely become a Sontag fan from page one. My well-worn copy of Susan Sontag's On Photography will improve, and you will likely become a Sontag fan from page one. is by way of a selection of quotes - little nuggets - by this visionary 20th century intellectual. Hopefully, this little taste will leave you wanting more, time consists of interesting events, event worth photographing" (11). "Just as the camera is a sublimated murder - a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time" (15). "Time eventually positions most photographs, even the most amateurish, at the level of art" (21). "The camera has the power to catch so-called normal people in such a way as to make them look abnormal. The photographer chooses oddity, chases it, frames it, develops it, titles it" (34). "But essentially the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality of how people age. . . . Photography is the inventory of mortality" (70). "What is true of photographs is true of photographs are (81). "The painter constructs, the photographer discloses. That is, the identification of the subject of a photograph always dominates our perception of it - as it does not, necessarily, in a painting" (92). "But photographic seeing has to be constantly renewed with new shocks, whether subject matter or technique, so as to produce the impression of violating ordinary vision" (99)."... an unassuming functional snapshot may be as visually interesting, as eloquent, as beautiful as the most acclaimed fine-art photographs are often invoked as an aid to understanding and tolerance. In humanist jargon, the highest vocation of photography is to explain man to man" (111). So, there you have it - some good old-fashioned food for thought. Photography is to explain man to man" (111). here is one with none - mere words upon the page - which, should you acquire, will enrich and expand every other book in your photography collection. On Photography is highly recommended. Susan Sontag was an American writer and filmmaker, teacher and political activist. Her best-known works include, On Photography, The Way We Live Now, and In America. Susan Sontag was long-time partner to famed photographer. 1977 collection of essays by Susan Sontag This article's lead section may be too short to adequately summarize the key points. Please consider expanding the lead to provide an accessible overview of all important aspects of the article. (December 2016) First edition(publ. Farrar, Straus and Giroux) On Photography is a 1977 collection of essays by Susan Sontag. It originally appeared as a series of essays in the New York Review of Books between 1973 and 1977. Contents In the book, Sontag expresses her views on the history and present-day role of photography. Among these, she contrasts Diane Arbus's work with that of Depressionera documentary photography commissioned by the Farm Security Administration. She also explores the history of America put forth by Walt Whitman and traces these ideas through to the increasingly cynical aesthetic notions of the 1970s, particularly in relation to Arbus and Andy Warhol Sontag argues that the proliferation of photographic images had begun to establish within people a "chronic voyeuristic relation"[1] to the world around them. Among the consequences of photography is that the meaning of all events is leveled and made equal. This idea did not originate with Sontag, who often synthesized European cultural thinkers with her particular eye toward the United States. As she argues, perhaps originally with regard to photography, the medium fostered an attitude of anti-intervention. Sontag says that the individual who seeks to record cannot intervene, and that the person who intervenes cannot then faithfully record, for the two aims contradict each other. In this context, she discusses in some depth the relationship of photography to politics. Criticism and acclaim On Photography won the National Book Critics Directed among the top 20 books of 1977 by the editors of the New York Times, said the book "shall surely stand near the beginning of all our thoughts upon the subject" of photography. [2] In a 1998 appraisal of the work, Michael Starenko, wrote in Afterimage that "On Photography has become so deeply absorbed into this discourse that Sontag's claims about photography, as well as her mode of argument, have become part of the rhetorical 'tool kit' that photography theorists and critics carry around in their heads."[3] He added that "no other photography book, not even The Family of Man (1955), which sold four million copies before finally going out of print in 1978, received a wider range of press coverage than On Photography."[4] Sontag's work is literary and polemical rather than academic. It includes no bibliography, and few notes. There is little sustained analysis of the work of any particular photographer and is not in any sense a research project as often written by doctoral students. For example, in her discussion of The Family of Man exhibition she quotes almost word-for-word Roland Barthes' critique in his book Mythologies, without acknowledgement; "By purporting to show that individuals are born, work, laugh, and die everywhere in the same way, "The Family of Man" denies the determining weight of history - of genuine and historically embedded differences, injustices, and conflicts." Many of the reviews from the world of art photography that followed On Photography at the time of its publication were skeptical and often hostile, such as those of Colin L. Westerbeck and Michael Lesy.[citation needed] In 2003, Sontag published a partial refutation of the opinions she espoused in On Photography in her book Regarding the Pain of Others. This book may be considered as a postscript or addition to On Photography. Sontag's publishing history includes a similar sequence with regard to her work Illness as Metaphor from the earlier work. Editions New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977. ISBN 0-374-22626-1. London: Allan Lane, 1978. ISBN 0-7139-1128-X. New York: Anchor Books, 1990. ISBN 0-385-26706-1. Reprinted in Sontag: Essays of the 1960s & 1970s, Library of America, 2013. ISBN 978-1-59853-255-5. Includes endnotes. Earlier versions of these essays appeared in The New York Review of Books: Volume 20, No. 16 (October 18, 1973). Volume 20, No. 18 (November 15, 1973). Volume 21, No. 6 (April 18, 1974). Volume 21, No. 19 (November 28, 1974). Volume 23, No. 21 & 22 (January 20, 1977). Volume 24, No. 11 (June 23, 1977). References ^ Sontag, Susan (1977), On Photography, Penguin Books, London ^ Gass, William (18 December 1977). "On Photography". The New York Times. Retrieved 22 July 2015. ^ "Focus on Photography. - Free Online Library". Retrieved from " Susan Sontag's On Photography (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), 207 pages. Susan Sontag's On Photography might have been called Off Photography, for "offing," in the '60s sense of committing murder, is what the book really intends to do. First, then, we have to remove the point of Sontag's book from the wound it has made in its subject matter. The deepest penetration seems to occur in the following passages:... photographs have their power as images (or copies) of the world, not of an individual artist's consciousness. . . . It makes sense that a painting is signed but a photographer, the more it seems in bad taste if it is). The very nature of photography implies an equivocal relation to the photography implies and equi individual authorship. . . . [T]here is no internal evidence for identifying as the work of a single photographer (indeed, one of the most interesting and original of photographers) those studies of human and animal motion, the documents brought back from photo-expeditions in Central America, the government-sponsored camera surveys of Alaska and Yosemite, and the "Clouds" and "Trees" series. Even after knowing they were all taken by Muybridge, one still can't relate these series of pictures to each other (though each series has a coherent recognizable style), any more than one could infer the way Atget photographed trees from the way he photographed Paris shop windows, To be legitimate as an art, photography must cultivate the notion of the photographer as auteur and of all photographs taken by the same photographs taken by the same photographer as constituting a body of work. (pp. 133-137)You have to deal rather gingerly with some of Ms. Sontag's examples. Her citation of Muybridge, for instance, really loads her case against the possibility of the auteur in photography. She knows that of the four phases of Muybridge's work she ticks off in illustrating her claim, only one phase will be known to most of her readers. Only the "animal motion" studies are going to come to mind. Yet by their very nature as photographs, these motion studies seem to squelch debate about the auteur status of the photographer before it has even begun. Obviously they cannot be compared to the landscapes, in order to get
at the personality of the photographer, since the whole purpose of the motion studies was to use the camera in a way that would be impersonal—to use it as an instrument of science. In the famous galloping-horse series, it was the horse, after all, who took the pictures. That Muybridge used a camera for both his "Clouds" and his motion studies has no more significance than the fact that Dr. Williams used his right hand to write both poems and prescriptions. (Muybridge's motion studies are just the sort of photograph that it would be "in bad taste" to sign, as Sontag says parenthetically. She has a way of really sticking in the knife—the knife of sensibility—in an aside.) Does Sontag actually expect to palm off the very special case of Muybridge's work as typical of the case for all photographers? Apparently she does. This is why I think her argument is loaded here, as it is elsewhere. She is making her real argument on the case for all photographers? Apparently she does. This is why I think her argument is loaded here, as it is elsewhere. the sly, by misrepresentation. When she turns to Atget, however, she missteps and gets into important trouble. She brings Atget in quickly to reinforce her case against Atget is even shakier than that against Muybridge, for one can infer Atget's trees from his shop windows. Unlike most documentary photographers of his day, and especially other commercial photographers producing "documents for artists," as Atget's work conveys his perception is through its tendency to layer the images, to superimpose one plane of the picture on another so that the subject is eclipsed or obscured. In his many photographs of stairs, for example, the picture often seems to be organized around some point at which a wrought-iron bannister doubles back in such a way that the foreground becomes a filigreed screen through which the portion in the background must be seen. Thus does Atget force the classical symmetry of French decorative art into opposition with itself. The sense of form is made to lose its composure, its equanimity. It breaks up on itself. Atget's photographs function as an antidote for Beaux-Arts draftsmanship. By observing through the camera the way in which an earlier ideal of design was actually seen and behaved in contemporary everyday life, Atget remade classical forms into modern ones. He betrayed into life a whole modern sense of form. The point is that the pictures of trees. It was, I suspect, from the spidery, tortuous, frenetic forms of trees in winter that Atget learned to see in terms other than graceful symmetry. Atget often imposed the limbs of such a tree over the ostensible subject of architecture in his pictures, and with very like results he also allowed the passing reflections in a shop window to impose fractures on the glass. In both instances, the impression is of a grand opposition between nature and buildings. In one picture that comes especially to mind, the bare limb of a tree somewhere on the Quai de Montebello extends into the center of the frame and aggressively claws away the image of Notre Dame on the Ile de la Cité in the background. The same opposition is felt when a street scene is reflected in a shop window. Because it is seen only in reflection, the street scene reveals qualities of transience and energy which contrast starkly with the monolithic appearance Atget's head-on view imparts to the shop window itself. What finally equates beyond mistake the imagery of trees and shop windows in Atget's work, and the very similar tensions between life and architecture they convey, is a shared quality which Sontag herself identifies as Atget's "grisaille." The sharp silhouetting of the street in the silvery plane of the windows gives those pictures a strong affinity with the ones where dark zig-zags of tree limbs are thrown into relief against walls or skies. They are in fact so alike—so much the product of a single and unique imagination—that declaring it impossible to "infer the way Atget photographed shop windows" requires almost a willful blindness. By insisting that we should be able to "infer" one example of an artist's work from another, Sontag is employing a gambit of modern criticism that can be found from I. A. Richards' experiments in "practical criticism" in the '20s to François Truffaut's "politique des auteurs" at Cahiers du Cinema in the '50s, and in a great deal of French literary polemics close to Son-tag's own heart. By these standards, the test of any artist is whether different samples of his work could be recognized as by the same hand even if they were unattributed. Like many other critics, Sontag derives her approach from the modern tradition of formalism, as her famous polemic "Against Interpretation" also makes clear, she goes far beyond formalism as well—so far that she ends up repudiating it. The interpretations she's against are those by Marxists, Freudians, and anyone else with an extra-esthetic point of view. She wants criticism to move away from meddlesome exegesis toward "descriptions." All of these things, which disencumber the text, formalists also want. But conventional formalism is not only against interpretation in the sense Sontag uses the term, it is against judgment as well. This Sontag is personal, precise and idiosyncratic. A word she uses at several crucial junctures in her essay is "immediate." She wants art to have more immediacy than either the buffer zones of interpretation or the detachment of formalism allow. There is a good deal to admire in Sontag's position. I agree, for instance, that art must give us access to the "individual artist's consciousness." Her desire to "infer" one part of an artist's work from another is simply a way of searching for this individuality in art. The one great difficulty into which Sontag's approach falls, however, is the one to which formalism itself always seems to come. It is the extreme isolation which the artist and his appreciators must feel. Like the formalism itself always seems to come. It is the extreme isolation which the artist and his appreciators must feel. Like the formalism itself always seems to come. It is the extreme isolation which the artist and his appreciators must feel. and be a law unto itself. That is why she is against the intervention of Marx or Freud. But this uniqueness in the work is at the same time, inevitably, a state of absolute solitude as well. The truth is that all the modern artist has left to offer us is himself, the private self made public. The result is that when the artist and his audience get together, they are utterly alone. (Sontag's 1967 essay on "The Aesthetics of Silence" deals with this very problem, as with many problems of attitude raised by On Photography.) Sontag fends off the depression this loneliness would produce by her insistence on judgment, by acting out all the gestures of self-confidence and critical tradition even though the reassurances of both are lost to her. It's a heroic struggle, if a futile one. The problem is that the solipsism inherent in her preferences. For if you are "against interpretation," and reject applying any external set of values to art, then everything must be judged on its own terms. And as long as a work of art is coherent enough to have terms of its own, it will require a great leap in the dark to prefer it to any other work of art. No matter how eloquent and refined the critic's judgments become, they are undermined by the fact that judgment itself isn't necessary. It may be that it isn't even justified. The only way out of this dilemma is through the escape hatch of estheticism. The critic has to make a philosophical preference out of the alienation which she and the artist feel from everything except art. This is what Sontag does. She reserves her approval for that modern art which, like pure mathematics, only makes statements about itself. She prefers Pound to Eliot, Alain Robbe-Grillet to Albert Camus, Godard and Resnais to almost all other filmmakers, and abstract painting to photography. Perhaps the insecurity Sontag must feel about her own judgments accounts for the vehemence with which she attacks John Szarkowski because he does not make judgments. Although she is at this point addressing herself to curatorial policy in general, the one curator she mentions by name, and the only one she seems to have in mind, is Szarkowski, who heads the Department of Photography's career in the museum," she complains, does not reward any particular style; rather, it presents photography as a collection of simultaneous intentions and styles which, however different, are not perceived as in any way contradictory. . . . Museums do not so much arbitrate what photographs are good or bad as offer new conditions for looking at all photographs. This procedure, which appears to be creating standards of evaluation, in fact abolishes them. The museum cannot be said to have created a secure canon of the photographic work of the past, as it has for painting. Even as it seems to be sponsoring a particular photographic taste, the museum is undermining the very idea of normative taste. Its role is to show that there are no fixed standards of evaluation, that there is no canonical tradition of the past, as it has for painting. work. Under the museum's attentions, the very idea of a canonical tradition is exposed as redundant. Accompanying its tendentious respect for the profoundly banal is the museum's diffusion of a historicist view, one that inexorably promotes the entire history of photography. (pp. 132, 141, 144) "Tendentious respect for the profoundly banal" is pretty strong talk, and misrepresents something Szarkowski once said. (He said only that the subject matter of a certain photograph was "profoundly banal," not that the picture itself was, much less that he respected banality or thought it profoundly banal," not that the picture itself was, much less that he respected banality or thought it profoundly
banal, "not that the picture itself was, much less that he respected banality or thought it profoundly banal," not that the picture itself was, much less that he respected banality or thought it profoundly banal, "not that the picture itself was, much less that he respected banality or thought it profoundly banal," not that the picture itself was, much less that he respected banality or thought it profoundly banal, "not that the picture itself was, much less that he respected banality or thought it profoundly banal," not that the picture itself was, much less that he respected banality or thought it profoundly banal, "not that the picture itself was, much less that he respected banality or thought it profoundly banal," not that the picture itself was, much less than the picture itself was, m her.Why should curators "create standards of evaluation" anyway? That's the critic's job, isn't it? Certainly Sontag's claim that museums have done this for painting seems to me shaky. Museums have seldom done it except when supported—or, more often, goaded—by a strong tradition in criticism. As I interpret it, the purpose of Szarkowski's curatorial policy is to give photography an opportunity to develop its own tradition, whose polemics and exclusive choices Szarkowski rightly leaves to others. He approaches his own work with the most catholic tastes possible because he hopes to transmit photography whole, or at least intact, to whoever will be interested in it in the future. Why carp and grumble because he's not acting in lieu of a strong critical tradition, which Sontag herself admits does not yet exist for photography? To understand On Books, where the chapters in the present volume appeared serially between 1973 and 1977. While Sontag tells us in a prefatory note that the NYR articles appear in the book in only "slightly different form," at least one article—the one dealing primarily with Leni Riefenstahl's book The Last of the Nuba—is missing altogether. Still, this is essentially the same document Sontag produced for NYR, and there can be little doubt that having had NYR's readers as the original audience for her thoughts was crucial to the form in which they were put down. Sontag admits in the book version that the essays "would never have been written were it not for the encouragement given by [NYR's] editors, my friends Robert Silvers and Barbara Epstein."Writing on photography for NYR? is a very curious project, though, when you think about it. In effect Sontag has done a serious study assuring her readers that her subject need not be taken seriously. She has spent four years of her life concentrating on photography—in a New York Times interview she revealed that to write each essay took her six months—with the purpose of convincing Silvers, Epstein, et al. that photography isn't worth their attention. She has written at length on photography isn't worth their attention. She has written at length on photography isn't worth their attention. She has written at length on photography isn't worth their attention. She has written at length on photography isn't worth their attention. only exception to this policy in the magazine's history.) In other words, Sontag has written an entire book to persuade certain people of something they already take for granted? Maybe they're beginning to have self-doubts on this score, finding it harder and harder to dismiss photography without giving it a thought. Maybe that's the reason this seemingly superfluous book is necessary—that it performs an essential service for us all—can be seen from the fact that the encouragement it received from NYR's editors has been corroborated by the editors of The New York Times Book Review, which chose On Photography as one of last year's 20 best books. Only a central document of our time could appeal to both NYR's narrow intellectual elite and the Times's editors had clearly made up their minds about the book beforehand, and they assigned it accordingly. From William Gass they got the effusion they wanted, a rave review which never tries to pin Sontag down to an argument anywhere. A man with multiple vocations—teacher, philosopher, and avant-garde novelist—who thereby straddles some of the same cultural contradictions that Sontag does, Gass loves Sontag for her sensibility, without requiring that she also make sense. Or even that he himself make any. With a metaphor whose opacity is typical of his whole review, Gass apologizes for the book is a thoughtful meditation, not a treatise, and its ideas are grouped more nearly like a gang of keys upon a ring than a run of onions on a string."The difficulty of pinning Sontag down and finding a real thesis in the book may account as well for the reception it has received among photography's friends and sponsors. The fact is that they seem to love the book too. Most of them either don't care, or don't understand, how damaging to new interest in photography books in recent years, the editor of Robert Frank's Les Americains and publisher of a number of books by Cartier-Bresson. Delpire is currently spending his time editing each year four Special Photo issues of Le Nouvel Observateur, and in the first issue last summer, the lead article, and the only genuine criticism in the whole magazine, was an excerpt from Sontag's book. This makes a strange text for a magazine dedicated to the idea that photography is art. But perhaps Delpire isn't as foolish in his choice of text as he at first appears. In a fundamental sense, the medium is more important than the message here. It is the fact that Susan Sontag has written a major essay on photography which tells us something, not what the essay actually has to say. The very determination with which she is trying to bar the door means that photography has already arrived somewhere it never went before. It has taken up residence in a part of our collective consciousness that always used to be closed to it. I think this is why Delpire and the other old-timers are rather pleased by Sontag's by-line, having to print the testy things she has to say about photography was a small price for Delpire to pay. The truth, as both Gass and Delpire appreciate, is that Sontag's subject is not merely photography. If Sontag's real motive for writing the book is to scuttle photography as an art, which seems likely, it remains a submerged and ulterior motive except in the penultimate chapter. The context which the rest of the book provides for this chapter and for all discussion of photography as art is a discussion of photography in general as a medium. But the boxes contained by boxes don't end there, either, for she has lifted the lid on a veritable Pandora's box. As Sontag herself explains in the Times interview mentioned before, I came to realize that I wasn't writing about modernity, about the way we are now. The subject of photography is a form of access to contemporary ways of feeling and thinking. And writing about the world. Poor photography, it also lightens the burden on Sontag in certain ways. No wonder the book is ultimately imponderable. From a book about mere photography we might expect rational argument. But anybody attempting to explain the whole world must obviously be permitted a good deal of speciousness. Notice that Sontag scales down the vastness of her claim for the book by saying simply that it is "about the way we are now." To explain ourselves to ourselves is, again, a project requiring that we tolerate a certain amount of doubling back in the argument. Intense introspection always makes the mind go a bit cross-eyed. It is only right, too, that Sontag should speak nominatively of the way "we" are. If she is examining the whole world, then her examination must include herself since she is part of the world. And insofar as her subject is herself, we must once more expect to find a certain illusory quality, a lyric ambiguity, in her overview of her subject. There is no denying that point by point the book is, as William Gass says, "brilliant." Sontag's powers of observation really can be dazzling. She has that ability, which all original criticism has, to make insight and judgment ride together in the same word. When she says that "Photographs . . . thicken the environment" or that "naughty," a word used by Diane Arbus to describe how photographing made her feel, is a "pop" word, the terms "thicken" and "pop" are so accurate, so right, that we are bowled over. There is a point at which a critic's talents have to approach a novelist's or poet's for economy—for coming upon the single word that is apt. This is what "thicken" and "pop" do, and they are only a couple of examples that happened to strike me in the first few pages of the book. Sontag's perceptions have this kind of density throughout. Nor is this quality just an aphoristic one, an ability to choose bons mots and get off one-liners. One of the six sections into which the first chapter is divided discusses the varieties of snapshots and culminates in. the following remarks on tourist photography:[It] especially appeals to people handicapped by a ruthless work ethic—Germans, Japanese, and Americans. Using a camera appeases the anxiety which the work-driven feel about not working when they are on vacation and supposed to be having fun. They have something to do that is like a friendly imitation of work: they can take pictures. (p. 10)This astute commentary not only pulls together two pages on tourist photography, but relates those pages to the general notion proposed by this section of the chapter that photography is used as "a defense against anxiety." Despite the impressive sense that passages like these make, however, the illusion they create that photography is used as "a defense against anxiety." Despite the impressive sense that passages like these make, however, the illusion they create that photography is used as "a defense against anxiety." Despite the impressive sense that passages like these make,
however, the illusion they create that photography is used as "a defense against anxiety." Despite the impressive sense that passages like these make, however, the illusion they create that passages like these make, however, the illusion they create that passages like these make, however, the illusion they create that passages like these make, however, the illusion they create that passages like these make, however, the illusion they create that passages like these make, however, the illusion they create that passages like these make, however, the illusion they create that passages like these make, however, the illusion they create that passages like these make, however, the illusion they create that passages like these make, however, the illusion they create that passages like these makes are not always been capable of the passages. first few pages of an essay on the philosopher Cioran are a more lucid and complete intellectual history of the last 150 years than is contained in many books on the subject. But Sontag has never been equally good at having continuous thoughts. Her boosting of Cioran might even be taken as self-pleading, since a quality of mind she especially admires in him is his capacity for making "broken argument." In On Photography, when the last chapter returns to some of the themes I have been discussing from the first chapter, the erratic quality of Sontag's own thinking becomes noticeable. In their reappearance some of those themes seem peculiarly altered, as when the issue of the work ethic comes up again, during some discussion devoted to Proust, with the contention thatNothing could be more unlike the self-sacrificial travail of an artist like Proust than the effortlessness of picture-taking, which must be the sole activity resulting in accredited works of art in which a single movement, a touch of the finger, produces a complete work. (pp. 164-165) "Travail" and "effortlessness" are the key terms of the dialectic here. Having earlier repudiates it for not being too much like work, Sontag now repudiates it for not being enough like work, Sontag now repudiates it for not being too much like work. This is one of the truly perplexing moments in her book. The notion that art can be nothing more than a kind of esthetic play, which is often all that the best photography is, gets no consideration here. Sontag is only speaking to, and for, her NYR readers, who tend to think of the life of the intellects, in particular their own intellects, as hard work—a vocation, like priesthood. The difficulty into which she has stumbled here is that she is herself a member of the workaholic culture she was dissecting earlier. No matter how reprehensible she may find its values in someone else, in the end she feels compelled to defend them. It seems not to bother her that the attitude she adopts in this last chapter toward both work and photography contradicts the ones she takes toward them earlier. This happens often, especially where her conception of photography is concerned. The conception that she has in one place is constantly being transmogrified into its opposite someplace else. I can easily imagine that Sontag's answer to some of the objections I am making might be to say, as Whitman does in Song of Myself, Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. (I am large, I contain multitudes.) Whitman is a literary patron saint hovering over Sontag's whole book. She invokes him at the beginning of the second chapter and characterizes all photography as a debasement of his aspiration for a democratic art. Besides insisting that we contain its contradictions, On Photography puts us in mind of Whitman's Song of Myself in other ways, too. Both are really essays on the whole ball of wax, on the world at large and on all civilization as we know it. And Sontag's book moves rather like Whitman's poem as well—by a kind of intellectual osmosis. There is no real development or structure in Song of Myself. The relationships between the parts are purely intuitive and free-wheeling. Sontag's book, from the six sections of the first chapter to the six chapters all told, is just the same. What holds Whitman's poem together is her sensibility. Her own highly cultivated tastes are the glue with which her disparate ideas are presumably made to stick. They are the stuff of which her superiority over all photography is made. Yet the strange truth is that Sontag's sensibility, for all her disparagement of her subject, is most like photography are to be found right in her own habits of mind as well. Fragmentation and trivialization are, for example, two tendencies she attributes to photography about which she remains pretty consistent throughout the book. She begins in the first chapter lamenting thatin a world ruled by photography about which she remains pretty consistent throughout the book. She begins in the first chapter lamenting thatin a world ruled by photography about which she remains pretty consistent throughout the book. She begins in the first chapter lamenting thatin a world ruled by photography about which she remains pretty consistent throughout the book. She begins in the first chapter lamenting thatin a world ruled by photography about which she remains pretty consistent throughout the book. She begins in the first chapter lamenting that in a world ruled by photography about which she remains pretty consistent throughout the book. She begins in the first chapter lamenting that in a world ruled by photography about which she remains pretty consistent throughout the book. She begins in the first chapter lamenting that in a world ruled by photography about which she remains pretty consistent throughout the book. She begins in the first chapter lamenting that in a world ruled by photography about which she remains pretty consistent throughout the book. She begins in the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first chapter lamenting that it is a second of the first photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and faits divers. The camera makes reality atomic. . . . (pp. 22-23)And at the beginning of the second chapter she introduces the Whitmanesque esthetic which she feels photography perverts: As Walt Whitman gazed down the democratic vistas of culture, he tried to see beyond the difference between beauty and ugliness, importance and triviality. . . . In recent decades, photography has succeeded in somewhat revising, for everybody, the definitions of what is beautiful and ugly—along the lines that Whitman's words) "each precise object or condition or combination or process exhibits beauty," it becomes superficial to single out some things as beautiful and others as not. If "all that a person does or thinks is of consequence," it becomes arbitrary to treat some moments in life as important and most as trivial. (pp. 27-28)Photography has foisted this ethic/esthetic on us, Sontag suggests by "conscientiously exploring plain, tawdry or even vapid material." At the end of the book, whatever else may have changed, this two-item catalogue of the evils of photography is still the same. Discussing the dual functions of photography is still the same. Discussing the dual functions of photography is still the same. logical extensions of what photography means: note-taking on, potentially, everything in the world is material for the camera. One finds that there is beauty or at least interest in everything, seen with an acute enough eye. . . . The other treats everything as the object of some present or future use, as matter for estimates, decisions, and predictions. . . . Though these two attitudes, the aesthetic and the instrumental, seem to produce contradictory and even incompatible feelings about people and situations, that is the altogether characteristic contradiction of attitude which members of a society that divorces public from private are expected to share in and live with. And there is perhaps no activity which prepares us so well to live with these contradictory attitudes as does picture-taking, which lends itself brilliantly to both. (pp. 176-177) This is really the height of gall, for Sontag is here inviting us to condemn in photography "contradictions" which we have had to live with in her criticism for years. No critic has done more to make a fragmentary approach to culture—mere "note-taking"— respectable. Nor has any critic done more to dignify trivial subjects with the same serious attention given great art. The ultimate Sontag essay, and perhaps the most famous, is her 1964 "Notes on Camp," which not only has as its subject (one she is "strongly drawn" to) the very soul of modern triviality, but also remains so rudimentary a form of annotation that Subject. As much as any photographer, the "one" who "finds that there is beauty or at least interest in everything, seen with an acute enough eye," is Sontag herself. Over the years she has turned facilely from pornography to esthetics to sci-fi movies to "happenings," etc., and it is in the same spirit that she now turns to photography as well. No subject is beneath her notice, and all, from camp to photography, receive the same, segmented treatment in the writing up. It is her own sensibility she is
describing. At yet another point in the book Sontag renews the claim that "a photograph is only a fragment," and this time she adds, "A photograph could also be described as a quotation, which makes a book of photographs like a book of quotations." (p: 71) She formulates this equation with an eye toward Michael Lesy's book Wisconsin Death Trip, which combines old photographs with quotations of the period to suggest that Middle America was a place of not-so-quiet desperation. Since Sontag fleshes out her own book, in order to get it up to 200 pages, with an anthology of quotations about photography at the end, her snide remark about "a book of quotations" seems curious. Nevertheless, her attack on Lesy is very much in tune with the more elaborate attack elsewhere—it takes up most of the second chapter—on Diane Arbus. When Sontag says of Lesy's book that it is "fashionably pessimistic" (p. 73), she is echoing the charge made earlier against Arbus in some passages that conclude, "The Arbus photographs convey the anti-humanist message which people of good will in the 1970s are eager to be troubled by. . . ." (pp. 32-33)What Sontag disapproves of in Lesy and Arbus alike is their morbidity. But again such an objection to photographs might easily boomerang against Son-tag's own art. Wisconsin Death Trip and Sontag's own novel of 1967, Death Kit, have similar it les, and they are similar in a variety of ways, not least of all in sensibility. Yet the similarity is even more striking between Sontag's claims to the contrary where photographers are concerned, so much of an auteur—that her style has a levelling effect on all subjects. It is a style that equates dwarfs, mongoloids and transvestites with middle-class families, "nice" homes and fashionable living. Thus it reveals the life of contemporary America to be a "death trip," an existence lived out of a "death kit." The inner being which Arbus' pictures imply for her subjects is in essence the same one that Sontag establishes for Death Kit's hero, Diddy, when he is first introduced: The sort of man who doesn't mistreat women, never loses his credit cards or breaks a plate while washing up, works conscientiously at his job, lends money to friends graciously, walks his dog each midnight no matter how tired he feels. The sort of man it's hard to dislike, and whom disaster avoids. Diddy, merely inhabit their lives. Like insecure tenants, never knowing exactly the extent of their property or when the lease will expire. Like unskilled cartographers, drawing and redrawing erroneous maps of an exotic continent. Eventually, for such a person, everything is bound to run down. The walls sag. Empty spaces bulge between objects ooze out along the seams. Deploying things and navigating through space become laborious. Too much effort to amble from kitchen to living room, serving drinks, turning on the hi-fi, pretending to be cheerful. But Diddy's difficulties can't be resolved by making a bigger effort. Stepped-up effort won't repair his ingenious sense of incapacity, which proceeds from a hallucinated erasure of the present as it becomes past. To supplement effort, Diddy needs faith. Which he lacks (now). Making everything unpredictable. Keep in mind that this extremely fragmented narration, where even the syntax is in shards, is written in the third person. The voice that is luxuriating in Diddy's suicidal consciousness, turning its depletions into an esthetic object, is Sontag's own. The truth is that it would be hard to imagine an equivalent for Arbus' pictures more perfect than Sontag's novel, whose style imparts to all her characters' lives just those qualities of bleakness and sameness which we find in Arbus' pictures. Arbus is the only photographer that Sontag's novel, whose style imparts to all her characters' lives just those qualities of bleakness and sameness which we find in Arbus' pictures. mindedness of the attack on Arbus is emphasized by the fact that Leni Riefenstahl, the only other photographer to receive a full treatment in the original NYR articles, is dropped from the book.) Yet in sensibility above all, Arbus is so like a photographic doppelgänger for Sontag that Sontag's contempt for Arbus feels almost as if it is contempt for herself. It's indicative of Sontag's attitude toward photography that there should be only one photography that there should be only one photographs as individual works in the same way that a bigot doesn't think of blacks or Italians or Jews as individual people. She manages to overlook the uniqueness of photographs by Atget, Cartier-Bresson or Walker Evans, and is clearly more comfortable with inferior, anonymous work that can confirm her bias against photography as a medium. To say that photography as a medium. To say that photography as a medium. is a medium rather than an art is one thing, and true enough. But to say that it is a medium incapable of art is sometimes used to tell lies. Sontag's condemnation of photography as an art simply won't wash, and it leaves us, still, wondering why this book has been written, or for whom. What lies behind the book is finally something she takes more personally than a subject for criticism ought to be taken—something about photography that she does not contemplate with disinterest, something irrational within herself. The truth is that she has a very deep-rooted ambivalence about herself as well. For one thing, she is a maker of movies. She has made three, Duet for Cannibals, Brother Carl and The Promised Land, and admired scores more in her essays. In On Photography she attempts to justify this double standard, at least indirectly, by saying, "Only that which narrates can make us understanding," which is a term of approbation. According to her, photographs do not promote "understanding," of course. But then neither would painting; yet Sontag uses painting more than once to browbeat photography. She can't get along with photography because neither is "narrative." Elsewhere, in a 1966 essay on "Theatre and Film," she can't even get along without photography itself, whose narrative properties in albums she cites as a precedent for movies! Photography is not so readily separated from either the art Sontag admires or the art she creates, nor can her attitude toward photography be, therefore, as clear-cut as she would have us believe. The photography is not so readily separated from either the art Sontag admires or the art she creates, nor can her attitude toward photography be, therefore, as clear-cut as she would have us believe. The photography is not so readily separated from either the art she creates, nor can her attitude toward photography be, therefore, as clear-cut as she would have us believe. The photography is not so readily separated from either the art she creates, nor can her attitude toward photography is not so readily separated from either the art she creates, nor can her attitude toward photography is not so readily separated from either the art she creates, nor can her attitude toward photography is not so readily separated from either the art she creates, nor can her attitude toward photography is not so readily separated from either the art she creates, nor can her attitude toward photography is not so readily separated from either the art she creates, nor can her attitude toward photography is not so readily separated from either the art she creates and the creates are created from either the art she creates and the creates are created from either the art she creat herself over the years reflect this ambivalence which she has toward photography. The review copy of Sontag's book, a text on photography with no photography with no photography with no photography in it, does come, nonetheless, accompanied by a photography with no photography with no photography with no photography with no photography in it, does come, nonetheless, accompanied by a photography with no some others that have been done. In this picture she is no longer the short-haired, stern-eyed, square-jawed, buttoned-up woman who appears in Harry Hess's portrait for the cover of her 1966 collection Against Interpretation. Even less is she the swan-necked, self-conscious and ravishingly beautiful woman whose face floats in a pool of light in Philippe Halsman's formal, stylized portrait for the dust jacket of Death Kit. Now Sontag becomes the typical subject of a Krementz snap. It is as if the photograph interrupted at her work a writer who, though friendly, can't be bothered to pose. It is the ideal attitude for a picture of someone who has just written a book politely ripping up photography itself. There is another portrait of Sontag that comes to mind too, not only for itself but for the context in which it appears. It is by Peter Hujar and appears in his book Portraits in Life and Death. The book begins with an introduction by Sontag in which she says in a sympathetic tone some of the same things said coldly in On Photography. And the book begins with an introduction by Sontag in which she says in a sympathetic tone some of the same things said coldly in On Photography. ends with a series of photographs made in a catacomb in Palermo—photography does express the culture of our time in some essential way, as Sontag says. There is no escaping it: it is a part of the sensibility of us all, a trait of the personality which we must somehow turn to our benefit and turn into art. But in On Photography Sontag represses this part of the personality which we must somehow turn to our benefit and turn into art. But in On Photography Sontag represses this part of the personality which we must somehow turn to our benefit and turn into art. But in On Photography Sontag represses this part of the personality which we must somehow turn to our benefit and turn into art. But in On Photography Sontag represses this part of the personality which we must somehow turn to our benefit and turn into art. But in On Photography Sontag
represses this part of the personality which we must somehow turn to our benefit and turn into art. But in On Photography Sontag represses this part of the personality which we must somehow turn to our benefit and turn into art. But in On Photography Sontag represses this part of the personality which we must somehow turn to our benefit and turn into art. But in On Photography Sontag represses this part of the personality which we must somehow turn to our benefit and turn into art. But in On Photography Sontag represses this part of the personality which we must somehow turn to our benefit and turn into art. But in On Photography Sontag represses the part of the personality which we must somehow turn to our benefit and turn into art. But in On Photography Sontag represses the part of the personality which we must some an art of the personality which we must some an art of the personality which we must some an art of the personality which we must some an art of the personality which we must some an art of the personality which we must some an art of the personality which we must some an art of the personality which we must some an art of the personality which we must some an art of the personality which we must some an art of the personality which we must some an art of the persona Levi-Strauss, she observes that his book Tristes Tropiques is an example of how "Modern thought is pledged to . . . seeking its Self in its Other." But On Photography is a somewhat different project, this self-evisceration. Back in 1968 when she went to Hanoi, where the whole purpose of a very dangerous trip was to put herself in touch with otherness, the experience finally had to turn inward, to become an "interior journey," as the account she wrote for Esquire confesses. Two years before that, in assessing "What's Happening in America" for Partisan Review, she had cried out on history with unconcealed pain, The truth is that Mozart, Pascal, Boolean algebra, Shakespeare, parliamentary government, baroque churches, Newton, the emancipation of women, Kant, Marx, and Balanchine ballets don't redeem what this particular civilization has wrought upon the world. The white race is the cancer of human history: .Even allowing for the heat of the time in which this was written, it comes pretty close to being a scream of despair. To reject the whole, high, accumulated culture of the Western world is for an intellectual of Sontag's capacities an act of self-loathing—indeed, of self-annihilation. Nor has the mood changed fundamentally in her writing since then. In On Photography it often seems obvious that the only thing she can hear in the modern art she would praise at photography's expense is its "discipline." This is a term she uses frequently in connection with painting, music or literature. She admires the demand they make for concentration, persistence and rigor—in other words, for hard work—in order to be understood. (So do I.) But it is only as work that she appreciates them, not as pleasure. Almost all the other properties of art, the ones which are the hard work's reward—self-realization, grace, vision and, even in the most alienated modern art, joy—seem now lost on Sontag. Who is On Photography written for? Unhappily, it is written for

Susan Sontag.—Colin L. Westerbeck, Jr.

