

Bikers, Photography, and Me: Analyzing Susan Sontag

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I stood armed with my camera, taking photographs of the young ladies in the swimsuit competition standing on a flat bed trailer at a local bike rally. A curly-haired biker was pelting my ankles with rocks, but I could barely feel the flicks because of my leather boots. I ignored the minor annoyance and kept photographing. Finally, my assailant aimed higher...and with larger stones.

I turned around, surveyed the audience, and lowered my camera. "What?" I asked the bushy biker sitting on a lawn chair behind me. "Is there some good reason you're interrupting what I'm doing?"

He motioned for me to come closer.

"Yes?" I asked, my camera poised on my shoulder.

"Why aren't you out here partying like the rest of us?" he asked.

I knew why, but I wasn't about to say. I don't think quoting Susan Sontag would have had an impression on him. "Because taking pictures is what I do."

"But don't you ever quit taking pictures?" Like myself, he had bare, sweating arms.

I cradled my camera against my cheek. "Not really."

"Why not? Why don't I ever see you partying?"

"Because I take pictures."

He was getting frustrated. "But *why*?"

"Because I enjoy it."

He shook his head. I don't think he bought my answer.

The real reason was ping-ponging between my ears: I didn't have anyone special to observe and share the experience with. Why party when there's no one special to party with?

Sontag would have loved me — a photographer who admits to her use of the camera as a means of escapism.

And from what am I escaping?

Confronting the lack of meaningful intimate relationships in my life.

As long as I have a camera in front of my face, I can share vicariously with the participants of any revelry set before me. As long as I have that camera in front of my face, I have to concentrate on composition and exposure, which leaves no time for pondering what actually is taking place inside my head. As long as I have that camera in front of my face, I have a barrier between my heart and the one thing that rips at it the most...my lack of a significant partner.

This absence had changed my overwhelming desire as an artist from art making to art sharing. Art making is often a lonely experience for me, taking place within the closed walls of my studio with my dog as my only companion. Art sharing is something else altogether; for me, it takes place outside gallery walls, but within the confines of friendship, where I share not just my work, but my feelings about the work, and in return am rewarded by the delight and joy expressed by its subjects.

Diane Arbus writes, "Photography was a license to go wherever I wanted and to do what I wanted to do" (41). I learned this early upon first picking up a camera, and I have capitalized on it ever since. The camera opens doors for me to places where I would otherwise not be welcome. It has become my social crutch, my scepter, my instrument of power. Sontag investigates just this phenomenon within her essays. Inside Sontag's slim volume *On Photography* are the answers to who I am and why I behave as I do...deeper answers that have more to do with psyche than with art. Then, again, psyche and art may be one and the same for some of us.

My camera keeps me from sharing my innermost thoughts and feelings; it helps me hide my protest against being alone.

My camera, however, also *allows* me to share my innermost thoughts and feelings by capturing images that cannot lie about my attitudes.

Sontag asserts that photographs are vehicles for capturing experience as well as powerful entities that have been used, rightly or wrongly, to dictate what is or is not worthy of observing (1, 28). Behind these entities, which can be owned and which can lie as well as share the feelings of the image maker, stands a human who wields power simply by his possession of a camera. Where once I thought of photographs and other works of art as empowering for the subject, I now recognize that the camera is a tool for empowerment not for the subject, but for the person behind the tool. This tool gives me the power to create worlds: what I include or do not include within an image shapes the impression of the viewers for or against the subject.

Beyond this, however, is the influence the camera has upon me. My camera forces me to act more assertively. Either I am bold enough to step in close and make the image I see unfolding in front of me, or I am not...and a part of the story I want to tell becomes lost.

Sontag writes that "photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects" (6). This is true. They are the photographers' standards of what they find worthy of freezing in time. However, I'm not sure I go so far as to agree that the use of a camera is an act of aggression or that the camera democratizes all experiences (7). The camera might bring images of widely varying experiences to the forefront for public consumption, but those images do not in and of themselves create a democratic experience...what one viewer takes from an image will not be what all viewers take from it. The interpretation of images, like the interpretation of literature, is inherent to the viewer's range of experiences. And as for the camera being aggressive, again, that notion of aggression comes both from the intent of the photographer and the reaction of those being photographed. If benevolence is a purely human characteristic that is unaided by machinery, then so too is aggression. The machinery to carry out such feelings is created in response to the feeling, and the camera was not created for either such purpose.

There are, I realize, those bikers whom I want to photograph who do indeed see the camera as an aggressive object...the tool of spies rather than the tool of an artist. These are the men I most want to work with: I want to change their attitudes about the presence of the camera to allow them to interpret it as a vehicle for sharing insights into their world and as a means to further humanize them to others. There is a vast difference between evidentiary photographs and candids of family gatherings or bikers celebrating together. Here, my intent is under question...and it is my intent that I must prove.

Equating taking a photograph with being predatory is a disturbing notion to me (14, 123). It might be a correct assumption, but I hesitate to agree. My hesitation comes from my refusal to label myself as a predator. Yes, the camera might allow the photographer and others to see the subject in ways in which that person does not or can not see himself, and yes, it may provide knowledge of them that they themselves did not have, and, yes, it does “turn people into objects that can be symbolically possessed,” but I have trouble saying that photographing a person is equivalent to violating them. That photography may in some cases be intrusive I will allow, but intrusion is rude and violation is more aggressive. I do not see photography as a violent act.

Sontag notes also that photography meant to aid society has done as much to anesthetize the public as to bring awareness to shocking or sad situations (20-21). “Much of modern art is devoted to lowering the threshold of what is terrible,” she writes. The photographer who photographs the grotesque or shocking must be able to accept looking at what is in front of his/her camera lens and thus invites the public to also be able to accept it (40). Those types of images cause viewers to be less able to react when faced with such situations in real life (41).

But while overexposure to the same types of visual images may cause the public to deaden their sensitivities and react with less and less shock to situations that should otherwise move them, it is interesting that in comparing recent coverage of America at war to media coverage during the Vietnam years, fewer and fewer photographs or moving images of atrocities are presented for public consumption. The types of photographs that spawned public outrage for Vietnam have been and are avoided in current journalism; I have seen cameras quickly cut away from blood-soaked amputees during live war coverage. Does this perhaps mean that the current America in subtle ways hopes to prolong war by not arousing similar public outrage? We have an economy built for and upon war, and few recent war protests have gotten any media coverage at all.

Sontag also believes that often photographers may hasten the disappearance of the things they photograph (65). If this is due to the attention drawn to those subjects by the publication of the photographs, perhaps this might be true. Too much attention can destroy. In the case of photographs used to arouse public awareness of atrocities, this can be a good thing, but what about aroused awareness about beautiful or rare things? I don’t believe this form of destruction will be an issue for the bikers in my photographs because I don’t see my work garnering a great deal of attention outside of my small circle of influence (if I indeed have any), but in any case, I don’t think the subcultures that peak my curiosity are cultures who would allow themselves to be destroyed by infiltration or emulation.

Sontag’s discussion of photography as a “social rite” and a “defense against anxiety” strikes a chord with me (8). Sontag mentions that the act of taking a photograph helps “people take possession of space in which they are insecure” and “assuages general feelings of disorientation” (9, 10). She also notes that using a camera helps those who are workaholics feel as though they are still working even though they might appear to be vacationing and having fun (10). Picture taking has become an event with which one can decide to ignore or participate with one’s surroundings (11). My fascination for the act of photography perhaps stems from each of these situations. I am unable to go to any event that takes place outside my studio without having my camera in hand...it furthers the sense that I am still “working” and validates my reason for putting down my pencil or my computer to indulge in social activity. It

allows me to avoid participation in behavior that I perhaps only secretly condone and gives me separation from those around me with whom I would not like to interact. Yes, it is an act of “non-intervention” (11). Yes, it allows me to produce an image of my loved ones that I can tangibly hold and thus “possess” a part of them...if I print the image, that is. Digital photography has left us without the need for prints, though the ephemeral screen image is more often less satisfying since it seems more mysterious, more spiritual in composition.

Something of the subconscious is present in my *motivation* for being a photographer. Far deeper than my aesthetic choices about composition or theoretical choices for working with subgroups as I do, there are internal reasons that have more to do with my personality and my relationship to self and the world. My camera has become the tool for separating myself from whatever dynamic is taking place in front of me; as long as I am taking photographs, I am not an active participant in the scene. Behind the lens is the optimum place to be for a former wallflower and current wall hugger.

Sontag brings up another point troubling to me: photography has become equivalent to participating in an event and vice versa (24). However, photographing is not the same thing as experiencing, and one cannot do both at the same time. Why is the public more satisfied with the image of an event than the event itself? Why is society labeled as “modern” simply because one of its chief activities is making and acquiring images (153)? What does it say about me when I am more fulfilled by making an image or writing about an experience than I am by participating in the event itself? Why do I rush through experience to the act of reliving it through words or images? Sontag says that this is “experience seeking a crisis-proof form” (162), and, sadly, I agree with her. Does this mean that to grow as a human being, to become stronger, I should put my camera and my notebook aside and begin to participate more? Will I begin to then feel more and deeper things? Will experience then become spiritual? Without my camera or my notebook, I feel alien and naked. Should I put them aside to become more comfortable with the world and myself?

I have often said that one of the challenges of photography for me is the desire to gain the confidence of my subjects. Sontag believes that this thrill is actually the thrill of the photographer overcoming his or her fear of the subject (38). Perhaps this is true. To gain the confidence of my subjects, I have to spend time with them. To spend time with them, I have to overcome my fear of being in their homes and their workplaces and the spaces in which they seek solace, all foreign territories for me, all places that make me as an outsider uncomfortable. Are these the places I should spend more time in? Are these the moments in which I should spend more time experiencing and less time photographing?

There might be a valid argument that taking a photograph of a certain scene makes me a passive participant in the event. Internally, however, I am aware that there are times when taking a photograph of an event becomes my only way of justifying my presence in a place where I am uncomfortable and would otherwise leave. Those moments of angst come not from being in a place where the activity might be illegal, but from activities that might have been labeled as immoral to me at some time in the past. Whether they are moral or immoral is not a judgment call for me to make, not if the images I am making are necessary to the complete understanding of the cultural subgroup with which I am working. To seek understanding, I have often had to let go of my own prejudices, but by the same token, I have also had to find

the lines I will not cross, and sometimes I do not know what those lines are until I have already crossed them at least once.

That said, wielding my camera has taught me what is most uncomfortable to me. It allows me a moment of second thought that other, more active participants in an event might not have: I as photographer have access to the images I have taken; they are mine to contemplate after the fact and either keep or destroy as I see fit.

Sontag writes, “In the old romance of the artist, any person who has the temerity to spend a season in hell risks not getting out alive or coming back psychically damaged” (39). Such is the work I do. I have at many times feared less for my physical safety than for my mental and emotional safety. At what point did I start to lose sight of what I believe in and begin to identify more with the beliefs of the people I photograph? I know this has already happened...I recognize it more and more each day. And the points of view I have adopted have separated me from my past in a way that is irrevocable. I know more than I once did about the world, and what I have learned can never be unlearned.

I am becoming — I have become — a biker.

Diane Arbus described photography in terms of combat, and this is perhaps inherent to the type of social documentary she was making — and the type I am making (39). It IS dangerous. At first, I didn’t believe it so. As I sink farther beneath the surface to look for the truth, I find myself spelunking on a frayed rope, however. Sontag says that a photographer voluntarily tries to voice the pain of others while a writer is thrust involuntarily into that role since language requires the writer’s empathy to the subject (39-40). I suppose, then, as an artist who writes, my ass gets kicked all the way round.

As Sontag discusses the use of photographs as information, she makes a good point in defense of the way I want to work...the pairing of images with the written word. Photographs can explain nothing and cannot lead to understanding. Only the written word, the narration of the image, can do this (22-23). If I seek to create understanding for my subjects and myself, my audience must hear both my words and theirs. Even at that, words are still simply an interpretation especially when it comes to socially conscious photography (109). Photographs are both a representation of the photographer’s self and an event forever frozen in time, but they are perhaps more a representation of what the photographer believes is reality rather than reality itself (120, 122). Of all the things I can and cannot do, I cannot make a claim to the total truth of a situation unless it is my life or my situation that I am representing. Any assumption I make that has to do with someone else’s reality is only an excuse for the way I want to believe.

I have always known that the most intense, intimate portraits I make as printmaker and painter are those my closest friends model for, but what drove the point home was when Steve Anchell, author of *The Variable Contrast Printing Manual* and other works about darkroom wizardry, said to me, “How you feel about a person is going to come out in any photograph you take of them. It’s inevitable.” He then went on to point out in my photos the individuals he could see I had admired and the ones I had not. He was spot on.

I’m not sure that total objectivity about any subject portrayed in any media — including photography — is possible. Something of the subconscious must always be present.

Sontag relates the photographer to an anthropologist or “super tourist,” bringing back evidence of other cultures and places (42, 110). True, a photograph is not so much an objective look at the world as it is an evaluation (88). This is the way in which I work with one

important difference: I want to become more than a tourist. I have become a part of the group in order to better understand the individuals within it and have collected not just new subjects, but new friends and allies. Sontag points out that a “photographer both looks and preserves, denounces and consecrates” and, as such, forever alters the thing that is photographed (64). Intellectually, I understand this. Philosophically, I’m not sure that I agree with it. My hope is to preserve, not change. My attitude in working with the bikers has always focused on this.

Perhaps there is a part of me that wants others to venerate the subjects of my photographs in the same way in which I venerate them. I have often said I want the common humanity of my subjects to be the most evident thing in my work. Sontag gives definition to humanity, writing that “it is a quality that things have in common when they are viewed as photographs” (111). I believe this is not descriptive enough. What is that quality? That quality is the redness of the blood that runs through us all, the ability to feel deeply, the ability to give care to others. That is the humanity I want to be apparent in my work.

True, as Sontag writes, photographs are not capable of explaining this humanity; they can only acknowledge it (111). But when she writes that the “success” in photojournalism lies in the viewer not being able to distinguish one photographer’s work from another, this dates her work (133-134). This might have once been the case, but more and more often, I see the work of socially conscious and photojournalistic photographers striving not only to capture a signature subject matter, but also a signature style.

When Sontag states there are no bad photographs, only less interesting ones, she gives me a bit of hope for my own photography, which I feel still has much room for technical growth (141). I don’t necessarily agree with her, however. Taking note of all the instructional photography manuals on the market, it is evident there are standards for “good” and “bad” photography, all having to do more with composition, lighting, and color than with subject matter. Museums might be the great equalizers for photographs since they tend to display photographs in historical contexts rather than an aesthetic one, but I do not believe this will always be the case. Galleries certainly make distinctions between good and bad photographs, and those decisions certainly will trickle into museums in the future.

What gives me a moment’s pause is Sontag’s declaration that “photography has weakened our experience of paintings” (146). This is true in the sense that the public can now purchase replicas of paintings via photographic prints and that giclees sell for prices my original prints cannot command because the buying public is not educated about the value of original versus machine-produced print technologies. But there is another sense in which photography could weaken the value of my own paintings; in the past, since I am a photorealist, galleries who have represented me have refused to show my photography because it confused the clientele. In a sense, the photographs, although showing a different subject matter to my paintings and drawings, devalued the latter because the clientele thought my hand drawn work either had to be photographs or somehow had been completely traced from a photograph.

“No one ever expects photographs to get help from paintings,” Sontag writes (145). I study as much photography as I do paintings and prints. I learn from the composition, design, and subject matter of both. Yet having read what Sontag has to say, I must admit I wonder how audiences will react to the display of my photographs alongside my other work and how I can differentiate between the two...though perhaps blurring and crossing the line is more the path I want to take, using printmaking as a medium. Or maybe my photography must always be

shown separately from images produced by my own hand. Is there a way, perhaps, for photographs to get help from paintings? Outside of Photoshop, of course?

Arbus writes, “A photograph is a secret of a secret. The more it tells you, the less you know” (111). This is true of all art. Each piece is a glimpse of a secret. All the aesthetic theory in the world, all the narration in the world, cannot completely explain it. The explanation, perhaps, lies not in unraveling the mystery of the work’s content, but in the exchange that takes place between the viewer and the work itself. Therein is the greatest magic and mystery, and these are qualities that should never be dissected. Sontag goes far into investigating this power, does a good job of answering it, and leaves the rest wonderfully unexposed by refusing to qualify or make standards of criticism for the art of photography itself.

Knowing a photographer’s intent is a powerful means of interpreting his or her work. Likewise, knowing one’s own intent is a powerful way of focusing on the images to be made — or not made. I believe that knowing one’s intent has everything to do with knowing one’s own limitations — not just technically, but also theoretically and morally. And knowing one’s own limitations necessarily comes from experiential involvement.

Know thyself; know thy camera.

Photography is just as much a mirror of the photographer as it is a mirror of the world.

Work Cited

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Doubleday, 1977.

Biographical Sketch

DebiLynn Fendley is a visual artist working in the disciplines of psycho-social documentary photography, printmaking, painting, and drawing. Her work is based on the premise of the artist as a social explorer. Currently she is working with Vietnam veteran bikers. She holds graduate degrees in art and English and has completed the requirements for graduation with an MFA in Interdisciplinary Art from Goddard College in Vermont.