
Sontag's Lament: Emotion, Ethics, and Photography

Sarah Parsons

Sarah Parsons is Associate Professor in the Department of Visual Arts at York University, Toronto, where she teaches the history and theory of photography. She has published on a number of contemporary photographers and photo-based artists including Sally Mann, Rodney Graham, Arnaud Maggs, Angela Grauerholz, Christian Boltanski, and Bernd and Hilda Becher. Her current research focuses on the historiography of prominent modern American women photographers and examines the relationship between ethics, gender and photography.

Abstract

Rare is the discussion of ethics and photography that does not reference Susan Sontag's groundbreaking collection of essays *On Photography* (1977). It was this accessible, sweeping book, quietly infused with the ideas of Barthes and Benjamin, which presented one of the first comprehensive explorations of the ethical challenges posed by the ubiquity of photography in a consumerist society. Sontag's arguments about the power and danger of photography to anesthetize its viewers are well accepted in relation to photojournalism and documentary although they were modified somewhat in her 2003 *Regarding the Pain of Others*. This article considers the complex ways Sontag linked photography, emotion, and ethics with particular focus on her scathing critique of Diane Arbus's work.

Keywords: photography, Susan Sontag, ethics, emotion, Diane Arbus

One of my oldest crusades is against the distinction between thought and feeling ... which is really the basis of all anti-intellectual views: the heart and the head, thinking and feeling,

fantasy and judgment ... Thinking is a form of feeling; feeling is a form of thinking.

Susan Sontag, interview in
Conversations with Susan Sontag

In 1964 Susan Sontag famously declared herself to be “against interpretation” and in favor of “an erotics of art.” By the time she collected six of her seven articles on photography written for *The New York Review of Books* between 1973 and 1976 into the book *On Photography*, she had already modified these positions. Like all critics, she interpreted as she critiqued, but she did commit to a dialog between thinking and feeling, between, what Abigail Solomon-Godeau later described in Sontag’s writing as, “knowing authentically” and “knowing objectively” (Solomon-Godeau 1994). Sontag’s insistence on listening to feelings, to gut reaction in the face of photographs leads to much of the contradiction in her work as well as some of her most useful and surprising insights. Even when critics object to Sontag’s overstatements and condemnations, there is often an acknowledgment that she has sensed or felt something important, pulled out a small fraction of truth that is justifiably hard to explain. In her critique of Sontag’s diatribe against Diane Arbus’s position as an outsider to the lives of her unusual subjects, Solomon-Godeau acknowledges that “there is a perfectly commonsensical way in which we all grasp what is meant by Sontag’s description of photography” (Solomon-Godeau 1994: 51). Sanford Schwartz observes that “when she tells us that ‘only that which narrates can make us understand,’ we know what she is driving at” even though the point highlights a logical discrepancy in Sontag’s essay

(Schwartz 1977: 32). When *On Photography* was first published, the emotional intensity, internal contradictions and leaps of logic were often cited as its weaknesses. This may still be the case, but they are the result of asking hard questions and those questions and their attempted answers are its enduring strength. *On Photography* is a passionate and brave effort to think through photography as an affective and effective medium, to understand how and why it impacts us so deeply. Feelings and emotions are at the heart of Sontag’s deservedly famous, often frustratingly contradictory, and incessantly probing book.

As importantly, *On Photography* is an attempt to understand the moral implications of the power of photographs to provoke strong emotions. Despite the gallons of ink spilled over *On Photography* and Sontag in general, a close study of the way Sontag linked photography, emotion, and ethics has yet to be undertaken. This is a significant gap because Sontag’s models for thinking ethically about photographs are still often cited, negatively and positively, in scholarly and cultural arguments. Her lament about the predatory nature of photography may have been overplayed in *On Photography*, and certainly some reviewers, especially those in art magazines, took issue with her claim that “there is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera” (Sontag 1977: 7). But, in all fairness to Sontag, the ethical concerns and anxieties produced by increasingly widespread public surveillance are now widely accepted and in many places enshrined in law. Sontag’s early arguments were even reconsidered in her own late work. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) Sontag returned to the topic of photography,

after several decades, to argue against those who had taken her argument about photography's power to anesthetize viewers to an extreme and proposed a world of nothing but mediated spectacle. Here, in her last book, she insisted on a reality outside photographs, often a reality of horror that only the most coddled viewer could argue is less real because of its representation in photographs. *Regarding the Pain of Others* updates her call to take the cultural meaning of photography seriously, to eschew cynicism and to pay close attention to what photographs do and what they obscure. Given the recent diagnosis of an "affective turn" in the humanities, time has come to reconsider Sontag's writings on photography, primarily *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others*, with a specific focus on these issues. This article examines the triangulation of affect, ethics, and photography in Sontag's most well-known works. Through close consideration of the contexts in which she first developed the ideas on the subject in *On Photography*, the reception of these ideas among alternately admiring and condemning critics, and the exhibitions which framed these moments, I argue that Sontag models a complex if imperfect process by which our emotional reactions lead us to make ethical judgments about photographs. Although she never describes herself in these terms, Sontag shows us how the embodied viewer connects feelings and thoughts through narrative and judgment.

Sontag on Photography

Sontag's vivid description of the possible emotional impact of photographs on their viewers is one of the only explicitly autobiographical references in her

photography texts. In 1945, at age twelve, she encountered photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau in a bookstore in Santa Monica: "nothing I have ever seen—in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously" (Sontag 1977: 20). When she "looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying" (Sontag 1977: 20). It is a poignant passage and one that seems to fulfill her own call for a sensibility and even an "erotics of art," a way of responding to art that does not move directly to intellectualized interpretation. The story serves Sontag well in establishing her passionate commitment to understanding the power of photographs, to understanding how the representation of pain and even trauma is a dangerous, yet potentially meaningful, human experience. This story also situates Sontag as an embodied viewer who both thinks and feels, a combination that often leads to contradictions in her writings about photography.

Elsewhere in the text, Sontag argues that in order for photographs to link emotions like those she had in the face of the Holocaust photographs to morality, and in order for these emotions to awaken the conscience, viewers must already have a context in which to place them. She argues that: "what determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the existence of a relevant political consciousness. Without a politics, photographs of the slaughter-bench of history will most likely be experienced as, simply, unreal or as a demoralizing emotional

blow" (Sontag 1977: 19). However, in the case of the concentration camp photographs, Sontag tells us that it was several years before she understood what they were about. By her own explanation of images and politics, then, one must assume that what she describes here is a demoralizing emotional blow. And yet, this emotional blow did not demoralize her in the literal sense. Despite their varied approaches, her critics generally agree that Susan Sontag was a moralist. It is important not to simply point out this seeming contradiction, but to explore this point carefully, because it exemplifies overstatement as a means of examining the reach of her argument. To echo Solomon-Godeau and Schwartz, we know what she is getting at even while we recoil at the suggestion that images can only come to mean if they can be absorbed into a pre-existing politics.

The underlying point is that there is an inextricable link between knowledge and emotion demonstrated by our reactions to photographs. For instance, showing us explicit trauma without adequate knowledge can make viewers "vulnerable to disturbing events in the form of photographic images in a way that one is not to the real thing" (Sontag 1977: 168). Her example in this case is of a human surgery, and Sontag describes being invited to witness one. When she was slotted into the machinery of the surgical event, dressed in gowns and being privy to the reason for the surgery and the plan for executing it safely, watching it was less traumatic, less emotionally disturbing and physically nauseating, than seeing a close-up image of the body sliced open in a photograph. It is not so much that the photograph lies, but that it manipulates our

emotions because we lack the knowledge to make sense of it. Similarly, what we know can heighten what we feel in the face of a photograph. Sontag argues that "one's reactions to the photographs Roman Vishniac took in 1938 of daily life in the ghettos of Poland is overwhelmingly affected by the knowledge of how soon all these people were to perish" (Sontag 1977: 70). The pain and horror in Vishniac's pictures is primarily outside the frame. It is the dialog between what we know and what we see in the powerfully constructed photographs that lends emotional force to them.

In photographs of trauma, this emotional force is evident and often intentional on the part of the photographer. However, Sontag's investment in what viewers bring to their encounters with photographs, namely knowledge and emotion, creates the possibility that even the most banal photographs can have emotional power. She offers examples of talismanic uses of photographs in daily life which suggest that the emotional impact of photographs can be far from traumatic. Talismanic photographs of loved ones, for instance, are tied up with feelings and sentiments. However, Sontag concludes that all photographs are ultimately in the service of possession (Sontag 1977: 14). There are other moments when she allows for pleasure in the face of the photograph, in one case quite literally: "photographs can abet desire in the most direct, utilitarian way—as when someone collects photographs of anonymous examples of the desirable as an aid to masturbation" (Sontag 1977: 16). But just as she offers this hint of pleasure, she snatches it back by suggesting that such erotic feelings for photographs are as implicated in the

modern culture of moral detachment as other kinds of feelings for other kinds of photographs: "the sense of the unattainable that can be evoked by photographs feeds directly into the erotic feelings of those for whom desirability is enhanced by distance" (Sontag 1977: 16). Though Sontag argues that physical distance from the subject of the photograph enhances the emotional power of the images when it comes to erotic photos, she insists that distance based on time alters and often lessens the affective impact of photographs. Sontag argues that "the ethical content of photographs is fragile ... A photograph of 1900 that was affecting then because of the subject would, today, be more likely to move us because it is a photograph taken in 1900" (Sontag 1977: 21). Rather than leading to any sort of specific or moral knowledge, historical photographs affect us in a generalized aesthetic or nostalgic way. They entice us to wallow in a comforting pathos safe without fear that we will be called upon to affect the lives of those pictured.

Whether private or public, photographs, in Sontag's view, often stir strong emotions as they come into dialog with our understandings of the world, but ultimately the problem is that they rarely steer that emotional power to morally useful ends, which she seems to define as humanitarian action: "Despite the illusion of giving understanding, what seeing through photographs really invites is an acquisitive relation to the world that nourishes aesthetic awareness and promotes emotional detachment" (Sontag 1977: 111). Here, Sontag comes to two distinct and contradictory conclusions about photographs and emotions. She has already recounted

how photographs can stir strong and even violent emotions in viewers. However, she argues that photographs also deaden our emotions and promote emotional detachment. So, do we run through a cycle with photographs where they excite and upset us and, finally, exhaust us so that we become immune to their enticement? It would seem so when Sontag argues that "The photographer is always trying to colonize new experiences, or find new ways to look at familiar subjects—to fight against boredom. For boredom is the reverse side of fascination: both depend on being outside rather than inside a situation, and one leads to the other" (Sontag 1977: 42). Indeed, most people tune out images of the same traumas and horrors day after day, especially if the images represent people and places detached from the lived experience of the viewer and this erodes the emotional power of the images. The photographs enhance the viewer's sense of impotence.

Interestingly, Sontag does not necessarily seem to suggest that photographs cease to have emotional impact, but that the quality, if not quantity, of emotional impact changes. She posits that familiarity with tropes of suffering in images lessen their "quality of feeling, including moral outrage" (Sontag 1977: 19). As the flow of photographs of pain and suffering accelerates, it tires us out and we seek to manage our emotional responses in order to lessen our pain and feeling of moral outrage, which Sontag clearly posits as a positive force leading to action. Sontag characterizes this image fatigue as symptomatic of modernity in which we try at all costs to avoid feeling "privation, failure, misery, pain" (Sontag 1977: 167). Again, we know the difficult issue she is getting at, even

if it reads as an absurd statement. In most situations, all humans seek to avoid pain, but the combination of the material affluence of the Western world and the technologically mediated existence afforded by modernity makes it possible for more of us to avoid feeling pain or being in physical proximity to the pain of others. In Sontag's argument, if we primarily encounter human suffering in photographs and not in the presence of suffering humans, we find it easier to look away so that it becomes a habit. But Sontag argues that photographs of pain eventually call us back. In this framework, Sontag's proposed cycle of looking and feeling now spins in the opposite direction. We look for photographs of pain and horror in order to feel safe in our distance: "The feeling of being exempt from calamity stimulates interest in looking at painful pictures and looking at them suggests and strengthens the feeling that one is exempt" (Sontag 1977:168).

Sontag on Arbus

In *On Photography*, Sontag posits Diane Arbus as the epitome of all the dangers of modern photography outlined above. Sontag's vitriolic and emotional response to Arbus's photographs and to the "grotesques" who are her subjects leaves no doubt that photographs can arouse strong feelings, but Sontag is strangely certain that they cannot elicit compassion or other "useful" moral responses. While Sontag had a longstanding interest in photography, her essays on the subject began with her fascination and repulsion at the huge posthumous retrospective of Arbus's work in 1972 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It was through looking at these photographs

and considering their incredible public allure that inspired Sontag to explore and refine her thoughts about the moral dangers of photography. In doing so, Sontag transferred arguments she seems to have developed around social documentary and journalistic uses of photography to an art context, paving the way for a more politicized reading of artistic practice, while, in so doing, excoriating both Diane Arbus and her subjects.

For Sontag it was axiomatic that no one in their right mind would want to look at or find any kind of beauty or pleasure in disabled bodies. In recently released excerpts from her early diaries, Sontag wrote that "physical beauty is enormously, almost morbidly, important to me" (Sontag 2006: 53). Sontag felt revulsion in the face of Arbus's subjects and she responded emotionally, if not transparently, by projecting her own anxieties onto Arbus. Sontag described Arbus's interest in her subject matter as a selfish and masochistic endeavor: "following the elation of discovery, there was the thrill of having won their confidence, of not being afraid of them, of having mastered one's aversion" (Sontag 1977: 38). Therefore, Arbus's work was "a good instance of a leading tendency in high art in capitalist countries: to suppress, or at least to reduce, moral and sensory queasiness" (Sontag 1977: 40). She sees Arbus's work as dangerous because "by getting us used to what, formerly, we could not bear to see or hear, because it was too shocking, painful, or embarrassing, art changes morals" (Sontag 1977: 40). Although this change highlights the arbitrariness of those morals, she argues that the long-term effect is dangerous because images like these "undercut politics ... by suggesting a world where everyone is

an alien, hopelessly isolated" (Sontag 1977: 33). Based on the alienation Sontag reads in Arbus's photographs, she accuses Arbus of having little regard for her subjects and of using her camera as a "kind of passport that annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from any responsibility toward the people photographed" (Sontag 1977: 41). Sontag refuses to believe that Arbus's images are motivated by, or could induce, any sense of compassion (Figure 1).

According to Sontag, though Arbus's photos show people who are "pathetic, pitiable, as well as repulsive ... [they do] not

arouse any compassionate feelings" (Sontag 1977: 33) because in reinforcing alienation they "make a compassionate response feel irrelevant" (Sontag 1977: 41).

These are harsh words, as condemning to Arbus's subjects as they are to Arbus, since there is little suggestion that her characters have all been made grotesque by the camera alone. One might even be forgiven for siding on this one point with Colin L. Westerbeck Jr., one of *On Photography's* most scathing and dismissive critics, who wrote that "what lies behind this book is finally something she takes more personally than a subject for criticism ought to be taken—something



Fig 1 Diane Arbus, "Susan Sontag and her son, David," 1975, © The Estate of Diane Arbus.

about photography that she does not contemplate with disinterest, something irrational within herself" (Westerbeck 1978: 60). A more reasoned response to the obvious emotion in Sontag's assessment of Arbus is provided by Sanford Schwartz in his generally positive review of *On Photography*. He suggests that the project as a whole seems to be motivated by Sontag's desire to find out why photography disturbs her. Not surprisingly, then, the most powerful essay is the one on Arbus whose work seems emblematic of all that Sontag sees wrong with photography in the modern, industrialized world. In writing about Arbus, Schwartz observes that "Sontag argues more directly from her feelings. Arbus' work angers her, and, in trying to explain that anger, she gets into Arbus' skin" (Schwartz 1977: 32). He argues that this leads to her most exciting writing and most useful insights: "even though she dislikes the photographs, she makes what Arbus was doing psychologically and poetically real" (Schwartz 1977: 32). Far from atomizing feeling, Sontag's response suggests that Arbus's work has elicited a tidal wave of feelings, at least from Sontag. In this sense, the passionate way in which Sontag writes about Arbus's photographs seems designed to underline her own remove from the dangers of photography, but it also belies her argument of their provocation of anomie. In one sense, Sontag's diatribe is a model of what she calls for, a moral outrage in the face of modern detachment. However, it is interesting to note that in her lengthy discussion of Arbus, Sontag never reveals her own experience as one of Arbus's subjects nor does she ever mention having met Arbus.

Sontag herself was photographed by Arbus for an *Esquire* magazine spread in 1965 on famous parents and their adolescent children called "Family Colloquies." The image of Sontag and David was not included in the article nor was it included in the 1972 retrospective that was the basis of the original New York Review of Books article, so perhaps it is not surprising that Sontag does not mention it there. But, in the context of a book on photography with a chapter on Arbus, it seems like an odd omission. The picture is a three-quarter-length shot of Sontag and her adolescent son, David, standing outside on a cool, cloudy day. David is not yet as tall as his mother, but he is nattily dressed in a vintage cap and stares down the camera with a cool assurance. Sontag wears baggy clothes and has her arm wrapped around David's shoulder and her head resting at an angle on the top of his (Figure 2).

Given her unwillingness to allow any generosity in Arbus's relations with her subjects, one cannot help but wonder if Sontag felt this was an unfair portrait, one that made its subjects unnecessarily strange. Of course, the striking, young, bohemian single mother and her dark, protective and precocious son were off to a good start even without Diane Arbus. Friends recall that David was usually included in adult events, shunning the company of his peers and Arbus managed to capture the strange power dynamic of the pair. Susan Sontag was renowned for her attention to her own representation in photographs, conditioning a string of famous and creative photographers to take glamorous and creative pictures for her book jackets. Although she rarely admitted in public that she cared about such trivialities, it seems disingenuous to suggest



Fig 2 Diane Arbus, *Untitled (7)*, 1970–1971. ©The Estate of Diane Arbus.

that she had no opinion about the Arbus photograph of her and David or that this opinion would have no effect on her feelings about Arbus's relation to her subjects.

Sontag is clearly angry, but what does she want from Arbus? On one level, she sets Arbus up for failure by framing the chapter with Walt Whitman's calls for a comprehensive and compassionate portrait of American life. What artist could fulfill this impossible, albeit noble, call? When Sontag discusses the motivations for producing photographs, they are generally instrumental: "a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power" (Sontag 1977: 8). Families reify themselves in albums and tourists seek trophies of their movements. If anything, we photograph to avoid feelings

or to move beyond them quickly. Sontag describes a "full-page ad shows a small group of people standing pressed together, peering out of the photograph, all but one looking stunned, excited, upset. The one who wears a different expression holds a camera to his eye ... having a camera has transformed one person into something active, a voyeur: only he has mastered the situation" (Sontag 1977: 10). On other fronts, Sontag has argued art for art's sake, but in the context of photography, she seems troubled by the lack of political will when she complains that Arbus was neither interested in public horrors like napalm and thalidomide nor in ethical journalism, but in private horrors. Is the objection here that Arbus fails to contribute to an existing narrative

which would provide the framework for a compassionate response? Sontag also seems to hold expectations of classical beauty in art that Arbus has failed to adhere to: "instead of people whose appearance pleases . . . the Arbus show lined up assorted monsters and borderline cases—most of them ugly" (Sontag 1977: 32). Thus, Arbus's photographs fail to be either political or beautiful.

Not all images of pain and even ugliness are chastised in *On Photography* and, for Sontag, the moral distinction turns on the intention or the relationship of the photographer to the subject. For instance, she allows that in general "an ugly or grotesque subject may be moving because it has been dignified by the attention of the photographer" (Sontag 1977: 15). Referring to Richard Avedon's photographs of his dying father, she notes that the camera's cruelty can produce another kind of beauty, in this case resulting in elegant, ruthless portraits (Sontag 1977: 104–105).¹ Sontag's acceptance of Avedon's photographic "cruelty" and disdain for Arbus's is important because it illuminates some unspoken assumptions in her analysis. Abigail Solomon-Godeau has argued that Sontag constructs an insider/outsider divide in Arbus's work in which the camera is a passport and Arbus is but a tourist and outsider to the people she photographs. For Sontag, Avedon occupies an insider position which affords him a different moral relation to the subject and one that literally enhances the beauty of the image. This assessment might line up with the process of putting together family photo albums, but does it hold when family pictures enter a public context? As Solomon-Godeau notes, "if the medium [of photography] itself is understood—in this

virtually ontological sense—to be limited to the superficiality of surface appearance, how then does one gauge the difference between the photographic image made with an insider's knowledge or investment from the one made from a position of total exteriority?" (Solomon-Godeau 1994: 51). One might question the notion of a son trying to reconcile with the estranged father he hardly knew as "insider," but even still this insider position is really just another aspect of narrative. We may fully understand the relationship between son and father in a small exhibition, but as those images circulate in magazines, books, group exhibitions, and now the internet, they quickly lose their original narrative and their insider provenance leaving us with just the images.

Being left with just the images is the danger that haunts *On Photography* and seems prevalent in Sontag's reading of Arbus's retrospective. Sontag is convinced that we are trained to read photographs as aggressive. Cultural historian Neil Evernden offers another possibility by way of John Berger's discussion of the differences between our reading of our private pictures and that of public ones. Berger suggests that familial reading strategies carry a context and narrative to the photographs and that we read them for what they can add to or adjust within that narrative. Evernden turns this back to critique Sontag's analysis by suggesting that the "fact that the viewer can be induced to provide a context, and that the photographer can deliberately seek to engage his subject so as to suggest a context, implies that the familial use may be more widely applicable" (Evernden 1985: 84–85). Evernden asks how Sontag can be so sure that viewers do not use

this strategy with other photographs they encounter. How, he asks, can we assume the prevalence of Sontag's disassociating viewing of photography? How can we be so sure that viewers cannot be moved to feel and to think through an emotional connection with the object of the photograph when, as Barthes suggests, the "object speaks" in good photographs? How can we presume that there are not subjects to relate to in photographs, only hard surfaces to "stalk"?

These questions have recently found lively engagement in disability studies. Sontag's vitriolic condemnation of what she saw as Arbus's cold and prurient interest in unusual subjects and especially those with different bodies was taken up by writers like David Hevey (1997). Hevey and others have focused on Arbus's final series, *Untitled*, taken at an institution for the severely developmentally delayed, as a model for thinking about the mistreatment of the disabled in Western culture and more specifically in visual culture. Hevey describes his discussion of Arbus as a "journey into oppressive disability imagery" (1997: 332). More recently, scholars have begun to question this ethical position in line with Sontag by drawing on theoretical models of subjectivity offered by Mikhail Bakhtin and Emmanuel Levinas. In his 2004 PhD dissertation, Christopher Smit argues that Sontag and Hevey pay too little attention to the subjects and any signs of agency they might exhibit in the pictures. Smit argues that the refusal to assign agency to the subjects in Arbus's pictures is a result of Sontag's reading the images through the lens of cultural stereotypes: because Arbus's "pictures often depict individuals who are normally denied agency; it is no surprise that they are similarly

denied a presence in theoretical discussions of Arbus's work" (Smit 2004: 128). Smit notes that while Hevey reads these images as exploitive, he offers no clear observations of the social interaction that took place or details in the image to back this up. Whereas Hevey sees Arbus sexualizing her subjects, Smit sees Arbus honestly confronting the sexual lives of people not normally imagined as sexual (Smit 2004: 128). Instead of this monological reading by Sontag or Hevey, Smit proposes a dialogical one based on Bakhtin's idealistic idea that all art is empathetic in that the making of art necessarily acknowledges something worth preserving in the subject. The idea that art edits and pulls out the detail, essence or aspect worth preserving in the subject is reiterated by Emmanuel Levinas who argued that art itself is the removal of "the thing" from the world. This is done through images and through time: "everything that belongs to past worlds, the archaic, the ancient, produces aesthetic impressions" (Levinas 1988 [1947]: 53). This de-worlding connects to Sontag's concern about the loss of specific or political impact among historical photographs. But, for Levinas this is not necessarily negative because the exoticism de-worlding produces is the basis of our strong attachment to art. The de-worlding of art is what compels and captivates us.²

One of the most useful aspects of Smit's critique is his call to enlarge the concept of artistic engagement with the other beyond simply the photographic moment. He wants to include the decisions made in editing, printing, and displaying photographs. He notes that the *Untitled* images are often of people in pairs or groups and thus can be read as a meditation on relationships. In

his defense of the ethics of *Untitled*, Smit notes that, at first glance, the images are like so many others of people enjoying the outdoors. The subjects are as aware as possible of the camera and Arbus. They address her, smile, or simply go on with their business. The images chosen for *Untitled* and included in the 2003 Arbus retrospective *Revelations* do not go out of their way to picture the subjects in undignified ways. Arbus surely had the opportunity to capture images of sexual activity and violence, but these do not appear in the pictures. Time also changes our view of these images, but not necessarily in the distancing way Sontag imagined. The political and social status of the mentally disabled in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the social debates at play meant that the images would have been interpreted in ways that are significantly different than they are today. Sterilization and institutionalization were the norms then. How can these pictures enter into those debates already at play? How might they play into more current discussions of the basic human rights of disabled people? Or, into debates about ending pregnancies when the fetus is determined to have Down's syndrome?

The recent, massive Arbus retrospective, *Revelations* (2003), demonstrated the power of exhibitions to encourage particular ways of viewing photographs. By including letters, journal excerpts, contact sheets and other accoutrements and ephemera, the exhibition conveyed a more complicated and narrativized portrait of Arbus's practice, including a sense of the relationship between Arbus and her subjects. This is entirely different from the exhibition in which Sontag encountered Arbus's work. It is

important to note that Sontag's essay on Arbus in *On Photography* was a very slightly modified version of a review of Arbus's first huge posthumous retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art curated by the late John Szarkowski. Under Szarkowski's three-decade-long reign, the Photography Department of the MoMA became the haven of modernist photography. Even in the early days of his reign in the late 1960s, Szarkowski broadened public notions about what a good photograph could look like by introducing Arbus and frenetic street photographers like Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander to a wide audience. However, all the photographs MoMA showed were subjected to a rigorous, high-modernist mode of display which eschewed any kind of context, narrative, politics, or morality. The photographs were meant to speak for themselves and they were selected and hung to do just that. Szarkowski's curatorial preference was for photographs whose work could reflect an individual vision in keeping with high modernism. This preference dovetailed neatly with those of Arbus's executor and eldest daughter, Doon, who sought desperately to avoid any connection of Arbus's sad pictures with her tumultuous personal life and especially with her suicide. This minimalist mode of presentation enhances, if not outright creates, the feeling of distance, of anomy, of an outsider looking in that Sontag reads in Arbus's work. Sontag's failure to criticize the exhibition as distinct from the photographs or to critique the curator's authorial voice seems like a remarkable oversight, especially given that the essay was originally written as an exhibition review. Like Sontag's anecdote about watching surgery live and

in photographs, exhibitions are yet another remove which inevitably negates context and can alter reactions from viewers.

Sontag's lack of attention to the way photographs are presented in exhibition, her inability to see and consider the screen on which she saw Arbus's work, contrasts with her sensitive and much more unusual analysis of the presentation of photographs in film. Sontag's use of knowledge in this context could be connected to her more literal and literary use of "narrative" in her argument since historical knowledge is knowledge of a narrative. Narrative enshrines the emotional impact and directs the ethical possibility. What viewing conditions affect the emotional impact of photographs? In *On Photography* Sontag notes that film, in this case Chris Marker's 1966 *Si j'avais quatre dromadairs*, "suggests a subtler and more rigorous way of packaging (and enlarging) still photographs. Both the order and the exact time for looking at each photograph are imposed; and there is a gain in visual legibility and emotional impact" (Sontag 1977: 5). This is an insightful point about the way we might learn to consider photographs. The film provides narrative for photographs, the anchor Sontag felt was necessary in order for photographs to be ethically useful, to give viewers a sense of connection to those represented, rather than distance. Still photographs in films can create a space or a pause that invites an affective response. Exhibitions are not as tightly controlled as films in terms of time, but they too can tell stories. Through the physical arrangement of images and text they can also create spaces that invite affective responses.

Regarding the Pain of Others

When Sontag came back to writing about photography at the end of her life, she continued to focus on viewers, emotions and affect and remained no less saddened by the relentless stream of images of suffering. She writes of the fortitude required for even attempting to read the daily newspaper so full of pictures that could or, perhaps should, make one cry. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she sharpened her arguments about what constitutes a moral response to these images while softening some of her judgments and expectations, such as the call for an ecology of images that concluded *On Photography*. In retrospect, she concludes that "people don't become inured to what they are shown . . . because of the *quantity* of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling" (Sontag 2003: 102). In addressing this passivity, Sontag refocuses far more explicitly on the need for narrative in an ethical response to photographs, which I have suggested was present, but diffused in *On Photography*. She assessed that this passivity and deadening of feeling in the face of photographs is heightened by the way the media circulates images and drains them of content. Narrative is not only a presentation distinct from high modernist self-referentiality, or historical knowledge, or filmic framing of photo stills. It is not only an important preparation for the moral impact of photographs; it helps us to cope with their impact: "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated" (Sontag 2003: 101).

In her final treatise on photography, Sontag is no longer as committed to

defending her moral position as she is to entreat us to narrate and to interpret, to think about what our desires mean, what power painful images have, and what histories they participate in. For instance, she asks why America feels a need to look at and to confront images of lynching, but not images of nuclear bombs, both atrocities systematically undertaken by the American people either in small groups and facilitated by authorities or officially enacted by those authorities. In coming back to the question of what photographs do and what they obscure, Sontag warns us that "perhaps too much value is assigned to memory, not enough to thinking" (Sontag 2003: 115).

Notes

- 1 Sontag's assessment of Avedon's pictures of his dying father is important to keep in mind in the face of more recent portraits of the dying and dead Sontag herself. These were taken, published and widely exhibited by Annie Leibovitz, Sontag's longtime partner. They have been heavily criticized by Sontag's son, David Reiff, and by critics. Avedon also exhibited his death portraits and, for Sontag, the insider position seems to have made a distinct difference in how they are received.
- 2 A similar critique of Sontag's assertion that aesthetics depoliticizes can be found in Carol Zemel's essay on Holocaust photographs (2003). Zemel argues that "to insist only on the evidentiary status of atrocity photographs obscures the way in which aesthetic effects deliver historical data, reify fragments of memory, and enable passage from document to icon (2003: 205).

References

- Evernden, Neil. 1985. Seeing and Being Seen: A Response to Susan Sontag's Essays on Photography. *Soundings* 68: 72–87.
- Hevey, David. 1997. The Enfreakment of Photography. In Lennard Davis (ed.), *The Disabilities Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 367–378.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1988 [1947]. *Existence and Existents*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Schwartz, Sanford. 1977. Review of *On Photography*. *Art in America* November/December 1977: 31–32.
- Smit, C.R. 2004. *Pictured in Dialog: A Dialogical Philosophy of the Disabled Body in Photography*. PhD thesis. University of Iowa.
- Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. 1994. *Inside/Out. Public Information: Desire, Disaster, Document*. Exhibition catalog. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. New York: Art Publishers, pp. 49–62.
- Sontag, Susan. 1977. *On Photography*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Sontag, Susan. 1995 [1978]. Susan Sontag: The *Rolling Stone* Interview with Jonathan Cott. In Leland Pogue (ed.), *Conversations with Susan Sontag*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, pp. 106–136.
- Sontag, Susan. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sontag, Susan. 2006. On Self. *New York Times Magazine* September 10: 52–58.
- Westerbeck Jr., C.L. 1978. On Sontag. *Artforum* 16(8): 56–60.
- Zemel, Carol. 2003. Emblems of Atrocity: Holocaust Liberation Photographs. In Shelley Hornstein and Florence Jacobwitz (eds), *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 201–219.