On Photography

Susan Sontag, "The Image-World" and Beyond

Timothy Quigley

"The Image World"—Introduction

Sontag begins the final essay in *On Photography* by returning to issues raised in the first:

Reality has always been interpreted through the reports given by images; and philosophers since Plato have tried to loosen our dependence on images by evoking the standard of an **image-free way of apprehending the real**.

But when, in the mid-nineteenth century, the standard finally seemed attainable, the retreat of old **religious** and **political** illusions before the advance of **humanistic** and **scientific** thinking did not—as anticipated—create mass defections to the real. On the contrary, the new age of **unbelief** strengthened the allegiance to images.

The credence that could no longer be given to realities *in the form of* images was now being given to realities understood *to be* images, illusions. [153]
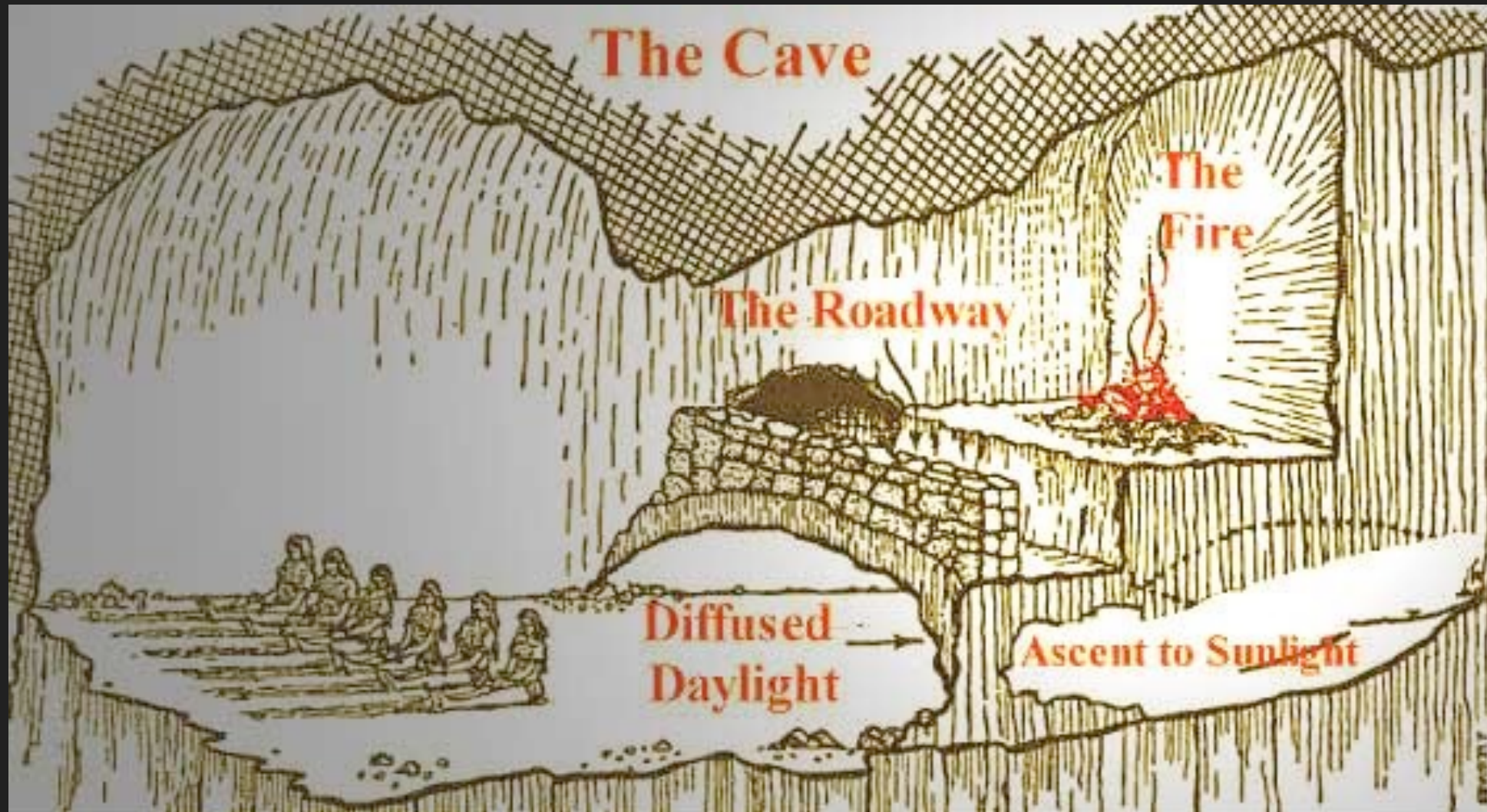
Recall Sontag's claim at the beginning of the first essay:

"Humankind lingers unregenerately in **Plato's cave**, still reveling, its age-old habit, in **the mere images of the truth**." [3]

"The Image World"—The Allegory of the Cave

"Socrates: And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened..."

Plato, *The Republic*, *Book VII* (514a–520a), trans. Benjamin Jowett

In summoning forth this ancient analogy, Sontag evokes both **Plato's** theory of **forms** originating in another, non-material realm and, in a more indirect fashion, **Aristotle's** theory of form **in matter**.

"The Image World"—Index and Icon

In the latter case, Aristotle suggests that **form** (and meaning) in the real world are impressed on the mind without material transmission or loss, in the way a **signet-ring** pressed into hot wax leaves its **form** (indexical trace) behind, without imparting or diminishing the gold or silver of the ring.

Pythagorean Signet Ring

In an analogous fashion, because a **camera** has to be exposed to some portion of the external universe of things to produce an image, the photo, in some sense, "touches" reality and imparts a form without taking anything away from its material source. This "**indexicality**" gives the image a "certificate of presence"*. [*Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 87.]

Raphael, *School of Athens* (detail, Plato & Aristotle), 1509

Cf. Barthes' on the optics and metaphysics of the photograph. [*CL* 81f]

"The Image World"—Image and Reality

According to Sontag, this "primitive notion of the efficacy of images presumes that **images** possess the qualities of real things, but **our** inclination is to attribute to **real things** the qualities of an **image**." [158]

Berlinghiero, *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1230, Tempera on wood

Andrei Rublev, *Trinity*, c. 1410s

"The Image World"—Image and Reality

Andy Warhol, *Untitled, Marilyn Monroe (Marilyn)*, 1967

Andy Warhol, *Self Portrait*, 1966

Sontag switches focus to the inverse and more radical notion of **real things as images**, rather than **images as real things**.

"The Image World"— Blurring of the Boundaries Between Images and Real Things

"'Our era' does not prefer images to real things out of **perversity** but partly in response to the ways in which the notion of what is **real** has been progressively **complicated** and **weakened**, one of the early ways being the criticism of **reality as façade** which arose among the enlightened middle classes in the last century." [160]

Thomas Demand, *Embassy VI*, 2007

"The Image World"

"[T]he true modern primitivism is **not** to regard the image as a real thing.... Instead, **reality** has come to seem more and more like what we are shown by cameras.

"It is common now for people to insist about their experience of a violent event in which they were caught up — a plane crash, a shoot-out, a terrorist bombing — that **'it seemed like a movie'**." [161]

Margaret Bourke-White, Dr. Kurt Lisso, Leipzig's city treasurer, and his wife and daughter after taking poison to avoid surrender to U.S. troops, Leipzig, 1945

"The Image World"

"[P]hotographic images tend to subtract feeling from something we experience at first hand and the feelings they do arouse are, largely, not those we have in real life. Often something disturbs us more in photographed form than it does when we actually experience it…."
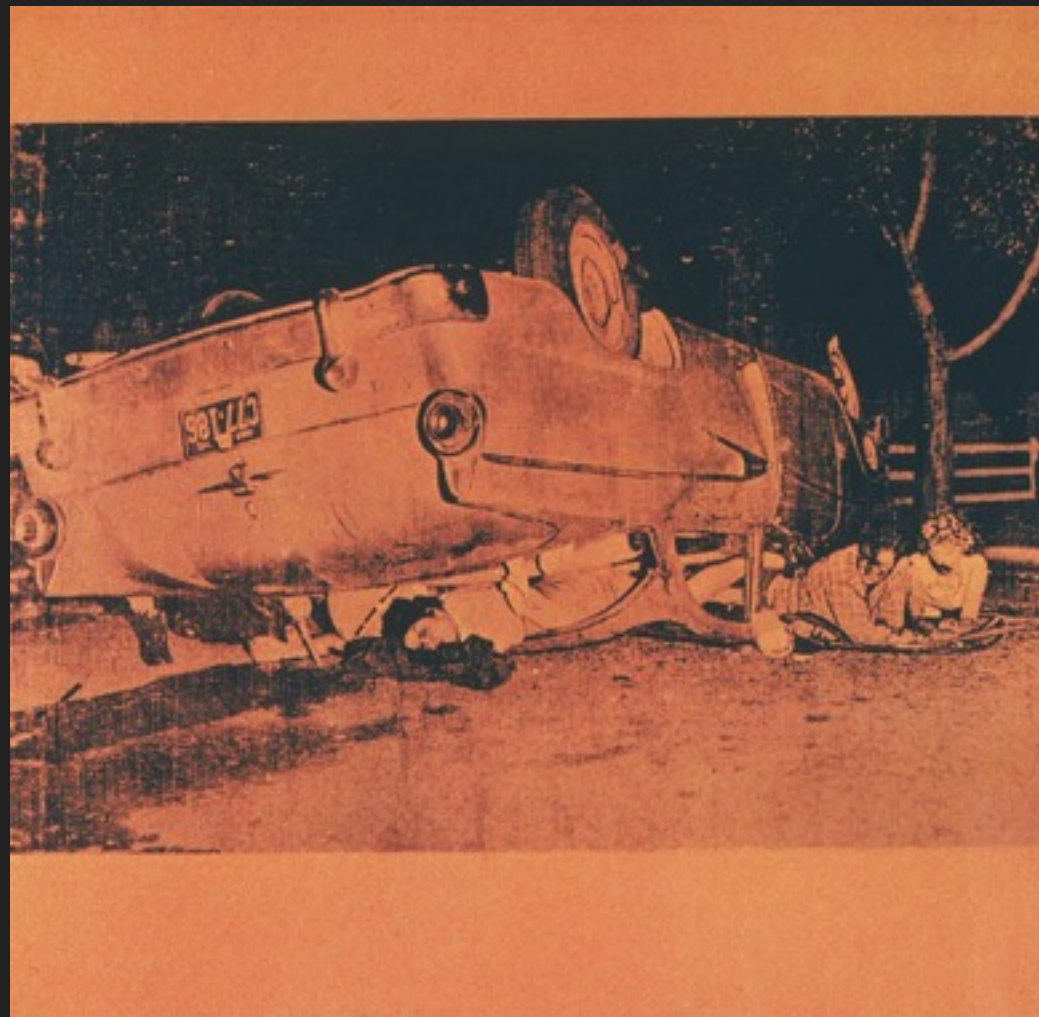
Andy Warhol, *Orange Disaster*, 1963

"One is vulnerable to disturbing events in the form of photographic images in a way that one is not to the real thing." [168]

"The Image World"—From Modern to Postmodern

"Photography does not simply **reproduce** the real, it **recycles** it — a key procedure of a modern society.

"In the form of photographic images, things and events are put to new uses, assigned new meanings, which go beyond the distinctions between the beautiful and the ugly, the true and the false, the useful and the useless, good taste and bad.

"Photography is one of the chief means for producing that quality ascribed to things and situations which erases these distinctions: **'the interesting'**.

"What makes something interesting is that it can be seen to be like, or analogous to, something else." [174f]

Think different.
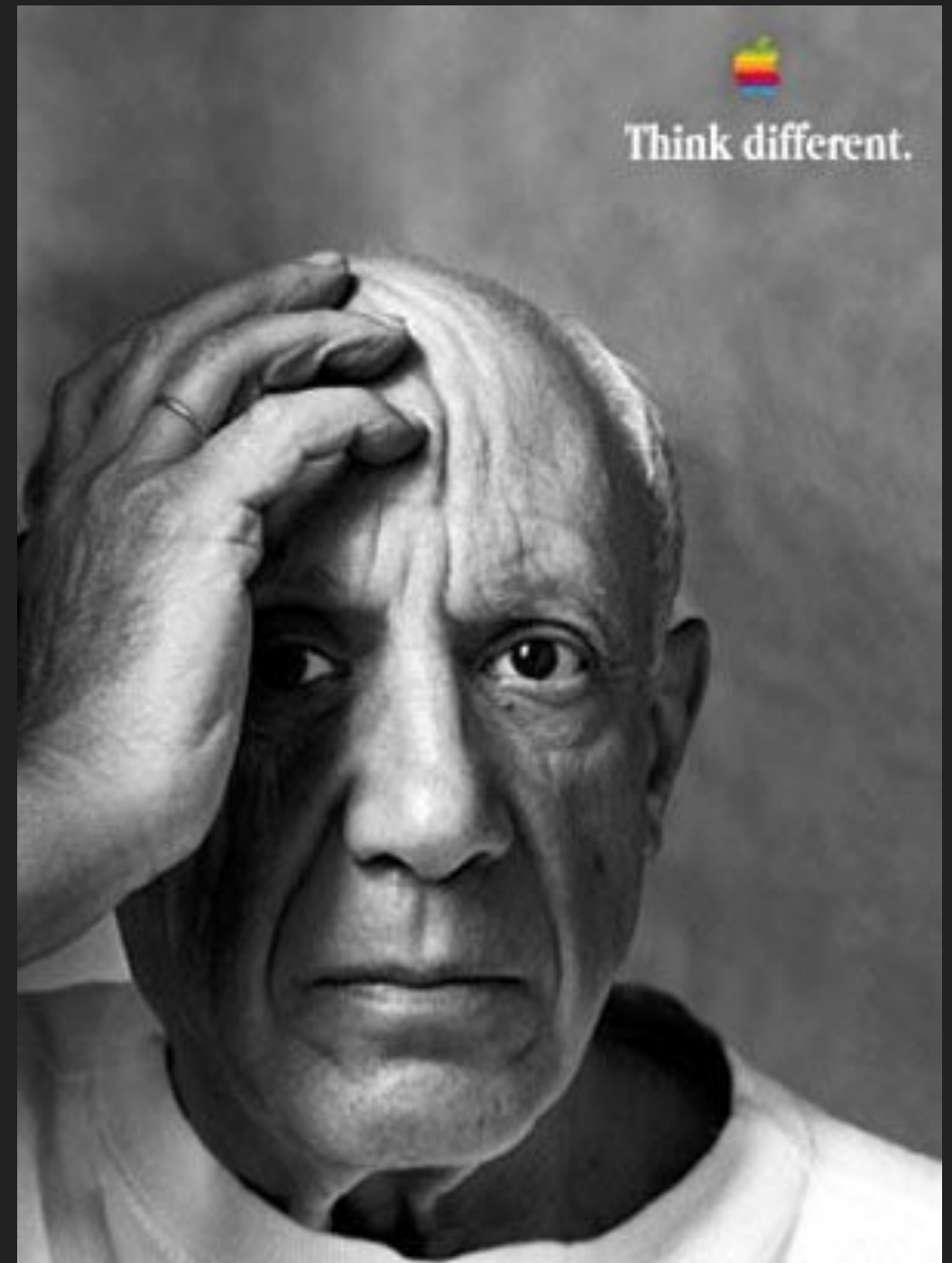
"The Image World"

"Two attitudes underlie this presumption that anything 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.

"According to one attitude, there is **nothing that should not be *seen***; according to the other, there is **nothing that should not be *recorded*.**" [176]

Normandy Invasion, Omaha Beach, June 1944

"The Image World"

"The camera's twin capacities, to **subjectivize** reality and to **objectify** it, ideally serve these needs and strengthen them. Cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a **spectacle** (for the masses) and as an object of **surveillance** (for the rulers).

"The production of images also furnishes a **ruling ideology**. Social change is replaced by a change in images." [178]

"The Image World"

"We consume images at an ever faster rate…. Cameras are the **antidote** and the **disease**, a means of **appropriating** reality and a means of making it **obsolete**." [179]

Paul Lowe/Panos, *Somalia*, 1992

"The Image World"

Arguing for an ecology of images, Sontag concludes this series of essays with the following remarks:

The powers of photography have in effect **de-Platonized** our understanding of reality, making it less and less plausible to reflect upon our experience according to the distinction between **images** and **things**, between **copies** and **originals**.

It suited Plato's derogatory attitude toward images to liken them to **shadows** — transitory, minimally informative, immaterial, impotent co-presences of the real things which cast them.

But the **force** of photographic images comes from their being **material realities in their own right**, richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them, potent means for turning the tables on reality — **for turning *it* into a shadow**.

Images are more real than anyone could have supposed. And just because they are an **unlimited resource**, one that cannot be exhausted by consumerist waste, there is all the more reason to apply the **conservationist** remedy. If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an **ecology** not only of real things but of images as well. [179f]

"The Image World"

Sontag approaches photography from a variety of perspectives — journalistic, artistic, historical, social, aesthetic, political, moral, etc. But what **emerges** from her free-ranging survey of the works, uses, and effects of the photographic image in modern and contemporary society is her **concern** and **ambivalence** about their social, political, and ethical value. The **power** and **influence** of photographic images are indisputable. Her **anxiety** is due to their being "untamed" (or "mad", in Barthes' terminology).

Sontag (and John Berger) claim that the photograph needs a **narrative** context in order to speak and to be understood. It depends on **language** for meaning. [Note that in an earlier essay from the 1960s, "Against Interpretation", Sontag argued "against" meaning, semiotics, hermeneutics, in favor of an "**erotics** of interpretation".]

But, at the same time, the **cumulative effect** of the proliferation of photographic images today runs the risk of **overshadowing** reality and replacing it with a shifting, phantasmagoric series of alternative realities.

So, on Sontag's account, it seems our understanding of photography is torn between the assertion of its dependence on language — what Lacan calls "the symbolic order" — and hence its social and political **impotence** on the one hand, and a kind of vestigial faith in its **power** to inform the real world and shape our experience and behavior, on the other.

Addendum 2003: *Regarding the Pain of Others*

Sontag's **ambivalence** survives to the end, as we see in her 2003 discussion of Jeff Wall's ***Dead Troops Speak***. Wall's work "speaks" of the unfathomable **horror** and **insanity of war**, but even that depends for its full significance and impact on our familiarity with and experience of war. According to Sontag, this nightmare is **incomprehensible** to those who have not lived through it.

Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)* 1992, Transparency in lightbox, 2290 x 4170 mm

Addendum 2003: *Regarding the Pain of Others*

Here's a brief summary of the work:

In *Dead Troops Talk*, Wall merges conventions from war and horror movies with those of the history painting of previous eras to create an elaborate, grotesque fiction.

The picture presents a hallucinatory scene in which soldiers who have just been killed on the battlefield are re-animated, engaging with each other in what the artist describes as a 'dialogue of the dead'.

As the title indicates, the troops are a Soviet patrol ambushed in Afghanistan during the war and occupation of the 1980s.

Each figure or group seems to respond differently to the experience of death and reanimation.

The three soldiers clowning with their own wounds provide a note of macabre levity. Wall has suggested that their black humour is as plausible a reaction to their circumstances as the more serious or distressed responses of their comrades.

As carefully constructed as a film or epic painting, the work was shot in a large temporary studio, involving performers and costume, special effects and make-up professionals.

The figures were photographed separately or in small groups and the final image was assembled as a digital montage.

Sunday, February 12, 2012

Jeff Wall, Detail from *Dead Troops Talk*
*(a vision after an ambush of a Red Army
patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter
1986)* 1992.

Addendum 2003: *Regarding the Pain of Others*

I wanted to involve an element of levity, but without comedy... In any group of thirteen men, three at least are going to be complete fools. So it's likely they would remain fools even after death. On the other hand, maybe they weren't fools before, and only became so once they were killed. - Jeff Wall

Addendum 2003: *Regarding the Pain of Others*

I've been able to experiment with a new range of subjects or types of picture that weren't really possible for me before. This technology has made available the picturing of possible worlds, parallel or imaginary universes...I have always considered my work to be a mimesis of the effects of cinema and of painting (at least traditional painting), and so the fictional, formal and poetic part of it has always been very important. - Jeff Wall

Sunday, February 12, 2012

Addendum 2003: *Regarding the Pain of Others*

The young boy, whose head is blown open and has lost his hands, is in a way the central figure, and he is saying something that he feels is urgent to the older captain but because the captain's dead too, he's also moved into another dimension, one in which he doesn't have to answer. There's no urgency – he's contemplating this boy's questioning nature, or contemplating the urgency itself, who knows. - Jeff Wall

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Dead Troops Speak operates on a number of levels. The soldiers speak, but of what we can only imagine. And **what** we imagine is determined by our relation to a **narrative context**. "They speak" (Jeff Wall and the work of art) in a general sense about the experience of war. But what we feel or "hear" in the work varies according to our own background knowledge and experience. (Note that a specific historical military engagement is referred to by the work, so one's response to the scene depicted could range from **memory** — first-hand experience of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan or similar circumstances — to **imagining** "from the outside" what such soldiers would think, feel, and say to one another.)

Addendum 2003: *Regarding the Pain of Others*

Finally, Sontag claims, the troops within the world depicted by Wall speak to **one another** and **not to us**. And here the **ambivalence** we noted above returns on another level. This powerful image is rendered **mute** in the presence of a viewer who does not **already understand**, or cannot **imagine**, the world depicted. (Here Sontag speaks "from the inside", as one who spent several months working in Sarajevo during the Bosnian war.)

Bringing It All Back Home

Looking for an entry point into Sontag's essays on photography is frustrating — she says so much from so many different angles, you could start almost anywhere.

I find myself coming back to photography as a **social practice** and the question of **how** that practice is taken up and engaged. The German artist Joseph Beuys urged on us the notion that "everyone is an artist". That's asking a lot, unless you extend your notion of art to the point of transparency. So I'm setting aside the concept of art for the time being and turning Beuys' proposition into a contemporary truism — "Everyone is a photographer."

Now we can ask ourselves how we pursue this practice of taking photographs. What's the **process**? Do we set any rules or constraints for ourselves? **How** are we looking, **why** are we looking, and **what** are we looking **for**? And how do Sontag's observations stand up to our own practices as both **makers** and **spectators** of images? How has reading her essays informed or challenged the way we make and look at photographic images?

Timothy Quigley, Clonmany Waterfall, 2010.

Timothy Quigley, 2012