

# Sontag's *On Photography* at 20

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The initial critical reception of Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977) is one of the most extraordinary events in the history of photography and cultural criticism. 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*. The scores of reviews of Sontag's book extended not only across the spectrum of specialized photography and art magazines—that is, from *Popular Photography* to *Artforum*—but also across an expansive range of general interest and intellectual periodicals from the *Christian Science Monitor* to the *Village Voice*, from *Esquire* to *Encounter*, and from the *Saturday Review* to the *Antioch Review*. What's more, *On Photography* won the National Book Critics' Circle Award for 1977 and was selected among the top 20 books of 1977 by the editors of the *New York Times Book Review*.

Perhaps no photography book—certainly no book about photography—has been analyzed and discussed with more intensity, from so many different and competing perspectives, as *On Photography*. No reader, apparently, was left unmoved or unprovoked by it. Consider, for example, the reception that *On Photography* has received in this publication. In addition to the two essays in this issue, *Afterimage* has published four strikingly different articles on or about *On Photography*. The first, Dru Shipman's "Sontag *On Photography*" (January 1975) is not, strictly speaking, a review of *On Photography*; rather, it is an obsessive, point-by-point rebuttal of the first four of Sontag's seven essays about photography for the *New York Review of Books* (six of these essays, of course, became *On Photography*). Although not heady as longwinded as Shipman's article (which, incidentally, took up nine pages of the 20-page issue), Michael Lesey's January 1978 review is equally if not more hostile. Like several other prominent responses to *On Photography* from the art-photography world—namely, Colin L. Westerbeck Jr.'s 1978 *Artforum* review and Robert Heinecken's 1978 photomontage portrait—Lesey tries to discredit Sontag's book by revealing it to be, as the title of his review put it, "an unacknowledged autobiography", as if the personal essay were somehow a criminal act. An abrupt about-face was signaled in the third and fourth *Afterimage* articles about *On Photography*: David L. Jacobs's "Sontag Re-Viewed" (Summer 1978) and John McCole's "Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, and the Radical Critique of Photography" (Summer 1979). In accord with Jacobs, McCole concludes that "the issues she raises will have to be faced, not only by radical critics, but by anyone who thinks and cares about photography."

That *On Photography* achieved a particularly broad and intense critical reception is indisputable. That Sontag's collection of essays is still sold and read (it is currently in its fourteenth English-language edition), and is available in numerous foreign-language translations (13 at last count), is equally certain. What is disputable and uncertain, however, is the complicated matter of how *On Photography* has been received by U.S. critics and scholars since that initial flurry of reviews, panels, symposia and other commentary in the mid- to late 1970s. The question is: How important, influential or authoritative is the book for currently active critics and scholars? Or, what is *On Photography*'s critical reputation today? Apart from polling or interviewing these experts, there are two easier yet more reliable ways of gauging Sontag's reception.

The first method involves counting all the anthologies that contain excerpts or sections from *On Photography*, or reprints of Sontag's original essays for the *New York Review of Books*, the presumption being that anthology editors and publishers are themselves authoritative arbiters of intellectual reputations. As one might expect, Sontag's writings are reprinted in most of the major anthologies that burst upon the scene in the late '70s and very early '80s; these include *The Camera Viewed: Writings on Twentieth-Century Photography* (1979), *Classic Essays On Photography* (1980) and *Photography in Print* (1981). Since 1982, however, few of the significant anthologies contain writing by Sontag—not *Reading into Photography* (1982), not *Thinking Photography* (1982), not *The Contest of Meaning* (1989), and not *The Critical Image* (1990).

Operating on the same premise as the above, a second way of estimating the critical reception of *On Photography* entails searching through the relevant journalism and scholarship and counting all of the citations to Sontag's photography writing. While I have not been able to do an exhaustive search of this literature, everything I have found clearly suggests that the trail of quotations and footnotes runs parallel to the trail of anthologies. In the late '70s and early '80s, for instance, one can locate references to *On Photography* in many important articles and exhibition catalogs, and in books such as Max Kozloff's *Photography & Fascination* (1979), A.D. Coleman's *Light Readings* (1979), Frank Webster's *The New Photography* (1980) and Jonathan Green's *American Photography* (1984). By the early '90s, however, specific references to *On Photography* have all but disappeared from the critical and scholarly literature.

What, exactly, do these counts of anthology selections and journal citations tell us about the contemporary critical reception of *On Photography*? Certainly they show that *On Photography* is not a book that today's critics, scholars and anthology editors feel they must cite or otherwise credit. If anthology inclusions and citations (along with original publications, of course) are the primary measure of intellectual status among critical writers, then it's clear that *On Photography* has little or no recognized standing within the theory and criticism field. However, does this lack of recognition mean that Sontag's writings *On Photography* are without any influence or impact upon the field? The answer, surprisingly, is no, for one can find allusions to Sontag's ideas and style in the writings of many of today's leading theorists and critics.

"The best writing on photography," declared Sontag in *On Photography*, "has been by moralists—Marxists or would-be Marxists—hooked on photographs but troubled by the way that photography inexorably beautifies." The category includes not only its maker, but also Allan Sekula, Martha Rosier and Abigail Solomon-Godeau—three of the top theorists and critics of the past two decades. All three started writing about photography in the mid-'70s, shortly after Sontag wrote her first photography essays for the *New York Review of Books*; all have had their critical articles extensively quoted and anthologized (both Sekula and Solomon-Godeau have anthologies of their own writings, respectively, *Photography Against the Grain* and *Photography at the Dock*); all have received major fellowships and awards; and all are tenured professors at prominent art schools or universities. Despite the absence of direct references to *On Photography* in their writings, Sekula, Rosier and Solomon-Godeau repeat many of Sontag's most famous, or infamous, claims; and they often do so in a style and tone that could be called "Sontagian."

It is instructive to compare Rosler's concern about the "decontextualization" of photography in her "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers: Thoughts on Audience" ("all photographic practice being hustled into galleries must be re-seen in terms of its revelatory character not in relation to its iconic subject, but in relation to its 'real' subject, the photographer") to Sontag's assertion that photographs, when taken out of their original contexts and displayed in museums and galleries, "cease to be 'about' their subjects in the same direct or primary way; they become studies in the possibilities of photography." Or compare Sekula's main point in "The Traffic in Photographs" ("affirmative commentaries on photography have engaged in a comic,

shuffling dance between...faith in the objective powers of the machine and a belief in the subjective, imaginative capabilities of the artist") to Sontag's claim that "[o]ne side or the other of the [scientism-esthetics] connection is always being rediscovered and championed" by photography's advocates. Lastly, compare the striking conclusion of Solomon-Godeau's "Photography After Art Photography" ("art photography has systematically engineered its own irrelevance and triviality. It is, in a sense, all dressed up with nowhere to go") to this passage from *On Photography*: "Underlying many of the recent defenses of photography is the fear that photography is already a senile art, littered by spurious or dead movements.... It is not surprising that this demoralization should be felt at the moment of photography's greatest acceptance."

These comparisons should not be taken as evidence of plagiarism—allusions are not quite the same as quotations. If Sekula, Rosier and Solomon-Godeau appear to "quote" *On Photography*, it is only because they are "quoting" a specialized critical discourse that has been significantly shaped by all the readings, discussions and repetitions of Sontag's book. In other words, *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.

There is one last question: If *On Photography* remains an influential book—albeit indirect—why is it no longer cited in the literature or included in anthologies? The explanation for this oversight may be found in the political role that footnotes, citations, anthologies and so forth play in intellectual fields and professions. Contrary to what your English teachers told you, the purpose of a reference is not simply to give credit to an original source; it is also, and more importantly, intended to confer the prestige and authority of the source upon the author mentioning the source. When discussing the reproducibility of photographs, for instance, more cultural capital is gained from citing Walter Benjamin than a Kodak photography manual, though both sources will tell you that an infinite number of reproductions can be made from one negative. Benjamin, after all, was a brilliant intellectual who was lost to the world until the pioneers of cultural studies re-discovered him in the '60s. To quote Benjamin is therefore to attach oneself to his "aura" and, by further extension, to the procession of cultural studies.

Although Sontag herself helped to bolster Benjamin's reputation within the emerging field of photography theory and criticism, in 20 years the field has developed into an academic sub-discipline that has little if any strategic use for *On Photography*. The product of a sensibility rather than a research methodology, and written by a public intellectual who dropped photography in 1977, *On Photography* cannot be used to advance either the field or professional careers. This explains why *On Photography* is alluded to, but not directly cited by contemporary academics. Sontag knew early on that it would not, indeed could not, find a place in academe. As she told a Wellesley College audience in 1975, "it's from that strictly independent and freelance position that I am saying my say; it's not as a member of the photography establishment or photography anti-establishment, but as an educated outsider."

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#### QUOTATIONS FROM REVIEWS OF ON PHOTOGRAPHY (1977) BY SUSAN SONTAG

From William H Gass. "A Different Kind of Art". *New York Times Book Review*. Dec. 18. 1977:

"No simple summary of the views contained in Susan Sontag's brief but brilliant work *On Photography* is possible, first because there are too many, and second because

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": (p. 7).

From Michael Lesy, "An Unacknowledged Autobiography," *Afterimage* 5; no. 7 (January 1978):

"This is not a book of primary research, but rather a series of inventive, witty, and perversely whimsical suppositions and intuitions, based on second-hand reports, brought by a messenger from the outside world" (p. 5).

From Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "Against Photography," *New York Times*, November 17, 1977.

"To the extent that an art fails, the civilization that produced it fails. So for her [Sontag] the failure of photography as an art form amounts not just to the failure of a technical experiment; it reflects what is wrong with industrial society."

"Argue with Sontag if you will. But know that she has made a powerful and complex case against photography" (p. 37).

From Alfred Kazin. "Sontag is Not a Camera," *Esquire*, February 1978:

"[Susan] Sontag is so much a theorist and what Europeans call a card intellectual—lots of opinions about everything that her book adds up to a series of epigrams about the widest possible significance of photography in our photo-crowded world" (p. 50).

"Sontag is a prisoner of literary chic. Social reality seems to her a symbol in the mind of some gifted artist writer, photographer. On Photography comes out of literature, not the naked world that is still there for you anti me to look at as we damn please" (p. 51).

From Cornell Capa, letter to the field. *Match* 11, 1978:

"As a photographer and director of the International Center of Photography, I wish to thank Susan Sontag for having reawakened the thinking process in *On Photography*, of who we are, what we are and what is the value of what we do."

"The essays bound into the same volume were obviously written spanning a period of several years and they remain separate pieces, some contradicting those written at an earlier time. However, the whole volume shakes from anger and frustration. It tries to wake us up to the fact that 150 years after photography's discovery, we still do not know the power and the failure of what we have."

"It is instructive and exciting to note the ripples of the earthquake that Sontag's book caused . . . To date, photographers have either ignored the book, denied having read it, or are furious about personal implications that they resent."

From Michael Starenko "On: *On Photography*," *New Art Examiner* (April 1978);

"To put it much too crudely, the unrelenting polemic; the great number of apparently contradictory intellectual shifts the obvious departures from common sense logic—the form—this then is the 'message' of *On Photography*. Any photography critic (or any critic, for that matter) could attempt to explain the contradictions of a photography-world which contains such elements as photographed pornography, wedding rituals, Harry Callahan, Les Krims, or *Popular Photography*. While reading *On Photography* we experience these contradictions immediately, vividly, and without external mediation" (p. 12).

From Colin L Westerbeck Jr., "On Sontag," *Artforum* Vol, 16. #8 (April 1978):

"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" (p. 56).

"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 in herself" (p. 60).

From Douglas Davis "Kicking the Image Habit," *Newsweek*, December 5, 1977:

"*On Photography*" overstates its ease because the book is really about a world polluted, as Sontag sees it by images, cars, poisoned air, poisoned water—the detritus of an industrialism gone mad, destroying man's old links to nature and himself. So many things in modern life conspire to disassociate us from ourselves,' she says. I'm not against images. I just want to open this case out. That she has done so is the great virtue of this passionate, flawed book. The sins she perceives in photography lie elsewhere, in the entire culture, in the moving image that is film and television, as well as in the still image. But even as she denounces it, she raises photography to a new level of seriousness. After Sontag, photography must be written about not only as a force in the arts, but as one that is increasingly powerful in the nature and destiny our global society (p. 100).

From Robert Hughes, "A Tourist in Other People's Reality" *Time* December 26 1977:

"It is hard to imagine any photographer's agreeing point for point with Sontag's polemic. But it is a brilliant, irritating performance, and it opens window after window on one of the great *faits accomplis* of our culture. Not many photographers are worth a thousand of her words" (p. 66).

*Choice*, September 19, 1978:

"In the course of pointing out the essentially surrealistic nature of photography, Sontag raises a number of questions, both moral and aesthetic, that 'will remain controversial. Though there are no illustrations, no sustained discussions of particular photographers or their work (with the exception of Diane Arbus), no critical paradigms, this volume raises issues important to photographers and students of photography. Recommended to all levels of libraries" (p. 854).

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