

# Susan Sontag



**This exhibition is based on the hypothesis that *On Photography*, the emblematic book published by Susan Sontag in 1977, can be explored as a curatorial exercise. Or at least that the author wrote her essay following a methodology that verged on the digital uses of images, without any pretension to construct another new “imaginary museum”.**

## ON PHOTOGRAPHY

14.03 – 17.05.2020

[LA VIRREINA]  
CENTRE  
DE LA IMATGE

Ajuntament de  
**Barcelona**



In 1977 Susan Sontag published, under the title *On Photography*, a compilation of texts written from 1971 to 1977 for the legendary magazine *The New York Review of Books*.

The book immediately gained wide acclaim, becoming a veritable combat manifesto: at the end of the “century of the image”, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century was called, a visual literature began to assert itself that combined outreach and sophistication, and that countered both the theoretical straitjackets of the time and historicist narratives.

*On Photography* ventures further along the path first trodden by Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes, both key mentors of Sontag’s; it converses with the sort of socio-political analysis developed by Siegfried Kracauer, Umberto Eco and especially John Berger; and it anticipates later perspectives such as those of Camille Paglia and, in a different way, Siri Hustvedt.

However, what initiates the popular essay of this American writer is a discourse on the image that is based on the association of opposing ideas and authors, photographic ekphrasis and a certain contemporary morality, all delivered with the abrasive, fast-paced style that characterises Susan Sontag’s work.

In this respect, it should be noted that *On Photography* belongs to a long list of books that, without being strictly rigorous, were decisive in the formation of a way of looking at the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; books that turned away from the inner sanctums of academics and specialists and arose out of personal poetics, sometimes from untimely perspectives.

The exhibition is based on the hypothesis that *On Photography* can be explored as a curatorial exercise; that is, that Sontag wrote her various texts following a work methodology that verged on digital contemporary uses rather than on the style of André Malraux’s *Imaginary Museum*. Hence, after the emptying of each and every one of the references provided by the author, they were rendered using museum grammars, constructing a sort of three-dimensional essay in which the sources, the images and their narrative links lie on the same level of reading.

This exhibition inaugurates the new ground floor spaces, which seek to expand and incorporate the content of La Vir-

reina Centre de la Imatge out towards La Rambla. It forms part of a series of proposals that take a new approach to Susan Sontag's legacy.

In this way, 2017 and 2018 bore witness to the cycle *On Photography*<sup>1</sup>, in which 12 women photographers engaged in successive dialogues, interrelating their paradigms, their practices and their stances.

In turn, in 2019, on the occasion of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the writer's death, La Virreina Centre de la Imatge and Arcàdia published the first Catalan translation of *On Photography*<sup>2</sup>, by Anna Llisterra, together with two additional texts, also previously untranslated.

## IN PLATO'S CAVE

This essay revolves around one of the central topics in Susan Sontag's visual thinking: Can images be judged from an ethical perspective?

In order to answer this question, the author re-reads the historical uses of photography, from the police files of the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to photographic output in wartime, from family self-portraits to the "tourist document".

Sontag also investigates a certain epistemology on the urge to photograph, how an experience regarding the world is articulated on the basis of looking at that world through the camera, what gaps grow or shrink between image and event, between photography, art and truth.

She accounts for the ways in which cinema and advertising manufactured a powerful construct around the figure of the photographer, paying special attention to those shifts that, within the collective unconscious, replaced the old moralistic and religious parables with a new photographic pietism.

Along the same lines, the photogenic nature of poverty and the limits on portraying pain—perhaps the great paradigm on which Susan Sontag constructs a politics of images—are set forth for the first time. Furthermore, following the characteristic concerns of the time the essay was written (1973), she analyses what system of democratisation the image has acquired after its unstoppable domestic reproducibility, how many ideological inhibitions are expressed by those photographs to which we have entrusted—or that have appropriated—the narrative on reality.

## AMERICA, SEEN THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHS, DARKLY

This is one of the most piercing of the texts that make up *On Photography*, and one of the essays in which Susan Sontag's caustic, implacable writing shines most brightly.

The title here is quite precise, as the author indeed appears to judge an entire country on the basis of its cultural and photographic myths.

<sup>1</sup> <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/lavirreina/en/activities/photography-1/83>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/lavirreina/en/publications/sobre-la-fotografia-photography/393>

The article starts off with an irate challenge to the foundational nature of Walt Whitman's poetry, and to his role in the formation of a vision of the world and beauty that Sontag identifies as genuinely American.

However, the real object of the chapter is Diane Arbus, whose work received definitive popular support with the monographic exhibition dedicated to her at the MoMA in 1972, just one year after her suicide.

Sontag wrote her text soon afterwards, when an "Arbus effect" could still be said to linger over the field of American photography. And it is in this ecumenical and exacerbated context that the essayist dismantles, one by one, all the interpretative clichés surrounding the photographer. For example, Sontag draws striking ideological parallels between *The Family of Man* (1955)—an exhibition in which in that same MoMA "celebrated" an ahistorical and sentimental human condition, common to all men—and the Diane Arbus retrospective, which likewise showed individuals as lacking any bond with political time, equally uniform in their monstrosities.

Indeed, Arbus's images were the perfect target for Susan Sontag to fire an endless tirade of moral judgements regarding photographic ethics, the gap in relation to the suffering of others, and so on. However, we will seldom come across such an unrelenting, unerring, perceptive and uncondescending analysis of an artist's work. Special mention should be made, for its absolute contemporaneity, the comparison the author makes between Diane Arbus—Jewish and upper-class—and Andy Warhol—Catholic and working-class.

Once again, Sontag raises her characteristic questions about the weakening of scruples in the wake of overexposure to photographed horror. To conclude, she returns to her comparisons between pornography and images of violence, which although we cannot share them today, nevertheless enable us to identify features of an intellectuality of another time, a militant progressiveness in "the natural" and "the authentic".





< William Henry Fox Talbot, *An Oak Tree in Winter*, ca. 1842-43. Courtesy of The British Library

> Maxime du Camp, *Colossus of Abu Simbel*, ca. 1850. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gilman Collection, gift of the Howard Gilman Foundation, 2005



Advertisement for a Leica Leitz camera, 1973

## MELANCHOLIC OBJECTS

Seemingly focused on investigating the relationship between photography and surrealism, this chapter examines the systems of social legitimacy within which certain photographic images are produced.

Once again Sontag relates, in this case in a rather preachy or naive way, the political condescension of some documentary photographers, the humanism prompted by numerous visual stereotypes of the oppressed, and the barriers the camera creates between changing the world and recording it.

Although she does not develop it extensively, the author makes a very thought-provoking attempt to deploy a possible theory of photographic production and reception that is based on the sentimentality of the middle classes, the mutations undergone by the bourgeois urban promenade—characteristic of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century—ultimately leading to the idle tourist and the keen photographer of the picturesque.

On a different note, Sontag quite rightly distinguishes between a typically European sociological photography and its American counterpart. She takes August Sander as a paradigm of the former, tracing an analysis that gives rise to certain platitudes rejected by subsequent historiography, but that nevertheless enable her to spotlight issues that are seldom addressed in the literature on the German photographer, such as the influence exerted by the taxonomic sciences of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and pseudoscientific treatises on the face and expressions, both of which were in vogue during the Weimar Republic.

As regards American photography, she offsets the tradition personified by, among others, Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, Robert Frank and Berenice Abbott—the only female photographer she vindicates in some way—against various publications of the time, such as *Down Home* (1972), by Bob Adelman, and *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973), by Michael Lesy and Charles Van Schaick, which could be taken as constituting the parodic flipside of the grand project on the American political photographic document.



Eugène Atget, *Street Musicians*, 1898-1899.  
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon), *George Sand*, 1864.  
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

The essay finishes with a fascinating disquisition on the figure of Walter Benjamin, and more specifically the urge to collect, under one archival figure, the images of the past and the metaphors of the future, photographs and quotes.

## THE HEROISM OF VISION

This chapter traces a possible historical path on how photography coped with abstract beauty, what conception of beauty can be expected of a discipline in which “the principle of reality” seems to be an irrevocable foundation.

Sontag borrowed the term that provided the title for her essay from the work of Edward Weston, or to be more exact, from what Weston personified with regard to the photographic output of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: formalist purism, a gaze hypnotised by elegance, the search for an ethereal and ideal expressiveness.

But “the heroism of vision” also parodies that strange and solemn moment at which people start to take photographs in order to leave their mark on the perceived, to set trends of images, to prove that they beheld beauty where everyone else saw the commonplace.

The grand dream of the modernist photography of the 1920s and 30s, which extended some formal findings of painting and stood parallel to poetry, along with the promise of a new visual sensitivity that would bring together art, technology and science, ceased to have any relevance in the 1970s. Then other “historical moods” arose, oriented towards disorder and the obscure, towards a sort of democratic verisimilitude.

However, according to the author, photography embellishes above all and despite all, even when it pursues the goal of truth. At this point she launches one of her habitual diatribes against moralistic readings of images and, more specifically, against any attempt to make a Marxist analysis, which Sontag associates—perhaps too schematically or due to the ideological and grammatical quarrels that were typical of the 1970s—with an interpretative excess. It comes as no surprise that years earlier she had written a book on this same topic, *Against Interpretation* (1966).

The essay ends with an epic homily on the degree of certainties that a photograph can generate; how much of the photographic leaning towards beauty is the cause of those same impossibilities of the camera to offer us absolute knowledge.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC EVANGELS

This chapter presents notable differences of content and orientation from the rest of the texts that make up *On Photography*. It could even be described as the most theoretical of the book’s essays, and in it Susan Sontag addresses a certain ontology of photographic practice.

The question concerning the knowledge that photography can distribute about reality occupies a major part of the essay, together with the different stances that photographers have taken historically with regard to this question. Likewise, the author elaborates on the technological uses of visual reproduction, passing judgement on Walter Benjamin’s theories, the taste for vintage images and the—even at that time—problematic role of the notion of the unique photographic work.

Although she focuses excessively on the American context, Sontag develops a particular genealogy on the frictions and the parallels that can be drawn between photography and painting, and above all makes a diagnosis of what losses and what overflows occurred in the field of photography when it was defined as art or, on the contrary, when it emancipated itself from any artistic assimilation.

At this point the author makes an insightful analysis of the process of musealisation of photography, in which 1970s America played a crucial part. Her shrewd treatment of the problem of photographic authorship is worthy of note.

To finish, she establishes a clear antagonism between Eugène Atget and Edward Weston, whom she regards not only as confronting figures—technical meticulousness versus immediacy, formal beauty versus the document—but also as ideologically opposed ways of understanding photography.

## THE IMAGE-WORLD

In this chapter Susan Sontag again theorises philosophically about images, jumping from a sociology of the act of photographing to the analysis of the role played by photographic consumption in contemporary societies.

It is striking that as early as the 1970s the author voiced the fears and hypochondrias that surrounded the proliferation of images and their supposed emptying for a “true” knowledge of the world, an unmistakable sign that current attempts at ethical and visual regulation, along with their consequent nostalgias of a certain lost purity, are paradigms with a long history.

Unlike in the other chapters, Sontag gives examples taken from the field of literature, noting the key presence of photography in the novels of Hardy, Genet, Melville and Nabokov, among others. She also dedicates a considerable number of digressions to speculating on the conception of images in China, bringing to bear a whole series of prejudices that might be attributable to the anti-Marxist dilettantism of the time.

More interesting, however, are her forecasts on the construction of ideological imageries in opulent capitalism, how photography partakes of an experience of reality mediated by the lack of distinction between want and need, distance and involvement, record and memory.



**Curator: Valentín Roma**

DL B 5370-2020

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**Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday  
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Free entry**



**#SusanSontag**

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