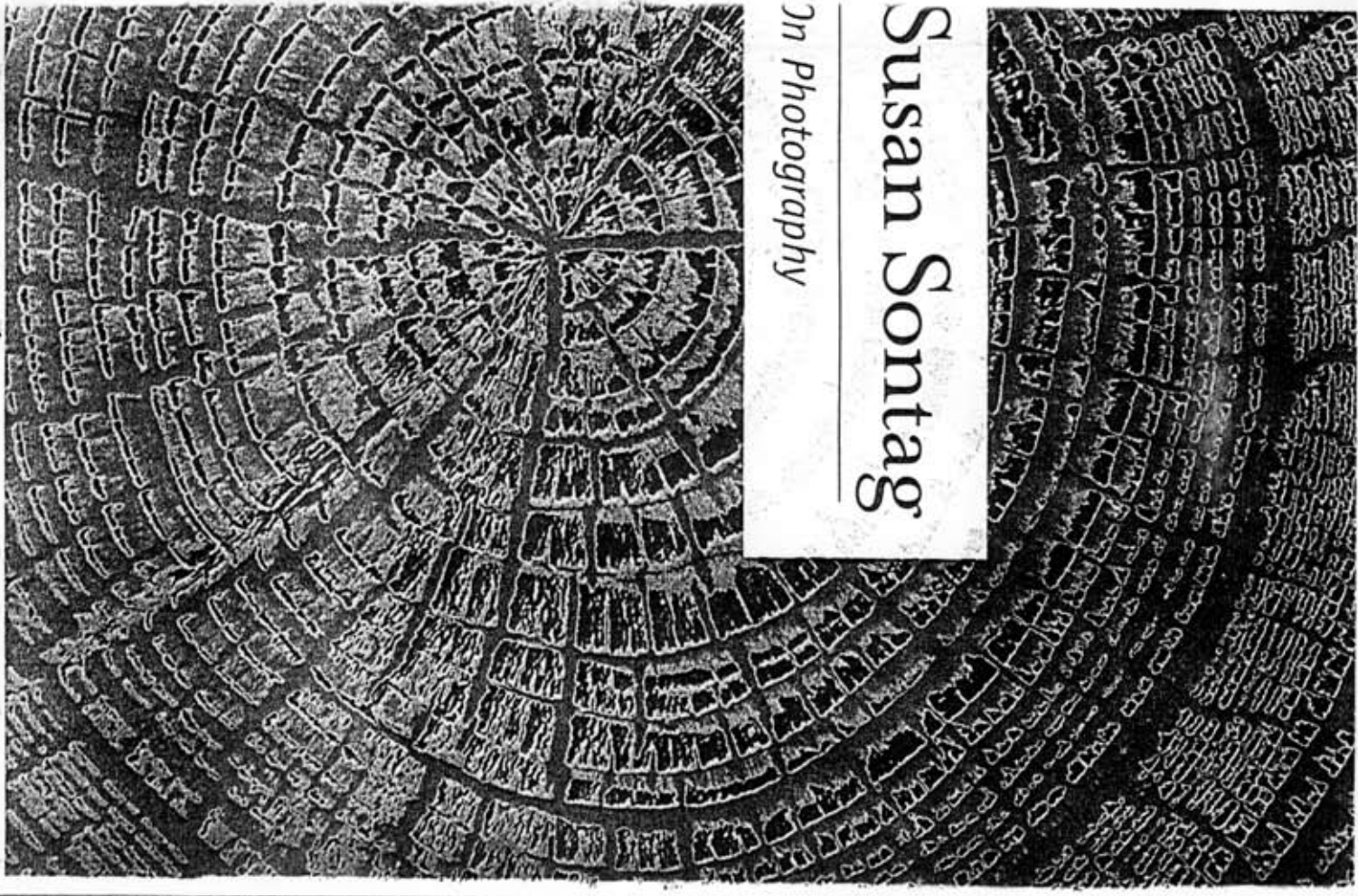


Susan Sontag

In Photography



Melancholy Objects

¶ Photography has the unappealing reputation of being the most realistic, therefore facile, of the mimetic arts. In fact, it is the one art that has managed to carry out the grandiose, century-old threats of a Surrealist takeover of the modern sensibility, while most of the pedigreed candidates have dropped out of the race.

Painting was handicapped from the start by being a fine art, with each object a unique, handmade original. A further liability was the exceptional technical virtuosity of those painters usually included in the Surrealist canon, who seldom imagined the canvas as other than figurative. Their paintings looked sleekly calculated, complacently well made, undialectical. They kept a long, prudent distance from Surrealism's contentious idea of blurring the lines between art and so-called life, between objects and events, between the intended and the unintentional, between pros and amateurs, between the noble and the tawdry, between craftsmanship and lucky blunders. The result was that Surrealism in painting amounted to little more than the contents of a meagerly stocked dream world: a few witty fantasies, mostly wet dreams and agoraphobic nightmares. (Only when its libertarian rhetoric helped to nudge Jackson Pollock and others into a new kind of irreverent abstraction did the Surrealist mandate for painters finally seem to make wide creative sense.) Poetry, the other art to which the early Surrealists were particularly devoted, has yielded almost equally disappointing results. The arts in which Surrealism has come into its own are prose fiction (as content, mainly, but much more abundant and more complex thematically than that claimed by painting), theater, the arts of assemblage, and—most triumphantly—photography.

That photography is the only art that is natively surreal

does not mean, however, that it shares the destinies of the official Surrealist movement. On the contrary. Those photographers (many of them ex-painters) consciously influenced by Surrealism count almost as little today as the nineteenth-century "pictorial" photographers who copied the look of Beaux-Arts painting. Even the loveliest *trouvailles* of the 1920s—the solarized photographs and Rayographs of Man Ray, the photograms of László Moholy-Nagy, the multiple-exposure studies of Bragaglia, the photomontages of John Heartfield and Alexander Rodchenko—are regarded as marginal exploits in the history of photography. The photographers who concentrated on interfering with the supposedly superficial realism of the photograph were those who most narrowly conveyed photography's surreal properties. The Surrealist legacy for photography came to seem trivial as the Surrealist repertoire of fantasies and props was rapidly absorbed into high fashion in the 1930s, and Surrealist photography offered mainly a mannered style of portraiture, recognizable by its use of the same decorative conventions introduced by Surrealism in other arts, particularly painting, theater, and advertising. The mainstream of photographic activity has shown that a Surrealist manipulation or theatricalization of the real is unnecessary, if not actually redundant. Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision. The less doctored, the less patently crafted, the more naive—the more authoritative the photograph was likely to be. Surrealism has always courted accidents, welcomed the uninvited, flattered disorderly presences. What could be more surreal than an object which virtually produces itself, and with a minimum of effort? An object whose beauty,

fantastic disclosures, emotional weight are likely to be further enhanced by any accidents that might befall it? It is photography that has best shown how to juxtapose the sewing machine and the umbrella, whose fortuitous encounter was hailed by a great Surrealist poet as an epitome of the beautiful.

Unlike the fine-art objects of pre-democratic eras, photographs don't seem deeply beholden to the intentions of an artist. Rather, they owe their existence to a loose cooperation (quasi-magical, quasi-accidental) between photographer and subject—mediated by an ever simpler and more automated machine, which is tireless, and which even when capricious can produce a result that is interesting and never entirely wrong. (The sales pitch for the first Kodak, in 1888, was: "You press the button, we do the rest." The purchaser was guaranteed that the picture would be "without any mistake.") In the fairy tale of photography the magic box insures veracity and banishes error, compensates for inexperience and rewards innocence.

The myth is tenderly parodied in a 1928 silent film, *The Cameraman*, which has an inept dreamy Buster Keaton vainly struggling with his dilapidated apparatus, knocking out windows and doors whenever he picks up his tripod, never managing to take one decent picture, yet finally getting some great footage (a photojournalist scoop of a tong war in New York's Chinatown)—by inadvertence. It is the hero's pet monkey who loads the camera with film and operates it part of the time.

¶ The error of the Surrealist militants was to imagine the surreal to be something universal, that is, a matter of psychology, whereas it turns out to be what is most local, ethnic,

class-bound, dated. Thus, the earliest surreal photographs come from the 1850s, when photographers first went out prowling the streets of London, Paris, and New York, looking for their unposed slice of life. These photographs, concrete, particular, anecdotal (except that the anecdote has been effaced)—moments of lost time, of vanished customs—seem far more surreal to us now than any photograph rendered abstract and poetic by superimposition, underprinting, solarization, and the like. Believing that the images they sought came from the unconscious, whose contents they assumed as loyal Freudians to be timeless as well as universal, the Surrealists misunderstood what was most brutally moving, irrational, unassimilable, mysterious—time itself. What renders a photograph surreal is its irrefutable pathos as a message from time past, and the concreteness of its intimations about social class.

Surrealism is a bourgeois disaffection: that its militants thought it universal is only one of the signs that it is typically bourgeois. As an aesthetics that yearns to be a politics, Surrealism opts for the underdog, for the rights of a disestablished or unofficial reality. But the scandals flattered by Surrealist aesthetics generally turned out to be just those homely mysteries obscured by the bourgeois social order: sex and poverty. Eros, which the early Surrealists placed at the summit of the tabooed reality they sought to rehabilitate, was itself part of the mystery of social station. While it seemed to flourish luxuriantly at extreme ends of the scale, both the lower classes and the nobility being regarded as naturally libertine, middle-class people had to toil to make their sexual revolution. Class was the deepest mystery: the inexhaustible glamour of the rich and powerful, the opaque degradation of the poor and outcast.

The view of reality as an exotic prize to be tracked down

and captured by the diligent hunter-with-a-camera has informed photography from the beginning, and marks the confluence of the Surrealist counter-culture and middle-class social adventurism. Photography has always been fascinated by social heights and lower depths. Documentarists (as distinct from courtiers with cameras) prefer the latter. For more than a century, photographers have been hovering about the oppressed, in attendance at scenes of violence—with a spectacularly good conscience. Social misery has inspired the comfortably-off with the urge to take pictures, the gentlest of predations, in order to document a hidden reality, that is, a reality hidden from them.

Gazing on other people's reality with curiosity, with detachment, with professionalism, the ubiquitous photographer operates as if that activity transcends class interests, as if its perspective is universal. In fact, photography first comes into its own as an extension of the eye of the middle-class *flâneur*, whose sensibility was so accurately charted by Baudelaire. The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes. Adept of the joys of watching, connoisseur of empathy, the *flâneur* finds the world "picturesque." The findings of Baudelaire's *flâneur* are variously exemplified by the candid snapshots taken in the 1890s by Paul Martin in London streets and at the seaside and by Arnold Genthe in San Francisco's Chinatown (both using a concealed camera), by Atget's twilight Paris of shabby streets and decaying trades, by the dramas of sex and loneliness depicted in Brassai's book *Paris de nuit* (1933), by the image of the city as a theater of disaster in Weegee's *Naked City* (1945). The *flâneur* is not attracted to the city's official realities but to its dark seamy corners,

by abrupt changes in the social level and ethical importance of subject matter. Perhaps the most dramatic break is that between the pre-war and the post-war work of Bill Brandt. To have gone from the tough-minded photographs of Depression squalor in northern England to his stylish celebrity portraits and semi-abstract nudes of the last decades seems a long journey indeed. But there is nothing particularly idiosyncratic, or perhaps even inconsistent, in these contrasts. Traveling between degraded and glamorous realities is part of the very momentum of the photographic enterprise, unless the photographer is locked into an extremely private obsession (like the thing Lewis Carroll had for little girls or Diane Arbus had for the Halloween crowd).

Poverty is no more surreal than wealth; a body clad in filthy rags is not more surreal than a principessa dressed for a ball or a pristine nude. What is surreal is the distance imposed, and bridged, by the photograph: the social distance and the distance in time. Seen from the middle-class perspective of photography, celebrities are as intriguing as pariahs. Photographers need not have an ironic, intelligent attitude toward their stereotyped material. Pious, respectful fascination may do just as well, especially with the most conventional subjects.

Nothing could be farther from, say, the subtleties of Avedon than the work of Chitta Carell, Hungarian-born photographer of the celebrities of the Mussolini era. But her portraits now look as eccentric as Avedon's, and far more surreal than Cecil Beaton's Surrealist-influenced photographs from the same period. By setting his subjects—the photographs he took of Edith Sitwell in 1927, of Cocotteau in 1936—in fanciful, luxurious decors, Beaton turns them into overexplicit, unconvincing effigies. But Carell's

innocent complicity with the wish of her Italian generals and aristocrats and actors to appear static, poised, glamorous exposes a hard, accurate truth about them. The photographer's reverence has made them interesting; time has made them harmless, all too human.

¶ Some photographers set up as scientists, others as moralists. The scientists make an inventory of the world; the moralists concentrate on hard cases. An example of photography-as-science is the project August Sander began in 1911: a photographic catalogue of the German people. In contrast to George Grosz's drawings, which summed up the spirit and variety of social types in Weimar Germany through caricature, Sander's "archetype pictures" (as he called them) imply a pseudo-scientific neutrality similar to that claimed by the covertly partisan typological sciences that sprang up in the nineteenth century like phrenology, criminology, psychiatry, and eugenics. It was not so much that Sander chose individuals for their representative character as that he assumed, correctly, that the camera cannot help but reveal faces as social masks. Each person photographed was a sign of a certain trade, class, or profession. All his subjects are representative, equally representative, of a given social reality—their own.

Sander's look is not unkind; it is permissive, unjudging. Compare his 1930 photograph "Circus People" with Diane Arbus's studies of circus people or with the portraits of demimonde characters by Lisette Model. People face Sander's camera, as they do in Model's and Arbus's photographs, but their gaze is not intimate, revealing. Sander was not looking for secrets; he was observing the typical. Society

contains no mystery. Like Eadweard Muybridge, whose photographic studies in the 1880s managed to dispel misconceptions about what everybody had always seen (how horses gallop, how people move) because he had subdivided the subject's movements into a precise and lengthy enough sequence of shots, Sander aimed to shed light on the social order by atomizing it, into an indefinite number of social types. It doesn't seem surprising that in 1934, five years after its publication, the Nazis impounded the unsold copies of Sander's book *Antlitz der Zeit* (*The Face of Our Time*) and destroyed the printing blocks, thus bringing his national-portrait project to an abrupt end. (Sander, who stayed in Germany throughout the Nazi period, switched to landscape photography.) The charge was that Sander's project was anti-social. What might well have seemed anti-social to Nazis was his idea of the photographer as an impassive census-taker, the completeness of whose record would render all commentary, or even judgment, superfluous.

Unlike most photography with a documentary intention, enthralled either by the poor and unfamiliar, as prematurely photographable subjects, or by celebrities, Sander's social sample is unusually, conscientiously broad. He includes bureaucrats and peasants, servants and society ladies, factory workers and industrialists, soldiers and gypsies, actors and clerks. But such variety does not rule out class condescension. Sander's eclectic style gives him away. Some photographs are casual, fluent, naturalistic; others are naïve and awkward. The many posed photographs taken against a flat white background are a cross between superb mug shots and old-fashioned studio portraits. Unselfconsciously, Sander adjusted his style to the social rank of the person he was photographing. Professionals and the rich tend to be

photographed indoors, without props. They speak for themselves. Laborers and derelicts are usually photographed in a setting (often outdoors) which locates them, which speaks for them—as if they could not be assumed to have the kinds of separate identities normally achieved in the middle and upper classes.

In Sander's work everybody is in place, nobody is lost or cramped or off-center. A cretin is photographed in exactly the same dispassionate way as a bricklayer, a legless World War I veteran like a healthy young soldier in uniform, scowling Communist students like smiling Nazis, a captain of industry like an opera singer. "It is not my intention either to criticize or describe these people," Sander said. While one might have expected that he would have claimed not to be interested in his subjects, by photographing them, it is interesting that he thought he hadn't described them either. Sander's complicity with everybody also means a distance from everybody. His complicity with his subjects is not naïve (like Carell's) but nihilistic. Despite its class realism, it is one of the most truly abstract bodies of work in the history of photography.

It is hard to imagine an American attempting an equivalent of Sander's comprehensive taxonomy. The great photographic portraits of America—like Walker Evans's *American Photographs* (1938) and Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959)—have been deliberately random, while continuing to reflect the traditional relish of documentary photography for the poor and the dispossessed, the nation's forgotten citizens. And the most ambitious collective photographic project ever undertaken in this country, by the Farm Security Administration in 1935, under the direction of Roy Emerson Stryker, was concerned exclusively with "low-

income groups."² The FSA project, conceived as "a pictorial documentation of our rural areas and rural problems" (Stryker's words), was unabashedly propagandistic, with Stryker coaching his team about the attitude they were to take toward their problem subject. The purpose of the project was to demonstrate the value of the people photographed. Thereby, it implicitly defined its point of view: that of middle-class people who needed to be convinced that the poor were really poor, and that the poor were dignified. It is instructive to compare the FSA photographs with those by Sander. Though the poor do not lack dignity in Sander's photographs, it is not because of any compassionate intentions. They have dignity by juxtaposition, because they are looked at in the same cool way as everybody else.

American photography was rarely so detached. For an approach reminiscent of Sander's, one must look to people who documented a dying or superseded part of America—like Adam Clark Vroman, who photographed Indians in Arizona and New Mexico between 1895 and 1904. Vroman's handsome photographs are unexpressive, uncondescending, unsentimental. Their mood is the very opposite of the FSA photographs: they are not moving, they are not idiomatic, they do not invite sympathy. They make no propaganda for the Indians. Sander didn't know he was photo-

²Though that changed, as is indicated in a memo from Stryker to his staff in 1942, when the new morale needs of World War II made the poor too downbeat a subject. "We must have at once: pictures of men, women and children who appear as if they really believed in the U.S. Get people with a little spirit. Too many in our file now paint the U.S. as an old person's home and that just about everybody is too old to work and too malnourished to care much what happens. . . . We particularly need young men and women who work in our factories. . . . Housewives in their kitchen or in their yard picking flowers. More contented-looking old couples. . . ."

graphing a disappearing world. Vroman did. He also knew that there was no saving the world that he was recording.

¶ Photography in Europe was largely guided by notions of the picturesque (i.e., the poor, the foreign, the time-worn), the important (i.e., the rich, the famous), and the beautiful. Photographs tended to praise or to aim at neutrality. Americans, less convinced of the permanence of any basic social arrangements, experts on the "reality" and inevitability of change, have more often made photography partisan. Pictures got taken not only to show what should be admired but to reveal what needs to be confronted, deplored—and fixed up. American photography implies a more summary, less stable connection with history; and a relation to geographic and social reality that is both more hopeful and more predatory.

The hopeful side is exemplified in the well-known use of photographs in America to awaken conscience. At the beginning of the century Lewis Hine was appointed staff photographer to the National Child Labor Committee, and his photographs of children working in cotton mills, beet fields, and coal mines did influence legislators to make child labor illegal. During the New Deal, Stryker's FSA project (Stryker was a pupil of Hine's) brought back information about migrant workers and sharecroppers to Washington, so that bureaucrats could figure out how to help them. But even at its most moralistic, documentary photography was also imperious in another sense. Both Thomson's detached traveler's report and the impassioned muckraking of Riis or Hine reflect the urge to appropriate an alien reality. And no reality is exempt from appropriation, neither one that is