

Susan Sontag On Photography

Susan Sontag's influential commentaries concerning photographs were intriguing and controversial. She continued to consider and write about the impact of images on human culture until her death in 2005. The following passage is excerpted from her award-winning *On Photography*, published in 1977.

To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.... [P]rint seems a less treacherous form of leaching out the world, of turning it into a mental object, than photographic images, which now provide most of the knowledge people
5 have about the look of the past and the reach of the present. What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings or drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.

Photographs, which fiddle with the scale of the world, themselves get reduced, blown
10 up, cropped, retouched, doctored, tricked out. They age, plagued by the usual ills of paper objects; they disappear; they become valuable, and get bought and sold; they are reproduced. Photographs, which package the world, seem to invite packaging. They are stuck in albums, framed and set on tables, tacked on walls, projected as slides. Newspapers and magazines feature them; cops alphabetize them; museums exhibit them;
15 publishers compile them.

First Reading

1. Summarize the comparison Sontag expresses in the first paragraph.
2. Explain the force of the details Sontag includes in the second paragraph.

Second Reading

1. Identify several claims Sontag makes in the passage. Select what you believe to be her most remarkable claim and, drawing upon your own knowledge and experience, elaborate upon it.
2. Taken together, Sontag's claims suggest a particular stance. Compare how her stance relates to the positions taken in the Momaday and *LIFE Magazine* passages.

Writing

Argument with Visual Text Synthesis

In her 2003 book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag writes that, unlike photographs, an individual's memory is "unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds." Sontag's position is that well-known photographs provide a shared but, unfortunately, artificial, selective, and therefore misleading record about what society deems as important about its history and character.

In a prepared essay of three to five pages, develop a position on the value that commonly known photographs can bring to a society. Research and refer to at least three well-known photographs that serve your argument.