

In Search of the New Sensibility:
Susan Sontag Writing on Art in the Sixties

Nancy Webb

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts (Art History) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

September, 2015

© Nancy Webb, 2015

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Nancy Webb

Entitled: **In Search of the New Sensibility: Susan Sontag Writing on Art in the Sixties**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Art History)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

_____ Chair

_____ Examiner
Dr. Martha Langford

_____ Examiner
Dr. Alice Ming Wai Jim

_____ Supervisor
Dr. Nicola Pezolet

Approved by:

Dr. Alice Ming Wai Jim, Graduate Program Director

Rebecca Taylor Duclos, Dean of Faculty of Fine Arts

Date: _____

Abstract

In Search of the New Sensibility: Susan Sontag Writing on Art in the Sixties

Nancy Webb

This thesis will offer an in-depth examination of Susan Sontag's collection of essays *Against Interpretation* with the aim of illuminating the process of writing about art. Echoing Sontag's own aesthetic concerns, this thesis focuses more intently on the form of her writings than their content. Her essays are compared to the work of other writers such as Roland Barthes, Clement Greenberg and Chris Kraus and contextualized within a mid-century modernist moment of ocularcentric criticism. Sontag's writing style is examined in relation to autobiography, the dilution of the self within the text and performative writing modes. This thesis also delves into the phenomenological underpinnings of Sontag's writings, asking: how does the body inform the writing process? This line of questioning charts unknown territory by looking at how the use of amphetamines affected Sontag's critical prose, while investigating the cultural importance of speed in the 1960s. The essays in *Against Interpretation* are also measured against the concepts of intimacy and eros and how these intersect with feminist discourse, queer subcultures and Sontag's own sexuality. Navigating the terrain of Sontag's critical prose, this thesis demonstrates how her early essays on art set a precedent for meaningful art writing.

Dedicated to Cynthia June

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my patient and attentive thesis advisor, Dr. Nicola Pezolet for seeing this project through with me. This would have been impossible without your eager support, close readings, generous advice and steadfast book recommendations.

Thank you to Dr. Martha Langford for polishing the rough edges of this thesis with precision. Your welcome guidance, vast knowledge, keen eye and exclamatory marginalia have improved this text immeasurably.

Thank you to Concordia University, the Faculty of Fine Arts and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for supporting this undertaking and to the staff at the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA for helping me dig through Susan Sontag's archives.

Thank you to my fellow art historians for being smart, kind and empathetic and most importantly for bringing the laughs.

Thank you to my brother Jamie for reassurance and lifelong number one fandom and to my family for unwavering encouragement.

Thank you Emily Bergsma for being my devoted reader, feeding me and understanding me down to my core. Thank you Natasha Chaykowski for sharing pizza and tears with me through a long winter. Thank you Matthew Palmer for endless waves of love and levity.

Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	vii
Introduction	1
Section One: Against Interpretation.....	7
Section Two: Tender Prose.....	11
Section Three: Seeing Is All.....	16
Section Four: The “Soluble Self”.....	22
Section Five: The Writing Body.....	25
Section Six: Speed.....	31
Section Seven: Intimacy.....	37
Section Eight: Eros.....	45
Conclusion	52
Figures	55
Bibliography	61

List of Figures

1. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), collection of Concordia University Webster Library.
2. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), 4-5, collection of Concordia University Webster Library.
3. Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation", *Evergreen Review* vol. 8, December 1964, 76-77 and cover image, collection of Concordia University Webster Library.
4. Diane Arbus, *Writer Susan Sontag with her son David*, N.Y.C. 1965, Gelatin silver print, 36.5 x 37.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
5. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes and his mother in Bayonne, circa 1923*, in *Mourning Diary*, trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 2009.
6. Unidentified photographer, *Jackson Pollock, Clement Greenberg, Helen Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner and an unidentified child at the beach, 1952*. Photographic print, 9 x 15 cm. Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Creeds, parties, public men – you
cheat
Principles – I shall forget you and
heed the fashions of my heart
Dead gods, I worship you all,
And churches, and the beauty
of the devotions of others
Also the A Minor Quartet and
rock 'n roll and
The throbbing whiskied consciousness
of Saturday night
and the lazy clarity of bed late
Sunday afternoon.
Spectator and agent, both
I shall have those pleasures before
Bodies give way to years and
I fall to the death which waits for me
at the bottom of the sky.

– Unattributed poem, Journal of Susan Sontag,
December 1957

Introduction

Writing about Susan Sontag's early essays is a way of thinking through writing about art. Writing itself as a subject has always been an originary dot on the map – the uncontested starting point. Because she is a very well known writer and certified famous person, there is absolutely no shortage of literature on Sontag. There is nothing I want less than to burden a pile that is already overflowing. In the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera writes:

We have more and more universities and more and more students. If students are going to earn degrees they've got to come up with dissertation topics. And since dissertation topics can be written about anything under the sun, the number of topics is infinite. Sheets of paper covered with words pile up in archives sadder than cemeteries, because no one visits them, not even on All Saint's Day.¹

The idea of the sad archive (sadder than a cemetery) has urged me throughout this process to be more imaginative about asking questions. Sontag herself remarked in the sixties that redundancy is the “principal affliction of modern life.”² At times, this project has veered dangerously close to biography, and then it swerved too close to becoming a scaffolding of historical context without a core – just bones.

Deciding to write about writing was a risk. One of the first discussions I had about my idea with a faculty member produced the term *meta-thesis* – a body of art writing about writing about art. Because the thesis required substance – a case study – I brought in Susan Sontag's early writings. The essays in *Against Interpretation* provide a Petri dish of words rippling through history. Sontag's essays also feel substantial; they are hardy enough to withstand prodding and diverse enough to hold up against a variety of questions. Some of her arguments, especially those relating to interpretation and writing, remain relevant today. Writers continue to cite these first texts of Sontag's to bolster their own ideas now. In addition, Sontag's fluidity as a writer (of novels, essays, films, plays) makes her an ideal case study for the flexibility of the critic. She never considered herself an art critic or an academic, yet her trusted words guided the tastes and opinions of her readers. Similarly, she held dual citizenship in both the worlds of “high art” and popular culture at a time when most critics positioned themselves resolutely on either side.

One way to approach the question of writing about art in the twenty-first century would have been to compile samples of writing by current art critics and assess their effectiveness or parse out their strategies. However, the result would have almost certainly been shallow,

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 103.

² Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), 13.

distracted and scattered. Plurality and overabundance characterize current writing on art, which far outruns its readers – it would be impossible to read it all. James Elkins takes this issue on most notably in *What Happened to Art Criticism?* – the first in a handful of investigations Elkins has conducted into this subject matter. In the opening lines of the book, he asserts: “There is no way to measure the sheer quantity of contemporary writing on visual art”.³ There is also no way to measure the quantity of contemporary writing on other topics such as poetry, travel and politics that lends meaning to visual art. As such, terms like art writing and art criticism are used provisionally in this thesis – that is, they are used in place of something more accurate and more encompassing.

Elkins’s diagnosis of art criticism: dying, but everywhere. Writing on art proliferates aimlessly. Contemporary criticism finds itself in a sustained moment of crisis, evidenced by the past decade’s flood of roundtables, conferences and entire volumes dedicated to answering the very basic question: how does one write about art?⁴ The practice of translating the sensual into the linguistic seems more fraught than ever, with the rise of the hybrid critic-curator-journalist and the concomitant collapse of criticality into praise, the dubious relationship between those who write about art and the commercial art market, the obligatory and buffet-style application of critical theory and the self-propelling pressure to produce that manifests itself in art criticism for art criticism’s sake – operating independently of quality, relevance or demand. This hectic ecosystem informed the decision to focus intently on one example, and draw conclusions from a contained source. Rather than skim hundreds of art reviews to get an idea of what it means to write about art, I am taking Sontag’s essays as precedents for a style of writing that has since evolved, but owes much to her.

This examination of Sontag is more concerned with the form of her writing than its content. In her twenties, Sontag asked of herself: “Why is writing important? Mainly out of

³ James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago, Ill: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 2.

⁴ See Ben Davis’s article in *C Magazine*’s “Criticism” issue: “Surviving The Crisis,” *C: International Contemporary Art* 118 (2013): 12-13; Hal Foster’s follow-up to a roundtable on the crisis of art criticism published in *October*’s Spring 2002 issue, “Post-Critical,” *October* 139 (Winter 2012): 3-8; Grant Kester’s recent article “The Device Laid Bare: On Some Limitations in Current Art Criticism,” *e-flux journal* 50 (December 2013); Jeff Khonsary and Melanie O’Brian, *Judgment and Contemporary Art Criticism*, Vancouver, BC: Artspeak, 2010 (the print evidence of a panel on art criticism organized by Artspeak and *Fillip*). These are just a handful of recent examples.

egotism, I suppose. Because I want to be that persona, a writer, and not because there is something I must say. Yet why not that too?”⁵ As one of her biographers puts it, “Unlike authors who write *because* they have something to say. Sontag writes *in order* to have something to say.”⁶ And writing became its own project, indeed, “the Project”. In a 1975 interview, she matter-of-factly states that what fed her decision to divorce her Freudian scholar partner Philip Rieff and move to New York to pursue writing was choosing “between the Life and the Project.”⁷ The act of writing, for Sontag, seems to have started out as a generative impulse without a clear objective. This seems more in line with the way that artists are perceived at their beginnings. Their first experiments are mainly formal; they make things in order to become. The motif of The Artist looms large on the horizon, in the same way that the The Writer motif provided Sontag with a kind of template.

Books and essays about writers tend to overemphasize content. When we read about artists, we’re inclined to want more than a reiteration of their work’s content. We want biographical details, details about the mechanics of making, how they laboured, what informed them, who their friends were. But with writers, there is still this insistent focus on content – the finished product on the page. Sontag, with her unwavering attention to form, would have lamented this. In a journal entry of 1965, she writes about her disappointment in the way that the reception of literature lagged behind art. That people couldn’t accept what Gertrude Stein wrote for its form, couldn’t get outside of the content and accept the novel as an object: “People who’ll take Larry Poons or Frank Stella are mystified by G[ertrude] Stein saying ‘One + two + three + four...’”⁸ Again, summoning Stein in her essay “On Style,” Sontag draws attention to the way that she manipulates language in order to alter cognition, or guide experience. The repetitiveness of Stein’s *Melanctha* and the use of common monosyllables jolt the reader into a “presentness of experience.”⁹ Although Sontag concludes of Stein’s work: “Every style is a means of insisting on something”, this maxim could be adapted to her own work.¹⁰ It would be a gargantuan irony to over interpret *Against Interpretation*.

⁵ Daniel Schreiber, *Susan Sontag: A Biography*, trans. David B. Dollenmayer (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 46.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 51.

⁸ Susan Sontag and David Rieff, *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 66.

⁹ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 35.

¹⁰ Ibid.

What do I mean by form? I suppose it begins with something very rudimentary and logical: the essay. The short critical essay. Layered on top of that are sensibility, structure, style, tenor. And on top of that, still, are Sontag's recently published journals, their divulgences, and how these things all read together. Content is kind of disposable anyway. In the paperback reissue of *Against Interpretation*, Sontag admits, "Before I wrote the essays I did not believe many of the ideas espoused in them; when I wrote them, I believed what I wrote; subsequently, I have come to disbelieve some of these same ideas again."¹¹ She also begins the title essay with a Willem de Kooning quote about content being a mere glimpse: "It's very tiny – very tiny, content".¹² Given the tininess of content, the form is probably what first attracts most people, unknowingly, to *Against Interpretation* even decades after its first appearance. Its title is a denial, plain and simple, and its essays are laid out cleanly in five sections. Citations are few, but each essay pleasurably snowballs into a nexus of interrelated references. Perhaps it is what Liam Kennedy calls Sontag's "intellectual generalism" that allows her such formal flexibility.¹³ Consciously operating outside of any one critical school, untethered to an academic institution, her aura as a rogue intellectual was most potent in the anti-establishment sixties and early seventies.¹⁴ Although Sontag owes the influence of the short essay form to the New York Intellectuals, by the time *Against Interpretation* came out, the independent critic was becoming an extinct species. Rapid professionalization gave rise to what Kennedy describes as "a 'New Class' of intellectual specialists – technical experts, policy advisors and academics" and intellectual opinions began to calcify around defined disciplines.¹⁵ The content of *Against Interpretation* supplies a pretext for looking closer at its form and the context in which the volume was released. In "On Style", Sontag opines that the content of art is merely the lure that engages consciousness; form transfigures it. On the first page of one of her notebooks of 1965,

¹¹ Susan Sontag and David Rieff, *Susan Sontag: Essays of the 1960s & 70s* (New York: Library of America), 4.

¹² Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 3.

¹³ Liam Kennedy, *Susan Sontag: Mind as Passion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 4.

¹⁴ Although Sontag only shifted to the overtly political in her public presence and writings in her later years, she was openly opposed to the war in Vietnam and left-leaning in the years following the publication of *Against Interpretation*, which cast her as a young, radical intellectual icon of sorts.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12. In 1965, Harold Rosenberg also comments on the effect that professionalization has on the arts: "...the essential mark of a profession is its evolution of a unique language or jargon into which it translates its subject matter and in which its methods, purposes and relations to other arts and sciences are formulated. The more incomprehensible this lingo is to outsiders, the more thoroughly it identifies the profession as such and elevates it out of the reach of mere amateurs and craftsmen" in Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 64.

she taped a piece of paper with the Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin's words on it: "to live is to defend a form."¹⁶

This thesis will offer an in-depth examination of Sontag's early formulation of a different kind of critic; one whose subjectivity is fluid, who does not shy away from emotional difficulty or subversive topics, who does not bury her words beneath hastily devised theoretical claims and who rejuvenated a discussion of the sensual in relation to writing about art in the 1960s. Although Sontag's oeuvre is immense and she has published many well-known works, I will focus only on the essays in the collection *Against Interpretation*, in order to provide a focused investigation within a limited space. I aim to contextualize Sontag's work, while opening up a broader discussion about art writing, and as such, a portion of this thesis will be devoted to shedding light on the ideologies that informed writing on art of the 1960s.

Section one, "Against Interpretation" provides a foundation for the rest of the thesis, describing Sontag's first published book of criticism in detail. Section two, "Tender Prose" compares the writing approaches of Sontag and one of her primary influences, Roland Barthes, with a specific focus on strategic self-divulgence. Section three, "Seeing Is All" contextualizes Sontag's writing within the mid-century modernist trend of ocularcentric criticism, exemplified by Clement Greenberg, while addressing sensory hegemonies and questioning whether or not modes of sensory input can imprint themselves on the page. Section four, "The 'Soluble Self'" explores the dilution of subjectivity – the extent to which a writer can disappear within a text. This section deals with Sontag's essays as the runoff of novels-in-progress and how she engaged with the artists, filmmakers and writers that she wrote about the way that a novelist inhabits her own characters, dissolving into her subjects and transcending the self through writing. Sections five and six – "The Writing Body" and "Speed" – delve into the corporeal and phenomenological underpinnings of Sontag's writing, asking: how does the body inform the writing process? Sontag's writings are also discussed in relation to performance theory. "Speed" extends the line of questioning initiated in "The Writing Body" to the implications of writing on drugs, charting unknown territory by looking at how Dexamyl affected Sontag's critical prose and the cultural importance of amphetamines in the 1960s. Section seven, "Intimacy" reveals the roots of disinterested modernist criticism, its Kantian undertones, and how it still bleeds into the practice of writing about art today. This section also takes on the question of whether subjectivity denigrates seriousness, focusing on this question's feminist entanglements by

¹⁶ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 125. The passage is composer Anton Webern quoting poet Friedrich Hölderlin. This information provided by David Rieff in an editor's note.

engaging Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* in a comparative study. The final section, "Eros", orbits Sontag's famous call to "an erotics of art", probing the relationship between aesthetics and erotics, especially in the context of Freudian revisionist theories of the fifties and sixties. This section also pulls from Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" and "Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*", ruminating on her relationship to queer subcultures and her own sexuality. We will begin by permeating the outer layer of Sontag's critical writing, with an introduction to the collection of essays that launched her career in the sixties.

Against Interpretation

I've checked out three different copies of Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* from the library. The first was a Delta edition with a cracked green cover and rounded white art deco lettering. The second was a generic copy of the Farrar Straus and Giroux edition, rebound in black. The third is an early Dell Publishing Co. edition; its flaking cover is pea soup-coloured and its eponymous first essay has been heavily annotated with pink highlighter, pencil and blue and red pencil crayon. Pages four and five are inflamed with red splotches, where words have been singled out and enclosed in scarlet bubbles: "obtuse", "onerous", "insensitive", "innocence", "theory", "consciousness", "stuck", "nuisance", "code", "translation", "interpretation". The sentence fragment "dangerous emotions" has been underlined and a deliberate red stake driven between the two words. Down the right side margin of page five, the page where Sontag deflates the authority of interpretation, wild scratches vertically spell out "FUCK SERIOUS" (figs. 1 and 2).

Since its initial publication in 1964, "Against Interpretation" has sparked strong feelings in those who have something invested in the act of interpretation – artists, writers, students, scholars. Sontag's original call to spruce up dusty modes of interpretation is a rebellious siren song, leading writers down a mutinous path. As Cynthia Ozick remembers it in her obituary for Sontag, "Against Interpretation" "was less a summons to hedonism (though it was that too) than it was a denigration of history."¹⁷ It is also, contradictorily, an example of doctrinaire exposition coming from a writer fresh out of an Ivy League education and eager to make a name for herself among the pantheon of Serious Modernist Critics. An intoxicating mix of structure and revolt, the essays in *Against Interpretation* were written between 1962 and 1965 and cover a broad range of topics in art, literature and film, much like Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*. A few of the major artistic phenomena discussed are: French New Wave films; Alain-Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute and the New Novel; Allan Kaprow's Happenings; Jack Smith's film *Flaming Creatures* and the pop culture miscellany that Sontag famously groups under the heading "Camp". The collection is divided into five sections. Section one contains the title essay and "On Style," an underrated bit of writing that deftly maneuvers through the themes of style vs. stylization, content, criticism, ethics vs. aesthetics and the will. Section two is devotional; Sontag directs her attention to other writers and intellectuals including Cesare Pavese, Simone Weil, Albert Camus, Michel Leiris, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georg Lukács, Jean Genet and Nathalie Sarraute. Sections

¹⁷ Cynthia Ozick, *The Din in the Head: Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 5.

three and four focus on theatre and film, respectively – both demonstrating Sontag’s ability to transcend medium as a critic and deliver broader meanings to readers regardless of their familiarity with the stage or screen. The fifth and final section of *Against Interpretation* is more loosely organized around cultural shifts and budding artistic phenomena such as evolving attitudes toward sex and sexuality in popular culture and the move away from medium-specificity in art engendered by Happenings. Overall, the essays speak to the artistic, political and social currents of the decade, signaling a tension with certain established systems of interpretation and aesthetic sensibilities.

The essay “Against Interpretation” originally appeared in 1964 in *The Evergreen Review*, an avant-garde literary magazine (fig. 3). In it, Sontag calls for a reassessment of the role of the critic in light of the dulling of sensory capabilities. She traces a brief history of art and the project of interpretation, from art as mythical or spiritual, to art as mimesis, to the symbolism and translation of religious texts and images in late classical antiquity, to her contemporary moment. Sontag ultimately takes issue with what she identifies in art, literary and film criticism as the “hypertrophy of the intellect over sensual capability” – an aggressive desire to excavate content in order to unveil meaning.¹⁸ This process, she contends, deprives an artwork of its immediacy.

In her essay, she labours over the differing values of form and content, and how each affects interpretation. Content, she argues, is vulnerable to interpretation, whereas form – if it is constantly changing – can sidestep interpretation and classification. She identifies “programmatic avant-gardism” – an evasive avant-garde in perpetual motion – as the solution to the devitalizing effects of interpretation, along with more attention to form and new vocabularies for describing form that take into account temporal and spatial elements. This was a prescient observation in the sixties, when so much of the art and criticism scene in North America was still centered primarily on painting and vision.¹⁹ For example, Sontag goes beyond the purely ocular in her essay “Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition”, paying close attention to the treatment of time in these fleeting artistic spectacles, remarking: “Happenings are always in the present tense.”²⁰

Sontag compares the frenetic, impersonal and polluted modern experience (specifically related to urban living) to the equally polluted critical sphere, congested with the noisy chatter of

¹⁸ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 7.

¹⁹ With the exception of a few critics. For example, Harold Rosenberg, who was beginning to outline a critical sensibility based on painting as process.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 266.

critics endlessly layering interpretations that obscure a more lucid experience of art. Specifically, she critiques Marxist and Freudian methods of interpretation, which assume that the text, event or object is meaningless without interpretation, arguing that a reliance on prescribed models of interpretation only indicates an ignorance of the immediacy of experience.

Sontag's resistance to an overtly ocular and theoretical form of criticism represents a break from the critical tradition of the New York Intellectuals and *The Partisan Review*. While it is difficult to circumscribe a cohesive group, the New York Intellectuals included writers such as Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, Mary McCarthy and Philip Rahv who were bound together by similar intellectual concerns and similar views on communism (which later mutated into anti-communism). The art critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg are often annexed to this group as well. Most of the New York Intellectuals began as literary critics, but ushered in a generalist style of cultural criticism that came to define postwar intellectual activity in America. Sontag was often referred to as a successor to Mary McCarthy (earning the nickname "The Dark Lady of American Letters") in a predominantly male intellectual-literary circle. However, Sontag experienced both generational and ideological clashes with the New York Intellectuals early on, who themselves were struggling to keep pace with the development of modernism and were stubbornly tied to all things literary. Meanwhile, Sontag began widening her critical sphere by writing about emergent and experimental art forms. Evocative of this shift was her call to "an erotics of art" at the end of "Against Interpretation".

Against Interpretation as a collection is not a canonical academic text. Rather, its parts have been splintered and parsed out to meet the needs of individual specializations – "Notes on 'Camp'" has been revisited by gender studies and queer theory scholars, "The Imagination of Disaster" and "Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*" among others populate film studies syllabi and "Against Interpretation" makes occasional appearances in introductory art history courses. In the context of art history, Sontag's later work is more commonly summoned, particularly in order to enrich an understanding of photography and the ethics of looking – for example, *On Photography* (1977), *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). Liam Kennedy suggests that reticence among academics toward teaching Sontag's earlier texts stems from a suspicion about the "universal intellectual" or non-specialist writer.²¹ Because of its unusual structure and equivocal content, *Against Interpretation* as a collection has been underutilized by art historians. However, there are lessons for aspiring

²¹ Kennedy, *Susan Sontag*, 13.

art writers enfolded in its pages. Its varied subject matter, jumping from film to literature to visual art, is like an early crash course in sharpening attention in the face plurality.

It is through Sontag's recently published journals that I came to know her essays more intimately. I found the journals gripping in their candour – although, all writing undeniably goes through a vetting process, a sloughing and polishing routine that would in this case include Sontag's son David Rieff's editorial decisions. Sontag's journals are the necessary counterpart to her essays. This is because the essays focus on what is external to Sontag – art, film, literature – and the journals turn the critical eye inward, analyzing sensations, relationships, mental states. Combined, these outputs form what Kennedy calls: “an intellectual self-examination made public.”²²

Read in tandem, the essays and journals intensify one another. A defining feature of Sontag's way of understanding the world begins to reveal itself. She has a desire to shell experiences and phenomena – to isolate form, or give form to feeling. This is a process of mitosis, a delicate splitting that is almost imperceptible. One example, in 1964 Sontag writes in her journal “Loving = the sensation of being in an intense form. Like pure oxygen (as distinct from air).”²³ In the same journal, Sontag describes smell as “All accent, no syntax.”²⁴ In the essay “On Style,” she asserts: “In almost every case, our manner of appearing is our manner of being. The mask is the face.”²⁵ This way of structuring experiences is undoubtedly a residue of Sontag's early studies in philosophy at Harvard. She pares things down to their primary elements and separates them in order to illuminate their lesser-understood parts. Thoughts, objects and sensations are peeled apart from their vehicles – perception, bodies, language. What is left exposed is the site of incision. One question that drives this exploration of Sontag's writing is: how was this way of thinking revealed in her criticism, specifically in the essays in *Against Interpretation*? How was Sontag's writing “like pure oxygen (as distinct from air)”?

²² Kennedy, *Susan Sontag*, 3.

²³ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁵ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 18. It should be stated that Sontag's intellectual formation did not occur in a bubble. For example, this particular passage seems indebted to sociologist Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959).

Tender Prose

I experience the writing as given to me – sometimes, almost, as dictated. I let it come, try not to interfere with it. I respect it, because it's me and yet more than me. It's personal and transpersonal, both.²⁶

– Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 1964

I'm *anti*-autobiographical.²⁷

– Susan Sontag to Sigrid Nunez, *Sempre Susan*, 2011

In the introduction to the second set of his mother's published journals, David Rieff mentions that Sontag was entertaining the idea of writing her autobiography. This was unlike her, he says, as "she was someone who always preferred to write as little as possible about herself directly."²⁸ The autobiographical, instead, is mobilized less explicitly in Sontag's critical writing. The personal gurgles up through the cracks of polemic. For example, Rieff claims that there is almost nothing of Sontag in her 1978 book *Illness as Metaphor*, but there is plenty of her. There is a driving erudition and a desire to clarify, to give voice to illness, which speaks from behind so many other masks. Although it is never acknowledged explicitly, Sontag was undergoing treatment for breast cancer during the time that she wrote the book – the subjective seeps in. Because the autobiographical in Sontag's critical writing is impossible to measure or authenticate, it is perhaps more productive to look at how her writing style echoed other writers' experiments with subjectivity in the postwar era. Specifically, I have chosen to focus on the consonance between Sontag's and Roland Barthes's approaches to critical writing, as Barthes was for Sontag a long-lasting and important influence. Barthes was also, like Sontag, a writer for whom the subject of writing itself was crucial. Some of these consonances have been gleaned from Barthes's writings published after *Against Interpretation* and, as such, it would be anachronistic to deem those texts influences. However, rather than providing a succinct timeline of influences here, I aim to draw out Barthes's writerly characteristics that may have begun as influences, but developed over time in tandem with Sontag's own growth as a writer. There is a continuity in the closeness with which each regards their reader.

In *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970*, Henry M. Sayre gathers Barthes and Sontag under the umbrella of what he terms *critical performance*, a new approach to critical writing that sought to overturn disinterested formalist criticism in the sixties

²⁶ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 38.

²⁷ Sigrid Nunez, *Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag* (New York: Atlas & Co, 2011), 27.

²⁸ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, vii.

and seventies by allowing subjectivity to enter writing by way of performance. Instead of critics bestowing meaning onto artworks from a purportedly fixed critical stance, writers like Sontag and Barthes proposed a more relational interpretive strategy, one that relied on the artwork to elicit a set of performed, malleable responses from the critic. Barthes often explicitly compared writing to performance, while according to Sayre, across the Atlantic, Sontag also prompted a turn toward *critical performance* with “Against Interpretation”. Sayre’s apt description is worth quoting at length:

That essay ends with a call for a new relation to art based on the immediacy of art’s experience as opposed to the questionable permanency of its content. “We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more. In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.” This is a profoundly anti-New Critical position, one which shifts our attention away from the art object per se in order to focus on our responses to it. To many it seemed to promise only the most profoundly subjective kind of criticism and threatened to atomize the experience of art so completely that the necessity for criticism itself would become obsolete. It seemed narcissistic and self-indulgent – it was anything but. What almost every reviewer of Sontag failed to understand at the time – just as they later failed to understand the similar sense of self-indulgence apparent in a work like *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* – was that Sontag was above all else a writer, someone whose thought enters the public forum in order to be heard, debated, tested against other responses. It was this dialogue which Sontag wished to inspire, the spirited dialogue of convictions deeply felt. “Against Interpretation” was *against* a much more truly narcissistic criticism that claimed to have the final word, to fix meaning, to close discourse. Sontag was asking that art be allowed to *live on*.²⁹

The seductive mix of subjectivity, writing and art made for a kind of cloaked autobiographical criticism practiced by both Sontag and Barthes. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes formulates his own subjectivity as being “at the conclusion of a very complex process of biological, historical, sociological, neurotic elements (education, social class, childhood configuration, etc.).”³⁰ This process of the art writer making avowals before sinking into a topic (unveiling their own position) continues to be utilized effectively by art writers and theorists today.³¹

²⁹ Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 250.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

³¹ One example that comes to mind is the prologue to Amelia Jones’s *Seeing Differently*: “I grew up a white middle-class girl in the American South, in Durham, North Carolina, with parents who were good Second World War-era ‘Roosevelt liberals’...” Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2012), xxiii. Another example is Lucy Lippard’s *The Lure of the Local* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

Crucially, neither Barthes nor Sontag intended to be explicitly autobiographical in their criticism. As François Cusset points out in *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, American readers discovering Barthes in the eighties connected him with “autobiography, criticism as confession, and homosexual literary style,” even though these characteristics (according to Cusset) were “antithetical to Barthes’s sense of discretion, his aversion for *doxa*, and his habitually indirect and periphrastic approach to sexual issues.”³² The vastly contradictory information available pertaining to the question of whether or not Barthes’s or Sontag’s writing was autobiographical leads one to question the definition of *autobiographical* as a descriptor for criticism in the first place. No standardized measure exists for how many divulgences, uses of the first person or references to personal history add up to a critical practice certifiably autobiographical in nature. Applied to Sontag and Barthes, the term autobiographical signifies lived experience aestheticized – intimate pasts, urges, thoughts, wishes organized around outside experiences, or mobilized to make sense of artworks, films, books and cultural phenomena.

Barthes’s *Mourning Diary* is stylized grief. Written after his mother’s death, it unravels a narrative of loss in sparse, aphoristic fragments. If Sontag’s journals, *Reborn* and *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, form the visceral substructure of her public essays, Barthes’s *Mourning Diary* does the same for *Camera Lucida*. Photographic theory and mourning are mutually supportive, hewn together by tenderly crafted prose. It sounds like a critique, but Barthes aestheticized pain well – or as one reviewer put it, he “ached, elegantly.”³³

Along with a veiled autobiographical impulse, the other Barthesian strategies that found their way into Sontag’s writing are: list-making as argument-building; detailed taxonomies; a fondness for short forms and devotion to the aphoristic, compressed essay style; and an interest in muting the lines between fiction and criticism. Sontag also inherited from Barthes the impulse to mix the critical with the sensual. In her introduction to *A Barthes Reader*, she reminds us that Barthes constantly compared reading to eros, writing to seduction. He was on one hand a calculating structuralist and semiotician and on the other a pleasure-seeker, finding intellectual stimulation everywhere (a generalist), but especially in the folds and minute details of a subject (e.g. the choreography of a wrestling match in the essay “The World of Wrestling”, or the almost

³² François Cusset, *French Theory How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 285.

³³ Dwight Garner, “Wallowing in Grief Over Maman,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2010, accessed May 28, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/15/books/15book.html>.

imperceptible formal patterns of a writer's work, as in "Flaubert and the Sentence", "The Last Happy Writer", *On Racine*).

Barthes opens writing up to the senses, remarking in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France that "writing is to be found wherever words have flavor (the French words for *flavor* and *knowledge* have the same Latin root)[...] It is the taste of words which makes knowledge profound, fecund."³⁴ Sontag's appeal to an "erotics of art" in *Against Interpretation* is called to mind here, and is relayed by Barthes's claim in an excerpt from *The Pleasure of the Text* that "pleasure is continually disappointed, reduced, deflated, in favor of strong, noble values: Truth, Death, Progress, Struggle, Joy, etc."³⁵ Although Sontag sometimes got stuck in the gears of high moralism and capital S Seriousness, *Against Interpretation* is brimming with pleasure. In "One Culture and the New Sensibility", she proclaims that "the purpose of art is always, ultimately, to give pleasure," argues for "the space of pleasure" in Jack Smith's film *Flaming Creatures*, discusses Robert Bresson's desire to get beyond the pleasure of "physical beauty and artifice" and move toward a "pleasure which is more permanent, more edifying, more sincere," problematizes Simone Weil's ascetic "contempt for pleasure," argues that the current era's "greatest artistic pleasure is in self-laceration" in reference to the "metatheater" of Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett, and warns that the rapidity of innovation in art during the sixties may trounce the pleasure of familiarity.³⁶

As a critical strategy, Sontag learned from Barthes to seek out the unpopular, the unfamiliar and the new, or to refresh the familiar. There is an undeniable emphasis on being descriptive over being tyrannical when it comes to judgment and interpretation (of artworks, literature, etc.). Writing is not just a vehicle for critical judgments, but has a sensibility of its own – what Barthes refers to as the "metalanguage" of criticism. Sontag's introduction to *Against Interpretation* echoes Barthes; she defines her writing as "meta-criticism", describing it as an attempt to reveal the skeletal matter of judgments and taste. A self-reflexive criticism undermines its own activity, chipping away at its intrinsic assumptions and patterns. The writing refers to itself, always. It advances on the page in its own shadow.

In *Consuming Pleasures: Intellectuals and Popular Culture in the Postwar World*, Daniel Horowitz draws an interesting parallel between Sontag and Barthes – that both writers boldly foregrounded pleasure and sexuality in their analyses of popular culture (Sontag in "Notes on

³⁴ Susan Sontag, ed., *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 465.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 411.

³⁶ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 303, 231, 192, 51, 138, 100.

‘Camp’” and Barthes in *Mythologies*). Horowitz also brings to light that although Barthes’s *Mythologies* was published in France in 1957, the first English translation did not appear in North America until 1972. This means that Sontag played an integral role in introducing Barthes’s distinct style of writing and analytical approach to popular culture to English-speaking audiences in America in her essays of the sixties. Horowitz implies, through the reproduction of vastly different American and European texts, that American intellectuals held more conservative opinions about the place of popular culture in academia and in scholarly publications. This places Sontag once again in between cultural traditions. The pluralistic and sometimes opposing influences in her writing of the sixties link her to the process of montage. Walter Benjamin thought of *The Arcades Project* as “literary montage”. He writes: “I needn’t say anything. Merely show....the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.”³⁷ Similarly, the manner in which Sontag takes up the material objects of culture – the perfumed handkerchiefs and Flash Gordon comics and Tiffany lamps – and turns them over in her hands, affording them careful analysis before translating their various significations into words, bears resemblance to both Benjamin’s and Barthes’s attention to detail and “montage” method of elucidation. Indeed, there is something distinctly literary about Sontag’s criticism (in her mind, the essays were always subordinate to her novel-writing), but we only glimpse Sontag *the person* in brief flickers, in the interstices of a swiftly-moving curtain of montaged references. Her essays function similarly to the way she characterizes Barthes’s: slipping between autobiography and fiction, dissolving the distinction between the essay and the novel – ultimately, muting the boundaries between critical prose, storytelling and autobiography.

³⁷ Daniel Horowitz, *Consuming Pleasures: Intellectuals and Popular Culture in the Postwar World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 94.

Seeing Is All

Body type:
 Tall
 Low blood pressure
 Need lots of sleep
 Sudden craving for pure sugar (but dislike desserts – not a high enough concentration)
 Intolerance for liquor
 Heavy smoking
 Tendency to anemia
 Heavy protein craving
 Asthma
 Migraines³⁸

– Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 1964

Three photographs. The first one: Susan Sontag in a wool duffel coat on a grey day in New York City in 1965, with David (fig. 4). Mother and son become vulnerable bruises before Diane Arbus's lens, just like the rest of the photographer's cast of forlorn characters. "Anybody Arbus photographed was a freak", Sontag would later say in *On Photography*.³⁹ Upon first viewing, the photograph immediately reminds me of second similar photograph of Roland Barthes as a child in his mother's arms (fig. 5). A few weeks after I make this association, I read the following passage in Sigrid Nunez's memoir *Sempre Susan*: "[Susan] showed me a photograph that she cherished, the young Roland Barthes with his mother: already quite a big boy at the time and thus a little comical to behold, aloft in the arms of *maman*, long legs dangling. Roland Barthes, one of Susan's greatest literary heroes [...] had lived with his mother till the day she died."⁴⁰

With Sontag, the person is difficult to extricate from the writer. She attempts to carve out a rift between the two. But is this division necessary? Imagine the other titan critics of the postwar period, living in their skins and writing from within this wrapping. Greenberg seems to have lectured from above somewhere, a disembodied voice, assuredly listing dictums of taste and quality. Now, the third photo: Greenberg, Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler and Lee Krasner at the beach in 1952. Greenberg sits between Pollock and Frankenthaler, leaning toward the camera (fig. 6). Bald, pale, squinting – hopelessly fleshy and human.

Greenberg eliminates the body entirely from the art critical process in his essay "Sculpture in Our Time": "The human body is no longer postulated as the agent of space in

³⁸ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 19.

³⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 35.

⁴⁰ Nunez, *Sempre Susan*, 99.

either pictorial or sculptural art; now it is eyesight alone, and eyesight has more freedom of movement and invention within three dimensions than within two."⁴¹

In her book *Eyesight Alone*, Caroline Jones describes Greenberg as "obsessed with the visual."⁴² For Jones, Greenberg's visual fixation unmistakably communicated the motivations of mid-century American modernism: to isolate, bureaucratize and commodify the senses. The hegemony of eyesight lent itself well to the interpretation of popular art forms at the time, particularly colour field painting, which legitimized a kind of sensory channeling (sensory information pared down to visual purity). As Jones and many other scholars have commented, bodies and sensory experiences became increasingly controlled in the postwar years. The rapid advancement of technology and the affordability and availability of mass-produced household goods (particularly in the United States) reconceptualized norms of hygiene, cleanliness and beauty. Enter the airtight body, the polished body, the odourless body.

As Jones explains in a follow-up essay to *Eyesight Alone*, published in the exhibition catalogue *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, "At mid-century in particular, modernist technologies of the self targeted ever more finely the way sense data were to enter those portals [of the body]: modes of hearing and thinking, smelling and tasting, feeling and seeing."⁴³ Perfume, sound-proofed buildings, artificial flavouring – Jones ruminates on several examples like these, which signalled the modern drive to organize, separate and commodify sensory experiences, avoiding the chaos of a muddled sensorium at all costs. This process of division also solidified "an ocular moment" in which Greenberg must have been at home, writing as an adolescent that he felt "contempt for everything I hear, see, smell, eat and feel."⁴⁴ Vision afforded curmudgeonly Greenberg what touch and smell, for example, couldn't: *distance*. The formalist reliance on vision meant both critical distance (disinterested judgment) and physical distance from the body (looking as disembodied thought).

In "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism," Mary Kelly reiterates Greenberg's totalizing theory of the senses, noting that in his 1961 essay "Modernist Painting," he ordains: "Visual art should confine itself to what is given in visual experience and make no reference to any other orders of

⁴¹ Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986-1993), 59.

⁴² Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 6.

⁴³ Caroline A. Jones, *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 10.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

experience.”⁴⁵ Such were the conditions under which one of the most influential modernist critics experienced art and wrote about it.

Greenberg’s vision-centred approach is rooted in a Kantian formulation of aesthetics, which collides with a distinctly modernist style of criticism. Amelia Jones explains that this model requires contradictorily that the critic make both subjective and universal judgments while maintaining a patina of “disinterestedness” in their writing – a requisite attitude for being taken seriously and maintaining the illusion of neutrality.⁴⁶ The objective purity of the modernist critic’s position (stripped of personal identifiers) mirrors the formal purity that Greenberg assigns to abstract painting. Purity manifests itself as non-figurative visual information and results in an experience of aesthetic immediacy. A modernist picture, for Greenberg, “succeeds when its identity as a picture, and as pictorial experience, shuts out the awareness of it as a physical object.”⁴⁷ This experience presents itself as exceedingly cerebral – of the eyes and the brain, transcending the body almost entirely. The work of art – or more specifically, for Greenberg, the abstract painting – is non-functional. It does not participate in the world; it barely constitutes a physical object in space.

In 1965, Sontag writes in her journal: “Eye an incarcerated organ – open to blandishments – doesn’t grab, demand immediate satisfaction.”⁴⁸ In an entry from the previous year, she describes smelling as giving “one a knowledge of sensation rinsed clean of thought (unlike hearing and seeing).”⁴⁹ Smell has no content, it is an accent, a hue. It does not register cognitively in the same way that vision does. Language is hung upon things perceived visually and gives meaning to form. Smells activate nameless sensations and memories. In *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Herbert Marcuse points out that smell and taste are senses of excess, “proximity senses” that are most prone to repression and taboo, but also the most emancipatory senses.⁵⁰ Freud also cast a murky shadow on these senses, connecting them to vulgarity, bodily pleasure and sexuality. As the co-author of a book on Freud and an avid reader of Marcuse (whose work sparked in her a special interest in the politics of eroticism), Sontag’s focus on smell and the less-discussed senses was no coincidence. She plainly acknowledges histories of

⁴⁵ Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 87.

⁴⁶ Jones, *Seeing Differently*, 27.

⁴⁷ Greenberg, *Collected Essays*, 33.

⁴⁸ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 77.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 39. Original publication: *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

sensory regulation in the essay “One Culture and the New Sensibility”: “But it is important to realize that human sensory awareness has not merely a biology, but a specific history, each culture placing a premium on certain senses and inhibiting others.”⁵¹ Of course, Sontag was not alone in wondering about the reciprocity between aesthetic forms and human sensations.⁵² This question had occupied philosophers in the field of aesthetics long before Sontag’s essays surfaced, and in the early fifties the philosopher Susanne Langer had dissected the sensed qualities of forms extensively in her book-length philosophical theory of art *Feeling and Form*. Although Sontag doesn’t mention Langer in *Against Interpretation*, the congruity of their views is striking. Both advocate for the transparency of artworks – seeing a work for what it is, beyond its interpretations, beyond discourse. Langer reinvigorates intuition as a viable form of reasoning or cognition, while Sontag yearns to translate a directness of experience in her writing.⁵³

Because it would be impossible to survey Sontag’s entire intellectual field and arsenal of influences in the space of this thesis, I have chosen to highlight postwar attitudes toward art and embodiment by way of a comparison between two different, but not adversarial critics. Greenberg rises to the challenge here, playing foil to Sontag, but only because his critical style provides the sharpest counterpoint to Sontag’s.

The rigidity of Greenberg’s prose begs the question: is the road from ocular perception to writing perhaps more concrete or restrictive than from, for example, olfaction? Were the patterns of Greenberg’s mainly visual perception reflected in his style of articulation? Does the syntax match the mode of sensory reception? Caroline Jones begins to answer this question in her analysis of Greenberg’s prose, particularly his essay “Louis and Noland” of 1960: “...for the eye to sense the threadedness and wovenness of the fabric underneath...The effect conveys a sense...of color as somehow disembodied, and therefore more purely optical.”⁵⁴ Evident in this passage, says Jones, is the way that Greenberg distills tactile materials (thread) into abstract qualities (“threadedness”). Materiality is severed from its relationship to the body (what it feels like) and “subsumed in the optical” – flattened, neutered, purified.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 302.

⁵² Discourse on the body and experience in relation to art was already being fortified in the interwar period, as exemplified by the American Pragmatists and John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934).

⁵³ For a more in-depth comparison of Sontag and Langer, see: Leslie Luebbers, “A Way of Feeling is a Way of Seeing” in *The Scandal of Susan Sontag*, eds., Ching, Barbara, and Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 171-187.

⁵⁴ Jones, *Sensorium*, 37.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Greenberg's essays on Abstract Expressionism stress the non-function of art. He states that abstract art should strive for a purity of experience, a "disinterestedness" that stands in contrast to modern life in America – to its speed and productivity: "I think a poor life is lived by anyone who doesn't regularly take time out to stand and gaze, or sit and listen, or touch, or smell, or brood, without any further end in mind, simply for the satisfaction gotten from that which is gazed at, listened to, touched, smelled, or brooded upon."⁵⁶ In this rare moment of introspection, Greenberg negates his adolescent asceticism and echoes Sontag's appeal to art as sensory salve. However, while he presents abstract art as a disembodied escape for the overworked senses, Sontag proposes a sharpening of the senses, a conscious re-engagement with them. This seems to parallel the two approaches to writing as well: Greenberg as an arbiter of taste at a cool distance, and Sontag as the sensualist entrenched in the moment.

Greenberg's writing style is direct, unadorned and self-isolating. While Sontag's writing reaches outside of itself to form networks of references and pay homage to influences, Greenberg's tends to be more hermetic, referring repeatedly to a limited arsenal of influences. Sontag's ability to find the new in art and explain artistic phenomena in relation to the cultural moment in *Against Interpretation* stands in contrast to Greenberg's attempt at a summary in the essay "Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties" (originally delivered as a lecture at the University of Sydney on 17 May 1968). In this text, Greenberg seems out of touch. His focus is again, limited primarily to painting and sculpture. Anything outside of these mediums is dismissed as "Novelty art."⁵⁷ In order to provide some cohesiveness to the pluralistic sixties art scene, Greenberg concludes that all art can be categorized as either good or bad and that these judgments are reached by a consensus of taste. He notes that the conflation of high art and popular art only adds to the confusion of the situation.

Conversely, Sontag resists the drive toward consensus and instead labels her method "case studies of my evolving sensibility."⁵⁸ She carves out the veins of her own artistic and cultural preoccupations and lets arterial routes form independently. Eventually the blood pools and her words gain potency through the support of readers, other writers and artists. Her early essays oscillate between a modernist moral seriousness and an irrepressible appetite for sensual pleasure. Sontag's initial critical views weren't so different from Greenberg's, devoted to the self-contained, self-validating art object. However, the two approaches fissure with respect

⁵⁶ Greenberg, *Collected Essays*, 75-76.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁵⁸ Sontag and Rieff, *Essays of the 1960s & 70s*, 3.

to the sensorium – Greenberg wants to mute it, Sontag yearns to flood it pleasurably. Through the essays in *Against Interpretation*, she seems to advocate for a hyper-awareness, the conscious attunement of a broad range of senses – making the whole self, the whole body vulnerable to undulations of sensory information. She compares a Happening to “a firecracker going off dangerously close to one’s face” and a Supremes song to the “feeling (or sensation) given off by a Rauschenberg painting.”⁵⁹ This multi-sensory mode of interpretation stood in contrast to the prevailing modernist ocularity and prefigured a shift toward more embodied forms of art criticism, which will be elaborated upon in the sections “The Writing Body” and “Intimacy.”

⁵⁹ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 268, 303.

The “Soluble Self”

The self is a text – it has to be deciphered...The self is a project, something to be built.⁶⁰

– Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, 1980

I have a wider range as a human being than as a writer. (With some writers, it's the opposite.) Only a fraction of me is available to be turned into art.⁶¹

– Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 1964

A tension between disclosure and restraint runs through Sontag's early writings. In the above quoted passage from her journals, she imagines the writing self as a resource that can be drained. How much of the writing self can be drained before it ceases to be recognizable as the self at all? Like a blood transfusion, how does the material subsumed by the writer change her very constitution? In her essay “‘This temptation to be undone’: Sontag, Barthes, and the Uses of Style”, Sarah Garland explores the notion of solubility in relation to Sontag's writing process. Sontag, she argues, always aspired to transcend the self in her texts, to allow aesthetic experience and sensory stimuli to dissolve the authority of the writer. Garland notes that this process begins with contemplation, which according to Sontag, “entails self-forgetfulness on the part of the spectator: an object worthy of contemplation is one which, in effect, annihilates the perceiving subject.”⁶² Early on, Sontag manages to write personally revealing essays while avoiding the use of the personal pronoun “I”. Perhaps this omission is an attempt at camouflage. In a journal entry of 1965, she writes: “Who has the right to say ‘I’? Is that a right that has to be earned?”⁶³ She compares the consciousness that steps outside of itself, the writer witnessing herself writing, to Sartre's autobiography, *Les Mots* – “I am playing the part of myself”, Sontag writes.⁶⁴ In his critical biography of Sontag, Liam Kennedy also notes the “performative” and “provisional” qualities of her early essays (the performative will be addressed more fully later in this thesis).

Garland characterizes Sontag's method as “aestheticist criticism” – “a tradition where the artist or writer tries to replace the sense of themselves as originators, hidden behind the text, by

⁶⁰ Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 39.

⁶¹ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 9.

⁶² Sarah Garland, “‘This temptation to be undone’: Sontag, Barthes, and the Uses of Style,” in *Art and Life in Aestheticism: De-humanizing and Re-humanizing Art, the Artist, and the Artistic Receptor*, ed. Kelly Comfort (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 194.

⁶³ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 60.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

a sense of themselves consumed by the text, dissolved and replaced by language.”⁶⁵ For Sontag, there was an impulse to conceal in both her novels and critical essays.

The author was in the process of getting lost in the mid to late sixties. Roland Barthes’s “La mort de l’auteur” was first published in 1968, followed by Michel Foucault’s “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” in 1969. French post-structuralists were among the first to ring the death knell in order to envision a renewed future for writing. For Barthes, the author returned to a pre-Enlightenment function, more akin to mediating – providing a channel through which language could flow. The reader’s interpretation of a text fractured meaning into countless pieces, erasing authorial intent, and texts became heterogeneous maps: “the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture.”⁶⁶ And like metal shavings coalescing around a magnet, disparate meanings and interpretations were seen by Barthes to gather at the site of the reader: “the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination.”⁶⁷ This reformulation of authorship extracted an enormous amount of power from one centralized point (the writer-genius) and diffused it into infinite parts.

Cary Nelson draws a parallel between Sontag’s belief that artworks and experiences are fundamentally ineffable, as expressed in “On Style,” and her own desire to hollow herself out as a writer, to vanish within her texts. Nelson labels this an “aesthetic of absence,” and theorizes that Sontag focuses on absences as sites of self-depletion for the critic.⁶⁸ Artists leave open spaces of interpretation and critics fill them, but in Sontag’s formulation, the critics also dissolve in these voids. Of this notion, Nelson asks: “Can it be true that critics consciously or unconsciously seek that self-depletion, that artists create not so much a language we can understand as a language we can mimic, thereby silencing our own consciousness?”⁶⁹ The appeal to resist interpretation involves stepping back, absenting oneself, or conversely, becoming engulfed entirely by the subject at hand. This merger is a complicated one in Sontag’s case. Throughout *Against Interpretation* she demonstrates an ambivalence toward almost every one of her carefully chosen subjects. Her essays never involve explicit praise. More often, she oscillates between aversion and curiosity. For example, in “Simone Weil,” she describes the

⁶⁵ Garland, “This temptation,” 195.

⁶⁶ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image / Music / Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁶⁸ Cary Nelson, “Soliciting Self-Knowledge: The Rhetoric of Susan Sontag’s Criticism,” *Critical Inquiry* 6/4 (Summer, 1980): 712.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 713.

experience of regarding Weil's life "from a distance with a mixture of revulsion, pity, and reverence," but simultaneously feels "moved by it, nourished by it."⁷⁰ The same feeling of reticence permeates "Notes on 'Camp'". It's an authorial game of give and take, wherein Sontag reveals her own investments in gay subculture and camp aesthetics, while maintaining a guarded distance. For example, she repels camp sensibility when she gets too close: "I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it."⁷¹ The use of the verb "to draw" or "to be drawn to" suggests a pre-existing distance between the writer and her subject that disqualifies the possibility of Sontag herself being camp, or relishing in camp sensibility. This delicate choreography of identification reveals itself especially in Sontag's early critical writing. As Nelson remarks, "To be convinced by her analysis of a work is to be led to yearn for what is not 'there' in her prose. It is not unreasonable to see her essays as strategic attempts to work out a rhetoric of self-presentation appropriate to a particular topic."⁷² Sontag's identity shifts alongside her subject matter, which she ultimately desires to wholly coalesce with. To know the self is to abolish the self, to describe art is to name its ineffability and to write is to disappear.

Solubility in writing is linked to porosity. The porous critic absorbs information as well as dispensing it. Because Sontag appears to be in a state of becoming as she writes – uncovering parts of her own identity by analyzing books, films and artworks – the process feels shared, open. Her criticism does not follow a one-way trajectory, doling out conclusive judgments, but stimulates a sharpening of attention. As Sohnya Sayres describes it in her critical biography of Sontag: "The living wall of criticism – that distancing that the critic presides over – disappears."⁷³ Sontag concurs in the introduction preceding her suite of essays: "Writing criticism has proved to be an act of intellectual disburdenment as much as of intellectual self-expression."⁷⁴ The act of criticism, for Sontag, necessitates a fracturing of the self. Each essay is performed differently and each subject is a solvent into which the critic melts, destabilizing the rigid critic-object relationship that *Against Interpretation* opposes.

⁷⁰ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 50, 51.

⁷¹ Ibid., 276.

⁷² Nelson, "Soliciting Self-Knowledge," 716.

⁷³ Sohnya Sayres, *Susan Sontag: The Elegiac Modernist* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 86.

⁷⁴ Sontag and Rieff, *Essays of the 1960s and 1970s*, 4.

The Writing Body

I can hide in the morning under the covers, make myself as small as possible. I can even let myself melt under the sun at the beach – it will always be there. Where I am. It is here, irreparably: it is never elsewhere. My body, it's the opposite of a utopia: that which is never under different skies. It is the absolute place, the little fragment of space where I am, literally, embodied [*faire corps*]. My body, pitiless place.⁷⁵

– Michel Foucault, “Utopian Body”, 1966

All of me is writing to you and I feel the taste of being and the taste-of-you is as abstract as the instant. I also use my whole body when I paint and set the bodiless upon the canvas, my whole body wrestling with myself. You don't understand music: you hear it. So hear me with your whole body.⁷⁶

– Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*, 1973

I don't really think – just have sensations, or broken fragments of ideas, when I am alone without a means to write, or not writing – or not talking. I write – and talk – in order to find out what I think. But that doesn't mean 'I' 'really' 'think' that. It only means that is my-thought-when-writing (or when-talking). If I'd written another day, or in another conversation, 'I' might have 'thought' differently.⁷⁷

– Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 1965

I admire Sontag's model of contingency. Beyond admiration, I cling to it, because there is no other way. And there is no greater agony in writing than feeling the weight of permanence, especially when it comes to words. Academics make contributions to knowledge, nail down definitions and seal their opinions in print. This, to me, is harrowing. Perhaps I've been rewired by the velocity of the times. Living with the Internet means accepting the impossibility of permanence and completeness. There will always be more to read, to find; oceans of information left undiscovered. For a researcher, this is maddening. So, I find solace in contingency, in Sontag's “my-thought-when-writing” method. This is not a new standpoint – postmodern and poststructuralist thinking championed a fragmentary approach to knowledge and communication decades ago and it has only become intensified and more unfathomably fractured since. This model has been useful for destabilizing power. That which is constantly moving and changing is impossible to define, subjugate, injure. Making definitive statements feels outdated, hegemonic. But writers still pine for those hardy judgments. I am thinking, for example, of the satisfying completeness of John Berger's writing on art, notably this passage from his 1986 essay “The White Bird”:

⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, “Utopian Body,” trans. Lucia Allais in Jones, *Sensorium*, 229.

⁷⁶ Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*, trans. Stefan Tobler (New York: New Directions, 2012), 4.

⁷⁷ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 146.

...we live in a world of suffering in which evil is rampant, a world whose events do not confirm our Being, a world that has to be resisted. It is in this situation that the aesthetic moment offers hope. That we find a crystal or a poppy beautiful means that we are less alone, that we are more deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe.⁷⁸

I recently discussed this essay with other art writers during a residency, and we concluded that this kind of universalizing writing would be smirked at if it were submitted to most art magazines and journals today. There is a reason for that, but I sometimes wonder what has been lost. Writing in broad strokes can be inane or poetic, depending on who is wielding the pen. Sontag's early writing is in constant negotiation between a modernist sensibility (asserting judgments as though they were objective truths using straightforward language) and a postmodern intuition that destabilizes master narratives. This is in line with Marianne DeKoven's proposition that the pivot between modernism and postmodernism took place in the tumultuous sixties. She argues that the countercultural, artistic and radical political movements of the decade formed the beginnings of postmodernism, and that during this period, the work of many writers, philosophers and artists melded both modernist and postmodernist ideologies. The politics of selfhood were churning; a restructuring occurred. A dualistic conception of subjectivity (heroic self vs. the hostile world) transformed into a fractured, pluralistic, egalitarian view of the subject.

Knowing has to do with an *embodied* consciousness...⁷⁹

– Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 1965

What does the writing body need? Some need coffee, some need a good sleep. Sontag: "What is the secret of suddenly beginning to write, finding a voice? Try whiskey. Also being warm."⁸⁰ I want to know what happens when we broaden our understanding of the writer to the conditions surrounding writing – when we heed Sontag's advice to not over interpret content, when we travel up the tip of the pen through the wrist and into the body and focus on what transpires beyond the page. There is something to the corporeal disavowal that occurs in the process of writing. The stiffness of academia. The brittleness of research. It seems natural to shift to the corporeal in a discussion of Sontag's writing. After all, the title of her second volume of published journals and notebooks is *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, a line borrowed

⁷⁸ John Berger, "The White Bird," reprinted in *Harper's Magazine* (June 2000): 52.

⁷⁹ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 151.

⁸⁰ Susan Sontag and David Rieff, *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947-1963* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 158.

from a journal entry of 1965. The writing mind is housed in the writing body. Consciousness and flesh conspire to produce an object.

The texts are objects. I want them to affect readers – but in any number of possible ways. There is no one right way to experience what I’ve written.⁸¹
– Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 1965

The word ‘embodied’ has been appended to unsuspecting nouns for a few decades now; ‘embodied writing’, ‘embodied art’, for example, or the catchall combination ‘embodied practices’. Talk of the body shifted to embodiment as a result of much of Western philosophy’s discounting of the body’s role in consciousness. The shift to embodiment also signaled a new understanding of the body not just as an object or conglomeration of biological matter, but as a way of being. Furthermore, this way of being is entirely subjective. Rather than anonymous, featureless bodies, we navigate our relation to the outside world from within a unique sensory apparatus. European phenomenologists, Maurice Merleau-Ponty in particular, melted the Cartesian divide and reinvigorated the body’s function in relating to the world around us. Most notably, in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes a case for subjectivity as bound to the body: “the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world.”⁸² Aided by arch-feminist Simone de Beauvoir’s reworking of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of phenomenology in *The Second Sex*, second-wave feminists laid the plans for merging embodied (personal) experience with the public and political. Both phenomenology and emerging feminist discourse placed importance on the value of individual lived experience, as have related identity-focused discourses that followed. This hasty philosophical timeline brings us to the use of phenomenology and the adoption of the word embodiment into the contemporary theoretical lexicon.

The residues of phenomenology have been mobilized by performance theorists, feminist theorists, queer theorists, critical race theorists and affect theorists to inform a process of thinking through the body. Because one of my research objectives is to plumb the relationship between the body, subjectivity and writing about art, I have attempted to locate explanations from within a matrix of feminist and queer theory and performance studies. Writers in these fields have explored writing and embodiment in a way that intersects intriguingly with Sontag’s work.

⁸¹ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 145.

⁸² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002), 475.

Performance studies sprouted out of anthropology, sociology, theatre studies and speech-act theory in the middle of the twentieth century and performativity became a defining methodology or way of thinking through identity politics in the eighties and nineties.⁸³ J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (originally delivered in the fifties as lectures at Oxford and Harvard) introduced speech-act theory, distinguishing between two types of utterances: *constative* (utterances that say something) and *performative* (utterances that do something).⁸⁴ According to Austin, performative utterances literally do the thing that they describe – for example by saying, “I promise you,” one is not only saying the words, but also making the promise. Austin's theory provided a starting point from which performance theorists could debate the viability of doing things (or performing) with words. Performance studies encompass a variety of theoretical concepts, but I will focus only on performative writing.

In some ways, performative writing is a failed intellectual conceit. Post-structuralism, the linguistic turn in philosophy, phenomenology and performance studies all collided and people (writers) got excited about what this could mean for writing. Performative writing has a bad reputation because no one can define it; by definition, it cannot be defined. It refuses to be something specific (a discipline, a strategy, an event), but it also refuses to be everything (total experimentation). This elusive rhetoric, understandably, has been frustrating for academics and lay readers alike. There have been a lot of intolerable sentences laid down under the banner of performative writing, of this there is no doubt, but there are some kernels of original thought that still hold promise. Here they are: (1) writing is a performance / the writing identity is performed, (2) writing subjects transcend themselves and time and (3) performative writing evades reason, linearity and hierarchy.

In her contribution to the 1998 anthology *The Ends of Performance*, Della Pollock borrows the phrase “reworking the self in its enunciation” from Elspeth Probyn to describe the function of performative writing.⁸⁵ Writing and becoming are equated. Pollock's self is non-linear – it's anachronistic, unstable. The self that emerges through writing is “a possibility rather than a

⁸³ See: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) and *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993); Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Parker, eds., *Performativity and Performance* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).

⁸⁴ Sontag attended Austin's lectures at Oxford during her fellowship in the late fifties.

⁸⁵ Della Pollock, “Performing Writing,” in *The Ends of Performance*, eds., Phelan, Peggy and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 87.

fact.”⁸⁶ This flexible notion of selfhood recalls Sontag’s conception of her own writing as both a process of “disburdenment” and “self-expression”, as well as both “personal” and “transpersonal”. Pollock reveals performative writing’s phenomenological leanings, describing it as “an intimate copformance of language and experience” wherein “the writer and the world’s bodies intertwine.”⁸⁷ Although this explanation is a little bit like a silk curtain blowing in the breeze, it does get at a core idea that many writers in performance studies and its auxiliary fields believe holds promise. That is, the idea that writing can be as Sontag puts it “transpersonal” and cross-temporal; that the words on the page do something (rather than just say something) and have some experiential quality.⁸⁸ This, according to Pollock, occurs when the reader reads *with* you, sees what you see, feels the impression of an image or idea on your imagination.⁸⁹

In her introduction to the same volume of essays, Peggy Phelan expands on performance and temporality: “Part of what performance knows is the impossibility of maintaining the distinction between temporal tenses, between an absolutely singular beginning and ending, between living and dying. What performance studies learns most deeply from performance is the generative force of those ‘betweens.’”⁹⁰ This non-linear conception of time, as it pertains to writing, lends an added depth to Sontag’s willed ambivalence and to the enduring lives of her texts. She wrote simultaneously from a canonized literary past (drawing on a formidable mental library of influences from childhood on) and in her present moment (heralding the new, contouring the current cultural mood). Her performance as a writer is not so different from the model of performativity proposed by J.L. Austin, fortified by Judith Butler and built upon by theorists like Peggy Phelan. Sontag performs herself as a modernist, a sensualist, a queer subcultural icon, a feminist, an aesthete, an elitist, a populist. Butler’s well-known theory of performativity defines gender identity as “the stylized repetition of acts through time.”⁹¹ That is, gender is not innate, but takes shape in the process of its everyday performance. In her debut essay on the subject, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1988), Butler invokes Simone de Beauvoir’s aphoristic pronouncement: “one is not born, but rather, *becomes* a woman” as well as Merleau-Ponty’s similar injunction that the gendered body is “an historical

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 81.

⁸⁸ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 38.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, *The Ends of Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 8.

⁹¹ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40/4 (December 1988), 520.

idea” rather than a “natural species.”⁹² Both examples uproot stability and highlight the protean quality of identities, which are constantly reorganized like the characters in a theatrical performance (Butler makes the explicit link between performative acts and theatre in her essay). People *do* gender, much like actors *do* roles, and Austin’s words *do* things. Butler continues: “the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body.”⁹³ This resonates with Della Pollock’s conception of performative writing as “a possibility rather than a fact”. Much like a body, Sontag’s critical stance is adaptive to its context; her judgments fluid and performative, rather than fixed and falsely attributed to a disembodied critical authority. In many ways, her essays of the sixties provided a flexible model of authorship, performance and identity that theorists and other critics wouldn’t fully embrace for another twenty years.

⁹² Ibid., 519-20.

⁹³ Ibid., 521.

Speed

After 25 hours of work (dexamyl – uninterrupted except for an hour with [the American journalist Herbert] Lottman and, later, [Godard's film] Alphaville) I think I've sorted things out.⁹⁴

– Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 1965

Kif melts the brain; dexemyl (sic) sharpens the edges.⁹⁵

– Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 1965

Susan Sontag took Dexamyl, an amphetamine, from 1964 to 1980. She used it as a “stimulant for writing.”⁹⁶ In London on August 18th, 1964, Sontag writes in her journal: “Dexamyls are called, in England, ‘Purple Hearts’ (they’re purple, not green – kids take them 20 at a time, with Coke...Then (lunch hour) pop into a ‘cave’ (nobody over 21 admitted) and [dance the] Watusi.”⁹⁷ Youth, newness, and quite literally, speed, weren’t merely intellectual concerns for Sontag in the sixties, but a shared physiological/pharmaceutical phenomenon. Historian Nicolas Rasmussen calls what happened in the postwar years an “amphetamine epidemic.”⁹⁸ And in his essay on Warhol’s factory and amphetamine, Juan A. Suárez describes it as “shifting society into a different tempo.”⁹⁹ He provides as evidence the following passage from Andy Warhol’s memoirs: “I could never finally figure out if more things happened in the 1960s because there was more awake time for them to happen in (since so many people were on amphetamine), or if people started taking amphetamine because there were so many things to do that they needed more awake time to do them in.”¹⁰⁰

Amphetamines were the answer to a postwar culture seeking hyperstimulation. Prescribed to soldiers in Vietnam and Korea, to depressed housewives, to terminally ill patients, or illegally procured by beatniks and artists, speed was ubiquitous. Why did speed become so popular in postwar America? Rasmussen suggests that it reflected the cultural shift toward rabid consumerism, a kind of imperative to spend (energy, money, time) all driving toward the fulfillment of pleasure. He borrows a Foucauldian adage to advance this hypothesis: “amphetamine became a crucial ‘technology of the self’ for constituting the healthy postwar

⁹⁴ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 88.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 111.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Nicolas Rasmussen, *On Speed: The Many Lives of Amphetamine* (New York/London: New York University Press, 2008), 180.

⁹⁹ Juan A. Suárez, “Warhol’s 1960s Films, Amphetamine, and Queer Materiality,” *Criticism* 56, 3 (2014): 626.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 627.

consumer.”¹⁰¹ Dexamyl – a combination of amphetamine (stimulant) and barbiturate (sedative) – was released in the United States in 1950 and heavily marketed as an anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication. It came in pill form – a small triangular blue tablet with a line down the centre, vaguely resembling a heart (as in “purple hearts” in the UK). Along with Sontag, Warhol was also fond of Dexamyl, and was filling a prescription for speed when he was shot in 1968. Rasmussen muses: “Without his speed, Warhol would not fully have been Warhol.”¹⁰² Would *Against Interpretation* have been *Against Interpretation* without speed? It’s impossible to know. But the following question still pulses mysteriously: what did amphetamine bring to Sontag’s early writing? How did this accelerated mental state imprint itself on the hundreds of pages she wrote in the sixties?

Sontag’s prose is polished. Some sentences are like marble pillars, every part solidified in its exact right place. “Every word is *the* word, chosen with fanatical care and unvarying elegance,” writes Craig Seligman of Sontag in his book-length comparison of Sontag and film critic Pauline Kael.¹⁰³ All of those elegant sentences, however, are mobilized toward a swiftly unfurling argument, which often loosely assumes the form of a list (as in the numbered paragraphs in “Against Interpretation” or the more deliberately enumerated “Notes on ‘Camp’”). Sontag sifts through literary, film and pop culture references at breakneck speed, covering an overwhelming breadth of topics in her first collection of essays. Her writing advice to Sigrid Nunez was: “streamline the prose and get it moving at a faster clip [...] If there’s one thing modernism has taught us, it’s that speed is everything.”¹⁰⁴ And Sontag’s intellectual velocity certainly matched the momentum of the decade in which she wrote her early essays. Daniel Schreiber recounts in detail the tempo of one day in the life of Sontag, culled from her journals:

On a single Saturday, for instance, she visits a museum in the morning, rushes in a taxi to lunch with friends, then to a theater in the afternoon to see Ernst Lubitsch’s 1932 classic *Trouble in Paradise*. Reading and maternal tasks occupy the early evening, after which she goes to the movies again to see a Kenneth Anger film and then to a party. Finally, she goes to a midnight showing of a Brigitte Bardot film.¹⁰⁵

Speed was the truest match for Sontag’s sensibility in the sixties. It attuned concentration, provided the stamina needed to see several films a day and deftly navigate intellectual

¹⁰¹ Rasmussen, *On Speed*, 181.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁰³ Craig Seligman, *Sontag & Kael: Opposites Attract Me* (New York: Counterpoint, 2004), 9.

¹⁰⁴ Nunez, *Sempre Susan*, 62.

¹⁰⁵ Schreiber, *Susan Sontag*, 56.

conversations and debates at night. Cabs also helped – she supposedly never took public transit despite financial restraints; she couldn't imagine not arriving precisely on the doorstep of where one intended to go. Her journals provide vivid descriptions of the effects of other drugs, including kif (cannabis resin) and LSD. Kif, which Sontag tried while visiting a friend in Morocco, is described as “Cotton in your head – everything is ‘beautiful’ – you glide toward it, away from it [...] I would never work – write– if I took a lot of kif. I feel a loss of energy, And I feel isolated, lonely (though not more unhappily so)”, “LSD: everything decomposes (blood, cells, wire) – no structure, no *situations*, no involvement. Everything is *physics*.”¹⁰⁶

Speed reverberated with the sheer velocity of mid-century modernism – emancipating bodies from habitual needs (chief among them sleep) and allowing the subject to keep pace with rapid advancements in art and technology, or adapt to the reality of cities that truly never sleep. As Caroline Jones explains (implicitly referring to the widespread adoption of prescription drugs and other *technologies of the self*): “mid-century modernism aimed to coax people into adapting to the requirements of the *socius*; the new sensorium provides chemicals that achieve that end with far less effort or even (in the case of children) conscious choice.”¹⁰⁷ Functioning on a combination of Dexamyl, coffee, cigarettes and cabs, Sontag was in some ways an exemplary modern subject, adapting to the new requirements of modernist immediacy by modifying her own sensory modalities. Although the connection between Sontag's amphetamine use and her writing is almost never discussed (only briefly mentioned in biographical contexts), her self-denying writing habits would place her comfortably among the legions of writers and artists romanticized for subjugating the needs of the body to their work (by way of alcoholism, drug abuse, sleep-deprivation, starvation, etc.). Sigrid Nunez recalls Sontag's punishing writing habits:

She would take Dexadrine and work around the clock, never leaving the apartment, rarely leaving her desk. We'd go to sleep to the sound of her typing and wake up to the sound of her typing. And though she wished she could work in a less self-destructive way, she believed it was only after going at it full throttle for many hours that your mind really started to click and you'd come up with your best ideas.¹⁰⁸

According to Nunez, Sontag agonized over writing and preferred to be out absorbing (at the theatre, art exhibitions, social gatherings) than sequestered with her typewriter, especially when

¹⁰⁶ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 114, 143.

¹⁰⁷ Jones, *Sensorium*, 41.

¹⁰⁸ Nunez, *Sempre Susan*, 88.

it came to her essays. She also had a deep aversion to being alone, and wrote best with another person in the apartment, even in the other room. Her apartment was spartan, with almost no adornments on the walls, populated mostly by simply made bookshelves crammed with meticulously organized and annotated volumes. She almost never cooked; Nunez recalls one of the first lunches at Sontag's when starting out as her assistant, consisting of canned cream of mushroom soup and a few cobs of corn scrounged from a near-empty refrigerator. Even bathing came second to intellectual pursuits – Sontag reminds herself in a journal entry of 1961: “Don’t smile so much, sit up straight, bathe every day.”¹⁰⁹

Sontag's disavowal of her body during the writing process is an interesting counterpoint to her insistence on sensual voracity on the page. It is as though she attempted to subordinate everything – sleep, food, cleanliness, relaxation, exercise – to The Project (writing), to become disembodied in the process itself, the body performing rote functions only (to hold up a book or pen, to type). This splicing of corporeal and cognitive activities recalls Caroline Jones's characterization of the modernist tendency to understand the self as a machine, divided between body and brain – “the body is a humble servant; thought is free only in the transcendence of lowly embodied routines.”¹¹⁰ It is as though when writing Sontag relinquished tenancy in her own body, while paradoxically injecting a sense of embodiment – a deliberate focus on describing things based on subjective sensory information – into her essays.

The effects of amphetamine are described as “a deeper immersion into [the world's] rhythms, sounds, and striations,” as opposed to the melting away of the world prompted by hallucinogens.¹¹¹ Sontag's project in *Against Interpretation* is unequivocally preoccupied with fine-tuning attention. Simplified, her argument is: the senses have been bludgeoned, bureaucratized by capitalism. Aesthetic experiences allow us to reinvest in the soma. Amphetamine seems to have the dual effect on writers of sharpening one's awareness and stimulating feverish productivity. Kerouac – a stock example – produced *On The Road* while mainly on speed. The final manuscript was one unbroken paragraph on a scroll three inches wide and 120 feet long. “*On The Road* has a nervous, tense and benzedrine feel,” recalls Kerouac's biographer.¹¹² And Suárez agrees, benzedrine or “bennies” likely fueled “the rhapsodic descriptions of minute nuances of mood and geography, character, and situation that

¹⁰⁹ Sontag and Rieff, *Reborn*, 289.

¹¹⁰ Jones, *Sensorium*, 5.

¹¹¹ Suárez, “Warhol's 1960s Films”, 631.

¹¹² Sadie Plant, *Writing on Drugs* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 121.

fill *On the Road*.”¹¹³ Amphetamines were *intensifiers* for many artists and writers in the fifties and sixties (Warhol and Kerouac included) and this sensorial intensification has been archived in books, films and other artistic formats. Suárez even makes the connection between the amphetamine side-effect of enhanced tactility and the diffuse brand of eroticism introduced in Warhol’s films, wherein pleasure is delayed and most explicit sexual content takes place off-screen. Speed could have a variety of effects on the libido; “in some cases, speed could mean sex without genital fixation: a cutaneous intensity distributed over the body and spreading over adjoining spaces, props, and materials.”¹¹⁴ The expansion of sexual pleasure across the body’s entire surface, the skin becoming a sprawling receptive topography, was also at the heart of Herbert Marcuse’s plea to liberate eroticism from its functional and normative strictures. This involved an “externalization of libido,” moving away from the “genitofugal” (or “genital supremacy”), toward “the eroticization of the entire organism.”¹¹⁵ Reconceptualizing the whole body as an erogenous zone, Marcuse proposed that sexualities would become “polymorphous” – a Freudian appropriation that also makes its way into Sontag’s essay on Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures*: “These are ‘creatures’, flaming out in intersexual, polymorphous joy.”¹¹⁶ Sontag also echoes Marcuse’s liberating message in “Psychoanalysis and Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death*,” charging *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* author D.H. Lawrence with a “puritanical insistence on genital sexuality” and America with being at “a very elementary stage of sexual maturity” for scandalizing the book in the first place.¹¹⁷ Sontag also takes interest in the liquid boundaries between bodies and objects in Smith’s film – “the shaken breast and the shaken penis become interchangeable with each other” – which recalls Suárez’s characterization of an “amphetamine eroticism,” spreading across surfaces infectiously.¹¹⁸ Similarly, Marcuse argues that sensuousness is a kind of “receptivity”, a way of being affected by sensations and information transferred between bodies and objects, and that this sensory receptivity has been socially repressed in favour of rationalism.¹¹⁹

It would be wildly deterministic to come to a definitive conclusion about how the form and content of Sontag’s intellectual output of the sixties was affected by her use of amphetamines.

¹¹³ Suárez, “Warhol’s 1960s Films”, 632.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 641.

¹¹⁵ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 208. Marcuse stayed with Sontag and Phillip Rieff in the fifties when he was working on his book.

¹¹⁶ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 230.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 257.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 230.

¹¹⁹ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 176, 180.

In his related investigation of Warhol, the Factory and amphetamines, Suárez shares this methodological concern: “The challenge then is to ground the work in its material circumstances without conflating it with them, to show how a certain type of subcultural practice intersected with a parallel aesthetic project.”¹²⁰ So, to make unverifiable claims about speed and writing would be unproductive, but to ignore entirely the social and material conditions behind a body of writing would also be detrimental – relegating that work to a purely aesthetic or formalist realm. It would likewise be unsatisfying to romanticize Sontag’s amphetamine use or simply place her among a brooding coterie of writers whose drug use has been mythologized (Coleridge and Poe on opium, Baudelaire on hashish, Sartre on mescaline, Burroughs on everything). Rather, like other scholars who have approached the question of art making and writing mediated by mind-altering substances, I want to offer an alternative interpretive channel. As Sontag’s public essays and private journals oscillate between carnal and cerebral concerns, it would be an oversight to ignore the corporeal conditions of *Against Interpretation*’s making, especially in relation to the accelerated cultural context of the notoriously up-tempo sixties.

¹²⁰ Suárez, “Warhol’s 1960s Films”, 627.

Intimacy

I understand writing as an ideally complex form of consciousness: a way of being both passive and active, social and asocial, present and active in one's own life.¹²¹

– Susan Sontag, Notes, “On Writing and Writers”, Date Unknown

“Women novelists lack executive force” ([*Columbia University English professor*] Steven Marcus the other night) – a different relation to their own ego. Prevail through sensibility.¹²²

– Susan Sontag, *Reborn*, 1963

It is hard to believe that intimate criticism – that is, a style of criticism that opposes disinterestedness and objectivity and is infused with a writer's own identifications – still rouses suspicion.¹²³ As previously mentioned, Amelia Jones has most notably questioned the lineage of models for art history and art criticism rooted in an “Enlightenment-based logic of viewing” that classifies and hierarchizes objects based on visual information.¹²⁴ This lineage, Jones asserts, is indebted to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, but has been modified and refined by aesthetic theorists from Hegel to Fry to Greenberg and beyond.¹²⁵ The Kantian model of aesthetic judgment necessitates the division of mind and body, “clearly distinguishing between contemplative, disinterested aesthetic judgment and embodied, sensate, interested, contingent, and therefore individualized and non-universal judgments.”¹²⁶ This elimination of personal investment and disavowal of corporeality puts the critic in a position to make authoritative judgments. It eliminates vulnerability, uncertainty, contingency and accountability. The critic descends upon the art object, dispenses judgment and then vanishes into an amorphous cloud of anonymity. This interpretive model appears now and then in art history programs as an apparition (of rigid Marxist and Freudian approaches), haunting the bureaucratic processes that underlie academic writing. Students are still encouraged to practice explicit reasoning and assertive pragmatism in their writing (for example, one is reminded to “contend”, “argue” and to “prove”, but rarely to “attempt”, which would display uncertainty or vulnerability). As such, more

¹²¹ Susan Sontag, Notes, “On Writing and Writers”, Box 271, Folder 14, Coll. 612, Susan Sontag Papers, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

¹²² Sontag and Rieff, *Reborn*, 312.

¹²³ I am thinking here of Jennifer Doyle's entire book devoted to defending feeling in contemporary art writing: *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013)—and of writers and critics such as Chris Kraus, Eileen Myles and bell hooks, to name a few.

¹²⁴ Amelia Jones, “Art History/Art Criticism,” in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (London: Routledge, 1999), 39.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 40.

speculative (as opposed to evidence-based) approaches have been slow to surface in academia.

As is often the case, strategies for writing have lagged behind the subject matter they hope to be able to accommodate. While the acceleration of identity-based discourses and the disintegration of fixed meanings were two of the major shifts characterizing theoretical conversations in art history programs of the mid-to-late twentieth century, the way they were written about did not gain equivalent momentum. On the other hand, the rapidly expanding field of art in the 1960s – from body art to Happenings – prompted a reevaluation of the critic's role and the importance of subjective opinion. Max Kozloff, an art critic for *The Nation* and the New York editor of *Artforum* in the early sixties, identified 1962 as the culmination of a crisis in art criticism. He cites as proof the deluge of essays on criticism surrounding that year and suggests that this renewed interest resulted from a fissure between art and art criticism; as unfamiliar modes of art-making began to surface, critics found themselves ill-equipped to discuss them.¹²⁷

Harold Rosenberg echoes Kozloff's sentiment in relation to action painting in *The Tradition of the New* (1965): "Language has not accustomed itself to a situation in which the act itself is the 'object.'"¹²⁸ *Against Interpretation* struck at the perfect moment – a moment of unease about how to put art and aesthetic experiences into words. Out of this unease came productive attempts at rethinking how to write about art, including feminist art criticism, as well as critical styles that have explicitly striven to foreground race, ethnicity, class and sexuality in the writing process. In the following section I will explore this opening up of the self to the art critical process through the example of Chris Kraus's book *I Love Dick*, published in 1997. Although this takes us over thirty years past the publication of *Against Interpretation*, I have chosen it as a lens through which to look at critical intimacy, as it is a potent example of a text that combines emotion, critical judgment, vulnerability, erudition and abjection. Kraus's book dissolves the divide between sterile critical thought and personal disclosure. *I Love Dick* illustrates what I believe Amelia Jones means when she says: "We are embodied, particular in our identifications; we are flesh and part of the flesh of the world. As such, we *change* the things we encounter."¹²⁹ This analysis sets us up to think about Sontag's work in a similar way. The distinction between public and private (or disinterested and interested) is much less glaring in

¹²⁷ Max Kozloff, "Critical Schizophrenia and the Intentionalist Method," in *The New Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Plume, 1973), 126, 128.

¹²⁸ Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*, 33.

¹²⁹ Jones, "Art History/Art Criticism," 50.

Against Interpretation than in *I Love Dick*, but it is this ambiguity that provides for a complex case study. Ultimately, this comparison will aid in evaluating the ways in which intimacy and criticism intersect, and how this pairing is always a delicate tightrope walk between essentialism and honesty.

Chris Kraus's experimental novel *I Love Dick* scales the precipice of destructive self-exposure. The book, which gained immediate popularity after its publication in the nineties, is a collection of letters, journal entries, critical musings, reminiscences and barely fictionalized accounts of encounters between Kraus, her then-husband Silvère Lotringer and the cultural theorist Dick Hebdige. The expanse of the story is sprawling: Kraus navigates falling in love with Hebdige, the intellectual and sexual stimulation that this stirs up in her partnership with Lotringer, the failure of her short film *Gravity & Grace*, schizophrenia and texts on artists including R.B. Kitaj, Hannah Wilke and Eleanor Antin.

Throughout *I Love Dick*, there is a hyper-attention to the process of writing itself and the risks of divulging the intensely personal. Kraus, age 39 when she began writing the book, admits that she never allowed herself to write in the first person before: "I had to find these ciphers for myself because whenever I tried writing in the 1st Person it sounded like some other person, or else the tritest most neurotic parts of myself that I wanted so badly to get beyond."¹³⁰ But in the process of untangling the personal from the philosophical, she legitimizes the subjective voice by extricating it from the idea of a fixed self in time – "there's no fixed point of the self but it exists & by writing you can somehow chart that movement."¹³¹ Writing in the nineties, she self-consciously refreshes that well-worn slogan of seventies second-wave feminism: *the personal is political*. In *I Love Dick*, Kraus lays bare the enduring injunction that male theorists can be philosophical about feelings, but with women writers, it is always personal, never objective, never social: "Why is female vulnerability still only acceptable when it's neuroticized and personal; when it feeds back on itself? Why do people still not get it when we handle vulnerability like philosophy, at some remove?"¹³²

Kraus's project is a forthright act of externalization – what poet Eileen Myles describes as "a remarkable study in female abjection."¹³³ It is unapologetically confessional, but probes theoretical questions introspectively. Theory, however, as Joan Hawkins points out in her

¹³⁰ Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2006), 138. Original edition: *I Love Dick* (Los Angeles, CA: Sexitext(e), 1997).

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 138-9.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 208.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 13.

afterword to the 2006 edition of the book, is *performed* by Kraus, rather than plainly articulated.¹³⁴ Literary and theoretical references and considered hypotheses on art, film, sexuality, health and activism convene around Kraus's subjective experience. There is no distinction between the private and public voice, between feeling and philosophy. Hawkins files *Love Dick* under "theoretical fiction", explaining that theory becomes a character in its own right, it infiltrates the plot: "In Kraus' 'novels', debates over Baudrillard and Deleuze and meditations on the Kierkegaardian Third Remove form an intrinsic part of the narrative, where theory and criticism themselves are occasionally 'fictionalized.'"¹³⁵ This bears resemblance to Sontag's own position at the fault line between criticism and fiction; her criticism is stained with a novelistic sensibility. It might be useful to think of fiction-writing and essay-writing as two vessels of water presided over by Sontag, whenever one overflows it spills into the other.

If Kraus is on one extreme end of the scale when it comes to personal disclosure in public writing, Sontag hovers somewhere near the other end. But there is something of Kraus's committed free fall into the chasm of self-exposure that derives from Sontag's early intentions in *Against Interpretation*. In an essay on Sontag, written in response to the publication of her journals, critic Dave Hickey offers the following theory of her relationship to self-disclosure and vulnerability. From the journals (which he argues have been over-edited to the point of defamation by Rieff), Hickey extracts two personae: Sad Susan and Serious Susan. "Sad Susan is the 'sensitive' one. She loves movies, literature, babies, and interesting women. She speaks in the early pages of *Reborn*, but as the book progresses she becomes increasingly silent."¹³⁶ "Serious Susan is a moral juggernaut," a fierce intellectual who isolates Sad Susan from the world of "dumb fun" and casual sex.¹³⁷ Serious Susan reprimands Sad Susan for her "dangerous streak of tenderness."¹³⁸ Ultimately, Hickey interprets the Janus-faced narrative of self-repudiation in Sontag's journals of the sixties as a stand-off between "the writer's disobedient body [which] told her a story about freedom and transgression that, ultimately, her mind and temperament could not countenance."¹³⁹ Hickey's condescension is predictably offensive, but gives a nonetheless evocative account of the balancing act of allowance and disavowal in Sontag's early oeuvre. The moralist and the sensualist collide. But where Hickey's cowboy critic

¹³⁴ Ibid., 274.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 263.

¹³⁶ Dave Hickey, "¡Una Lesbiana Enamorada!: The Reverse Bowdlerization of Susan Sontag," *Harper's Magazine*, December 2009, 95.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 96.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 94.

mode engages and he reduces Rieff's edited version of Sontag's journals to "a gay chick lit memoir with a few big words," a more generous reading might welcome the complexity that "Sad Susan" offers to "Serious Susan".¹⁴⁰

Writing to the fictionalized version of Dick Hebdige in *I Love Dick*, Kraus says of her own quasi-theoretical confessions: "You think it's personal and private; my neurosis...I think our story is performative philosophy."¹⁴¹ She has casually and self-mockingly referred to her genre as Lonely Girl Phenomenology – a self-ordained counterpart to Hickey's Sad Susan? Reviews of *I Love Dick* were similarly reductive in conflating the writer with the person, often focusing on the love story or the scandal that followed the book's publication and completely ignoring the theoretical discussions that unfold within its pages. Simone Weil, about whom both Sontag and Kraus have written, was also subject to essentializing interpretations that relied too heavily on her biography. In *Aliens & Anorexia*, the follow-up to *I Love Dick*, Kraus remarks: "Until recently, nearly all the secondary texts on Simone Weil treat her philosophical writings as a kind of biographic key. Impossible to conceive of a female life that might extend outside itself. Impossible to accept the self-destruction of a woman as strategic."¹⁴² In the following section, the way that Sontag's essays were conflated with the intimate details of her life will be explored.

In the early sixties, the stakes were very high for women who wanted to reveal something of themselves – something of their inner lives – in their writing, especially in critical writing. In an unfavourable review of the second volume of Sontag's journals, Simon During concludes that the intimacy of the journals tarnished her legacy as a serious critic. He disguises his own opinions behind assumptions about Sontag's goals as a writer: that she strove for a "historicist seriousness and nobility" in order to travel passably within a certain early twentieth-century American intellectual milieu; that a tonal frequency of "seriousness, impersonality, formalism" would serve the dual purpose of securing her intellectual esteem and erasing the untidy personal aspects of her life.¹⁴³ The discussion returns to self-transcendence, which During interprets literally as Sontag's disavowal of all things personal (her sexuality, her marriage, her child, her heartbreaks) in the hopes of reaching some sterile plateau of critical objectivity. While it is undeniable that in her early critical writings Sontag dabbled in a high

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 211.

¹⁴² Chris Kraus, *Aliens & Anorexia* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2013), 49-50. Original edition: *Aliens & Anorexia* (Los Angeles, CA.: Sexiotext(e), 2000).

¹⁴³ Simon During, "How Did Susan Sontag Get to Be So Famous?" *Public Books*, (August 7, 2012), accessed March 5, 2015, <http://www.publicbooks.org/nonfiction/how-did-susan-sontag-get-to-be-so-famous>.

modernist tone, affecting a moral seriousness approaching irony, the personal remained imperative to her judgments. The rawness of the journals works in symbiotic relation to the polemical public essays; neither fully consumes, erases or transcends the other.

According to During, Sontag failed herself. By revealing her “almost continuous state of abjection” through the journals, she fails to transcend herself, and thus relinquishes the legacy of impersonality.¹⁴⁴ Here, seriousness and impersonality in writing are bafflingly equated with “political resilience and power.”¹⁴⁵ During’s critique stands in for dozens of others that reiterate the same stale argument: that subjectivity denigrates seriousness, that self-exposure can’t be perceived as anything other than narcissism. Sontag’s abjection is seen to be “contaminating” – her inability to erect solid barriers between her “intense personal neediness and confusion” and her formal prose is perceived as a failure, rather than a deliberate writing strategy.¹⁴⁶ This criticism is also dubiously familiar, repeatedly directed at women artists and writers who retool subjectivity for political, artistic or philosophical purposes. The early work of the artist Hannah Wilke is one example adjacent to Sontag’s writings of the sixties. Reacting against the claim that women artists were incapable of making universal (i.e. non-gender-specific) art, Wilke flooded her work with the personal, until she drowned out its associations. However, Wilke’s work, such as the *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* (1974-82) in which she poses topless and dotted with small labial sculptures, narrowly preceded the acceptance of self-exposure as a critical position for feminist artists. As a result, she was ridiculed by critics and labeled narcissistic for her experiments with transparent subjectivity.

In *Against Interpretation*, Sontag lodges her own subjectivity within the cracks of an at times detached voice. She reveals herself through her relation to a floating web of references, which expose her investments. While her process of undressing through writing is not as abashed as Kraus’s, it hints at the potential for the critical act to be dipped in feeling early on in the sixties, at a time when disinterested criticism still prevailed. That Sontag is a uniquely polarizing case only further problematizes the delicate balance between detachment and investment in criticism. Her writing has been variously described as “intelligence uninflected by

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

personality” and “euphoric.”¹⁴⁷ In a personal letter to Sontag sent on March 23rd, 1964 (housed at her archives) the writer and reviewer for *The Partisan Review*, Gertrude Buckman, effuses:

You have an openness and a humanness that I haven’t observed in other intellectuals [...] I find your writing persuasive, by virtue, not only of your reasoning, the evidence you bring to bear, but a moving sincerity that suffuses what you say. This isn’t to be confused – and I’m not confusing it – with a humorless earnestness; it springs from a fresh perceptiveness, a real interest in what you’re talking about, a real wish to communicate your responses, which are delicate and alive.¹⁴⁸

The equally “delicate and alive” pages of *Against Interpretation* espouse the origins of a style of criticism that has in subsequent decades gained traction. In her book *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, Jennifer Doyle argues for the infusion of feeling into critical writing and interpretive strategies. She urges, “the rhetorical deployment of the personal and the emotional should not be assumed to be a retreat into an ahistorical, apolitical self” and suggests that the personal and emotional can in fact support meaningful aims.¹⁴⁹ That we refuse to allow the personal and the intellectual to intersect, signals a failure. For Doyle, it is impossible to take up a critical position “independent of the author’s networks of affiliation, friendships, and mentoring relationships, as if it were not informed by his or her points of identification, estrangement, and institutional location.”¹⁵⁰

Throughout *I Love Dick*, Kraus is routinely reminded of her perceived insufficiency as the partner of a respected male intellectual (Silvère Lotringer). Indeed, in the final pages of the book, after months of letters and meetings with Dick Hebdige, Dick chooses to address his final dispatch to Silvère, even cruelly misspelling Chris’s name. Undoubtedly, Sontag came up against similar pressures as a writer and intellectual three decades earlier. Her feminist politics were complicated and polarizing. Sontag was rarely explicit about her position; presenting a “sexually ambiguous image”, she exercised what Angela McRobbie has labelled an “idiosyncratic disavowal” of the more essentializing narratives informing early second-wave feminism.¹⁵¹ If the use of an exhausted metaphor will be permitted one last time, Sontag

¹⁴⁷ Seligman, *Sontag & Kael*, 8 and Alice Y. Kaplan, *Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 84.

¹⁴⁸ Letter, Gertrude Buckman to Susan Sontag, March 23, 1964, Box 82, Folder 43, Coll. 612, Susan Sontag Papers, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

¹⁴⁹ Doyle, *Hold it Against Me*, 72.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Kennedy, *Susan Sontag*, 14.

doubtlessly shattered a glass ceiling in the sixties, but let a couple of the shards fall on the women below. In her essay “Inside the Body Politic: 1980 – Present”, Catherine Lord asks:

How can one possibly untangle the nomenclature of Sontag's selves as she lived through several decades of historical change? Could she have been in the closet before the metaphor of 'the closet' came into play? Was she a feminist snob? A fag-hag of epic talents? A dyed-in-the-wool modernist with a weakness for Claire Morgan's pulp classic *The Price of Salt* and any little morsel by Djuna Barnes? A bisexual polemicist? A single mom? A dyke caught between breast cancer, which she refused to see as either metaphor or punishment, and the so-called gay cancer, a metaphor inflicted as genocide?¹⁵²

The contradictory nature of Sontag's public image may have aided the process of advancing her work in a male-dominated sixties critical milieu, however, she hardly escaped misogyny in those early years. Sigrid Nunez retells a story about a reporter asking Sontag to confirm a rumour that she was Sartre's mistress; when asked what it was all about, Sontag responded sarcastically: 'What it was about,' [...] 'was that a brainy woman *must* have a brainier man.'¹⁵³ In her memoir, Nunez meditates on the challenges Sontag must have faced:

But to think of this proud, intellectually ambitious person coming of age in the days before women's liberation and of the kind of bias she must have routinely encountered, one can imagine how galling it must have been. (A partial list of those who put her down almost as soon as she stepped out of the gate would include Norman Podhoretz, Mary McCarthy, William Buckley, James Dickey, Philip Rahv, John Simon, and Irving Howe).¹⁵⁴

Considering the context in which she wrote the essays in *Against Interpretation*, it is astounding that Sontag risked divulging anything of herself, offering even a shred of intimacy. Whether intentional or not, those early essays infused disinterested criticism with curiosity and humanness. Sontag's early critical writing has a quality to it that is somehow immanently present without being obvious – like the warmth of a body without the touch of skin.

¹⁵² Catherine Lord, “Inside the Body Politic: 1980 – Present,” in *Art and Queer Culture*, ed. Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer (London: Phaidon, 2013), 30.

¹⁵³ Nunez, *Sempre Susan*, 80.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

Eros

...sexualization of life – seeing the world through a trope, in this case, sexual attraction, sexual adventure, sexual failure.¹⁵⁵

– Susan Sontag, Journal, December 1957

Sensuality and art criticism seem to repel each other to opposite poles. While one gorges on the fullness of physical (and sometimes sexual) experience, the other deals pedantically with words, prioritizing the visual above all else. When Sontag calls for an “erotics of art” at the end of “Against Interpretation”, scholar Guy Davidson proposes that she “fully collapses the sensuous with the sexual.”¹⁵⁶ The first line of *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, written in May 1964, reads: “The right hand = the hand that is aggressive, the hand that masturbates. Therefore, to prefer the left hand!...To romanticize it, to sentimentalize it!”¹⁵⁷ The sexual and the intellectual are threaded through Sontag’s private writings explicitly (her journals map an inclination to reconcile writing and sex) and less explicitly through her public work as a critic. Her swift categorization as a high modernist critic by other scholars has buried an attention to sexuality and an engagement with desire legible in Sontag’s early writing on art that break from the dictums of disinterested criticism.

Sontag’s invocation of the sexual in her writing was well in stride with the atmosphere of sexual liberation in the 1960s, and echoed the stirrings of a shift toward the corporeal in art (foreshadowing a wave of feminist body art). Carolee Schneemann’s *Meat Joy*, Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* and Andy Warhol’s film *Blow Job* all emerged in 1964, the same year that Sontag wrote many of the essays later published in *Against Interpretation*, including the title essay and the controversial “Notes on ‘Camp’”. The fifties and early sixties have been historically framed within a “sex-positive movement”, wherein revolutionary politics and an openness toward sexuality collided.¹⁵⁸ The result was a potent utopian feeling, as Jonathan Katz describes it:

What was truly revolutionary in the sexual revolution was this push towards a single, universal body-in-common. Sexuality, it was held, could dissolve or suspend the very physical and social differences that subsequent liberation movements understood as inherently divisive. In this early phase of the sexual

¹⁵⁵ Susan Sontag, Journal, December 1957, Box 124, Folder 3, Coll. 612, Susan Sontag Papers, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

¹⁵⁶ Guy Davidson, “‘The Closet of the Third Person’: Susan Sontag, Sexual Dissidence, and Celebrity,” *Life Writing* 8.4 (2011): 393.

¹⁵⁷ Sontag and Rieff, *As Consciousness*, 3.

¹⁵⁸ Amelia Jones, ed. *Sexuality* (London/Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery/The MIT Press, 2014), 17.

revolution, sexuality would be the hinge between people, a powerful solvent to embodied physical and social differences.¹⁵⁹

As such, many artists harnessed the radical potential of the body in their work, moving beyond two-dimensional artworks into a broad variety of practices now mainly gathered under the banner of performance art. Emancipated from the canvas, these burgeoning art forms sought to override modernist ocularity by opening up the experience of art to lesser-utilized senses. Schneemann's *Meat Joy* infused the room with the fetid aroma of sweat and raw poultry, while Paul Thek (the artist and friend to whom Sontag dedicated *Against Interpretation*) sullied minimalist tropes with his hyperrealistic sculptures of waxen flesh slabs. Needless to say, Greenberg's "eyesight alone" approach to art criticism was abruptly invalidated. Surprisingly, there is one instance wherein sex does enter Greenberg's criticism; Caroline Jones explains: "'Feeling is all,' Greenberg once wrote to a friend, evaluating some particularly good sex; this phrase was later abstracted from the event, reemerging after more than a decade to describe abstract opticality in modern art."¹⁶⁰ The attempt to infuse aesthetic observations with sexual force, in Greenberg's case, does not quite carry the same significance as in Sontag's. Characteristically, he let the sentiment calcify over ten years before rinsing it of any bodily association and applying it to abstraction. In the case of Sontag's criticism, eroticism, sexuality and subjectivity play a more palpable role.

I want to resist setting up a binary. Plainly, Sontag's criticism is not solely cerebral, nor sensual. Rather, thinking is carnal. Sensuality is smart. As Mark Greif notes in his review of *Reborn*: "Anyone who thought [Sontag's call to an 'erotics of art'] meant throwing analytic intelligence out with the hermeneutic bathwater was disabused. Philistinism or superiority, for her, lay in the quality of mind manifested in one's sensuous reaction. If you couldn't think – think well, think quickly, think like Sontag – then you didn't feel."¹⁶¹ Sontag did away with boundaries as a teenager; after her first night hurtling through San Francisco's gay scene with Harriet Sohmers, she composed the following buzzed backseat rumination over the Golden Gate Bridge: "I watched the bay and felt warm and alive...I had never truly comprehended that it was possible to live through your body and not make any of these hideous *dichotomies* after all!"¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Jonathan D. Katz, "Art and the Sexual Revolution," in *Sexuality*, ed. Amelia Jones (London/Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery/The MIT Press, 2014), 65.

¹⁶⁰ Jones, *Sensorium*, 34.

¹⁶¹ Mark Greif, "Still Superior," *London Review of Books* 31/3 (2009), accessed May 20, 2015, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n03/mark-greif/still-superior>.

¹⁶² Sontag and Rieff, *Reborn*, 27.

This attention to the sensuous bathes the essays in *Against Interpretation*. Take for example, her defense of Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* and Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* in which she argues: "Disenchantment is the characteristic posture of contemporary American intellectuals, but disenchantment is often the product of laziness. We are not tenacious enough about ideas, as we have not been serious or honest enough about sexuality."¹⁶³ Or, in her lavish descriptions of Jack Smith's film *Flaming Creatures* (a film avoided by most of her contemporaries and charged with obscenity): "Very studied visual effects (lacy textures, falling flowers, tableaux) are introduced into disorganized, clearly improvised scenes in which bodies, some shapely and convincingly feminine and others scrawny and hairy, tumble, dance, make love."¹⁶⁴ Or, in her description of Resnais's *Muriel*: "Here, a strong emotion – the pathos of erotic frustration and longing – is raised to the level of a meta-emotion by being set in a place that has the character of an abstraction..."¹⁶⁵ These early essays are infused with what Greif describes as "an odd, partly disowned, seemingly extraneous but electrifying language of sex."¹⁶⁶ Sontag's intertwining of eros and intellect was not entirely coincidental. In fact, it was well in stride with theoretical shifts occurring at mid-century, rooted in Freudian revisionism, such as Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, Brown's *Life Against Death* and R.D. Laing's *The Politics of Experience*.

Marcuse's book seems to have been in the back pocket of every student, artist, left-wing scholar and political radical in the late fifties and early sixties. Its dual focus on the repressive force of alienated labour and the liberating potential of sexuality was a potent mix that became emblematic of a decade. Marcuse, Brown and Laing all rallied against the perceived decay of sensory capacity in America, and helped to change attitudes toward pleasure, which led to a wider embrace of mass culture. If work, for Marcuse, is the deferral of pleasure, then art and popular culture, for writers like Sontag and Barthes, is the re-introduction of pleasure into a life of sensory and libidinal repression. For Marcuse, artistic creation is the only example of labour that does not pit sexuality and social utility against one another. This notion certainly holds up against Sontag's own model of artistic labour as an autonomous writer whose work engages directly with the sensual. *Eros and Civilization* begins with a critique of capitalism that calls for the undoing of "the somatic and mental mutilations inflicted upon man," reminiscent of Sontag's

¹⁶³ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 258.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 230.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 239.

¹⁶⁶ Greif, "Still Superior."

own comments in *Against Interpretation* regarding the desensitization of the body and mind.¹⁶⁷ Marcuse's re-imagination of sexuality as "polymorphous" and fantasy as "chiefly against normal sexuality" were perhaps early attempts to articulate the cultural and artistic manifestations of the sexual revolution. Again, Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* comes to mind, and as previously mentioned, Sontag's description of the film's writhing bodies finds a conceptual foothold in Marcuse's influential text.¹⁶⁸ "Notes on 'Camp'", as well, effuses sexuality and from the moment of its publication has aroused a clamour of opinions about its correlation to queer subcultures of the sixties and Sontag's personal sexual life.

"Notes on 'Camp'", first printed in *The Partisan Review* in 1964, has become an essential text in the gender studies/visual culture/queer theory matrix. It is steeped in ambiguity and controversy for the way that Sontag navigates sexuality and aesthetic sensibility. "Notes on 'Camp'" embodies a dual existence: having one original written form anchored in its historical moment, and another independent life as a cultural phenomenon that continues to mutate as we struggle with its major subjects including camp, irony, seriousness, performance and how gender and sexuality relate to gestures, objects, tastes and representation. It is written in an aphoristic style and plays out as a struggle between the writer's inner modernist and irrepressible sensualist. Sontag's essay is abundant with contradictions as she rifles through a bottomless personal inventory of pop culture, literary and film references in order to assemble a sensibility that she associates with historical aristocracy and "homosexual taste."¹⁶⁹ Most of the scholarship on Sontag in relation to sexuality (her own or of those she wrote about) that exists is centered on this particular piece of writing. Many scholars, including Terry Castle, have attempted to read "Notes on 'Camp'" for its latent autobiographical qualities, framing it as a kind of sly coming-out. Castle argues that the "mock didacticism" of the essay is meant to strategically obscure its autobiographical undertones, especially those details that point to the sexuality and personal desires of its author.¹⁷⁰ She views "Notes on 'Camp'" as both a "backhanded confession" that Sontag eschewed in later years and "a complex hello to an absent yet much-desired unknown."¹⁷¹ This "unknown" recipient of Sontag's message was perhaps the sexual "other" – the drag queens, queer artists, camp performers and sexual

¹⁶⁷ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, xviii.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 146.

¹⁶⁹ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 290.

¹⁷⁰ Terry Castle, "Some Notes on 'Notes on Camp,'" in *The Scandal of Susan Sontag*, ed. Barbara Ching and Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 23.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

‘deviants’ of 1960s New York. Castle’s idea of the “absent yet much-desired unknown” repeats in a sense what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies in the discourse of camp as “camp-recognition”:

...camp-recognition doesn’t ask, “What kind of debased creature could possibly be the right audience for this spectacle?” Instead, it says what if: What if the right audience for this were exactly me? What if, for instance, the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of attention and attraction that I am able to bring to this spectacle are actually uncannily responsive to the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of the person, or of some of the people, who created it?¹⁷²

Sedgwick situates camp in a network of recognition based on “reader relations” and “projective fantasy.”¹⁷³ When Sontag describes the “haunting androgynous vacancy behind the perfect beauty of Greta Garbo,” “the exaggerated he-man-ness of Steve Reeves” and the “melodramatic absurdities of most opera plots” is she appealing to a specific reader?¹⁷⁴

Transmitting hidden messages? Confronted with these questions, it is tempting to conflate the critic and the person, or the writing and the writer. In a diary entry of 1959, Sontag mystifyingly self-identifies as queer, writing: “Being queer makes me feel more vulnerable. It increases my wish to hide, to be invisible – which I’ve always felt anyway.”¹⁷⁵ She consciously maneuvered around her sexuality in her professional practice as a writer and in her personal life. It is not that they were kept separate, but they were both shrouded equally in a strategic ambiguousness that made it possible for her to publish a risky essay like “Notes on ‘Camp’” in 1964. Sontag’s early example hints at the possibility for a different formation of the critic; one whose subjectivity is fluid – evades fixity.

In the essay “‘The Closet of the Third Person’: Susan Sontag, Sexual Dissidence, and Celebrity”, Guy Davidson qualifies Sontag’s early essays as “a kind of closet” in that they articulated identity while simultaneously obscuring it: “Sontag embeds queerness in seemingly sober and impersonal prose.”¹⁷⁶ While the metaphor of the closet is too loaded to map directly onto Sontag’s essays, some elements of “Notes on ‘Camp’” mimic the form of detached commandments, particularly her numbering of camp characteristics. There is also a feeling of reticence that permeates the essay, wherein she reveals her own investments in gay subculture and camp aesthetics, while maintaining a guarded distance. Was Sontag’s reticence an early

¹⁷² Eve K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 156.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 279, 282.

¹⁷⁵ Sontag and Rieff, *Reborn*, 223.

¹⁷⁶ Davidson, “The Closet”, 393.

manifestation of her ongoing mandate of sexual ambiguity? Or was it a much more matter-of-fact decision reflecting the pressures of building a viable career as a woman and critic in the 1960s, when writing about non-normative sexual practices marked one as either this or that, as serious intellectual critic or outsider?¹⁷⁷

It is useful to look at the interplay of obscuring and revealing in Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" as a precursory attempt at destabilizing objective or distanced criticism. Her text is riddled with codes and specific cultural minutiae that are more easily translated by certain readers than others. Whether she intended it or not, "Notes on 'Camp'" contributed to a growing queer vocabulary, which was defined largely by the strategic act of omitting or disguising. Richard Meyer identifies this language as "the parlance of homosexual camp."¹⁷⁸ These coded utterances or slang terms were crucial to protecting details about speakers' intimate sexual lives. A sixteen-year-old Sontag was already studiously observing "gay slang" in her journal, scrawling the following entry in 1949:

"gay"
 "a gay boy"
 "a gay girl"
 "the gay kids"
 straight (east)
 jam (west)
 normal (tourist)
 "he's straight"
 "he's very jam"
 "I lead a jam life"
 "a jam friend of mine"
 "I'm going normal"
 "drag"
 "be in drag"
 "go in drag"
 "a drag party"¹⁷⁹

The unavoidable question is: how do the personal details of Sontag's life – her sustained interest in gay subcultures, her polymorphous sexual history, her close friendships with and support of gay artists – structure the way that we look at her criticism? Does her membership in queer networks of the 1960s art world function as a badge of legitimacy and belonging or allow her to speak for others? The way that Sontag has been rebuked for what D.A. Miller calls a

¹⁷⁷ Sontag was anxious about losing custody of her son David in 1964, the year "Notes on 'Camp'" was published (Davidson, "The Closet", 391).

¹⁷⁸ Richard Meyer, "Inverted Histories: 1885-1979," in *Art & Queer Culture*, ed. Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer (London: Phaidon, 2013), 17.

¹⁷⁹ Sontag and Rieff, *Reborn*, 41.

“phobic de-homosexualization of Camp” provides a case study for grounding the above questions.¹⁸⁰ Miller and other critics of “Notes on ‘Camp’” (also Andrew Ross) have argued that Sontag’s ambivalence about homosexuality – for example, her claim that “if homosexuals hadn’t more or less invented Camp, someone else would” – was a strategy for “de-gaying” and depoliticizing queer modes of representation.¹⁸¹ While the details of Sontag’s personal life are not sufficient to downplay her ambivalent treatment of the homosexual subject in “Notes on ‘Camp’”, they do enrich an understanding of her text and complicate the question of whether or not her views were “phobic”. The majority of arguments directed at Sontag’s articulation of sexuality in the essay are gay male-centred. Anne Pellegrini draws attention to the question of queer female camp in Sontag’s text:

To my mind, Sontag’s de-homosexualization of camp is neither a matter of simple homophobia (whatever that is) nor the closet (whether imagined as internalized homophobia, necessary self-protection, or canny careerism) [...] Sontag was hardly the only feminist, then or now, straight or queer, to express reservations about gay male camp’s “woman question.”¹⁸²

Reading “Notes on ‘Camp’” from a queer feminist point of view, with female desire in mind, opens the text to a greater depth of analysis – rather than stunting it with the charge of de-homosexualization and homophobia. In an interview in 1975, quoted in Pellegrini’s article, Sontag reveals: “camp taste for the theatrically feminine [helped] undermine the credibility of certain stereotyped femininities – by exaggerating them, by putting them between quotation marks.”¹⁸³ Perhaps, then, “Notes on ‘Camp’” can be seen as an experiment in subtly articulating patterns of non-normative sexuality and desire (not limited to the gay male experience), within the formal boundaries of the critical essay. There is an intimacy to the way that Sontag writes about camp – a kind of closeness that allows for mutual identification. As Sontag reminds us in note 52: “Camp is a tender feeling.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ D.A. Miller, “Sontag’s Urbanity,” *October* 49 (1989): 93.

¹⁸¹ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 291.

¹⁸² Ann Pellegrini, “After Sontag: Future Notes on Camp,” in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 174.

¹⁸³ Sontag qtd. in Pellegrini, “After Sontag”, 170.

¹⁸⁴ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 292.

Conclusion

In early December 2014, I watched icy, barren Montreal shrink into the distance and landed in humid, fragrant Los Angeles, spending three delirious days engrossed in Sontag's archives, which reside at UCLA. The collection is immense, housing everything from manuscripts to love letters, postcards to leather-bound journals, hand-written marginalia to French press clippings. Each day, I walked from a quiet residential borough southwest of Beverly Hills to the university's Westwood campus, passing on my way manicured lawns, elaborate cacti gardens, shaded mansions, burnt clay roofs and tall palm trees like lanky teens. Susan Rosenblatt became Susan Sontag at age 13, when her widowed mother remarried and moved the family to Los Angeles; she attended high school in North Hollywood, reading Gide and Rilke in her free time, and even studied at UCLA briefly before transferring to Berkeley.¹⁸⁵ Hours melted away as I laid the ephemera of a life out in front of me, tucked away in a cool, dimly lit room at the Charles E. Young Research Library (a modernist structure designed by A. Quincy Jones and opened in 1964, the same year many of Sontag's first essays were published). Overwhelmed by the volume of information, I attempted to adhere to three research mantras: do not romanticize the subject, do not assume the objectivity of archival documents, and do try to go beyond the text (Sontag's essays, as the focus of my research, in this case).

Afforded the privilege of plumbing the archives, I hoped to get a better understanding of her process as a writer, the trajectory of her essays and her underlying inspirations. I was also interested in accounting for what had been omitted from the published journals edited by Sontag's son, David Rieff. To my surprise, Rieff seems to have published the most intensely personal bits of Sontag's journals and left a significant portion of the vocabulary lists, reading agendas and intellectual notes behind. Her notebooks and journals of the late fifties – kept while living in Paris – reveal extensive, almost obsessive lists of cafes, theatres, radio stations, magazines, book stores, churches, gay bars and French vocabularies for everything from drink names to bird species, penned in Sontag's small and neat but imperfect handwriting. I examined several drafts of the essays featured in *Against Interpretation*, looking for a map of Sontag's writing approach, only to find wispy stacks of onionskin paper essays heavily marked up, without any changes to their core sentiments. The editorial process seems to have been arduous, but generally pedantic. Even though I peered into the intimate spaces of Sontag's life and followed a breadcrumb-trail of references that seemed to align with her intellectual concerns

¹⁸⁵ Kaplan, *Dreaming in French*, 83-84.

of the sixties (letters from Norman O. Brown, a postcard from Harold Rosenberg, etc.), I remained on the surface. I found no distinct treasure, no hidden gem. Ruminating on this experience over the past several months, and revisiting the photographs and notes I took while at UCLA many times, the value of my visit to archives has finally materialized. Rather than concealing in their folds the secrets of a life, the materials in Sontag's archives prove that she lived publicly through her work. Each journal entry, letter and draft from the sixties merely confirms what Sontag's essays bodied forth elusively – an interiority made public.

Researchers rarely discuss ambivalence. But in this case, ambivalence is key – it harmonizes with Sontag's own project as a writer, and also with her credo as a judge (of artworks, literature, people). Set down your impressions in the moment, let them be guided by the senses, write from within yourself but constantly adapt that self to your circumstances. Opinions flake away over time, but Sontag has managed with *Against Interpretation* to ensnare readers born decades apart with the pulsing vitality of her essays. In this thesis, I have attempted to delineate what it is that makes these writings special; what qualifies them as both precursors to the broadening of critical styles and beacons of light in art criticism's cold, disinterested and emotionally sterile hollows. I have located and outlined a history of mid-century modernist criticism and elaborated on how prevailing critical trends (exemplified by critics like Clement Greenberg) were focused on disembodied objectivity, while pointing to emerging critical modes that embrace subjectivity. In keeping with the theme of ambivalence, I have discussed both Sontag's autobiographical urge – to construct her self in writing – as well as her desire to transcend the self through the text. Turning to performance theory, I have demonstrated how Sontag's writing method utilized provisional tactics and aligned with identity-formation theories that surfaced a few decades following the publication of the essays in *Against Interpretation*. Notably, the connection between Sontag's use of Dexamyl as a writing stimulant and the phenomenological underpinnings of embodied writing has been discussed for the first time in an academic context here. In addition, I have explored the importance of an undercurrent of eroticism in Sontag's texts, linking this to queer subcultures of the sixties, discourses of sexual identification and theoretical arguments about the societal and psychological functions of sex at the time.

In a sense, this thesis has fulfilled a self-serving pedagogic function. From the beginning, the desire has been to inhabit writing, nest in one example and absorb its wisdom. Just as Sontag's practice as a writer has been described in gustatory terms – she often alluded to her process of absorbing knowledge as cannibalistic or vampiric – my motivation here has always

been to quench a thirst for meaningful (tasty) prose in art's nebula. As for the problems with contemporary art criticism set out in the introduction to this thesis, they persist. Empty words proliferate like weeds, but thoughtful words – nourished by precedents like Sontag – poke up above the soil, too. Indeed, Sontag is just one of *many* writers whose words about art are worth taking up residence in for a little while. It has been my desire with this thesis to simply provide pliable scaffolding on which to hang ideas about art writing, with the hope that we might learn something from the patient inspection of a single writer's work.

Figures

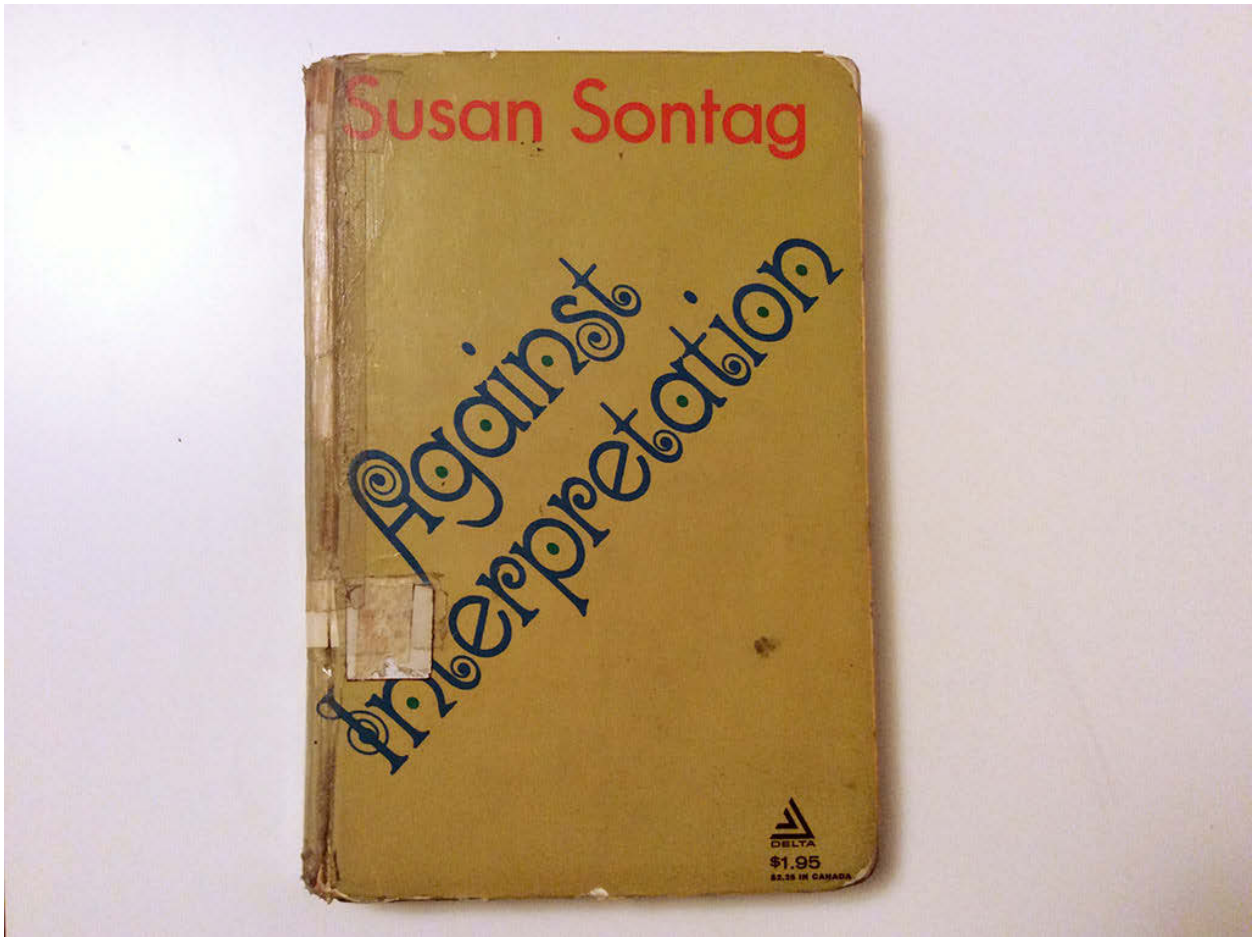


Figure 1: Cover of Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), collection of Concordia University Webster Library.

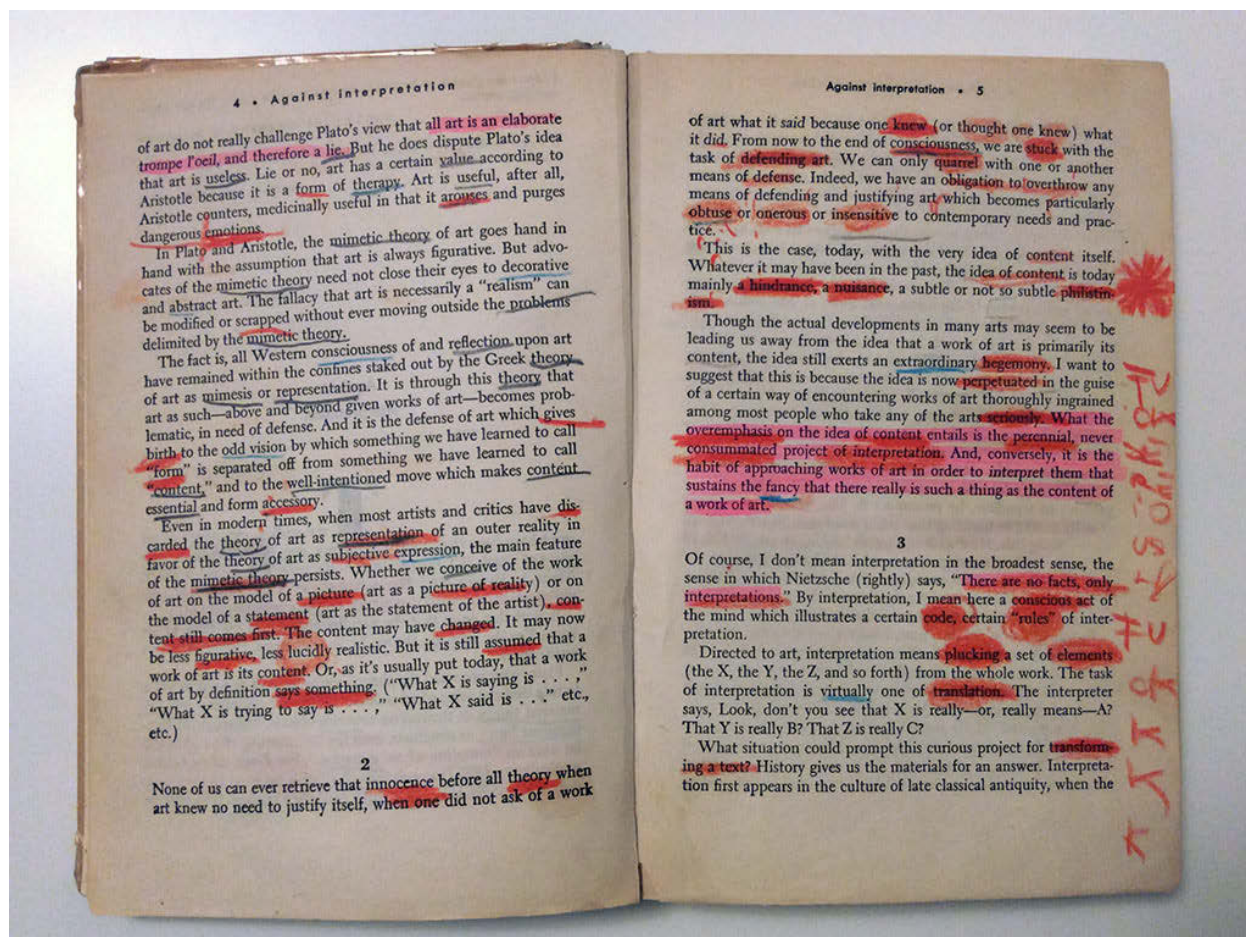


Figure 2: Interior of Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), 4-5, collection of Concordia University Webster Library.

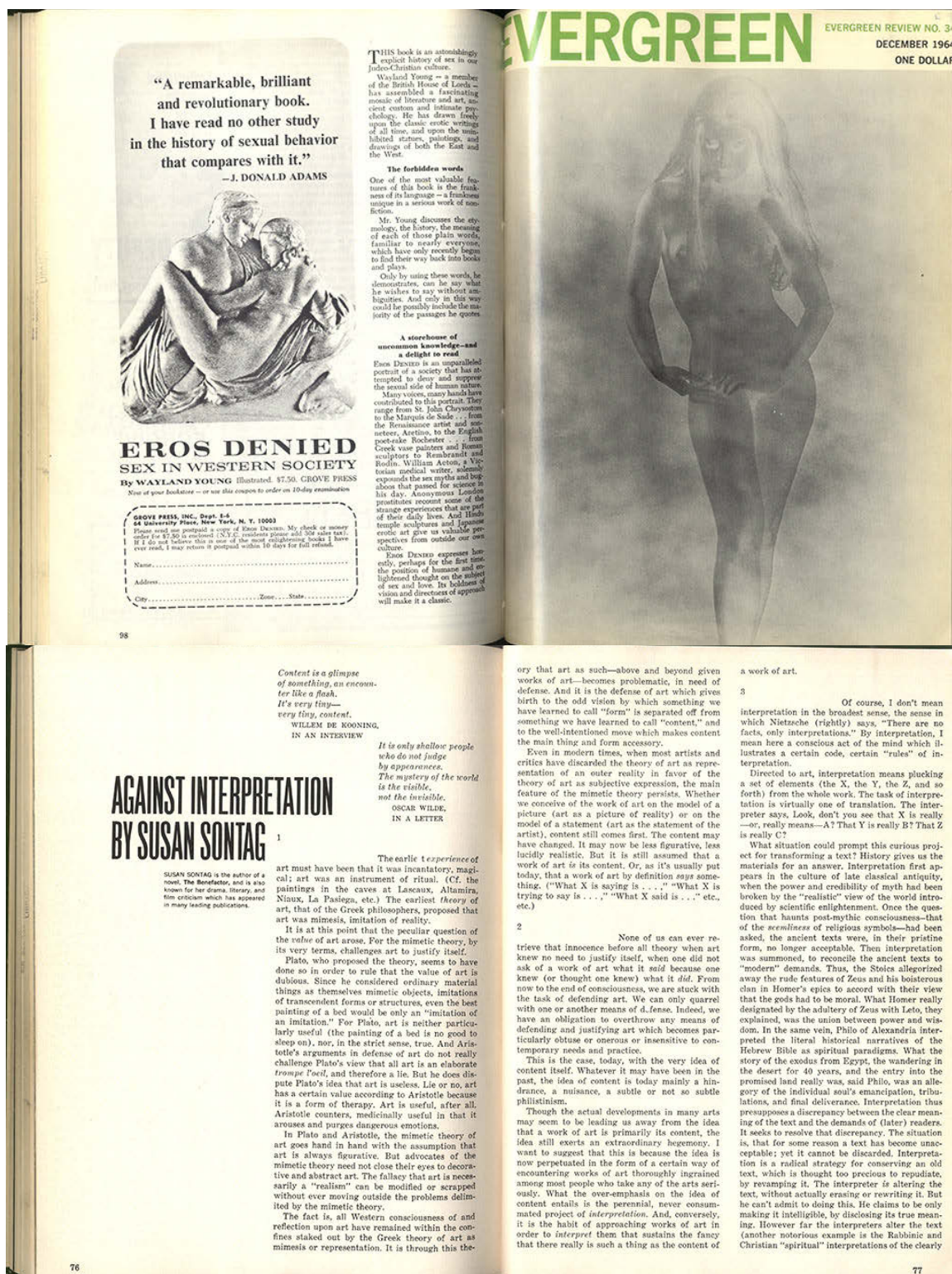


Figure 3: Cover and Interior of Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation", *Evergreen Review* vol. 8, December 1964, collection of Concordia University Webster Library.



Figure 4: Diane Arbus, *Writer Susan Sontag with her son David, N.Y.C.* 1965, Gelatin silver print, 36.5 × 37.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 5: Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes and his mother in Bayonne, circa 1923*, in *Mourning Diary*, trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 2009.



Figure 6: Unidentified photographer, *Jackson Pollock, Clement Greenberg, Helen Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner and an unidentified child at the beach, 1952*. Photographic print, 9 x 15 cm. Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Bibliography

Primary Sources: Books, Articles and Journals by Susan Sontag

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays*. New York: Dell Pub. Co., 1966.

---. "Non-Writing and the Art Scene." In *The New Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Gregory Battcock, 152-156. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1966.

---. *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.

---. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.

---. *Illness As Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.

---. *Under the Sign of Saturn*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980.

---. *AIDS and its Metaphors*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989.

---. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003.

Sontag, Susan and David Rieff. *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947-1963*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

---. *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.

The Susan Sontag Archive, Charles E. Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, UCLA.

Secondary Sources on Susan Sontag

Ching, Barbara and Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor. *The Scandal of Susan Sontag*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Davidson, Guy. "'The Closet of the Third Person': Susan Sontag, Sexual Dissidence, and Celebrity." *Life Writing* 8/4 (2011): 387-397.

During, Simon. "How Did Susan Sontag Get to Be So Famous?" *Public Books*, August 7, 2012. Accessed March 5, 2015. <http://www.publicbooks.org/nonfiction/how-did-susan-sontag-get-to-be-so-famous>.

Garland, Sarah. "'This temptation to be undone': Sontag, Barthes, and the Uses of Style." In *Art and Life in Aestheticism: De-humanizing and Re-humanizing Art, the Artist, and the Artistic Receptor*, edited by Kelly Comfort, 189-207. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

- Hickey, Dave. "¡Una Lesbiana Enamorada!: The Reverse Bowdlerization of Susan Sontag." *Harper's Magazine*, December 2009.
- Kaplan, Alice Y. *Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Kennedy, Liam. "Precocious Archaeology: Susan Sontag and the Criticism of Culture." *Journal of American Studies* 24/1 (1990): 23-39.
- . *Susan Sontag: Mind as Passion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995.
- Maunsell, Jerome Boyd. *Susan Sontag*. London: Reaktion Books, 2014.
- McRobbie, Angela. "The Modernist Style of Susan Sontag." *Feminist Review* 38 (Summer, 1991): 1-19.
- Miller, D.A. "Sontag's Urbanity." *October* 49 (1989): 91-101.
- Nelson, Cary. "Soliciting Self-Knowledge: The Rhetoric of Susan Sontag's Criticism". *Critical Inquiry* 6/4 (Summer 1980): 707-726.
- Nunez, Sigrid. *Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag*. New York: Atlas & Co, 2011.
- Ozick, Cynthia. *The Din in the Head: Essays*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006.
- Pellegrini, Ann. "After Sontag: Future Notes on Camp." In *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, edited by George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry, 168-193. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007.
- Rieff, David. *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008.
- Rollyson, Carl and Lisa Paddock. *Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.
- Rubin, Louis D. Jr. "Susan Sontag and the Camp Followers." *The Sewanee Review* 82/3 (Summer 1974): 503-510.
- Sayres, Sohnya. *Susan Sontag: The Elegiac Modernist*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Schreiber, Daniel. *Susan Sontag: A Biography*. Translated by David B. Dollenmayer. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2014.
- Seligman, Craig. *Sontag & Kael: Opposites Attract Me*. New York: Counterpoint, 2004.

Other Sources

- Austin, J.L. "Performative Utterances." In *Philosophical Papers*, edited by J.O. Urmson and G.L. Warnock (ed.), 3rd edition, 233-252. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

- Barthes, Roland. *Writing Degree Zero*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1968.
- . *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.
- . *Image / Music / Text*, Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- . *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.
- . *A Barthes Reader*. Edited by Susan Sontag. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.
- . *Criticism and Truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- . *Mourning Diary*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 2009.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage, 2011. Original publication: *Le deuxième sexe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1949.
- Brown, Norman O. *Life Against Death*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1959.
- Burke, Seán. *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40/4 (1988): 519-531.
- Cusset, François. *French Theory How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Davis, Ben. "Surviving The Crisis." *C: International Contemporary Art* 118 (2013): 12-13.
- DeKoven, Marianne. *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern*. Raleigh: Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Milton, Balch & Co., 1934.
- Doyle, Jennifer. *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.
- Fabozzi, Paul F. *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and Around American Art Since 1945*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002.
- Foster, Hal. "Post-Critical." *October* 139 (Winter 2012): 3-8.
- . "Roundtable: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism." *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 200-228.
- Genter, Robert. *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America*. Philadelphia:

- University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.
- Greenberg, Clement. *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*. Edited by John O'Brian. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Horowitz, Daniel. *Consuming Pleasures: Intellectuals and Popular Culture in the Postwar World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Jones, Amelia. *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- (ed.). *Sexuality*. London/Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery/The MIT Press, 2014.
- Jones, Amelia and Andrew Stephenson, eds. *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Jones, Caroline A., ed. *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006.
- . *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Kelly, Mary. *Imaging Desire*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996.
- Kester, Grant. "The Device Laid Bare: On Some Limitations in Current Art Criticism." *e-flux journal* 50 (2013).
- Khonsary, Jeff and Melanie O'Brian, eds. *Judgment and Contemporary Art Criticism*. Vancouver, BC: Artspeak, 2010.
- Kraus, Chris. *I Love Dick*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2006.
- . *Aliens & Anorexia*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2013.
- Langer, Susanne K. *Feeling and Form*. New York: Scribner, 1953.
- Latour, Bruno. "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 225-248.
- Lispector, Clarice. *Água Viva*. Translated by Stefan Tobler. New York: New Directions, 2012.
- Livholts, Mona. *Emergent Writing Methodologies in Feminist Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Lopate, Phillip. *Notes on Sontag*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Lord, Catherine and Richard Meyer, eds. *Art and Queer Culture*. London: Phaidon, 2013.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston: Beacon

- Press, 1966. Original publication: *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 2002. Original publication: *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard, 1945.
- Phelan, Peggy and Jill Lane. *The Ends of Performance*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.
- Rasmussen, Nicolas. *On Speed: The Many Lives of Amphetamine*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2008.
- Robbe-Grillet, Alain. *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*. New York: Grove Press, 1966.
- Rosenberg, Harold. *The Tradition of the New*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965.
- Ross, Andrew. *No Respect: Intellectuals & Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- . "Uses of Camp." In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, edited by Fabio Cleto, 135-170. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.
- Sayre, Henry M. *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Sedgwick, Eve. K. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Siedell, Daniel A. "Art Criticism as Narrative Strategy: Clement Greenberg's Critical Encounter with Franz Kline." *Journal of Modern Literature* 26/3-4 (Summer 2003): 47-61.
- . "Contemporary Art Criticism and the Legacy of Clement Greenberg, or How Artwriting Earned its Good Name." *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 36/4 (Winter 2002): 15-31.
- Suárez, Juan A. "Warhol's 1960s Films, Amphetamine, and Queer Materiality." *Criticism* 56/3 (Summer 2014): 623-651.