

Notes on Photography & Accident

by Moyra Davey

For a long time I've had a document on my desktop called "Photography & Accident." It contains passages from Walter Benjamin's "Short History of Photography," Susan Sontag's On Photography, and Janet Malcolm's Diana & Nikon. All of the quotes hover around the idea that accident is the lifeblood of photography.

Walter Benjamin: "The viewer [of the photograph] feels an irresistible compulsion to seek the tiny spark of accident, the here and now."

Susan Sontag: "Most photographers have always had an almost superstitious confidence in the lucky accident."

Janet Malcolm: "All the canonical works of photography retain some trace of the medium's underlying, life-giving, accident-proneness."

Add to these exceptional writers on photography Roland Barthes and his notion of the punctum: that "cast of the dice . . . that accident which pricks" (Camera Lucida).

Benjamin's masterpiece is from 1931, Sontag and Malcolm were publishing their superlative prose in the mid-'70s in the New York Review of Books and the New Yorker respectively, Barthes' Camera Lucida appeared in 1980. I have long been drawn to these writers, and I am fascinated by the ways their thinking overlaps. Some instances are well known, as in the homage paid by Sontag to Benjamin and Barthes, but other connections are more buried: Sontag's references to the photograph as "memento mori" and "inventory of mortality" before Camera Lucida; Sontag and Malcolm circling around the same material in the '70s (accident, surrealism, the vitality of the snapshot versus formalism) and coming to remarkably similar conclusions about "the enigma of photography."

The notion of accident has had many meanings, from "decisive moment" to "photographing to see what something will look like photographed." But is this an anachronism for contemporary work, decades after the ethos of the street?

Roberta Smith, writing in the New York Times, has aptly characterized recent trends in image making (very large, staged color photographs) as "the Pre-Raphaelite painting of our day." The

problem, to state it baldly, is one of stilt coupled with bloat. Absent from these oversized tableaux is the inherently surrealist, contingent, “found” quality of the vernacular photograph, the quality my quartet of writers so eloquently identifies and holds so dear. My goal is to reclaim this critical history of ideas in relation to contemporary photographs, and to understand how the notion of accident might still be relevant.

And I have another motive as well: I want to make some photographs, but I want them to take seed in words.

Being

July 2006. In the hospital, on steroids, I have the feeling for perhaps the first time in my life that I can simply “be.” I no longer have to push myself to do anything, to prove anything. I can just sit on the bed and be.

Writers

Why these particular writers and critics now? I admit to an acolyte’s devotion to Malcolm, to a thirst for everything she writes. There’s a thrill to reading her that comes from the moments when her writing breaks ever so subtly with the decorum of journalistic worldliness to hint at something personal, painful even, about Malcolm herself.

Malcolm generally operates at a metadiscursive level—in some ways it’s her signature as a writer—but I’m thinking here of instances that are more localized, of remarks almost having the quality of a Freudian slip, that crop up in the essays and give the reader pause. A small aside, perhaps having to do with aging or the unhappiness of artists, or families, or childhood, will unexpectedly open up a window of emotional life onto what had otherwise been a fairly hermetic discursive field. It is tempting to call these punctum moments, small ruptures in the studium (Barthes’ term for the aspect of a photograph that gets taken for granted, doesn’t surprise) of Malcolm’s flawless, expository prose. For Barthes the punctum could not be willed, and while Malcolm’s interjections are clearly not accidents; they have a strong unconscious quality. Her view of the world is profoundly and understatedly psychoanalytic. I love to read her because of this, and it reminds me of why I could never read Nabokov: he had an utter disdain for Freud and psychoanalysis. Malcolm’s perceptions thrill because they signal “truth” in the way that strange, eccentric details nearly always do.

A punctum moment comes in Benjamin's "Short History of Photography" when he describes, and shows, an early studio portrait of Karl Dauthendey and his betrothed. This woman, Benjamin tells us, would "one day [be found] shortly after the birth of their sixth child . . . in the bedroom of [Dauthendey's] Moscow house with arteries slashed." Prefiguring Barthes and his scrutiny of images of condemned men ("he is dead and he is going to die"), Benjamin notes the "irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of accident," the contingency or sign that might allow us to read in the photographic record of this woman a foretelling of her tragic end. It's very eccentric, the way Benjamin includes this biographical information in a text on photography, and contemporary readers of this poignant aside cannot but speculate as to Benjamin's emotional state at the time he was composing his essay. We know of his suicide at the French/Spanish border in 1940, but we also learn from Sontag's essay "Under the Sign of Saturn" that Benjamin contemplated suicide more than once, beginning in 1931, the year "Short History" was published. (Later I Google "Dauthendey" and find a genealogy that tells me his wife's name was Anna Olschwang, and that her suicide was the result of postpartum depression.)

I read Benjamin over and over, sometimes getting it, sometimes not. I identify mostly with his nostalgia, which seemed to ebb and flow, depending on which part of his temperament prevailed. At times it was the Marxist side that dominated, when he was under the sway of Brecht and spoke of mechanical reproduction as a liberation from aura. But Benjamin was also, as Sontag points out, a melancholic collector who sought out beauty and authenticity, and who wrote lovingly of the earliest auratic photographs, the long, drawn out exposures that preceded the mass hucksterism and popularization of the medium.

I confess to never having had a handle on Sontag's On Photography. It's teeming with insight, and contains exhilarating passages but I've always had trouble keeping the essays straight in my mind. William Gass, reviewing the book in the NYT when it came out in 1977, sheds some light on her method: "Sontag's ideas are grouped more nearly like a gang of keys upon a ring than a run of onions on a string." A perfect description of On Photography's epigrammatic structure, where ideas, indented with dingbats, accumulate, and indeed follow one another with a sort of loose, fragmentary randomness. I never connected on an emotional level with Sontag; nonetheless I'm awed by her avant-gardism and erudition.

Sontag's book prefigured Barthes'. Sontag and Barthes were friends, and I wonder how much On Photography, especially its ideas about death and the photograph as memento mori, might have been generative to his thinking in Camera Lucida.

Blocked

Writer's block has a legitimacy. There's nothing comparable for artists, no common designation for similar stoppage, and with this symbolic deficiency comes a shame implying a failure of the will, lassitude, impotence. I may as well admit it. I'm blocked. I take pictures of the same dusty surfaces, the cherry wood bedside table with its thin coating of linen dust, a color that I know doesn't reproduce well. It will have that plummy magenta look that I always find a bit sickening. A week later I pick up the film: no transformation. My ratio these days is perhaps one usable frame for every five or ten rolls of film.

I think of Robert Frank's contact sheets for The Americans, his incredible ratios of productivity.

I think of filmmaker Nina Fonoroff beginning to shoot The Accursed Mazurka after a long hiatus, emitting a howl as the first feet of film run through her Bolex. Release, expenditure, risk, surrender.

I think of Janet Malcolm, apropos of Edward Weston: "One gets the impression he didn't enjoy himself very much. What artist does?"

Ampersand

The ampersand between Photography & Accident is to remind me of Virginia Woolf, who made regular use of the symbol, writing for instance of her habit of "reading with pen & notebook." There is a flânerie of reading that can be linked to the flânerie of a certain kind of photographing. Both involve drift, but also purpose, when they become enterprises of absorption and collecting. Walter Benjamin's Arcades project was a superlative flânerie, a long, digressive list of notes and citations. It was a surrealist-inspired collection, but with a nihilist twist, what Hannah Arendt called "a refusal of empathy." The historical quotes were intended to stand alone, a tacit protest and stark witness to Benjamin's despair over what was taking place in Europe in the late 1920s and '30s.

Benjamin and Virginia Woolf were contemporaries. They committed suicide within six months of each other in 1940–41, at the height of personal hopelessness and Nazi terror.

Reading

Reading is a favorite activity, and I often ponder its phenomenology. As I write this essay, the reading I do for it is a mitigated pleasure. Sometimes it feels like a literal ingestion, a bulimic gobbling up of words as though they were fast food. At other times I read and take notes in a desultory, halting, profoundly unsatisfying way. And my eyes hurt.

I remember Lynne Sharon Schwartz in her book Ruined by Reading, writing of letting Cagean principles of chance and randomness determine her reading. I've never read John Cage, but since I'm writing about accident I determine that now is the time and begin with a book I find on the shelves called Notations, a collection of several hundred pages of composers' musical scores, and notations on these notations. I open the book at random. Someone has written: "I mix chance and choice somewhat scandalously." I copy this phrase into a notebook, a perfect encapsulation of my own desire for contingency within a structure. I decide to allow chance elements, the flânerie, as it were, of daily life, to find their way into this essay.

Notes

Roland Barthes spoke of his love of, his addiction almost, to note-taking. He had a system of notebooks and note cards, and Latinate names to designate different stages of note-taking: notula was the single word or two quickly recorded in a slim notebook; nota, the later and fuller transcription of this thought onto an index card. When away from his desk he used spring-activated ballpoint pens that required no fumbling with a cap, and wore jackets with pockets that would accommodate these tools. He maintained friends who would not question his habit of stopping, mid-walk, mid-sentence, to quickly note a thought.

Barthes: "When a certain amount of time's gone by without any note-taking, without my having taken out my notebook, I notice a certain feeling of frustration and aridity. And so each time I get back to note-taking (notatio) it's like a drug, a refuge, a security. I'd say that the activity of notatio is like a mothering. I return to notatio as to a mother who protects me. Note-taking gives me a form of security" (La Préparation du Roman, 1979).

Reading and thinking about note-taking gives me a form of security, a thrill even, so I will indulge myself a little further and add here advice from Benjamin's list, "The Writer's Technique in Thirteen Theses":

“Item #4. Avoid haphazard writing materials. A pedantic adherence to certain papers, pens, inks is beneficial. No luxury, but an abundance of these utensils is indispensable.

“Item #5. Let no thought pass incognito, and keep your notebook as strictly as the authorities keep their register of aliens.” (“One-Way Street,” 1928)

Hannah Arendt on Benjamin: “Nothing was more characteristic of him in the thirties than the little notebooks with black covers which he always carried with him and in which he tirelessly entered in the form of quotations what daily living and reading netted him in the way of ‘pearls’ and ‘coral.’”

Diaries

September 10, 2006. The [New York Times](#) prints excerpts from Sontag’s diaries of 1958 to 1967. I marvel at the immediacy and intimacy of her notes and lists, and the quirky way formal typesetting reproduces and transforms the idiosyncrasies of her punctuation and abbreviation; at her using the word “queer” to describe herself in 1959, her talk of lovers, orgasm, depression, drinking, Rilke, writing, and her seven-year-old son. The tone of these diaries is so radically different from anything I’ve ever read by her. It’s a revelation and makes me rethink many of my assumptions about Sontag.

[A Barthes Reader](#), edited by Sontag, begins and ends with essays on the diary. “Deliberation,” published the year before Barthes died, is a melancholic meditation on his ambivalence over that form. He finds pleasure in the spontaneity of recording an entry, but ultimately expresses irritation with the “verbless sentences” and the “pose” of the diary voice. He feels that everything he writes is merely reproducing the voice of all the diaries that have come before.

Vision

I’m working haltingly on this essay while simultaneously undergoing treatment for optic neuritis in my left eye. My doctors are kind people who especially want to help me because I am a photographer; my ophthalmologist collects Leicas and is always eager to discuss optics and lenses and uses the terminology of f-stops and “shutting down” to describe the darkened perceptions of my affected eye. I don’t tell my doctors that my production of photographs has dwindled to a trickle, that I’ve grown melancholic and ambivalent about photography. After all, one of the motivations for this essay has been to try to rekindle a desire to make images.

I have a resistance to engaging my true topic, “photography & accident,” and instead find myself inexorably drawn to thinking about writing. As I struggle to write about photography, I remember how much easier it seemed to write about reading and writing, and how much I love to read about both these subjects. I begin to wonder if it’s not just the modernist paradigm kicking in, that a metadiscourse is always more satisfying: painting about painting, photographs about photography, and writing about writing. I can always be engaged by discipline- or medium-specific metaproductions.

Words, Pictures

Sontag: “A photograph could also be described as a quotation, making a book of photographs like a book of quotations.” And Barthes speculated that the haiku and the photograph have the same noeme, the same essence. What each reveals, unequivocally, is the “that has been.”

Light Writing

This is the Greek origin of the word “photography,” and Eduardo Cadava reminds us that Henry Fox Talbot, author of The Pencil of Nature, used the expression “words of light” to describe his first photographs. In Camera Lucida Barthes gives us a possible Latin equivalent for “photograph”: “imago lucis opera expressa,” an image “expressed (like the juice of a lemon) by the action of light.”

Automatic Writing

Sontag: “[A photograph] is a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask. . . . [A] photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation.”

Barthes, invoking Sontag: “[F]rom the real body, which was there, proceed radiations, which ultimately touch me . . . like the delayed rays of a star.”

As indexes or imprints, photographs constitute an unmediated transcription of the flow of the real onto a two-dimensional plane. In her essay “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism” (1981), Rosalyn Krauss recast photography as a form of automatism or automatic writing.

Martha Rosler

I am immersed in reading works by and about my four authors, trying to think through this notion of accident and what it could possibly mean in relation to contemporary practices. There is an archaic ring to “accident,” somehow associated with the “truth” claims of the photograph, a notion of authenticity long ago debunked by critics such as Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler. Rosler published her seminal, brutal critique of documentary photography (“in, around, and afterthoughts”) in 1981, and, ironically, I think the subsequent decline in the medium can be attributed at least in part to a super-valuation, not to mention a convenient distortion, of her argument. Rosler’s essay portrays documentary as an untenable practice: to look at and record the real world, unmediated, is to run the very high risk of victimizing a second time those already victimized by social injustice. This was the message that filtered down and out, widely, from that influential essay and touched a generation of artists. One possible response to Rosler’s argument would have been to create instead a world of one’s own. Much of the staged, directed, and patently constructed work of the ’80s and after, whether it’s of a critical nature or not, is underpinned by Rosler’s critique.

Wolfgang Tillmans

Wolfgang Tillmans’s work is at P.S. 1: a major exhibition of mostly enormous, framed photographs, very abstract and painterly, gestural. They are images of flares and light leaks, giant swaths of color spilling across the paper like thrown paint. They are nothing if not a testament to the possibilities of accident, yet I am filled with boredom and disappointment, skeptical about Tillmans’s choice to produce these works on such a massive scale, and to give up his usual, unpretentious method of tacking pictures to the wall with Scotch tape. I walk quickly through the galleries; a little later I look at the catalogue in the bookstore, in which everything is reduced to a thumbnail, little smudges of color. Without the grand scale of the originals, the images make almost no impression. I think: this is the true indictment of Tillmans’s current works. Only their massiveness of scale and the technical mastery of manipulating gigantic sheets of color paper in the dark make any claim on our attention. There’s accident, but it’s the accident of a Pollock drip—it’s not the idiom of the photograph.

The Book

Writing about William Eggleston’s now legendary first showing of color photographs at MoMA in 1976, Malcolm notes how weak an impression they make on the wall. The catalogue, however, is

another story: its hip design gives his work the avant-garde look of modern art “that eluded it in the museum.”

Photographs have been embedded in books almost from day one, beginning with Talbot’s The Pencil of Nature, and they continue to be happy companions. I’m convinced that reproducibility in book form is part of the vocabulary of the photograph.

Reproduction and Type

There is a seduction to the editorial use of photographs: surround almost any image with type and it takes on an allure, an authority, provokes a desire it might otherwise not have. What is this appeal, exactly? The seduction of language, of the symbolic? Is it that, as Benjamin and Brecht speculated, photographs are more at home with, even in need of, words?

In one of the grad programs where I teach, students are required to write a thesis about their work and process. I notice that their photographs become vastly more interesting to me after I read what they’ve written about them; I like seeing their images shrunken and recontextualized, embedded in paragraphs of descriptive text.

Malcolm: “The dullest, most inept and inconsequential snapshot, when isolated, framed (on a wall or by the margins of a book), and paid attention to, takes on all the uncanny significance, fascination, and beauty of R. Mutt’s fountain.”

Fragments

I’m drawn to fragmentary forms, to lists, diaries, notebooks, and letters. Even just reading the word “diary” elicits a frisson, a touch of promise. It’s the concreteness of these forms, the clarity of their address, that appeals and brings to mind Virginia Woolf’s dictum about writing, that “to know whom to write for is to know how to write.” I am similarly drawn to fragments of an artist’s oeuvre, a single image in a magazine or brochure. I tear these out and hold onto them. No doubt I also like the miniaturization, and the possibility of possessing the thing.

Taped to the wall above my desk is a Thomas Hirshhorn print of Emma Kunz’s geometric shapes, stolen for me from his last show by my friend, filmmaker Jennifer Montgomery, and beside it is a page torn out of Afterimage, with a Gabriel Orozco photo (Coins in Window) reproduced in black and white.

In a pencil jar is a six-inch nail, also pinched from the Hirshhorn show by Jennifer, and embedded between it and the pens and pencils is a tiny reproduction of an Andrea Gohl window, an image I saw in an Allen Frame show at Art in General a few years ago. Frame is an artist I discovered in Nan Goldin's curated show Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing in 1989 at Artists Space, a show that included many other loved artists, such as David Wojnarowicz and Peter Hujar. Frame made color diptychs of Kodachrome snapshots with handwritten captions in the margins. They seemed to be images of friends and lovers, and reminded me of Larry Clark's Tulsa.

All of these images, the ones at hand and the ones remembered, become part of a psychic landscape; they feed a fantasy, have what Sontag calls a "talismanic" quality.

Found

Sontag: "Photographs are, of course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem, in a world littered with photographic relics, to have the status of found objects."

"A painting is commissioned or bought; a photograph is found (in albums and drawers), cut out (of newspapers and magazines), or easily taken oneself."

The space of reverie opened up by images I come across in a group show or in a magazine is often squelched by an encounter with the larger body of larger works from which these have been extracted. So much of what we see in galleries is responding to the imperative to overproduce, overenlarge, overconsume, and for artists with ascending and funded careers this trajectory can seem all but unavoidable. As Roberta Smith points out, the primary meaning of these works is often: "I made this because I can."

One of the rare instances where large-scale photography seems to be justified is Hannah Wilke's Intra-Venus series. Here there's a reason for the massive size: these pictures of Wilke's delicate body rendered monstrous and bloated by cancer treatments are meant to be an affront, in-your-face, a gutsy cry of rage and defiance. I saw some of them recently at P.S. 1. They were a little warped and fraying around the edges, not precious or commercial looking, or well preserved. Probably not very saleable or collectible.

Consumption

“The final reason for the need to photograph everything lies in the very logic of consumption itself. To consume means to burn, to use up—and, therefore, the need to be replenished. As we make images and consume them, we need still more images; and still more” (Susan Sontag).

Periodically, but infrequently enough to be surprised by what I find, I go through boxes of photographs and contact sheets made as long as twenty-eight years ago. My latest foray into the archive was sparked by a need to find specific negatives for a piece that never went beyond the contact sheet stage. In my memory the negs were 35mm color. When I finally uncovered them, they were medium format, black and white, and fewer than I imagined. Nonetheless, I was very happy to find them; I am always happy and reassured when I “find” something that has been “lost.” And in the process of searching, I flipped through hundreds of contact sheets of my baby, wondering how I could possibly have taken so many pictures of him in the first few years of his life (a veritable compulsion is how it strikes me now). Still, these were the images I wanted to look at, pore over, scrutinize.

Dipping into the archive is always an interesting, if sometimes unsettling, proposition. It often begins with anxiety, with the fear that the thing you want won’t surface. But ultimately the process is a little like tapping into the unconscious, and can bring with it the ambivalent gratification of rediscovering forgotten selves.

Rather than making new pictures, why can’t I just recycle some of these old ones? Claim “found” photographs from among my boxes? And have this gesture signify “resistance to further production/consumption”?

Love

In the essay “Diana and Nikon,” Malcolm quotes Lisette Model on the attraction of the snapshot: “We are all so overwhelmed by culture that it is a relief to see something which is done directly, without any intention of being good or bad, done only because one wants to do it.”

And Barthes, in one of many emotive passages in Camera Lucida, speaking of the pathos of the photograph, and of the particular direction his investigation of its essence will take, says: “I was like that friend who had turned to Photography only because it allowed him to photograph his son.”

I remember Sheryl C., a beautiful young lesbian at the University of California, San Diego, who enrolled in photography classes so that she could take pictures of all the girls she had crushes on.

Thomas Hirshhorn writes unabashedly of love in relation to his literary and artistic heroes (and I love him for this), including Emma Kunz (1892–1963), whose “healing images” he featured abundantly in his installation at Gladstone Gallery in 2005:

“I want to take the beauty of her work superficially to make use of it as pictorial energy in a three-dimensional display where questions of decoration, formalism, superficiality are confronted to pictures of war, human violence and wounds.”

I love these words and I love Jennifer for her nerviness, for pinching the Kunz print I coveted but didn't have the guts to steal myself. I picture her on that cold winter day in her long coat and platform heels, like one of Robert Altman's women, moving stealthily and placidly through the frigid glass and concrete spaces of Gladstone in Chelsea.

Sitting through MFA admissions committees, looking at slides or electronic images and listening to the candidates' statements being read aloud, I am struck by these 20-to-30-year-olds' declarations of love for photography. I remember my own love of B&W photography at that age, the seduction of materials, the finishes and textures of special papers, the toners that could be added to further alter warmth or coolness. A simple appreciation of materials becomes taboo.

Zoe Leonard later brought a love and estimation of the old-fashioned gelatin silver print into the postmodern equation, at a time, in the early '90s, when it was thought most uncouth to do so. Her work represented a bridge between old-school photography and the concept-driven practices of the post-Pictures generation, i.e. appropriation and staged photography.

October 4

Page count: 23. Typeface 16-pt bold. I have been reading and writing these notes in a meandering, aleatory fashion, but it is becoming increasingly clear that I must address directly what Benjamin, Sontag, and Malcolm meant by accident and their valuation of it in relation to photography. I go back to the books to reread my opening quotes in context.

Walter Benjamin

Benjamin's essay is a love letter to the earliest practitioners, the first portraitists, and then to subsequent generations of document producers: Eugène Atget, August Sander, and Karl Blossfeld. Benjamin had an uncanny eye for everything that would prove enduring in photographic history, and famously railed against the arty and fashionable, the "creative"—in particular, Albert Renger-Patzsch, author of The World Is Beautiful.

For Benjamin, "the tiny spark of accident" is a little like the punctum, the detail that escaped the photographer's notice but reaches out to the viewer, decades or centuries later, collapsing time, making the viewer feel contemporaneous with the image. He includes in his essay, recently retranslated as "Little History of Photography," David Octavius Hill's Newhaven Fishwife, and writes of "an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real."¹ I find this a strikingly Barthesian remark, this way of talking about desire in relation to the photograph. And looking at the reproduction you know exactly what Benjamin is talking about: you have the uncanny sense that the photograph could be a contemporary one of a stage actress in nineteenth-century dress.

Benjamin's tribute to Atget, an artist all but ignored in his own lifetime, but who photographed the Parisian arcades, those architectural structures that figured so emblematically in Benjamin's thought and oeuvre in the last decade of his life, is especially moving. It is almost as though Benjamin sees in Atget's undervalued life and work, and in the lonely, poverty-afflicted circumstances of his death, a mirror of his own struggles and unrewarded work, his own life beset by cruel accidents of history, that would end in conditions even more fraught than his subject's.

For Benjamin accident is the tiny mark of destiny, the ability of the camera to signal a moment of historical truth. In a strong allusion to mounting Fascist violence in Europe, to city streets becoming more and more perilous to citizens such as himself, Benjamin writes: "It is no accident that Atget's photographs have been likened to those of a crime scene. . . . Every passerby a culprit." He follows with a series of rhetorical questions, a call to photographers to make their works literate, to be eyewitnesses, to pin down meaning with inscription.

But "Little History of Photography" then concludes in classic Benjaminian fashion, with a gesture away from the revolutionary engagement demanded of photographs, back to the melancholic tone that opened the essay, to "the photographs [that] emerge beautiful and unapproachable, from the darkness of our grandfathers' day."

Benjamin and Barthes

Sit at glass-topped table. Copy passages from Benjamin, Barthes. Begin to see new connections.

Benjamin: "For the reader is at all times ready to become a writer. . . . [C]onsumers into producers, readers or spectators into collaborators" ("The Author As Producer").

Barthes: "The Text decants the work from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice" ("From Work to Text").

For Benjamin the art photograph quickly became a fetish; he was interested in photographs whose aesthetic qualities were secondary, a by-product of some other intention or drive. At the end of Camera Lucida, Barthes declares that photography as art is worthless to him because it's not mad. Only an original, mad work will pitch the viewer right back into what he calls "the very letter of Time," the wound of Time, the sense of loss that in turn produces for Barthes a "photographic ecstasy." This ecstasy reminds me of the bliss of Barthes' writerly Text, which, like the punctum, also "cuts," "chooses," "imposes . . . loss." It is also the Text that blurs the distinction between writer and reader.

There are some remarkable affinities between Barthes' decrees in the 1970s and Benjamin's pronouncements in his trio of related works from the early-to-mid-1930s ("Author As Producer," "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," "Little History") that touch on the revolutionary power of the photographic image. In the days of escalating Fascism in Europe, Benjamin felt that what photographs urgently needed was text to ground them, and he advocated Brechtian acts of "unmasking and construction," urged writers to become photographers and readers to become writers.

Though conceived at very different historical moments, and under very different circumstances, these prescriptions from Benjamin are nonetheless very close in spirit to Barthes' own manifesto texts that call for collapsing the distinctions between writers and readers, producers and consumers.

To illustrate this collapsing of roles, both writers make analogies to models of musical production. For Benjamin it is the concert that "eliminate[s] the antithesis between performers and listeners"; for Barthes the conflation of roles signals a period in musical history when "'playing' and 'listening' formed a scarcely differentiated activity."

October 7

Meet up with friends in the East Village. Walk over to St. Marks and look at enormous Annie Leibovitz coffee-table book for her show about to open at the Brooklyn Museum: shocking photographs of Susan Sontag, very ill, in hospital, and on a stretcher being transported by ambulance plane. Photographs and video stills of Sontag dead, almost unrecognizable.

Next day, read article online from Friday Times on the Leibovitz show and book in which Sontag is described as “a private person” and Leibovitz is quoted as saying:

“If [Sontag] was alive, of course this work wouldn’t be published. It’s such a totally different story that she is dead. I mean, she would champion this work.”

Walk the dog and think of the strangeness of this intensely voyeuristic, almost freakish book that chronicles fifteen years of Leibovitz’s commercial work and her private life with Sontag. I think of Sontag’s razor-sharp criticism, her withering critique of Diane Arbus; think especially of Sontag’s last book, Regarding the Pain of Others, an account of the relationship between victimization and photography, and wonder at the terrible irony of these final images of her corpse.

Dust and vacuum bedroom where I work on the bed. Within days every surface is again covered in powdery white dust.

Sontag and Accident

I am struck more than ever by Sontag’s prescience.

She mentions accident more than once, including this passage on photography’s privileged relation to surrealism: “Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise . . . has always courted accidents, welcomed the uninvited. . . . What could be more surreal than an object which virtually produces itself, and with a minimum of effort?” (I wonder what debt Rosalyn Krauss’s essay on the surrealists and photography might owe to Sontag, and go back to Krauss and look over her footnotes. No mention of Sontag.)

For Sontag it is the unmanipulated photograph that is inherently surreal and comes about “through a loose co-operation (quasi-magical, quasi-accidental) between photographer and

subject.” It does not require elaborate means or technical ingenuity; in fact the opposite is true: it is artifice that kills off what’s interesting and vital in a photograph. Artiness squelches: “The less doctored, the less patently crafted, the more naïve, the better a photograph is likely to be.”

Malcolm and Aging

For Barthes accident is the detail that wounds; the punctum is also the wound of Time that every photograph embodies. Janet Malcolm’s essay “Pink Roses” in Diana & Nikon, a review of Andrew Bush’s photographs of a home inhabited by a group of aging aristocrats, is also about the wounds of time. Three quarters of the way into a fairly straightforward review, Malcolm writes:

“But [the photographs] ultimately tell a story more personal and painful (and universal) than the narrative of the ‘European aristocratic lifestyle’ at bay. With a precocity resembling that of Muriel Spark, who wrote her masterpiece Memento Mori when she was half the age of her characters, Bush delicately but with a devastating accuracy probes the world of old age. Led by the camera’s bland inquisitiveness, the young visitor penetrates to the heart of the matter of being at the end of one’s life and getting through the day as best one can.”

I find this writing “devastating,” and Google Malcolm to know her birth date: 1934, in Prague, which means she was 56 when she wrote her review, and was thinking about aging. Now she would be 72. I think of all the accidents of fate and history involved with these writers: Benjamin’s persecution and suicide at age 48; Woolf’s at 59. Barthes hit by a truck at 64, Sontag succumbing to a third bout of cancer at age 71. She railed against “quality of life” and fought for the very slim chance of a cure. Of the four, only Janet Malcolm, the daughter of a Jewish psychiatrist whose family left Czechoslovakia in 1939, the year the Germans invaded, is still alive.

Robert Louis Stevenson: “[Death] outdoes all other accidents because it is the last of them.”

Psychoanalysis

Nineteen thirty-nine was also the year of Freud’s suicide in London following his flight from Nazi-occupied Vienna the previous year. Unlike Benjamin, who was forced to abandon his cherished library when he left Paris, Freud had been allowed to bring his collection of antiquities with him to England. But by then he was in unbearable pain from cancer of the jaw, and induced his own death by morphine with a physician’s assistance.

Janet Malcolm has written extensively on psychoanalysis. In some ways she is at her most dazzling when she uses psychoanalysis as a lens through which to view the world, as in this passage from the essay "Diana and Nikon," on the irascible documentarian Chauncey Hare:

"Hare takes the camera's capacity for aimless vision as his starting point and works with it somewhat the way a psychoanalyst works with free association. He enters the universe of the undesired detail and adopts an expectant attitude, waiting for the cluttered surface to crack and yield to interpretation."

Here Malcolm puts her own artful spin on Benjamin's famous allusion to the camera's ability "with its devices of slow motion and enlargement" to reveal hidden and unseen truths:

"It is through photography that we first discover the existence of [the] optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis."

October 10

First Interferon injection. Pictures of dust motes in sunlight after shaking out bedspread; picture of large weed growing by the West Side Highway. I've broken the ice, am taking pictures again. I risk something, but what, exactly? I am overcoming my resistance to committing further images to the world, new negatives to the archive. Think again of Nina's long howl as she took the plunge.

October 13

For Sontag and Malcolm accident is the vitality of the snapshot, to which they oppose the turgidity and pretentiousness of art. For Barthes accident is wholly subjective; it is what interpolates him into any given photograph.

It's becoming clear to me that my own relation to accident is also extremely subjective, that accident is to be located outside the frame somehow, in the way we apprehend images. I shun the formal encounter via the institutions of galleries and museums, and gravitate to books and journals.

Lost

As I'm writing I start to remember, or think I remember, reading that Benjamin (or was it Barthes?) wrote about clocks in photographs, the idea of a picture recording the exact moment of its taking. I flip through books, hoping I've made a mark. But the thing I was looking to find remains lost. I feel unlucky.

I am developing new coping mechanisms for lost words and lost negatives, as here for instance: compensate by describing the episode instead. Where something is lost, redirect energy, follow the dérive, the chance and flow of what life tosses us, and make something new instead.

Remember that I'm often struck by certain passages of descriptive writing, writing that is not about driving home a point but about providing detail, background, setting the scene (it's tempting to call this the studium of writing). It has a "something from nothing" quality: a pleasurable experience has been had, and no one has paid a price. Remember that writing does not have to be torture.

October 15

Read. Read something else. Go back to the first thing and see how it is changed.

Writing

"Every writer has to reach and is constantly aware of how basically it comes from inside; . . . whereas for the photographer, the world is really there" (Sontag, "Photography within the Humanities").

Writing seems like the ultimate magic trick, of making something from nothing. Perhaps I still "write" like a photographer—I go out into the world of other people's writing and take snapshots. These "word-pictures," like Benjamin's "pearls and coral," have Sontag's "talismanic" quality, and from them I can make something.

October 25

Increase Interferon. Dream-filled, restless sleep. Prompted by Sontag's diary, read Rilke, who said: "Love the questions."

Transformation

In an interview in Afterimage in 1999 Jennifer Montgomery describes the initial attraction film had for her, that it was a medium that could bring together writing, performance, and the visual, all in one work. And then came the discovery of film language:

“We always used to talk about whether a film had been transformed or not. You would get some footage back [from the lab], and it wouldn’t be successful because it wouldn’t have become something other than just the image and the text. . . . [It wouldn’t have] gotten constructed to the point where it had a life of its own.”

This “life of its own” is film language, “the thing we don’t count on . . . the language of the unexpected.”

Jennifer’s comments remind me of Gary Winogrand’s famous statement about why he took pictures. In her essay “Certainties and Possibilities,” Janet Malcolm cites a longer version of the well-known quote in which Winogrand is responding to this query from a student: “What is it, say, in a picture that makes it interesting instead of dead? What makes a picture alive instead of dead?”

Winogrand gives the example of a Robert Frank photograph of a gas station: “[It’s] the photographer’s understanding of possibilities. . . . When he took that photograph he couldn’t possibly know—he just could not know—that it would work, that it would be a photograph. He knew he probably had a chance. In other words, he cannot know what that’s going to look like as a photograph. . . . That’s really what photography—still photography—is about. In the simplest sentence, I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed.”

This “not knowing” has, for the better part of two centuries, been an integral part of working with celluloid and emulsions. Even with a Polaroid you had to wait a minute or two. Not to be too mystical about it, but the delay, the waiting and the anticipation, were all part of a process that embraced accident and contingency.

And this phenomenon of latency, while not exactly eliminated from digital work, has been diminished. A fundamental idiom of the photographic process has been altered by the introduction of previsualization, by the little screens that allow us to compose, rearrange, jettison. The next step is often the larger screen of the computer monitor and the tools of digital enhancement.

Many of the pictures produced by this method are fundamentally no different from the gaudy mid-nineteenth-century pictorialist tableaux of Henry Peach Robinson and F. Holland Day.

Tod Papageorge

Tod Papageorge has been teaching at Yale for a long time—he’s one of the archetypal street photographers of the ’70s, and while my photography teachers all talked about him thirty years ago, I never knew his work. Now he has two books coming out, and an interview recently appeared in Bomb.

“Bomb: Are the mistakes that your students are prone to now the same mistakes that students were prone to when you were teaching back in the ’60s?”

“TP: No. I think that, in general—and this includes a lot of what I see in Chelsea even more than what I see from students at Yale—there’s a failure to understand how much richer in surprise and creative possibility the world is for photographers in comparison to their imagination. This is an understanding that an earlier generation of students, and photographers, accepted as a first principle. Now ideas are paramount, and the computer and Photoshop are seen as the engines to stage and digitally coax those ideas into a physical form—typically a very large form. This process is synthetic, and the results, for me, are often emotionally synthetic too. Sure, things have to change, but photography-as-illustration, even sublime illustration, seems to me an uninteresting direction for the medium to be tracking now, particularly at such a difficult time in the general American culture.”

October 28

Insane mood swings.

Virginia Woolf

In 1926 Woolf wrote an essay called “The Cinema,” about how primitive the art form still was, and about its clumsy attempts to poach on great works of literature such as Anna Karenina. Woolf contrasts the experience of reading, of knowing Anna “almost entirely by the inside of her mind” with film’s rendering of an actress’s “teeth, her pearls and her velvet . . . her [falling] into the arms of a gentleman in uniform [as] they kiss with enormous succulence.” With her usual discernment,

Woolf locates cinema's potential not in its parasitic relationship to the novel but in an "accidental scene [taking place in the background]—the gardener mowing the lawn."

She begins to glimpse film language in what was probably a hair in the gate of Dr. Caligari: "a shadow shaped like a tadpole [that] suddenly appeared at one corner of the screen. It swelled to an immense size, quivered, bulged, and sank back again into nonentity." This monstrous, hoary apparition signifies fear in a way that no facial expressions or words spoken by actors could ever approach, and Woolf speculates that it is in this sort of formal, materialist device, apprehended by accident, that the future of cinema lies.

There are some obvious parallels between Woolf's send-up of hokey film adaptations and what's going on today with photographers who work with Hollywood actors and sets. I know that photography has to evolve, and that for some artists it makes no sense to produce a photograph that is not self-acknowledging "as a construction," but I still stubbornly cling to those artists, like Francesca Woodman, who did it without dusting the hairs from the gate.

A picture like Three Kinds of Melon in Four Kinds of Light, from 1976, capers around the problematics, à la John Berger (Ways of Seeing), of objectifying the naked female body. Woodman cranked this stuff out with effortless verve and wit. Jason Simon introduced me to her work in the late '80s via a catalogue with poor-quality reproductions that he found in a secondhand-book store. I was blown away by this young artist, born the same year I was, dead at twenty-two in 1981, a suicide.

Recently I bought the new Phaidon monograph with superb plates and intoxicating smell of ink. It includes many images I'd never seen before—they take your breath away, they are as mind-blowingly smart and captivating as the work I first saw nearly twenty years ago.

November 27

I'd intended to go to Chelsea, but instead return to St. Mark's to look at the Annie Leibovitz book. The book has been placed on a podium with a stool in front, and this time I look at it from beginning to end. I have a different perception: I realize that there are fewer of the celebrity portraits than I remembered, and many, many more of the B&W diaristic pictures of Leibovitz's aging parents, her children, her siblings, and of course Susan Sontag, looking very real, with her papers and books and notes spread out all over the bed. Clad in jeans and sneakers, she had the frumpy glamour of someone who cared very little for how she looked. I know one is not supposed

to look at B&W documentary photographs and think “these pictures tell me what it was like to be Susan Sontag,” and I know what Barthes said about our fatuous projections onto the “writer’s life,” but I do it anyway, and I read into the pictures all of her intelligence, her passion, and the intensity of her commitment to the “writer’s life.”

Leibovitz’s book is not perfect by any means—it’s trying a little too hard to be epic, and it’s bracketed by monumental, “eternal” desert shots, but it has a tenderness and a grittiness that I missed the first time round. I’m not nearly as judgmental as I was.

Openness

This time I make it to Chelsea. There’s nothing in particular I’ve come to see; mostly, I’ve had a pressing feeling that it’s been way too long since I made the effort, that I’m out of touch, that I’ve neglected my responsibilities. I feel guilty for being a recluse and not participating.

Yesterday’s “openness” (as witnessed by my second encounter with the Leibovitz book) is still in place; it’s 5 p.m. and dark, everything closes in an hour, but actually that’s plenty of time to see a lot of things. First, a group show at Murray Guy with a Matthew Buckingham video playing on a small monitor. There’s almost nothing to look at: a nondescript patch of sidewalk, grass, and fence; occasionally some bread crumbs get tossed into the frame and a few birds appear to peck at them. On the wall is a slot-shaped box containing a typeset printout with a text by Matthew. I take one of these to read later.

I linger at Paula Cooper’s bookstore, then head over to Sonnabend, not knowing who’s there but having a moment of recognition as I walk in and realize these are the Hiroshi Sugimoto photos of shadows on white walls I’ve read about somewhere. Sugimoto has an appealing statement too, about tools and making things, about devices he’s had to invent and construct for his fastidious photographs of seascapes and movie screens. For these shadow pictures he had the walls of a penthouse refinished in traditional Japanese plaster to better absorb and reflect light. I like his words, and I even feel an availability to these large, dumb, marshmallow pictures, to their Zen-like quality of muteness and refusal. I think about color prints I’ve made and the often compelling quality of shadows on a white wall, sometimes having the purplish hue of a bruise.

Robert Longo has massive graphite drawings of the cosmos and the moon, and a couple of sentimental photographs of beautiful blond children sleeping, all done totally straight-faced and

earnest. This is the art world at its most absurd: Mount Rushmore—scale pieties, dwarfed only by the deafening ka-ching of the cash register.

A few days later I read Matthew's wonderful, vaguely Sebald-ish text (printed in two columns of Times Roman with little documentary stills at the bottom) about the cultural history of house sparrows in Brooklyn. This is one of my favorite types of artwork, where the meaning of a work is deferred and completed, often over short distances of time and place, by the reading of a handout text.

Zoe Leonard

Head down to Dia for a lecture by Zoe Leonard on Agnes Martin. I get there just before 6, only to realize I've gotten the time wrong; the talk starts at 6:30. I can't drink much anymore, but Paula Cooper's bookstore is still open, so I spend the half hour reading a few pages of Annie Leibovitz's introduction to her book. Again, I am surprised—by the simplicity and directness of her writing. It's all about Susan, about how this doorstep of a book grew out of digging around for photos to give to friends at Sontag's memorial. The writing touches me.

I make a few notes: Leibovitz describes her method as "personal reportage," an expression I've never heard before, and she says that when she gives advice to students she tells them to "stay close to home." My own work could not be further from Leibovitz's, yet both these terms could be used to describe what I do. And while I don't want to make what she makes, I do want to look at it, and on a fundamental level I subscribe to the ideas that underpin this particular work.

But getting back to the fact of this book. What does it mean that I've softened so much in my regard of it? Is this some sort of momentary, hysterical conversion? Have I lost my critical faculties and succumbed to the schlock of pathos? On some level I've given in to a sentimental impulse—I've changed my mind about the book because on closer inspection I see that it documents a writer's life, and not just any writer, but the life of a heroine writer, replete with world travel, committed work, beds strewn with papers and notebooks; a life devoid of possessions, with the exception of a prized library. My change of heart is bound up with ideas I've already touched on, having to do with a yearning to connect, even if only symbolically or metaphorically, photographs with words, photography and writing.

Zoe gives her lecture on Agnes Martin, but doesn't show any paintings. With her characteristic flair for storytelling, she describes photographing the paintings over and over, and the difficulty of

it: all she can see is the dust in her viewfinder. No paintings, no photographs; at the last minute Zoe substitutes a repetitive, structuralist film, the only film of any kind Martin ever made. Yet I leave the lecture with an incredibly vivid image of the absent, unseen photographs: classic, vintage B&W Leonard, signature black frame line enclosing Martin's pale, gray, pencil-lined grids. Photographs of pencil marks. . . . But wait, did Agnes Martin even use pencil? I realize, rereading this, that I don't actually know, and may have invented these pencil lines, fantasizing photographs to suit my own desire.

Jeff Wall

A big survey of Jeff Wall's light boxes is at MoMA. In his astute essay "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or As, Conceptual Art," Wall makes the case that photography became modern and relevant (became "art") not with the f.64 school of Edward Weston and Ansel Adams (which Wall qualifies as still in the pictorial tradition), but with the crummy little snapshots of Robert Smithson, Ed Ruscha, and Dan Graham. Yet Wall's own photographic project exists in stark contrast to the modesty of that vernacular tradition: his massive transparencies want to be understood primarily in relation to nineteenth-century painting and its history.

As one of the ur-purveyors of large pictures in the late '70s, Wall was definitely attempting something new and radical in the presentation and reception of photographs, and he's historically important for that gesture of innovation, for giving the photograph a status as "constructed object" as opposed to "window on the world." I liked his sink pictures and the anemone-filled grave when I first saw them reproduced in magazines, but at MoMA even this work seems ultraflat and sterile in its effect, and I'd argue that it's not just a problem endemic to big, ossifying museum shows, but an issue with the grandiosity and ungainliness of the silver-boxed Duratrans themselves.

Wall is a smart guy and a good writer, and I always thought that one of the things he had going for him was his progressive politics: he could perform social documentary without the victimization. But as I think of it now, Sherry Levine did pretty much the same thing with a vastly greater economy of means, i.e. appropriation and critique of the genre via her modest representations of Walker Evans and Edward Weston works in B&W 8 x 10s.

Kerry James Marshall

Lest I be accused of dismissing photographs simply because they are big, I want to register my love for Kerry James Marshall and his show of large inkjet prints at the Studio Museum in Harlem: a mural-size baobab tree; a Christmas tree with black nativity and lights; inky, blue-black figures and silhouettes, barely discernible invocations of Ellison's Invisible Man (Wall's version is a Macy's holiday window by comparison); the faces of the white women who stare out at the camera from an infamous 1930s lynching photograph. In this show there was a prodigious mixing of genres and textures: sculptural elements in the form of handmade, improvised furniture, and lounging areas mingled with photographs of all shapes and sizes, all manner of presentation. The corporate look of most museum shows was nowhere in evidence; what ruled instead was a breathtakingly inventive heterogeneity of formal invention and storytelling.

Bed

Early spring, 2007. Think back to July, sudden blindness in left eye and diagnosis of multiple sclerosis (a disease of accidents, "mistakes of the immune system"), leaving hospital with prednisone taper. For a few weeks I'd wake early each morning and with push from vitamin P, bring the computer to bed where I'd stretch out and make myself write. I'd asked some questions about photography and accident, about what it meant to my four writers; I'd laid down a gauntlet or two. And while the "decisive moment" metaphysics of accident might have been a red herring, it nonetheless pointed me to contemporary photographers whose work is compelling and vibrant. To those already mentioned (Peter Hujar, Zoe Leonard, Kerry James Marshall, David Wojnarowicz, Francesca Woodman) I'll take the opportunity to add here: Liz Deschenes, Jitka Hanslova, Hanna Liden, Claire Pentecost, James Welling. In these artists I intuit, wholly from the gut, a love for "the aged and the yellowed," what Barthes, unabashed in his essentialism about photographs, identified in a 1979 lecture as the "real photography," unlike the glossy pictures in Paris-Match.

Finally, there is the accident of words: what wells up when we make space for such occurrence, when we lie on the bed in morning sunlight and bring laptop to lap. I've often heard it said, most recently by novelist Monica Ali, that as writers "we're not at liberty to choose the material, the material chooses us." Geoff Dyer has noted parallel statements by photographers: "It is the photo that takes you" (Henri Cartier-Bresson), "I don't press the shutter, the image does" (Arbus), and one from Paul Strand on choosing his subjects: "I don't. . . . They choose me." While I've always intuited this about pictures, I was skeptical when it came to words. But I now know it to be true, beyond any doubt, for writing as well.

Notes

I still haven't come across that lost reference to clocks. I did, however, begin to read Walter Benjamin's correspondence, and in a letter to Gershom Scholem dated December 20, 1931 (the same year "Little History" was published), he describes his study, a room with a panoramic view from which he can see the ice-skating rinks, as well as a clock: "as time goes by, it is especially this clock that becomes a luxury it is difficult to do without." Benjamin also tells Scholem: "I now write only while lying down." I think of Leibovitz's photograph of Sontag on her bed. I don't have the photo before me—it's another absent picture—but perhaps I can conjure it from memory: Susan in jeans, white shirt, and dirty white sneakers, reclining on the left, her hair thick and wiry, black with white stripe; and, spread out over more than half the bed, a complex patchwork of ruled pads with half their bulk folded over, typescript pages crossed out and annotated, and oddly shaped scraps of paper with handwritten notes.

Moyra Davey

New York, July 2007

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¹ In the new translation, "accident" is rendered as "contingency," perhaps another indicator of the term's downgrading in the contemporary photographic lexicon.

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