On Photography

by Susan Sontag

The following passages are exceprts from Susan Sontag's essay, *On Photography*

To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power. A now notorious first fall into alienation, habituating people to abstract the world into printed words, is supposed to have engendered that surplus of Faustian energy and psychic damage needed to build modern, inorganic societies. But print seems a less treacherous form of leaching out the world, of turning it into a mental object, than photographic images, which provide most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present. What can be read about the world is frankly an interpretation, as are older kinds of flat-surface visual statements, like paintings and drawings, Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it: miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.

A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it—by converting experience into an image, a souvenir. Travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs. The very activity of taking pictures is soothing. Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter. Lacking other responses, they take a picture. This gives shape to experience: stop, take a photograph, and move on. The method especially appeals to people handicapped by a ruthless work ethic—Germans, Japanese, and Americans. They have something to do that is like a friendly imitation of work: they can take pictures.

Like guns and cars, cameras are fantasy machines whose use is addictive. However, contrary to the rhetoric of ordinary language and advertising, they are not as lethal as guns and cars. For cars being marketed like guns there is at least this much truth in the hyperbole: except in wartime, cars kill more people than guns do. The camera does not kill, so it seems to be all a bluff—like a man's fantasy of having a gun, knife, or tool between his legs. Still, there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have. To photograph is to turn people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. To photograph someone is a sublimated murder, just as the camera is the sublimation of a gun. Taking pictures is a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.

Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, an approach which starts from not accepting the world as it looks. All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no. Strictly speaking, it is doubtful that a photograph can help us to understand anything. The simple fact of "rendering" a reality doesn't tell us much about that reality. A photograph of the Krupp factory, as Brecht points out, tells us little about this institution. The "reality" of the world is not in its images, but in its functions. Functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand.