

ing a doubled pathway with negative trails of light.

Several of the artists chart a course into ancestral futures: *Magellan Doesn't Live Here* (2012–17), a film by Mariquita “Micki” Davis, for example, seeks to dislodge narratives of Western maritime “discovery,” following the passage of a replica of an 18th-century-style Chamoru outrigger canoe (called by its makers the *Sakman Chamorro*) on its journey to Guåhan (Guam) from San Diego. Davis follows the Chamoru diasporic communities in California who crafted and dispatched the vessel to Guåhan as a gesture of return: to language, to ceremony and to ancient systems of star navigation. The canoe makes its trans-Pacific voyage via freighter due to seasonal storms, and Davis’s final scene is a double-exposed footage of a plane’s arrival into Guam’s airport and the Sakman’s welcome into harbourage. This scene parallels the disjuncture of

travel itself, which produces in the traveller a longing to align temporal and positional coordinates that are simultaneous yet out of joint. Linger over this moment of the film is the question carver and historian Mario Borja asks of his Chamoru relations in Guåhan: “I brought this for you and can you accept me?”

*Transits and Returns* asks us to look beyond certain institutional frameworks that fix Indigenous art, toward the moving points on the ocean’s horizon. The exhibition’s collaborative incubation in Brisbane (notably also the home of the Asia Pacific Triennial) and its subsequent iteration in Vancouver point the way toward multiple hemispheric reorientations.

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**Sontag: Her Life and Work: Benjamin Moser  
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The gist of Benjamin Moser’s recent 800-page biography of Susan Sontag is that there were two of her: the “Susan” and the “Sontag.” If this has been a common dilemma of the celebrity who is now anyone with access to a camera phone—the projected persona and the private, vulnerable person, guarded close—it has also been a queer passing thing. Traits are turned on and off according to when and where it feels most safe to do so. The hand on the switch is generally thought to be the brain, the conscious mind. And so, another dilemma of Susan Sontag’s in this very queer biography by a queer author: disembodiment, and the question, if I don’t have my brain, what do I have?

In this way, *Sontag* makes a paradox of its subject’s lifelong critical analysis of how thinking in metaphors can be vulgar, reductive, violent, unsatisfactory. Why not, Sontag asked in works such as “Against Interpretation” (1966) and *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), focus on what *is* rather than what *is like*? Sontag’s closeted desire for women scrambled this conviction (she never wrote about being gay, and was terrified of being outed by the media). So did her self-awareness as a public intellectual, a girl of the zeitgeist dependent on what she published to represent her, only to dismiss it months or years later like last season’s slacks. (In 1973, *The Harvard Crimson* wrote of Sontag, “When the cultural wind shifts, she rustles in the breeze.”) What Sontag eventually demanded of her life, Moser suggests, became the opposite of what she demanded in her criticism: take me for what I am like, for what I aspire to, for whatever I choose to give you. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. Consequently, a reader splashes through *Sontag*’s first half and feels cold, creeping shadows in its second. The utopia of queer ambition; the apocalypse of its praxis.

It is indeed thrilling to read a biography that focuses so vibrantly on the formative development of a queer intellect. At *Sontag*’s start, nothing feels tragic even when it should. Susan’s remote alcoholic mother, Mildred (“the queen of denial”), sips vodka on ice from a tall glass while asking guests if they’d also like some water. (Moser compares her, and later Susan, to Joan Crawford.) When Susan’s family moves to Tucson, Susan is so pleased with the minimalist desert landscape that she hugs a cactus. Susan is desperate to

**by David Balzer**

become popular, and succeeds. (Of the bunk beds she shares with her sister Judith: “Susan inevitably was on top.”) Moser’s description of Susan’s high school years in Sherman Oaks, California—“bleak and intellectually starved”—recalls Rosalind Russell’s Auntie Mame, who dictates flamboyantly to her memoirist, “how bleak was my puberty.”

Sontag’s queerness is Moser’s chief fixation. She wanted to abolish “distinction[s],” he writes, “not because she was Jewish. Because she was gay.” In a chapter entitled “The Color of Shame,” Moser includes the key, queer lines from *Reborn* (2008), the first published volume of Sontag’s journals: “the incipient guilt I have always felt about my lesbianism—making me ugly to myself,” and, from a later entry, Sontag’s resolve to use writing as a weapon, because “my desire to write is connected with my homosexuality.” Moser stresses Sontag’s reading of Djuna Barnes’s cult-classic lesbian novel *Nightwood* (1936), whose decadent characters blur what is and what is like. Sontag’s first girlfriend, Harriet Sohmers, would use “Have you read *Nightwood*?” as a pickup line. (Hot.) Sontag slept with 36 people in her second year at Berkeley, the lovers’ names listed in her journal under the title “The Bi’s Progress.”

When Moser tells of 17-year-old Sontag marrying 27-year-old academic Philip Rieff after knowing him for a week, things take a turn. What is like becomes horrific: Sontag reads *Middlemarch* (1872) during this time and realizes she is exactly like George Eliot’s heroine, Dorothea Brooke, who marries the feckless, musty intellectual Edward Casaubon. What is becomes unfathomable: Sontag gets pregnant but ignores her body, thinking, when her water breaks, that she has peed the bed. Sontag’s intellectual identity is severed: she ghostwrites the book still attributed to Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (1959). Few Sontag studies dwell on this book as Sontag’s official first, and Moser’s use of the phrase “she writes” while quoting from it feels defiant.

Among the subsequent stories about post-divorce, Bright Young Thing Sontag, the queer encounters stand out: playwright María Irene Fornés (she “could make a rock come,” says Sohmers), the duchess Carlotta del Pezzo (Garbo-esque in her druggy indolence), Cocteau star Nicole Stéphane (she and



COVER PHOTO: Richard Avedon; Susan Sontag; April 10, 1978, New York City, 1978  
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Carlotta were two of the “four hundred lesbians in Europe,” according to Sontag, Camille Paglia (who did not fuck Sontag but named her as rival, trying unsuccessfully to start a “trashy literary [feud]”). Sontag had passionless sex with Warren Beatty and Robert Kennedy, and her first male-induced orgasm with John F. Kennedy aide Dick Goodwin (yes, his real name). “Oh shit,” Sontag recalled of the orgasm. “Now I’m just like everybody else.”

She most certainly was not. In fact, it’s always been a sport to try to cut Sontag down to size, and though Moser acknowledges this, he does it too, in passages that can feel extraneous, competitive and bitchy. (One rarely goes to a biography for in-depth negative criticism of the subject’s body of work.) Sontag’s musings on the Cuban revolution are, Moser writes, “fuzzy, unsubstantiated.” Like a bad editor, Moser chastises Sontag for what makes her herself—her shoot-from-the-hip, epigrammatic style. Sontag may have been a dilettante in Vietnam, but at least she had the courage to go, and to write, in 1967’s “What’s Happening in America,” that “the white race *is*”—italics hers—“the cancer of human history.” (As a cancer survivor, Sontag would later apologize for the metaphor, nothing else.) Moser also jabs at Sontag’s body and its functions, recalling David Plante’s pseudo-misogynist characterization of Germaine Greer in *Difficult Women* (1983). Sontag loved “excremental food,” such as chicken feet (she’d chase down the dim sum cart for them), and had difficulty bathing regularly (probably due to her lifelong struggle with depression, a connection Moser doesn’t make).

Sontag’s exceptionalism was her own undoing. In no uncertain terms, her later-in-life relationship with photographer Annie Leibovitz was abusive, and though Leibovitz would take Sontag’s merciless criticisms about not being smart enough in valiant stride, Moser makes them painful to visit. “They were the worst couple I’ve ever seen in terms of unkindness, inability to be nice, held resentments,” Sontag’s son, David Rieff, is quoted as saying. “I said to [Susan] more than once, ‘Look, either be nicer to her or leave her.’” When Sontag had her last, fatal bout with cancer, Rieff would, at times, refuse to come to her bedside. After her negative prognosis, Sontag would claim

to a doctor’s assistant to have “no spiritual values” and “no friends.” (On her deathbed, she preferred watching Old Hollywood musicals to Bergman films.)

Terry Castle’s 2005 *London Review of Books* essay “Desperately Seeking Susan” is a loving lampoon of a sometime lover. Castle writes of how Sontag told her about being in Sarajevo, where Sontag put on a production of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* during the Bosnian War. In Palo Alto, Sontag conveys to Castle what it’s like to dodge sniper fire, ducking in and around Restoration Hardware in her drapery “intellectual diva outfit.” But Moser’s depiction of what Sontag did in Sarajevo is not funny, not camp. In Sarajevo, the distinction between what is and what is like had to dissolve for Sontag, not only because of the brutality of war, but also because of the imperative to relate. Risking one’s life to uphold the humanizing aspects of art and culture, seeing art and culture as sustenance itself when everything else falls away—that is a queer thing, too.

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