



Notes on photography & accident

From Index Cards - 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.

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