

ART AND CONSCIOUSNESS

**Susan Sontag interviewed by Bonnie Marranca
and Gautam Dasgupta**

I remember very well the day we taped this interview with Susan Sontag. Gautam Dasgupta and I were already waiting in her apartment at 106th Street when she arrived and, smiling, said “I’m all yours” before settling down for our conversation. She had just returned from a chemotherapy treatment. She was wearing brown slacks and a brown sweater, with a gold silk Indian scarf, folded at her neck. It was February 1977. Susan Sontag was forty-four years old. We were planning the interview for the fifth issue of *PAJ*, which was published the fall of that year.

It was perfectly natural to include Sontag in an issue whose other pages featured a special section on experimental theatre, with contributions by Sam Shepard, Megan Terry, Carolee Schneemann, Stanley Kauffmann; articles on contemporary dance, text-sound art, Fassbinder, and European festivals; a new Edward Bond play. Unusual for American intellectuals who have largely ignored the non-literary arts, Sontag had a far-ranging knowledge of world theatre, opera, and dance, in addition to film and painting. She was a passionate theatregoer, sometime playwright and director, who could be seen frequently at BAM or Lincoln Center or in downtown spaces. While her literary work is widely known and celebrated, it is perhaps less evident how much she cared for and wrote about and supported the world of performance over four decades.

I am grateful for the encouragement she always gave to *PAJ*. Like any young person in the downtown scene at the time, I wanted Sontag to acknowledge our publication. She always understood the new, the avant-garde. She appreciated work outside the mainstream. She valued independent small presses. Mainly, she cared about what you were doing if she respected your endeavors. She had critical perceptions that went in complicated directions and yet made fine historical distinctions. In this interview she demonstrates her knowledge of the then new theatre of artists such as Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman, linking many of the concerns of the seventies, such as perception, consciousness, and imagery, to the modernist legacy. (I was already preoccupied with these issues in *The Theatre of Images*, which was published a few months after our interview.) No matter what the era, Sontag was always our contemporary. It was the rare writer, performer,

filmmaker, or artist who didn't want to be noticed by her luxurious mind and discerning eye. The intellectual landscape of New York is forever changed at her death. Who remains to distinguish the ecology of images?

Sontag was always supportive of our publishing activities, not only the journal from its early stages, but in the next decade when we started to publish fiction and other non-theatre titles. I can recall a long afternoon at her place, by now she had moved downtown, during which she pulled out from her bookshelves several foreign-language editions, suggesting possible projects for us to consider. One of them that comes to mind is the untranslated autobiographical writings of Robert Musil. We sent her every journal we ever published and most of the books. (*Could they be hardback copies?—OK, sure.*) It gives me great pleasure to know that so many PAJ publications are in her beloved book collection.

In the last conversation we had just over a year ago, by telephone, I made some remarks congratulating her on *Regarding the Pain of Others*, then launched into a discussion of several older artists I knew who were doing such good work. But, when I lamented that it was a struggle for them in this culture, how hard it was to keep going, Sontag wasn't interested in such complaints. Did I think Goya didn't struggle? (*Your're right. You're right.*) I could find no defense against her steadfast belief in the exemplary. She respected struggle.

I had seen examples of that up close. One summer evening, in 1999, Sontag was the guest of honor for dinner at the home of her dear friends, Bob and Peg Boyers, editors of *Salmagundi* who run The Summer Writers Institute at Skidmore College, in Saratoga Springs. Sontag had come there for a reading though she was again facing a severe health crisis. Her current treatments created neurological damage that affected her walking and she was unsteady on her feet. (*How are you? We don't want to lose you. I hope to have you around for many more years.—I'm planning to be.*) But, she was as interested as ever when, newly arrived home from several months in Europe, I told her of the brilliant theatre work of the Italian director Romeo Castellucci. A short while later, she walked onto the stage at the college and gave a reading from her then novel-in-progress, *In America*, whose central character is the Polish actress Helena Modjeska. She was living in the moment, in her writing, in her thought. She was showing that life is worth fighting for, you do your work, you go on.

We reprint this interview to honor her.

—Bonnie Marranca



What performances in the past few years have you felt were worthwhile experiences?

Lucian Pintilie's *Turandot*. Robert Anton's puppet theatre. Merce Cunningham. Peter Brook's *The Ik*. Beckett's Berlin staging of *Waiting for Godot*. Plisetskaya doing

Ravel's *Bolero*. Watergate. Franz Salieri's *La Grand Eugene* (the original Paris production, not the one that went on tour). Strehler's production of *The Cherry Orchard*. The invented Act Three of the Met's recent production of *Lulu*. Maria Irene Fornes's staging of her play, *Fefu and Her Friends*. . . Shall I go on?

Why haven't you written about these events?

I'm writing other things. Mostly fiction.

Don't you want to go on writing criticism?

I don't consider that I ever was a critic. I had ideas, and I attached them to works of art that I admired. Now I attach them to other things.

How do you view the current critical scene?

You mean monitoring productions and giving out grades—the kind of consumer reporting that decides whether something is good or not good, well performed or not well performed?

If that is what people are satisfied with, isn't it due to the lack of a new critical vocabulary with which to treat the new theatre?

I don't expect ideas from critics. They come from poets and painters and novelists and even playwrights—doing a stint of writing about the theatre. And from directors who found their own theatres.

But the current experimental theatre is such a radical break from our theatrical past, not part of a developing American tradition. No one seems to know quite how to deal with it.

I think the problem is that the more than sixty-year-old international tradition of modernism has bequeathed us a surfeit of critical perspectives—Constructivism, futurism, Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski, et al. And that we give an open-ended but increasingly limited credence to them all. It's not lack of familiarity with experimental theatre that explains the critical vacuum. It's the mounting disenchantment—partly justified, partly shallow and philistine—with modernism. And a widespread boredom with high culture itself.

You mentioned Artaud and Grotowski. Their theories—which go back to the origins of theatre in ritual and ceremony—seem to be a negation of everything that's transpired in Western culture. Isn't that a regression? And doesn't their kind of theatre remove one from the immediacy of the moment?

There's no opposition between the archaic and the immediate.

I see such theatre as a form of hermeticism, a withdrawal into a world that we have no contact with whatsoever.

Well, I've no objection to art that is hermetic. (Some art *should* be hermetic, I think.) But, far from being hermetic, the theatre influenced by Artaud and by Grotowski is very much about immediate, present experience. The difference is that both Artaud and Grotowski believe in the reality of evil—the reality treated superficially, or denied by so-called realistic theatre.

Why do you emphasize evil?

First of all, because it exists. And because an awareness of the reality of evil is the best defense against artistic trivialization and vulgarity.

The modern attack on "dialogue" or realistic theatre seems to have taken two directions. One, represented by Artaud and Grotowski, explores feelings. The other, represented by Foreman, is more interested in exploring the thinking process and modes of perception.

Perception in and for itself?

Yes. In order to perceive *better*.

Perceive *what* better? Doesn't the material offered for perception have to be trivial, precisely so that the audience can't be distracted by it and can concentrate on the process of perceiving? If you are invited to consider the relationship between a chair and a grapefruit—that is, what's on the stage is a chair and a grapefruit and a string connecting them—then you will indeed perceive something about how they are alike and how they differ. But it's no more than an interesting perceptual problem (and that largely because it's a problem one does not ordinarily consider).

You don't think being interesting is enough?

I used to think so. But I don't anymore. You know, that notion has a history—a rather brief one. To apply the word "interesting" to a work of art was an invention of the Romantic writers of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and one that seemed very peculiar at first. (Hegel for example, thought it was *not* a compliment to say that something was "interesting.") The notion of "the interesting" is approximately as old the notion of "the boring." Indeed, it seems to me that "the interesting" presupposes "the boring," and vice versa. One of the proudest claims of the modernist theatre is that it is anti-psychological. But "the interesting" and "the boring" are psychological categories, nothing more. They are feelings, assumed to be of limited duration, and to be capable of mutating into each other—categories of the solipsistic, narcissistic worldview. (They replace "the beautiful" and "the ugly," which are attributes—hypostasized, quasi-objective, assumed to be permanent.) An "interesting" object has an arresting quality: it seizes our attention, we take cognizance of it, and then let it go. An "interesting" experience is one that

has no lasting effect. The notion of “the interesting” arises when art is no longer conceived of as connected with truth. (When truth comes to be reserved for science, for so-called rational inquiry.) In continuing to consider something to be valuable—valuable enough—because it is interesting, we perpetuate a Romantic attitude that needs reexamining.

Foreman's theatre is about thinking, about the-being-consciously-aware at the theatre event of the working of the mind in the theatre. I can't think of another kind of theatre where one feels so consciously in the present. It's Foreman's attempt to actively engage the audience that is important.

I don't agree that consciousness-as-such is Foreman's subject. Or, if it could be—and I don't think consciousness-as-such is really a subject at all—that it could be very engaging.

What about Beckett?

Beckett is dealing with emotions, however abstractly, and there is a progress from one emotion to the next that feels inevitable. Not only are his plays narrative but, as Joe Chaikin once observed, Beckett has actually discovered a new dramatic subject. Normally people on the stage reflect on the macrostructure of action. What am I going to do this year? Tomorrow? Tonight? They ask: Am I going mad? Will I ever get to Moscow? Should I leave my husband? Do I have to murder my uncle? My mother? These are the sorts of large projects that have traditionally concerned a play's leading characters. Beckett is the first writer to dramatize the microstructure of action. What am I going to do one minute from now? In the next second? Weep? Take out my comb? Stand up? Sigh? Sit? Be silent? Tell a joke? Understand something? His plays are built on reflections leading to decisions, which impart to his dramas a real narrative push. Lessing was right about the irreducible difference between spatial and temporal arts. A play—or a novel, or a film—can be non-narrative in the sense that it need not tell a story. But it has to be linear or sequential, I think. A succession of images, or of aphorisms, is not enough to give a play the linear cohesiveness proper to the temporal arts.

Do you feel the same way about Peter Handke's works—his Sprechstücke, particularly—which resemble Foreman's plays in the lack of dialogue, in the attempt at consciousness-raising, in the dialectical relationship of the stage and the audience?

No, because Handke's plays are about specific ideas or problems (not about consciousness or perception as such), dramatized in a sequential form. The ideas matter dramatically.

In Foreman's recent Rhoda in Potatoland, there are many quotations—from Breton's Nadja, from Wittgenstein, et cetera—allusions to paintings, and so forth. How can the contemporary artist cope with the radical strides made in art in this century without alluding to them in his work?

Modernist self-consciousness can take many forms. Painters like to quote other painters. But one can't imagine Beckett quoting anybody or making allusions to predecessors and models—as Wittgenstein didn't. The demands of purity and the demands of piety may be, ultimately, incompatible.

Consciousness is the principal subject of modern art. Is that in some way a dangerous tradition?

It seems to me that its biggest limitation is the value placed on consciousness conceived of as a wholly *private* activity. Modernist art has given the central place to asocial, private fantasy and, in effect, denied the notion that some intentions are more valid than others. . . It's hardly surprising that so many modernist artists have been fascinated by the diseases of consciousness—that an art committed to solipsism would re-capitulate the gestures of the *pathology* of solipsism. If you start from an asocial notion of perception or consciousness, you must inevitably end up with the poetry of mental illness and mental deficiency. With autistic silence. With the autistic's use of language: compulsive repetition and variation. With an obsession with circles. With an abstract or distended notion of time.

Are you thinking of the work of Robert Wilson?

Of Wilson, for one. More generally, of the long faux-naïf tradition in modernist art, one of whose great figures is Gertrude Stein. (What *Four Saints in Three Acts* started, *Letter to Queen Victoria* and *Einstein on the Beach* continue. . .). But the symptomology of mental deficiency recurs in most of the really seductive productions I've seen recently: Pintilie's *Turandot*, *The Ik*, Carmelo Bene's *Faust* fantasy, Patrice Chereau's production of Marivaux's *La Dispute*. . .

Twelve years ago, in "One Culture and the New Sensibility," you advanced the argument that the function of art is to extend and educate consciousness. You seem now to have moved away from the ideas expressed in that essay.

I don't disagree with what I wrote then. But to assert that art is an exploration of consciousness is vacuous, unless one understands that consciousness has a structure, a thematics, a history. The choice of materials is never accidental or extraneous.

Is that what you were arguing in your essay in the New York Review of Books (February 6, 1975) on Leni Riefenstahl and fascist aesthetics?

Yes, that's one assumption behind the essay. It seemed to me all too easy to say that Riefenstahl's work is beautiful. The question is: What kind of beauty? In the service of what ideas, what forms of consciousness, what emotions? Not only ideas but emotions—joy, fear, whatever—have a history. There is such a thing as fascist emotions, a fascist aesthetic impulse.

How do you feel about Adrienne Rich's attack in the New York Review of Books (March 20, 1975) on your Riefenstahl piece for its "unwillingness" to discuss Riefenstahl as a product of a patriarchal society? Do you feel put upon by feminists who demand that you take another "line" in your writing?

Since I'm a feminist too, the situation can hardly be described as a difficulty between me and "them." As for Rich's argument, I said what I thought about that in my reply (in the same issue of the NYR) to her letter—that it's not as if Nazi Germany were a patriarchal society and other societies aren't. What society is not patriarchal? Riefenstahl's work is explained by Nazism, not by the attitudes of Nazis toward women.

Yet many people see Riefenstahl's work as purely aesthetic, beautiful films.

There is no such thing as an "aesthetic" work of art—as there is no such thing as the engagement or exploration of consciousness as such. Neither consciousness nor the aesthetic is something abstract. We're not being honest about our experience if we ignore the iconography of consciousness. You can't look at the Rembrandt self-portraits and see them just as an arrangement of forms, as studies in brown. There's a face there.

Isn't this way of looking at art radically different from the one you espoused in "Against Interpretation"?

No. I never argued that all art should be looked at *abstractly*; I argued for the intellectual importance of its being experienced *sensuously*. "Against Interpretation" was a polemic against one reductive way of accounting for art, much more common a decade ago: treating a work as if it were equivalent to the account that could be given of its "meaning." This practice seemed to me misguided—first of all, because a great deal of art doesn't mean very much, in any non-tautological sense of meaning. (Of course, a work may not have a "meaning" and still contain "referents" outside itself, to the world.) And because it weakens and corrupts our direct appreciation of a work's "thingness." Instead of relying so much on questions about what elements in a work of art mean, I thought we could rely more on questions about how they function—concretely, sensuously, and formally—in the work.

I categorically refuse not to see meaning in a work. Otherwise it doesn't pay for me to go to see something. I have to approach the problem that is put before me and make it worthwhile for my own experiences.

I categorically refuse to ask art to "pay for me." Nor does it have to touch me personally, as people say. Isn't pleasure "worthwhile"? Among other things, art is an instrument of pleasure—and one doesn't have *that* much pleasure in life. And pleasure can be quite impersonal. And complex.

Are you positing a hierarchy of art—the kind that gives pleasure and the kind that makes you think? Are they mutually exclusive?

Hardly—since thinking is one kind of pleasure, both solemn and playful. But I don't want to minimize the fact that the role of pleasure in art raises all sorts of serious questions. I find it impossible to keep moral feelings out of my desire for pleasure. That is, part of my *experience* of pleasure is that there are facile pleasures, as there are facile ideas. Since art is a form of flattery, I find myself also responding to the quality of an artist's refusal. The history of art is not only part of the history of pleasure. It is also a series of renunciations.

Why should art have to renounce anything?

Because every leading idea—every leading style—needs a corrective. As Oscar Wilde said, "A truth in art is that whose contrary is also true." And a truth *about* art is one whose contrary is also true.

What do you hope for when you go to the theatre?

Passion. Intelligence. Intensity. Lyricism. Theatre—and poetry and music—supply a lyricism not to be found in life.

Why not?

Because life is too long. For life to be like *Tristan and Isolde*, the average human life should last two months instead of seventy years.

Is intensity the same as pleasure?

It's better. Sexier, more profound. As you see, I'm an incorrigible puritan.

You seem to be excluding humor.

I'm not. But I get restless when the treatment of the emotions in art takes second place—it does in so much of modernist theatre—to the dramaturgy of surprise, to a negative desire, the desire to avoid the expected.

Are you suggesting that surprise is not a worthy element in the performing arts?

After a century and a half of surprises in the arts—during which time the ante has been upped steadily, so that people are harder and harder to surprise—it seems to have gotten much less satisfying. Most instances of outrage or shock now are gags.

You have written in one essay that "the history of art is a series of successful transgressions." If, as you say, the ante of shock and surprise is always being upped, what is left to transgress?

The idea of transgression, perhaps. . . Transgression presupposes successful notions of order. But transgressions have been so successful that the idea of transgression has become normative for the arts—which is a self-contradiction. Modern art wished to be—maybe even was, for a brief time—in an intractable, adversary relation to the established high culture. Now it is identical with high culture, supported by a vast bureaucracy of museums, universities, and state and private foundations. And the reason for this success story is that there is a close fit between many of the values promoted by modernism and the larger values of our capitalist consumer society. This makes it difficult, to say the least, to continue thinking of modernist art as adversary art. And that's part of what lies behind the disenchantment with modernism I spoke of earlier.

You seem discouraged by this situation.

Yes and no. Rebellion does not seem to me a value in itself, as—say—truth is. There's no inherent value in transgression. As there is no inherent value to being interesting. My loyalty is not to the transgression but to the truth behind it. That the forms of life in this society, having become increasingly permissive, corrupt, vulgar, and disgusting, thereby deprive artists of the taboos against which they can, comfortably, heroically, rebel—that seems far less dismaying than the fact that this society itself is based on lies, on untruths, on hallucination.

What should artists do now?

In a society that works and enriches itself by means of organized hallucination, be less devoted to creating new forms of hallucination. And more devoted to piercing through the hallucinations that nowadays pass for reality.