

VIEWPOINT

On December 8, 1981, the Henry Gallery Association sponsored an evening with Susan Sontag. She spoke to a packed house in Kane Hall. During her most successful visit to Seattle, she graciously agreed to an interview with Jeffrey Bishop to be published in this issue of Insight.

*Susan is widely regarded as the pre-eminent critic of our times. Almost always controversial, she is the author of such noted books as *Against Interpretation*, *Styles of Radical Will*, *On Photography*, *Illness as Metaphor*, and *Under the Sign of Saturn*. Her numerous honors include two Rockefeller and two Guggenheim fellowships; she is a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. It has been said of Susan that her essays have largely been commentaries on the relation between moral and aesthetic ideas. In addition to being a critic and essayist, she is also the author of three works of fiction and two film scripts.*



Jeffrey Bishop is an outstanding artist and teacher. He came to Seattle from Boston to follow his education at Tufts and the Boston Museum School with an M.F.A.

from the University of Washington in 1977.

Jeffrey's work has been featured in exhibits at the Seattle Art Museum, Henry Art Gallery and LAICA, and he has shown extensively in the area. He is represented by the Linda Farris Gallery in Seattle and the Mirage Gallery in Los Angeles, and he teaches at Cornish Institute. Jeffrey has been a member of the Board of Trustees of the Henry Gallery Association since 1979 and is co-chairman of our Education Committee.

AN INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN SONTAG

Jeffrey Bishop: In your critical writing you have been preoccupied with certain issues in modern intellectual life and modernism. Certain themes continually surface, such as necessary estrangement, alienation, negation, victimization by one's own consciousness, societal exile, and in the extreme, mythification and insanity. Your writings on Artaud, Genet, and Benjamin, for example, as well as your fiction, seem to have gravitated to this. My question concerns the extent to which in recent art the powers of negation themselves have been worn down, become perhaps mere rhetoric, clichés. Octavio Paz writes that "Negation is no longer creative," and "I'm not saying we are living the end of art. We are living the end of the idea of modern art." Could you please comment on this?

Susan Sontag: I think everything you've said is true. And yet, I hesitate because it's a very delicate subject. If one really says that one has used up the idea of modern art, of adversary art, art as the expression of negation, then what are we going for? What are we replacing

it with? This is precisely our dilemma. There is no doubt that this idea seems in some way exhausted, or at any rate deeply unsatisfactory, largely because the powers of negation could, in fact, be turned into an affirmation. The very nature of the reception of art is to turn negation into affirmation, and modern art, in the high sense of modernistic art, is no exception to that rule. This is something we've experienced now very deeply — that these negations can be turned into affirmations. So, in that sense, I think the analysis that you've presented is accurate, and even more specifically the quote from Paz. I've talked about these matters with Paz, and I always find that we agree, and yet I'm very reluctant to let it go at that because the idea of modern art was a great idea. I don't think we have had a better idea. It's really the only idea we have. I feel this more and more in a time in which everyone is so eager to say just that, that modern art is finished, hence, this absurd meaningless label "post-modern," which is literally meaningless because, of course, it's just another version of the modern, only one which is released from certain kinds of traditional restraints. All "post-modern" means is eclectic,

an eclectic re-cycling of some of the basic achievements of high modern art. Therefore, it's not *post*-modern at all. At a time in which people are so eager to say modernism is finished, modern art is finished, criticism is finished, radicalism is finished, I want to dig in and say it's the only idea we've got. We obviously have to use it better.

JB: Is it a question of re-cycling? In talking of the recent surge of expressionism in current American visual art, Donald Kuspit suggests that in each instance of recent American art, in abstract expressionism, pop, minimalism, and now in a new expressionism, that American art has purged its European sources of any spiritual content, making art that is more autonomous, perhaps merely formal. Given your own empathies with European thinkers and culture, I wonder if you would agree with this characterization. Is there any particular urgency or spirituality unique to American art?

SS: I think there is something extremely shallow about a great deal of American creative activity at this time. I think in literature, for example, that people are very much content with a kind of shallow mimetic notion, a sort of low mime-

tic idea that you reproduce the banality of people's conversations and thought. A lot of American fiction is caught in that. Obviously most of the interesting visual art today is not mimetic in that direct way. It seems to me that a lot of American art has been content to be art based on an idea, based on a comment, very often a comment on other art — which all art is to a certain extent anyway, that's normal — but much more specifically, a comment on what's being done right now in the art scene. A lot of art is about the art scene, art fashions, and in a larger sense a comment about American junk, if you say — which a lot of people feel even if they don't say it — that what this culture is largely about is junk. Yet there's the great curatorial aspect of American culture: we have more museums in this country than practically the rest of the world put together. We have some of the greatest collections. We're great archivists. We're great collectors. We're great museum builders, restorers and preservers, and as I say, archivists of culture. But a great deal of what we actually produce is understood as junk, and there's a great American fear of high culture except as something from the past. It's okay

from the past, but it's somehow un-American in the present. Many people seriously say that the best thing on television is commercials. It may be the best thing, but what a comment on what is produced in this country if the best thing is advertising. Now, what do people mean when they say that? They're saying in a way that it isn't the distinctive American aptitude to produce high art in the traditional sense. Let me jump a step ahead here to return to the idea underneath this discussion.

I want to save the modern idea because, as I say, I think it's the only idea that we have, the idea of adversary art. The modernist idea — I think it's one of the greatest ideas people have ever had in the whole history of consciousness. I can't imagine anyone coming up, as long as this culture exists, with a better one that wouldn't be a terrific repression. We could have an art based on moral and political repression as most societies do, but obviously we don't want that. Okay, what can we do to save it? I think we have to have a new idea of seriousness and a new idea of the imagination. I think that's where American art really falls down. People don't want to do something

really ambitious. They're really afraid of masterpieces. They're almost embarrassed by the idea. Everyone talks about American grandiosity and the perennial fantasy of the great American novel, but in fact, hardly anybody wants to really go for broke, to really go for those glorious stakes and do something truly big. They want to do something trivial. In some ways the modernist idea has gotten confused with a certain idea of triviality. There's where I think the corruption is.

JB: The media and marketplace have a way of trivializing and reducing, of consuming culture. I think young artists fear, even while being attracted to, success and fashion and the way our culture seems to consume and exhaust art, artists and thinkers.

SS: Surely that's true, but then one has to face up to the consequences of that. If you really are afraid of that, if you really want to protect your art, and it seems to me that art is something to be protected as much as it is something to be disseminated, then one must take the consequences. For instance not lending oneself to certain forms of recycling of one's work. Rothko, one of the last of our artists to have



Susan Sontag. Photo: Chris Bruce.

a big idea, said "I don't want my paintings in a restaurant." I don't think he was necessarily right, but that's the kind of decision people

should be able to make. I don't want my work necessarily in this magazine or in that space, and I'm willing to take the consequences of that.

People fear the corruption of these various forms of placement and recycling, but they're rarely willing to make the hard decisions like Rothko not wanting his work in a restaurant or de Kooning for many years refusing a retrospective, but these are very eccentric decisions. But by god, it *does* do something to the work, it does protect it even if the decision can't be justified — just the very quality of the decision, if not the nature, the content of the decision.

JB: Clyfford Still perhaps.

SS: Clyfford Still is the other great example, exactly, I was about to say. We're very, very divided in America. We're very much against the idea of minority art, art for small audiences which now is being attacked everywhere both on the so-called right and left as elitist art. I'm very much in favor of art for small audiences. I think it's almost a natural career for a great deal of art to have a small audience first, to go slower and to find its audience later, that the art will really have its correct impact if it doesn't have its big audience right away. But we are deeply populist in a way, you see, and there are deep anti-intellectual traditions in this country. If we want a difficult art, we want it diffi-

cult in a way that can be understood by everybody or recycled by everybody and acceptable to everybody.

JB: Shifting course a bit, I'd like to pick up on your statement that you want to give audiences material that is new to them, and this affects your choice of material. Could you comment on why you have not written as extensively on feminism as many might have expected.

SS: No, I haven't. I did write a long piece, which I was asked to do in the early 70s and which was published in the *Partisan Review*, and I've done a little bit of feminist journalism. I haven't written that much because I think other people are doing it. It's really as simple as that. I don't think that my feminist ideas are original. I don't think I should write about everything I think. I want to write about things that nobody is saying. So, I do leave out a lot of things that are really very important to me because I think they are being taken care of, at least as far as essay writing is concerned.

JB: Shifting again, in 1968 you expressed a kind of frustration and distance in your empathy for the Vietnamese situation as a moral abstraction. "Trip to Hanoi," dealt with your attempt to reconcile that

distance and abstraction as necessary, which also provided an effective critique of America at the time. What do you now see giving us a basis for effective criticism of American society?

SS: Well, there is no left in this country to speak of, and I suppose the serious long-range answer is we have to rebuild everything. The basic notions of "left" and "right" have effectively collapsed. The issues on which we should be able to mobilize people even in this period of political lobotomy are issues which absolutely transcend these categories, environmental issues for instance, or population issues, issues of world poverty, the ecological issues. There's no reason whatsoever that these should be so-called left-wing issues except in the old sense that the left is anti-capitalist and capitalism is a despoiling of the environment and a non-regarding of these sorts of interests. Ideologically these issues are conservative in the literal sense — conservation, after all, is a word that is etymologically connected to conservatism, and we're trying to conserve a lot of the things that so-called left-wing people are doing or should be doing. Therefore, we ought to want

to go beyond this polarization, and I think we will. There are other reasons why we have to get beyond left and right. We do need labels, but I don't know what they should be.

There is a reason that the left has collapsed; it has collapsed because it has been systematically undermined in this country since the 30s. Somebody we look back to with admiration, Franklin D. Roosevelt, that is, dismantled the left in this country during the Depression. The unions were changed in the 30s and the really critical ideological element in the labor movement was defeated. Then, the enormous patriotic consensus of the Second World War and the economic boom afterward really brought the end of a serious, mass-based left. If one thinks that this society could be a hell of a lot better than it is, which I do, if one thinks that it is very important to head off disaster, both of an ecological and environmental character and of a larger political disaster of military confrontation, nuclear confrontation between the super powers, and if one is also a feminist, this then is certainly an agenda, a radical agenda that is very powerful and a basis on which one should be able to mobilize huge

numbers of people. Why can't it be done?

JB: Why are they being mobilized more effectively in Europe?

SS: I think it has a lot to do with the fact that we don't even have politics in this country in the way that it exists elsewhere in the world. One thing that people always said and it was kind of a cliché, but it turns out to be true, is that the Democratic party and the Republican party are the same party. Until you can actually get a party in this country that represents something of a different idea about how to run things, you can't have serious political activity in this country. You just have television, political television. You just have different kinds of presentable people being elected to mismanage the system more or less. Some will mismanage it less. I happen to be a registered Democrat, so I vote Democratic and want to play the game. I think the Democrats are the lesser of the two evils right down the line, but I can't seriously believe that they represent an alternative. In Europe there are older traditions which give people a different idea about how to do things. Right now in England, for instance, there are actually three political options. There is the Tory

option; there is the traditional left option which has been adopted by the Labor party after so long sort of trying to be both a Social Democrat party and an old-fashioned left party and now has decided to become an old-fashioned left party, which then liberated a third party which calls itself Social Democrat. I think the Social Democrats are going to win. We're going to have a second woman Prime Minister of England, Shirley Williams, which is going to be terrific. There you have a serious political choice, and then it will or will not be better. It's unfortunately not possible for any European country to make these decisions on its own because what the United States does matters more than what any of these countries do individually. We don't have choices in this country, and the question has to be asked not just of what intellectuals, artists, professional people, and the so-called enlightened minority think, but about the actual structure of the politics in this country which has been designed to have no politics. The best book ever written on the United States and the one that still tells you more than any other book is *Democracy in America* by de Toqueville, written in the 1830s. He said there's no

politics in this country. He also said an extraordinary thing in the 1830s. He said the United States is a country where religion matters more than in any other country, or what people call religion, because it is, of course, not religion in any traditional sense. Imagine saying that in the 1830s when you would have thought, my god, didn't religion matter in France, or didn't it matter in Italy, or didn't it matter in Europe in the 19th century, and yet he foresaw the reason we have 50 million hysterical people who think they're born-again Christians (they're not Christians in any traditional sense of Christianity). That's because there is no real politics in America.

So, you have to start there, but there's one other element. There's one fact that one must be honest about. It's very important for *me* to be honest about it in particular because of what I've written. One of the things that we are seeing in the end of the 20th century is that communism doesn't work, and that we — progressive, radical, critical people — can no longer entertain the idea that communism is a real alternative. We thought, though, "it's always been badly done, that we're against all these horrible dictatorships, but that it is still a good

idea it's just that, well, Stalin did this and Mao Tse Tung did that, but still communism's a real alternative." I think there's enough evidence in after sixty-five years in the Soviet Union and a lesser time for all these other countries to say it's lousy, that it really isn't a good system, and that it's something in the system itself. Maybe it's the Leninist idea, the Leninist party, that kind of simple party structure, whatever you want to call it. It's a bad system.

We have thought that the *ideas* represented in the evolution of revolutionary communism were in some respect attractive, even though we couldn't really admire for very long what was going on in any particular country after the wonderful first couple of years that follow every revolution. Now, as I say, I think the evidence is in, it's *not* a good system and it doesn't work. It's rather a disaster. In fact, when we really study it very much, it resembles fascism. When we get enough distance on the 20th century it is going to look like there were these two forms of — what does Nazism mean after all, it means national socialism — it's going to turn out that fascism and communism, despite the great dif-

ference of language were really two forms of the same thing. Now, if that's true, and that's a big thought to take in, then where are we going to go from there? We no longer have a clear alternative even as an ideal model, so we have to think much more about how to make better a system which doesn't have a clear ideological consensus on virtue and wickedness, which is going to be pluralistic. This again is why words like left and right have become very discredited, I think.

At least they have been for me, although I know they continue to be used. I think that if it were possible for more decentralization of a global political nature, we would be in much better shape, but these empires turn out to be so much more powerful than we ever thought.

When I went to Cuba and Vietnam in the 60s and saw the best part of those societies, I remember talking to people in Cuba and talking to people in Hanoi who said "we're never going to be anything like the Soviet Union, we hate that. We're going to have open discussion and a lot of decentralization, and we're going to have a lot of cultural pluralism." I think those people were sincere. I'm sure they were. But the fact is, they don't, and

they don't have those options. Look at what's going on in Poland now. If those people could break free, they would, of course, leave tomorrow. Ideologically, there are no communists in Eastern Europe. There are none. They don't believe it at all. They hate it. You've never met an anti-communist until you have gone and talked to people who have gone to live in those systems. If you say you are interested in socialism, they look at you as if you were crazy because for them it just means dictatorship. From their point of view, they're right. So, if that's true, then, again, we have to think through a lot of things. What could we possibly have that would radically improve what we do. It doesn't seem to be, in any case, an increase in state power.

JB: I have a couple of short questions here. Are you as a rule able to write criticism and fiction concurrently?

SS: I'm always just writing one thing, while taking notes on the other.

JB: Is fiction more enjoyable?

SS: It's much more enjoyable. I'm trying to get back to fiction. I have two more essays, one I've almost finished which is a very general essay that's linked to the work of

Roland Barthes, but is really an attempt to deal with the whole larger question of the aesthetic way of looking at the world — the aesthete consciousness. Then I want to write an essay I hope will be much quicker, an essay about intellectuals and communism. And then I want to really sign off. I have been off-and-on for the last couple of years working on a long novel, which is obviously not a novel in any conventional sense, but anyway, a long work of fiction. And that's what I want to do, but it's one or the other. All I can do is take notes for the novel while I'm working on the essays.

JB: Regarding *Illness as Metaphor*, isn't it likely that even with the eventual de-mythification of cancer that society will continue to draw metaphors from human dissaffection, specifically from bodily or mental illness, as ways of characterizing cultural malaise?

SS: Sure, but I think it's very helpful if the target changes. Lay off cancer and go onto something else. I think it will happen, of course. I think as soon as one has a rather down-to-earth, simple account of what causes cancer that this will take a great deal of the mythical energy out of the sickness. I don't

know what the next one will be. *Illness as Metaphor* is really another version of *Against Interpretation*. It's *Against Interpretation* applied to the real world. Of course I'm not against interpretation, not in any simple sense, because to think is to interpret. There is no thinking without interpretation, and there is no thinking that isn't metaphoric. All thinking is based on implicit metaphor. Even as I speak now, I say all thinking is "based on". The notion of something being based on something else is a metaphor. A very clear metaphor. There's no way of saying or thinking anything that doesn't involve some interpretation and some metaphoric structure. But I think it's very important to keep moving, because any metaphor, any interpretative framework becomes imprisoning. The real function of a critic is to dislodge them and offer something new, but you are only offering another one.

JB: In *Debriefing* you speak of "old rites of counter exorcism — reason! self preservation!", and then one phrase I find particularly notable: "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will". Does this aptly describe Susan Sontag?

SS: (pause) It does.