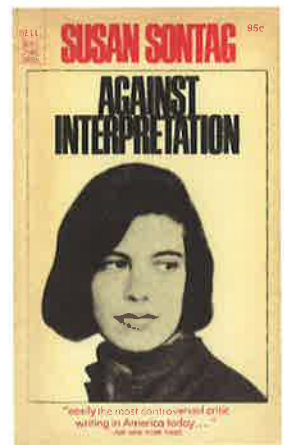


THE FACTS HAVE THE FLOOR: AGAINST INTERPRETATION, SUSAN SONTAG

Christophe Van Gerrewey

When it comes to talking, writing and thinking about art and culture, one of the clearest and most attractive texts remains “Against Interpretation” by the American author Susan Sontag, published as an essay in 1964 in the journal *Evergreen Review*, and reprinted in 1966 in the collection *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Sontag rejects the ascription of content to works of art: “Whatever it may have been in the past, the idea of content is today mainly a hindrance, a nuisance, a subtle or not so subtle philistinism.”¹ She recognizes that interpretation – the search for meaning in a work of art or culture – is important under some circumstances and during certain periods. Only the 1960s isn’t one of them. “Today is such a time”, Sontag writes, “when the project of interpretation is largely reactionary, stifling. Like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities.”²

Against Interpretation – the book – was one of the most important and successful essay collections of the twentieth century. It was translated into Italian as early as 1967, into German and French the following year, and into Dutch in 1969. The French edition, from the supposedly revolutionary year of 1968, is revealing. Titled *L’œuvre parle*, “the work speaks” – subtext: so nobody else has to do this in its stead – it was published by Éditions du Seuil as part of a series that included works by Barthes and Bakhtine, among others. The cover of each edition bore a quotation by Rabelais: “*Je ne bastis que pierres vives, ce sont hommes.*” With these words from the sixteenth century, Rabelais was indicating that he saw his readers as “living stones”, as animated parts of a building that was, nevertheless, constructed by



Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, Dell Books / Laurel Edition, 1969

1
Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”, in Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 5.

2
Ibid., 7.

3
Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear, Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 243.

4
Quoted in Manfredo Tafuri, Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture*, trans. Robert Erich Wolf (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), 339.

him, the author. By the end of the 1960s, the relationship between reader, artwork and critic had changed. Rather than interpret or explain, the role of an author à la Sontag was – eventually – to keep silent, so the audience could listen to the talking artwork all by itself. The way we look at an artwork, and the words we use to talk and to write about art, all derive from the models and means we use to deal with the world in general. So if you stop trying to find content in art or culture, you do so because you are convinced that nothing can be interpreted or properly understood – that meanings are always fictitious, and that people are wrong when they think they know something for sure. In *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Dostoyevsky has the pious Alyosha ask his tormented brother Ivan, very directly: “What do you understand?” And he responds:

“I understand nothing”, Ivan went on, as though in delirium. “I don’t want to understand anything now. I want to stick to the facts. I made up my mind long ago not to understand. If I try to understand anything, I shall be false to the facts, and I have determined to stick to the facts.”³

Someone who is against interpretation does exactly this: he or she decides to stick to the facts – a conscious decision that is not only in line with the atheism of an Ivan Karamazov at the end of the nineteenth century, but also connects to the conceptual and performative art that Sontag loved at the end of the 1960s. It was a form of art that hardly could be interpreted, because it presented itself as a series of actualities: a set of proportions, a sequence of gestures, a fragmentary collection of precise descriptions, a short measure of time, mathematically filled in with sound or silence.

However, when facts are allowed to speak for themselves, the danger, paradoxically, is that in the end people will have nothing left to say. Sontag’s generation discovered, as it were, how exciting and revealing it can be to stop interpreting, and many texts and books have been written about this evolution. But the question arises: for how many consecutive generations can we go on committing this bold and liberating murder of interpretation? How many times can obedience to the facts be declared? It brings to mind a beautiful but icy aphorism by Karl Kraus: “Since the facts have the floor, let anyone who has anything to say come forward and keep his mouth shut.”⁴ These same words would later famously be applied by Manfredo Tafuri to the Seagram Building in New York – a building by Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson that, not coincidentally, Susan Sontag visited

in 1965 on a commission from the BBC.⁵ Here, too, in the cool and repetitive architecture of Mies (at least in Tafuri’s reading), no signs are supplied of the building wanting to communicate – because if a building in a modern city were, against all odds, to try to say something, then the message would deal, inevitably, with publicity, and any interpretation would come down to the commercial importance of this architecture.

In the end this analysis became, during the second half of the twentieth century, a self-fulfilling prophecy, in the same way that many strategies of Sontag’s (and Tafuri’s) generation have been taken up and acquired a striking obviousness. Uninterpreted art (and architecture) is omnipresent nowadays, and this is both the consequence and the origin of a number of false truths. Because interpretation is subjective, because everybody can decide on his own, because the price of a painting is its most important characteristic, because images say more than millions of words, because the only thing that counts is measurable interest and attention – because of all these things the absence of interpretation and of content has become self-evident. Just ask a student today what a project or a work of art could *mean* and you will see how unconsciously this has become the norm for younger generations, who consider interpretations as completely personal things with no public or collective importance, and thus no real right to existence.

Sontag was conscious of how her once bold ideas became part of the ruling ideology as the century drew to a close. In her 1996 text “Thirty Years Later...”, included in the anthology *Where The Stress Falls* (2002), she admits: “The recommendations and enthusiasms expressed in the essays collected in *Against Interpretation* have become the possession of many people now”.⁶ The underlying motivations of her texts from the 1960s (and the evolutions they describe) were not unequivocally positive, certainly not when embraced on a massive scale:

Let’s use Nietzsche’s term: we had entered, really entered, the age of nihilism. ... What I didn’t understand ... was that seriousness itself was in the early stages of losing credibility in the culture at large, and that some of the more transgressive art I was enjoying would reinforce frivolous, merely consumerist transgressions. Thirty years later, the undermining of standards of seriousness is almost complete, with the ascendancy of a culture whose most intelligible, persuasive values are drawn from the entertainment industries.⁷

5
A short fragment is available on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UirwUtTCfLY&t=8s> (Last consulted on 28 May 2017.)

6
Susan Sontag, “Thirty Years Later”, in Susan Sontag, *Where The Stress Falls* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001), 272.

7
Ibid., 272–73.

Sontag's conclusion: "The judgments of taste expressed in these essays [from *Against Interpretation*] may have prevailed. The values underlying those judgments did not."⁸ Sontag does not make those values explicit, but they are closely related to writing, thinking and making art and culture, and they try to do justice to the complexities of life and society, but also to the human desire for knowledge, insight and understanding. Half a century after the publication of *Against Interpretation* it is no longer desirable to give the floor to the facts – the facts *have* the floor, seemingly every moment of the day, and in almost all domains of life. But artists, architects and critics can show that interpretations are important, if only because the activity of living is never based on facts alone.