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Clockwork from 10th, Bijoux Altamirano, *Behind the Wall of Silence*, Parts 1-4, 2008, Set Hall, Black Hole
Overlapp Experiment #41, 2005, Heather Rasmussen, *Untitled*, (New Orleans, Louisiana), September
 10, 2005), 2010, *Facing pages*, Fay Ray, *Snow White Released in Her Conf*, 2010



Curious Silence

January 15 - February 25, 2011

Opening Reception: Saturday, January 15, 2011 6-9pm

Bijoux Altamirano, Jennifer Bastian, Bridget Carron, Siri Kaur, Renée Martin, Julia Paull, Heather Rasmussen, Fay Ray and Carly Steward.
 Curated by Renée Martin and Heather Rasmussen

Contributing text by A.S. Hamrah



In a Silent Way

Susan Sontag went silent the old-fashioned way—by dying. We can read her works or see her films but she will not add to them, no matter how many of her diary pages are published. Unlike certain artists she wrote about, who chose silence when the art they made could no longer fulfill their spiritual or intellectual or moral ideals, Sontag chose to suffer along, producing essays and novels during her long fight with cancer. She wrote as eloquently on pain as she did on silence, but she probably knew more about pain. She had a real relationship with pain. She and silence only passed in the night.

There are two kinds of silence, and people seem to confuse them today. There is the silence of the artist and there is silence about the artist. The first kind the artist chooses herself, the second kind is imposed on her from outside. The first kind is a retreat from the world, the second kind is imposed by the world. Susan Sontag was famously shy of publicity, even though she was an egotist, and for this she has been punished even in death. It didn't make sense in a fame-obsessed culture that she could both shun publicity and be self-confident. Establishment journalists who produced her obituaries may not have mentioned her long relationship with the magazine photographer Annie Leibovitz, but, really, so what?

Clockwise from Left: Jennifer Basjian, *Driving Home*, 2009. Carly Steward, *Untitled Sculpture #2*, 2010. Julia Paull, *I am me, You are you, N 5*, 2010. Renée Martin, *Untitled*, 2009.



The problem is not that newspapers didn't mention her love life, which she probably would not have wanted them to anyway, but that decades after she began writing and even after she was dead, journalists (especially male journalists) were still beating her up for being a better writer than them, for being smarter and for knowing more, and for looking good in photographs.

There is something that transcends the quest for the spiritual described by Sontag, something that transcends it by undermining it and making a mockery of it, which is that Nobody Cares. Nobody Cares about your autobiography, your influences, the landscape you saw as a child, the poverty you see today, none of it, unless you make them care by doing something worth caring about. Artists today put the cart of autobiography before the horse of artistic accomplishment. It won't matter if they ever lapse into the kind of silence Sontag described in her essay. They will already have leached mystery out of their biographies because that was what they were taught to do in school. (The corollary of this is that when Everybody Cares, what they care about is trivial.)



A. S. Hamrah is the film critic for n+1. His work has appeared in the Los Angeles Times, The Boston Globe, Newsday, The Boston Phoenix, Bookforum, The Baffler, Mother Jones, and Suck. He is the former editor of Hermaut, and has appeared on the National Public Radio programs Talk of the Nation and Weekend Edition Sunday, and on the BBC. His essays have recently appeared in the books *Defining Moments in Movies* (Cassell) and *Taking Things Seriously* (Princeton Architectural Press). Hamrah has lectured on film at New York City's New School, at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, and at other institutions. He currently works as a semiotic brand analyst, investigating the cultural meaning of consumer goods and media properties for large corporations.

While a photographer like Francesca Woodman preserves an essential mystery about herself and her work by not growing old, a photographer like Annie Leibovitz loses all mystery by becoming world-famous and lingering. If you are Annie Leibovitz and you go bankrupt, everybody cares because you are a celebrity who spends her time with other celebrities. But if you are not famous and go bankrupt, Nobody Cares, and you join the crowd in a whole new way.

"In part inspired by the spread of the ideals of psychotherapy," Sontag wrote in "The Aesthetics of Silence," in 1967, "people are yearning to say 'everything' (thereby, among other results, further undermining the crumbling distinction between public and private endeavors, between information and secrets)."

Will a quotation from her book *On Photography* countermand this prediction she made over 40 years ago? Let's open it randomly and see. On page 107 she says that the best writing on photography has been written by Marxists and would-be Marxists troubled by the way photography beautifies. Always a great finder of relevant quotations, she then quotes Walter Benjamin, who points out that photography has succeeded in turning poverty "by handing it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment."



She ends this section by quoting Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin from the narration in their 1972 movie *Letter to Jane*, which is a study of a single newspaper photograph of Jane Fonda in Vietnam: "This photograph, like any photograph, is mute. It talks through the mouth of the text written beneath it." The opposite of a "curious silence," the photograph of Fonda has a voice imposed on it from somewhere else. Which is worse?

—A. S. Hamrah

