‘Where is the out-going freedom, the instrumental freedom from, freedom that is not this enormous possession of one’s own heart which is death?’ — Susan Sontag, *Reborn*

When she died of a pulmonary embolism, a few days after her 31st birthday, Alix Cléo Roubaud (1952-1983) left behind a most singular diary and a cache of photographs, many of which were self-portraits, taken over and over in the same room, in the same positions. She kept her diary in a series of colorful notebooks: ‘the blue notebook,’ ‘the orange notebook,’ ‘the second blue notebook,’ evidence of a tendency towards seriality that is borne out by her photographs. The diaries are full of her worries about her impermanence, her contemplations of suicide, and, tragically, her decision to fight for her life at all costs, written ten days before her death. The following year, her husband, the poet and mathematician Jacques Roubaud, published these notebooks with the assistance of the photographer Denis Roche (whose own work frequently combined texts and images of his own creation), inserting several key photographs into the text, mainly taken from the photo series *Si Quelque chose noir* (1980). In *Le Journal d’Alix* (1984), Jacques Roubaud specifically published only the diaries written between 1979 and 1983, which chart the years of their marriage, her embrace of photography, her first gallery show and the film Jean Eustache made about her work; he excised the more sensitive or intimate passages. The diaries were re-released with a new preface in 2009, and appeared in English for the first time in 2010.

Within a year of the French re-release and the English translation of Alix Roubaud’s diaries, Susan Sontag’s diaries began to be published, edited by her son, David Rieff. *Reborn: Journals & Notebooks 1947-1963*, the first volume,
accounts for the years when she was aged 14 to 30, years that saw Sontag begin college, marry the Freud scholar Philip Rieff, bear a son, and leave her husband and child to move to Europe. The second volume, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks 1964-1980*, begins the year after the publication of her first novel, *The Benefactor* (1963), and follows her meteoric rise to fame thanks to her first collection of essays, *Against Interpretation* (1966), through her battle with cancer and subsequent radical mastectomy, several failed relationships, and into the early years of her writings on photography. Perhaps predictably, the diaries spend more time on the relationships and less time on the fame and the photography; the diary entries fall off almost completely when she is diagnosed with cancer in 1974, only to begin again in March of 1975.

Read in close succession, the two women’s diaries are strikingly similar. Both write in a fragmented style, inherited from Kierkegaard, Benjamin, and Wittgenstein; Sontag tends towards obsessive lists, Roubaud to idiosyncratic punctuation and spacing. Both are linguistically diverse; Roubaud, who was born in Mexico to Canadian parents and grew up in a variety of settings including Egypt, Portugal, and Greece, moves between her father’s native English and her mother’s native French, never completely at home in either; Sontag hungers to depart from her family’s everyday English and to use the language (along with French and German) as a tool for thinking. The pressure of time bears down on them both. Sontag works furiously to establish herself as an important writer as quickly as possible, and Roubaud, deeply asthmatic since childhood, feels the presence of death at all times; her journal and self-portraits record her slipping away, or attempting to remain. Roubaud lives with more acute physical limitations in the form of her asthma, her frequent illnesses, and her abuse of alcohol and drugs; Sontag, for her part, feels her artistic potential to be limited by her own tendency towards physical neglect. Perhaps in an attempt to slow things down, to counteract the inexorable forward march of time, both fixate on the physical details of everyday life: Roubaud vows again and again to quit smoking, drinking, and to lose weight, while Sontag reminds herself constantly to bathe and wash her hair. The body appears as both an obstacle and an enabling device, a source of pain and of pleasure; the act of creation, Sontag and Roubaud realize, lies somewhere in between.

But their mutual concern with the body moves beyond the textual domain of the diary to another (what we might call) technology of the self: the camera. Although Sontag was not a photographer like Roubaud (though she does admit, in 1977, to having a ‘photographer’s eye,’ *Consciousness*, 425), in the diaries we see taking shape the critic who would maintain a lifelong interest in what photographs could do, what photographs could know. This instinctive feeling for the image would lead her to make films of her own: *Duet for Cannibals* (1969), *Brother Carl* (1971), *Promised Lands* (1974), and *Unguided Tour AKA Letter from Venice* (1983). Years before she would turn to cinema or to writing explicitly on photography, Sontag stakes out in her journals her vision of the writer she would like to be – forever picturing herself into this role, often in scopic, and even voyeuristic, terms. Roubaud, on the other hand, engages in a daily practice of self-portrait photography, picturing herself in order to inhabit her body more concretely in the present moment. Where Sontag’s journal is a self-portrait of the writer as she would like to appear, Roubaud’s journal and her self-portraits combine to form, as Jacques Roubaud puts it, ‘a multiple self-portrait.’ (Roubaud 2009/2010: 13/14)

Sontag’s diaries have received little scholarly attention since their publication; this is surprising, given her stature in American literary culture. One of her most enduring contributions to intellectual thought has been her writings on photography, which began appearing in the *New York Review of Books* in 1973 and were collected in 1977’s *On Photography*. She went on to combine her work on illness and the body with photography thirty years later in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2002); this late work on the function of the photographic image took on political urgency in her essay on the appalling Abu Ghraib photographs in ‘Regarding the Torture of Others.’ (2004) Alix Roubaud is just beginning to attract a body of secondary work, most notably in the form of Hélène Giannehini’s monograph, *Une Image Peut-Être Vraie, Alix Cléo Roubaud* (2014), and the exhibition she organized at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 2014-2015.
Self-portraits are a form of diary-keeping, and diary-keeping is a kind of self-portrait. An embodied reading of these two genres enables us to rethink their temporal and phenomenological status as documents of self-writing, and to see them as attempts to come to terms with the ways in which the body both hinders and helps the artist or writer to carry out her imaginative work.

In what follows I move between Roubaud’s journals and self-portraits, and Sontag’s journals and writings on photography, paying particular attention to their period of overlap, the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Roubaud is making her experiments in self-portraiture and Sontag has just articulated her key ideas about photography. By addressing Roubaud and Sontag’s journals alongside the genre of the photographic self-portrait, I establish that there is something coextensive across these practices: self-portraits are a form of diary-keeping, and diary-keeping is a kind of self-portrait. An embodied reading of these two genres enables us to rethink their temporal and phenomenological status as documents of self-writing, and to see them as attempts to come to terms with the ways in which the body both hinders and helps the artist or writer to carry out her imaginative work. In these diaries and self-portraits, Sontag and Roubaud turn to tropes of rebirth and death to articulate their struggles with becoming writers and artists in the second half of the twentieth century, and challenge a too-easy understanding of the indexical function of the photograph or the diary. Through textual and photographic catalogues of their physical and creative experiences, Sontag and Roubaud produce textual visions and visual texts of the late twentieth-century female artist temporally inscribed and continually in formation.

spaces of self-picturing

We are accustomed to see texts and photographs brought together; the latter often complements the former, providing an example by way of illustration; likewise, images often on text, if only in the form of a legend or caption. In autobiographical writing, photographs have often played a destabilizing role in the recounting of an individual life; studies like Ofra Amihay and Lauren Walsh’s *Future of Text and Image*, Alex Hughes and Andrea Noble’s *Phototextualities*, Timothy Dow Adams’s *Light Writing and Life Writing*, Marianne Hirsch’s *Family Frames*, or Linda Haverty Rugg’s *Picturing Ourselves* probe the encounters of text and image in different forms of life-writing. Scant critical work exists that reads together the diaries and self-portraits of the same individuals, in part because we have few examples of the published diaries of photographers. There seem to be relatively few cases in which the photographer has turned both kinds of attention – verbal and visual – on herself; Claude Cahun, Lee Miller, Jean Cocteau, or Francesca Woodman come to mind, and could be productively brought into a discussion of the continuities between self-portrait photography and diary-writing. Photographers’ writings, when they are published, are often illustrated with their photographs (see, for example, the *Daybooks* of Edward Weston; *Self-Portrait* by Man Ray; *Portrait of Myself* by Margaret Bourke-White), while writers’ work may occasionally be paired with their photography, if any exists (see, for example, editions of *Alice in Wonderland* published with Lewis Carroll’s photographs of young Alice Liddell).

The above studies, with the exception of one brief discussion in Dow Adams of Edward Weston’s *Daybooks*, take ‘life-writing’ to mean ‘autobiography’ and not ‘diary.’ Dana Asbury, in her catalog essay for the exhibition *Self as Subject:*
Visual Diaries by 14 Photographers, held at the University of New Mexico in 1983, continually conflates the terms ‘autobiography’ and ‘diary’; only one of the artists included in the show, Barbara Jo Revelle, engages in work that is, Asbury notes, ‘specifically diaristic’ (Asbury 1983: 11), in the way it brings together handwritten accounts of the artist’s life surrounding photographs of herself, her family, and friends. It is not clear, however, whether or not these are actually excerpts from Revelle’s diary, or whether they are performative diary entries created for the work of art. The distinction we draw here between diary and autobiography has to be sharper; the mechanisms for recording as daily practice or recalling at a distance are completely different. As Asbury writes, ‘[t]hese photographers have used (…) their own inventive varieties of fiction in the endlessly fascinating game of constructing identity.’ (Asbury 1983: 18) But while there is certainly much that is both aesthetic and playful in Roubaud’s and Sontag’s eminently self-fashioning diaries (both verbal and visual), they were not created to be art objects, or games. They are literal recordings of their authors’ hopes, dreams, and anxieties, and must be analyzed in these terms. We need, then, a specific, historicized poetics for the text-image relationship in the context of the diary.

A diary is a particular kind of time-based project; as Georges Perec (a member of the Oulipo, like Jacques Roubaud) reminds us, a journal is an agricultural unit of measurement marking out how much work can be done in a day. Felicity Nussbaum in her groundbreaking essay ‘Toward Conceptualizing Diary’ suggests that in contrast to autobiography, which has traditionally been thought to present ‘a coherent core of a self with a beginning, middle, and end’ (Nussbaum 1988: 130), the serial nature of the diary reflects the shifting nature of the self, perennially contested and re-made. Even when we consider that, as Paul John Eakin puts it, ‘the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure,’ (Eakin 1992: 3) this undermines the present moment, and ‘produces a crisis of attention to the present.’ (Nussbaum 1988: 133) Philippe Lejeune describes a shift in the usage of diary since the 17th century to our own time, from a system of notation that accounts for the date of the reported event and not that of its writing, to one in which the date of writing ‘becomes crucial’ as a three-stage process that specifically accounts for disparities between present and future writing and reading selves: a previously “told” practice of dates (based on a present looking back over the past) becomes a ‘telling’ practice of a dated present looking towards the future.’ (Lejeune 2009: 85)

What, exactly, is the ‘telling practice’ of a photograph? How can we describe the photograph’s relationship to its present, or its future? Temporality is a key critical trope (if not an outright cliché) in talking about photography, often categorized as an ‘indexical’ art holding a testimonial relationship to reality: an indication that at one time, the subject was present, even if this is no longer the case. Sontag, for example, argues in On Photography that this is what gives a photograph its ontological, social, and judicial authority: because it is a ‘trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a deathmask.’ (Sontag 1977: 154) Rosalind Krauss echoes, ‘Photography is an imprint or transfer off the real; it is a photochemically processed trace causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a manner parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables (…) On the family tree of images it is closer to palm prints, death masks, the Shroud of Turin, or the tracks of gulls on beaches.’ (Krauss 1981: 26) ‘Every photograph is a certificate of presence,’ Barthes wrote. (Barthes 1981: 87) What kind of certificate a photograph is, is a matter of some debate.

The photograph has the power to capture the fact that we, in all our corporeality, once were. If the photograph contains within itself both presence (the ça-a-été) and absence (that moment is gone for ever, and so one day will its subject be), then what that present absence confirms is the paradox of the human, that something so very alive is at the same time very much dead. The living, breathing organism that is frozen in time is also, somehow, frozen in a prolepsis of its own expiration. This, then, is an ‘indexical’ theory of photography, so called by Krauss in reference to C.S. Peirce’s theory of signs to describe the reality status that sets a photograph apart from other more representational works of art, like painting, or sculpture. The index is the smoke from the chimney, that indicates there is a fire in the hearth, the cast shadow that indicates a presence in front of the sun. But the indexical quality of the photograph has
recently been challenged in photography studies, as evidenced by James Elkins’s ‘The Art Seminar,’ a lively gathering of respected critics come together to ask why photography ‘remains so hard to contextualize.’ (Elkins 2007: 30) Some dismiss it altogether; others are more reluctant to let it go, identifying the photograph as necessarily bound to something it is taken of; there is some physicality that it doesn’t lose. But what happens, Joel Snyder asks, when the figure in the photograph is unrecognizable, or a smudge from the lens appears on the print? Margaret Iversen counters: ‘The index doesn’t guarantee the resemblance of the image.’ (Elkins 2007: 138) Sabine Kriebel suggests, simply, that it won’t be possible ‘to find one set of words, or one vocabulary, to talk about all of photography.’ (Elkins 2007: 153)

Elkins, along with Jan Baetens, argues that we need to historicize the discourse around indexicality, suggesting that it became an important concept in the 1970s as ‘a way to say that photography was a legitimate medium – that it was able to support serious critical attention – without either returning to a naïve realism, or giving it away to aesthetic values that would have been imported from painting.’ (Elkins 2007: 143) We find a strand of thought about photography at that time that seizes on the idea of the photograph as frozen in a moment of ‘suspension,’ as Hervé Guibert puts it in Ghost Image (1981). But what if the body isn’t, in fact, frozen in suspension; what if there were a way to capture change on the print, through photomontage, and overlays? Challenging an indexical way of looking at the photographic image, specifically in terms of its relationship to embodiment, was a key concern for female artists in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as Chris Townsend shows in his study of Roubaud’s near-exact contemporary Francesca Woodman (1958-1981), which situates her work with regard to that of Revelle as well as Duane Michals; similar preoccupations may be found in the work of Margareta Mitchell, Judy Dater, or Bea Nettles, or Marie-François Plissart or Suzanne Doppelt in Europe. Even in the late 1970s, as Margaret Olin reminds her fellow art critics, indexicality ‘was part of the discourse of the trace (…) In that respect, it is the heir of a previous discourse of touch.’ (Elkins 2007: 146)

This is the context in which we must read Roubaud and Sontag’s photographs, diaries, and writings on photography. For Sontag as writer and critic, and for Roubaud as writer and photographer, the daily self-portrait and the diary are attempts at recording presence, and fighting extinction, even as they track encroaching absence; indexicality is cast as a process, not a given. A missing key element from this discussion of indexicality and the status of the photograph or the diary as proof is the unstable site of the body itself as the sometime object of the lens and the diary. By refocusing our attention on the issue of embodiment in documenting the self, Sontag and Roubaud rephrase Barthes’s syntactical understanding of presence from the past tense of the ça-a-été [that has been] to the future perfect of the ça aura été [that will have been].

Roubaud explicitly conceives of the space of the self-portrait as a ‘future perfect being endlessly ripped apart.’ (Roubaud 2009/2010: 45/51; punctuation original) She sees self-portraiture not merely an indexical act, but as an embodied one. That is, is is not only what the photograph records on the print that is important – whether person or smudge – but the way in which the photographer has produced what has been recorded. This is evidenced by her understanding of the role of the artist in the development of the photographic print. Although the camera operates mechanically, a certain kind of work must be performed to print it on the page. Roubaud insisted on doing her own tirages and did not believe a photograph developed from her negatives but not by her own hand counted as ‘her’ work. In what Jacques Roubaud describes as a ‘Wittgensteinian distinction’ (Alix Roubaud began but did not finish a doctoral dissertation on Wittgenstein), she distinguishes between the photographic image, which she calls the ‘living image,’ and the image in the photographic negative, or the ‘piction,’ which needs to be printed in order to bring it ‘into motion and truly make an image.’ (Roubaud 2009/2010: 14/16) It is as if Roubaud is trying to secure a Benjaminian aura for the photograph as a unique, un reproducible work of art: there could be no posthumous photographic work by Alix Roubaud if the photographer is necessary to produce every print, ‘with the aid of light and chemistry.’ (Roubaud
Roubaud asserts the presence of the photographer at the same time as she prefigures the absence of the subject of the photograph: herself, already fading from view. Or perhaps it is the other way around; perhaps in our encounter with Roubaud’s photographs, Roubaud herself begins to appear to us.

Her work features a variety of self-portraits which play with the solidity of the photographed body, dissolving it, or manifesting it, depending on your reading. In all of the shots, Roubaud appears nude. In some of them, multiple negatives have been superimposed in order to make her figure appear transparent, there but not there (Correction de perspective dans ma chambre, n.d.). In some of the seventeen photographs from her 1981 series Si Quelque chose noir, Roubaud has photographed herself lying naked on the floor, as if she were dead, while in others we see her sitting under the window with her head in her hands, her knees drawn up towards her. In still others, this image has been replaced with a photograph of Roubaud when she was a child (Si quelque chose noir, 1981). These images are potent: Roubaud mourns her death in advance, and her childhood self mourns her adult self. ‘All portraits are childhood portraits,’ she entitled an aphoristic meditation on the nature of the photographic image. ‘A photograph of me as a child shows me what I didn’t see when I was there.’

Bringing together photos of the Roubaud of the past conjugates the photos of Roubaud in the present as already belonging to a past, but a projected one, in which she has vanished like her childhood self. She speaks of this childhood self not as a time, but a place to be (‘when I was there’), introducing a spatial aspect into the temporal distance; including this photograph of her childhood collapses the distance between that place and this; in one of the photographs with the childhood self layered in, a photograph of what appears to be New York City has been layered into what is in other photographs an empty window. Through photographic montage, the self-portrait becomes spatially and temporally dynamic.

Her journals are full of spaces in unexpected places, such as directly before commas, or are sometimes left out after periods; this distinctive (but not illegible) punctuation slows the eye as it makes its progress down the page, or speeds the eye from word to word, as if there’s no time to lose. This manipulation of punctuation is comparable to the manipulation of the negative that Roubaud seems as an essential part of the photographic process, and speaks to an insistence on presence and individuality in language as much as in photography; the way her words appear on the page is unique to her, not merely an accident or failure of education but a further example of the imprint of the artist’s hand on the page. Through these alterations, neither writing nor photography is reduced to a mechanical operation. The future present of the diarist’s embodiment is shored up, as certainly as in her 1980 photograph Quinze minutes la nuit au rythme de la respiration, which is actually produced by Roubaud’s body itself.

Severely asthmatic since childhood, Roubaud’s life was seriously impacted by her difficulty breathing. Her symptoms had an effect on her work, argues Hélène Giannecchini, who reads these spaces as ‘mak[ing] her sentences pulse with a jerky rhythm (…) Some passages pant, suffocating under her pen (…) Alix would do the same with her photographs.’ (Giannecchini 2014: 115, translation mine) In the summer of 1980, while staying in the South of France with Jacques, she created a ‘self-portrait in breath’ (Giannecchini 2014: 119): ‘Developed a print of the St Felix cypress trees. Taken at night with an aperture of 10-15 minutes. Slight up and down movement of the camera, no doubt due to my breathing. 15 minutes at night to the rhythm of breathing’ (Roubaud 2009/2010: 92/94). The trees, seen through the window at night, blur and bend, not from lack of light, or the wrong camera settings, but from the laboured breathing of the photographer. Quinze minutes does not capture a frozen moment, but the moment as it unfolds, as it endures.

Roubaud thus articulates the ‘that-has-been’ of the photograph in different temporal registers. ‘I am here now but I will have faded away’; ‘I was there and I was always already fading away.’ The I, in both cases, is seriously undermined as a verifiable referent to the image on the print. The figures these photographs depict are often so light that they are more ghostly than human, as if by the time she sat for her camera, Roubaud were already deceased but not necessarily departed, her self-portraits a record of her afterlife. Sontag writes in On Photography that photographs ‘transmute[.]’
consciousness from flesh

Like photographs, the diary may be seen not as a truth-teller but as an agenda, a desire to communicate, or to set the record straight. It is not an automatically verifiable certificate of presence, but a gesture at its mutability. Reading the diary as a form of self-portrait, of self-picturing, opens up possibilities for a particular kind of self-writing, one that testifies that the author’s presence is at the same time a disappearance; every trace is also an erasure. If a photograph is ‘a future perfect being endlessly ripped apart,’ a journal may be as well. Because of the serial nature of the diary, argues Georges May, it may seen as ‘more akin to self-portraits than to autobiography.’ (May 1978: 323-4) Roubaud’s practice of daily self-portraiture is a daily exercise in self-producing, aligning it with the ongoing self-construction of the diary, a space for recording (and fighting) the decay of the body.

Roubaud recognizes the crucial importance of daily writing in the journal, as if inflecting her writing as well with the future perfect tense: I will have been here if I write in my journal every day.

Of all the attempted divisions: English/French: prose/non-prose: photo/journal; none of them works. Only one rule: always have a notebook and write in it almost every day: everything; despite everything; include everything; the simplest of resolutions; stop smoking; ... incidents; photographs; everything. (Roubaud 2009/2010: 51, 57)

None of the oppositions stay cleanly on their own side of the slash; they all bleed into each other, notably the photo/journal. The only solution is to keep a notebook with her at all times, in which to capture the movement across the slashes.

Two days later she writes in English:

O my love listen here: if I don’t write everyday, in absolute and uttermost privacy, I hear voices and go quite crazy at rather short notice. O my sweet love please listen carefully: (…) I HAVE to write, as often as possible, everyday if I can; an exercise both vital and horrible because none of its products can ever be shown to anyone as long as I am alive. Not really. No. Not really. No. O darling it doesn’t matter if you do not understand as long as you know. (Roubaud 2009/2010: 56/62-3)

She tries very hard to ‘keep alive,’ for herself and for those who love her, particularly her husband, and writing every day is an act of survival. Frustrated at her inability to understand herself and her own urges, she catalogues her medications, her attempts to smoke and drink less, her insomniac nights, riven with fear and love, her twin impulse to annihilate herself and to survive. She writes on 26.I.80, ‘I asked myself why I abuse myself in this manner when I am loved and really must keep alive; why do I get drunk on an empty stomach, why do I drug myself with sleeping pills, why do I smoke. looking after oneself.’ (Roubaud 2009/2010: 27/33)

It is worth noting that in the above passage, Roubaud addresses her husband as the projected reader of her diaries, perhaps in an awareness that after her death, he will be left with them. Philippe Lejeune writes that the diary is ‘motivated by a search for communication’ and always imagines an addressee, whether this be the diary itself, or a projected future reader, which may indeed be herself.’ (Lejeune 2009: 192) The ‘constant ethical demand’ of the journal is a responsibility to be accountable to oneself, as well as to others. To lie to oneself in one’s diary is as unethical an infraction as lying to someone else. For Roubaud, the attempt to care for the self, and to ‘keep alive,’ is not only for her own sake, but for that of her husband, Jacques; she herself never went back to reread or correct her diaries. Sontag, on the other hand, with an eye toward posterity and eyes other than her own, did reread and correct her journals; Rieff notes in brackets where a later hand has edited or commented on an earlier entry. Each in her own
For Sontag, the diary opens up a space not only for self-expression, but for curating the self for public consumption. ‘In the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could do to any person; I create myself. The journal is a vehicle for my sense of selfhood,’ Sontag writes in an entry from December 31, 1957 entitled ‘On Keeping a Journal’ (Sontag: 2008: 164-65), taking the occasion of the end of the year to assess her journaling practice past and future. She reflects on the work that diary writing does – the ‘ego-building,’ creating a ‘persona’ that she can attempt to live up to. Writing, Sontag notes in 1958, is the construction of a mask, one that over time she hopes will become her real face: ‘More interesting than the mask as concealment or disguise is the mask as projection, as aspiration. Through the mask of my behavior, I do not protect my raw genuine self – I overcome it.’ (Sontag 2008: 178, 1/6/58) Sontag effectively sets up a split between her ‘natural’ self – prone to laziness, overly dutiful and pedantic, prone to sloth – and her ideal writer self: disciplined, dynamic, self-confident, and clean. Her journal, as Jerome Boyd Maunsell has pointed out, is a ‘device’ for getting there, and staying there, the means by which ‘Sontag very self-consciously built up her persona, both in life and on the page.’ (Maunsell 2011: 3) But this ideal self is a non-existent destination; Sontag’s journals record the writer forever becoming, permanently pitched towards an impossible future.

Her dedication to building herself up comes through a keen attention to the relationship between intellectual inspiration, and bodily pain and pleasure. ‘Everything begins from now – I am reborn,’ wrote Sontag when she was sixteen years old, in an entry in which she recounts her first lesbian experiences. (Sontag 2008: 34, 5/31/49) This moment of sexual awakening is a rebirth, but what follows in the journals is Sontag’s self-supervised upbringing as the writer she wants to be. This future self, for Sontag, would have to master the mingled threats and pleasures of the body. Rieff notes in his preface to the early journals that his mother ‘was as uncomfortable with her body as she was serene about her mind,’ but the journals do not reveal such a strict dichotomy. (Sontag 2008: xiii) For Sontag, the mind and body coincide in desire, in the desire to write, in the act of writing. She experiences intellectual breakthroughs when she is happy with the physical experience of her body: ‘The orgasm focuses,’ she notes; ‘I lust to write.’ (Sontag 2008: 218, 11/19/59) Likewise, during moments when life seems uncertain, she attempts to control the uncontrollable by fixating on her body: January 1957 finds her adopting certain ‘Rules + duties for being 24,’ namely ‘1. Have better posture (. . .) 3. Eat less,’ and ‘4. Write two hours a day minimally.’ (Sontag 2008: 127, 1/15/57) During this period, she was preparing to move to Oxford for a fellowship, contemplating leaving her child for a year and her husband for good, and so we find an increase in the campaign of self-improvement: in addition to these vows, she resolves, in one of my favorite quotes from the journal: ‘To take a bath every day, and wash my hair every ten days.’ (Sontag 2008: 286, 9/14-9/15/61) Just as the journal functions as a means of becoming the kind of writer she wants to be, so does it provide a means of socializing her body as well as her mind.

The ‘problem’ she has keeping clean, she decides in 1961, ‘is connected with sex. I feel ‘ready for sex’ after a bath, but there isn’t any, so I’m reluctant to bathe – I fear the awareness of my own flesh that it always gives me.’ (Sontag 2008: 285, 9/12/61) If we follow through the chain of associations the diaries have set up, bathing makes her want sex, and sex makes her want to write, therefore bathing makes her want to write. But if bathing makes Sontag ‘fear the awareness of [her] own flesh,’ it follows that writing (and sex) does as well. Creativity and the body are predicated on each other.

Sontag recognized the flesh as the potential enemy of the spirit, the body as the eventual conqueror of the mind. From very early in the journals she struggles with the infiniteness of the spirit and its bounded corollary, the body: ‘I must not think (. . .) of infinities of space (. . .) – my whole spirit – all that animates me and is the original and responsive desire that constitutes my ‘self’ – all this takes on a definite shape and size – far too large to be contained by the structure I call my body.’ (Sontag 2008: 11, 12/25/48) She describes this opposition as a ‘pull[ing]’ and ‘push[ing],’ a ‘yearn[ing]’ and ‘strain[ing];’ she writes that she
It desires what I am not (yet)

Like the diary, the camera, as Sontag puts it, ‘constructs.’ Sontag’s relationship to photography evolved as the problems of the body became dire, giving it a new urgency: her essays on photography were largely written in the years preceding and following her treatment for cancer in 1974-76. ‘At any point while preparing On Photography,’ Jerome Maunsell observes in his biography, ‘Sontag knew she might relapse and the book could remain unfinished. Her hyper-awareness of her own mortality made the themes of melancholy, death and time in photography resonate naturally.’ (Maunsell 2014: 125) Immediately after On Photography, she wrote Illness as Metaphor (1978); the two, it could be argued, emanate from the same place of physical violation.

When On Photography was first published in 1977, the art world – and especially photographers – saw it as an attack on their medium, as if the collection should have been entitled ‘against’ photography. (Foster 2005: 188) Jonathan Cott notes that Sontag reaches again and again for a certain pool of words to describe photography: ‘appropriate, package, possess, colonize, patronize, imprison, consume, collect, and aggress.’ (Sontag 2013: 48) Her position was in fact somewhat less blameful, more interested in the ethics of what the camera sees and the process by which the photographic image comes to be defused of its power. ‘To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed,’ wrote Sontag in On Photography, and her choice of words is telling: to photograph is to reduce the subject to a thing. She goes on: ‘It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and therefore, like power.’ (Sontag 1977: 4) It is for this reason, I argue, that Sontag was fascinated by photography, and yet had such a vexed relationship to being photographed.

Sontag, as a precociously famous young novelist and critic, frequently found herself at the receiving end of the camera’s lens; this must, for her, have been a validation of her efforts to invent herself as a serious novelist and critic: ‘To photograph is to confer importance,’ as she notes. (Sontag 1977: 28) She wrote about the loss of subjectivity that entailed in a 1985 essay on Robert Mapplethorpe: ‘Although reason tells me the camera is not aimed like a gun barrel at my head, each time I pose for a photographic portrait I feel apprehensive.’ (Sontag 1985: 233) She describes the
experience of being filmed as a deeply physical experience, one that ‘jam[s]’ the ‘relation of consciousness to the world’ and forces her to ‘yield to another command station of consciousness.’ (Sontag 1985: 233) She writes of feeling disarmed, my consciousness reduced to an embarrassed knot of self-consciousness striving for composure. Immobilized for the camera’s scrutiny, I feel the weight of my facial mask, the jut and fleshiness of my lips, the spread of my nostrils, the unruliness of my hair. I experience myself as behind my face, looking out through the windows of my eyes. (Sontag 1985: 233-234)

Being photographed requires that Sontag paste this ‘facial mask’ in place, which requires ‘overcom[ing],’ as she noted in a 1958 diary entry, her ‘raw genuine self.’ (Sontag 2008: 178, 1/6/58) The camera demands something from her on the spot that the diaries indicate she has long felt she must work to produce; it desires what she is not now, but might become, or might work to become. Which is also to say that it desires what she will inevitably become against her will – that is, an image, without a subjectivity, after her death.[22]

Early on in the diaries, she uses very similar terminology; the act of journaling in this way makes her feel ‘self-conscious’ as if she were ‘treating [her]self as an other. Self-supervising.’ (Sontag 2008: 155, Undated, 1957) What troubled Sontag about being photographed, she explains in the Mapplethorpe essay, was the feeling that as subject, she could not ‘respond’ to the photographer ‘with anything equivalent, unless I were to decide to be photographed with my head behind my own camera. The photographer’s look is looking in a pure state; in looking at me, it desires what I am not – my image.’ (Sontag 1985: 234)

Perhaps this is part of why David Rieff was so deeply offended when Sontag’s partner, the photographer Annie Leibovitz, photographed Sontag in the hospital as she was dying, and after she had died. Rieff declared the photographs, which Leibovitz published in her collection Annie Leibovitz: A Photographer’s Life, 1990-2005 ‘carnival images of celebrity death.’ (Rieff 2008: 150) ‘Photographs,’ as Caitlin McKinney notes in her essay exploring the queer politics of these images, ‘unlike obituaries, memoirs, or diaries, seem to have a unique ability to transgress private boundaries.’ (McKinney 2010: 8) They can be circulated outside their intended context, and have the potential to move from the confines of the intimate relationship between Sontag and Leibovitz into the realm of salacious spectacle.

Sontag was aware of the spectacle the photograph can become, especially in her later writings. Regarding the Pain of Others (2003) revisits the arguments articulated thirty years earlier, and demonstrates a continued skepticism about what photographs can show, or what they can communicate, what the spectator can actually absorb from them. ‘Photography: A Little Summa’ concurs: photography is ‘a way of seeing. It is not seeing itself.’ (Sontag 2007: 124) But it is in her essay ‘Regarding the Torture of Others’ that she unleashes her ethical outrage against the ‘horror’ that the pictures of prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison being tortured by their captors included images of those captors standing over them, or next to them, and ‘gloating.’ (Sontag 2007:132) The only difference between these are the photos of lynchings in America between 1880 and 1930, she writes, is the ‘ubiquity’ of photographs in the early twenty-first century. (Sontag 2007: 132) The ethical problem of photography that Sontag lays out in Regarding the Pain of Others is how to respond to the proliferation of photographs of atrocities, when we have become so immune to what we see on the news. But what makes the photographs of Abu Ghraib so appalling is not only that they were taken, and how they were taken, but that the Bush administration attempted to spin their dissemination as – in Donald Rumsfeld’s words – ‘making matters worse.’ (qtd in Sontag 2007: 141) The ‘voyeuristic intimacy’ Sontag observed as innate to the movie camera in her early diaries holds true. What has changed is her political commitment to sharing what the camera has observed. (Sontag 2008: 164, Undated, late 1957)

**into the future perfect**

It is one of the mysteries of embodiment that, as Elaine Scarry notes, ‘the events happening within the interior of that
person’s body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth.' (Scarry 1985: 3) Writing (and to an extent, self-portraiture) excavates those feelings, and shares them forcefully on the page; even if they are destined to fail in the attempt to make another feel what we feel, the translation to language and to image at least makes these feelings visible, and to some extent legible. The seriality of the diary makes the self appear, and appear, and appear.

But what do we see, when we scrutinize this writing, or these self-portraits? What moment are we apprehending, or what succession of moments? Sontag and Roubaud’s respective preoccupations with death and the image provide ways into addressing these questions, though not answering them. The rebirths that Sontag and Roubaud describe in their diaries, and Roubaud’s repeated appearances (or disappearances) in her photographs, are accompanied by an abject awareness that they are also advance stagings of death.

Photography takes us into our own future perfect, and into that of the subjects we look at in photos. That presence may be an intrinsic part of absence, and vice versa, is an uncomfortable truth. This is the ‘defeat of time,’ as Barthes, puts it; this is the punctum in historical photographs, Barthes’s term for the element in a picture which stands out from it, which ‘pricks’ him; a ‘sting, speck, cut, little hole’ in the composition or the subject. (Barthes 1981: 27) Of the two little girls he finds in one old photograph, he exclaims, ‘how alive they are! They have their whole lives before them; but also they are dead (today), then are then already dead (yesterday).’ (Barthes 1981: 96) There is something inescapably abject about being able to see them, there, alive and yet dead. This is the affect behind Barthes’s punctum; in a sense, we are reactivating their death every time we look at their picture; there is something deadly about the gaze of the lens. The photograph inspires what Sontag called a ‘primitive dread,’ which comes from ‘thinking of the photograph as a material part of themselves,’ as Balzac did, fearing the Daguerrotype camera would ‘lay hold of, detach, and use of up one the layers of the body on which it focused.” (Sontag 1977: 161 & 158) Roubaud is also aware of the abject power of the photograph; on August 2, 1980 she notes her ‘Fear of looking at these photos of your dead brother; ridiculous fear;fear which adds to the fear of trying again that has not left me for a month now.as if one could go at it again, as if this death were really a habit.’ (Roubaud 2009/2010: 65/71) Death becomes the habit of her photography, a rehearsal staged perhaps to quell her fears, to manage the excess of her body, to bring its vagrancy under control.

The death of the diarist may also leave a trace, as Lejeune tells us: ‘Death itself can write in a diary,’ leaving its imprint on the page in the diarist’s ‘stammering,’ or even in a mark at the bottom of a page, as in Jehan Rictus’s last notebook. ‘Did he knock over his inkwell as he died?’ (Lejeune 2009: 199) Roubaud’s ignorance, and our knowledge, of her impending death leaves an imaginary stain at the end of her journal. Nine days before she died, the final entry is marked not by imminent death, but by the choice of life:

It took a fatal illness, or one recorded as such, to cure me of wanting to die. In the most oblique, organic, slow manner, I, in a way, invented my own illness.

— and the one from which I will recover. (Roubaud 2009/2010: 221/221)

This is one of the most optimistic entries in the diary, in which the menace of illness and extinction is finally harnessed to the will, and brought within its purview.

It falls to Jacques Roubaud to provide the trace of death in his elegiac poetry cycle, Quelque chose noir. He paints a vivid image of Alix’s lifeless body as he found it in their bed, early one Friday morning. What is most troubling to him is the poetic equivalent of Barthes’s punctum: her fingers.

(…) your hand hung down from the bed.
Almost warm. almost. still almost warm.

Blood coagulated at the fingertips, like dregs of Guinness in a glass.

I couldn’t see it as human. ‘there’s blood in any human hand.’ I understand this proposition very clearly. because I was seeing it confirmed by its negative.

I didn’t have to tell myself: ‘blood flows through any human hand.’ though it’s a thing no one has ever seen. the blood here obviously not flowing. I could not doubt it. I had no reason to. (Roubaud 2009/2010: 11-12)

This is still a discussion of photography, of what the image can do. In Quelque chose noir, he images her death, again and again, contrasting it with her photographs, insisting on it as an image, an un-photograph she could not have taken. ‘Not a photograph./ Death itself-self. identical with itself-self… The world will choke me before this image fades.’ (Roubaud 2009/2010: 14, 19)

This echo – itself-self’ – is the aural equivalent of the present-absence of the photograph, an aural repetition that echoes the duty of remembrance, analogous to the repetitive nature of Alix Roubaud’s self-portraits. She becomes her own negative – endlessly replicable as long as she was alive; her death a destruction of that negative. Death doesn’t look like anything but itself, and yet it looks just like her, and she looks just like herself, but she is not there; another absent presence, or present absence. The image of her hand fallen from the bed recurs across the cycle, repeated like a trauma (or its opposite, the blood contained within the hand, the lack of wound the wound itself), impossible to absorb into just one poem. Notes Barthes, whose Camera Lucida is an elegiac tribute to his recently deceased mother, ‘The photograph is so violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force.’ (Barthes 1981: 91) The shock of the image can recur, memory transformed into something like a photo manquée (a cruelly embodied ‘ghost image, in Guibert’s terms). And yet it is the shock of the image, the punctum, that impels Jacques Roubaud to translate the image into language, to begin to write after the two years of silence that followed her death: ‘By its sheer tenacity and repetition, indeed by its insistent novelty,’ writes Jean-Jacques Poucel in his study of Roubaud, ‘this souvenir leads the poet to break his silence… in order to separate horror from living memories.’ (Poucel 2006: 180)

A full account of Roubaud’s artistic practice, especially as it relates to her conception of the body and her impending death, would need to take into account the major role played in her work by Jacques Roubaud. He is her primary interlocutor, the person to whom most of her entries are addressed, around whom she has built her existence, and for whom she worries most as she contemplates the closeness of death. I think it important to insist on the twin energies of love and death which were for Roubaud so inseparable; many of Roubaud’s photographs picture Jacques and herself naked in bed, in scenes that are more touching and intimate than invasive or erotic. The final image in Si Quelque chose noir depicts Jacques Roubaud himself, lying naked on the floor, with a transparent Alix lying on top of him.

For both Roubaud and Sontag, a fear of death was relieved by the joy of the body, and both of these affective states were intensely creative ones. Through their diary practice, Sontag and Roubaud are able to remind themselves of why they create, and what it all means: the diary becomes a space in which not only to create themselves, but to comfort themselves, to look after themselves. One of the quotations Sontag copies into her journal is from Lucretius: ‘Life lives on... It is the lives, the lives, the lives, that die.’ (Sontag 2008: 33) Sontag and Roubaud both console themselves, in the face of extinction, that something in which they both take part lives on.

Notes

[1] There do exist earlier journals, dating from 1970, that have not yet been brought into print. They remain in the possession of Jacques Roubaud.

volume three is scheduled for 2019.


For more on Sontag as filmmaker, see E. Ann Kaplan and Sohnya Sayres’s chapters in Ching and Wagner-Lawlor.

I provide the page numbers of the 2009 French edition first, and the 2010 English edition second.

See Jerome Maunsell, ‘The Writer’s Diary as Device’.


Anne Tucker, former curator of photography at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, agrees, and suggests that in our digital age Nancy Rexroth’s or Dawoud Bey’s Facebook pages could be considered diaries, where both frequently post ‘selfies,’ as it seems self-portrait photography must henceforth be known (correspondence with the author via the curator Terry Pitts, 20 December 2015).

Townsend suggests Woodman was working in a tradition of photographic ‘manipulation, fabrication and fabulation, which might include such diverse nineteenth-century photographers such as Hippolyte Bayard, Henry Peach Robinson and Clementina Hawarden,’ as well as, more contemporarily, Revelle and Michals. Further research in Roubaud’s archive is necessary to track her influences, to establish what she was reading and looking at, but the archive is at the moment principally held in private between Jacques Roubaud and Hélène Gianneckchini.

See Olin’s *Touching Photographs* for a more developed discussion of the history of what she calls ‘tactile looking.’ (Olin 2002: 1)

For more attempts on thinking about photography beyond *Camera Lucida*, see Geoffrey Batchen, ed., *Photography Degree Zero*.

‘Il est vrai que la photographie est un futur antérieur sans cesse déchiré.Je veux dire la pratique photographique de l’autoportrait quotidien ,toujours à recommencer.’ (25.IV.80) Roubaud marked the date with the day of the month first, the month second, indicated in Roman numerals, and then the year, and I will follow this format.

The precise role of impression in photography is something the ‘Art Seminar’ critics cannot agree on.

This theory goes beyond the self-portrait, and beyond even photography: ‘All photographs are me,’ she declared in a manifesto she drafted in her journal, in the sense that ‘everything that is fabricated (produce, work) contains the fabricator (producer, worker).’ (Roubaud 2010: 231)

She comments on this in her journal that, unlike most of the others, was written in English, not French:

30.VIII.80

‘continued the atelier series,

myself as a laughing child
in front of my dead body.' (Roubaud 2010: 78-9)

[16] ‘Les seules vraies photographies sont les photographies d’enfance (...) Une photographie de moi enfant me montre ce que je n’avais pas vu alors que j’y étais.’

[17] Tiré epreuve des cyprès de St-Félix. Prise la nuit avec ouverture de 10-15 minutes. Légère oscillation de bas en haut de l’appareil due sans doute à ma respiration. quinze minutes la nuit au rythme de la respiration. (20.XI.80)

[18] De toutes les divisions tentées: anglais/français; prose/non prose; photo/journal; rien de tout cela ne tient. Une seule règle: avoir toujours un cahier, et y écrire presque tous les jours: tout; malgré tout; tout inclure: les résolutions les plus simple; ne plus fumer,... les incidents, les photographies, tout. (14.VII.80)

[19] je me demande pourquoi je me maltraite de cette manière alors que je suis aimée et dois survivre; pourquoi je me saoule sans manger, pourquoi je me drogue de somnifères, pourquoi je fume. se soigner (25.1.80)

[20] Maunsell skilfully demonstrates the way in which Sontag’s diaries fit into her thinking elsewhere about life-writing. However he does not account for the role photography played for her in this self-fashioning, or the journals’ emphasis on embodiment.

[21] ‘Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself – a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness.’ (Sontag 1977: 8)

[22] And yet, in what McKinney terms an ‘ethics of queer domesticity’ (McKinney 2010: 1), Sontag posed in at least two nude photographs for Leibovitz, one in an attitude of voluptuous abandon, naked amongst the bedclothes in their home in the Hamptons, another in the bathtub, hand over her mastectomy scar. While in another of what must have originally been a private family snapshot, Sontag sits at her desk wearing a bear suit, calmly looking at the camera as if it were just another day at the office. Exposed or covered up, it was only with her partner behind the lens that she truly felt comfortable in front of a camera.

[23] Peur de regarder ces photos du frère mort; peur ridicule; peur qui s’ajoute à la peur de recommencer qui ne me quitte pas depuis un mois. comme si on recommençait, comme si la mort était une habitude.

[24] Il me fallait une maladie mortelle, ou réportorée telle, pour guérir de l’envie de mourir. De la manière la plus oblique, organique, lente, j’ai inventé, en quelque sorte, ma maladie.

– et celle dont je guérirai. (19.I.83)


Tiède. tiède seulement. tiède encore.

Du sang s’était alourdi au bout des doigts. comme un fond de guinness dans un verre.

(…)

Je ne le voyais pas humain. ‘il y a du sang dans une main humaine’. je comprenais très clair le sens de cette proposition. parceque je contemplais sa confirmation négative.
Il ne m’étais pas nécessaire de me dire : ‘du sang coule dans une main vivante’. chose que pourtant personne n’a jamais vue. ce sang là de toute évidence ne coulait pas. ce que je ne pouvais mettre en doute. pour douter me manquaient les raisons. (Roubaud 2001: 13 & 14)

Pas une photographie.

La mort même. identique à elle même même. (Roubaud 2001: 16)

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