

**ART**

**WITHOUT**

**COMPROMISE\***

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# Visual Episodes

**One** summer while traveling in Italy, I visited an archaeological site. It was a broiling hot day so I sought out shade in an underground passageway. The corridor was dark except where the sun came through holes in the ceiling and made a row of bright blobs on the ground. The shapes were stunning. My first thought was, “I want these.” So, I took pictures, first of the row, then of each individual blob. I felt like I was at a flea market and had discovered a treasure—better yet a whole matched set—and I couldn’t leave a single piece behind.

I enjoyed the experience. I decided that I would carry a small point-and-shoot camera with me on a regular basis. As a result, I became more aware of visual episodes: moments and spaces that, together, piqued my aesthetic interest. I started taking pictures to “see” more, to notice what I normally missed. The camera was an integral piece of this exercise.

My new habit made me curious about photography as a filter for seeing. In order to explore this activity that is so compelling to such a huge number of people, I decided to look for a book published back in 1970s: *On Photography* by Susan Sontag. It’s still popular, and I found it easily in the bookstore. Within the first few pages there’s a reference to photographing as a means of attaining ownership: “To collect photographs is to collect the world.” Sontag goes on to explain, “Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood.”

I continued reading, discovering subtle variations. In addition to ownership, there is more that I'm seeking. I'm trying to develop a heightened awareness of my own aesthetic vision, as opposed to someone else's. Sontag's descriptions of the photographer-as-collector reminded me of my experience of seeing the shapes in the passageway. Not only did I want to have and keep those beautiful forms, I also felt that I had special claim to them. I was, I decided, a connoisseur of light blobs. Anyone else would have walked right by, missing the desirability of this dusty fortune. Sontag refers to the fact that the value of the object being photographed is unimportant, that the value lies instead in the photographer's vision.

This made me think about other visual episodes that attract my eye. I looked through a few sets of my slides and realized that they are primarily pictures of long, horizontal rows of short vertical elements. Like a collector, I seem to be acquiring a series. But in my case, the series is not of objects, it is of arrangements. My purpose is not to take great photographs; instead, I want to have the physical reminder of making a visual selection—one that I consider personally valuable—and enjoying it.

I found more examples throughout the book that helped me to articulate my reasons for taking photographs. For example, Sontag discusses the phenomenon of translating a recognizable object into an abstract form by photographing it close-up or by removing it from its normal context. Of the slides that I had shot in the underground passage, a few showed the entire corridor. Boring. But the shapes themselves—close-up, tightly cropped, and isolated from their surroundings—were mysterious.

However, just as isolation can make an object abstract and beautiful, the photograph can help you to see your own work from a new perspective. We all have ways to get a fresh look at something we've been working on and staring at for too long: taking a walk around the block, turning a piece of artwork upside down or looking at it in the mirror. I use photography to separate myself from my work. I remember a particular occasion when I created an installation in a gallery, concentrating only on the artwork itself. Later, when I looked at a photograph of the room, I was shocked to find that the work was competing with a patterned floor, an unnecessary ceiling light, and a badly painted door, all of which I had literally not seen.

After reading Sontag's book, I realize that the act of photographing is, for me, a way to explore and develop seeing. Taking pictures is like exercise, and the camera is the aid that helps me tone my aesthetic eyesight. It helps

me to see something I know too well, showing it to me from a new, unfamiliar perspective. It encourages me to isolate a visual event, and to translate it from a physical, named reality into something more abstract.

By carrying around a camera, I look harder. By taking a picture, I acknowledge and give credit to the shapes and compositions that please my eye, and I add to my personal collection of visual episodes.

## One