

Press kit

SUSAN SONTAG

Seeing And Being Seen

14 March – 28 September 2025



Susan Sontag during the filming of *Duet for Cannibals*
© AB Svensk Filmindustri (1969) Still photographer: Peder Björkgren

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Exhibition Information

Duration	14 March – 28 September 2025
Press officer	Sven Bergmann
Curator	Kristina Jaspers
Exhibition Manager	Katharina Chrubasik
Scientific traineeship	Daniela Baumann
Publication / Press copy	18 € / 9 €
Cultural partner	



Renate von Mangoldt, Susan Sontag during the event "Three Americans in Berlin", Akademie der Künste, Berlin, September 1976 © Renate von Mangoldt

General Information

Director	Eva Kraus
Managing Director	Oliver Hölken
Opening Hours	Tuesday 10 am to 6 pm Wednesday 10 am to 9 pm Thursday to Sunday 10 am to 6 pm Public holidays 10 am to 6 pm

Combined ticket for all exhibitions

13 €/reduced 6,50 €
All visitors up to and including 18 years of age have free admission
7 € happy hour ticket for all exhibitions
(1 hour before closing time, for individual visitors only)

Climate-Ticket

In the Bundeskunsthalle app, visitors receive a 10% discount on the ticket price as an incentive to travel in a climate-friendly way
www.bundeskunsthalle.de/en/klima-ticket

Public Transport

Underground lines 16, 63, 66 and bus lines 610, 611 and 630 to Heussallee / Museumsmeile
Deutsche Bahn / UN-Campus:
Lines RE 5 (Rhein-Express), RB 26 (MittelrheinBahn), RB 30 (Rhein-Ahr-Bahn) and RB 48 (Rhein-Wupper-Bahn)

Parking

There is a car and coach park on Emil-Nolde-Straße behind the Bundeskunsthalle.
Navigation: Emil-Nolde-Straße 11, 53113 Bonn

Press Information (German / English)

www.bundeskunsthalle.de
For press files follow 'press'.

General Information
(German / English)

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The Bundeskunsthalle is supported by



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#Bundeskunsthalle
#SusanSontag

Media Information

SUSAN SONTAG

Seeing and Being Seen

14 March – 28 September 2025

Throughout her life, the author, critic and *public intellectual* Susan Sontag has worked intensively with visual media. Coming from a background in philosophy and literary studies, she clearly recognised the decisive influence of photography in our media-driven society. As an attractive woman herself, she was a sought-after subject for photographers and utilised the power of the medium for her own agenda. She described her early encounter with images of the Holocaust as a 'negative epiphany' in her life and as the starting point for her further involvement with photography. Film is life, photography a memento mori, she wrote in her first novel *The Benefactor* in 1963. As a passionate cineaste, Sontag saw film as the 'most vibrant, exciting and significant of all art genres.' The cinema as a school of sensibility not only showed us 'how to pose, smoke, kiss or fight', but also offered us the opportunity to grieve. As a director, Sontag made four films and explored the boundaries of visualisation and voyeurism in practice.

In her programmatic essay *One Culture and the New Sensibility* (1965), Sontag called for the abolition of the distinction between high and popular culture and propagated a new way of perceiving and experiencing things. Her self-empowerment as an author and intellectual also included an examination of feminism and the question of what it means to be a woman in today's society. Like her role models Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt, Sontag emphasised equal recognition as a thinker. She deliberately did not make her bisexuality public in order to avoid being labelled. Her own illness with cancer and the AIDS crisis sharpened her awareness of discrimination and blame with the help of metaphors. She also explored the enlightening effect of photography together with her partner Annie Leibovitz, with whom she travelled extensively and also documented her own illness. As an activist, Sontag travelled to numerous crisis regions to help make political conflicts more visible. 'Ethics and aesthetics are one', she noted, following

Ludwig Wittgenstein, meaning that we cannot separate the two: Looking at photographs - like looking at the world - requires us to receive content and form without prejudice. But we must not stop at mere perception. For Sontag, seeing and being seen are always active processes of being involved.

The exhibition *Susan Sontag. Seeing and Being Seen* focuses on her reflections on photography and traces Sontag's theories and thoughts on the subject. Her engagement with queer culture, discrimination against people infected with HIV and her own cancer are also mentioned. Sontag is also shown in her role as a film enthusiast and director, not least to portray her as an independent woman who rebelled against society throughout her life.

Exhibition texts

SUSAN SONTAG. SEEING AND BEING SEEN

The author, critic and public intellectual Susan Sontag (1933–2004) was intensely involved with visual media throughout her life and recognized early the defining influence of photography in our media-driven society. Her own attitude was ambivalent: on the one hand, she collected celebrity portraits and confessed to being “obsessed” with photos. On the other hand, she criticized photography as an aggressive act that makes the world available and at the same time keeps it at a distance.

In her writing, Sontag repeatedly explored the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, between empathy and the impulse to act. Her own experiences of illness, her involvement in the civil rights movement and her travels to various areas of conflict around the world had a significant impact on her thinking. According to Sontag, “to pay attention to the world” is a prerequisite for knowledge of the self and knowledge of the world.

As a passionate cineaste, she saw cinema as a school of sensibility that not only provides great pleasure but also acts as a moral model. As a film director, she moved behind the camera and explored forms of visual essays. Sontag saw her entire life as an experiment and worked on her self-formation throughout her life. She explored new ways of perception and no longer wanted to differentiate between high and popular culture.

More than 20 years have passed since Sontag's death. Photographs and films are more ubiquitous than ever; the global production of images has increased immeasurably in recent years. The questions Sontag raised are as relevant as ever: What do we do with images and what do the images do to us? For Sontag, seeing and being seen are always active processes of engagement.

THE OBJECT OF PHOTOGRAPHERS

Susan Sontag was a sought-after object for photographers. She had herself been photographed by prominent photographers to market her books and used the power of the medium for her own agenda.

The biggest critic of photography is also its biggest profiteer, it was said. Portraits by Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, Peter Hujar and Robert Mapplethorpe as well as the personal images taken by her partner Annie Leibovitz established her reputation as the “Dark Lady of the Intellectuals”. With her masculine outfits and her dark, wild hair – which became streaked with white as she grew older – she invented her signature look. Sontag's appearance also defined her status as a smart, glamorous and contemporary thinker.

THE NEW SENSIBILITY

The 1960s were a time of upheaval and revolt. Susan Sontag moved in avant-garde circles, becoming close friends with the painter Paul Thek, the photographer Peter Hujar and the artist Jasper Johns. With her collection of essays *Against Interpretation* (1966), she provided a guide to current art movements such as *Nouvelle Vague* and *Happening*, while criticizing the intellectual interpretative approaches and calling for an unbiased sensual perception of works of art. At the same time, she reexamined the relationship between high and popular culture. Her postulate that the feeling triggered by a Robert Rauschenberg painting could be compared to that evoked by a song of The Supremes provoked a wave of outrage.

NOTES ON CAMP

With her "Notes on *Camp*" (1964), Susan Sontag focused on the supposedly superficial nature of the queer subculture. Instead of definitions, she presented 58 theses on various forms of *camp* expression. The ballet *Swan Lake*, for example, is just as "campy" as a Tiffany lamp. Sontag wrote: "*Camp* sees everything in quotation marks: not a woman, but a 'woman'." Excessiveness and artificiality were central characteristics of *Camp's* taste. Sontag's concept found its first practical application in the trial surrounding the film *Flaming Creatures* (1963) by Jack Smith, which had been confiscated for obscenity. In her expert opinion, Sontag characterized the film as a sensual and poetic shock film, thereby consolidating her status as a non-conformist film critic.

TO BE A WOMAN

Sontag's self-empowerment as a critical writer and controversial intellectual included her exploration of feminism and her role as a woman in society. Like Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt, she demanded equal recognition as a thinker, without any additional attribute as "female". In the 1970s, Sontag wrote several essays criticizing gender inequality. Men are "seen", but women are "observed". While men supposedly gain competence with age, women lose their beauty. Sontag outlined an androgynous ideal of beauty, combining the masculine and the feminine. Together with her partner, the photographer Annie Leibovitz, she initiated the book *Woman*, which celebrates the diversity of women of different ages, cultures and professions.

HEALTH AND DISEASE

When Sontag was diagnosed with breast cancer in the mid-1970s, it changed her life forever. She underwent heavy chemotherapy and several operations over a period of two and a half years. During this time, she wrote her book *Illness as Metaphor*, in which she analyzed the stigmatization to which sick people are subjected. When many of her friends became infected with HIV in the 1980s, she expanded this exploration to include AIDS. How can we make sick people more visible without victimizing them? Annie Leibovitz achieved this with a photograph of a friend with AIDS and her campaign portraits for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation. When Sontag was diagnosed with cancer again in 1999, Leibovitz documented the progression of the disease and her partner's regained sense of self-control.

LIFE AS AN EXPERIMENT

Sontag came to see her life as an experiment. In her diary she made lists of everything she wanted to change. She constantly reinvented herself, whether as a critic or film director, as a writer or public intellectual. Sontag saw herself as a "project" and worked on her self-formation throughout her life. Self-reflection and self-criticism were essential for this, as was courage and the willingness to make a new start.

ON PHOTOGRAPHY

In her book *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag elaborated on the different functions of photographs, which are still valid today: They store our memories and can therefore also overwrite real memories. Photography is about power relations and specifies how something should be seen. Photographs teach us a grammar, an ethics of seeing, which is usually accompanied by an evaluation. And they suggest an availability of the world, while in reality they create distance and prevent real experience. Photography tends to aestheticize its object and numbs viewers to the depicted pain.

At the beginning of the Iraq war, Sontag deepened her analysis of war photographs in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). She examined whether such images shake us up or paralyze us and whether they can promote understanding of the world. She also dealt with photographs of atrocities and explained techniques of image manipulation. Finally, she emphasized the need to be "haunted" by photographs in order to not forget what human beings can do to each other.

THE RIEFENSTAHL CASE

Leni Riefenstahl made several propaganda films during the Nazi era that are still controversial. In the 1960s, Susan Sontag described the films *Triumph des Willens* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938) as "masterpieces", which were essentially propagandistic but very remarkable from a formal point of view. Ten years later, she revised this opinion on the occasion of the publication of Riefenstahl's Nuba book. In her essay *Fascinating Fascism* (1975), Sontag now emphasized the constants in Riefenstahl's fascist aesthetics: pain, submission and obedience were primarily glorified. Sontag's essay made Riefenstahl's comeback in the USA considerably more difficult. In her memoirs, Riefenstahl dealt with Sontag's criticism.

CINEMA AS A SCHOOL OF SENSIBILITY

Susan Sontag was a passionate cineaste. She sometimes went to the cinema several times a day. "Cinema is the most alive, the most exciting, the most important of all art forms right now", she wrote in the mid-1960s. In her diary, she recorded which films she had seen, which ones she still wanted to see, and which films were a must-see. Sontag loved European independent films, but was also familiar with silent film classics, Russian and Asian cinema and American experimental film. With her essays, she established herself as a film expert at a time when Film and Cultural Studies were just emerging.

In the late 1960s she was invited to direct two feature films in Sweden. The critic then moved behind the camera. She experimented with the portrayal of deafness and blindness, practiced teamwork and learned about editing and rhythm. She made her next two documentaries in essay form., with a subjective narrative perspective and the experimental use of tones and sounds. She also saw cinema as an opportunity for genuine experience and for opportunity to mourn.

AT THE MOVIES WITH SONTAG

Susan Sontag considered cinema a social space that not only shows visitors "how to strut, to smoke, to kiss, to fight", but also contributes to a better understanding of the world. At the same time, the cinema is a place of desire: you let yourself be overwhelmed by the images, flirt with the people sitting next to you and fall in love with the actors and actresses on the screen.

Sontag's film analyses were diverse: in *The Imagination of Disaster* (1965), she examined science fiction B-movies of the 1950s and 1960s and recognized the collective fear of nuclear war in their horror scenarios. She described films by Jean-Luc Godard or Ingmar Bergman in terms of how they expanded the language of film. And she identified elements of *camp* in Hollywood films starring Greta Garbo or Marlene Dietrich.

Exhibited Works

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

Eddie Adams
Freddy Alborta
Eugène Atget
Ingmar Bergman
James Bidgood
Peder Björkegren
Brassai (Gyula Halász)
Jewgeni Chaldej
Walker Evans
Gisèle Freund
Reginald Gray
Anabell Guerrero
Peter Hujar
Jill Krentz
Dorothea Lange
Rolf Lantin
Annie Leibowitz
Helmar Lerski
Rouben Mamoulian
Renate von Mangoldt
Fred W. McDarrah
Bill Meurer
Georgij Petrussov
Hans Pölkow
Albert Renger-Patzsch
Leni Riefenstahl
René Saint-Paul
August Sander
Napoleon Sarony
Christian Schulz
Ekko von Schwichow
Nick Út
Andy Warhol
Edward Weston
Susan Wood
Willy (Wilhelm Otto) Zielke

CLIPS FROM FILMS BY

Ingmar Bergman
Jack Smith
Susan Sontag
Andy Warhol

BOOKS BY

Anna Banti
Simone de Beauvoir
Jonathan Cott
Clark Kinnaird
Annie Leibowitz
Adolf R. Lerner
Leni Riefenstahl
Chris Riley
W. Eugene Smith
Susan Sontag

DIARIES / NOTES / LETTERS BY

Hannah Arendt
Leni Riefenstahl
Susan Sontag

WORKS ON PAPER BY

Paul Thek
Robert Rauschenberg

RECORD FROM

The Supremes

Publication



The exhibition is accompanied by a publication

SUSAN SONTAG
Sehen und gesehen werden

Published by
the Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany

With contributions by
Daniela Baumann, Katharina Chrubasik, Anna-Lisa Dieter, Kristina Jaspers,
Annekathrin Kohout, Eva Kraus, Katharina Sykora

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In German language
Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, Cologne
Price museum edition: 18 Euros
Price bookstore edition: 19,80 Euro



Educational Programme

GUIDED TOURS

AUDIOGUIDE

German

Free of charge via the Bundeskunsthalle app

Artistic concept and production Linon Medien

Mediation in the exhibition

Sundays and public holidays, 12–5 p.m.

Discourse for interested visitors

A contact person will be present in the exhibition during opening hours.

You are welcome to ask questions and talk to us about what is on display and the themes of the exhibition.

This offer always starts at 12 noon with an introduction (60 minutes)

The queere perspective – Seeing and Beeing Seen

Sunday, 13 April

Sunday, 22 June

2–3.30 p.m. in each day

15 €, incl. visit to the exhibition

Whether old or new, surprising and hidden, queer content is addressed in the exhibition tour. Afterwards, there will be an opportunity to discuss the topic with other participants

Curator tours

With Kristina Jaspers, curator of the exhibition

Tuesday, 18 March, 2 pm

With Daniela Baumann, scientific trainee

Wednesday, 26 March, 5 p.m.

Wednesday, 9 April, 5 p.m.

60 minutes each

5 €/reduced € 2.50, plus admission to the exhibition

Tickets are available at the box office or via bundeskunsthalle.de/tickets.

Guided tour during the lunch break

Art break

Wednesdays, 12 March, 9 April, 18 June, 12.30 – 1 p.m. each day

To balance out your daily working life, we offer you an entertaining speed tour during your lunch break.

8 € (guided tour and admission)

Tickets are available at the ticket office or at bundeskunsthalle.de/tickets.

Individually bookable for groups

Information and registration at buchung@bundeskunsthalle.de



Baby-Art-Connection

Guided tours and talks for parents with babies

From the nappy-changing table to the museum

Wednesdays, 19 March, 14 May, 10 September, 10.15–11.45 a.m. each day

15 €, incl. visit to the exhibition (one parent and baby)

Registration via buchung@bundeskunsthalle.de or in advance at bundeskunsthalle.de/tickets

Exhibition tour for intercultural groups

Meet & Speak

Dialogue-based guided tour for people with and without a history of migration.

Intercultural groups can discover the exhibition together, talk to each other and ask questions.

Come along, bring friends and your languages!

Bookable free of charge for intercultural groups

Max. 15 people/group

Written registration required: buchung@bundeskunsthalle.de

Group tours

60 minutes, 70 €

90 minutes, 90 €

60 minutes, guided tour with curator € 180

60 minutes, guided tour with artistic director 250 €

plus admission ticket € 13/reduced € 6.50 per person

Written registration required: buchung@bundeskunsthalle.de

Detailed descriptive tour for visually impaired and blind people

Susan Sontag. Seeing and Being Seen

Sundays, 13 April, 17 August, 11.30 am - 1 pm each day

Susan Sontag influenced and polarised as an author, critic, intellectual, political activist, film and photography enthusiast throughout her life. Politically interested and equipped with a sharp tongue, she commented controversially on current affairs. Topics that had previously only played a role in underground or popular culture or were not part of the mainstream were brought into the public eye by Sontag. Early on, she focussed on the meaning and impact of photography. The core statements of her volume of essays *On Photography* are still highly topical today. A flood of images, dullness, voyeurism, power and powerlessness are put up for discussion.

The exhibition also addresses Sontag's exploration of queer culture, being a woman in today's society and her own cancer.

Even if the presentation cannot offer any tangible objects, the art mediator Uschi Baetz would like to make the works accessible to you during the tour by means of detailed descriptions and integrate them into the cultural-historical context. We look forward to an intensive dialogue with you!

3 € tour fee, plus admission to the exhibition

Written registration required: buchung@bundeskunsthalle.de

Telephone guidance *When Calling: Culture!*

Susan Sontag. *Seeing and Being Seen*

Thursday, 3 April, 5–6 p.m.

She was considered controversial, polarising and critical of politics and culture: Susan Sontag (American author, director, activist). She commented on current affairs with a sharp tongue, dealt with feminism, queer culture and AIDS and publicly shed light on her own cancer.

A coveted object of contemporary photographers herself, Susan Sontag recognised the importance and impact of photography today at an early stage. In her 1977 publication *On Photography*, she scrutinised aspects such as the flood of images, voyeurism, power and powerlessness, reality and manipulation, and then applied them to the work of Leni Riefenstahl. 25 years later, her work is continued in *Das Leiden anderer betrachten*, in which she examines the effect and function of war photography.

To this day, her thoughts on photography, which are at the centre of the exhibition at the Bundeskunsthalle, have lost none of their significance.

When Callin: Culture is aimed at people who, for various reasons, cannot visit museums or cannot visually grasp the content of a guided tour. For example, because they are blind or visually impaired. Or they are not mobile or live in a care home. For these interested parties, the communication of culture, art and historical topics is made possible via telephone.

Free participation

You can register via the website www.beianrufkultur.de using the 'Register free of charge' button in the description of the respective telephone tour until shortly before the tour.

You will receive a landline number for dialling in by e-mail immediately after your registration. Please also check your spam folder. On the day of the event, dial the telephone number you receive about 2 to 3 minutes before the start.

Alternatively, you can also register for guided tours a few days in advance by calling the *When Calling: Culture* team: (040) 209 404 36.

Further dates and information: www.beianrufkultur.de

EVENTS

WEDNESDAY_LATE_ART

SPEEDGUIDES_DJ_DRINKS

19 March, 6–9 p.m.

Your evening full of art, culture and music!

SPEED GUIDED TOURS

(German, English)

Susan Sontag. Seeing and Being Seen

Save Land. United for Land

MITMACH ACTION

Empowerment – Inspired by Susan Sontag

Photography and collage

With Sarah Waschke

LOUNGE & DJ & DRINKS

With DJ@Jounce

13€/6,50€ with ELLAH-Card, including a drink

ELLAH – The annual pass for young art lovers



WEDNESDAY_LATE_ART
SPEEDGUIDES_DJ_DRINKS
Para-Modernism. Life Reform Movements from 1900 Onwards
21 May, 6–9 p.m.
Your evening full of art, culture and music!
SPEED TOURS
(German, English)
Para-Modernism. Life reform from 1900 onwards
Interactions X WEtransFORM
Susan Sontag. See and be seen
Save Land. United for Land
MITMACH ACTION
Flowerpower
Design jewellery
With Argia Dehn
LOUNGE & DJ & DRINKS
With DJ tbd
13€/6,50€ with ELLAH-Card, including a drink
ELLAH – The annual pass for young art lovers

WEDNESDAY_LATE_ART
SPEEDGUIDES_DJ_DRINKS
Wim Wenders
24 September, 6–9 p.m.
Your evening full of art, culture and music!
SPEED TOURS
(German, English)
Wim Wenders
WEtransFORM. The New European Bauhaus and Beyond
Interactions 2025
Susan Sontag. See and be seen
LOUNGE & DJ & DRINKS
With DJ Buena Vista aka DJ @Jounce
13€/6,50€ with ELLAH-Card, including a drink
ELLAH – The annual pass for young art lovers

Next date:
WEDNESDAY_LATE_ART
Wednesday, 19 November



Current and Upcoming Exhibitions

SAVE LAND
United for Land
until 1 June 2025

Our soils take up to hundreds of years to form. But one extreme event is enough to deplete soil in a matter of minutes. We are degrading 100 million hectares of healthy and productive lands each year; an area roughly three times the size of Germany. Land restoration is of the utmost urgency not only for ourselves, but also for biodiversity and the world's climate. Land is of existential importance for our lives, and it is a treasure of immeasurable value that must be preserved.

The immersive exhibition *Save Land* was developed in partnership with the UNCCD-G20 Global Land Initiative. It brings together insightful contemporary art positions with exhibits from the natural sciences and uses the latest media technologies to understand the global situation of land. What is the state of our soils in cities and on agricultural and industrial land? And is there any untouched nature left on Earth? What can we do to protect our soils? The exhibition aims to inspire action for the common good.

An exhibition organised by the Bundeskunsthalle and the UNCCD-G20 Global Land Initiative to mark the 30th anniversary of the UNCCD

Please save the dates:

SUSAN SONTAG: "EVERYTHING MATTERS"
23 May – 30 November 2025, Literaturhaus München
www.literaturhaus-munehen.de

In the Bundeskunsthalle:

PARAMODERNISM
Life Reform Movements From 1900 Onwards
11 April – 10 August 2025
Media conference: Wednesday, 9 April 2025, 11 a.m.

INTERACTIONS X WEtransFORM
1 May – 26 October 2025
Media conference: Tuesday, 29 April 2025, 11 a.m.

WEtransFORM
The New European Bauhaus and Beyond
6 June 2025 – 26 January 2026
Media conference: Wednesday, 4 June 2025, 11 a.m.

Subject to change
Status: March 2025