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Diane Arbus: The Gap Between Intention and Effect

JUDITH GOLDMAN

The recent articles on Diane Arbus' photographs all falter in the same private, indulgent way. The writings have been homages to suicide, eulogistic tributes, and noncritical memoirs. Diane Arbus, who was a very good photographer, deserves better. Not that the abundance of essays are not well done or interesting. The nature of the subject predetermines at least voyeuristic interest and they are competent, if strikingly similar.

Each offers the same mixture of biographical facts: born in 1923, Diane Arbus was upper-middle class, the daughter of a successful New York department store owner. She attended private, progressive day schools. Her brother is the poet and literary critic Howard Nemerov. She married young and worked with her husband, Allan Arbus, as a fashion photographer. She quit fashion photography in 1958 and a year later studied with Lisette Model. She died in July of 1971—a suicide—after a career of only 10 years.

The essays couple these facts with visual perceptions about her subject matter and technique. Her subjects were people on edges—the physically malformed—dwarfs, midgets, giants, twins, and transvestites with sideshow relationships to society, and physically normal people, whose edge was a fact of their social class and whose condition, like the malformed, was loneliness and the psychological despair of boredom.

In most of the writings, visual perceptions dissolve into self-revelations, as if the task of the assignment were too much for the writer. The effect, like a potent drink, turns the critical prose into boozy private musings, more about the writer than Arbus the photographer. The critical reaction is redundant—and the diffuseness of its praise suggests the power of Arbus' photographs as well as their inherent problems. Her photographs unleash the observer's private despair and their back-alley secrets are offered as explication as if her own statement were not mean enough.

Cultism is easy and hard to avoid. The "Sylvia Pláthisms" that now decorate the Arbus legend and hang from it like purple hearts are harder still to circumvent. The fault is not critical but cultural: Diane Arbus died heroically in action. And an assumption that where she chose to travel contributed to her death makes viewers look away from the art. If you look too hard, you take your life in your hands; isn't that, after all, what Arbus did? What's more, it is in better taste to place laurels at the shrine. But those flowers wilt into literary trivia, and no one is well served. Who after all remembers, or

cares, that Sarah Teasdale drowned herself in a bathtub; that is the cult of poetry, not the stuff of it. Sylvia Plath and John Berryman are not better poets because they took their lives, nor is Diane Arbus a better photographer for that fact.

The mesmerizing power of Arbus' photographs is also their problem. That power derives from her choice and, more importantly, from her handling of subject. Each picture acts like a visual boomerang; freaks and lonely people scare us into looking first at them and then back at ourselves. Arbus' camera reflected the visual confrontations we choose not to have, the appearance of horrors that stop us but are hard to see. That is never easy. Yet should it be as difficult as her pictures seem to make it? We come away from an Arbus photograph never having seen the whole picture. The visual statement is strangely unresolved and incomplete, not because we get stuck in our own frame, but because her handling of subject prevents it. Something about her honesty is dishonest.

I do not think this happens because she chose to photograph freaks. Though trained not to admit it, we are fascinated by the aberrant, the violent, and the perverse. When we are assured no one is watching, we stare at cripples and auto wrecks. Although the sensationalism of Arbus' subjects offers a cogent, if superficial, explanation of why her pictures are hard to see, the fact that they are freaks is secondary to the larger problem of how she saw them and elected to present them.

We are, remember, a third party to the photographic record. The observer and creator was Arbus and the photograph captures her past encounter. The docile subjects were participants, who worked with her in a picture-taking process that was active. What is disturbing about her photographic record is its ceaseless consistency. Identical compositions repeat to the same effect. Subjects are almost always presented dead-center in the foreground of the square picture plane, against a soft-focused ground, or in the enclosed space of a room. The uneven edges and the occasional black line that borders the abstract ground literally and figuratively frame the subject and push them out to confront and envelop us. Her camera's invariable focus was on the subject's eyes. In photograph after photograph, they stare out with frozen despair. The eyes of a Mexican dwarf in a hotel room carry the same wistful vision as a woman on a park bench. Their dulled expectation is that of the Junior Interstate ballroom dancers, the tattooed muscle man, and the young man in curlers. Each



Diane Arbus. *The Junior Interstate Ballroom Dance Champions, Yonkers, N.Y. 1962*, photograph.



Diane Arbus. *Topless dancer in her dressing room San Francisco, Cal. 1968*, photograph.

FALL, 1974



August Sander, *Verfolgter Jude, Köln 1938*, photograph. Sonnabend Gallery.



August Sander, *SS-Mann, Köln 1938*, photograph. Sonnabend Gallery.

suggests endless replays of an original confrontation.

Arbus fixes her subject's eyes in an additional symmetry that nears contrivance and often precludes a composition's successful completion. In a photograph of a nudist lady,¹ breasts, vulva, knees, and peeping teatlike toes reiterate the shape of her winged sunglasses. This alignment freezes the preening woman into a naked statue, and makes her adornments of the clothed—a bracelet, a necklace, and a coy towel—suggest nakedness, not nudity. They act as a reference and judgment on a way of living. The camera has stripped bare the nudist's freedom. Immobile and lifeless, the lady as object is seemingly the picture's subject. In fact, she is the whole picture, a more than adequate conception; but pictorially, it doesn't work. The nudist lady sits on the picture's surface, while her breasts push out of the frontal plane and break the surface, causing the background to literally fall off. The picture reads in one dimension—as a visual narrative fact. But the narrative, in overwhelming the visual, subverts it. The photograph does not read as a whole picture. It is as if Arbus became so caught up in the storytelling that she forgot about her picture. The technique employed is conventional portraiture, yet the camera does not portray qualities about the subject that are in and of it, but a suspiciously prearranged storyline from outside the picture plane. Successful photographs combine plastic qualities with literary narrative. When the two break down, when the narrative is not about the picture, or when it overwhelms the picture, something goes awry, and a photograph cannot hold together as a whole.

In Arbus' photographs, narrative and visual facts splinter into a strange and twisted moral tale. The *Topless dancer in her dressing room* (1968), sequined and centered in the picture plane, is balanced by the dressing table on either side, a mirror, and the three lights behind her. The shabby background of empty glasses, scrambled clothes, and a decaying wall, documents the picture's point about a transient, plastic life. The dancer is equated to her background. The picture almost works, but the composition's well-planned artifice divides the visual and narrative facts. The eye reads the background as an indictment against the subject, while the subject's alignment makes the background hard to see, almost visually extraneous. There are countless other examples of Arbus' symmetry: a curtain, reinforcing stage center, parts to reveal a naked man being a woman; the woman with pearl earrings is further centralized and mimicked by her rounded jewelry, and the twins echo each other.

The obsessive nature of Diane Arbus' vision is revealed by the repetition of compositional technique. Both form and metaphor are familiar, the simple snapshot suggests a happy "instamatic" life. And because similar groupings fill our own picture albums, we misconstrue Arbus' evenness for fairness. By turning a known convention inside out, Arbus captured the fears, taboos, and fragmentation of 20th-century life. The brilliance of her invention explains our fascination and discomfort, for her camera exposed a despair that was not, like Dorothea Lange's, the result of an economic condition, but rather the result of an emotional famine and interior drought.

Arbus' use of the snapshot transformed the nature of photography; yet if her achievement was great in a general sense, it was also extremely problematic.

Light is crucial to the narrative of the frontal compositions Arbus favored. Where light hits sets and activates the scene, controlling the picture's story. And it was, I think, Arbus' handling of light that made her narrative so dark and overpowering. In picture after picture, light falls on the surface: the shimmer of a transvestite's pearls, the cold, outdoor light on a woman's cheek. Often when it is not light, a white object draws the eye to the frontal plane: the tangled and unmade sheets of the sexually ambiguous friends, a chair in the foreground of the man being a woman. In reinforcing the surface, Arbus' use of light stymied the narrative's movement. Her frontal compositions remain static in their symmetry and repeat the same story, forcing subject and viewer into a predetermined mental set of despair.

It is interesting to compare August Sander's photographs of another time and country, Germany before and after the two wars. Sander's subjects also posed and stared into his camera. He favored symmetrical compositions and centered subjects in his picture plane. However, the same feeling does not ooze out of them. More than 100 different faces stare out of *Deutschenspiegel Menschen* (1962). The *Sturmhauptführer* (1935) is earnest, the hunted Jew (*Verfolgter Jude*, 1938) is alert. We are not forced to conclusions about them. Sander's SS man is as human as his Jew. Although frightening, the Nazi's mien of doggish obedience is his alone. A moral judgment is not made. The subjects are left in control of their fates; history may interfere, but Sander does not.

Germany in the late 1930s and 1940s was not a better or saner world than the United States in the second half of the 20th century. Why was Sander able to document his subjects and leave them life? His peasant maidens (*Bauernmädchen*, 1927), dressed alike in Sunday best, though posing, are real. That event is still alive. The smaller of the two girls has just picked a flower, her ankles are better, her neck thinner. The two girls seem to like each other, the landscape feels green.

In comparison, Arbus' two girls in identical raincoats (1969) look desperate, bedraggled, and indistinguishable from each other.² They remind us neither of themselves nor of anyone else, nor of the kind of adolescent love which instigates dressing alike. Hard to see and hard to remember, they are without pride or communication and seem predestined to doom. As in so many of Arbus' pictures, the specific has become the general. Arbus' girls push out of the frontal plane and overwhelm the viewer in a nonspecific and ambiguous sadness, while Sander's *Bauernmädchen*, resting in the plane, hold it and allow us to see them. Perhaps Arbus could never completely focus on her subjects. Her frontal approach carried with it a compositional failing that pulled the picture apart. The inability of the subjects to hold the picture plane kept them from having lives of their own. For Arbus, the crucial balance of an aesthetic distance seems to have been off.

Arbus' pictures read as one. Their intention is never clear. That is the irony of Arbus' hunt and unquestionable talent. Masquerading as documentation, the same fantastic quality of an emotional netherland pervades each image and contradicts any reality. That is their flaw. To use Arbus' own words, that flaw is a "gap between intention and effect."

Everybody has this thing where they need to look one way but they come out looking another way and that's what people observe. You



August Sander, *Bauernmädchen, Westerwald 1927*, photograph. Sonnabend Gallery.

see someone on the street and essentially what you notice about them is the flaw. It's just extraordinary that we should have been given these peculiarities. And, not content with what we were given, we create a whole other set. Our whole guise is like giving a sign to the world to think of us in a certain way, but there's a point between what you want people to know about you and what you can't help people knowing about you. And that has to do with what I've always called the gap between intention and effect You know it really is totally fantastic that we look like this and you sometimes see that very clearly in a photograph. Something is ironic in the world and it has to do with the fact that what you intend never comes out like you intend it.³

There is every reason to think Diane Arbus liked her subjects. She followed their lives and worked hard at becoming their intimate. Her pictures seem honest and meticulous, if condescendingly sympathetic. When her friend Marvin Israel described her contact sheets, he revealed a life:

There are hundreds of sheets where the same face never appears more than once, all very close-up. It's like some strange catalogue. And then there would be a contact sheet from several years later with one of those same faces in which you can trace Diane's progress from the street to their home, to their living room, to their bedroom. These are like a narrative, a slow process leading up to some strange intimacy.⁴

But there is something dishonest about Arbus' intimacy. An air of complicity and misplaced trust escapes from the framed



Diane Arbus, *Masked Woman in a Wheelchair. Pa. 1970*, photograph.



Diane Arbus, *Untitled (4) 1970-71*, photograph.

subjects. That dishonesty was neither moral nor even intended, but a kind of compulsive cheating, made by someone who had the upper-hand. It has to do with not being completely straight, with surreptitious intentions that were very likely as hidden from herself as from her subjects. The pictures finally sell their strange intimates out. Diane Arbus once said that “a photograph is a secret about a secret.” Her secret was not the ostensible one—the intrigue of other people’s lives—but that she was a double agent, always in the act of betraying her subjects and her art. The betrayal was not intentional; it was an obsessive vision that isolated each subject in despair. The effect was an aesthetic boomerang. Arbus’ camera reflected her own desperateness in the same way that the observer looks at the picture and then back at himself. Her focus on a narrative statement instead of on a visual one too often prevented her from making a complete pictorial statement.

Diane Arbus took care to present her pictures as facts. Her head-on compositions are clinical in their directness. The accompanying captions add a further documentary quality by citing date, place, and subject. Accordingly Arbus has been classified as a “new documentarian” who changed the nature of photography by focusing on interior truths. But the similarity of despair in Arbus’ pictures cancels their credibility as objective statements. The captions further discredit the documents’ objectivity by telling us how to see the picture. The nudist of the swan-winged glasses is a *lady*, not a woman; the young man with a flag is needlessly dubbed *patriotic*. The caption for the photograph of the now famous giant reads: “A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y. 1970.” With or without the caption, the photograph is spectacular; a young man towers over two tiny people, stooping to avoid the enclosing ceiling. The curtain seems *trompe l’oeil*. The giant’s youth exaggerates the sterility of slip-covered furniture. The picture smells from stale cigars. The caption tells us to read this picture a certain way. The giant is Jewish and he lives in the Bronx with his parents. A non-Jew will see this differently than a Jew, a non-New Yorker from a New Yorker. Regardless, Arbus has made David into Goliath and brought the wrath of the Old Testament God to the

Bronx. That wrath is the artist’s wrath and fortunately this photograph is strong enough to withstand Arbus’ inability to keep herself out of the picture.

Diane Arbus took many good photographs, but a basic deceptiveness that grew out of her failure to get past a private narrative make them less good than they first appear. Her very best pictures like *Xmas tree in a living room in Levittown, L.I. 1963* are peopleless or, like the Jewish giant or the tranvestite at a birthday party, are contained by the structured space of a room. Often, her balanced view fixes excellent formal compositions like the *Identical twins* (1967) or the *Mexican dwarf* (1970) and others, too, particularly those like the *Elderly couple on a park bench* (1969) where the subjects’ eyes are not directed at the camera. Among the very best pictures are the very last taken in 1970 and 1971. Dressed in Halloween clothes, institutionalized subjects cavort and play for the camera, depicting a change of vision. Backgrounds are in evidence. With the exception of three, action no longer takes place in the center of the picture plane.⁵ The subjects’ eyes have changed as well; they are no longer frozen in futile expectation, and the masked subjects, unlike the earlier masked man and woman, do not peer out from their charade as unknowing accomplices to the event. In the end, Arbus seemed to be leaving her own psychological *mise-en-scene* to go elsewhere. ■

¹ *Nudist lady with swan sunglasses, Pa., 1965*. This is illustrated in Diane Arbus, Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1972, plate 34. The Arbus estate will not permit this picture to be reproduced.

² *Two girls in identical raincoats, Central Park, N.Y.C. 1969*. This is illustrated in *Diane Arbus*, (First Edition) Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1972, plate 63. The Arbus estate will not permit this picture to be reproduced.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴ Marvin Israel, “Diane Arbus,” *Infinity*, November 1972, p. 7.

⁵ The best examples of Arbus’ change in composition can be seen in *Untitled (2) 1970–71*, *Untitled (6) 1970–71*, and *Untitled (7)*. Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1972, plates 75, 79, and 80. The Arbus Estate will also not permit these pictures to be reproduced.

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