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The Art of Difference

Hilton Als
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Diane Arbus: In the Beginning

an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, July 12–November 27, 2016; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, January 21–April 30, 2017

Catalog of the exhibition by Jeff L. Rosenheim

Metropolitan Museum of Art, 269 pp., \$50.00 (distributed by Yale University Press)

Diane Arbus: In the Park

an exhibition at Lévy Gorvy Gallery, New York City, May 2–June 24, 2017

Diane Arbus: Portrait of a Photographer

by Arthur Lubow

Ecco, 734 pp., \$17.99 (paper)

Diane Arbus: A Chronology, 1923–1971

by Elisabeth Sussman and Doon Arbus

Aperture, 177 pp., \$29.95 (paper)

In the mid-1990s, when *The New Yorker's* offices were a stone's throw from the main branch of the New York Public Library, I worked down the hall from Joseph Mitchell. The great writer was in his eighties then. It had been decades since he'd published anything, but it was thrilling to discover his old pieces in the bound volumes that lined the magazine's library shelves: back issues made the past feel present. When Mitchell became a staff writer in 1938, he introduced *The New Yorker's* readers to a world I recognized as not too far removed from the Manhattan I knew—a universe peopled by characters in sour barrooms, a bearded lady or two, black men who wore their self-protective reserve like a second suit. Indeed, Mitchell's portraits—snapshots—of outsiders spoke to me of difference in a way that strenuously “queer” literature of the time did not.

The longest conversation I ever had with Mitchell was not about writing, though. It was about the photographer Diane Arbus, and took place around the time *The New Yorker* published my review of *Untitled*, her third posthumous book of photographs. (She died by her own hand in 1971.) Both he and Arbus used the word “freaks” to describe their subjects (a word I found disparaging and objected to, albeit silently in his presence). But Arbus's subjects were unlike Mitchell's: her photographs showed them pursuing their otherness with a fierce velocity that had little in common with his ultimately more assimilated characters, seen through the skein of his elegant and sometimes ironical prose.



The Estate of Diane Arbus

Diane Arbus: A young man and his girlfriend with hot dogs in the park, N.Y.C. 1971

Arbus's photographs were elegant, too—classically composed and cool—but they were on fire with what difference looked like and what it felt like as seen through the eyes of a straight Jewish girl whose power lay in her ability to be herself and not herself—different—all at once. The story she told with her camera was about shape-shifting: in order to understand difference one had to not only not dismiss it, but try to become it. “I don't like to arrange things,” Arbus once said. “If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself.”

When my review of *Untitled* appeared in *The New Yorker* Mitchell stopped me in “our” hall to say that Arbus had first telephoned him in 1960, after she read his work. She wanted to talk about his subjects—the “freaks” that he had described on the page and that she was attempting to describe in her photos. He told Patricia Bosworth for her *Diane Arbus: A Biography* (1984):

I urged Diane not to romanticize freaks. I told her that freaks can be as boring and ordinary as so-called “normal” people. I told her what I found interesting about Olga, the bearded lady, was that she yearned to be a stenographer and kept geraniums on her windowsill.

Mitchell said that Arbus phoned him several times after that first conversation. They would always talk for at least an hour, and he jotted down some of the topics they discussed: Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Walker Evans, Grimms' Fairy Tales.

While Arbus's genius found its fullest expression in photography, she was also an astute reader and writer whose letters, journals, and other writings deserve space on any serious reader's shelf. She began keeping extensive notebooks at the time she started taking pictures in earnest, in 1956, and much of her available writing is collected in *Diane Arbus: A Chronology* (a treasure trove of a book whose design is vexing: the type is too small). Indeed, a number of her best-known images, ranging from *Russian midget friends in a living room on 100th Street, N.Y.C. 1963* to *Hermaphrodite and a dog in a carnival trailer, Md. 1970*, feel like tales of the fantastic—stories she might have been tempted to write down if making images didn't claim her attention first, last, and always.

Still, language was important to Arbus. “Another thing I've worked from is reading,” she once said. “It happens very obliquely. I don't mean I read something and rush out and make a picture of it. And I hate that business of illustrating poems.” But it was the camera that not only gave her license to “go where I've never been before” but also, as her more recent biographer Arthur Lubow suggests in his *Diane Arbus: Portrait of a Photographer*, allowed her to be looked at in return, especially after she started using a square-format Rolleiflex, a camera that allowed her to confront more directly those she photographed, since it didn't obscure her face. She wanted her queer subjects—all those “other” self-created people whom she memorialized in Manhattan, her wrecked, magical city—to see her difference, too.

That difference was something she felt nearly from the beginning. Born in 1923, she was the second child of David and Gertrude Nemerov. (Her brother, Howard, born three years before, would go on to become a noted writer. Her sister, René, an artist, was born in 1928.) Nemerov supported his family as the merchandising director at Russeks, one of the city's leading fur emporia; the company had been founded in the late nineteenth century by Frank Russek, Gertrude's father, along with two of his brothers. Families that go into business with one another often live in a peculiar world defined by power, an uneasy closeness based on trade and profit, and the isolation that can come with wealth. Throughout her life Arbus was drawn to other closed societies.

In a slide show of her work in 1970 (a Japanese student, unsure of his English, recorded her lecture so he could play it back later), Arbus tells the audience that she grew up “kind of rich,” and when they laugh, she doesn't laugh with them. Her silence feels like a sign of an injury. But by virtue of the education that her class and money made possible, she was able to articulate in her writing what her difference felt like, while her “freaks” could only display theirs, and hope for the best. Writing to her close friend Marvin Israel in 1960, Arbus said:

I remember the special agony of walking down that center aisle, feeling like the princess of Russek's: simultaneously privileged and doomed. The main floor was always very empty like a church and along the way were poised the leeringest manikins ever whose laps and bosoms were never capacious enough for refuge and all the people bowed slightly and smiled like the obsequies were seasoned with mockeries. It seemed it all belonged to me and I was ashamed.

Another cause for shame or secrecy, perhaps, was Arbus's relationship with her brother: Lubow suggests that it was incestuous, beginning when they were children, cosseted by nannies but emotionally neglected by their beautiful, depressed mother and remote father. He goes on to say that based on material provided by Arbus's therapist, the affair lasted until shortly before her death. Whatever the circumstances, incestuous coupling can be viewed as a kind of twinning—a game you can explore with someone who is you and not you, all at once. Throughout her career Arbus returns, again and again, to that feeling of twinning and difference. It's there in her application in 1971 for an Ingram Merrill grant (she didn't get it):

The sign of a minority is The Difference. Those of birth, accident, choice, belief, predilection, inertia. (Some are irrevocable: people are fat, freckled, handicapped, ethnic, of a certain age, class, attitude, profession, enthusiasm.) Every Difference is a Likeness too.

Like Howard before her, Arbus went to Fieldston, the Riverdale campus of the Ethical Culture School. One classmate recalls that “she came full-blown with her mature privacy intact.” Direct, shy, secretive, and charming, her writing was advanced. A 1940 paper about Chaucer is detailed, questioning, and specific:

Chaucer seems to be very sure and whole and his attitude toward everything is so calm and tender because he was satisfied and glad that he was himself.... The pleasure he gets from meeting [people] is part physical, part spiritual. He seems to love physical things, even obscene ones, and from looking at them, he gets a contact with the other person. His way of looking at everything is like that of a newborn baby; he sees things and each one seems wonderful, not for its significance in relation to other things, but simply because it is unique and because it is there.

Arbus's uniqueness was heralded right away, but the praise disturbed her. During her first years at Fieldston, she met Allan Arbus, who was working in the advertising department at Russeks. (David Nemerov's partner, Max Weinstein, was Allan's uncle by marriage.) Five years Diane's senior, he had dropped out of City College. The two quickly became allies, according to Allan, and began meeting in secret on weekends, vowing to marry. Sometimes they were mistaken for siblings. That he was already a part of her family's professional life when they met, a brother who was not a brother, might have added to his appeal, too.

Still, there was high school to finish and the awful weight that came with being “gifted.” At Fieldston, Arbus's literary skills were considered equal to her gifts as a painter. The late screenwriter Stewart Stern, a fellow student, recalled:

When she picked up her brush for the first time she was simply not doing what anybody else did. We were all trying to be representational and she had no interest in that, except as a kind of satire.

For Arbus the question was: What realities does reality represent? And yet she couldn't bear making art that was “art”; like all those Russeks furs, painting belonged to a moneyed class, the world of connoisseurship. Was she talented, she wondered, or was she encouraged to make art because a girl of her background was supposed to? For her senior class assignment, Arbus produced her “Autobiography,” in which she wrote:

Everyone suddenly decided I was meant to be an artist and I was given art lessons and a big box of oils and encouragement and everything. I painted and drew every once in a while for 4 yrs. with a teacher without admitting to anyone that I didn't like to paint or draw at all and I didn't know what I was doing. I used to pray and wish often to be a “great artist” and all the while I hated it and I didn't realize that I didn't want to be an artist at all. The horrible thing was that all the encouragement I got made me think that I really wanted to be an artist and made me keep pretending that I liked it and made me like it less and less until I hated it because it wasn't me that was being an artist.

Who was that “me”? Despite her horror of painting—“I remember I hated the smell of the paint and the noise it would make when I put my brush to the paper. Sometimes I wouldn't really look but just listen to this horrible squish squish squish,” she told the journalist Studs Terkel—Arbus's teachers thought they were encouraging her true self, or a self she wanted to be. But she knew she was acting, and felt herself a fraud. Like most reasonably self-aware, polite,

socially adept young girls of the time, Arbus might have considered herself the problem when, in fact, what she was really questioning was the world's authenticity, which turns equally on the fake and the real.

This was the 1940s and she was a girl and even though power belonged to the world of men, there were questions. What if she was smarter and more talented than Howard? Than Allan? Than her father, who loved the Impressionists and became a Sunday painter because he wanted to, and could? What would that make her? Howard's son Alexander Nemerov—he never met his aunt—saw what Diane Arbus no doubt tried to hide but could not:

Arbus had the courage not only to bend photography over backward but to bend her own written eloquence backward, too.... The world for my father responded only to his intelligence.... Arbus, by contrast, could see the world as it was without her. She simply gave it the chance to be as it was. What she saw, in one sense, was the ardency and joy of a world relieved of the burden—this is how I would put it—*of having to be intelligent for her*, of having thereby to mirror her own intelligence, of being required to give that intelligence back to her in a genuine way, ever-present, all the time, that must have been exhausting to the person of such expectations, like going to the school of your own mind twenty-four hours a day.¹

Arbus's search for real feeling—she suffered from manic depression her entire life, just as her mother had before her—was not an unintelligent reaction to the closed society she had grown up in, one that placed a great deal of importance on appearances, and the silences that permeate decorum. Arbus could rail against all that fakery in photography, and in her writing, without disturbing her sitters' shell of secrecy, of being known only to themselves—and then to her. Together, they would tell the truth while sending up the “hierarchy” of art, the world her parents inhabited, and that Howard followed them into. (His 1965 book, *Journal of the Fictive Life*, is, in part, a condemnation of photography as a form of pornography. Alexander Nemerov recalls his father holding one of Arbus's most famous images, *Identical twins, Roselle, N.J. 1966*, the only one of her pictures he had, like something that stank.)

A naked man being a woman N.Y.C. 1968, for example, is a kind of joke on Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. In the picture a naked man stands center frame. His genitals are tucked between his upper thighs. His left hand rests sweetly on his left hip; his right hand on his right thigh. His right foot is arched. The manufactured pudendum, the powdered face and penciled eyebrows and rouged lips do not obscure his “real” self—his wide, shaved chest, his long male feet—but add to the reality of his dream of a self, being-as-a-wish. Arbus wanted in on that deeply private exchange with the self. “I have learned to get past the door, from the outside to the inside,” she wrote in a fellowship application in 1964. “I want to be able to follow.”

It took Arbus a long time to become Arbus. Shortly after her marriage to Allan in 1941, they began collaborating on fashion photography. (They had two children, in 1945 and 1954.) Their first client was Russeks—more family business. Arbus styled the shoots and Allan, always more technically adept, shot the photographs. By 1956 Arbus decided she had to end her collaboration with Allan or lose her mind.

She marked her transition from commercial photographer to artist when she began studying with Lisette Model. Born in Vienna in 1901, Model, like Arbus, had grown up rich—a world she rejected in her black-and-white pictures, in which one feels the spiritual fatigue or complacency behind the idle and pampered. What Arbus needed from Model was her permission to be herself, as a photographer. Model recalls:

I said, “Originality means coming from the source....” And from there on, Diane was sitting there and—I've never in my life seen anybody—not listening to me but suddenly listening to herself through what was said.

Arbus's first 35-millimeter images were, she remembered in a class she taught in 1971, “very grainy things. I'd be fascinated by what the grain did because it would make a kind of tapestry of all these little dots and everything would be translated into this medium of dots.” She did not like being a painter, but she could certainly see and speak in the language of one. The photographs in the exhibition “In the Beginning” at the Met Breuer last fall, curated by Jeff Rosenheim, began in 1956 when Arbus was making those dots more specific. These pictures are important to our understanding of her work: despite the fact that many of them might qualify as street photography, they're markedly different from those of her contemporaries—Sid Grossman, Saul Leiter. They are not about Manhattan as a clichéd

swirl of taxis and people but, instead, the city as a hitherto unseen terrain containing faces and bodies and most importantly souls that haunt it at odd angles and on empty streets.

At the same time Arbus was working those dots out. Looking at the prints at the Met Breuer (early on Arbus used the popular and lightweight Leica; Rosenheim's show ends in 1962, when she switched to the Rolleiflex) was like reading draft after draft of a first great poem as it comes into focus: you know that once the writer finishes it, that poem will be the bridge to other great poems. Arbus knew her apprentice work was pivotal to clarifying what she needed to say with the camera:

But when I'd been working for a while with these dots, I suddenly wanted terribly to get through there. I wanted to see the real differences between things. I'm not talking about textures. I really hate that, the idea that a picture can be interesting simply because it shows texture.... It really bores the hell out of me. But I wanted to see the difference between flesh and material, the densities of different kinds of things: air and water and shiny.

Whatever her tools, Arbus generally recognized what she wanted to photograph—people and relationships that were queer, or that queered our idea of the “normal.” Arbus was particularly attuned to postures that connote shame, the horror of avoidance as played out by so-called normal-looking people. In a picture like *Woman with white gloves and a pocket book, N.Y.C. 1956*, the figure looks slightly rattled, as if recoiling from the memory of an emotional pummeling that nevertheless, and miraculously, left hair and makeup in place (see illustration below). The same year, Arbus took a picture titled *Mother contemplating her toddler, N.Y.C.*, in which a hefty mother in her winter coat looks at her offspring with nothing approaching maternal concern. It's as though she can't decide if he's a bad dream, or why he isn't a dream, and Arbus captures this complication in the most primal of relationships.

Those two feel like a curtain raiser to the devastating *Woman and her son, N.Y.C. 1965*, in “Diane Arbus: In the Park” at Lévy Gorvy Gallery. In this image, the two figures are physically similar; the boy is overweight, the better to be “like” his mother—or to withstand her psychological weight, the mouth that keeps going, even during the sitting. Both mother and child pictures feature the drama of interaction no matter how distanced or cruel: the story couldn't happen without that tormented or tormenting other.

As Arbus went on, though, she became more and more interested in the drama of the self as it appeared not only to her through her lens (her magic portal) but to her subject. No visual artist of the twentieth century has described with more accuracy the enormous pride her characters, certainly in the early pictures, feel at having risked all to become themselves—selves they could not lock up, or hide, or resist being recorded despite the pain of being marginalized in their daily life.

In *A very thin man in Central Park, N.Y.C. 1961*, in the Lévy Gorvy show, the subject resembles an elongated Raymond Massey; he has a movie star's interest in his effect—his verticality of form, his costuming, the spats that emphasize the thinness of his legs, a “defect” that no doubt contributes to his unblinking pleasure in his own self-worth. And because he's proud of his look, he's interested in his effect—his power as, potentially, an erotic object. The picture is a record of a come-on—what can he give Arbus in exchange for her having been interested in him? His mouth is slightly open with the questions, with desire.

Arbus once said that when she went to photograph someone she heard herself saying, “‘How terrific,’ and there's this woman making a face.” She continued:

I really mean it's terrific. I don't mean I wish I looked like that. I don't mean I wish my children looked like that. I don't mean in my private life I want to kiss you. But I mean that's amazingly, undeniably, something. There are always two things that happen. One is recognition and the other is that it's totally peculiar. But there's some sense in which I always identify with them.



The Estate of Diane Arbus

Diane Arbus: *Woman with white gloves and a pocket book, N.Y.C. 1956*

The Lévy Gorvy show helps open up just how much the Rolleiflex expanded Arbus's view. It's like going from a 16-millimeter screen to Vistavision: the enlarged format allows her to take in her subjects' surrounding worlds. In early pictures she took with the new camera, such as *Lillian and Dorothy Gish in Central Park, N.Y.C. 1964*, the actresses are huddled against not only the cold but against the white loneliness of the surrounding landscape, a landscape redolent of the frozen wastes Lillian struggled to survive in the silent film *Way Down East* (1920), except the east now is not Maine but New York in winter.

Unlike Garry Winogrand or Robert Frank, Arbus made pictures that grew out of and described the loneliness we are all taught to be ashamed of and should try to "fix" through conventional connections—marriage, children, and so on.² Arbus's "I"—the eye behind her camera—was unabashed loneliness, looking to connect, if only because she understood what it felt like not to. She wanted to see the world whole, which meant seeing and accepting the fractures in those connections, too, along with all that could not be fixed. When she started taking pictures of drag queens and interracial couples, homosexuality was illegal, and miscegenation was still met with violence or derision.

While the figures in the Lévy Gorvy show sometimes look like creatures you'd expect to find at night, all of the photos were taken during the day when Arbus trolled for subjects in Washington Square Park and Central Park. That only adds to their boldness—and surreality. What world is this? A world we turn away from as we jog and cycle through leaf-dappled public spaces, ignoring our mortality or troubled self as it takes form in that madwoman's eyes or those depressed kids holding hot dogs. About her work in Washington Square Park, Arbus once recalled:

I could become a million things. But I could never become that, whatever all those people were. There were days I just couldn't work there, and then there were days I could.... I hung around a lot. They were a lot like sculptures in a funny way. I was very keen to get close to them, so I had to ask to photograph them. You can't get that close to somebody and not say a word, although I have done that.

The former painter was never far from the photographer.

Once, while working with Model, Arbus said she was ashamed of what she saw—that it was evil. Her elder daughter and executor, Doon, took exception to this, writing in 1972:

I think what she meant was not that it was evil, but that it was forbidden, that it had always been too dangerous, too frightening, or too ugly for anyone else to look on. She was determined to reveal what others had been taught to turn their backs on. As far as I know, it was her first description of the territories she wanted to make her own, those that would attest to her daring.

Arbus's daring separated her from Joseph Mitchell, in the end. When it was revealed after his death that he had put some if not a lot of fiction into his later journalism, my first thought was less about the nagging contemporary issue of "truthiness" than about Arbus. Some journalists make things up when they're naturally reticent, tired, and can no longer bear to do the journalist's essential work, which is to listen to one's subject. I cannot say why Mitchell relied on his imagination more and more as his career went on, but perhaps he felt he needed his imagination to help round his stories out. Maybe he got tired of listening to what other people had to say, but was too afraid to rely on his own voice to write fiction.

Arbus did not have to make her subjects up. And she never tired of listening. As Doon Arbus points out in her 1972 piece, her mother told her subjects things she never told her friends or family; a sitting was also an exchange of secrets. Just as her diary entries and letters often describe a life in flux—the girl becoming a woman, the novice becoming an artist—Arbus's photographs are about the act of transformation, too—a man becoming a woman; a pig once alive, now dead.

She and Mitchell were wrong to call their subjects freaks, a sixteenth-century word that originally meant "sudden turn of mind." Arbus's mind was deliberate, not sudden. She did not photograph freaks but characters, citizens in her Manhattan, a city that gets relatively little attention in her work, even though it is everywhere she turned, including inward. "I am not ghoulish am I?" she asked Marvin Israel in a 1960 note:

I absolutely hate to have a bad conscience, I think it is lewd... There was a lady stretched out on the ground... fallen, I think, yesterday weeping and saying to the cops please help me with one shoe off and covered with a blanket waiting for an ambulance which came, on Lexington Ave and 57th Street. Is everyone ghoulish? It wouldn't anyway have been better to turn away, would it?

1 Alexander Nemerov, *Silent Dialogues: Diane Arbus and Howard Nemerov* (Fraenkel Gallery, 2015), p. 92. ↵

2 In the wall text to "Arbus Friedlander Winograd: New Documents, 1967," the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that introduced Arbus to a larger public, John Szarkowski, then head of the museum's department of photography, wrote of the trio's pictures: "They are anti-news—or at least, non-news—things as they are rather than things as they should be, could be, or thought to be. Their photographs are not visual 'no comment' but rather records of real events offered to an audience who may not always believe the events are that way." *Arbus Friedlander Winograd: New Documents, 1967*, edited by Sarah Hermanson Meister, with an essay by Max Kozloff (Museum of Modern Art, 2017). ↵