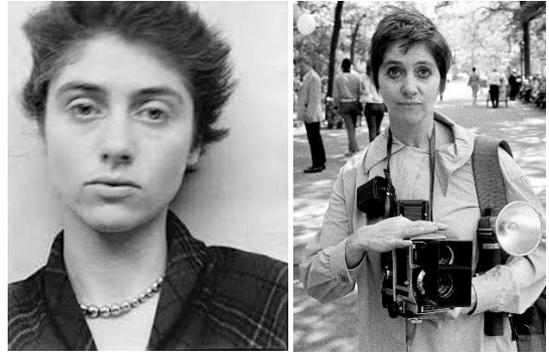


#39 April 2018 Cameraderie
Diane Arbus (1923-1971)



Diane Arbus, often called “the photographer of freaks,” is a good follow-up to last month’s piece on Weegee, as she greatly admired his work. But she left a substantial legacy as a significant artist in a deeper sense than Weegee ever penetrated to. She was also a very complicated person, both in her art, and underlying that, in her personality—she was subject to depression, serious illness, and ended her life in suicide. In these brief articles, I don’t generally look deeply at how the photographers’ lives and personalities affected their art, but in this case, the interweaving is, I think, intense and essential. We have to settle why this photographer was so interested in capturing images of “freaks” and what that expressed about her subjects, herself, and the rest of us.

Here is the Wikipedia website on Arbus: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diane_Arbus, and some quotes from that website. There is quite a story to tell, as evidenced by the length of the Wikipedia article, and its poignant content. Therefore, I am going to tell that story through the extensive use of quotes from the Wikipedia article:

Arthur Lubow states, "She was fascinated by people who were visibly creating their own identities—cross-dressers, nudists, sideshow performers, tattooed men, the nouveau riche, the movie-star fans..." Michael Kimmelman writes ... "Her memorable work, which she did, on the whole, not for hire but for herself, was all about heart—a ferocious, audacious heart. It transformed the art of photography (Arbus is everywhere, for better and worse, in the work of artists today who make photographs), and it lent a fresh dignity to the forgotten and neglected people in whom she invested so much of herself."

Arbus's style is said to be "direct and unadorned, a frontal portrait centered in a square format. Her pioneering use of flash in daylight isolated the subjects from the background, which contributed to the photos' surreal quality." Her methods included establishing a strong personal relationship with her subjects and re-photographing some of them over many years.

Philip Leider, then editor in chief of Artforum and a photography skeptic, admitted, “With Diane Arbus, one could find oneself interested in photography or not, but one could no longer . . . deny its status as art.”

[She was part of]"a new generation of documentary photographers...whose aim has been not to reform life but to know it."

Arbus experienced "depressive episodes" during her life similar to those experienced by her mother, and the episodes may have been made worse by symptoms of hepatitis. Arbus wrote in 1968, "I go up and down a lot," and her ex-husband noted that she had "violent changes of mood." On July 26, 1971, while living at Westbeth Artists Community in New York City, Arbus took her own life by ingesting barbiturates and slashing her wrists with a razor. She wrote the words "Last Supper" in her diary and placed her appointment book on the stairs leading up to the bathroom. Marvin Israel found her body in the bathtub two days later; she was 48 years old. Photographer Joel Meyerowitz told the journalist, Arthur Lubow, "If she was doing the kind of work she was doing and photography wasn't enough to keep her alive, what hope did we have?"

Here are Arbus's own words, from the Wikipedia article:

"Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot.... Freaks were born with their trauma." [I think this is a statement of envy; that is, Arbus's trauma, whatever it was, was unnatural to her, having come to her awkwardly during her lifetime. But freaks were somewhat better adjusted to their lifelong trauma, and she envied their adjustment.]

"You see someone on the street and essentially what you notice about them is the flaw."

"I really think there are things nobody would see unless I photographed them."

"I work from awkwardness. By that I mean I don't like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself."

There is also a considerable body of review commentary on Arbus that explains why Arbus is a landmark photographer, still from the Wikipedia article:

In a 1967 review of MoMA's New Documents exhibition, Max Kozloff wrote, "...Arbus' refusal to be compassionate, her revulsion against moral judgment, lends her work an extraordinary ethical conviction.

Judith Goldman in 1974 posited that, "Arbus' camera reflected her own desperateness in the same way that the observer looks at the picture and then back at himself."

Susan Sontag wrote an essay in 1973 entitled "Freak Show" that was critical of Arbus' work; it was reprinted in her 1977 book *On Photography* as "America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly." Among other criticisms, Sontag opposed the lack of beauty in Arbus' work and its failure to make the viewer feel compassionate about Arbus's subjects. Sontag's essay itself has been criticized as "an exercise in aesthetic insensibility" and "exemplary for its shallowness." Sontag has also stated that "the subjects of Arbus's photographs are all members of the same family, inhabitants of a single village. Only, as it happens, the idiot village is America. Instead of showing identity between things which are different (Whitman's democratic vista), everybody is the same." A 2009 article noted that Arbus had photographed Sontag and her son in 1965, causing one to "wonder if Sontag felt this was an unfair portrait." Philip Charrier argues in a 2012 article that despite its narrowness and widely discussed faults, Sontag's critique continues to inform much of the scholarship and criticism of Arbus's oeuvre. The article proposes overcoming this tradition by asking new questions, and by shifting the focus away from matters of biography, ethics, and Arbus's suicide.

In Susan Sontag's "Freak Show," she writes, "The authority of Arbus's photographs comes from the contrast between their lacerating subject matter and their calm, matteroffact attentiveness. This quality of attention—the attention paid by the photographer, the attention paid by the subject to the act of being photographed—creates the moral theater of Arbus's straight on,

contemplative portraits. Far from spying on freaks and pariahs, catching them unawares, the photographer has gotten to know them, reassured them—so that they pose for her as calmly and stiffly as any Victorian notable sat for a studio portrait by Nadar or Julia Margaret Cameron. A large part of the mystery of Arbus's photographs lies in what they suggest about how her subjects felt after consenting to be photographed. Do they see themselves, the viewer wonders, like that? Do they know how grotesque they are? It seems as if they don't."

In reviewing *Diane Arbus: Untitled* for Artforum, Nan Goldin said, "She was able to let things be, as they are, rather than seeking to transform them. The quality that defines her work, and separates it from almost all other photography, is her ability to empathize, on a level far beyond language. Arbus could travel, in the mythic sense. Perhaps out of the desire not to be herself, she tried on the skins of others and took us along for the trip. Arbus was obsessed with people who manifested trauma, maybe because her own crisis was so internalized. She was able to look full in the faces we normally avert our eyes from, and to show beauty there as well as pain. Her work is often difficult but it isn't cruel. She undertook that greatest act of courage—to face the terror of darkness and remain articulate."

Leo Rubinfien wrote in 2005, "No photographer makes viewers feel more strongly that they are being directly addressed....When her work is at its most august, Arbus sees through her subject's pretensions, her subject sees that she sees, and an intricate parley occurs around what the subject wants to show and wants to conceal....She loved conundrum, contradiction, riddle, and this, as much as the pain in her work, puts it near Kafka's and Beckett's....I doubt anyone in the modern arts, not Kafka, not Beckett, has strung such a long, delicate thread between laughter and tears."

In a 2018 review for The New York Times on Diane Arbus's *Untitled* series, Arthur Lubow writes, "The 'Untitled' photographs evoke paintings by Ensor, Bruegel and especially the covens and rituals conjured up by Goya....In the almost half century that has elapsed since Arbus made the 'Untitled' pictures, photographers have increasingly adopted a practice of constructing the scenes they shoot and altering the pictures with digital technology in an effort to bring to light the visions in their heads. The 'Untitled' series, one of the towering achievements of American art, reminds us that nothing can surpass the strange beauty of reality if a photographer knows where to look. And how to look."

Now here are some of those images that made Arbus so significant a contributor to the ever-evolving story of photographic art.

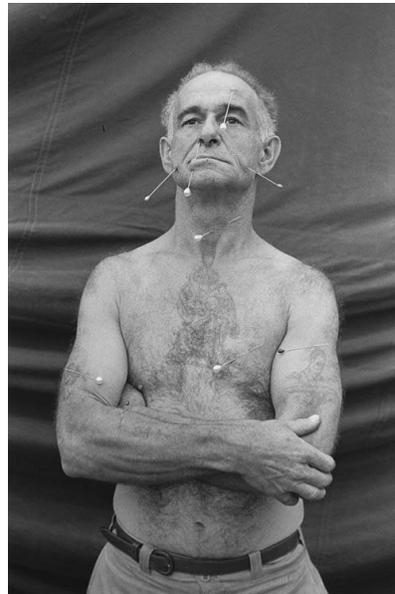
Identical Twins, Roselle, N.Y., 1967



This image was criticized by the parents of the twins as being not particularly good. In it, I see represented a clever externalization of the internal dualities besetting the personality of a single person—hence its staying power and its fame.

Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, NYC, 1970

The human pincushion (1), Ronald C. Harrison, 1962



[Paraphrased from a website:] Popularly known as “The Jewish Giant”, Eddie Carmel [stage name] was developing as any other child was until his teenage years, when a tumor on his pituitary gland caused him to grow to a staggering 8’9”. Speaking of the image, the photographer reportedly stated: "You know how every mother has nightmares when she's pregnant that her baby will be born a monster? I think I got that in the mother's face....".

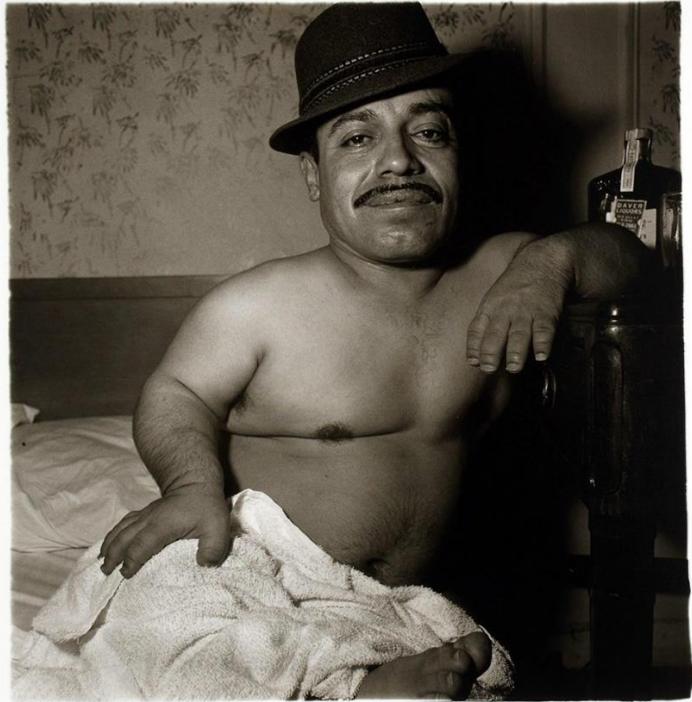
Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, NYC, 1962



[Quoted from a website:] The boy in this photograph, Colin Wood, claims that Arbus caught him at a moment of exasperation in this iconic shot. At the time that this photograph was taken, the subject's famous tennis playing father, Sidney Wood, and his mother were going through a divorce – so their son felt lonely and was experiencing “a sense of being abandoned”. The scrawny child holds himself in a tense manner; his right hand clutching a toy hand grenade and his left clenched into a claw like position. This, combined with the disheveled clothes and manic expression on his young face communicates the frustration the boy held and, in his own words, the “want to connect” without knowing how.

Jack Dracula at a bar, New London, Connecticut, 1961

Mexican Dwarf in his Hotel Room, NYC, 1970



[Quoted from a website:] In Susan Sontag's "On Photography", the author accuses Diane Arbus of cruelly exploiting her subjects, stating, "In photographing dwarfs, you don't get majesty and beauty...you get dwarfs". This image of a "Mexican dwarf" leaning against a bedside table with a smile on his face, however, does not appear to have been taken with any malignity. The subject appears relaxed – comfortable in knowing that Arbus is interested in who he is, and well aware of her interest in photographing "outsiders". Sitting as any other man would, the humour in the image comes from the seediness of the subject's nakedness, his dirty towel and visible liquor bottle. The man's dwarfism has nothing to do with the titillating aspect of the image, eradicating prejudice amongst the audience and also Susan Sontag's point.

Two images from Arbus's famous *Untitled* book:

Untitled (6), probably 1970

Untitled, probably 1970



The *Untitled* images were shot at residences for the mentally retarded. In the left image, we see three women simply clowning around on a lawn. In the right, others are evidently dressed up for a party or festival. We see here the normalcy of non-normalcy. In my view, we are drawn in to realizing that all people are just people.

Back in 2008, I viewed the “Georgia O’Keeffe and Ansel Adams: Natural Affinities” exhibit at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. When there, I happened across the photographic curator of the exhibit and got to ask them about the development of photography in the 20th century. Their remark that stuck with me was “A lot has happened in photography since Adams.” Quite a number of the photographers I have been discussing in this series certainly fulfill that statement, and clearly Arbus is one of them.