

Hope Jennings

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The Subject is Not Her/Self: Diane Arbus and the art of evasion

“...a thing is not seen because it is visible, but conversely, visible because it is seen...”

~ Passage underlined by Diane Arbus in her copy of
The Works of Plato, Modern Library Edition, 1928, p. 46.

“I really believe there are things nobody would see unless I photographed them.”

~ Diane Arbus

“...what is hidden is for us...more ‘true’ than what is visible.”

~ Roland Barthes



Image 1:

*Inadvertent double exposure of a self-portrait
and images from Times Square, N.Y.C. 1957*

As is usually the case when devising a title for a paper not yet written, I don't think I had any definitive idea what I intended by *this* particular title. I knew I wanted to explore what Susan Sontag calls “the subjectivity of seeing” (136), a concept inherently located in the photographic gaze or event. I was aware this would require an examination of the relationship photography constructs between desire and knowledge, self and other, absence and presence. I wanted to focus that exploration on a series of female portraits by Diane Arbus, and for a number of reasons that were not at first entirely clear to me but became so through my consideration of her work and formulating critical questions around not only the images themselves but also the personal relationship or interest I had invested in them. In my presentation here of the Arbus images I've selected, I will be questioning what, if anything is revealed about their subjects, the photographer, and more importantly, the viewer. Whose gaze imposes meaning and intention on the photograph? What identifications are we asked to make; what is withheld from us? Where do we locate Arbus in relation to her own work?

In her typically evasive manner, Arbus once claimed: “A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know” (*Diane Arbus: Revelations* 278; hereafter cited as *Revelations*). This statement indicates precisely the problem that photography poses for us as viewers. When looking at a photographic image, as Arbus’ photography often demonstrates, we are forced to confront our need for disclosure and knowledge projected onto the image; or, as Peter Bunnell, the former curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art observes, her photographs “demand we ask ourselves who we are” (*Revelations* 50). Before I embark on a closer examination of Arbus’ images, I would like to preface that I am not speaking from a stance that holds any specialised knowledge of photography. This is not a defensive tactic (in case any one wishes to poke holes in my argument later on), but is an admission directly related to the immediate concerns of my paper, which is an attempt not so much at resolving but at least addressing both the personal and theoretical tensions that arise between desire and knowledge when confronted by a photographic image.

This tension is perhaps located in the image’s impenetrability, its resistance to language; in our attempts to know or understand what a photograph means we come up against a barrier that refuses access to words, since, as Roland Barthes points out, because a photograph is “never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents)” (5), it cannot be “spoken”; the photograph itself “cannot *say* what it lets us see” (Barthes 100). As a highly ambiguous form of representation, which fails to carry its own chain of signification that might allow us to fix its meaning in language, Susan Sontag argues photographs thus “suggest a very tenuous relation to knowing” (115). Through the multiplicity of meanings imposed on photographs, we “encounter a potential object of fascination” and spectacle; in other words, “photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy” (Sontag 23). Ultimately, then, the photograph justifies our desire for knowledge, while failing to satisfy that desire through an endless deferral of absolute meaning located in the image (Barthes 99). To contextualise some of this dense theorizing around the nature of photography, and the implications Barthes and Sontag suggest it has in relation to either the absence or presence of language, I would like to begin by attempting to articulate my own speculations and fantasies surrounding one particular photograph by Arbus (see Image 2 below). Although this part of my discussion will in itself be quite subjective, I hope it will lead us into a more critical examination of several successive images that allow for a more critical exploration of the relationships that exist between self and other, subject and author, which Arbus’ work deliberately cultivates and constructs.



Image 2:

Child in a nightgown, Wellfleet, Mass. 1957

I first saw this photograph at the international retrospective on Arbus, which had arrived in London a couple years ago, and it was, I believe, one of the first images I encountered in the exhibition; it shocked me, rendering me literally and somewhat prosaically, speechless. I didn't have the words to describe the impact the image had on me, to define why I was drawn to it, why it "spoke" to me through its photographic medium that paradoxically resists language and interpretation. I formed an immediate relationship with the image; it disturbed me and I could not understand why, and probably still don't even today. It inflicted upon me a "wound," a "bruising" of my unconscious, essentially the effect of the *punctum*, which Barthes claims accompanies the subjective relation we individually hold with a certain image, and for private reasons that often remain incomprehensible (26-7). The first sign of this wound, as Barthes indicates, is the absence of language: "What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance" (51).

Thus, I can only try to re-articulate what I initially saw in this image as an approximation of the meaning it held for me: a fragile figure set in the foreground against a blurred, grainy landscape, the detail of the child's wispy hair blown by the wind, her pensive expression yet almost defiant upward tilt of the head, her gaze staring off at something or someone unknown, at least unknown to me – it was a frozen moment in time that nevertheless captured a sense of movement into the strange interior landscape of childhood desires – those desires as mysterious to us now as when we ourselves were children. I could almost see, or at least sense, some perverse future ghost of the woman this child would become. I didn't know the subject of this photograph, the "child in a nightgown," but I identified with her; or rather, to be more accurate, I projected myself onto her, believing I'd discovered my own spectral self present there. From a more distanced perspective, I might say that my relationship to this image, to its subject, was an appropriative one. I could only relate to it by imposing myself, my own desires, onto what still remains, for me, an evocation of absolute otherness. Arbus in fact captures here what is so provocative in the majority of her work. She exposes an interiority that nevertheless remains private, mysterious, secret, remaining in possession of the subject while exposing in us not only our desire to grasp the meaning of that secret, but also our own alienated interiority.

The personal relationship that I have with the image is one that I continue to struggle with in terms of language and interpretation. The most I can coherently say is that in my first encounter with this photograph it was not at all what I'd been expecting of Arbus. As someone with an interest in documentary portrait photography, and having several close friends who are photographers, I'd already been introduced to some of Arbus' work. My knowledge however derived mostly from a vague familiarity with her images of "freaks" and social misfits, as well as the constructed mythology of Arbus as a "tortured genius" following her suicide in 1971. That mythology, as well as some of her most iconic images, have often led to a misperception, or mis-recognition, of what Arbus was attempting to explore throughout her career, which primarily developed during the 1960s when she was producing some of her best, if not her most intensely focussed, work. At that time, Arbus was part of a new engagement with documentary photography, questioning "how it worked and where meaning might reside" (*Revelations* 61).

For Arbus, the most important aspect of her work was the relationship that was formed between the subject and photographer (*Revelations* 50); her difference from most of her contemporaries is located in her intense interest in how subjects saw themselves and their own mutability – by focusing on subjects' visions of themselves she refused to romanticize but rather acknowledged their complexities (*Revelations* 57). She felt that "the objective documentary nature of the photograph could not be disentangled from the experience of the personal encounter" that took place between subject and photographer; thus, she rejected the illusions of distance and aloofness promoted by her forerunners, Steiglitz and Evans, who, albeit in different ways, insisted that the subject exists in the image as separate from the photographer (*Revelations* 62). Arbus held a deep admiration for and shared many similarities with Weegee, as they both accepted and emphasized through their images that the "relation between subject and author must be at once intimate and detached"; that photography does not so much reveal what is "factual" or "objective" but what is paradoxically invisible – the mythic, or ritualistic – challenging our presumptions of detachment and objectivity (*Revelations* 63). Arbus' interest in anonymity seems to have been shaped by the influence of Brassai, whose work taught her "that obscurity could be as thrilling as clarity" (*Revelations* 62). In other words, Arbus wanted to highlight what we in fact don't see or understand in a picture; what is absent, not known, but conversely, present, there before us if only we had some key that allowed us to unlock our desire for disclosure. As Patricia Bosworth observes, Arbus was primarily "interested in suggesting the mystery of existence, however unbearable, and in the deep, secret, interior lives of people" (123).

Moreover, Arbus' concern with how fact and illusion work together as co-presences in the photographic image translated itself through her technical choices. Her use of the 2¼ camera, held at the waist with the photographer looking down through the lens, required the subject's mutual cooperation in holding the pose. She began attaching a portable strobe flash, since "the illumination of the flash ... stripped away artifice and pretense" in her subjects while also revealing a deeper level or "sense of psychological malaise" (Bosworth 223). Lastly, by choosing to retain the irregular, un-cropped black borders in her prints, this called attention not only to the fact that it was an image on a two-dimensional sheet of paper, but also the photographer's presence: that the photograph is not an objective, unmediated vision of "truth," but "a real, tactile object made by someone, an expression of someone's point of view"; and so the "presence of the borders underscores the complexity of the transaction between subject, photographer, and viewer" (*Revelations* 60).



Image 3:
*Stripper with bare breasts
sitting in her dressing room,
Atlantic City, N.J. 1962*



Image 4:
A widow in her bedroom, N.Y.C. 1963

In capturing a “vision of terrifying isolation and aloneness” this paradoxically required Arbus to develop a deliberate collaboration with her subjects. She at first began by photographing at a distance, studying the subject in the context of his or her environment (see above, Images 3 & 4); and then shifted to the close-up, recognizing how in isolation the human figure is capable of representing essential aspects of his or her society (Bosworth 132). She attempted to balance an “emotional investment in the subject with a documentary photographer’s interest in recording the apparently incidental yet telling detail” (*Revelations* 50) (see below, Images 5 & 6). Arbus had an uncanny ability to get people to reveal themselves: “the way they were and the way they presented themselves to the world” (Bosworth 166); her portraiture, which was both collaborative and confrontational, became organized around a single focus: the face (Bosworth 191).



Image 5:
*Blonde girl with shiny lipstick,
N.Y.C. 1967*



Image 6:
*Woman with a veil on Fifth Avenue,
N.Y.C. 1968*

Arbus’ self-awareness of the photographer’s ambiguous relationship with the subject located itself in the sense of responsibility she personally felt towards her subjects. Her emotional investment was often in conflict with the need for deliberation and dispassion. As we see in these portraits, she conveys a sense of the heroic, or hyperbolic, the larger-than-life, while also attempting to reveal the specific idiosyncrasies of each women’s personality, or mood. The composition of each image is repetitively uniform, yet Arbus captures vast differences between them. Images 7 & 8 (see below) are especially unsettling, as we are directly

confronted by a gaze that seems to judge us, the viewer, and by extension the photographer, for intruding on their privacy. As Arbus acknowledged, the camera subjects each of us to a certain cruelty: “We’re nicer to each other than the intervention of the camera is going to make us...I think it does, a little, hurt to be photographed” (*Revelations* 59).



Image 7:
Woman in a rose hat,
N.Y.C. 1966



Image 8:
Woman with pearl necklace and earrings,
N.Y.C. 1967

According to Sontag: “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed” (14). Sontag goes on to state in her appraisal of Arbus’ work that she relinquished any sense of moral responsibility toward her subjects: “Photographing an appalling underworld (and a desolate, plastic overworld), she had no intention of entering into the horror experienced by the denizens of those worlds. They are to remain exotic, hence ‘terrific’. Her view is always from the outside” (42). For Sontag, Arbus’ subjects are ultimately “unknown” – and more precisely, they are unknown to Arbus herself, who, operating from a middle-class privileged background, remained removed from the experiences of her subjects (42-3). Although Sontag is writing in the 1970s, when access to the majority of Arbus’ work was limited to and dominated by the images of carnival freaks, and before any extensive biographies had been written about her, I would argue Sontag herself is operating from her own presumptions concerning not only class but also notions of how we define what is “freak” and “norm.”

Sontag chooses to focus on the hideous and deformed aspects of Arbus’ subjects, arguing that she merely contributed to the phenomenon of photography’s ability to aestheticize what is ugly or horrific, concluding: “Instead of showing identity between things which are different...everybody is shown to look the same” (47). This not only contradicts Sontag’s previous statement that the inherent aggression of Arbus’ work forces the viewer to acknowledge how there are differences between individuals and cultural groups, forcing us to look at what “is really *other*” (34), but also refuses to consider how for the viewer of an Arbus image, it becomes a disturbing if not violent experience precisely because we are made to realize how “we” look no different from “them.” If anything (as Image 9 demonstrates below), Arbus seemed intent on leveling the distinctions we make between what is freak and norm by attempting to change our contexts of definition for these categories (Bosworth 199).



Image 9:

Puerto Rican woman with a beauty mark, N.Y.C. 1965

Moreover, Arbus did involve herself with her subjects to the extent that Sontag's claim that her view was always from the outside seems almost negligent. This was a photographer who agreed to engage in sexual orgies before photographing their participants; or, before photographing her series of nudists, also disrobed in order to gain the confidence and trust of her subjects. As her close friend and mentor, Marvin Israel, tells us: "A photograph for Diane was an event"; it was about the experience rather than the result, a personal adventure; Arbus herself observed: "Taking a portrait is like seducing someone" (Bosworth 193). Arbus' tactics of seduction when attempting to get closer to a subject indicates however the problematic gendered positioning that she worked from; she refused to categorize herself as a woman photographer; yet she remained ambivalent toward her identity as a woman in a predominantly male profession. She confessed to manipulating her positioning as a female photographer in relation to her subjects, that they trusted her more because she was a woman, or felt less threatened by her. As the journalist Christiane Amanpour once observed, "...subjects simply react to women differently," and Arbus would often play on a perception of herself as helplessly amateurish, as if she didn't know what she was doing, claiming somewhat disingenuously she was never certain or confident in her ability to load a roll of film. On the other hand, she seemed to take some pleasure in the "voyeuristic masculine role" that the camera allowed her, using it as a defense and hiding behind her equipment as if it granted her a kind of power or invulnerability. She felt the camera allowed her to cross boundaries and enter forbidden territories with a greater mobility and/or access to a variety of relationships and experiences (Bosworth 208, 212, 215).

On the other hand, perhaps Arbus' approach toward her work had nothing to do with any inherent gendered difference but was solely a product of her idiosyncratic vision; her personal approach toward photography. This is demonstrated in her opinion of the contrasting approaches that she observed between herself and Avedon. She believed there was something "unfair" in Avedon's retouching of his images, which produced the effect of distortion; she could not understand the superficial relationship he had with his subjects, its sense of rushed intimacy, as Avedon claimed he often forgot the experience of photographing his subjects, all of them becoming for him a kind of blur. For Arbus, everyone was different, and she believed the image should be both literal and transcendent. She didn't want sentimentalized, manipulated representations of people but dramatizations of a specific, particular life or interiority. To achieve this it was thus necessary to take her time in knowing her subjects, often working with them over the course of several years, returning to them repeatedly until

she managed to achieve the one “perfect” shot, as she did with one of her most famous subjects, the Jewish Giant (see Image 10 below), which took nearly a decade for her to capture (Bosworth 189).



Image 11:

Jewish Giant, taken at Home with His Parents in the Bronx, NY, 1970

Above all, Arbus was concerned with “the endlessly seductive puzzle of sight” (Bosworth 228). She understood how every photographer sees differently, and that photography itself is primarily a process of learning how to see and how to care passionately about one’s subject matter – it is an intensely personal investment of the self in the image and in relation to the subject (Bosworth 231). If a subject obsessed her enough, Arbus would slowly gain his or her confidence and cooperation through her own un-judgmental attitude and lack of pretensions, “demanding self-revelation of herself as the price of the self-revelation of her subjects,” which was an exhausting process for Arbus (Bosworth: 232). She once noted: “photography is not about being comfortable, either for the photographer or the subject” (qtd. in Bosworth 249); and in much of Arbus’ work, this discomfort is extended toward the viewer.

Regardless, Arbus feared that in any exhibition of her work, the public would misinterpret what she was attempting to reveal in both her subjects and the viewers; that most people would only find a lurid fascination with her misfits and freaks, choosing only to see the “surface distortions” (Bosworth 241). This, actually, was the point that she was attempting to make, forcing us to confront our own voyeuristic desires – her subjects gaze back at us unflinchingly, causing in us the desire to look away even while we remain obsessed with looking (Bosworth 247). According to Marion Magid, the effect of Arbus’ work on the viewer is to remind each of us that it is impossible “to look with impunity...Once having looked and not looked away we are implicated. When we have met the gaze [of the subject] a transaction takes place between the photograph and the viewer. In a kind of healing process we are cured of our criminal urgency by having dared to look. The picture forgives us, as it were, for looking. In the end the great humanity of Diane Arbus’s art is to sanctify that privacy which she seemed at first to have violated” (qtd. in Bosworth 248). The respect Arbus had for her subjects, as John Putnam observes of her work, is ultimately located in the fact that she realized: “It’s impossible to get out of your skin and into somebody else’s...somebody else’s tragedy is not the same as your own” (qtd. in Bosworth 236).

I would argue, then, that Arbus consciously attempted to refuse any appropriative act in “taking” a picture; in seducing people to reveal themselves, their secrets, she claimed: “if I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself” (qtd. in Bosworth 248). In other words, the “event” of an Arbus photograph becomes an act of exchange between self and other, a reciprocal exchanging of secrets, which allows her subjects to retain their

mystery even while exposing themselves (Bosworth 253). Arbus' intimacy with her subjects was made possible by her ability to relate to them individually; her genuine interest in their specificity; as well as her openness toward asking questions and listening (Bosworth 274). Mostly likely influenced by her extensive reading of Freud, she believed that everyone possessed some hidden trauma, and she wanted to capture this, to expose it with the camera (perhaps even to make the unconscious visible) (Bosworth 271). As Sontag observes: "Arbus photographs people in various degrees of unconscious or unaware relation to their pain...she specialized in slow-motion private smash-ups, most of which had been going on since the subject's birth" (36). Nowhere is this more evident than in "her ghostly, voluptuously daydreaming portrait of the ravaged former debutante Brenda Frazier" (see Image 11), which provides an example of how Arbus simultaneously questions "identity versus illusion" while "scrutinizing the stoic self-sufficiency inherent in her subjects" (Bosworth 225).



Image 11:
Debutante at Home, 1966

Arbus "believed that picture-taking is a profound experience because it involves the risk of seeing ourselves as others see us"; in posing, the subject becomes an object, forced to step outside the self (Bosworth 131). In spite of acknowledging this, Arbus was surprised, even baffled, when her subjects disliked her portraits of them, and more specifically, when they resented what she had discovered and revealed in them (Bosworth 197), as seen in Images 12 & 13 below.



Image 12:
Superstar at Home, N.Y.C 1968



Image 13:
Feminist in Her Hotel Room, N.Y.C. 1971

We're confronted here by instances when Arbus perhaps failed to act in a spirit of generosity and respect toward the subject, as she "could not and did not accept all of her subjects with grace. If she couldn't [personally] respond [to them], her reaction was often severe" (Bosworth 282), resulting in images that were indeed cruel and without regard for the subject's "truth" or privacy (Bosworth 263). The first image (12) is of Viva, a model and one of Andy Warhol's entourage at the Factory, who claimed there was nothing spontaneous in this photograph and that it had been intentionally manipulated by Arbus, who'd directed her to roll back her eyes while assuring her she was merely taking headshots (Bosworth 263). Whether this is true or not, Arbus' combination of text and image certainly distorts our reading of the photograph, as also seen in the almost unrecognizable image of Germain Greer (13), for whom the experience of being photographed by Arbus was purely confrontational. According to Greer, Arbus was intent on forcing her to open up, choosing to shoot her face only in those moments when she expressed tension, boredom, or annoyance. Greer insists Arbus deliberately provoked her into the expression we see here, physically straddling Greer after asking her to lie down in order to get the shot she wanted – which, along with the attached title, offers us a kind of stereotypical photograph of the angry feminist, allowing for no other context, as the image is a painfully close-up shot of the face frozen in an expression of almost blank hostility. Greer sums up Arbus' approach as one of "tyranny" – "I felt completely terrorized by the blasted lens" (qtd. in Bosworth 314-15). Years later when she eventually saw the image at the recent London retrospective, she detested its dishonest and unflattering representation of herself.

In general, Arbus was not concerned with flattering her subjects but exposing what lies beneath the surface image or artifice of the persona each of us believes we project onto the world, something that is indeed alienating (Bosworth 197). Arbus herself, though, was often incapable of confronting her own alienation in relation to those subjects who attracted and repelled her. For example, in her last extensive series of images which focused on "mental retardates," in spite of her fascination with their absolute difference, locked as they were in a world beyond most people's reach, she found that because she was incapable of forming any kind of intimate relationship with them, as she'd been able to do with past subjects, she eventually dismissed these photographs as unworthy of any serious consideration (though ironically they're now viewed as some of her best work) (Bosworth 319).

For me, at least from a critical stance, Images 14 & 15 (see below) define what is best in Arbus' work, encapsulating the many complex ambiguities her images reveal concerning the nature of identity and how we choose to see the subject. The iconic haunting image of the identical twins (14), who upon closer examination are not so alike, and the gentle humor of the two ladies in their nearly identical pillbox hats and mirrored poses (15), inevitably reminding me of the elderly twin sisters Nora and Dora Chance (from Angela Carter's *Wise Children*), demonstrate Arbus' sensitivity toward her subjects; the subtlety of her skill in "finding and revealing [their] defining characteristics" in order to "explore each person's singularity" (Bosworth 56). Arbus was "looking not for a typology, but for varieties of experience," as she once claimed: "nothing is ever alike. The best thing is the difference" (Bosworth 57). We can see here Arbus' genuine concern with seeking out the differences that construct each of our subjective identities and experiences.



Image 14:
Identical twins, Roselle, N.J. 1967



Image 15:
Two ladies at the automat, N.Y.C. 1966

Perhaps the most valuable lesson Arbus gained from her teacher, Lisette Model, was that those photographs that demand our attention and admiration are the ones that are most profoundly disturbing, capturing the “subversive, unreasonable, delirious” (Bosworth 134), which, if anything, this last selected image (16) exemplifies.



Image 16:
Bishop by the sea, Santa Barbara, Cal. 1964

In her Afterword to the book that accompanied the Diane Arbus retrospective, Doon Arbus included a defense of her mother’s work and the subjects involved in them, claiming, as the inheritor of her mother’s estate, she personally felt the need to protect the images “from an onslaught of theory and interpretation, as if translating images into words were the only way to make them visible.” This included a continuing sense of responsibility toward the images’ subjects, who never conceded to being “diagnosed by strangers as mere symptoms of someone else’s hypothetical state of mind.” She also feared that her mother’s own absence had often led in the past to the dangerous urge to mythologize her, to mis-recognize her intentions. Thus, the retrospective, which was structured around many images not seen before, was intended to allow the viewer to make independent discoveries based purely on the images themselves and with only Arbus’ words as a guide; a somewhat paradoxical strategy, as Doon admits in her hope “that this surfeit of information and opinion would finally render the scrim of words invisible so that anyone encountering the photographs could

meet them in the eloquence of their silence.” (*Revelations* 299) This is a provocative and somewhat contentious statement. When encountering a photograph – and in our attempt to interpret its meaning – language, words, are all that are available to us. As Arbus acknowledged, reconciling the often conflicting relation between image and text: “I can tell you a picture. We’re all verbal and visual; it’s all open to us” (qtd. in Bosworth 305).

Thus, in closing, I would like to return to the image that served as a point of departure for my discussion. Although I now know who the subject of this photograph was, the image still baffles me. I cannot quite comprehend how Arbus was able to transform the event of photographing her younger daughter, Amy Arbus, from a simple family snapshot into an image that demonstrates her “consummate awareness” (Bosworth 327) of the subject’s private existence. If, as Sontag claims: “A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” (16), then I’m not at all certain in my relationship to this photograph about who is present or absent in the meaning that I impose upon it: the subject, the photographer, or myself, the viewer. I want to resist my impulse to theorize and instead accept its mystery without attempting to resolve that desire for knowledge or comprehension because ironically, at their best, Arbus’ images are capable of articulating, yet without explicitly disclosing, “the secret experiences that are within all of us” (Bosworth 311).

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