Camera & Confusion
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Camera & Confusion:

the dynamics of photography, Diane Arbus & society

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Introduction

Diane Arbus will forever be known as a tragic figure in art. She was an explorer of her time. Arbus was famous for venturing into subcultures that others feared and bring back photographs of her observations. She grew up in an upper-middle class family, who's wealth derived from the fur industry. As she started her career in photography she and her husband, Allan Arbus, became well known fashion photographers. Arbus moved into the genre of fine art photography when she began to take pictures of people on the fringes of society. The results of these explorations beyond the suburbs of middle America are photographs that are relevant to the structure of our society. These photographs are more than just prints on the wall, they are a mirror to be held up to that middle America. The most socially relevant of her work is the *Untitled* series. With her suicide in 1971, she left this group of unnamed, and virtually unexplained photographs. This series was taken over a period of two years (1969-1971) inside the walls of the residence for the mentally retarded in New York state. In these photographs Arbus, although she is never seen, seems to be having a good time with several Downs Syndrome affected children and adults. These smiling people have been warehoused at the convenience of society. Because she died before the series was named,

or explained, these faces are left for us to ponder. Some people find this work her strongest, others her weakest. Basically, because the artist cannot explain her work, there have been several varying interpretations of the work. This thesis is one person's interpretation of the work and how it is perceived by society. Diane Arbus as a documentor effects society directly because the work was produced for that specific reason. Diane Arbus as an artist effects us as a society, but also more profoundly, as individuals. The way society interacts with the medium of photography is just as relevant to the effect of the *Untitled* series as Arbus' vision. Arbus' choice to process her vision through photography allows her social commentary, and artistic expression an extra sense of importance. In order to understand the full importance of photography one must look at how its effects are felt within society.

Photograph by Diane Arbus

Untitled

Photograph by Diane Arbus

Untitled

Photograph by Diane Arbus

Untitled

Photograph by Diane Arbus

Untitled

Chapter 1

Photography and Power

The modern western world is exposed to the power of photography on a daily basis and most people own a camera, yet the medium is not well understood. Although we are no longer afraid that the steam engine, racing towards us in the movie theatre, will run over us, as we might have been in the infant stage of photography we do continue to be extremely vulnerable to the photographic image. The average viewer still has difficulty differentiating between truth and photography. Our culture tends to equate photographs with the real thing as if the image has reached a "realness" of its own. We kiss our lovers' photograph and burn that of our enemy. Since most people use, and feel comfortable with cameras they consume and digest images with little discretion, the images with which one is bombarded are consumed and digested with little discretion. This "hap-hazard" way of image-consuming by the public makes those who control the images extremely powerful.

Advertising agencies are modern day propaganda factories. Their goal is to sell products. Their ads suggest that happy, healthy, beautiful people, consume the shiny product on screen. Before Diane Arbus started her career as an artist, she was part of this "illusionist" world as a successful fashion photographer.

Many people have accepted this sort of "persuasion" as a compromise for their personal capitalist freedoms. It is the power of the image itself, that causes the persuasion to become manipulation.

Most people know that advertisers have a certain agenda, it is therefore, the other kinds of media of which the public needs to be more aware. The news magazines and news programs can equally manipulate the public by choosing representations that fit the publication's purpose. Even images that are not slanderous can mislead, and thereby, can effect a career or a government in seconds. Viewers believe they are seeing unbiased information, while actually the agenda of the editor is silently being fulfilled.

The public needs to be as knowledgeable about the medium of phòtography as it is of language. It consumes this substance (photographic images) on a daily basis without understanding what the main ingredients are. Not only is photography as easily manipulated as a painting, drawing, or sculpture, but, with digital technology, people can appear to be making love to someone they never met, in some place they've never been. The manipulation has the potential to be extreme. It is an increasingly common, and ethically questionable, practice for tabloids

to visually put heads on bodies that do not belong to them. Even reputable publications have been guilty of publishing altered photographs. One example of this practice (albeit in a less offensive form) was the well-respected magazine *National Geographic* which published a cover with a beautiful sunset behind two of the Egyptian pyramids (Feb 1982, vol 161, no 2). It was a visually interesting photograph, but in nature an impossible feat. The pyramids are in fact situated (to many tourists' dismay) at an angle that is inaccessible to a sunset photograph. Most of these indiscretions have been executed for a similar purpose -to sell more magazines, advertising space, and papers -for money. If there is a photograph to support a sensational story, people will buy, because the visualization of oddity, sells. It is the more subtle manipulations within photography that people should be aware of, because the images thus produced are quietly influencing the viewer. Diane Arbus, still stands accused wrongly of this sensationalist practice (not of altering photographs, but of taking photographs of oddity for personal gain). These accusations are only be made by people who are unknowledgeable about the medium, and, therefore, unable to read a photograph. Further explanation of Arbus' practice appears later in the thesis. In order to

understand the work of Arbus, one must look at the influence of photography first.

One should never underestimate the power of the media photograph as it fuels certain issues and smothers others. The media reports whatever sells. If certain stories do not appeal to the market place, those angles are scrapped. So, typically, the media reports news to the largest community base in order to make as much money as possible. Whatever group will make them the most money will be addressed. This tends to perpetuate the existing class, and cultural hierarchy. There is considerable criticism of the media in both Great Britain and the United States that the members of the African-Caribbean or African-American communities, for example, are not represented fairly or adequately in the media. This problem is apparent in news reports about white victims versus victims of another ethnic background. There are comparatively few reports on the violence committed against the minority communities within the U.K. and the U.S. compared to reports on white, and typically, middle class, communities. Furthermore, poorer people are more often the victims of violence and crime in general, yet the news tends to focus on these acts against middle class community. Many ethnic organizations recognize the media as an extremely

important and potent force in their representation. The media perpetuates the politics and social situation of minorities by avoiding certain representations, and glorifying others. The photographic image is, therefore, an important part of how the media subtly can change the public's view of minorities. The photograph may be orchestrated to alter the publics view.

The way a photograph is taken and presented can be just as manipulative (and manipulated) as the subject itself. In the case of politicians, their images are carefully controlled by their public relations managers for this very reason. The image consultants prepare candidates for their engagement with the media, maximizing opportunities and minimizing potential disasters. Any United States candidate for president has learned, from political image coordinators, not to use hands to express himself in a speech, as the photographs taken during the speech will make him appear extremely awkward. Hitler was even filmed from below to make him seem more sturdy and majestic in the propaganda reels before, and during, World War II. If a politician were to sneeze during a press conference, the photograph taken at the time would make him or her look deranged. Although President Roosevelt was suffering from Polio and was confined to a wheel chair, he insisted on standing

for every speech. There was no way a man who could not stand could lead the country, according to the visual imagery at that time. Presidential power, meant, and still means, calmness, strength, masculinity, and height. Any image that contradicts these standards would make the president look weak in this image age. It is still a common practice for U.S. presidential candidates to stand on a box which to them appear taller at a debate. It was often thought that it took less than five minutes to make a good first impression. In today's photographic world, the first impression depends on the speed of the film.

Barthes' theories (from Susan Sontag's The Barthes Reader) on the photographic message develop such arguments concerning photographic interpretation. The interpretation of the photograph is what gives the photograph its power. Barthes clearly lists the manipulative factors at issue here. These seven factors are: 1)connotation, 2)trick effects, 3)pose, 4)objects, 5)photogenia, 6)aestheticism, 7)syntax. Some of these are more self-explanatory than others, but all need to be examined. If one knows how a photograph is potentially manipulative, than one is less likely to be manipulated.

The different ways the photograph is taken and displayed can alter that moment in time to mean countless

things. Barthes calls this inferred meaning connotation. "Connotation, the imposition of second meaning on the photographic message proper, is realized at the different levels of the production of the photograph (choice, technical, treatment, framing and layout) and represents, finally, a coding of a photographic analogue" (Sontag, A B.R. 199). The way a photograph is taken can overlay connotations that were not in the actual experience of the moment. An example of a potential situation is a photograph of a happy politician at a party with a wine glass raised in celebration across the page from a photograph of a homeless person. The connotation is extended in the layout. It is, thus, insinuated that the public figure does not care, or that they are not working hard because the two separate images juxtaposed make a statement. These two separate and potential stories bounce off of each other and then begin to mean something else. Other connotations may be produced with a more malicious nature.

One of the most despicable practices of some news sources is the use of trick effects. "Trick effects… A photograph given in wide circulation in the American press in 1951 is reputed to have cost Senator Millard Tydings his [congressional] seat. It showed the Senator in a conversation with communist leader Earl Browder"

(Sontag A B.R. 200). The photograph to which Barthes was referring was manipulated. In fact, Senator Tydings never met with the communist leader. The improvements in technology, have made it impossible to detect trial effects with the naked eye. Even trained photographers have no way of telling if an image in question emanated from a camera, or a computer. With the great changes in photographic technology, only specially trained technicians after several hours of investigation can truly determine if a photograph has been tampered with. Lower grade trick-effects are still enough to fool the general public. In fact, an early trick-effect convicted Lee Harvey Oswald in the court of public opinion, according to the Oliver Stone movie JFK. The public viewed a photograph with Oswald carrying a gun. The shadow (as the film explains) on his face was inconsistent with the shadows on his body and in the rest of the photograph. This suggests that Oswald's head was put on another man's body in the photograph. A photograph insinuating something about a sensitive subject (such as the JFK assassination) defiantly had the potential to effect public opinion. How many other people have lost careers, reputations, or even lives due to altered photographs?

Control over the pose increases the manipulation, as Barthes invites us to "… Consider a press photograph of President Kennedy widely distributed at the time of the 1960 elections, a half-length profile shot, eyes looking upward, hands joined together. Here it is the very pose of the subject which prepares the reading of the signifieds of connotation: youthfulness, spirituality, purity" (Sontag A B.R. 201). This is a pertinent example of the strings being pulled between the media and the government. The media presents an article on a new politician that reads in an unbiased way, and they use an official photograph taken by campaign organizers, that makes the candidate look like Jesus instead a photograph that shows the candidate tripping on the rug. The public may literally be subconsciously effected by imagery as this.

Barthes' fourth category explains "Objects… [where in] The interest lies in the fact that the objects are accepted induces of associations of ideas (bookcase = intellectual) or, in a more obscure way, are variable symbols (the door of the gas chamber for Chessman's execution with its reference to the funeral gates of ancient mythologies)" (Sontag A B.R. 202). It would be rare that a documentary program would present an "expert", a doctor, for example, without a bookcase in

the background. Most news programs, such as Sky news (U.K.) and NBC news (U.S.A.) use this technique frequently. In fact, most all news programs are guilty of making their expert look more important by strategically placing a bookshelf full of books in the background.

Barthes' explains his fifth category of photogenia: "In photogenia the connoted message is the image itself, 'embellished' (which is to say, in general sublimated) by techniques of lighting, exposure, and printing. …technical 'effects' (as for instance the 'blurring of movement' or 'flowingness' launched by Dr. Steinert and his team to signify space-time)" (Sontag, A B.R. 202-203). Just as dream sequences in movies are signified by blur, commercials use special effects for their own purposes. Some of the effects have been around since the advent of the Hollywood portrait of the 1920's. There is hardly a commercial for women's skin products (moisturizer, foundation, anti-wrinkle cream etc.) that the woman displayed is not blurred and brightened in some way. Not only does this technique cover the imperfections, but it also implies angelic, virgin, and youthful qualities. Such images are always over-exposed so the "whiter-than-white" quality is enhanced. The manufacturers want the public to believe that the

"miracle" cream they are selling will achieve this appearance, when actually it is achieved by the camera.

Barthes maintains that "... aestheticism in photography, it is seemingly in an ambiguous fashion: when photography turns painting, composition, or visual substance treated with deliberation in its very material 'texture,' it is either so as to signify itself as 'art' (which was the case with 'pictorialism' of the beginning of the century) or to impose a generally more subtle and complex signified than would be possible with other connotation procedures" (Sontag, A B.R. 203). Unlike within art, the viewer should not be expected to look for a deeper meaning in a media photograph. This results in people seeing the image for more than what it really is (a strictly visual happening as perceived by someone else).

In relation to Barthes' analization of Syntax, he continues to explain: " Naturally, several photographs can come together to form a sequence (this is commonly the case in illustrated magazines); the signifier of connotation is then no longer to be found at the level of anyone of the fragments of the sequence but at that what the linguists would call the suprasegmental level of the connotation" (Sontag, A B.R. 203-204). The use of a

photo-essay format, or a sequence of images again helps the image maker guide the viewer through the photographs. Arbus uses the photo-essay style in the *Untitled* series, and as will be explained further in the thesis, the format has put a definite connotation into the work. Each photograph relates to another in a very specific way, but if they were rearranged somehow, a very different conclusion may be formed about the subject. It is the conclusions of the photographic message that may alter reality. We tend to relate a photograph closely to reality, when this it not borne out, it becomes a perceived reality. A perceived reality effects our judgment just as reality would. So, we are indeed a society influenced by photographs. Therefore we are a society of life imitating subjective information (or in this case photographs).

Every sighted person in the modern western world has felt the power of photography at some time. Whether it is the photograph of a relative, or of a starving child in a far away land, the power of the photograph perseveres. It is arguably more than an image. Sontag describes it as a trace of something primal. "...a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace of something directly stenciled off the real, like a

footprint or a death mask" (Sontag, O.P. 154). "No one takes an easel painting to be in any sense co-substantial with its subject; it only represents or refers. But a photograph is not only like its subject, a homage to the subject. It is part of , an extension of that subject; and a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it" (Sontag, O.P. 155). The expectation put upon photography is almost as it is a way to know someone, as if one could gaze deep into that person's soul. People view photographs of places far away, and almost feel that they have received that culture, as if they have visited that far-off land. Not everyone has been in a helicopter, but because of the moving image, we feel that we know what it would be like. Many little experiences in life, have been "half-lived" through photography, before the actual happening. As a culture of all-knowing, by images, it becomes difficult to differentiate what we have only seen in photography, from what we have truly experienced.

As a society we must acknowledge what the limits of photography are and recognize how we push these limits. We must also understand that because photography is so versatile, thanks to technology and the nature of the photographic process, the truth-element in every image must not be taken at face-value. It is the responsibility

of the consumer, who is constantly being exposed to these images, to resist manipulation by the media. Just as the person who knows a particular artist's struggle and situation will understand the portrait that is hanging on the museum wall; so too will the person looking at the news article understand the photograph of a politician if they know the politics of the paper they are reading.

Photography must be read as text in an article, not as something closer to reality. The relationship between reality and photography is naturally flawed. "...the camera makes exotic things near, intimate; and familiar things small, abstract, strange, much farther away" (Sontag, O.P. 167). The camera has the ability to manipulate the image, but it is the context of reality that gives the image it's impact. Just as a wine-taster must educate the palette, the viewer must know the context from reality in order to savour the photograph fully. "Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote. One can't possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images..." (Sontag, O.P. 163). Reality is the basis for understanding all photography. We unfairly perceive photography to be almost an equal to reality. The

division between photography and reality must be made clear.

Currently the main political, inter-media concern lies with minorities and their representation. The blurred borders between reality and the representation of reality as manifested in photography need to be sharpened. This needs to be clarified so the subject of the photograph will not be at the mercy of the photographer. Increasingly, minorities in the States, specifically, demand that their images be used responsibly. Women, homosexuals, ethnic groups, and the disabled do not yet have the upper-hand in media production and distribution. These different groups know that their representations indicate, as well as perpetuate public opinion pertaining to their group-identities. " …The notions of imagery and reality are complementary. When the notion of reality changes, so does that of the image, and vice versa" (Sontag, O.P. 160). "…[video and cinema] technology has made photography a tool for deciphering behavior, predicting it, and interfering with it" (Sontag, O.P. 157). It is unfair that a medium of expression can somehow decipher behavior. The image-maker has power over the subject and influences public opinion about the subject. A recent and horrendous example of this on a large scale was the

racism manufactured and controlled by the deadly propaganda machine of Hitler's Third Reich. The way the image makers of the regime controlled the minorities in the concentration camps, and the messages of hate disseminated by the propaganda. The concentration camps came after public opinion was cemented. Fueled by media text and imagery, society began to perceive the Jewish, Travelers, and almost anyone else as different, as the cause of all social problems (a threat to the system). As Sontag observes, "The camera has the power to catch so-called normal people in such a way as to make them look abnormal. The photographer chooses oddity, chases it, frames it, develops it, titles it" (Sontag, O.P. 31). The camera and the people behind the cameras have the power and ability to taint the reputations of millions people.

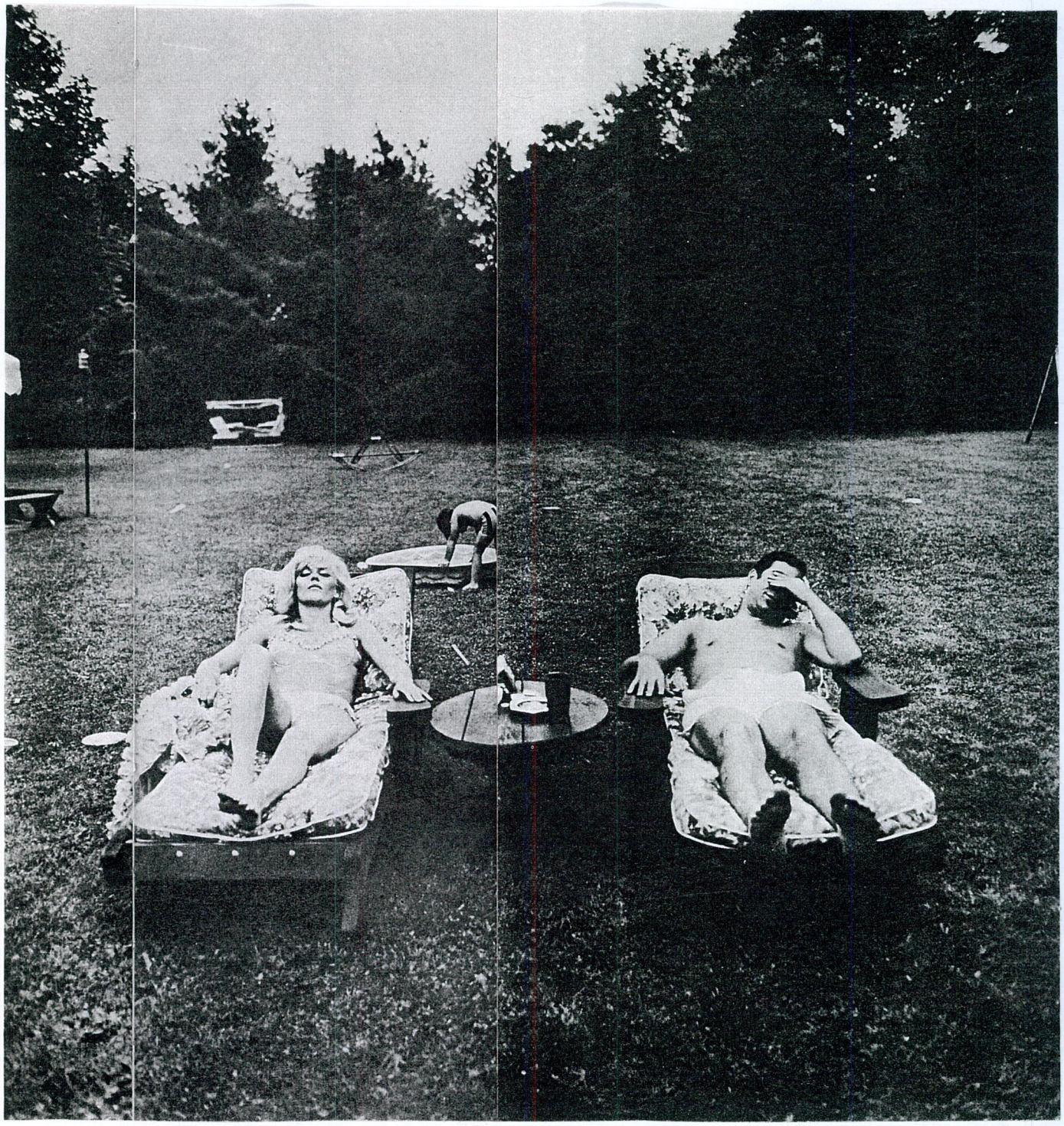
For all the previously given reasons, the manipulations within a photograph, no matter how subtle, need to be taken into consideration in attempting to understand the photograph. The strong belief in the "realness" of a photograph is the driving force of its significance. Not only will the manipulation of photography never diminish, but the possibilities for ever more elaborate manipulations are inherent in new technologies. If individuals accept the medium as it

truly is, (nothing more than a closer likeness than a painting) then the people being represented in the photograph would not be tried in the court of public opinion by flawed evidence. Photographs are by nature flawed evidence because photography is in all senses a visual-opinion (hear-say). Photography is empirically tampered and influenced evidence. The "image-Utopia", that is suggested, can only become a reality if people are taught about images just as they are taught the written word. In that way the photograph would become what it is within society, and not what it appears to be. Information will always be controlled to a certain extent, but perhaps the information would be handled more responsibly by all members of the public if the public were re-educated.

Chapter 2

Arbus and the Untitled

Representing people of different lifestyles is the cornerstone of the work by Diane Arbus. Arbus' career as an artist consists mostly of photographs taken of people mostly on the fringes of society. Conversely she also has a knack for making the "normal" look "abnormal", for example the photograph of the suburbanites from Westchester Connecticut. Two contrasting pictures called "Two American Families", were published in *Sunday Times Magazine* (London, November 10,1968) one of the photographs has a husband and wife sun-bathing in their huge backyard, with their son in the background. The couple look so far removed from reality, they seem almost ill and distressed. One could easily say the couple look more "freakish" than the subjects in the *Untitled* series. In the beginning of her artistic career she took photographs of people who chose to live outside the mainstream, such as those in the nudist colony, or the "rocker" photographs. These sequences of photographs were well received by the majority of mainstream viewers. The audience, in general, did not feel uncomfortable viewing these bodies of work because clearly no group of, or individual was victimized, according to the current ideology of the photographing and photographed public. It was the photographs of people who did not have a



Photograph by Diane Arbus

Two American Families

choice in their social status, that has caused considerable controversy.

The *Untitled* series is Arbus' most controversial work because the subjects of the photographs are disabled. This last body of work, was left unnamed and almost unexplained by the artist. This, in itself, has left greater interpretational leeway for us who are left to view her work. Unsurprisingly, the *Untitled* series is to some her weakest work, and to others her strongest. Arbus' intention was to cause people to look at what they are afraid to look at.

Arbus' technical approach gives us all a clue as to what her intentions were in making the series. Her use of flash in her *Untitled* series causes a brighter light to be cast on the subject, a revealing, rather than an idealizing, strategy. Crucially, the use of the flash also makes the viewer more aware that the photographer is standing in-between the viewer and the subject. One knows that the photographer has affected the subject, either by causing them to close their eyes for a second, or promoting a conversation afterwards. This gives the illusion of a human "connection" between the viewer and the subject. This mediation is both technical and

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conceptual. Some might think the flash is cruel because it subjects the subjects to relevatory intensity. The quickness of the handeling of the photograph, the coarseness used in the photographic techniques are picked up by David Hevey. "She still uses flash-and-daylight to pick up the figures from their landscape, but the focus is clearly weaker than that of previous work" (Hevey 64). The focus of the camera (or lack of focus) is not due to the artists lack of knowledge, it is purposefully intended to convey the effect of movement and spontaneity. To the unaware first-time viewer of Arbus' work she may appear sloppy or hap-hazard, but, in fact, the way she has produced this last work is a perpetuation of her professionalism. Hevey even maintains that "There is no doubt that Arbus, as an ex-fashion photographer knew what she was doing using technical disharmony as an underwriting of the narrative disharmony" (Hevey 64). The disharmony conveys a strong anti-glamour message. The viewer is made aware of the interaction between the two very present parties in the photograph, with the flash-and-go effect. It is almost as if the photographs are secondary to the action of the moment, like when someone takes a photograph to remind the participants of a vacation of some sort. This makes the experience more valuable than the photograph. The photograph was just taken to remind the viewer of the moment. It is almost

as if she took the photographs for herself or the people in the photograph. It makes the images more personal, like family members are participating in the photograph.

Arbus undoubtedly used a portable camera, in the *Untitled* series, as an extension of the family-photograph look. This allowed her to take photographs that are less like the work of a portrait photographer, emphasizing the spontaneity of the moment. This further implies that Arbus was having fun. Specifically, in the photographs of the Downs Syndrome-affected girls in their swimming suits, one can almost hear them saying "Take our picture!!" as their friend looks at the world upside-down though her legs. They are at play, and Diane is part of the fun. "She is part of the 'snapshot aesthetic'… This form attempted to overturn the sophisticated and high-technique processes of the Hollywood fantasy portrait, as well as rejecting the beautiful toning of much of *The Family of Man*. However more than any of her peers, she took this aesthetic nearer to its roots in the family photograph or album (indeed she intended to shoot a project entitled Family Album)" (Hevey 58). The idea that we are all equal, part of the same family, is important, especially when one considers the circumstances of the subjects in the United States.

Arbus, through her work makes a statement on how these children and young adults have been cut out of the family photographs of their parents through their institutionalization. Diane Arbus has put them in the world's family album.

Arbus defiantly used techniques that relate to the photo essay format established as a form of analysis in the United States through *Time Life* magazine. The black and white photograph is very important in this tradition. "To print a photograph in shades of gray does not guarantee objectivity, but it does encourage it to be read as objectively…" (Holland 170). If the public believes she, as a photographer is objective, then her issue is more likely to be listened to. Many may argue that she does not work in social issues, but there is definitely a great many cross-overs to the social documentary in the work. Arbus' daughter, Doon Arbus wrote the Afterwards in the book containing the *Untitled* Series. In her short essay she explains that her mother was not interested in the social issues associated with the photographs. It is common for artists to claim a neutrality in political issues, just to allow more interpretation. It is obvious, through looking at her

work, that Diane Arbus was aware of the politics, and she played heavily with it.

These photographs where taken over a 2 year period more than two decades ago. Since these photographs were first hung, political correctness has fundamentally changed our imagery. It is not that the "freak-show" phenomenon is considered unfashionable, but it is now considered a violation of civil rights. The warehousing of Downs Syndrome affected children is no longer common practice. People affected by Downs Syndrome are out and about and increasingly integrated into the community; the word "retard" (or other variations thereof) is no longer acceptable wording for people, thus afflicted with Downs Syndrome. When Arbus took these photographs, however, she was exposing a form of ghettoisation as disabled people were segregated from society. Most people would not have previously seen photographs of individuals affected by Downs Syndrome when these photographs were first presented. Traditional photography of disabled people was characterized by freak, or medical overtones. The children and young adults in this series were represented as vibrant people that Arbus undoubtedly would come to know and like. This was something new. Society had almost forgotten the people in the

photographs, and many people did not know whether or not to feel comfortable with it.

While it may be difficult to precisely determine Arbus' personal beliefs on the subject of photographing disability as a practice, it is artistically unimportant. Most artists, and this case is confirmed by her daughter, Doon (in the afterwards of Untitled), that Arbus wishes the work to speak for themselves. Her renitence on the subject, she would maintain, encourages interpretation. It is clear, however, that she was not afraid of difference, in that she was drawn to what was considered unacceptable at the time. In fact she has been quoted by David Hevey as saying that she loved some of the disfigured people she photographed. What she exactly meant by the statement, is difficult to determine. He makes several statements of what Arbus' innermost thoughts about disabled people were. Hevey specifically talks about his interpretation of Arbus use of the disabled as a metaphor for her apparent own alienation from her upper-class upbringing. He explains that Arbus' portraits (her older work) of disabled people were reflecting her personal alienation from her family. He believes that the *Untitled* series is not successful on this level, because the subjects are not up-close, and portraitized. He likes the idea of the disabled

interacting on a more one-to-one level in photography because the image world is so lacking in disabled photography with individual overtones, meaning that disabled people are only represented as their disability and nothing more. This type of imagery is very common in charity or medical imagery. The imagery Hevey dislikes are stereotypes that are brought into all other forms of imagery that are understandably offensive. Stereotypes, perpetuate falsehoods about minorities, and by nature separate people from mainstream society. To suggest that Arbus stereotypes is premature. He, in fact, responds positively to Arbus' earlier work because he feels the individuals were being represented, unusually, as individuals. For this reason he finds the *Untitled* series short of his expectations. "The subjects are now barely engaged with Arbus/ the viewer as *themselves*" (Hevey 64). One can understand his taking "offence", at first, but one must look at the "normalcy" of the images. Arbus has made the individuals who have been alienated by society because of their disability, appear just as us, the "Normals". Sontag defends Arbus, indirectly, when she specifically refers to Arbus' older work where the subject tended to look directly at the camera. She makes the following point: "Most Arbus pictures have the subjects looking straight into the camera. This often

makes them look odder, almost deranged" (Sontag, O.P. 34). This is specifically shown in the suburban couple photographed in her "Two American families".

There is a child-like quality to which everyone can relate in the *Untitled* series. Yes, they are disabled, but it is their humanness which emanates from the *Untitled* series, rather than their "situation". The predominant stereotype ascribed to the disabled, that they are their disability and nothing more is effectively challenged. Hevey continues to make sweeping assumptions concerning Arbus' personal life to back up his view of the *Untitled* series being insuperior to her older work. "In her career-long attempt to pull the psychic underworld into the physical overworld by manipulating the bodies of disabled people, she had come to the borders in these images. She had met 'the limits of her imagination'; she had not found in these images the catharsis necessary for her to continue" (Hevey 64-65). To say an artist has reached the limits of her imagination is a ruthless assumption. He continues by asserting that "Arbus first loved, then hated this last work. She entered a crisis of identity because these segregated people with Down's Syndrome would not perform as an echo of her despair... Arbus' camera became

irrelevant not only for disabled people, but for Arbus herself. This was her last work before she killed herself" (Hevey 65). These assumptions that Hevey places on Arbus' death reiterate the importance of keeping photography in perspective. Because she was a public figure, one bases emotional assumptions on the images given, not the reality. The only person who could truly know why Arbus killed herself is Arbus, and Diane Arbus alone. Whatever he sees in the photographs that insinuates that she killed herself for a reason, is purely speculation. Hevey portrays himself as a defender of the disabled, yet he disregards the fact that depression is a medical condition and is disabling for millions of people. It is more likely Arbus was suffering from this illness (an assumption based on current medical opinion, that depression is the leading cause of suicide). Hevey thereby undermines his own campaign (a good campaign of anti-stereo types) by making sweeping assumptions which suggest that people kill themselves for a healthy rational reason. This is an insult to people who suffer from this type of mental illness. One should not read into what is given. That is the way we, as a society, need to understand photography. It is obvious that Hevey does not understand the *Untitled* series in this situation.

Chapter 3

Documentary and Difference

Arbus' plays with the idea of family photography, extending it to include the "institutional family", but the reason her work is so controversial is the more documentary aspect of her work because of how documentary is read. Documentary photography carries with it a certain weight implying a closer relationship to reality than perhaps more "artistic" forms of photography. The term "documentary photography," has come to mean many different things to different people. Just as the word, "document" might imply to some that the people being represented in the photography are made to be information. There is no one determining description for documentary photography. Many individual works are embraced within this classification. According to Liz Wells, John Grierson coined the word, documentary in 1926 "to describe the kind of cinema that he wanted to replace what he saw as the dream factory of Hollywood, and it quickly gained currency within photography" (Wells, 63). There are many aspects of a photograph, or usually a set of photographs, that would lend themselves to the documentary genre. "Primarily, documentary was thought as having a goal beyond production of a fine print. The photographers' goal was to bring attention to the subject of his or her work and, in many cases, to pave the way for social change" (Wells 63-64). "Although not rigid,

these [following] characteristics serve as referents for comparing photographers working within... the documentary tradition- a tradition that includes aspects of journalism, art, education, sociology, and history. - Ohrn 1980" (Wells, 63-64) Not withstanding her vagueness about her work and her goals in making the *Untitled* series Ohrn's definition would appear to provide a useful model for Arbus. Certainly, she was knowledgeable about documentary photography in its many manifestations. The subject matter looses its validity if it did not appear to be mostly neutral. Arbus officially (according to her daughter Doon) had no political or social interest in the disability issue, so, if she is to be read as the omniscient story teller, everything she says in the photography is fact. It is, of course, impossible to read the photography as if Arbus is unbiased, because the photographs so explicitly show a photographer interacting with her subjects.

The actual style we now know as documentary photography was developed from work featured in German magazines from the 1930s. "These magazines carried articles of general and topical knowledge and topical interest, but driven by market pressures and in the spirit of democracy they developed a reputation for covering ordinary subjects from everyday life. Also, and

like documentary film, they felt the need for an immediate social knowledge which encouraged them to delve 'behind the scenes', showing and expanding what remained outside of normal experience or hidden from view" (Holland 169-170). This is exactly what Diane Arbus revealed in the *Untitled* series. Arbus allows us to see what we [the democratic public] have never seen, behind-the-scenes of a mental institution. Rather than investigating "behind the scenes" to reveal medical structures or procedures, she chose to narrate more personal stories. But the series is investigative in that it shows the people that were hidden on purpose. It could, thus, be suggested that while her mode of analysis was anecdotal, Arbus' intentions were, nonetheless investigative.

The use of the rectangle and squared format was applied in the early German magazines, because the traditional rounded edges in photography of the 1930's made the image look less factual. The hard-edged format described here was put to effective use by Arbus in her work. The use of black and white film also makes the images look more document-like. This type of photography perpetuates the idea of photography as neutral, as if the image provides some sort of objective knowledge. In this way, the photographer trying to make a social point is

all the more effective. " '...Because the citizen under modern conditions cannot know everything about everything all of the time', it was documentary's task to guide citizens through the complexity of modern life towards an active role in democratic processes" (Holland 169). The problem with "guiding" one through information is whatever information is left out is deemed unimportant, and whatever is included is deemed relevant to society. "Because it [the documentary magazine of the 1930's] dealt with that which is common to all, and because it did so in an unbiased way, documentary film was seen as essentially democratic- it gave everybody the facts upon which to base their opinions" (Holland 169). The notion that photographs can be unbiased is generally acceptable to the public, but to one who understands the medium, the mental-connection between photography and fact is not automatic. The older German magazines may have been seen to be democratic, but by fooling the public they were manipulating the public. Documentary photography is, therefore, not necessarily democratic and is very often manipulative, a mild form of George Orwell's 1984.

To identify specific, concrete characteristics that separate news photography from art photography is problematic. The identifiable characteristics pertaining to documentary photography and artistic photography, for

example, merge in Arbus' work creating a strong social message. The idea of neutrality within document is the added 'leverage' in Arbus' work and functions as a tool of persuasion. The documentor runs the risk of loosing credibility every time he/she crosses the line of neutrality to the bias. An artist, by the nature of purpose, may take liberties that would be considered a risk for the journalist. This is not to say that news is in reality unbiased, but that appearances must be maintained. If the viewer is not trained in media analysis, this line is often blurred between documentary, entertainment, and reality. The public wants unbiased information in their news and, as in a documentary, they expect to "learn" from the information given. There is a necessity for greater subtlety in photographic art that is not required in social documentary because audience expectations differ in each case. Though Arbus would have more leeway in expressing her opinions, as an artist, if a piece of work is merely a statement of an opinion, it is artistically boring. There a necessity for many levels in photographic art that do not need to be present in social documentary because of the audience being addressed.

The apparent objectivity in Arbus' *Untitled* series comes directly from her references to documentary

photography contained within the work. The irony is that this objectivity does not exist, and Arbus knew it. "Like a letter or an object itself, the photograph is held to be an objective representation of something factual, the image a way of presenting 'facts' about its subject in a purely informational way. But complications begin to seep in to this apparently clear-cut notion of the photographic 'document'… Like all documentary records, photographic documents may of course be altered in order to offer a false or different interpretation from that which they would disclose if they had not been tampered with" (Hall 81). The tradition of believing the "eyes" of a camera over the words of a witness gives documentary added authenticity. There is a tremendous amount of information that a viewer could be potentially shown in documentary. It is the documentor's intention to guide the viewer through the information that the documentor feels is important so that the viewer will come to the same conclusions as the documentor. Everything is very carefully controlled. Images are excluded or included for very definite reasons. "…part of the power of such work -its ability to influence the perceptions of the viewer- derives from the ambiguity of the photographic representation itself, the notion that the images so produced are not the product of a human brain but of an impersonal 'camera eye'" (Hall 81).

Diane Arbus is artistically playing with this paradox within photography directly.

Diane Arbus, as an accomplished photographer, knew the photographic image is whatever she makes it. That connotation of document in the *Untitled* series puts her into the tradition of social documentors. These photographers expose problems in society, mainly to the middle classes who may not normally see the issue, in order to promote change in the social condition. There is a long tradition of photographers who have to witness injustices in order for the public to feel witness. "Roy Stryker, argued that 'good documentary should tell not only what a place or a thing or person looks like, but must also tell the audience what it would feel like to be an actual witness to the scene" (Hall 83). Documentary is about being a witness, but truly the images are not even an iota of the actual witnessing account. The artist or journalist is the witness and is just conveying what they saw. "It is only through his subjective experience of the object facts that the photo-reporter can become a witness to his time. His alertness and his gift of observation distinguish his work from that of others- not as an artist, but related to the artist by virtue of this talent of creative observation.-Gidal 1973" (Wells 66). "The photographer …is both gifted

with a particular acuity of vision and acts as a kind of 'exemplary sufferer' on our behalf; an artist who, in his or her person, becomes a guarantor of the accuracy of the image" (Wells, 66). Diane Arbus acts as a "playmate" of the subjects who is also a "tour guide" for the viewer. The viewer is seeing the lifestyle of the patients for the first time. She is guiding the viewer through this institution and introducing us to these smiling faces.

Diane Arbus' photographs in the *Untitled* series were taken over a period of 2 years. A documentary photographer might have done the same thing, but Diane was an artist. The documentor would have a more specific purpose in photographing the mental institution, and therefore would have taken images that would have "driven home" the photographic message. Arbus' artistic individuality is apparent in the photographs, because they are subtle and one can get many meanings from them. Yet Arbus gives us a definite main line to draw conclusions from. Arbus constructed these photographs carefully.

Arbus was aware of the allusions to documentation in her photography. The use of black and white makes the pictures look more truthful, and factual, just like the 1930's German documentary magazines. The use of a series

is also more story-like. It invites people to see several moments in time in the lives of the people in this same, small community. The people continue off the paper, the figures continue living and being. "What may seem journalistic, even sensational, in Arbus' photographs place them, rather, in the main tradition of Surrealist art- their taste for the grotesque, their professional innocence with respect to their subjects, their claim that all subjects are mearly *objets trouves*" (Sontag, O.P. 41). The grotesque element that Sontag mentions is fading slowly in society. The strangeness of disability is not seen as "grotesque" as often, but as a difference. This is not to say that there is no more ignorance of disability, but that it is getting better. Sontag's statement would be one way to interpret the images. Arbus is not strictly following the documentary path, the images are above all art. Therefore, people are invited to wander off the path and interpret the photographs on an artistic level. Sontag identifies the truly small difference between art and documentary photography on a philosophical level. "To us, the difference between the photographer as an individual eye and the photographer as an objective recorder seems fundamental, the difference often regarded, mistakenly, as separating photography as art from photography as document. Both are logical extensions of what

photography means: note-taking on, potentially, everything in the world, from every possible angle" (Sontag, O.P. 175-176). It is an interesting ideology, but most people when confronted with photography react very differently if they know the intention is to document, in comparison with the intent to express.

Within documentary photography there is a definite tradition of a class-based hierarchy. Documentary photography produces for the middle classes. In the beginning of documentary photography (around the 1930's), the subject matter was usually about the lower classes' lifestyle. Traditionally the way the "other-half lives" was the subject for the first documentary photographers. The photographers of the day showed the urban and rural plight. During the depression, the works programs set-up photographers with the facilities to document the hardships of the depression. Even then the photographers were affecting the political situation. "...the very fact that the Resettlement Administration (RA) and Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers did not adhere inexorably to the victimization model, is troubling. Maurice Berger, the curator of an exhibit of RA and FSA photographs at Hunter College Art Gallery in NY City, for example, is uncomfortable with Arthur Rothstein's photograph of a farmhand in Goldendale,

Washington, in 1936 and Lange's photograph of the wife and children of a tobacco sharecropper in Person County, North Carolina, in July 1939. Utilizing the technique of shooting from below, 'an angle that traditionally signifies stature and esteem,' Rostien, Berger charges, created a 'metaphor for stability… a respect for hard labor dignity of toil.' [Dorothea] Lange's photograph 'similarly ignores the devastation [of the Depression]. Not only do the robust mother and son smile, but the children appear clean, well-fed, and neatly dressed.' Images like this result in 'weakening the effect of the depictions abject poverty, racial unrest, crime, disease, and despair" (Berger, 174-175). These documentary photographs where seen to be incorrect to Berger. Diversity in the imagery can "wear thin" a social message. Diane Arbus subjects are smiling, therefore, are diversifying the imagery, but unlike pure documentary photography the smiling gives the message an irony. Many well recognized photographers came out of the generation of photography that was set up by these before mentioned organizations. Dorothea Lange's image of a woman with her daughters became the "poster" image of poverty during the depression. While documentary photography grew as a medium in economically happier days into "behind the scenes" photography, at the beginning it served a very

specific propose, to make people aware of social injustices.

The subjects that Arbus chose in the *Untitled* series is a remnant of showing people "how the other- half lives". Arbus' upper-middle class background brings layered similarities in the tradition of document. Her life as a successful photographer is nothing like the lives of those she photographed. These parallels must be considered when understanding the series itself.

In western culture most of our imagery is commercial. Whether the images are in an advertisement or not, most images are created for a monetary reason. Ideally art is not, but the majority of the time, images are created to attract money. Beautiful people sell beautiful products, and because right now being handicapped is not considered beautiful, the imagery of disability is not around us. As the movies too are trying to sell beauty, sex, adventure, and, above all the product, there are few physically challenged people featured because, by societal standards a wheelchair does not embody the necessary criteria. It is perceived to "slow down" the fantasy. Given the absence of reminders of the disabled it becomes a novelty to see someone different. We are taught not to stare in this day and

age. However, the photograph is, a mechanism of staring. This is why it is considered impolite to photograph a person who is disabled. The unknown makes us uncomfortable. Most of the images of disability comes from charities, and are presented to us in the safety of our homes, to make us pity the disabled. This is a comfortable relationship for many. So this particular group of humans remain "other" in our image-driven world.

The disability issue is an issue of the eyes, as well as the mind. If someone is dyslexic, they may have many special needs which challenge traditional educational structures. But the child who also looks different, as well as having learning difficulties, is going to be separated socially as well as academically. This happens because of the culture of categorizing, by the eyes. This problem results from the way we in western nations instantaneously view the image: we register "normality" or "abnormality" instantaneously. Any visually noticeable difference is classified as "disabled". "Through being photographed , something becomes part of the system of information, fitted into schemes of classification and storage which range from crudely chronological order of snapshots sequence pasted in family albums to dogged accumulations and meticulous filing needed for photographers uses in weather

forecasting..." (Sontag, O.P. 156) What Sontag explains is relevant because we now catalogue people as easily as bugs in a Victorian natural history museum.

Arbus' images contrast with traditional disability photograph in many ways. The charity organizations, especially in pursuit of funds, have disabled people portrayed in a way that expresses unfulfilled needs. People want to help the unhappy and dependent; they are, thus, depicted accordingly. Hevey, even though not a big fan of Arbus' *Untitled* series, effectively differentiates Arbus' work from that of other disability imagery. "Her critics and defenders have built a wall around her work (and any discussion of disability in her work) by 'naturalizing' the content. In this, the images of disability have been lumped into one label, that of 'freaks'. Perhaps this has been done because her work tends to buck the contradictory trend of 'compassion' in the portrayal of disabled 'victims' practiced by other photographers. Although Arbus's work can never be 'reclaimed', it has to be noted that her work, and the use of 'enfreakment' as a message and metaphor, is far more complicated than either her defenders or her critics acknowledge" (Hevey 58). Even though Hevey has implied many things about Arbus, previously mentioned in this thesis, his point here is well recognized. Arbus'

imagery is very different from that of other disability photographs. Although the statement of a "wall" having been built up around Arbus is arguable, many critics miss the full complexity involved in her work. Perhaps, some of these complexities could not be articulated. "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 shown to look the same" (Sontag, O.P. 42). Because she is so nonjudgmental of what is usually considered horrific, and that she deals with the subjects in a kind, equal way, the viewer is allowed to do the same. -"Her photographs offer an occasion to demonstrate that life's horror can be faced without squeamishness. The photographer once had to say to herself, Okay, I can accept that; the viewer is invited to make the same declaration... Much of modern art is devoted to lowering the threshold of what is terrible. By getting us used to what formerly, we could not bear to see or hear, because it was too shocking, painful, or embarrassing, art changes morals- that body of psychic custom and public sanctions that draws a vague boundary between what is emotionally and spontaneously intolerable and what is not" (Sontag, O.P.

36-37). Arbus, is attempting to make the "others" the "same".

The act of taking a picture is looked upon as a way of controlling a subject. That the photographer will "aim and shoot" in that there is no negotiation with the subject, is potentially compromising. "That photographic recording is always, potentially, a means of control was already recognized when such powers were in their infancy" (Sontag, O.P. 156). Because photography is looked upon as a powerful tool, it makes the practice of photographing the people on the fringe of society very delicate. This is complicated by the conflicting expectations inherent in photography, as personal expression and apparent neutrality grapple for attention. The photography for which Diane Arbus is known defiantly plays with the boundaries of what is acceptable in photographs and what is not. The subjects in the *Untitled* series run the risk of being classified as victims twice over, once by society, and again by the photographer. The *Untitled* series is captured on such a personal level it would be hard to classify the individuals, other than that they are all in the same limiting situation- the mental institution.

"One is vulnerable to disturbing events in the form of photographic images in a way that one is not to the real thing. That vulnerability is part of the distinctive passivity of someone who is a spectator twice over, spectator of events already shaped, first by the participants and second by the image maker" (Sontag, O.P.,168-169). The viewer feels uncomfortable when looking at the photographs, because one realizes that it is our society that keeps these smiling faces locked up. Although the viewers are not subjected to a "disturbing" event per se, they are made witness to the judgmental injustice of others being incarcerated, perhaps against their will. The viewer is forced to look at what they are responsible for hiding. This is not a bunch of sad, despondent faces looking back at them. The photographs show smiling children and adults, staring with all of their kindness and humanity at the viewer. The oppressed are smiling at their oppressors. This makes the impact of the photograph sharper and the complicit guilt of the viewer all the more disturbing. Therefore, in the hands of the photographer work functions more effectively as a social document, than that produced by any social documentor. This ironic contrast with the social documentary tradition screams "injustice".

Conclusion

Many social changes have come about since Diane Arbus walked the halls of the residence home in her *Untitled* series. More children who are born with disabilities are mainstreamed with amazing achievements that were once thought impossible. The images that are in the *Untitled* series set a visual argument for changes such as these. The changes that have occurred over the two last decades could not all be attributed to the *Untitled* series, of course, but Arbus' work it has probably made a difference. Until the photographic image is considered to be nothing more than an opinion, rather than something like evidence, it will continue to have tremendous power. It has the power to oppress minorities, such as the disabled, but it also has the power to free. The very same aspect of photography that gives it its strength to oppress is the same aspect that enables artists, like Diane Arbus, the power to protect. This is exactly what Arbus accomplished in the *Untitled series*. It is a shame that she did not live longer to protect more.

THE END

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