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DIANE ARBUS

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INTRODUCTION

The desire and power to represent what the eye sees is something that mankind has been doing since early civilization. Photography is one of the most successful mediums in which the two dimensional represents the three dimensional.

In Arbus's work we see a metaphor which expresses the uneasy displacement of a society divided and dissatisfied with itself. She exposes the illusions we have of youth, harmony, of gender identity and innocence. She worked intuitively, drawn to the unconventional side of humanity. These bizarre people exercised a peculiar fascination over her, compelling her to seek out the truths behind their lives.

In turn Arbus's work holds a peculiar fascination over us. What makes someone want to explore these "off limit experiences"¹ Are we being voyeuristic if we enjoy her images. Arbus can be criticised for her voyeurism or praised for her compassion.

In this essay I hope to explore the work of Diane Arbus, I intend to examine her influences, and how she has affected our perception of what is acceptable in photography.

¹ Arbus saw her work as "off limit experiences".

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY YEARS

Diane Arbus (Numeror) was born in 1923. She was the second child, Howard, Diane and five years later Renee, the children of Gertrude and David Nemeror, owner of the large Russeks fur department store in N.Y.C. and Chicago. She had the type of childhood where she, and her family were protected from any sort of harsh reality, despite the effects of the 30's depression, there was a sort of uneasy oblivion to the rest of the world. Diane as a child was disappointed in people, she could see through all the adult roles that were played, her mother was the unsuspecting wife - whilst her father had affairs and gambled, but played the role of loving father and husband. Arbus was ashamed of the family wealth and as a child hated been shown off in the shop or to relatives. Of her childhood she says "One of the things I felt I suffered from as a child was I never felt adversity, I was confirmed in as sense of unreality which I could only feel as unreality. And the sense of being immune was ludicrous as it seems a painful one, it was as if I didn't inherit my own kingdom for a long time. The world seemed to me to belong to the world. I could team things but they never seemed to be my own experiences".¹ These feelings made her exist in a state of unreality rebelling against her background, as a child with her friend Phylis Carton she explored areas of the city Spanish Harlem, the Bronx, etc. these outings were ways of conquering her own curiosity, she would push her self towards terror, in an attempt to experience life.

The relationship Diane had with her brother and sister was a strange one. She and Howard had been very close, but on the arrival of the third child they drifted apart. Diane

showered Renee with loving affection possibly because she also craved such attention. The strangeness of their relationship lies in their inability to recognise or refer publicly to one another's talents, even as children, Diane was emphatic in her refusal to learn the piano; as soon as Howard took lessons. Diane was not very close to her own mother, as brought up by the tradition of the time, Nannys and Summer Camps. At the Ethical Cultural School, Diane was the type of child that floated between group and cliques in a popular fashion always retaining her independence.

Diane did some early drawings with Dorothy Thompson (illustrator for Russeks) . Thompson had studied under George Gross and brought Diane into contact with his satirical and critical views of humanity. Diane was a highly intelligent child, her father confided in his sister Bessie Shapiro, that she was possibly too bright for a girl. This type of attitude no doubt had a great effect on her, as throughout her later life Arbus was more confident about advice given from male friends, Avedon , Marris Israel etc) with the exception of the Lisette Model, her former teacher.

As a child Diane was very talented in everything she did according to her earlier art teacher Victor D'Amico, Diane felt she wanted everyone to think she was similar to them. Any recognition of her own talents made her uneasy she was constantly afraid of being discovered to be a sham. Arbus felt that she " wasn't a child with tremendous yearnings I didn't worship hero. I didn't long to play the piano or anything. I did paint but I hated painting and I quit right after High School because I was continually told how terrific I was..... It made me feel shaky. I remember I hated the smell of the paint and the noise it would make when I put my brush to the paper. Sometimes I wouldn't really look but just listen to this horrible sort of squish, squish, squish. I didn't want to be told I was terrific. I had the sense

that if I was so terrific at it, it wasn't worth doing."²

At the age of fourteen Diane met Alan Arbus, then working for Russeks, At an early age Diane decided that this was the person she wished to marry. At the age of eighteen Diane did marry initially much against her parents wishes. Alan had been very interested in becoming an actor but with post war economy it was decided that it would not be adequate to support a wife.

Alan had received a photographic training during the war and it was decided to enter fashion photography. Initially David Nemeror promised to pay for all their equipment but he reneged on his promise. However, they did a lot of work for Russeks. The Nemerors despite weekly meetings were not a very close family. None of the children got any financial support from the family, nor did Diane, Howard or Renee publicly recognise each others talents, Howard as a poet and Renee as a sculptress.

As a couple Diane and Alan Arbus were very secretive and private. This was possibly due to the inaptness of the match - age and socially. For Diane the attachment was probably comparable to a modern day 'Romeo and Juliette' - but with a happy ending.

Diane learned the initial technicalities of photography through Alan. She also attended classes given by Bernice Abbot, the first shots were informal ones of family and friends which she kept very private. Photography was an area where she could make her own decisions, outside of this her early life was concerned with pleasing others - her family, father and children. By being married she could fulfill others, and win approval in the role of mother and wife. She was afraid that talent would set her apart from others. By expressing herself through photography Arbus had chosen an area of art that was breaking new territory. It was fastly becoming

accessible to vast audiences through publication and advertising. America was seeing it's self mirrored by photography with Magnum, The F.S.A. Farm Security administration (documentation of America during depression - Dorothy Large) documentary style magazine such as Life Newsweekly, N.Y. Times.

Diane was very interested in literature, she read Jung, Willa Cather, Kafka and Dickenson. She enjoyed the theatre and cinema. Close friends (Alex Eliot) described her as some one who relished life and enjoyed scrutinising people. In all Diane led a very varied and exciting life exposing herself to many new and exciting art forms, the effects of painting styles - cubim, impressionism and expressionism did cross over into her own work, by the way she focused and the compositions she sought. These early years can be seen to be of formative importance. She used her work to try and experience emotions and incidents. Her early years were ones of reasonable stability and normality expected of any rich American family. The parents never seemed too close or too interested in their children. The fact that the family was Jewish was not of any considerable importance in Arbus's upbringing - although no doubt if the family had been very orthodox it would have given her a very different dimension to life. The only thing that stands clear is the sort of cold relationship Arbus had with her family. Her mother Gertrude suffered from deep depression, this was the one thing Diane sought her mother's advice on, wanting to know how she had overcome it, and dealt with it. Diane responded very quickly to anyone who suffered from depression, as she suffered from bouts of it herself.

The whole Nemeror family seemed to have that one thing, depression in common with each other. Howard used his writing to lift himself out of it and Renee her sculpting, but Diane seemed to suffer the most and like the others she used to work to get herself out of it, but the very nature of Arbus's

work, and it's interpretation could be seen as a depressing means to an end in itself. Diane eventually concentrated solely on her own work in an effort to gain control of her life, and rid herself of depression. Of the many people who were of importance and influence to Arbus's work two stand clear - Richard Avedon and Lisette Model.

Avedon like Arbus worked as a Fashion Photographer. Arbus had a great affinity with Avedon, his father a Russian Immigrant had owned a Fifth Avenue fashion shop. Both were Jewish. Arbus also worked with one of Avedon's former teachers Brodorich Brodorich had encouraged fashion photographers like Avedon and Irving Penn to be "serious", in their work .

Diane admired Avedon's engery, his work covered many areas fashion, rock stars, civil rights etc. Diane was critical of some of Avedon's methods, such as distortion, cropping and retouching negatives. His approach to portrait work was very different to hers, he worked at a much faster pace, with split second timing. Whilst Diane worked to achieve certain things, taking whatever amount of time was demanded by the subject or situation.

Lisette Model like Diane had been up by wealthy aloof parents Both women had come from a privileged background, both worked with a very individual vision. Perhaps it is through this "genteel" upbringing, they were overtaught by the social elequette of society, making it possible to be sensitive to the breaking of the kind of constraints and customs that were part of their social history. Both women in their work were fascinated by a leakage behind a social presentation (this can also be seen in Weegee's work).

Arbus admired work by fellow photographers who were probing or exposing, like Brassai and Bill Brant, Brassai's work on the secret Paris of the thirties and Bill Brant's on the

social class system in Britain - both Brassai saw that the camera was the perfect machine to use to expose the night world of Paris, in it's many different lights from the shots of prostitutes to views of Notre Dame. She admired Henri Cartier Bresson, and after reading his essay, she agreed with his idea of the decisive moment, when every thing falls into its own place, and training the minds life, by potentially seeing images as shots and using a camers (even if unloaded) to perceive the decisive moment of a situation. This was early on in her career and the decisive moment theory was not one she held onto.

In Arbus work we feel that her concern is more with the image she is making rather than the technical aspect of photography, she had little interest in technique but was very interested in the instrument she used. Her first camera was a speed Graphic given to her by Ben Lichtenstein, throughout her career as a photographer she used a Leica, Rolleiflex, Mamiya C33 to a pentax on the advice of Aredon. According to Garry Winogrand Diane would talk a lot about being imitated, and would often change camera in an attempt to change her images.

Arbus made a remark about her life and photography. She was born at the top of the social ladder and through the use of photography she was able to climb down the ladder as fast as she wanted to. For Arbus the camera held a certain power, an edge over others, the ability to fix a subject as never seen before.

Arbus strayed from the norm of what would have been expected of a product from the higher side of the social scale, I think this gave her the sensitivity to percieve many subtleties in the facades that exist for society and the weaknesses in our own view of humanity. Arbus did not have to answer to any peer group, as she had removed herself from any, apart perhaps for her husband Alan, but once he no longer was the

tour de force in her life, she was able to do anything through her work for herself. By having formed such a close relationship with Alan, at the age of fourteen, he was four years her senior, Diane immediately removed herself from the normal type of existence a girl her age would have had.

FOOTNOTES

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CHAPTER 2

MAGAZINE YEARS

When Diane and Allan Arbus worked as fashion photographers the first commissions were mainly for Russeks. In post war America fashion photography had escalated in popularity. Diane and Allan worked very much as a team often they would share the session between them. Those post war fashion years were ones of wild exhuberant style, but in their very private manner the Arbuss did not join in any of the social life connected with the trade.

The Arbuss enjoyed working with their models in the "action manner". They worked for Glamour, Vogue and Seventeen . On location they were discribed as being incredibly close they worked like strange twins, each having different and complimenting characteristics. Allan was discribed as being brisk, rational and organised in an anxious sort of way. Diane was dreamy, empirical and receptive to ideas yet distant in dealing with people.

Both Diane and Allan were prone to depressions, they worked with each other to overcome them . Allan would encourage anything to act as a distraction for Diane's moods. Allan made Diane immune to life by being very protective. From the age of fourteen he had interposed his ideology into her thinking, giving her his firm opinions on life and how she should present herself to the world. It was inevitable that the marriage would end. After her marriage, as an explanation why she did not take up photography seriously until later in her life she said "Because a woman spends the first block of her life looking for a husband and learning to be a wife and mother just trying to get these roles down pat you don't have time to play another role."¹

Diane was never much interested in the Feminist Movement possibly because she had at certain stages of her life been unquestionably happy to fulfill the roles that were questioned by that very movement. She had been the working wife in the 50's during the period of the mother-house wife heroine. Diane if anything preferred to use her sexuality to achieve certain things in her work, she often appealed to men by her ability to appear completely helpless. No doubt her work would have been very different had she been a man. Diane Arbus had her own sense of feminist values but they were for the individual as she did not feel women were united in a common cause.

In 1969 Arbus was asked to photograph some of America's leading Feminists Betty Freidan, Kate Millett and Ti Grace Atkinson. Arbus considered that if roles were reversed as far as she was concerned women wouldn't act any differently. In her shots of Ti Grace Atkinson. Arbus considered that if roles were reversed as far as she was concerned women wouldn't act any differently. In her shots of Ti Grace Atkinson the work was considered too shocking for publication, the work was frontal nudes. Atkinson was one of the most radical feminist believing in total separation of the sexes. Arbus was creating a male image of sexuality, using a radical feminist as the sex symbol.

Arbus displays this sexual irony in another portrait of a feminist. The portrait of Germain Greer (illus. 1) I feel is comparable to illus. 2. A young man in curlers at home on West 20th St. N.Y.C. 1966. The use of the close up shows skin textures which could belong to either sitter. Both have highly plucked eyebrows and eye make up. Not really the image you would expect of an ardent feminist. The young man is trying to push his image into becoming a credible woman, or like the feminist, who in turn is trying to shake off the role playing expected of her as a woman Germain Greer recounted her experiences with Arbus on that shooting as being.

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ilus 1 Germain Greer



illus 2 A young man in curlers at home on West 20th st.
N.Y.C. 1966

"Tyranny - Really tyranny..... if she'd been a man I'd have kicked her in the balls".²

In the fashion work most of the shooting was done by Allan, the styling was done by Diane and also the setting up of the models. The 8 x 10 format favoured by fashion photographers didn't suit Diane's needs, during the session Diane would work with her own leica.

The leica gave room for the snap shot aesthetic for Arbus. The dominance of the serious and fashionable art photograph has produced a reaction - recognition of qualities achieved by the snap shot. This runs parallel to the arrival of minimalism in painting and the alternative culture of the Sixties unformal spontaneous sincere a time to let things happen. This kind of snap shot work was more "real" for Arbus.

In 1951 Allan, Diane and her eldest daughter went for a year to Europe. From film work done in Italy at this period it is possible to assess Diane as the superior photographer. Diane made studies of street urchins and through this work it is possible to discern that Diane had a much more discriminating new point. Allan was the partner who was much more concerned with technical details.

From the fashion work, Diane's work with children was the most disturbing and unusual work with children ever seen for advertising. Even as late as 1968 on location in Jamaica for a feature on childrens fashion these qualities were still applicable e.g. illus.3, Ready for Action. These images would not have the same effect in the 80's as we're now used to the idea of androgynous looking children, possibly because childrens cloths have become more unisex. For the fashion work of 50's and 60's Diane did stray from the conventional childrens photo work - showing children as attractive and desirable products with which the viewer could identify.



Illus 3 Ready for Action

Arbus treated her subjects in a portrait manner e.g. illus. 4, Bill Blass. Designs for little ones, the viewer is primarily struck by the piercing stare of the girl. Arbus picked children that were unlikely to be model types. She explored role playing and character identity. John Szarkowski said that "her most frequent subject in fact was children - perhaps because their individuality is purer - less skillfully concealed - closer to the surface"³

Arbus in her fashion work was able to investigate the question of identity. The difference between a fashion shot being a portrait or a photograph lies in the relationship between the subject, role playing, identity and how this relationship is expressed in the image. Arbus did not supply Media images of doll like boys and girls. This could have been due to the kind of relationship she had with her own children, Doon and Amy.

Through her children she explored the type of relationship she would have liked to have had with her own mother. Feeling that her own mother had brought her up without any feelings of courage. Diane encouraged her own children to be completely independent and as adventurous as possible. It is ironic to see that after her death her "adventurous and independent" children remain very private and protective about any material published about her. Because of this there is very little information concerning the many strange situations which her own work brought her into.

Like many photographers of her time Diane used magazines as an important part of earning her living. It gave her greater opportunities and a larger audience. This kind of viewing made her consider her work in a more serious manner as often her magazine work equals the quality of her private work.

Working in the fashion magazine idiom meant she had to fulfill certain requirements she forced herself to devise new ways



BILL BLASS DESIGNS FOR LITTLE ONES
Harper's Bazaar, September 1962

Illus 4

of interpreting her images, she often approached editors with suggestions for their magazines. These years spent working for magazines made an overall unique experience that contributed to the development of her individual style, her technique and her perception of photography. After working in a very 'fake World', fashion a world concerned with illusions, in her own work she strived for truth through exposure and challenge.

Arbus often used the image of twins in her fashion work , in using the image of twins she is delving into the question of normality versus abnormality eg. illus 5 Identical Twins N.J. 1967. The image is one of personal identities, yet different persons, the image is pushed further because with just a quick glance the identical twins could be seen as Siamese twins, joined by the arm. This image of twins expands when she extends it into an image of triplets eg. illus 6, Triplets in their bedroom N.J. 1963, close inspection gives three identical girls of identical dress, yet ironically they have individual expressions. The cross reference of images that twins give causes us to do a double take. This kind of viewing is most important for fashion photography (illus. 5 & 6 are not considered part of Arbus's fashion work, but she did use twins for some of her magazine consignments).

If one were to try and put Diane Arbus's fashion work into a category, Nancy Hall Duncan's description would be the most apt "..... Stylized approach questions of self identity"⁴ The credit line 'Diane & Allan Arbus', continued on Allan Arbus's fashion work through to the early 60's some time after which Diane had worked with him.

During Diane's eleven year career as a commercial photographer, she never stopped working for magazines. This was for financial reasons and also because of the audiences attracted by magazines, photo-books were rare, as were photography galleries. Many of her contemporaries were working for magazines.



Illus 5 Identical twins Rosette N.J. 1967



Illus 6 Triplets in their bedroom N.J. 1963

Diane was lucky at this stage as many magazines were becoming much more design conscious and were redefining their editorial and visual contents. This type of atmosphere encouraged a good working relationship between art editors and photographers.

Diane was constantly suggesting projects for Esquire, Harpers Bazaar, N.Y. Times Magazine, Nora etc. Esquire was the first magazine to encourage Arbus to believe in her work. The vertical journey was a six part portfolio based on the strange character caught in the city life, as described by Arbus as "six movements of a moment within the heart of a city"⁵, the images ranged from natural treats, tatoed men, society, people a dwarf, etc to the final image of an unknown person in the city morgue.

Esquire had changed it's format from fiction to contemporary viewing of life, and with this was seeking out new young photographers. Esquire's founder Arnold Gingrich felt that the new role for photographers was "The existance of monthly magazines deadline precludes reportage as such, whether with a camera or with a type writer..... The photographer plays a dual role as historian and as commentator"⁶. Robert Benton (art director for Esquire) and Harold Hayes (Editor) were both strong supporters of Arbus's work. Arbus went on to do another portfolio of work for Esquire 'The Full Circle', but it was felt by Esquire to be too similar to the 'Vertical Journey'. They did not publish it.

The 'Full Circle' was a portfolio of five different people who lived in their own world by imaginery means. (illus 7 Cora Pratt/Polly Bushong was one of the subjects I shall be discussing later). The 'Full Circle' was published by Harpers Bazaar in November 1961. In Thomas Southall's opinion on his essay on Arbus's magazine work "it represented a significant development in Arbus's work as a portrait photographer, intorducing her as a writer and may have come

fulfilling her concept than any other magazine project she took on in later years".⁷

The advantage of working for the Press gave Diane the asset of the Press Pass, giving her credibility and access to situations and people since many of the projects that interested her required credentials according to Diane "It is terribly useful to flash credentials and sometimes Esquire's are good but other times their attitudes are too well known and just provoke suspicion".⁸

Image & Text.

The magazine work does not consist solely of fashion shots, but more of photo documentation, combined with text. This work is of great importance as we are able to introduce ourselves to Arbus's way of seeing. The combination of text and images initially enables us to become accustomed to any visual information which has not been easily available to us for close inspection.

For Diane often the story, or situation which surrounded the image was of equal importance to the image.

"There've been a couple of times that I've had an experience that's absolutely like a photograph to me even though it'sd totally non - visual".⁹ When Arbus's images are seen as pieces which incorporate writing the horizon of the image is broadened also the intensity and realism of an image are further. As an example of Arbus's work in this area I have chosen a sample from the 'Full Circle' portfolio. Often it is not enough to have straight portrature, the text gives more strength to the image (illus. 7 & 7a)

"Miss Cora Pratt, the Counterfeit Lady is fashioned of a set of teeth, an old wig, bead, brooches, feathers and whimsical inclinations of Polly Bushong who has been practicing this little hoax for nearly twelve years..... If Polly is a delightful witty and talented Dr. Jekyll, Cora is a guileless, rapturous and preposterous Mr Hyde, who commits the most unerring blunders and cheerfully treads where angels fear to. Once Cora appeared, by prearrangement with the host as the maid at an elegant New York Cocktail Party..... She surreptitiously sipped the drinks as she served them, blew the ashes out of the ashtrays in full view of the aghast guests, solicitously offered pieces of cheese on her out-

Illus 7 Miss Cora Pratt
The Counterfeit Lady



Illus 7a Polly Bushong



stretched bare hand to gentlemen who looked hungry, and fell asleep in a corner of the living room.....

Often Cora is reputed to be extremely wealthy and an eager stockbroker once spent an entire evening hopelessly wooing her fortune, while she blithely conversed about doughnut recipes and butterflies and Fire Day deodorant Pads.....

Cora has tweaked the moustaches of an uneasy diplomat, mentioned unmentionables in the Chase National Bank and sipped coffee from a soucer at the Plaza.....

Polly says that Cora lives in peabody, Mass, where she chases butterflies and bakes gingerbread in a cottage overlooking the garbage dump.

Cora speaks of Polly with utmost admiration and Polly is devoted to Cora, while Polly's mother cannot bear her and Polly's brother thinks she is divine.

Polly says "She is so dear and happy and pathetic, you'd be surprised how much you can tell about people by whether or not they take to Cora".

Even her best friend couldn't tell that Polly is Cora and although Polly knows what Cora doesn't only Cora can say¹⁰ anything that comes into Polly's head.₁₀

Arbus never gives any of her own personal opinions of her subjects, she states facts which have been supplied to her.. In a strange way this is similar to her style of photography, objective and straight forward in manner.

The balance of text and image has become an important part of our aesthetic, it has now been absorbed into our mass media culture, advertising which relies on slick prose have the ability to capture our attention, especially when we're in transit.

When looking at the effects of text and images, it is noted that, realism is an inherent quality in every good photograph, which has not relied on technical tricks such as cropping and over enlarging. Realism in photography is not just a comparison between that which is represented and the image prior to being represented. It is a complex relationship between the motive and the manner in which it's representation has been determined. It is this understanding of realism which gives rise to the paradox that I shall discuss at a later stage in the essay.

If we can let a picture draw us into itself we are by all accounts being drawn into its realism. By the inclusion of text alongside the images we can further depart from the image with a clearer prototype.

Text alone can "flatter and collude, investigate and invade. A reporter in any medium can be objective or subjective. A report can be made with or without the knowledge and agreement of the people involved..... But a photograph represents a scene an event a person..... It leads to an identification that is qualitatively different..... A photograph promises a reality"¹¹. So with the combination of text and images our knowledge is greater and for an audience knowledge is all important as it gives a feeling of power, our knowledge depends strongly on the information being true, i.e. reality. The manipulation of this information, text and image is at the discretion of photographer editors etc., and can be used to distort or control, but this depends on the audiences ability to accept what is being shown.

If a "realism" that has been represented has touched on some of our emotions, the "realism" can extend further and touch on something in our past.

Many of Aubus's images of freaks remind us of how we relate

to people who are different from our own self images by avoiding looking at dwarfs and handicapped children.

If an image can hold our imagination by relating to something in our past the image then becomes implicated in our present, and in part can then be referred to as an additional aspect of our past. The longer an image can hold our eye, demanding further inspection to penetrate through to the image, the more rewarding it becomes for the viewer.

Everything that constitutes reality is impregnated with meaning, these meanings are the products of history and society, they reflect our ideology. Every image has a meaning associates to it, whether literal or abstract.

Many images work within the context of having three menaings. The first menaing is at an informative level this would be the first glance which gathers all the information from the various elements within the image. The second level of meaning would be the symbolic level, this could be described as more sophisticated level demanding certain knowledge from the viewer, an ability to read such symbolism, this would give more significance to the work. The third level of meaning is one of a metaphor - where the image is able to carry an aesthetic significance. the number of times a viewer is prepared to read an image varies from one individual to another.

Too often a selection of work put into a show situation means that the audience is suddenly swamped by images, which are usually absorbed far too quickly. The images get treated in the same manner as the products of mass media are treated. Naturally by closer attention the image can come into its own and stand clear from the mass media.

The reading of an image, the ability to digest the meaning has many variables - such as our knowledge cultural and aesthetic feelings and how we incorporated this into our verbal language.

The written language can make clearer the intent of the artist.

According to Roland Barthes the inclusion of text within a photograph quicken the work so that the text becomes a catalyst. In this way the image becomes nothing more than an illustration, the audience would deduce the larger part of the information from the text. The text then just "loads" the image burdening it with more meaning than necessary or the opposite can happen with the image illustrating the text for more clarity. This manner of interpretation is one that implies all text and image should be defined by the constraints of mass media. Mass media can broaden our idea of images as symbols and metaphors, but it is important to be able to classify images and media as separate entities.

Arbus's use of text is an important aspect of her work, it shows her to be not only a photographer, it puts a greater perspective on her work as seen by illus 7 and 7a and the story of Miss Cora Pratt.

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CHAPTER 3

INFLUENCES

In 1957 the Arbus's marriage was breaking down. Allan's desire to work as an actor was becoming intense, especially as he was approaching his 40th Birthday. Diane was getting more depressed by working in the fashion world. They agreed that Allan would develop his own interests and continue to run the fashion work, while Diane would be free to do her own work, and look after the children Doon and Amy.

For a short while Arbus studied with Bernice Abbott. Bernice Abbott was a contributor to the development of high speed photographs in scientific investigation. She showed the importance of documentation in her book "Varnishing New York" a collection of images which show the changing architecture and life of a city. She was important in the development of Art photography and portraiture for the American eye. Abbott also recognised the genius and work of Eugene Atget's work, and also collected his work. It was the technical aspect of photography - speed, light, chemicals, which made Abbott believe that it would become the ultimate art form for the 20th Century. Abbott would often quote Goethe "Few people have the imagination for reality"¹.

Diane also worked with Alexey Brodoritch workshop this was partially to help her overcome her initial shyness. When confronting Broderitch was partly responsible for the recognition of Bill Brant, Lisette Model, Brassai, Penn and Avedon, through Harpers Bazaar. These photographers were people that Arbus felt a certain closeness to because of their style and approach. Arbus was aware of Brassai's book on the secret life of Paris - Paris of the 30's. Brodoritch had a saying "If you've seen something don't click the shutter"². This made Arbus more

aware of other peoples work, and the importance of developing her own way of seeing.

Arbus was also aware of Cartier Bresson's views and approach to photography. Bresson and Arbus had one thing in common, in their work they are both trying to be objective. Bresson felt that photography had not changed much since its origins, it had mechanically become easier, but the work that lay behind the initial selection of a photograph was what added further "error variance" to the function of the camera. As Cartier Bresson wrote.

"Subjects do not consist of a collection of facts, for facts in themselves offer little interest. Through facts, however, we can reach an understanding of the law that governs them, and be better able to select the essential ones which communicate reality"³. This relies on his 'decisive moment' when everything falls into place, but relies on the photographer to recognise this.

Cartier Bresson's images are very different from Arbus's, but for the most part his viewers are touched by his sincerity he sees the good in humanity, he shows us how we live our lives with our own funny ways and expressions.

After reading Bresson's essay on photography Arbus used to keep a camera at hand, (even if unloaded) and was constantly clicking away at it, she felt that it was training her eye.

Arbus stopped going to Brodoritchs workshops as she simply did not like the man. He was very critical of peoples work and had very little interest in their personal lives. Diane found him difficult and narrow minded. She was interested in exploring the mystery of existence and the secret aspects of peoples lives.

Diane took a formal interest in photography from a historical

basis. She admired the work of Robert Frank, and Louis Faurer. Both were contemporaries of hers. Their work was a new kind, a more rebellious view of America, with views that challenged the moral complacency of a society, which had become used to a more sentimentalized view of humanity, such as Cartier Bresson, Dorothy Lange etc. Diane was able to respond to this work as she did not believe in Stieglitz theory that the quality of a print was a good criteria for a good photograph.

Once Arbus had stopped going to Brodoritch's workshop, she spent a lot of time researching past photographers. Starting from the first photographs ever taken, to the invention of the daguerreotype, she like Balzac's theory on the daguerreotype, that every person in his natural state is made up of a series of images superimposed on one another, which the camera peels away. she was familiar with the dreaming portraits of Julia Cameron, the civil war work of Mathew Brady. For America, Brady's work was the first to show war as horrific, dirty and useless, previously painting had shown the romance of war, this kind of work brought a new relationship between people, photographer and subjects.

Arbus was aware of the work of Paul Strand and of Lewis Hine. Strand did some portrait work he never talked to his subject (even if they were famous, Picasso and Sartre), he didn't feel it was necessary for a photographer to know his subjects. Strand had worked with the concept of cubist inspired work in the 20's. Arbus was impressed by Hine's shots of children. Lewis Hine had been commissioned by the American Child Labour Committee to show the exploration of children. Hine was considered to be a reformer, he worked for causes which he felt needed to have their interests advanced. In his own words he wrote, "I wanted to show the things that had to be corrected. I wanted to show the things that had to be appreciated"⁴.

It can be seen that Arbus's interest in past and present

photographers, literature and art must have played an important part on the formative influences she exposed her self to. The knowledge of other artists is the most important, she had close friendships with fellow photographers whom she admired. Many of her contemporaries had common links either in their style, who they were taught by or what kind of commercial work they involved themselves with.

Lisette Model was one of the strongest influences on Arbus's life. In 1958 Arbus started attending Model's classes at the 'New School'. Model was one of the greatest influences on Diane. Model saw photography as an instrument to extend our vision, a combination of the eye and the camera. Model was aware of the technical details that were important to the making of a good photographer. Model was able to push Diane into situations where she really had to confront her subjects. Lisette shared the same interest in images of the grotesque, and the close scrutiny of humanity e.g. illus 8. Model shows her subjects as "extremes" "exaggerations".

Model is recognised for her own work, but is better known for her teaching and theories on photography. From looking at her work it is possible to see the type of influence she exerted over Arbus. Model was to remain one of Arbus's closest friends. The two women had a lot in common, both were the children of rich parents, she taught Diane a lot about the camera and its place in history.

Diane often sought Model's opinion, it was as if by pushing Diane to her limits, Model could make her do all the things which she herself would like to have done. Model always stressed the importance of the motive for taking a photograph.

"It is not important whether one likes or dislikes a photograph, the important thing is to find out what it is all about".⁵

The fundamental influence that Model had over Arbus, was



Illus 8 Fashion show New York By Lisette Model

the support that she gave Diane. Model was an influence over a number of photographers. Charles, Pratt, Larry Frank, and Rosalind Solomon. Model was able to give Diane the courage and support she needed.

Diane was also influenced by the work of Arthur Fellig (1899-1968), known as Wegee.

Wegee was an Austrian immigrant who worked as a freelance news photographer in New York. Wegee realised the camera's power to capture split second drama and intensify emotion. His influences on Arbus was not just his unique subject matter and his exposing close ups, but his zeal to photograph the city at all times and social levels.

Arbus did go out on an assignment with him. She admired the lengths he went to, and how he manipulated the negative to compose itself to his satisfaction. Wegee had a radio wired up to the Manhattan Police headquarters, this enabled him to be first at the scene of the crime. During a period of ten years he was able to document 5,000 crimes.

Wegee's images were taken with bright flash, e.g. illus 9. This concentrates the attention onto the figure, but we are aware of the background, it wipes out the effect of a central focal point, it gives a foreground and background focal point. Wegee liked the crude quality of black and white contrast. He felt it was similar to a dramatic lighting.

Wegee's motives were different from Arbus's. He wanted to cause sensationalism, he was also interested in creating elements of sarcasm, for this he used the rich and their society. Towards poverty Wegee was able to show images of compassion. Wegee was interested in showing "How in a city of ten and a half million people live in complete solitude"⁶.

Wegee felt that by working in such a candid fashion (he used



Illus 9 Lulu (From Wegee's People)

an infrared film and concealed his presence) and by working alone with people the photographer had the power to represent people as he so desired. The events which he photographed were short lived temporary moments which affected the lives of few, but gave us the opportunity to observe. These events did not alter our culture, but expose the terror and hopelessness that underlies it. When Wegee was asked about his method of work he replied that, "Working as I do with human beings, and I find them wonderful, I leave them alone and let them be themselves..... The trick is to be where people are"⁷.

Wegee's work has been published in a number of books, "Naked City", "New York 1945", "Wegee's People" and "Naked Hollywood". They remain an account of the private moments in anonymous peoples lives. After Wegee's death in 1968 Diane approached his common law wife and was able to look at a vast number of unpublished negatives and prints.

Another photographer to influence Arbus was August Saunders (1876-1964). Saunders was one of Arbus's historic influences, as the body of work which has won his recognition was done prior to World War II. Having decided to document the 'Archetypes' of every trade and profession of the Weimar Republic. It is one of the largest and most amazing studies of portiture ever attempted (approx. 500 portraits). Saunders managed to convey his sitters individuality by attention to detail and expression (e.g. illus 10 and 11). He relied on the use of his sitters surroundings. The range on individualization is amazing. Many of the sitters are able to express the difference in the social class which they occupy e.g. illus 11 and illus 12 Pastry Cook).

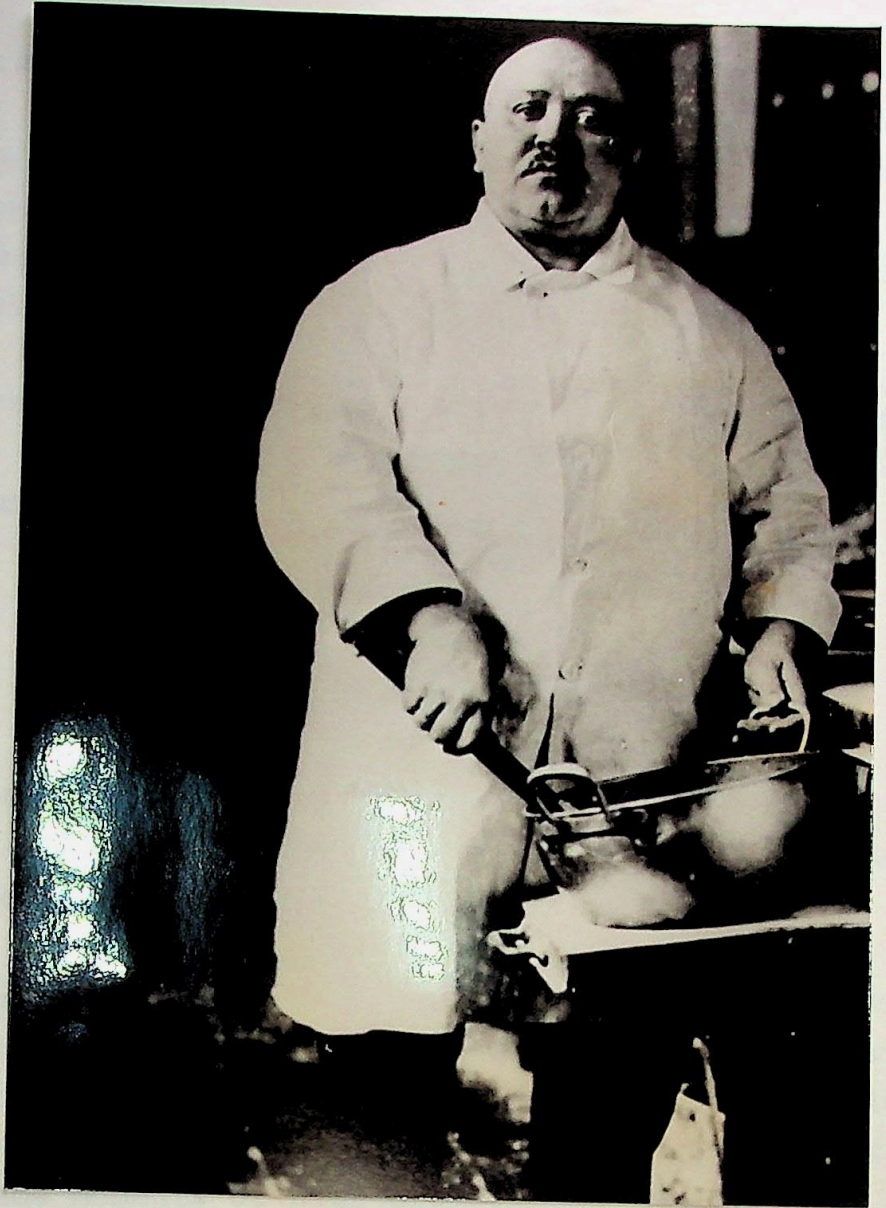
Apart from being a collection of revealing portraits, Saunders project littled Man of the 20th Century, he felt that in his portrait work he "never made a person look bad. They



Illus 10 Peasant girls Westerwasbid 1928



Illus 11 Korp student from Nuvemburg Cologne 1928



Illus 12 Pastry Cook

do that themselves. The portrait is your mirror, it's you"⁸.

These portraits also indicated the political unrest that existed in Germany prior to World War II. The work did not show the German Race in the same terms as the Nazi idea of an Aryan Master Race. On the pretext of Saunders Son's Socialism many of the plates were destroyed by the Gestapo. The project was discontinued.

Saunders project could easily have turned into a very impersonal account of humanity, but Saunders manages to show the camera's ability to reveal.

Richard Avedon and Marvin Israel were considered by Diane to be her "mentors", they were the only two people whom she showed her work in progress to.

Avedon's fashion work was the most popular in the 50's and 60's. Avedon has managed to reflect the moods and fashions of our society with an innovative and creative style. Avedon's fashion work is most dramatic, the occasion for wearing certain clothes became moments of high drama.

In the 50's Avedon's work changes, he rarely used daylight and started working from the studio for Avedon working in this manner "it isolates people from their environment..... they became in a sense symbolic of themselves"⁹. The development of Avedon's portraiture has paralleled that of his fashion work. Avedon's portraits are strong on their emotional impact. In Avedon's work it is he who reveals the subject, he shows his subject as they are seen by him in his studio and his poses. His subject agree to this, probably because of who he is. For

Illus 13 Isak Dinesen Writer Copenhagen Denmark 1958



Illus 14 John Martin dancer N.Y.C. 1975

Avedon photography is a mental activist. His view is very clinical, showing people without their props. Avedon's work has never been convention, he did a series of very revealing shots of his father whilst he was dying. In illustration 13 Avedon reveals the black negative edge in each print, it is a way of technically demystifying photography the steeper angle is a quality belonging to the amateur.

Avedon's approach to work is very different to Arbus, he manages to be a commercial success and still attend to his own request. He worked in a much faster way, concerned with the finished print, not the relationship of sitter and photographer. Patricia Bosworth says that "he would be influenced by Diane - by her patience her endurance, by her elaborative, confrontational portraiture organized around a single focus, the face"¹⁰.

Arbus often stopped by on Avedon and sought his advice. At her funeral Avedon stated that he wanted to be an Artist like Diane Arbus.

In Halla Beloff's Book Camera Culture Sanders is referred to as the "Anatomist" dissecting society. Arbus is referred to as the "Pathologist" dissecting the diseased areas of society for closer examination, and Avedon is referred to as the "Surgeon".

FOOTNOTES

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PUBLIC VIEWING

For some people Arbus's work can be seen as playing with photographic convention, her work does not alter the code of photography, or challenge our visual aesthetic. This opinion is one that Susan Sontag believes in, on writing about Arbus she says "Arbus's photographs - with their acceptance of the appalling suggest a naivety which is both coy and sinister, for it is based on distance on privilege"¹.

But Arbus's work is clearly understood by many, her motive for her work is not as Sontag suggests. Arbus's work makes a social - political point. No community wants to be described in her terms, her subjects would probably not see themselves in those terms either. They believe in their own identities, and the 'norm' of their lives. But we the audience can see that it's not true, Arbus creates a dramatic irony.

Through Arbus we can look at transvestites, transexuals, freaks and retarded people. Normally these are people we can not view, or observe. We know of their existence and they do hold a certain fascination, or revulsion over us. When we do get to view these people in reality, we have a very stereotype set of emotions which we reach with. Through Arbus we can observe and not feel any guilt. Arbus shows us these people the way she has seen them.

In Arbus's work everything eventually has an insane or abnormal quality. She exposes us to things which she wants us to see. Her view never changes, it always challenges us by the poses of her people. This I feel is a vital element of her work, it gives us an inside out, or upside down look at the world, a world which we want to accept as being all fair, and all good. Arbus makes us realise that such a simplistic view is inadequate.

The desire of the human being to be documented is something

common to us all, a way of learning a living proof of our existence. All of Arbus's work was taken with the knowledge and consent of her subjects. In her work with retarded children Arbus expressed dissatisfaction, as she knew that the subjects were completely oblivious to her documenting them. There is no feeling of intrusion, when you look at this work, more a feeling of being a passive observer of people who are trapped in an eternal childhood. All of Arbus's subjects have attitudes that vary - brave, sullen, defiant, yearning or complacent, yet the impression that her subjects leave us with is one of sadness. Her subjects strick us as victims sad and pathetic. They arouse our sympathies. It is telling that this is the emotion that can be araised by any single piece of her work. Despite this her subjects must never seem to feel too much, no matter what their situation is, this would make it impossible for them to be so frankly observed. for Arbus, freaks were the aristocrats of society.

"Most people go through life dreading that they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've passed their test in life. They're aristocrats"².

Arbus recognised a social structure which existed amongst freaks - those who were born with a difference, and those who achieved it.

Throughout her work we are aware that Arbus has conquered her fear of a situation or subject, and is able to dominate them. Accounts of working with her by such people as Germain Greer, Ti Grace Atlinson, Vogue, Model, Vive, indicate that she was very demanding and aggressive. Arbus saw her camera as both a weapon and a shield with which she could confront society. Her siter Renee Sparkia said of Diane, "The camera was like a shield, she seemed to be hiding behind it. I think she imagined that she was invisable, everyone would forget that she was there"³. The camera was the instrument with which Diane could be protected by, but at the same time she could use it in an aggressive fashion. She was usually to be seen with a camera at hand.

The danger in Arbus's ability to dominate her subjects lies in the fact that the images leave us with the same range of emotions. This is debatable, we can be dulled by the repeating emotion, and because immune to the effects of the image, or the opposite can happen, we can become more and more aware of the overall effects the image has. Arbus greatly respected Lisette Model's advice that, "The more specific you are the more general it'll be"⁴.

In Diane's circus work, and side shows. We respect her victims of nature. The subjects can be seen as gallant in their ability to face the camera. The challenge is in our ability to view them. They devote themselves entirely to facing the camera whatever else is involved in their lives at that moment is unimportant. The stance of straight frontal poses shows their acceptance of themselves by the conventions of portraiture photography. Any of the positions could be one that any other person in the world could assume. This kind of posing makes a claim for personal identity, and social acceptance implied by the studio portrait. Arbus's work doesn't just stand on professional portrait, it includes a combination of snapshots and documentary to give an intimacy of scenes. None of her work was the product of a studio situation. her subjects expect something of us but situation for the most part doesn't. The subject is showing us their identity in an environment which we can accept as true.

"It seems necessary to keep insisting that an image can not transport its message unless it acquires primary form at its primary level"⁵. This quote from Rudolf Arnheim I feel can be used for Arbus's work. This primary level of form can be seen as any of the three sets of values that are suitable for documentation photography. Arbus's work is in sorts a documentation of the world. The world which we often refuse to look at, or which we are unaware of.

Authenticity is a basic requirement of documentation. This

requires that the scene has not been tampered with. The next basic requirement is correctness the photographic image should correspond to what the camera saw. The final requirement is that the audience can accept that the image is true. We can refer to the image as a statement about fact, which the picture is supposed to convey, and not as simple as a statement about something which was present in front of the camera. If we see Arbus's work as a collection of images that are presented to us via the camera we would be looking at a mass of clinical / medical images. Arbus's work is about real people documented by her interpretation of them which we can accept as true. The view she presents us with is a challenge for us.

Arbus's central theme is "The futility of Artifice"⁶ the effect of Arbus's work relies on us knowing that the people she presents us with are real. For Arbus this reality has to be made clear in one image only.

Her earlier work of nudists and nudists camps examples illus. 15 and illus. 16 is undoubtedly a reaction to the constraints inflicted on her by fashion photography. This work is a breaking down of the fashion myth yet it remains a clinical look at reality. It is obvious how ugly the grim reality of people thinking that they are the children of nature, is how these people clash with nature. These people are never really free from the trimmings of the real world from which they are trying to escape. Arbus could see through the deception of these nudists camps. "After a while you begin to wonder. I mean there'll be a empty pop bottle or a crushed bobby pin underfoot, the lake bottom oozes mud in a particularly nasty way, the out houses smells , the woods look manky. It gets to seem as if way back in the garden of eden after the fall Adam & Eve had begged the Lord to forgive them and he, in his boundless exasperation had said 'alright' then said ' stay in the garden, get civilized, procreate, muck it up', and they did."⁷ In this work Arbus illustrates the ugliness of ageing bodies and unwanted flesh . This clash of artifice against nature is the force of Arbus's keen sensitivity.



Illus 15 Retired man and his wife at home in a Nudist Camp
one morning N.J. 1963



Illus 16 A family one evening in a Nudist Camp Paris 1965

Arbus's approach to her subjects , her ability to gain their trust, goes further than just a mere photographic approach. The nudist work is more than just a camera record, or a beautiful composition.

The nudist work I feel is work which a lot of people could identify with . One wonders what this collection of images did to the lives of the people illustrated. Many of us would not admit to having any desire towards being a nudist, as it is socially not quite the right thing , there is a certain stigma attached to the whole notion of it. The nudist work challenges our idea of the image of children of nature. In reality they are vastly overweight drooping flesh and not too attractive looking.

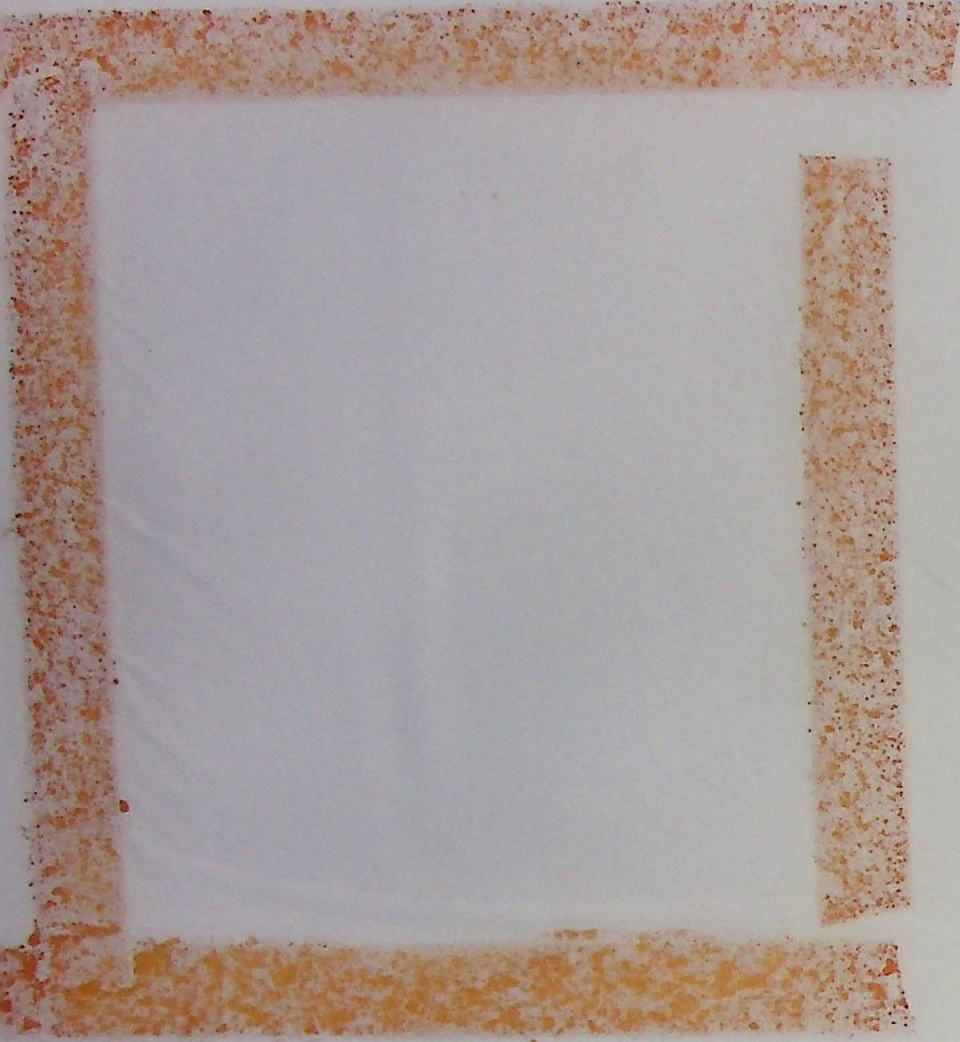
The subject matter does interpret our vision the illustrations I have chosen (15 & 16) show how this happens. The size of each person in illustration 16 has an immediate effect on us we are faced with something that conflicts with an idea of what we idealised nudist into being. Our change in vision through challenge is the result of the reality perceived by Arbus in the nudist collection. Arbus's images of the artificial illus. 17 & 18 show us that the artificial world which we create is a romantic lie. These places when seen as empty devoid of human beings emphasises their own delusions towards reality.

Illus. 17 is a photographic irony. A photographic image made of a photographic image of outside natural world which now exists in a man-made interior all by deceptive terms. This image has a surrealistic feeling. Everthing in the image is symbolic of the natural surrounding so many of us desire, beauty open space etc. but we are meant to be able to appreciate this as an interior.

As an image without a title illus. 17 would look more like an empty stage set but given that it is part of an interior the image becomes a reflection on the absurd elements of our



Illus 17 A lobby in a building N.Y.C. 1966



Illus 18 A castle in Disneyland Cal. 1962

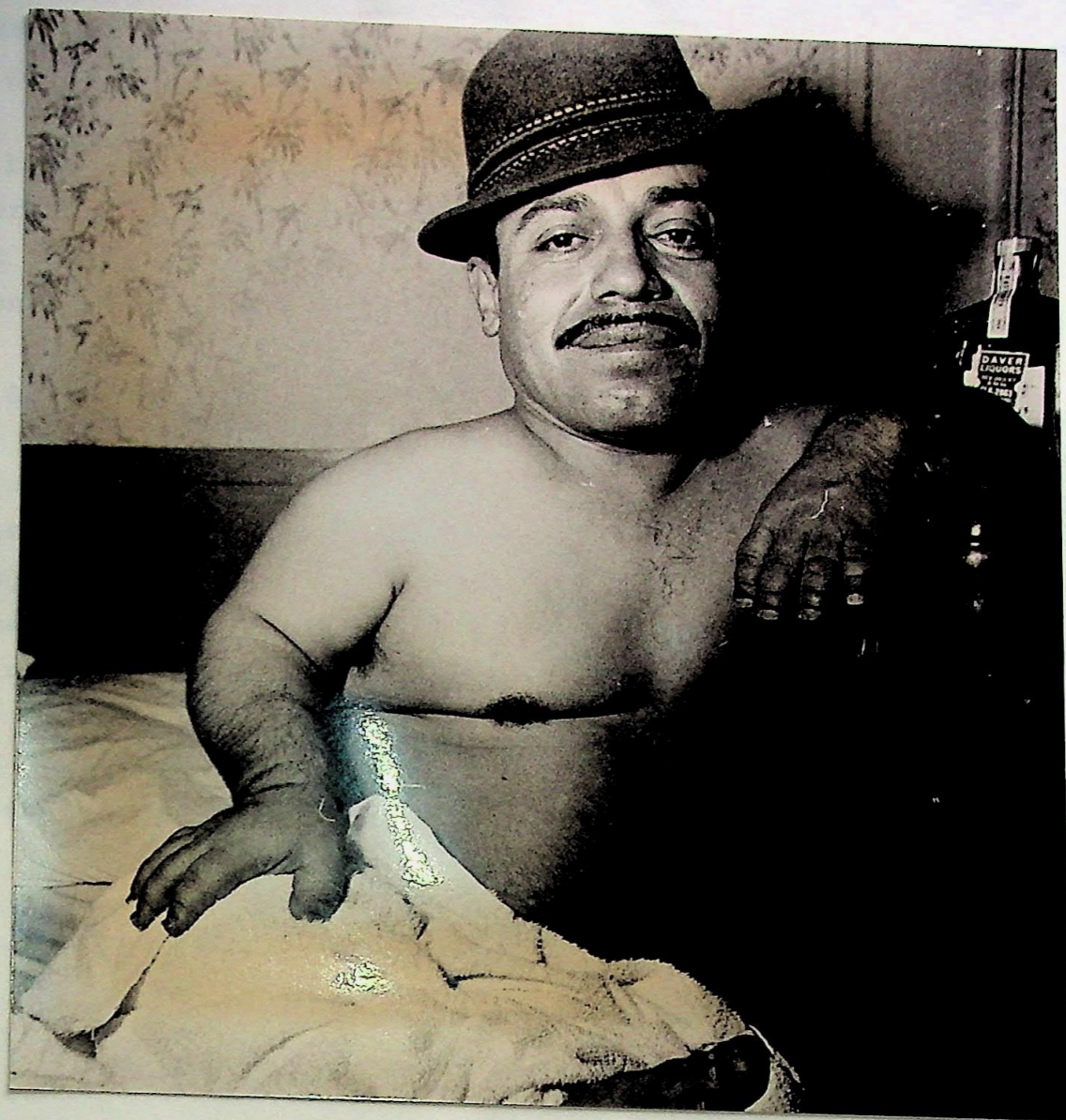
society which we adapt to. It is a metaphor for living in a fast world. (As in illus. 18). If you live in the city but like the country then exist in both. If you live a dull life and you crave enchanted castles and dreams then make your holiday in a place that satisfies this. Arbus in an effortless way, by simply images, shows us the futility dreams.

By showing us "What is personal and social and presented as if it were abstract and sociological"⁸ Arbus questions the artifice of the world which we live in.

ANGLES

In Arbus's shots of freaks, the images are usually taken with a hard light, from a close up point of view, e.g. illus. 19. Arbus is justified in using the flash as according to Max Kozloff the flash is 'a great simplifier. Its brilliant light falls off rapidly as it leaves the camera and imposed on the structure of the picture a light planarily against a dark background. The character of flash light from the camera is profoundly artificial, intrusive and minutely descriptive.'⁹.

In illus. 19 there is no attempt to camouflage or beautify the dwarf. This sharp image is uncomplicated. The subject is startling and requires us to inspect it closely. By looking at the dwarf with such uncomplicated close inspection, we are at the same time made very aware of our association with dwarfs, historic little toys of court films, dwarf throwing competitions etc. But this image presents us with a very macho figure, the hat, the whiskey, and the setting, a rumpled bed. There is no belittling of his sexuality. Indeed this is one image which I feel Arbus achieved through the use of sex. The dwarf has a very satisfied assured expression. This photograph has a certain 'endless' quality, this one image requires us to relate



Illus. 19 Mexican Dwarf in his Hotel Room N.Y.C. 1966

it to other proceeding events. For some this would be a voyeuristic quality, but I feel it gives her work a strong sense of documentation, a glimpse of what could have taken place between the photographer and the subject.

By letting her work be interperated as an event in a persons experience, Arbus installs a further sense of realism to the work removing it from being merely illustrative, giving a strong intelluctual and emotional level.

In Arbus's group shots (illus. 16 & 20) and her interiors, the work is often done in a much more diffuse light. Another device used by Arbus (eg. illus 20) is the low angle shot this gives a much more dessolate atmosphere, and devoid of human beings, it also turns the space into a very confining cube, emphasised by the tree being cut shot. It also make the tree the main focal point in the image.

This use of a very dominant symetrical composition invariably suggests an impersonal documentary approach to her subject matter. The ability to face the subject straight on gives more force and presence to the work. Arbus does not allow the technique become affected, she uses it as it seems to be the most appropriate way of dealing with her subject matter. It does not give any sense of intrusion made by her on her subjects.

The use of fairly banal settings, is for the subtlst effects eg. illus. 6. By focusing on the figures (the triplets) and having banal backgrounds Arbus is able to create an almost surrealistic element. By juxtapositioning of other elements Arbus is able to make constant references to the main image in the picture. These elements are often the sitters choice. It is strange to see that in illus. 21 the woman resembles her baby monkey this also happens in illus. 22 the Lady Bartenders hair is an exact replica of the dog's body. Arbus shows her facination in depicting people with objects or things that they cherish. The baby monkey has become the woman's baby.



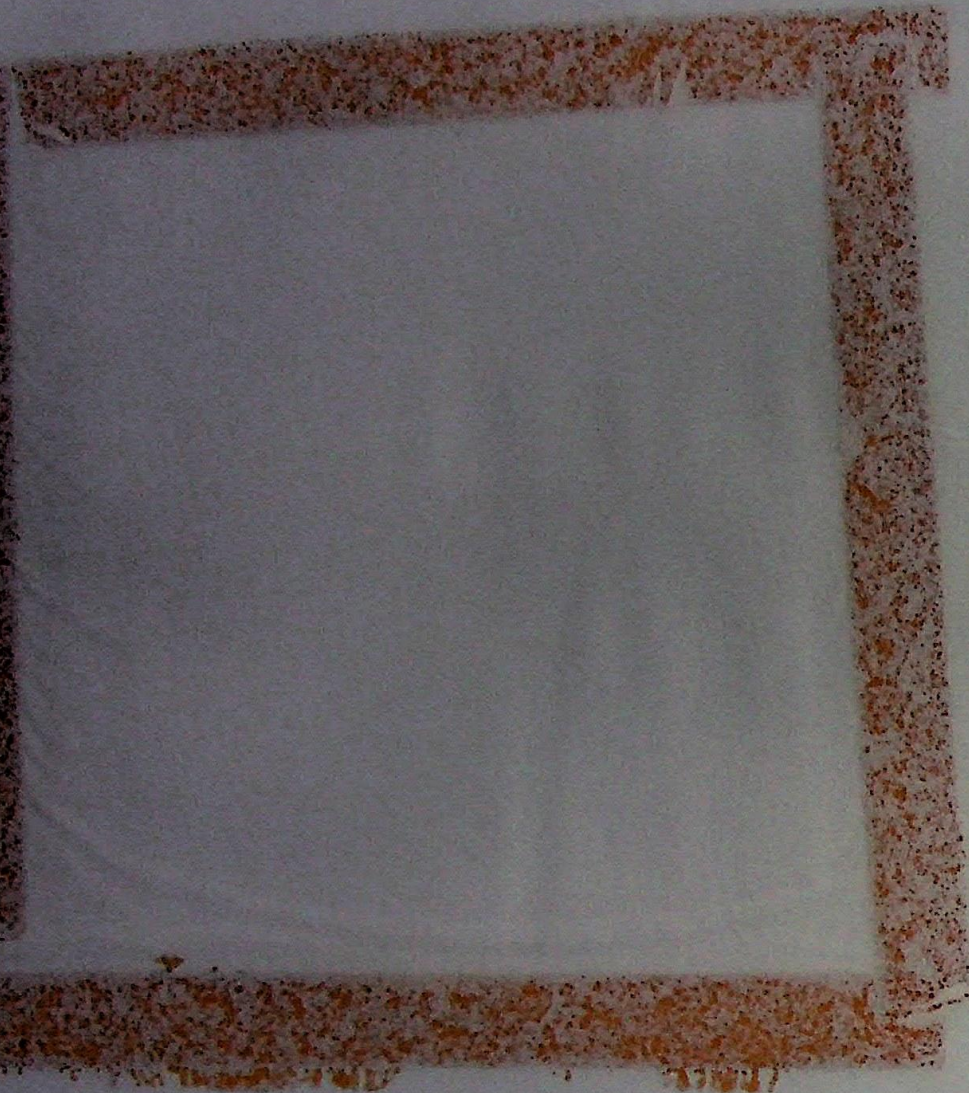
Illus. 20 Xmas Tree in Livingroom in Levittown Li 1963



Illus. 21 A woman with her baby monkey N.Y. 1971



Illus 22 Lady Bartender at home with a souvenir dog, New Orleans 1969



These are people and the objects the love. For Diane "Love involves a peculiar unfathomable combination of understanding and misunderstanding"¹⁰. In a number of pieces it is possible to see a resemblance of an almost identical nature to others in illus. 23 The Jewish giant and his Parents could inhabit the room with the Xmas Tree (illus. 20), both have the lamps in the room wrapped in plastic. Illus. 23 is considered to be one of Arbus's most important photographs.

Arbus manages to capture the complete look of horror on the faces of Eddie Carmel's parents that their child is a monster. It is ironic that the chairs in the room have covers on them, as if to protect them from the everyday wear and tear a child gives to it's surroundings. Children usually consider their own parents to be giants, figures of power in their world, all of this is completely reversed when the giant looks down at his own parents.

Diane photographed Eddie Carmel for over ten years. The first shots were of him at work in his insurance office. Then she took some of him in Washington Square. Eventually Eddie invited Diane home to his parents house. Over the year they build up a close friendship with Eddie confiding in Diane his desire to be an actor.

Diane Arbus was working at a time when art was looking for new trends. America was looking at itself in a more harsh light. People were speaking out against the Vietnam War. Diane work is too personal to be considered overly political, when compared to political work by contemporaries such as Don Mc Cullin who made the horrors of the Vietnam War a visual reality through his serious documentation of it. Arbus was interested in the Vietnam War and did attend rallies. A few pieces are political, such as illus. 24 & 25. Because of Arbus's adsorption with her subjects it would have been impossible for her to expand into this type of area. Arbus favoured freaks who were natural freaks, if they were not, they were usually so absorbed in

being 'odd' that they had achieved a natural credibility as freaks. Nor would Arbus work with mutations or war victims. This indicates her sincerity in her subjects, due to the trauma that possibly would have surrounded their deformities. Of the subjects she worked with, many of them were objects of public curiosity.

When Arbus is aggressive with her subjects, it was the 'Normal' people who were victims of it. Arbus's drive for work came from fear, and the desire to confront that fear by using her camera. The fear of going into strange and difficult situations, we can see that Arbus manages to overcome this fear in her work. Diane Arbus is unique in her work. The work is not merely illustration on other people's lives, but informative analysis of the people depicted, how they wish to be perceived. The audience in turn affects this overall image by understanding or rejecting it as an alternative form of reality, a reality which we could easily be part of. Arbus's work is something for our society to see itself reflected in. The questioning quality of Arbus's work is both a strength and very unique. Her work can be upsetting, but it always asserts itself on us demanding a reaction. If the reaction is ultimately a rejection of the image, then it is not wasted but can be seen as an achievement. Because the viewer can be shown to be timid and too scared to be confronted by something which upsets their ideology. The nudists are more than fat or silly looking people, they are us with all our pomp even when naked. The freaks are the people that we are scared of possibly because it could have been us, just by a missing gene or hormone. By traditional standards we parcel up the emotions through sympathy. Arbus removes this traditional emotion and replaces it with a question mark, one of our own making. This I feel is reason alone in calling her an individual and unique photographer. Her ability to approach such subject matter has altered the course of photography.

Arbus has brought us into contact with a wide variety of her



Illus. 23 A Jewish giant at home with his Parents in the Bronx
N.Y. 1970



Illus. 24 Patriotic young man with a flag N.Y.C. 1967



Illus. 25 Child with a toy hand grenade N.Y.C. 1962

"off limit experience" in her work, challenging us to question the stances and environments of these people.

When looking at Arbus's work, one doesn't just turn away with a vague notion about her work. The features and faces of Arbus's subjects have an uncanny ability to remain on our minds. We are not left with the artistic image, but a very demanding image of a previously unfaced reality. Arbus's threat to us all, her images of normal people could be made up by anyone of us, her audience. Arbus believed in the notion that all bare facts are true and all deceptions are lies. This is borne out by the manner in which she approached and worked with her subject. Each subject has at some time held great fascination over her. This kind of involvement has given great unity to her work. When looking at Arbus's work, of already familiar with her the view expects something, another challenge perhaps this is due to the unity of style, image and manner we experience in her work. For Diane "if you scrutinize (subjects) really closely enough if in some way you really get to it, it becomes fantastic"¹¹ Arbus's images of transvestites and transexuals question our ideas about sexuality. For the most part the women/ or impersonator, are usually strong domineering aggressive character, whilst the men are timid eg. illus. 26.

Apart from exploring sexuality this image raises our perception on how people fulfill roles. The positive and negative aspects of relationship. This unlikely couple could be more than just friends, they could be mother and son. It is a rearrangement of expected roles. The 'weak' become the strong. In this image Arbus also manages to take a knock at the whole fashion aesthetic, a redictous element of this image is the woman's hand high shelt of hair, making her look more dominant, more of a masquarade of feminity. As Amy Golding say of Arbus's work "what is universal in Arbus's vision is that we all support illusions about ourselves and we're all afraid the disparity shows"¹².



Illus. 26 Two friends at home N.Y.C. 1965

FOOTNOTES

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CHAPTER 4 - PART 2

ANGLES

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CHAPTER 5

THE PARADOX OF PHOTOGRAPHY

What we see when we look at Diane Arbus's work, is what was seen through the lens. The lens of a camera only acts as a frame for a small portion of what can be seen by the eye. Arbus uses her camera to define the view of her eye. By taking a picture the framing and content make up the image. The framing of a painting is just an edge to the overall image. For photographic images the concern with what happens after the chosen portion of the image is viewed continues. We are aware of the time sequence, The image captured in a moment is long since gone, and we have a curiosity as to how it continued. The camera is an extension of the eyes the physical skills of Arbus as a photographer are important, as the camera relies solely on her eye. Therefore the mind that controls the eye is of great importance, it has to express completely the intent of the artist. This is where the paradox begins. We feel we are looking at truth reality - the camera never lies. But we're not, we're looking at the chosen personal point of view of an artist. Arbus is not concerned with the beauty of the print, she documents for the consideration of others. How her work was perceived by others was of great importance to her.

The demands that are placed on a photographer are heavy ones. People want a product/image which they themselves cannot produce. These are almost expectations which make a photographer a heroic figure for society to look up to for images that will ultimately exalt. This sort of role can only be filled if the observer is comfortable with such as Cartier Bresson, Lartique etc., but any work that is liable to cause confusion or embarrassment is likely to imitate. Work which has this reaction is often rejected.

In pierre Rouve's criticism of Diane Arbus. Hayward show (June 1974). The show was criticised at being a "Relentless sadism of the thematic choice"¹. It was seen as the left overs from the awakening out of hte Great American Dream, very much out of place for anyone with fine sensitivities. Rouve felt that mankind had, had its own series of monster, such as Hitler, Stalin, etc. Popularity for Arbus's work was (according to Rouve) due to "The success of such unashamed photography is due to the fashion redemption of all deriant states of mind"²

In fact Arbus has an uncanning ability to show us images of people which we would have a natural curiosity about, part of this is so we, (because we want to), be reassured by our own normality But ironically it doesn't work, like that, because in showing us these 'freaks' she also shows us how bizaar our own normality is in contrast it all becomes a subtle reversal, what is mad is no longer mad.

Les Levine in his article 'Camera Art' discusses the role of the Artist, as some one who when showing an audience that they are no better than the audience is immediately criticised and rejected as producing 'bad art'. Arbus can be seen in this way her very simple view point, and the few technical details she employs could be easily acheived. The work that is as a photographer, the drive that went behing her, and her intent is not something which could be mass produced. But in a very simple way her work could if removed from life styles, conceivable by produced by any number of people. By this, Arbus is telling us that she is no better than any of us, or as Les Levine puts it "Being no better than they are is a state of madness, as far as they can see. Now you give them something which is a serious problem; a model of yourselves as themselves. They have some understanding of that modes and they start to see the nature of the model. So at that point they just automatically assume something has gone wrong. That they are not witnessing what they are supposed to witness"³

Audiences expect an artist to create a situation which does not exist in their lives, a suitable image which will fit in with the aesthetic of the sublime, picturesque and beautiful. The desire is strong for something which will take us away from our own lives.

Arbus uses her camera to express feelings and experiences, through this 'state of sense', these emotions are transmitted to others. When looking at Arbus's work you feel that given that situation, you too could have produced an image, this lets us question our own aesthetic on the image, in less of an alien way. Her work is no longer something to look at, but something we could potentially be involved with. For an audience this is an advantage, so long as this reasoning just remains a feeling, and we do not force it into action. This takes the art of photography out of the realm of unusual or isolated experiences, and puts it into the range of credible experiences. "The work should act as a feedback mechanism to the viewer's own mode of himself. Photography which relies on the aesthetic pressures of one sort or another usually fail".⁴

As the values of work such as Arbus's can not usually relate to the aesthetic pressures which apply to other arts. The value of photography lies in its instantaneous characteristics. So that mind and eye work simultaneously, to capture a moment of real experience and vision. Arbus's work is fundamentally about experiences, we go to see her experiences of something we are curious about. This could be considered voyeuristic of her audience but Arbus does satisfy our curiosity, and as such the voyeuristic tendencies of her audiences are not wrong. The best of photography deals with subjects that have not been dealt with through painting or sculpture, it no longer has immitational qualities. This work, new images has the power to make us question our society.

Arbus's work confronts us and demands just that sort of attention

Her work questions how the contemporary mind percures information her experiences are most suitably expressed through photography This conceptual process of mind/eye/image/artist demand that the photographer and viewer have to merge to a common understanding for the image to be effective. By committing suicide Diane Arbus made very clear to her audience the integrity she felt for her subjects, and made clear her intent in the work produced. Her death was to her work comparable to the deaths of Sylvia Plath, James Dean and Yukio Mishim. The culmination of a personal and political conflict which has effected our perception of Arbus as an artist, it is without a doubt that had she not committed suicide she would not be as well known today. The removal of the artist from the work gave the images the seal of authenticity which Diane Arbus strived for in her working life. Arbus was seen by her contemporaries as an adventuresome talented photographer. Initially her work was not given much praise as seen in the criticism of the new documents show.

Peter Bunnell was able to recognise her ability to overawe her audience through her images " What disturbed and disoriented people most was the pictures power to dominate".⁵ For some she was seen as the "Wizard of odds".⁶

The critics view of Arbus ranged from admiration. But initially more of domination, perhaps afraid of the public criticizing them for being voyeuristic. It would seem as if they imposed a character on Arbus and were washing their own hands of her in a feeble attempt to keep her questioning reality from their doors.

It is possible to see the influence of Arbus on young photographers her classes were never empty and square formal with flash has been used by many photographers since.

The New Documents Show was similar initial impact to Robert Franks 'The Americans'. as Saul Leiter says " There wasn't

much overt excitement, but the residual effect was enormous"⁷.

For co-exhibitor Garry Winogrand the New Document Show Arbus's work " did suggest some of the pure potential of photography"⁸. The New Document Show was with Winogrand, Lee Freeland and Arbus, most of the shows attention was directed at Arbus's collection of thirty pieces consisting of midgets, transvestites and nudists, Arbus's work was set apart from the other two photographers. For Walker Evans Arbus was the 'huntress' her ability to capture/photograph whatever she felt a need to and with such conviction was her strongest asset.

For Walter Hopps (Director of the Corcoran Gallery in Washington). "Arbus was a central and crucial figure in the renaissance of still photography - absolutely uncompromising in her vision..... her importance stemmed from the fact that in style and approach she was radically purifying the photographic image".⁹

FOOTNOTES

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CONCLUSION

"Each moment in history has its own art form of artistic expression, one that explains the political climate, the intellectual concerns, and the taste of the period"¹. Taste is as always everchanging and unexplicable. It is an element in society that indicates the characteristics of the social structure of each stage of change.

Each society develops artistic expressions that are born out of the needs and demands of the dominant social class from nobility to the last of the bourgeois. This change in control by class also brings about a change in the techniques used by artists. The formulas used by earlier photographers have become more involved, it is not enough just to illustrate, nor is it enough to simply have an aesthetic of beauty. Diane Arbus shows us freaks. As the tastes of society became more refined, and freaks were not considered forms of amusement, it was considered inhumane for freaks to 'explore' their differences in side shows such as Hubbard. Coney Island N.Y. have been closed down, but our own curiosity about freaks can not be shut down. Arbus shows us in the most humane way a glimpse at the existances of lives and people that are different from us, she shows us that often the apparent differences are in fact not as large as we expect. Her ability to show us these similarities make her a sensitive artist, unlike the side shows she is not exploiting the subjects, merely showing us. For our society the involvement and intent of the artist has to remain very clear, for photography to work it can no longer just illustrate through the eye of the camera.

Photography has become a necessary element of society, in our culture, science and industry it has become such an indispensible part of our daily life that it is often over looked. It exists in an area of society where it crosses all borders of class, and can be found everywhere. Photography can express the values

of the dominant society and still have Mass appeal. It has the ability to distort reality depending on the photographers view point. Photography does not rely solely on its importance as an art form, but also on its ability to sharpen our idea, influence our thinking and define our society, this is achieved in the work of Diane Arbus.

The sense that is most used in our society is vision, the special characteristic of vision is its ability to move us. It leaves little time for reflection and absorption, this is both a virtue and a fault, the world is no longer imagined but represented. Photographers power of persuasion is constantly being exploited, by manipulation by the mass media; so work produced by an artist using photography is quick to come under criticism. Photography is the key to vast amounts of imagery, which would maybe not be suitable in another media. The effect of Arbus's work is based on our knowledge that it is a true representation of reality, which should no longer be avoided. Her ability to capture the reality in a sensitive way which at the same time demanding our ability to confront the image, is indicative of her unique talent as a photographer.

In exploring Arbus's work I hope I've shown the vital importance of her past. Arbus's sheltered childhood and involvement with fashion enables her to see the world in a very critical manner. Arbus's work with unconventional subjects, and by doing so manages to make her audience aware of the mass problem society as a whole has in accepting the unacceptable. If we can begin to understand this we are better able to face up to the reality which Arbus shows us.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

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