Where Diane Arbus Went

A comprehensive retrospective prompts the author to reconsider the short yet powerfully influential career of a photographer whose “fascination with eccentricity and masquerade brought her into an unforeseeable convergence with her era, and made her one of its essential voices.”

BY LEO RUBINFIEN

For almost four decades the complex, profound vision of Diane Arbus (1923-1971) has had an enormous influence on photography and a broad one beyond it, and the general fascination with her work has been accompanied by an uncommon interest in her self. Her suicide has been one, but just one, reason for the latter, yet for the most part, the events of her life were not extraordinary.

Arbus's wealthy grandparents were the founders of Russek's, a Fifth Avenue department store. Growing up well-protected in the 1930s, Arbus had only a vague sense of the effects of the Depression, and in her generation, her family became greatly cultivated (her brother was the poet Howard Nemerov). She married Allan Arbus at 18 and learned her craft with him as they prospered as commercial photographers and raised two daughters, but by the mid-1950s she felt trapped in fashion and advertising. Leaving their business, she dedicated herself to her personal work, and by the decade's end she and her husband separated, though they remained married until 1969, and were close until the end of her life. Her essential interests were clear after 1956, and for the next six years she photographed assiduously with a 35mm camera, in locations that included Coney Island, carnivals, Hubert's Museum and Flea Circus of 42nd Street, the dressing rooms of female impersonators, and the streets, cinemas, parks and buses of Manhattan.

Around 1962, after Arbus studied with Lisette Model, her work changed dramatically. Adopting a 2 ¼-inch camera, she began to make the square portraits that would occupy her almost exclusively in her prime decade. Her subjects would come to include the members of many kinds of subculture—among them nudists and transvestites—and also the deformed and the brain damaged. She described her investigations as adventures that tested her courage, and as an emancipation from her childhood's constraining comfort. At the same time, she worked as she wandered freely in New York City, where ordinary people gave her some of her greatest pictures. Proposing projects to the editors of magazines that included Harper's Bazaar, Esquire and London's Sunday Times Magazine, she was able to publish many of the photographs (sometimes accompanied by her own writing) that eventually appeared in museums. In her late years she suffered from intermittent illness and harsh depression, but her work was prominent in John Szarkowski's celebrated "New Documents" at the Museum of Modern Art (1967)—Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander were her co-exhibitors. Her renown grew steadily after that, a large, posthumous retrospective of her work appearing at the Modern in 1972.
Many aspects of Arbus’s life and art have helped myth to form around her. These include not only her death by her own hand, the immediate cause of which has never been clear, but also her descent into the worlds of the stigmatized and into financial duress, which grew severe after she was without her husband, and as Russek’s expired. There are also the exoticism of certain of her subjects and her erotic adventurousness, which, though the license of the 1960s must have encouraged it, seems to have been exceptional. Beyond all this there is the paradoxical character of her work itself—which is visually clear yet always mysterious—and also her reflections on photography and life, which were aphoristic, evocative and often rather oracular. “A photograph is a secret about a secret,” she wrote, “the more it tells you the less you know.”

Until recently, most knowledge of Arbus came out of just four books. Soon after her suicide in 1971, Diane Arbus (Aperture, 1972), edited by her daughter Doon and the designer and art director Marvin Israel, established its 80 pictures as the core of her oeuvre. This volume (which includes much of what was in the MOMA retrospective) is rightly considered one of photography publishing’s highest achievements, but it works in contradictory ways. Though it served for years as the only accounting of her art, it was designed as a dramatic unit that aimed not for historical precision but expressive power, and it therefore limited the reader’s understanding of Arbus. Two later volumes (also edited by Doon Arbus and Israel), Diane Arbus: Magazine Work (Aperture, 1984) and Untitled (Aperture, 1995), enlarged on diane arbus, but did little to change one’s sense of her work’s meaning, or of her character. Meanwhile, Patricia Bosworth produced a biography (Diane Arbus, Norton, 1984), with minimal access to Arbus’s extensive correspondences and none to her diaristic notebooks and project lists or to most of the people closest to her. This book was also damaged by inaccuracy and a poor understanding of photographs. Where Bosworth’s information was weak, she tried to compensate with atmospheres and guesses, and she came out both worshipful and condescending, overattentive to sex, depression and famous people, and too little concerned with the distinctive element of Arbus’s life after 1956—her art. Many readers who had known Arbus deplored the book, yet for most others, it was the only way to learn much about her; beyond what the introduction to Diane Arbus offered, which is exquisite but obscure, and exasperatingly brief.

That early volume also contributed to mythmaking in its own way. Presenting only the square pictures of 1962-71, it suggested that Arbus had had no period of development, but burst into her full powers, and it ended with seven images from the untitled work that Arbus did at two New Jersey hospitals for the mentally disabled during her final years. These photographs are harsher and more frightening than most of Arbus’s earlier work, and grouping them as the book’s conclusion created the sense that Arbus descended inexorably into despair and death. In fact, it seems that she was often slated, even near the end, and she made great pictures away from the hospitals in the same years when she was working at them.

The current traveling Arbus retrospective, “Revelations,” and the book of the same name (Random House, 2003) correct many misunderstandings, and tell far more about her than most people have known. The show is a project of curators Elisabeth Sussman and Sandra Phillips for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and opens this month at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. “Revelations” includes many rarely seen pictures from the 1950s, when Arbus was finding her way, and many wonderful ones omitted from diane arbus. It also contains much new information about Arbus’s life, plus ephemera, a reconstruction of a “collage wall” where she mingled her own photographs with photographs by others, and extensive excerpts from her writings. In Revelations, the book, this material fills a long central section, “A Chronology”; in the show, elements of the Chronology appear in three rooms called “libraries,” together with cameras, Arbus’s enlarger, photographs of her, and books and photographs she owned (the latter by Jacob Riis, Richard Avedon and others).

The Chronology, edited with interpolations by Elisabeth Sussman and Doon Arbus, is the outstanding achievement of this large, extremely complicated undertaking, and it should be read in full with all its 543 footnotes. Arbus as she returns to life there is a woman of piercing intelligence and great sophistication. (Though she never attended college, she graduated from the Ethical Culture-Fieldston Schools, and her library ran from Plato to E.M. Cioran to New York Unexpurgated, “Petronius’s sardonic guide to the under-underground” of Manhattan, ca. 1966.) She is also relentlessly funny, and dispatches with her own words the idea—promoted by Bosworth—that she was a somewhat benighted, self-indulgent depressive. Above all, she is unerringly sensitive to what is going on in her pictures and before her camera, in her own mind and body, and in the climate of her native city. She wrote as well as she photographed, and her letters, where she heard each nuance of her words, were gifts to the people who received them. Once one has been introduced to it, the beauty of her spirit permanently changes...
and deepens one’s understanding of her pictures; that spirit also takes a place in one’s map of the terrain of American culture as artists’ personalities rarely do. Since its appearance, “Revelations” has been called hagiographic, and argument will probably continue for years over whether information about Arbus’s person should be allowed to impinge on the reading of her work. My own view is that, having met the Arbus of “Revelations,” one cannot wish not to know her.

—L.R.

There is a once-famed essay—it was published just before Diane Arbus made her always astounding photograph of an unhinged Fauntleroy with a toy hand grenade, Central Park, N.Y.C, 1962. © 1970 The Estate of Diane Arbus, LLC.

This account was given in 1961—an age before Jim Morrison sang that all the children were insane; before the Air Force destroyed Ben Tre in order to save it; before anyone heard of the Manson Family; before one president had his brain shot out, another left politics in despair and a third fled his office in disgrace—but the strict-en astonishment that accompanied Americans through the 1960s was already there. It would be Arbus, more than any other artist, who would grasp, in photographs, what Roth thought writers were failing to get. Last April at the Metropolitan Museum, John Szarkowski was asked how her pictures looked to him long ago, when they were entirely fresh, and he appeared to turn inward for a moment before answering, quietly, “They were shocking.” This is inarguable, but it does encourage one to ask what was truly so shocking about them. The question is not simple, and it leads a long way.

The anguish Arbus’s work can incite is such that Susan Sontag, who herself was never shy about using the word “freak,” saw someone spit at a parakeet, “an idiot village,” where “everybody is an alien, hopelessly isolated.” It is often countered that her photographs express a warm compassion for the outcast, yet this is no less simplistic. The distress that her work provokes is real. Its ability to awaken fear, for example, is one of its great strengths, and that emotion is felt by those who cherish as well as by those who hate it. It is likewise said in her defense that deformity didn’t really interest her, when of course it did. What is essential to understand is that it interested her not as a blunt, obscene fact, but for how it shaped the psyche of the person who endured it, which is the meaning of her famous comment that “freaks were born with their trauma. They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats.” If to get to the ultimate beauty and tenderness in Arbus’s photographs one must abandon the idea that she was an artist of the horrible (as Sontag crudely expressed it), one cannot do so completely because it is partly true. It does no good to sanitize Arbus’s work, but then, one must never fail, either, to see how it shines with wonder, and a death-giddy idea of what’s funny that came intact from the Pale of Settlement. There are loves more complex than that for handsome faces and figures. It was with her characteristic hilarity that Arbus wrote, “I cannot seem to [make] a person . . . look good . . . the few times I’ve made a special effort the photograph was rotten.”

Meanwhile, no photographer makes viewers feel more strongly that they are being directly addressed, and this must have been another incitement to her opponents. Though you may be sure that you are far from the Mexican dwarf in his hotel room, N.Y.C. (1970), say—securely above the few times I’ve made a special effort the photograph was rotten.

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A decisive change occurred with Arbus’s square photographs, which exhibited their subjects like specimens in jars, and forced themselves on the viewer as stubbornly as unwelcome news intrudes into the mind.

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Arbus persistently hunted the moment when a subject acquires the conjoined simplicity and complexity of a symbol. The Jewish giant and his parents were "a truly metaphorical family," she wrote.

headlong cities, none has opened a broader channel than Arbus to connect the private and the public. She was curiously explicit that Eddie Carmel, the Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y. (1970), was a Jewish giant, and if this picture begins with one personal tragedy, with the anguish of motherhood and destiny's mocking laugh ("You know how every mother has nightmares... that her baby will be born a monster" Arbus is said to have said), it only reaches its full, sad, funny strength when one remembers all the Jewish boys who have wished to be as tall as the English admirals of their imaginations, and all the work-beaten parents of Flatbush and the Grand Concourse who yearned bitterly for their sons to reach great heights. A single Arbus photograph will finger delicately the ticking moments of a fantastic encounter in a room that never sees sunlight, and will also find there the spectacle of America flung forward by its gargantuan dreams, and see in this how bloated and fragile the country has become.

It was, in fact, precisely by insisting on the private that she grasped the derangement that Roth so early recognized. She photographed gutter hippies, orgiasts, the League for Spiritual Discovery, Central Park's vast antiracist protest of 1967, and Tricia Nixon's operatic wedding at the White House, but such subjects were never her best material. What happened offstage and unrehearsed was, and when things went right for her a minute crisis would briefly unfold, and she would bring away in a picture a sense of looming disaster as problematic as what a fortune-teller gets from the lines of one's hand.

All strong Arbus photographs are richly ambiguous from the start, and if anything, they grow even more complex as bits of her story adhere to them. Her suicide and her separation from her husband are part of it, along with her attraction to what she called danger and excitement. The Jews of New York are there, too—their amazing best material. What happened offstage and unrehearsed was, and when things went right for her a minute crisis would briefly unfold, and she would bring away in a picture a sense of looming disaster as problematic as what a fortune-teller gets from the lines of one's hand.

Arbus took abundantly from literature, movies, the news and popular myth, but if one wanted a purely photographic genealogy for her, one would have to put on one side Weegee, who loved the extreme as she did, and Lisette Model, who passed her a small legacy from the Neue Sachlichkeit, and from whom she learned graphic drama and the importance of getting close. On the other side would go Walker Evans, in whom she must have guessed the ability to look critically and untangle the contradictory things for which a subject stood, and August Sander. Sander especially seems to have underwritten her instincts. She saw his work in 1960 in the Swiss journal Du (and later studied it at MOMA), and she wrote of one spring day that year when Manhattan's people looked to her like his: "everyone [on the street]... immutable down to the last button, feather, tassel or stripe. All odd and splendid as freaks and nobody able to see himself..." She would have understood from Sander how a person can conceal and reveal himself at once, but where this matter was subtle for him, Arbus put it right at the front of her art.

If we can say that their coats, hats, medals, canes and dogs give Sander's strongest subjects screens behind which to hide, almost all the principals in Arbus's finest portraits are also masked. This is obvious where they cover their faces—with a veil, a concoction of feathers, sunglasses fashioned after swans, the plastic visage of a warty witch—but it is equally true of her posturing transvestites, her gracelessly made-up young women of the later '50s, her nudists (whose nudity is not nakedness but a special kind of clothing), and even her Cousins in Arbus's finest portraits are also masked. This is obvious where they cover their faces—with a veil, a concoction of feathers, sunglasses fashioned after swans, the plastic visage of a warty witch—but it is equally true of her posturing transvestites, her gracelessly made-up young women of the later '50s, her nudists (whose nudity is not nakedness but a special kind of clothing), and even the Girl with a cigar in Washington Square Park, N.Y.C. (1965), who has fled behind the austerity of her own face. Sometimes the mask is nutty (Two ladies at the automat, N.Y.C., 1960); sometimes it is easy to guess why a person dresses as he does, at other times not. Sometimes the mask slips ominously; sometimes, as with her commanding, insidious Identical twins, Roselle, N.J. (1967), its hold is tight.

What impressed Arbus the most powerfully, though, was less the mask per se than the discrepancy between mask and face. She seemed to have been able to tell from a block away ("you see someone on the street and... what you notice is the flame") who would be unable to keep from showing what he hoped to protect, and she found an elegant name for this—the gap between intention and effect, between "what you want people to know about you and what you can't help people
The idea of the gap offers not just a guide to the route Arbus's intuition took; it is also a principle that sets her world apart from the ordinary one.

During the preparation of "New Documents," MOMA's director, René d'Harnoncourt, urged that her pictures of the stigmatized be hung in a separate room, but Arbus and Szarkowski insisted that, in understanding of things, people as remote in life as, say, the gauze-turbaned Woman with a veil on Fifth Avenue (1968) and the crack-toothed male whore (Transvestite at her birthday party, 1969) belonged together. One has come from tea sandwiches at Lord and Taylor and the other from the lower depths, but these differences are overridden by what they share—the way they shriek.

Position and prestige ridden by what they share— the way they shriek, the way they shriek— are as fearful as the Puerto Rican woman, but the subject of any strong Arbus picture is never merely ridiculous. The sour, porcine idealists of A factory one evening in a nudist camp, Pa. (1965) have failed spectacularly to win the lost grace and innocence that clotheslessness was supposed to give them, and their obsession is so adamant that they will sit naked on a parking lot’s thistles as soon as on soft grass—yet nearly everybody has been a prisoner of mania at some time. When one remembers one’s own, one cannot be blind to the real innocence with which Arbus’s nudists furiously chase the Innocent; one must see how the atoms of the dreadful fuse in them with the atoms of the good, and will sense, astonished, a little love rising into one’s revulsion.

When her work is at its most august, Arbus sees through her subject’s pretensions, her subject sees that she sees, and an intricate parley occurs around what the subject wants to show and wants to conceal. The Puerto Rican woman with a beauty mark, N.Y.C. (1965), for example, is one of many Arbus women who doctored their faces in pursuit of a beauty they will never attain, this time with a smear of lipstick that outruns the lips as anxiously as the famished heart strains for love. In the photograph (thanks perhaps to Arbus’s intelligence, or perhaps luck) the lips are violently sharp while all else is slightly blurred, and though the woman could not have known this she is as shaken as if she’d been found with her fingers in her neighbor’s wallet. Of what does she think she is guilty? Of longing too much, perhaps—but loneliness is universal, and if she had truly wanted to hide her own, she would never have painted her mouth so bravely. In fact, a further, uglier secret can be discerned in the swell of her right-hand upper lip. That far reach of her mouth is full of contempt, for the world and for herself, and concede to what she has herself over to the sullen conviction that what she longs for isn’t coming. No one ever wants another to find out about oneself any such thing, but here, Arbus has grabbed it fiercely, and the Puerto Rican woman knows and is appropriately ashamed.

This series of phenomena—the masked subject; the slipping of the mask; the subject’s awareness that his or her pride has been exposed and that the photographer has seen—was the great discovery of Arbus’s strongest years. Few of her subjects are as fearful as the Puerto Rican woman, but most know that their illusions are falling away as Arbus watches, and raise what courage they can.

The Naked man being a woman, N.Y.C. (1968) should have found it easy to ask Arbus to leave, but instead, like so many others, her intrusion become, for a moment, terribly important. Each one allowed a miniature trial to occur, in which he or she might fend off the photographer’s strenuous eye, or sag and reveal the truth. And what would it mean to be courageous? In Arbus, paradox is everywhere. For some of her subjects keeping the mask up would be nobler, and for others, letting it drop. We cannot say that she wanted to find her people brave—she was impartial on this—but she weighed their courage as minutely as if it had been dust of the purest gold, which, in fact, it was.
Arbus sought out the isolated person's longing—
to be glamorous, to be strong, to be lovable,
to be female if one was male, male if female—
capturing the unanchored hysteria of pure desire.

Puerto Rican woman with beauty mark, N.Y.C., 1965. © 1969
The Estate of Diane Arbus, LLC.

III
Szarkowski has said more than once that Arbus's
artistry emerged full-blown in 1962—"it was like
St. Paul on the road to Damascus"—but this
seems an exaggeration. After she quit fashion and
advertising, there were six years of superb 35mm
photographs, often of elegantly hatted and gloved
women, of slightly skew-faced kids, and of theaters
where Hollywood's white glare strides over the
dim, hunched gapers in the seats. It was a decisive
change that came to her in the new decade, when
she adopted the square camera and emptied her
work of elisions, digressions, evocative shadow
and routes of escape. In her new photographs she
used a bright flash, and let the background go cha-
totic. They exhibited their subjects like specimens
and for its beauty. Before all else her
songs of the '60s, when truthtelling
fit into many of the rueful, hortatory
caricature in writing like Exley's and Plath's even
in her youth. A serious person would have seen
risics. For 20 years the heroes of fiction
were frequently found in madhouses and
often strapped down for electroshock therapy. They were, with Sylvia Plath,
"plummeting . . . through year after year of doubleness and smiles and compro-
mise." They had failed, with Frederick
Exley, to "function properly in society" to enlist in the home-making, flag-wav-
ing, war-waging and product-promoting that he reviled as the national religion.
Neither did they have the golden hair or
impeccable optimism of the model
Americans Exley and Plath both envied
and despised, and whose prototype had been fab-
icated in part by the magazines Arbus served
in her youth. A serious person would have seen
cartoon in writing like Exley's and Plath's even
when it was fresh, but would have felt the struggle
against the false on behalf of the true
to be urgent just the same.

There is an apothegm of Arbus's,
from 1960, that goes, "What's left after
what one isn't taken away is what
one is." Put into rhyme, it would
fit into many of the rueful, hortatory
songs of the '60s, when truth-telling
was praised both as a moral medicine
and alongside the new demand for truth,
the Cold War's cheerleaders went on
assuring Americans that theirs was the
greatest nation, with the world's freest
elections and most plentiful refrigera-
tors. For 20 years the heroes of fiction
might still have followed out her interests, but
the decade's torment profoundly.
Szarkowski would eventually write that Arbus,
more than any other photographer, conveyed what
Americans felt as they saw themselves fail in
Vietnam.24 Vainglory reached a historic apogee
there; its roots, he suggested, could be seen in the
vanity of the people in her work.

It was a central paradox of Arbus's strongest
years, however, that the pursuit of the authen-
tic did not necessarily voyage toward sanity.
Liberation was promised, was made to seem easy,
and Bob Dylan would later write that "[the] myth
of the day [was] that anybody could do anything
... ignore [his] limitations, defy them ..." It was
almost like a war against the self.25 Despite its
passion for unmasking, the decade was crazy for
costumes ("from all the intersections between his-
tory and the comic books," Mailer said), which
were believed to have more truth in them than the
skinny neckties of lifeless convention. Bare
skin itself could be costume; on Arbus's nudists it
is full of message. Anybody—could-do-anything was
the air they breathed.
A young Brooklyn family going on a Sunday outing, N.Y.C., 1966.
© 1971 The Estate of Diane Arbus, LLC.

A family on their lawn one Sunday in Westchester, N.Y., 1968.
© 1968 The Estate of Diane Arbus, LLC.

As the principle of authenticity marched to the sea, it ignited a million private delusions, and here, Arbus stands dramatically apart. Though it pleads for honesty her work is not confident that honesty solves much, or is even possible. She never proclaims that any liberation can be had, and even as the dreams of her subjects dismay her, she cannot say that they would be better off without them. In a mournful essay of the year when she died, Lionel Trilling deplored the pulling away of masks. It was hardly certain that behind each one there was not another, he said, no heart could be certified clean, and old-fashioned goodwill might be a better aim than the realization of the dreams of the innermost self—yet Arbus cannot go this way either. They must carry their dreams on their faces, and they must see their dreams debunked, she says of her people, and after that, they must take them up again. One might well ask why, if the search will be fruitless, we must search for the authentic at all, but there is no answer to this question, either in Arbus's pictures or in what she wrote.

IV

There is a surprising moment in his "Letter to His Father" when Kafka says that "my writing was all about you," and it is possible to read Arbus not for America in its vastness but for what was closest to her. She was sharply aware, for example, of her privileged origins, and spoke of the sequestration in which she felt she grew up, of being taken by her nanny to gaze at a Hooverville in Central Park, and of "clambering down [the ladder] as hard as [I] could." Her adventures as a photographer were, she believed, an escape from huge, too-silent apartments, and teachers who thought her juvenilia brilliant. She told Studs Terkel that she thought her father, a merchant prince, was a phony, and in Russian midget friends as a living room on 100th Street, N.Y.C. (1965), it is hard not to feel an overturning of the bourgeois table, and hear Arbus laughing breathlessly as crystal flies around the room.

She would have felt in her bones the improbable speed of her family's rise. She was born just 26 years after her immigrant grandfather founded Issak's with capital assembled at the racetrack. Her father's work involved gambling, too—one could say that after bringing Issak's to its acme, he gambled it away. Even as the Jews of Poland and Russia won much in the New World and left the Jewish baroque behind for real refinement, many still felt everything to be precarious (as she would have known), and from their tenacious anxiety we can reach the uneasy luxury of the Tarnopols, the parents and child of A family on their lawn one Sunday in Westchester, N.Y. (1968). In the end, though, the Jewish-American dream was just a variant of the extravagant, desperate, fate-defying American dream, and the picture will return us obliquely to America itself and its always too-now prosperity.

There is a beautiful text in which Arbus relates what she saw one night, in her sleep:

I am in an enormous ornate white gorgeous hotel which is on fire, doomed, but the fire is burning so slowly that people are still allowed to come and go freely. I can't see the fire but smoke hangs thickly everywhere especially around the lights. It is terribly pretty. I am in a hurry and I want to photograph most awfully. I go to our rooms to get what I must save and I cannot find it whatever it is. . . . I do not know . . . how soon the building will collapse. . . . Maybe I don't even have film or can't find my camera. . . . Everyone is busy and wandering around. . . . The elevators are golden. . . . My whole life is there. It is a sort of calm but painfully blocked ecstasy like when a baby is coming and the attendants ask you to hold back because they aren't ready. I am almost overcome with delight but plagued by the interruptions of it. There are cupids carved in the ceilings. . . . I am strangely alone although people are all around. They keep disappearing. . . . It is like an emergency in slow motion. I am in the eye of the storm.

Which hotel is this? Is it the house of the family? The house of the Jews? The house of the nation? The house that is the self? Some other? None at all?

Arbus's suicide is continually probed for a key to her art, her art for a key to her suicide, but the connection between her work and her self will be mysterious even if new data about her death are someday known. It is announced everywhere that her pictures are "personal," but the fact that they are intensely subjective, that they manifest a unique consciousness, does not take us far. They look not into, but out of her life, at a world of happenstance. In photography, of course, an immense amount is response, and while many artists of the '60s saw authenticity in submitting to chance, her openness to it is legendary. "I have never taken a picture I've intended," she said, "they're always better or worse," and she said that "I don't press the shutter. The image does. And it's like being gently clobbered."

Chance shines out where the Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C. (1962) appears in frame 8A of proof sheet 1841, after seven frames in which he flirts, smiles and hams. Utterly unlike its antecedents, 8A suddenly has the boy immense with the rage of the stifled child, the swaddled soul, but then, a moment later, in 9A, his foolishness is back. No photographer could claim to have authored what happened—it could never have been imagined beforehand—and at home Arbus would have studied 8A in amazement because, though what happened came from nature, it seemed to mirror her own character. Over time, the photographer who finds herself in her pictures...
Most of Arbus's adolescents see that they will never evade what is coming, and some, like the Teenage couple on Hudson Street, N.Y.C., who are perhaps 16 but can't wait to be 50, rush into its arms.

as Arbus did is shaped by them, and she often speculated that the self is a less-than-solid entity. She persistently hunted that moment when a subject acquires the conjoined simplicity and complexity of a symbol, and this, indeed, was a project once more, insuring that it could never be opened again. Photographs being empty of action, it is hard to call them parables, but Arbus's finest work frequently has the same impervious logic a parable does, pointing like a giant arrow beyond the facts that it relates.

There is, for example, her Young Brooklyn family going for a Sunday outing (1965), where the mother's face is covered by paint as heavily as Hollywood lies upon our spirit. Who could this woman have been before she pickled herself in illusion, that her rowhouse neighbors might believe her as torrid as the Cleopatra of 20th Century Fox? The flaw is not her lazy eye but her getup—her gothic mascara and thundercloud of hair—and it says how deeply she has been wounded. No one whom life hadn't pierced with swords would so insist that she was someone else. It must have been her spastic boy—this we think we understand: that something unbearable has happened, that he was ruined before he emerged from her body, and that this made her into a monstrosity, too.

The boy sees nothing, of course, but the father—he sees all. He knows what his son and wife are, and though he never wanted any of this to happen and probably wishes no photographer was hanging around, he waits, open, patient, immaculately courageous. He has set his neck gently on fortune's block, is loyal where a hundred men would flee.

And yet... and yet... Arbus in her strength is never so simple. There is always another question. What if this wasn't a matter of mangled birth? What if the mother always looked like this? What if, by dealing the son half-wittedness, fortune saved him from her? Here is the manic, melancholy joke in the picture, and while you laugh about how life is just as absurd as this, the father still waits, and your ridicule makes him no less kind. The more that you laugh, in fact, the sadder it becomes. I doubt anyone in the modern arts, not Kafka, not Beckett, has strung such a long, delicate thread between laughter and tears.

V

Arbus wrote that she thought all families were creepy in a way, and though we cannot ask her what she meant, I imagine it had to do with how a family's members imprison each other, children destining their parents just as parents do their children. She was greatly interested in fate, not only as it forms photographs. "It's just extraordinary," she said, "that we should have been given these peculiarities." and when mentioning Sander in 1969, she wrote, "all of us are victims of the special shape we come in." Later, with tremendous force, she said of the whole of her work, "What I'm trying to describe is that it's impossible to get out of your skin into somebody else's... That somebody else's tragedy is not the same as your own." Her people wear their lots like helmets, howdahs, sherpas' packs, the bricks at Sander's hod-carrier's neck. Of the Identical twins, it is obvious that neither will ever escape her sister, while even the lovely Young girl in a watch-cap (1963) seems to feel the presences that mold her, though she cannot yet know their names. Most of Arbus's adolescents see that they will never evade what is coming, and some, like the Teenage couple on Hudson Street, N.Y.C. (1963), who are perhaps 16 but can't wait to be 50, rush into its arms. It is not so much that people imprison each other that is creepy, in fact, but that they consent to be imprisoned—that they choose to relinquish the ability to choose, as surely as Arbus's daughter locked her padlock's hoop through its key.
The distress that Arbus’s work provokes is real. Its ability to awaken fear is one of its great strengths, and that emotion is felt by those who cherish as well as by those who hate it.

How people challenge their fates is Arbus’s transcending subject—if, and to what extent, they are free. In refusing to assume that they are, or can be, she expresses a vestige, perhaps, of the temper of the vanished Jews of Eastern Europe, who saw inevitability everywhere. Her “collage wall” included an old picture of some 50 women and children of the Warsaw Ghetto, forced against a building, hands high and heads down, all choosings finished now, and on the reconstructed collage wall in the current show and in its book, this image appears near her own Untitled (2), 1970-71, and her Patriotic young man. And then there was a Jacob Riis that she once hung in her apartment, where a young girl stands on a box at the edge of the vast Atlantic, under a blank, ungenerous sky; she has a broom in the surf, and seems to be working diligently; it is called Sweeping Back the Ocean. Both the Warsaw and the ocean photographs are stylistically remote from Arbus’s own (they show gesture where hers are static; neither shows a face) but they are so close to hers in essence that, when one puts them all together, no explanation is required.

I suspect that Susan Sontag really denounced Arbus’s work for this—not the freakishness of her characters, but their fatedness. Sontag needed too much to believe that people are the authors of themselves to be able to recognize the humor and poignancy and strange beauty that Arbus found in acquiescence, and with leaden positivism, wrote that Arbus “undercut politics” as if negotiation and protest could push back the sea. Americans have long been among the most optimistic of people, and the idea that we lead and follow blindly—like, say, the noble and numbly ignorant promenaders of Arbus’s Untitled (7), 1970-71—is the nearest thing our country has to hers. Arbus once said, “I don’t like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself.” She was speaking here of the directing of subjects, but the echo of a philosophical position is also there in her words. To call Arbus an all-out fatalist would be a distortion, yet a not terribly American fatalism is strong in her, counter-American, Sandra Phillips has said (7), and it is mixed in an extraordinary way with a fully American rationality. In all her best work after 1961 her characters’ obsessions—and their helplessness before them—are set forth with the elegance of a logical problem that can never be solved.

In the untitled pictures of her last years, from two hospitals in New Jersey, Arbus discovers, perhaps, an ultimate paradox. The inmates there suffer from many kinds of mental infirmity, and expelled from society, locked up behind actual walls, are the most abject of all her characters. Yet while they have the best of reasons to rage and to grieve their fates, we never see them do so. Perhaps, one thinks at first, they lack the ability to know they are pariahs. In the strongest pictures among the untitled works, though (which include some of Arbus’s greatest), one sees that the inmates are intelligent—enough, anyway, to know that what they have is not the complete intelligence of people outside—and one must then ask if the reason why they do not rage and grieve is that they know it would not help them. Perhaps intelligence itself has advised them to acquiesce. Arbus described a party for “handicapped people” that she went to once, and the moment of clarity that came to one aged man as she danced with him and he said “this incredible sentence. It was something like, ‘I used to worry about’—it was very slow—I used to worry about being like this. Not knowing more. But now”—and his eyes sort of lit up—“now I don’t worry anymore.”

Some of the inmates wear costumes for Halloween, but their performances are different from the ones Arbus found in the streets and bedrooms of the unconfined. Unlike us, the inmates have nothing else they want to be—and nothing to hide—yet there is only the slightest comfort to be found in their innocence. Their masks are slovenly and childish—many are monstrous; none of them can see how grotesque they are. Even the hundredth time one meets the skullface of Untitled (3), 1970-71, one is nauseated a little by dread. On days when we accept, slightly, the supernatural, the inmates seem death’s agents. On ordinary days they seem at least, in their passivity, death’s accomplices.

Yet Arbus remains Arbus, even in the hospitals, and if the spectacle in Untitled (3) is doom, it is also a joke about doom, and if the inmate maskers are frightful, they are often full of delight. Studying them, we learn that it is impossible—even when freedom has shrunk to near zero—for people not to pursue the beautiful. Indeed, the wisdom at the core of Arbus’s art is exactly here. Failure, hideous, is inescapable, it says, but this exempts no one from aspiring.

In Untitled (2) there is a cretinous woman who wears a dress with wide stripes. She has grown fat, but she might have been pretty if things had been different, and now she holds her palms out over an infinite lawn as if to catch a gust and be lifted slightly into the air—and reaches with her intense, bright eyes toward the uppermost clouds and the fading sun. She feels her way from moment to moment with perfect care, because none is unimportant, because each contains a possibility. Within her stupidity she is acute. It is frequently said that Arbus is dark. This is not a bad word for her, but it is not precise. There are artists who say that people have no freedom at all. She only says that they have no choice but to believe that they do. And when one has arranged oneself correctly to perceive this, her pictures suddenly seem, for all their darkness, heavy with love. The woman in the striped dress
Arbus's photographs speak the language of the '60s through their immediacy, their raw intensity and love of the strange; these are all aspects of their fundamental concern with the truth.

is another kind of being from you and from me, but the trap in which she lives is not unlike yours or mine, and in how well she works to make it her home, she is no different from us at all.

3. Susan Sontag, "America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly," in On Photography, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977, pp. 33, 45, 47. (Originally published as "Freak Show," New York Review of Books, Nov. 15, 1973.) On Photography was a bestseller. Sontag's essay on Arbus's photographs memorializes her, even though Arbus was neither uninterested in the famous, nor unenthusiastic about working on assignment (as she was doing with Masterprinters). Most likely, the famous were adept at controlling what they allowed her to see.
9. Diane Arbus, in conversation, as recalled by Frederick Eberstadt in Bosworth, p. 11.
11. This great photograph is actually a bit of an anomaly. In most photographs by Arbus she is the inquisitor, but here—where the twins see you more sharply than you ever wanted to be seen—the subjects are.
13. Ibid., p. 2.
14. Arbus's photographs of famous people are generally less satisfying than her best work, even though Arbus was neither uninterested in the famous, nor unenthusiastic about working on assignment (as she was doing with Masterprinters). Most likely, the famous were adept at controlling what they allowed her to see.
19. Holden Caulfield was one of the first. Soon after, Allen Ginsberg would write that the best minds of his generation were destroyed by madness. Esther Greenwood, of Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, would undergo electroshock therapy, as would McMurphy of Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and the narrator of Frederick Exley's A Fan's Notes.
23. The most detailed discussion of how Arbus's work was touched by the social forces at work in the 1950s and '60s may be Ariella Budick's unpublished dissertation, Subject to Scrutiny: Diane Arbus's American Grotesque, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1995.
28. Franz Kafka, "Letter to His Father," in Dearest Father, New York, Schocken, 1954, p. 177. "All I did [in my work]," Kafka continues, "was to bemoan what I could not bemoan upon your breast."
31. On the rise and decline of Russek's, see Bosworth.