Between the Life and the Image is the Myth:

The Legend of Diane Arbus

A Thesis

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INTRODUCTION

"Recollections are inextricably bound up with what one needs to believe."1

In exploring the life and legend of photographer Diane Arbus, this thesis will incorporate a content analysis which takes two distinct, yet overlapping paths. Chapter I explores numerous examples of critical responses to the photographer's life, which aim to interpret Arbus's photographic images through her emotional state. Many of the critiques are highly sensationalized thereby aiding in the perpetuation of the Arbus legend. Chapter II explores the critical responses and the issues raised specifically in relation to Arbus's images.

The critical responses contained in this analysis represent a selection of writings about the photographer and her images from the time of her death, in 1971, to the present. Realizing the ethical difficulty in speaking for others, I have utilized quotes by Diane Arbus not to place them in opposition to the critiques of her and her work, nor to imply that they represent a 'truth' about the photographer—but, rather I include Arbus's 'voice' in an effort to provide a perspective which contributes to my analysis. My analysis aims to assess and demystify the social climate in which Arbus participated as a

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1 Arbus, Doon. "Diane Arbus: Photographer." Ms. (October 1972), p.44.
documentary photographer, while negotiating the ethical questions which arise in the assessment of interpretations which aim to explore artist intentionality. By juxtaposing the multiple narratives, I also aim to place the reader in a position to better see the difficulties in interpreting the life and work of Diane Arbus.
CHAPTER I

Diane Arbus, a U.S. photographer, was born Diane Nemerov in New York City in 1923. Educated at the Ethical Culture and Feldston Schools until 1940, she began taking photographs later that year. In 1941, at age 18, she married photographer Allan Arbus and the couple went to work as fashion photographers for the Nemerov family retail store, Russels Fifth Avenue. During their marriage the Arbus's had two daughters, Doon and Amy. From 1955-1957 Diane Arbus studied photography with Lisette Model. In 1959, Diane Arbus and her husband dissolved their marriage and she embarked on a solo photography career, completing commercial work for magazines such as Esquire, Harper’s Bazaar, Glamour, The New York Times and The Sunday Times Magazine of London.

Publicly, the 1960’s were a period of great artistic achievement, as the first of Arbus’ published photographs appeared in Esquire in 1960, and she received Guggenheim Fellowships in 1963 and 1966. In 1967, along with the works of two other photographers, Arbus’s work was displayed in the “New Documents” exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art. Additionally, in the late 1960’s she taught photography classes in New York City at Parsons School of Design, and Cooper Union, and at the Rhode Island School of Design. Arbus’s work was becoming increasingly recognized when she
committed suicide in 1971.

Surviving her are thousands of photographs which she produced primarily during the fifties and sixties, many of which have neither been published nor exhibited. Those that have been publicly viewed, as well as the woman who created them, have been fiercely criticized by contemporary photographic essayists and exhibition reviewers. Although during her career as a photographer Arbus worked through various stages of equipment usage and permutations of style, the widespread consensus of public interpretation avoids these fluctuations in its contention that overall her work is disturbing and haunting. Additionally, many of the written critiques of Diane Arbus and her images center around psycho-social judgments that are arguably sexist and anti-Semitic in nature in terms of the manner in which Arbus’s persona is constructed.

Through analysis of reviewer and critic responses, this investigation will explore critically facets of the legend which pervade the memory of Diane Arbus. Throughout this discussion I will refer to the Arbus legend. The legend is composed of sensationalized information, fictions and fabrications of mythic proportions about the artist’s life. While certain facts of Arbus’s life may be the basis for such interpretation, they have been significantly embellished. Yet, the questions for my discussion come not from Arbus’s legendary status itself, but from the inherent bias in the
perpetuation of specific ideologies and cultural assumptions which function not only to sustain the bias, but are invested in its continuation.

Diane Arbus produced portraits of a range of well known individuals such as actress Mae West, authors Norman Mailer and Germaine Greer, dancer Ruth St. Denis, film stars Lilian and Dorothy Gish, to name but a few. But the photographs which have received the most critical attention are those depicting transsexuals, members of nudist colonies, identical twins, female impersonators, a Jewish giant, a Mexican dwarf, suburban families, people sitting on benches throughout parks in New York City, people at Coney Island, performers at Hubert's Flea Museum, young women at a camp for overweight girls, and carnival performers. Regarding her subjects, it is ambiguous to whom Arbus was specifically referring when she utilized the term "freaks."

A text compiled after the photographer's death, entitled Diane Arbus, contains a collection of her photographs accompanied by Arbus's thoughts which were obtained from tapes of classes she taught, as well as from interviews. One of the best known interviews is with Studs Terkel. In this text Arbus explains:

"Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot. It was one of the first things I photographed and it had a terrific kind of excitement for me. I just used to adore them. I still adore some of them. I don't quite mean they're my best friends but they make me feel a mixture of shame and awe. There's a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a
riddle. Most people go through life dreading they’ll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats.”

In reference to the critical responses to her photographs, I include this quote by the photographer not only for its description of a portion of her work, but also because it is often cited in the critiques of Diane Arbus which function to place this label upon the entirety of her work.

The criticism also classifies her work through dualistic means, primarily through repetitive references to her images of “freaks” and “normals.” Although these images do not make up the entirety of the photographer’s collected works, the emphasis on the dichotomy of these groups adds an interesting component to this discussion of the critical responses to the photographer’s work.  

In general, Arbus’s work has been criticized for its “disturbing” qualities, and although her photographs of “freaks” have received an enormous amount of criticism, she has been criticized as well for photographing “normal” people in a way which is viewed as “disturbing.”

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2 Arbus, Doon., Israel, Marvin., eds. Diane Arbus. Aperture, 1972, p.3.

3 The criticism which focuses on the dualism of Arbus’s work may have to do with the fact that much of her work was produced for commercial publications, and the reality that exposing the lives of those who are either elevated or side-lined by mainstream society remains a profitable selling feature.
Critic Jozef Gross writes:

"The 'aristocrats' of the freak world, those who were born with some physical defect, gave way to another of Diane's preoccupations. She acquired a knack of photographing people with no visible malformation or defect in such a way as to make them appear 'freakish'." 

Arbus explains her fascination with photographing people:

"Everybody has that thing where they need to look one way but they come out looking another way and that's what people observe. You see someone on the street and essentially what you notice about them is the flaw. It's just extraordinary that we should be given these peculiarities. And, not content with what we are given, we create a whole other set. Our whole guise is like giving a sign to the world to think of us in a certain way but there is a point between what you want people to know about you and what you can't help people knowing about you. And that has to do with what I've always called the gap between intention and effect."

Frequently, critics note that Arbus had a proficiency for seeking out the odd, and the deviant, in all human beings. The "flaw" to which Arbus refers may be seen as the basis for this critical interpretation. Many of the critical responses which I will discuss explore several forces as potential motivations behind Arbus's photographic interest in seeing human "flaws." The extraordinary amount of criticism of Diane Arbus, with the attendant search for her motivation, form the foundation for what has become a legend surrounding the photographer's life and work.

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The critical responses to the photographer encompass numerous areas relating to the photographic subject matter and the apparatus of photography. Some of the critics function to perpetuate the legend, while others critique the legend itself. Through a deconstruction of the critics' constructions of Arbus's persona and motivations, I will illuminate particular strategies utilized in the critical responses which perpetuate sexist and anti-semitic thought. Specifically, my focus is upon those critiques which stem from a social and psychological assessment of the photographer and the images she produced. The prevalent themes that arise out of the critiques center around issues pertaining to suicide, mental illness, class and ethnicity. These themes represent different ways in which Arbus's emotional state has been interpreted. The existence of these themes is crucial to the critical phenomenon in which Arbus's images are interpreted by her emotional state, and conversely, the manner in which Arbus's emotional state is interpreted through her photographic imagery. Importantly, in many of the critical responses, the discussion of the imagery is less an interpretation of content, than a perpetuation of the Arbus legend with the photographs existing as a catalyst. Additionally, no theme is one-dimensional; notions of suicide circle around class issues, many photography critics use psychological terminology, and issues surrounding class and ethnicity are often conflated.

The legend surrounding Diane Arbus's memory began a steady ascent when she committed suicide in 1971. The critiques discussed
in this analysis were written after the death of the artist. Additionally, a biography was written about Diane Arbus in 1984, which regenerated the discussion of the photographer through an abundance of reviews and critical responses to the biography. Although the biography is not the definitive study of Diane Arbus, and has been criticized as excessively poorly researched and unreliable, it nevertheless remains the only extensive study to date and the “sourcebook” for many of the critical responses in this discussion which perpetuate the legend of the photographer.

There exists a cultural taboo towards suicide in this society, and oftentimes when an artist (male or female) commits suicide, there is a tendency in many critical responses to state that the art, in whatever form, somehow wasn’t able to provide a space to express all that needed to be expressed, that something in the person’s life was inadequate, or, perhaps, too much to bear. Yet, when the artist who commits suicide is female, the responses take a particular turn. The identity of the woman artist who decides to end her own life is often conflated with those of other women artists, and the tragedy is implied to be a result of difficulties imposed by society due to gender. This particular “tragedy of gender” which results in suicide has been applied to Diane Arbus. One critical interpretation of Arbus is an

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8 An excellent example of this phenomenon is an improvisational play entitled Disquieting Muses: A response to the Suicides of Women Artists. Conceived of by Betsy Shevey, this play explores the suicides of Diane Arbus, Billie Holiday, Janis Joplin, Marilyn Monroe, Sylvia Plath and Virginia Wolf.
example of how the "plight of the female artist" is constructed when public memory of the woman artist relegates her to the status of victim.


This victim role dismisses any concept of agency, i.e., an acknowledgement that the woman artist may have maintained control over her own life, and also her death. That patriarchy exists cannot be denied, but the victimizing trap of conflating all female artists with a powerlessness to which they succumbed is too simplistic, particularly since this concept shapes the way in which the public engages with the art work produced.

The content of Diane Arbus's images, coupled with her life ending in suicide, are the foundation upon which several writers have linked the interpretation of the photographer's imagery with her emotional state. Critics have constructed a direct connection between the content of Arbus's photographs and her ultimate suicide. Evoked from this construction is a concept of lethality inherent in the practice of photography for Diane Arbus. This lethal nature is established in the manner in which critics explore the effect the individuals she chose to photograph had upon the photographer, while at the same time maintaining primarily
psychological overtones about Arbus's motivations.

Richard Schickel discusses this idea in his critique of the legend:

"Because she chose to look upon things others had not, because she
was a well bred middle-class woman who turned away from a
flourishing career in fashion photography, and because finally, she
died a suicide, there is a tendency to want to make her into a cult
figure on the order of Sylvia Plath."\(^{10}\)

This critique of the legend alludes to the fact that it is difficult to
separate the legend from the critique in that critics have constructed
a direct connection between the content of her photographic imagery
and her ultimate suicide. This connection evokes a
multidimensional concept of lethality and danger inherent in the
practice of photography for Diane Arbus.

One aspect of the lethal nature of photography is found in the
manner in which the critics explore the effect the individuals she
chose to photograph had upon the photographer. In much of the
written critiques of Diane Arbus, the critic is often fixated on the
victimization of the photographer. It is assumed that there existed
deep psychological trouble which compelled her to photograph a
specific subject matter. And presumably it was the act of looking at
the subject matter itself that contributed to her death.

Art essayist Judith Goldman criticizes this facet of the Arbus legend,
and states that:

"Cultism is easy and hard to avoid. The ‘Sylvia Plathisms’ that now decorate the Arbus legend and hang from it like purple hearts are harder still to circumvent. The fault is not critical but cultural: Diane Arbus died heroically in action. And an assumption that where she chose to travel contributed to her death makes viewers look away from the art. If you look too hard, you take your life in your hands; isn’t that after all what Arbus did?"\textsuperscript{11}

The concept of Arbus’s lethal photographic practice is apparent as the critics maintain primarily psychological motivations for Arbus’s actual act of photographing. One review fuels the Arbus legend by stating:

"But at length something fatal took hold of her: perhaps whatever was hollow and compulsive in her photographic ‘quest,’ perhaps a disposition to depression inherited or copied from her mother...or perhaps her feelings that her latest subjects, an institutional group of retarded people in New Jersey, were immune to her, unimpressed, affording her no power illusion of control."\textsuperscript{12}

The female victim issue surfaces in the critics’ discussions of Diane Arbus’s psychologically compelling need to seek out the subject matter for the images she produced. In a perpetuation of the legend, critics present a connection between the photographer’s choice of subject matter, her emotional state of being, and her ultimate suicide. This connection is stated in Kavaler’s psychoanalytic analysis. She states:

"...if she had not been so addicted to seeking the shame in others, and to running from the shame in herself, she might have


survived.”

The "shame" this critic interprets Arbus as seeking may be akin to Arbus' previously cited term, the "flaw." It is implied in this critique that whatever the photographer was "seeking" or documenting with her camera should remain hidden from others to view. This interpretation of Arbus's motivation places her as a victim, while the argument is psychologically re-established that by looking too much at individual's "peculiarities," and not facing up to her own, her demise was inevitable.

As the impetus for the danger-laden critiques, Diane Arbus's suicide appears to have provided a mystique that not only encompasses how she is remembered, but also the way in which the images that she produced will be viewed and remembered. Susan Sontag states:

"The fact of her suicide seems to guarantee that her work is sincere, not voyeuristic, that is compassionate, not cold. Her suicide also seems to make the photographs more devastating, as if it proved the photographs to have been dangerous to her."

The "cultisms" of suicide contained in these critical responses which function to perpetuate the legend of Diane Arbus have created a space for other critics to discuss the potential motivations for the work she produced. Much of the criticism attempts to explore psychological reasons for the content choices of the images she produced. Many critics view her childhood and upbringing through

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a discussion of class and ethnicity as a basis for the psychological examination of her motivation to photograph individuals who exist at the margins of society’s mainstream. The psychological component of the criticisms is twofold: on one hand is the psychological despair which critics feel her camera reflects as her own, and on the other, the psychological despair contained in the psyche of the woman herself. Yet, overall the critics combine these two psychological aspects as a single phenomenon.

Examples include statements such as:

“The brilliance of her invention explains our fascination and discomfort, for her camera exposed a despair that was...the result of an emotional famine and interior drought.”¹⁵

“...one senses that her pictures express her own fears and doubts about herself, and, in doing so, they slyly tap into that uneasiness about the awkward embarrassing monsters in all of us that we struggle to keep buried.”¹⁶

“She seemed to seek the hidden shame behind the glamour, and her camera was her vehicle for knocking down the parental walls, and finding the secret within. As such her camera was her weapon.”¹⁷

“...a modernist heroine, braving the dark places of psychology, her only shield her camera, an eye that would not flinch.”¹⁸

Similarly, at the same time that these critics assign the status of victim to Diane Arbus through their language of despair, they state that the photographer was violently extracting something from her subject matter which could not in her own self be satiated. She is often criticized for exploiting her subject matter through the metaphor of the camera as a weapon. Arbus thus becomes the victimizer as well as the victim.

It is true that an aspect of this has to do with the language of photography itself. Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes:

“Numerous commentators have pointed out that the camera functions as an instrument of appropriation, possession and objectification (e.g. Sontag, 1977). Such attributes are signaled by the very vocabulary of photography: to take a picture, to aim the camera, to shoot a picture, to capture the subject.”

The responses toward Diane Arbus are riddled with sexual overtones which conclude that her sexuality was imposed upon the individuals who became her subject matter. In other words, she seduced her subjects to achieve what the critics feel were her desired results.

Critic Calvin Bedient asserts that:

“Arbus collected photographs the way a big game hunter collects mounted heads. With her little-girl’s voice and her disarming questions she got her subjects to stand still for her, and then she shot them.”


The implication of this critique is that Arbus was a manipulating woman, who, utilizing the fictitious feminine guile under the guise of an unassuming child, took advantage of the people she photographed. This gendered notion functions to perpetuate primarily sexual, and ultimately demeaning attitudes toward women. Specifically, in terms of Arbus, this notion diverts critical attention away from the actual work she produced.

In a review of the Bosworth biography, Grace Gleuk maintains:

"There is sometimes in them, too, the odd ruthlessness of the specimen collector who, as he traps yet another exotic butterfly or spider for show in his cabinet says to himself, 'wait till they get a look at this one.' "\(^{21}\)

The "hunt" correlates with adventure in the critical responses towards Arbus' photographic investigation, yet, as implicit in previous critical responses to the artist, the adventure maintains a gendered sexual component. This critical interpretation of Arbus' 'adventures' is not specific to the art world, rather, larger social institutions function in the perpetuation of this thought process.

Particularly in this male dominated society, whether women are constructed as the victims or the victimizers, a mainstream cultural response toward women and the interpretation of their lives often results in allusions to sex. In U.S. culture, this construction of woman has as much to do with capitalism as it does with patriarchy.

Cultural symbols in a mass consumer society exploit women under the rubric of selling sex in order to sell products, and consequently we are bombarded with a proliferation of images which demean women as products for consumption. Historically, with this notion embedded in the minds of the populace, the work and progress of women has been undermined. Thus, in relation to Arbus, critics have drawn upon decades of associating women, not with creativity, innovation, or authority, but rather with sexual pleasure and subordination. This social reality is apparent as critic Calvin Bedient bridges the social construction of Diane Arbus as victim and victimizer quite explicitly.

Bedient states:

“Arbus’s need to give herself over adventurously may be the single thread through the maze of personality and its relation to her art. It unites her interest in sensational ‘adventure’ and her nearly beatific receptivity...And it helps account for her sexual behavior: though her photographs are antisensual, she herself exuded a room-pervading sensuality that may have been the signal of her ‘submissive’ practice of having sex with women, old men, and young boys, as well as with any man more or less her own age who happened to ask her.”

The exploitative photographic huntress who desires out of a psychological need to capture all that is accessible to her becomes a victim. The victimizing adventurer turns into the victim through submission. Bedient correlates Diane Arbus’s “adventure” as a professional photographer directly to her personal life. Her

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diligence as a photographer is subverted by turning potential photographic motivations into a sexual ploy. Other critics who fuel the legend surrounding Diane Arbus construct her in this manner as well.

Phyllis Rose’s criticism is one such example:

"Photographic explorations were allied to other ventures. The more successful she became with her camera, the more aggressive she became sexually, the camera...gave her access to forbidden places and she took advantage of that."\(^{23}\)

These aspects of sexual victim and victimizer which are linked through the critics’ discussions of Arbus submitting to adventure, has found its way into professional psychological journals. Bosworth’s biography has become the basis for a psychoanalytic interpretation of the photographer and her work.

Mental health practitioner Susan Adler Kavaler explains that:

"[a]s a photographer, Diane sought the odd, the deviant, the authentic flaw in human subjects...[h]er camera was a voracious mouth seeking sustenance, but it was also a weapon."\(^{24}\)

That this psychoanalytic interpretation sees Arbus’s work as "a voracious mouth seeking sustenance" suggests that not only was her photography a source of life, but that the equipment was employed to extract life from her subject matter. It is interesting that Kavaler


utilizes the metaphor of the camera lens as a mouth, as opposed to a voyeuristic discussion of the lens as the all-seeing eye.

The interpretation of the photographer through the evocative concept of submission fuels the legend of the female artist to gendered extremes. The information provided here on Arbus’s actual behavior remains conjecture. Her life and sexual activity, which cannot truly be known, are not the primary issues for this discussion. Yet, what is significant is the manner in which Arbus’s personal and professional motivations are constructed by the critiques, and the larger social implications of this construction. Specifically, to degrade and demean the accomplishments of women by references to them as sexual beings is to enforce upon them an "appropriate" behavioral code. If the code of behavior is not adhered to, women are relegated to the role of "slut." This strategy operates in a male dominated society as it aims to keep women dependent, and at its very core is ultimately a power play since independent women are a threat to the normative structures of patriarchy. Diane Arbus is a threat because her photographs depict realities that the critics, and by extension, society, have found to be disturbing to the sensibilities of what is considered worthy of portraiture and appropriate to view. Arbus’s work has been critiqued for its depiction of society’s "normals" in providing images which do not adhere to the beautified glamour shots so common in this culture, as well as for its depiction of "freaks" who disturb mainstream accepted ideals of society and visibility. Subsequently,
the critics construct Arbus as ultimately a sexual being, a victim and victimizer, in order to place her and her images at a distance where they will not infect the implicit or explicit norms of society. An engagement with the images, and the threat they are supposed to represent, does occur on some level. The images are validated by her suicide, and regardless of content they become Art.

Sexist assumptions in responses to Diane Arbus come together with ethnic bias, when a suggestion is made that a direct relation to the photographer’s upbringing underpins much of her personal and professional choices. Critic Anne Tucker writes:

“Bosworth proposes that a suffocatingly overprotective childhood led Arbus to seek adventure. Specifically, Arbus wanted to confront, then capture with her camera, things she’d been forbidden to view and contemplate as a child. Bosworth concludes that Arbus’s desire for adventure became insatiable and uncontrolled.”

In relation to the photographic subject matter, I have previously mentioned that critics have pointed to class and ethnicity issues operating in Arbus’s desire to photograph the individuals she did. In fact, many of the critical responses accomplish more than simply noting Diane Arbus’s family of origin and its ethnicity; rather, the critics are fixated on the Nemerov family’s identity as Jews.

Bedient expands upon his earlier ideas about submission to include issues relating to gender and ethnicity. These issues come together

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when Arbus is constructed as the virginal Jewish princess who, rather than yield to the literal law of the father, submitted herself to the exploitation of others. Bedient states:

"This exploitative capacity to submit at once perpetuated her docility as the overprotected daughter of a rich furrier, David Nemerov, and dirtied to her own delight, her self image as a clean, too clean untouchable Jewish princess."\(^{26}\)

Quite obviously, the stereotypical sexist and anti-semitic phrase, "Jewish American Princess" is evoked from this critical response. The references to Arbus as a spoiled little girl who has no concept of reality are symptomatic of the ignorance that pervades anti-semitic thought.

Additionally, some of the stereotypical criticisms make inferences to the inappropriateness of Arbus's images through the interpretation that her work is reactionary, motivated by an ethnic/class rebellion. This idea is insinuated by art critic Hilton Kramer when he states:

"The woman who produced this extraordinary body of work, thereby effecting a historic change in the way a new generation of photographers came to regard the very character of their medium, was not herself born into the world of social oddities she came to celebrate in her pictures. Far from it. She belonged to the comfortable world of the upper Jewish bourgeoisie in New York."\(^{27}\)

Class-laden and anti-Semitic viewpoints such as these function to subvert the relation of Arbus's work to the history of the medium.

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Her photographic accomplishments are viewed as secondary to a claim that due to her upbringing she wasn’t suited to take the pictures she did; the result leaves critics to view her work as a rebellion.

Critic Calvin Bedient also perpetuates this notion when he asserts that Arbus was:

"The opposite of the heroine-as-social-climber, she was a rebellious rich beauty who descended into the lairs of freakishness as if determined to mate, despite her parents, with a mythical beast."\(^{28}\)

This critique utilizes the fable of Beauty and the Beast to explain an escape from, or punishment of, Arbus’s parents. Most importantly, the language of the critique and the direction in which the ideas are taken is wrought with sexist assumptions and class bias. The implication is that Arbus went slumming into the bowels of lower Manhattan where a woman of her origins simply did not belong. Not only do the critics imply that where and who Arbus photographed was somehow unsuitable due to her origins, but for the same reason her "rebellion" is considered inauthentic because she presumably always had her wealthy family behind her.

In an article entitled "Arbus in Wonderland," photography critic Hal Hinson writes:

"Arbus seemed to be trying to break through her feelings of numbness and isolation—which she regarded as a result of her over-\(^{28}\) Bedient, Calvin. "The Hostile Camera: Diane Arbus." *Art in America* 73 (January 1985) p. 11.
protective, upperclass, Jewish background-to something genuine."\(^{29}\)

Critic Phyliss Rose states this concept directly when she refers to Arbus as a "pampered daughter of a wealthy Jewish retailing family... (and)...behind her photographs lies a rich girl's sense that deprived and traumatized people are more real than she is."\(^{30}\)

These interpretations that Arbus's life and work lacked authenticity are also found in the writings of photography critic Max Kozloff who says that "Arbus came from a rich New York Jewish family,"\(^{31}\) in his juxtaposition of her origins against another photographer's beginnings as a 19th century miner. Kozloff's comparative statement about the two photographer's backgrounds alludes to a concept of artistic worth in that a hard working miner is perceived as more credible than a rich Jew who has had everything handed to her. The assumption remains that Arbus's photographs are less worthy because she was born into a wealthy Jewish family, implying that she could not empathize with, or was exploitative of her subject matter.

The specific questions which are apparent from this analysis are: 1) Why are the critical responses to Diane Arbus preoccupied with her being born Jewish? 2) Why are the critics fixated on the Jewish component when the critical arguments they establish could be


\(^{30}\) Rose, Phyllis. "Plunge into a Dark World." Time, June 4, 1984, p. 70.

made solely on the basis of class? 3) How are the critics maintaining a connection between issues of class and Jewish issues?

We cannot definitively know why Arbus photographed who she did, we can only presume. But our presumptions are oftentimes warped by bias, fear, and hatred. What is the rationale for the critical preoccupation with Arbus having been born Jewish, and utilizing this issue to create the psycho-social motivation for what became a large portion of her life’s work? The critics seem to be looking for an excuse for the existence of Arbus’s photographic images. Ultimately the excuse is found by interpreting and creating Arbus’s personae through sexist and anti-semitic means.

Diane Arbus was born Jewish. Inasmuch as there is little indication that she practiced the religion or defined herself as a Jew, the critics project this identification onto the photographer through repetitive references. Therefore, in addition to sexist and anti-semitic commentary, the critiques socially construct a female Jewish identity for her.

Art critic Jozef Gross discusses this issue pertaining to identity:

“in 1969 in an interview with Studs Terkel [Arbus said], ‘...I never knew I was Jewish when I was growing up. I didn’t know it was an unfortunate thing to be,...But if you are born one thing , you can dare-venture-to be ten thousand other things.’ [Gross continues,] ‘Here Diane came very close to naming her deepest unrecognised problem. But for this one then needs to invent an identity.”

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The invention of an identity is precisely what has occurred in the construction of the Arbus legend. The result is that a fact of birth, although seemingly not an identity for the photographer, becomes a useful critical tool to apply stereotypes and prejudice to explain the images which are so disturbing to the critic.

The basis for my discussion thus far has been to illuminate the manner in which the critics interpret Arbus’s images through an analysis of her potential emotional state. This interpretive process is not only devoid of a photographic exploration of Arbus’s images in the construction of her persona, but it is reliant upon the critic’s own personal biases and cultural norms. Art critic Judith Goldman explains a similar phenomenon in the critical writings:

"In most of the writings, visual perceptions dissolve into self-revelations, as if the task of the assignment were too much for the writer. The effect, like a potent drink, turns the critical prose into boozy private musings, more about the writer than Arbus the photographer."33

The critics bring their individual ideological baggage and place it upon Diane Arbus as an explanation for her life and work. The critical assumptions are biased in a manner which perpetuates social prejudice in a supposed discussion of photography. Finally, their prejudices are displaced from themselves onto Arbus. Instead of looking at Arbus through a language of photography, the critics discuss predetermined notions of ethics and morality, right and

wrong, emphasized not necessarily by what they say, but the manner in which it is said.

These critical responses come together in what photography theorist Catherine Lord refers to in her critique of the legend surrounding Diane Arbus as the "nice-rich-girl-courts-danger-motif." This phrase succinctly describes the narrative discourse of the critical responses as a whole. The critics are so preoccupied with Arbus's class and ethnic origins that they create a weapon for themselves with which they can hunt Arbus in the way they criticize her for hunting down her subject matter. The critic is compelled to explain away Arbus's images with language such as "forbidden" and "dangerous" because they are seen as too disturbing to be viewed. The result is a categorization of the images which stems from the interpretation that they are too disturbing. The images are then be placed at a safe distance where the critics' fears of "the other" will neither be acknowledged nor diminished.

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CHAPTER II

This chapter will explore the critical responses to Diane Arbus’s images, initially through an analysis of what has been written about her process of photographing,—i.e., Arbus’s interaction with her sitters, and the style(s) which resulted from this interaction—and then through a discussion of selected photographs. The critical conclusions drawn about Arbus’s life and work, discussed in chapter one, contain little photographic analysis. This chapter will focus on what has been said about the images themselves. The interpretations of Arbus’s life are based upon her images, while the criticism of her images is drawn from her perceived intentions and emotional state, thereby fueling Arbus’s legendary status. For the most part when critics look at Arbus’s images they are not specific. Rather they provide a general account of her images, often lumping the subject matter together if they refer to specific images at all.

Although Diane Arbus is historically viewed as a documentary photographer, much of her imagery is classified as portraiture. By its nature photographic portraiture requires the achievement of a rapport between the photographer and the sitter. The rapport assists in the realization of the photographic objective, although the desired result may remain somewhat ambiguous since what is recorded onto the film cannot always be exactly determined.
Critic Richard Schickel discusses

"the subtle, indiscernible time lapse between the decision to snap the shutter and the instant of its accomplishment—just time enough, as inevitably happens, for the subject to alter his expression in some way he doesn't know and the photographer cannot observe."38

The ambiguity of the final product can also have as much to do with technique and the apparatus of photography (i.e., lighting, camera, lens, shutter speed, etc.), as with the rapport that is established between the individuals involved in the act of creating an image.

The photographer/sitter relationship may appear to be a precarious one if thought of in terms of the "control" the photographer maintains in the "appropriation" of an image. The ambiguity and subjectivity of interpretations in the photographic balance of power in portraiture would engender an analysis of "subject" and "object" positioning.

As I have mentioned in chapter one, commentary exists which suggests that photography is a medium which captures and objectifies its subject matter. An individual may feel validated by having her photograph taken, and she may feel worthy of being photographed, but this does not preclude the fact that objectification occurs.

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The critical responses to Diane Arbus’s imagery have been engaged in the discussion of the relationship between the photographer and her sitters. The critical discourse explores conflicting interpretations of issues pertaining to photographic collaboration (photographer interest and sitter willingness), and the resultant form and content of the images which emerged from this interaction. Ultimately what arises through an exploration of the criticism of Arbus’s photographic processes and the images themselves, is the nature of the impact of the photographs upon the spectator. The questions for this discussion revolve around Arbus’s images themselves in terms of what has been written about how the images have been viewed, and how these writings have contributed to Arbus’s legendary status.

In many ways, this is a subjective and potentially circular discussion since Arbus’s photographs are interpreted by what the spectator sees in relation to form and content, and is influenced by what is “known” in terms of what is written or interpreted about how Arbus worked with her sitters. The subjectivity of interpretation is further complicated by who gets the label “freakish,” or “normal,” since some critics base their analysis solely on one of Arbus’s documented thoughts, which may have been taken out of context.
The Process: Interpreting Arbus’s Photographic Strategy

Arbus’s photographic processes, that is, how she worked with the individuals she photographed, have been interpreted disparately by various photographic essayists. Arbus photographed people predominantly in a straightforward, frontal manner. This style has led much critical interpretation of the images into a discussion of collaboration. Critics have seen Arbus’s collaborative process as maintaining 'a partisanship with her subjects.'

This "partisanship" stems from the knowledge that Arbus’s photographs were not captured surreptitiously, rather, the individuals were aware of the fact that they were being photographed. I would argue that the collaborative process, specifically the individuals’ willingness to pose, is what makes Arbus’s face-to-face, confrontational style possible.

Art critic Richard Schickel comments on the collaborative act, and sees it as a break from the norms of the medium during the time period in which Arbus photographed. He states:

"Nearly all of her subjects are in repose, and nearly all actively, consciously collaborate with her in the creation of the photograph. In effect she turned her back on professionalism, on all established notions of what constituted a proper aesthetic for a serious

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The photographer provides a perspective on the act of photographic collaboration when she states:

"If I were just curious, it would be very hard to say to someone, 'I want to come to your house and have you talk to me and tell me the story of your life.' I mean people are going to say, 'You're crazy.' Plus they're going to keep mighty guarded. But the camera is a kind of license. A lot of people, they want to be paid that much attention and that's a reasonable kind of attention to be paid. Actually, they tend to like me. I'm extremely likable with them. I think I'm kind of two-faced. I'm very ingratiating. It really kind of annoys me. I'm just sort of a little too nice. Everything is Oooo. I hear myself saying, 'How terrific,' and there's this woman making a face. I really mean it's terrific. I don't mean I wish I looked like that. I don't mean I wish my children looked like that. I don't mean in my private life I want to kiss you. But I mean that's amazingly, undeniably something. There are always two things that happen. One is recognition and the other is that it's totally peculiar. But there's some sense in which I always identify with them." \(^38\)

The process of identification which the photographer describes is a dynamic which may aid in the success of the collaborative act. Schickel notes that this process of identification and collaboration may impact the visual experience for the spectator:

"...the act of involving the subject with the camera, of making him conscious of the need to present an image to the lens, to those perfect strangers who may see the shot later, leads, paradoxically, to greater revelation than in a picture taken unawares." \(^39\)

On photographing and interacting with her sitters Arbus has said:

"I work from awkwardness. By that I mean I don’t like to arrange things: If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging, I arrange myself."\(^{40}\)

If this statement can be applied to Arbus’s photographic interactions, she created visual representations which provided the subject with the opportunity to present him or herself to the camera.

Critic Jasia Reichardt states:

"She said that people would not tell one the story of their life, but being photographed is different and that is something most of them will allow. So her photographs are real portraits of people who actually arrange themselves in the way in which they want to be seen- they pose and look at the camera."\(^{41}\)

Arbus’s hands-off strategy may attempt to avoid objectification by providing the subjects with some control over what is recorded onto film, thereby to some extent dissipating the total control that the photographer maintains. Of course, avoiding the arrangement of the subject of a photograph is not representative of an “objective reality;” the photographer inevitably omits and includes specifics within the confines of the photographic frame based on aesthetics, field of vision, or personal biases. Also the spectator will bring a certain knowledge or perspective to the interpretation of the image.


Judith Goldman interprets Arbus's images differently. She writes:

"Arbus' pictures read as one. Their intention is never clear. That is the irony of Arbus' hunt and unquestionable talent. Masquerading as documentation, the same fantastic quality of an emotional netherlands pervades each image and contradicts any reality. That is their flaw. To use Arbus' own words, that flaw is a 'gap between intention and effect'...But there is something dishonest about Arbus' intimacy. An air of complicity and misplaced trust escapes from the framed subjects. That dishonesty was neither moral nor even intended, but a compulsive cheating made by someone with an upper-hand."\(^2\)

Although Goldman senses the intimacy of Arbus's collaborative portraiture, she sees it as neither honest nor sincere. The basis for Goldman's criticism is what she describes as Arbus's "upper-hand."
It is unclear as to whether the imbalance described by Goldman relates to Arbus's position of control as the photographer, or if perhaps this critic is referring back to the proliferation of ethnic/class bias projected onto Arbus which I have explored in chapter one.

On the content conveyed in her photographs, Arbus has stated:

"for me the subject of the picture is always more important than the picture. And more complicated. I do have a feeling for the print but not a holy feeling...I mean it has to be of something and that is always more remarkable than what it is."\(^3\)

Art critic Hilton Kramer claims:

"part of the secret of [Arbus's] power, [is that] she invited them to collaborate in the picture-making process, and they agreed. Her subjects are thus participants, who face the camera with patience and


\(^3\) Arbus, Doon., Israel, Marvin., eds. Diane Arbus. Aperture, 1972, p.15.
interest and dignity; they are never merely ‘objects’.”

The dignity that this critic sees reflected in Arbus’s images may stem from the collaborative process itself. Yet, it also contributes to Arbus’s legendary status in the public reception of her images. Dignity is a word customarily attributed in portraiture to royal families or other individuals elevated in society by virtue of their class or power positioning. The subjects of Arbus’s photographs, predominantly the “freaks,” are not often afforded dignity through mainstream visual media. Additionally, Arbus’s sitters are not bestowed dignity simply by virtue of having their photograph taken, rather they are presented in a dignified manner.

This concept of dignity is a crucial point in this analysis of the critical responses to the photographer, and the perpetuation of the Arbus legend. One may sense from the criticism of the photographer’s motivations based upon ethnic/class issues I have discussed in chapter one that the personal investigation of Arbus’s intentions exists as a diversion from a discussion of the photographic content. Diane Arbus’s photographs are seen as morally disturbing. The representation of individuals who disrupt social norms of “beauty” and “acceptability” in a dignified manner disturbs the intrinsic biases of a society which fetishizes beauty as thin, white, and sexually available to men.

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Critic Hilton Kramer sees Arbus's images as innovative in comparison images to the history of the medium when he states:

"Part of the shock of Arbus' photographs...She takes us 'inside' in a way that photography had rarely attempted in the past. The dwarfs, the transvestites, the identical twins and triplets, the retarded women and nudists and other 'freaks' in her photographs are not observed--are not 'caught'--in the usual photographic sense."^6

The images have 'shocked' spectators who are unfamiliar either with Arbus's confrontational style of portraiture, or the depictions existing within the confines of the frame.

The Images: Objects of Interpretation

"Locking at an Arbus photograph, we feel the same revulsion and curiosity that hits us when we pass a bad car accident."[^46]  

Specifically, who and what did Diane Arbus photograph beyond the generalization implied by the otherness of "freaks?" What is revealed in her imagery as a result of the photographic collaboration? What is haunting, disturbing or psychologically possessive about Arbus's images? What is depicted to provoke such critical uproar? How are these questions pertinent to the photographer's legendary status?

The photographs included in this analysis have frequently been referred to in such a way as to aid the Arbus legend. Specifically, three themes for discussion have arisen from my analysis of the critical writings on Arbus's photographs. These themes relate to the concept of the mask/masquerade in the manner in which the subjects are represented, Arbus's choice of titles for her images, and Arbus's proficiency for representing "normals" in a disturbing manner.

As I have explained, Diane Arbus predominantly photographed people in a straight-on frontal manner. The spectator is drawn to the faces of individuals looking attentively into the eye of the camera which functions as the literal lens through which the spectator is allowed to see. Facial features, particularly the subject’s eyes, are initially striking as the spectator comes face-to-face with Arbus’s representation of the subject. Judith Goldman addresses the prevalence of the face-to-face nature of Arbus’ work:

"Her camera’s invariable focus was on the subject’s eyes...in photo after photo, they stare out in frozen despair."\(^{17}\)

My discussion of the critical writings has explored the sitter’s frontal positioning and presumed collaboration within the frame as being representative of a dignified manner. Yet what also emerges from the critical interpretation of the images relates back to the psychological concepts placed onto the psyche of the photographer which I explored in chapter one. As Goldman’s use of the term “despair” implies, a psycho-social component is brought to bear on the images relating to the manner in which the subjects of Arbus’s imagery are represented.

The psycho-social reading of a photograph relates to the manner in which the spectator/critic analyzes the elements of the image in order to find meaning in its representation. Photography essayist Max Kozloff, in his discussion of portraiture in the work of Diane

Arbus and two other photographers, August Sander and Lucas Samaras, focuses on the face and its associations with the concept of ‘the mask’ in reading photographic images. Kozloff explains that "... one’s features are ostensibly readable, not as a clock, but as a mask, whether consciously imposed or not." 

The concept of having one’s image recorded onto film has connotations beyond reading the individual’s face in an image. A face has been ‘put on’ which the spectator may decipher. The mask itself may render an ambiguous identity of the sitter, since the concept of the mask lends itself to a disguise, or masquerade.

Many of Arbus’s photographs capture various forms of the masquerade identifiable either by states of dress, undress, occupation or the playing of roles. The psychological component of the masquerade is reflected in the critical writings on Arbus’s imagery. Kozloff continues his discussion of the mask, and states:

"They [Arbus, Samaras, and Sander] probe in common the psychology that exists behind the playing of roles, and that would, if possible, convert role into true identity...[i]n Arbus’ pictures, those who pose frequently possess insufficient face and we seek to restore it to them, though with some uneasiness."

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*49 ibid., p.59.
The Pose and the Masquerade

The similarities between "A naked man being a woman, N.Y.C. 1968," [plate I] and "Nudist lady with swan sunglasses, Pa. 1965" [plate II] are particularly striking. Both subjects most obviously are unclothed, and depicted in a similar pose where both stand upright, and alone within the confines of the frame. The pose which both sitters maintain is one of fully displaying their bodies to the camera (with the exception of the male figure whose penis is presumably hidden between his legs), with hands on hips, and one leg bent at the knee. It is a suggestive pose, one which Victor Burgin refers to as 'a conventional sign for sexual desirability allied, at least in principle, to accessibility.' Of course, one major difference between these two images is that one depicts a woman, the other depicts a man masquerading as a woman. There is a theatrical nature to the image of "A naked man being a woman," not only in his pose, but in that he is centered and framed by a pair of stained curtains which expand to the edges of the photograph. He stands depicted in the glamour-like suggestive pose, in an extremely unglamorous surrounding. The bed he stands in front of is strewn with sheets and clothing. Lying on the floor underneath the bed is a hot plate, crumpled wax paper, and a can of beer. It is an odd backdrop for the pose and its associations with glamour and sexuality. Visible on his

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naked body are strap marks from recently removed undergarments. His face is heavily prepared with make-up, his eyebrows are plucked and replaced with penciled ones. In fact much of his body hair has been removed. His prepared body stand in contrast to the disarray of the room.

Interestingly, the man is termed "naked," as opposed to the "Nudist lady with swan sunglasses," who is depicted against a back drop of grass and trees. As a "nudist" she is somehow more natural, as the outdoor setting as well as the title implies. Both images are theatrical in pose, but the "naked man" appears exceptionally staged both in his nakedness and in his "being a woman." Nevertheless, the "nudist woman" is still theatrical in her pose framed by the trees, with her eyes hidden behind a pair of swan sunglasses which function to heighten the mystique of the image. The way in which the glasses accomplish this mystique is reminiscent of cinematic representations where the bespeckled female character is quite often the one who knows something which the other characters will find out later in the story. Here, although she is outdoors, the "nudist lady's" sunglasses make it seem as if she is hiding something. Her smile appears unnatural, toothy and stiff. This photograph is among a series of images Arbus completed in a nudist colony, a series to which two critics in particular reacted strongly. Richard Schickel sees the "absurd exposure of nudists," while Phyllis Rose sees "smug nudists with ugly bodies."

“Hermaphrodite and a dog in a Carnival trailer, Md. 1970” [plate III], completed as a part of Arbus’s series on carnival performers, is an image which can also be discussed in relation to the masquerade and visibility. Centered within the frame the hermaphrodite sits on a towel-covered cushioned chair in a sequined bikini top with a matching bottom of fringed fabric accented with a patch of sequins covering her/his crotch. Sitting on the chair as well is a little dog who looks directly into the camera as its head rests on the hermaphrodite’s upper thigh. The shape of the dog’s head echoes the shape of the sequined crotch cover. Both the hermaphrodite’s and the dog’s eyes are caught by Arbus’s electronic flash which provides a glistening effect on the sequins and the rhinestone necklace with matching earrings, but a bleached-out effect on skin and most of the other light-colored objects in the trailer. The hermaphrodite’s made-up face looks directly at the camera. One hand is placed on a hip, the other arm rests on a table to his/her left. It is difficult to ascertain whether the hermaphrodite is shaved on one side of her/his body, or if this is a result of the electronic flash inside the small trailer. The effect of the flash is visible on the hermaphrodite’s legs which are cut off just below the knee by the photographic frame. The leg upon which the dog rests, farther from the flash, is hairy, while the other appears smooth. The arm with the hand on hip is closer to the camera’s flash. It appears whiter and softer as it rests in the “feminine-glamour” position on the hip, while on the other, a distance away from the direct light of the flash the spectator can see a tattoo which says “love,” and a wide metal
bracelet. On the dark hairy arm, painted fingernails are visible, while the more "feminine" hand is curled on the hip in a way which conceals fingernails.

The effect of the electronic flash emphasizes the "male" and "femaleness" of the hermaphrodite, who is defined literally as having both male and female reproductive organs. Since the hermaphrodite (among other of Arbus's subjects) is socially viewed as a "freak," and in this case a performing "freak," critics have placed Arbus's images on a continuum of normality.

In an exhibition review entitled "Diane Arbus and American Freaks" critic Ian Jeffrey states:

"her subjects range from the disturbed and mongoloid through the ranks of transvestites and hermaphrodites to the near-normality of burlesque entertainers and topless dancers."53

The contrast quality of the photograph is less affected by Arbus's electronic flash in "Burlesque comedienne in her dressing room, Atlantic City, N.J. 1963" [plate IV]. The differentiation between shades of black and white are easily distinguishable. Her blond curly hair trims her heavily made-up face as her eyes, framed thickly with mascara, stare out to the camera. Erectly she sits, legs crossed in a dark wooden chair, wearing a short shiny dress trimmed with sequins. A bow is tied around her neck, and on her leg she wears a

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garter belt. Her high-heeled metallic sandals display painted toe nails, both of which catch the light from the flash. The showy outward display of her appearance exists in sharp contrast to the dressing room. The cement walls are water stained and dirty, while wiring from the few scattered lamps is visible. Strewn on the cracked, bare floor next to the comedienne’s crossed leg is an overflowing garbage can and a single sandal. Her elbow rests on a counter scattered with make-up accessories, an ashtray with a cigarette burning in it, a small make-up mirror and two larger ones propped against the wall. Through the largest mirror, centered on the counter, the spectator can see the comedienne’s partial reflection cut off by the edge of the photograph. The reflection in the grimy mirror has a softer, painterly quality to it than the harsher lit comedienne. The reflection is dream-like, while the woman who sits before the camera appears to have posed on a break in between performances. Though her eyes stare out, she is otherwise expressionless. The comedienne’s eyes are significant because similar to other Arbus images, they draw the spectator in. It is common for photography criticism, particularly of portraiture, to refer to the subject’s eyes. Yet, what is important is the critics repetitive references and how they state what they see regarding the subject’s eyes.

In reference to Arbus’s 1972 Museum of Modern Art retrospective Susan Sontag writes:
"lined up assorted monsters and borderline cases—most of them ugly; wearing grotesque or unflattering clothing; in dismal or barren surrounding—who have paused to pose and, often to gaze frankly, confidentially at the viewer."\textsuperscript{54}

Although Sontag finds Arbus's images rather unpleasant, her language shifts when commenting on the subject's eyes. Sontag's term "confidentially" suggests the eyes do draw the spectator in, that the eyes tell a different story beyond the elements of appearance and the discontinuity of the setting.

The concept of visibility in photographic interpretation is important in the differentiation between the stylized component of the masquerade, against a rather dreary back-drop in Arbus's image of "Max Maxwell Landar, Uncle Sam" [plate V], published in Harper's Bazaar in 1961. This image appeared in a series entitled "The Full Circle," for which Arbus wrote this accompanying text:

"These are five singular people who appear like metaphors somewhere farther out than we do, beckoned, not driven, invented by belief, author and hero of a real dream by which our own courage and cunning are tested and tried; so that we may wonder all over again what is veritable and inevitable and possible and what it is to become whoever we may be."\textsuperscript{55}

Not surprisingly, "Uncle Sam" who was hired as a "sandwichman" to advertise for a tax advisory service, wears a top hat with star studded tails, and striped pants. His eyes lifted upward, he stands in the forefront of the photographic frame with one arm raised out in

front of him, while the other hangs at his side. "Uncle Sam" stands in a courtyard surrounded by dirty brick buildings connected with clothes lines, whose laundry hangs above his head. Behind him children run and play together amidst the newspaper, garbage, and other discarded items scattered about. The contrast between "Uncle Sam" and this back-drop is emphasized by the camera's focal point. Although there is a grainy quality to the entire photograph, aside from his hand outstretched in front of him, "Uncle Sam" is clearly in focus. The children, the buildings and the garbage which encircle him are grainy and out of focus. The social context of the man who "embodies" the United States of America is another blatant contradiction represented in this image amidst the dirty realities of urban life. Many of Arbus's images contain a kind of purposeful visual discontinuity. Some like "Uncle Sam," can be critically perceived, while others are more generally seen as disconcerting. For example, critic Hilton Kramer speculates on the public reception of Arbus's Museum of Modern Art retrospective:

"A great many people are going to be shocked by it, appalled by the audacity of her subject matter and stunned by the photographer's studied refusal to soften its effect with the usual artistic embellishments."56

The perceived "problem" with Arbus's images such as "A naked man being a woman," "Hermaphrodite and a dog in a Carnival trailer," and "Burlesque comedienne in her dressing room" relates to the subject matter itself, and to the spectator's inability to do

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anything more than condemn the image for what it represents. A powerful component of these images is their discontinuity in contrasting the pose which suggests “glamour” or “beauty” against a backdrop which depicts quite the opposite. Critics have reacted strongly to this discontinuity, though not by exploring what is articulated through an analysis of composition or content specifics in the photographic representations. Rather, some critics condemn Arbus while dismissing the photographic subject matter as false. Ian Jeffrey states:

“[I]n her occasional savagery...she attends to anyone who has been to the trouble to prepare a face or posture for the world.”

The deceptive quality of the masquerade may be reflected by Arbus’s comment in chapter one pertaining to the “gap between intention and effect.” Arbus claims she was relating to an individual’s desire to create a persona for the outside world, and the gap exists because the outside world will interpret things about ourselves which we cannot always observe. Hinson’s critique appears to have been informed by Arbus’s statement when he writes:

“...her camera registered in merciless detail the discrepancy between our real and our fictitious selves, between what we are and what we invent.”

The discrepancy which Hinson sees relates to the apparent discontinuity of the messages contained in the images. Yet that

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discontinuity itself pertains to the instability of the masquerade. In particular, the personae of the "naked man" and the "burlesque comedienne" are constructed quite literally as facades. When the make-up and poses are without a stage, and they are photographed behind the scenes, in a bedroom, a trailer, and a dressing room providing for "...moments when the mask seems to slip." The subjects of these images confront the spectator, face to face, yet it is the perceived loss of face to which critics react so fiercely.

Assigning Labels

Although Arbus’s photographs of “A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y. 1970” [plate VI], and “A Jewish couple dancing, N.Y.C. 1963” [plate VII], were taken seven years apart, there are interesting similarities. The most apparent is her use of titles to point out the ethnicity of her subjects. These are the only two of Arbus’s published work which make the distinction of Jewishness.

In regard to Arbus’s image of the “Jewish giant,” Leslie Fiedler explains:

“Her subject is Eddie Carmel-claimed height 9 feet 5/8 inch, real height 7 feet 7 inches-and his small-normal sized parents; but both her title and treatment strip the Barnum and Bailey show Giant, who lived from 1938 to 1972, of all identity except his Jewishness...at home, with his head bowed as if to mitigate the difference between him and his dwarfed parents, yet his sheer bulk threatening to bring down the walls of their tiny apartment.”

Another similarity in these two images is the presence of the older parental-like couple. “The Jewish giant” towers over his his parents, his mother is centered in the photographic frame wearing a flowered house dress and her hands on her hips as she cranes her neck upward to look at him. The father in this image is more physically withdrawn as is indicated by the body language of his

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stance. Standing slightly behind the mother’s outstretched elbow, his hand rests in his jacket pocket as he look straight ahead, eye level at his son’s waist. Behind the couple, the window shades are drawn. The “Jewish giant” leans on a cane in front of the living room couch with a floral fringed covering. Beside the couch is something reminiscent of many immigrant, working-class homes I have visited, a lamp with the shade still wrapped in the clear plastic from when it was purchased. There is nothing particularly “Jewish” about these people, or their living room. It is curious as to why Arbus would call this to the spectator’s attention with her choice of title. Critic Judith Goldman claims:

“With or without the caption, the photograph is spectacular; a young man towers over two tiny people, stooping to avoid the enclosing ceiling...The giant’s youth exaggerates the sterility of slip-covered furniture. The picture smells from stale cigars. The caption tells us to read this picture in a certain way. The giant is Jewish and he lives in the Bronx with his parents. A non-Jew will see this differently than a Jew, a non-New Yorker from a New Yorker. Regardless, Arbus has made David into Goliath and brought the wrath of the Old Testament God to the Bronx. That wrath is the artist’s wrath and fortunately this photograph is strong enough to withstand Arbus’ inability to keep herself out of the picture.”

It is equally perplexing why this title should apply to “A Jewish couple dancing.” The couple are pictured up close, bright-eyed, and smiling toward the camera within the blackened frame of the presumed dance floor around them. The dark framed glasses the man is wearing echoes those of the giant’s father. The woman’s arm cuts across the center of the image to clasp the man’s hand bedecked

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with a bulbous pinky ring. Though the woman wears a pearl necklace and matching bracelet, none of these jewels reflect any sort of Judaic symbolism. They are certainly a “couple dancing,” but what is the purpose of identifying them as “Jewish?”

Critic Ian Jeffrey is less concerned with the title of “A Jewish couple dancing,” than he is with Arbus’s image. Jeffrey describes:

“petty coarseness...where in a parody of a party photograph the smiling man shows his discoloured and malformed teeth and his partner her craggy elbow.”

The issue of labeling identity is apparent in Arbus’s photograph entitled, “Russian midget friends in a living room on 100th Street, N.Y.C. 1963” [plate VIII]. In the center of the photographic frame are three elderly “midgets,” two women and one man who face the camera directly. The room is filled with dark wooden furniture, and a three-panel wood framed mirror against the back wall which reflects one of the women while providing a partial view of the room behind the camera. Visible are several photographs placed around the frame of the mirror. Critic Hal Hinson is disturbed by these photographs. He states:

“At first we share her absorption in the tiniest details of her subject’s lives—like the neatly pressed child’s shirt worn by a Russian midget in his living room and the snapshots of normal-sized people stuck into the mirror behind him. Looking at the snapshots, we think, Who are they? Family members? Children, perhaps? What are they like? But then we may begin to feel sleazy about our interest in

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them."

The "midgets" sit leaning on the edges of their seats as if they were just having a conversation with one another and turned to pose for the camera. The wrinkles on their skin and folds in their clothing are intensified by the artificial light of Arbus's flash, and the ambient light coming in from the window to the right of the frame. The sunlight draws attention to small plants potted in whipped butter containers sitting atop a side table. The man has a surprised look on his face, his mouth hangs half open as he stares at the camera. The woman in between her two friends appears amused, she smiles with her mouth closed, holding her reading glasses in the hand which rests on the man's chair. The woman next to her leans on the stool next to her with one arm, while the other rests on her knee. She looks at the camera with her wrinkled face scrunched-up, and appears rather puzzled. Though the women wear dresses covered by aprons, the man's clothing, a printed button-down shirt tucked into his pants, appears less domestic. There is nothing essentially "Russian" about this image, nothing in the "midget's" faces display their heritage.

Although the titles "Jewish" and "Russian" provide information by telling the spectator what is not necessarily apparent, Jozef Gross sees Arbus's qualifiers operating in such a way that "the title added attacks the word which condemns the subject to the status of

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outcast."44 Since a particular identity of the subject is brought to the attention of the spectator through the usage of titles, it influences the way in which the image will be viewed. The titles achieve the "status of outcast" in emphasizing an identity which has no specific reference point contained in the image, thereby providing a space for the anticipation of the image based upon the title and the projection of biases associated with the qualifier to an image which might not otherwise evoke such sentiment.

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What determines normality?

Arbus completed photographs to accompany an article for the
Sunday Times Magazine (London) which discussed Camp Lakecrest
for overweight girls located in Dutchess County, New York [plate IX].
The series of images published in Diane Arbus: Magazine Work
depicts adolescent girls outdoors engaged in camp-like activities;
sports, dancing, playing, and walking arm in arm. In two of these
photographs, a camper stands alone facing the camera and holding a
small photograph of herself presumably at a heavier weight.
Clothed in sweatshirts, shorts, and sneakers, the girls appear to going
about their activities, stopping to pose for a picture. In general there
is nothing unusual about these freckled-faced girls, who are far from
obesity. Without the title which locates them as overweight, they
could be viewed as average adolescents. Although the two who
hold images of themselves are distinct from the others in that there
is an indication of a personal history, the photographs are so small
they are hardly descriptive. Without the overweight title, the
spectator may not assume that the images they hold are of
themselves.

Critic Hal Hinson says:

"[T]he oppressive gracelessness of the young girls at a fat camp
begins to get to us. We may start to wonder why Arbus is shoving
these people and this squalor in our faces."

"A family on their lawn one Sunday in Westchester, N.Y. 1968" [plate X], is an example of the critical interpretation that even Arbus’s photographs of “normal” people appear disturbed. The parents lie sunbathing on lounge chairs in the foreground of the image, behind them the large expanse of their backyard spreads out to the corners of the frame where their son plays in a kiddie-pool. Their backs are towards the child, and the child’s backside is towards the camera. This arrangement makes it appear as if the parents are indifferent to him. The mother’s eyes are closed as she soaks up the sun with one leg raised up, bent at the knee. Her right hand rests on what appears to be a ruffled cover-up which matches her ruffled bikini. Her face heavily made-up, she rests her head against the back of the chair, appearing indifferent to the camera. The father hides his eyes with his hand. This is one of the few Arbus portraits where the sitter doesn’t acknowledge the camera in some manner. Yet, perhaps their seeming indifference is some kind of acknowledgment.

Critic Ian Jeffrey discusses this image and writes:

“a couple sprawl on deckchairs sunbathing, whilst their son plays on the lawn in the background: a row of trees cuts out most of the sky and closes the picture. This could epitomize middle-class normality, but for the sombre gothic cast of the bank of trees and the unalleviated leaden intricacies of the wide stretch of lawn. The

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boringly normal has become sinister in this photograph."

There are elements of this image which are disconcerting,
particularly the way in which the spectator can see all that is
occurring within the photographic frame, while the subjects cannot.
The parents have their eyes closed to the camera, and their backs
turned to their son. The son plays in the small pool seemingly
oblivious to the presence of his parents and the documentation of
their afternoon in the yard. Is their apparent indifference justifiably
"sinister?" It may be that what this critic finds "sinister" about the
image is their "boring normality." Particularly, this slice of suburban
life shares a common legacy with Arbus's "freaks," thus compelling
the critic to search out the disturbances in the imagery. This is the
force of Arbus's legendary status.

CONCLUSIONS

For more than twenty years Arbus’s images have been discussed in relation to one another and informed by what is known about the photographer’s “troubled” life. The legend of Diane Arbus was not constructed in reaction to a few photographs, or critical responses. Chapter two has explored numerous elements which have aided in the construction and perpetuation of the Arbus legend. These elements have been discussed in an effort to illuminate contradictory interpretations in the process of demystifying the legend of Arbus’s life and work. This chapter has sought to answer questions pertaining to the way Arbus’s images have been received and interpreted by the critics. Through an analysis of what has been written about Arbus’ interactions with her sitters, this chapter has explored disparate interpretations which see the interaction as a collaborative act as well as a manipulative and insincere one. Arbus’s interaction resulted in imagery which brings the spectator face to face with the subject matter. Some critics witness the portrayal of a dignified subject, while others see the occurrence of objectification.

In interpreting Arbus’s images, chapter two has the utilized three key themes to address the question of what provoked the critical uproar. The themes, derived from the critical interpretations, help to clarify not only why the images are seen as disturbing, but also the
way in which the legend may be perpetuated. It is apparent that Arbus's representations of the masquerade depict the instability and discontinuity between the appearances of her subjects and a disruptive backdrop. In the realm of the masquerade, the visible signs of otherness in costume, outdoor nudity, and unstable gender roles were significant in contributing to the proliferation of criticism. Arbus's use of titles to label and categorize provides ample room for critics to expound upon Arbus's personal life in search of the motivation for the labels. Finally, the third theme illustrates the way in which concepts regarding social norms pertaining to body weight and class standing reinforce the legend in its indeterminate manner of judging who will be labeled as ugly, disturbed, "freak" or "normal."

Both chapters one and two have explored the manner in which the legend of Diane Arbus is perpetuated through critical writings which seek to interpret the photographer and her emotional state through her images. Similarly, the interpretation of Arbus's images is significantly influenced by the details of the artist's relatively short life. The result of this interpretive process essentially confuses the photographer's life and images. The legend has bestowed upon the photographs lives of their own. Ultimately, the problematic component of the legend and of the critiques has more to do with the manner in which they are written, it is not necessarily what they say, but rather, how.
This thesis illuminates the difficulties inherent in interpreting either the photographer or her images without the impact which is constructed by the legend. That the legend constructs the critiques is a function of Arbus’s suicide. Nevertheless, the photographs remain as an abstract extension of the photographer. Both the life of the woman and the images cannot be described with the same language. Yet, the muddy waters of the legend dictates how the images have been interpreted, and in turn conclusions made about the images have become rationales for interpreting the life of Diane Arbus.
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Plate I: “A naked man being a woman, N.Y.C. 1968”
Plate II: "Nudist lady with swan sunglasses, Pa. 1965"
Plate III: “Hermaphrodite and a dog in a Carnival trailer, Md. 1970”
Plate IV: “Burlesque comedienne in her dressing room, Atlantic City, N.J. 1963”
Plate V: "Max Maxwell Landau, Uncle Sam"
Plate VI: "A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y. 1970"
Plate VII: "A Jewish couple dancing, N.Y.C. 1963"
Plate VIII: "Russian midget friends in a living room on 100th Street, N.Y.C. 1963"
Plate IX: "Camp Lakecrest for overweight girls located in Dutchess County, NY"
Plate X: "A family on their lawn one Sunday in Westchester, N.Y. 1968"