

The Diane Arbus You've Never Seen

By **RANDY KENNEDY** MAY 26, 2016

This summer, the Met Breuer will be showcasing the artist's early work, much of it never before published or exhibited. Here is a guide from the show's curator. [RELATED ARTICLE](#)



Credit Diane Arbus/The Estate of Diane Arbus LLC

Girl with a pointy hood and white schoolbag at the curb, N.Y.C., 1957.

“Arbus was particularly sensitive to children,” the curator Jeff L. Rosenheim said. “They’re in the process of changing their identities as they grow. She’s at the curb — the curb itself is that liminal stage.”

In his classic study of the short story “[The Lonely Voice](#),” the Irish writer Frank O’Connor identified the primary difference between the novel and the short story as one of belonging. Novels, to put it simply, are about people trying to fit into society, while stories are about the loners, the outsiders, the kooks, those to whom society “offers no goals and no answers” and for whom the short story’s “intense awareness of human loneliness” is perfectly suited.

From practically the moment that the commercial photographer Diane Arbus set out to become an artist at the ripe age of 33 — numbering her negatives sequentially from 1 to more than 6,000 before her suicide in 1971 — she seemed to know that the story of the outsider was her intellectual inheritance. And she had the uncanny ability, in a city as crowded as New York, to isolate even those who thought they belonged, to find them almost alone on a sidewalk, their eyes searching hers — later ours — fiercely and uncertainly through the camera.

“[Diane Arbus: In the Beginning](#),” which opens July 12 at the Met Breuer, will give the first real glimpse of one of the greatest artists of the 20th century in chrysalis. Drawing from the Diane Arbus Archive, acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 2007 from the artist’s daughters, Doon and Amy Arbus, the exhibition focuses on the years 1956 through 1962 and includes mostly images that have never before been exhibited or published, a huge body of work predating the pictures that have defined Arbus’s career. The show will arrive just after the publication of “[Diane Arbus: Portrait of a Photographer](#)” (Ecco), a highly anticipated and unauthorized biography by Arthur Lubow, a contributor to The New York Times, that delves deeply into the connections between Arbus’s work and her sometimes troubled life, in interviews with many friends who have never before spoken publicly about her.



Credit Diane Arbus/The Estate of Diane Arbus LLC

Woman with white
gloves and a

pocketbook, N.Y.C., 1956.

“We’re in the isolationist ’50s, and here’s a glamorous woman on Fifth Avenue, wearing gloves, with her pocketbook, but with this anxiety on her face.”

Jeff L. Rosenheim, the curator in charge of the museum’s photography department and organizer of the Arbus exhibition, sat down at the Metropolitan Museum last week to talk about the years of work that led to the show and about Arbus’s remarkable conviction, even in her earliest images, of what she called her own kind of “rightness and wrongness.”

“The camera is cruel,” she once said, “so I try to be as good as I can to make things even.”

These are edited excerpts.



CreditDiane Arbus/The Estate of Diane Arbus LLC

Little man biting woman's breast, N.Y.C., 1958.

“We’re at a street festival, and there’s a theatrical aspect. People are performing for her. They’re having fun.”

It seems amazing that so much work by an artist of Arbus’s stature could go largely unknown for so many years. Why has it taken so long for it to come to light?

JEFF L. ROSENHEIM In 2007, when I brought the archive to the museum as a gift from her two daughters, we knew that in addition to all the negatives and papers and correspondence, there were also hundreds of original works of art, vintage gelatin silver prints, primarily from 1956 to 1962, printed by her. And what was interesting was that most of those had been discovered long after [the 1972 Aperture monograph](#) that established her reputation, the square-format pictures we know so well. Arbus had a darkroom separate from her home at Westbeth in the West Village, and there were lots of boxes that had been hidden away there, on Charles Street, at the time of her death. They weren’t found until years later and not inventoried until many years later.



Old woman with hands raised in the ocean, Coney Island, N.Y., 1960.

“There’s something ambiguous in the woman’s gesture. She could be waving or calling for help.”

What was your reaction when you started going through the prints yourself for the first time?

ROSENHEIM I thought that the work had such authority. And that the genesis of this artist was something I didn’t know anything about. And wouldn’t it be interesting to see what this looked like and compare it to the larger whole. If you think of what we know of Arbus, it’s really Chapter 2. What we’re doing is Chapter 1. And the two are much more connected than you could ever imagine. The opportunity is to look at the poetics of a

great artist at the beginning of her career, and if we compare that to Walker Evans, for example, or for that matter Robert Frank or Helen Levitt or Lee Friedlander or Garry Winogrand, when you look at their beginnings, they are very different from their middles and their ends. And Arbus's work is really just one beautiful thing.



Credit Diane Arbus/The Estate of Diane Arbus LLC

Empty snack bar, N.Y.C., 1957.

“She was often looking in from outside. The street was the pathway to the private world.” How does it look and feel like Arbus (of whom [Norman Mailer](#) once said, in a famously backhanded compliment, that giving a camera to her was like giving a hand grenade to a baby) even in the first images?

ROSENHEIM There are many pictures from her first 50 rolls of film in the show. And you can see for yourself that she is already isolating individuals, pedestrians on Fifth Avenue. She is approaching people, and in almost every instance, it's one image and the

subject is addressing the camera. Arbus did not want to do what almost every one of her peers was doing, which she was highly aware of — she was well versed in the history of the medium; she was taking classes from Lisette Model and she had studied with Berenice Abbott *and* Alexey Brodovitch. What she took away from that training was this feeling that she could find her subject and they could find her in equal measure. She allowed herself to be vulnerable enough. Helen Levitt used a right-angle viewfinder so her subjects couldn't see what she was doing. Walker Evans used the folds of his coat to [hide his camera on the subway](#). The style of documentary photography was that you wanted to see but you didn't want to be seen, and Arbus had a completely different method. It was to use the camera as an expressive device that allows the viewer of the photograph to be implicated by the subject looking directly at the artist.



CreditDiane Arbus/The Estate of Diane Arbus LLC

Blonde receptionist behind a picture window, N.Y.C., 1962.

“This is the transition year, when she changed to square format. The receptionist is in a kind of diorama, not one made by the woman but by the culture.”

Why did that matter so much to her?

ROSENHEIM I think Arbus was suggesting that just as people are looking at us and we're looking at them every day, the pictures made us introspective as viewers. They forced us to confront our own identity. And that's a really beautiful switch, that switcheroo. We're looking at somebody else but we're mindful of our voyeurism, and we're mindful of how we ourselves are presenting. 'How am I different? How did I become the person I am?' That's one of the qualifying elements of an Arbus photograph: that you feel something about you, often something that might not be comfortable.



This image was shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2000-2001. Credit Diane Arbus/The Estate of Diane Arbus, LLC

Screaming woman with blood on her hands, 1961.

“This is a shot inside a theater, of a movie called ‘Horrors of the Black Museum.’ The woman is using binoculars and when she focuses, daggers come out and blind her.”

The longtime criticism of Arbus, by [Susan Sontag](#) among others, was that she was often producing that effect — her art — at the expense of her subjects, the sideshow freaks and cross-dressers she sought out. Will this show change anyone’s mind about that?

ROSENHEIM I feel that when I look at these pictures the effect is of the gaze that people strike when they catch a glimpse of themselves in a picture window or a mirror when they’re not expecting it. It’s their split-second performative response to themselves. Whether it is what they are or not, it’s what they seem to be. And I think in a certain sense each of her subjects seemed to gain some self-knowledge from that experience, the experience of being photographed by Arbus.



This image appeared on the cover of the Evergreen Review in 1963. Credit Diane Arbus/The Estate of Diane Arbus LLC

Child teasing another, N.Y.C., 1960.

“She’s interested in how we choose our others, how we choose to behave in public.”

Metropolitan Museum Acquires Diane Arbus Archive

(New York, December 18, 2007)—The Metropolitan Museum of Art announced today that it has acquired the complete archive of Diane Arbus (1923-1971), the legendary American photographer known for her revelatory portraits of couples, children, nudists, carnival performers, and eccentrics. The Estate of Diane Arbus has selected the Museum to be the permanent repository of the artist's negatives, papers, correspondence, and library. The Museum will collaborate with the Estate to preserve Arbus's legacy and to ensure that her work will continue to be seen in the context of responsible scholarship and in a manner that honors the subjects of the photographs and the intentions of the artist.

The Estate's gifts and promised gifts to the Museum include hundreds of early and unique photographs by Arbus, negatives and contact prints of 7,500 rolls of film, glassine print sleeves annotated by the artist, as well as her photography collection, library, and personal papers including appointment books, notebooks, correspondence, writings, and ephemera. The entire collection - which will be preserved, fully catalogued, and eventually made available for research to scholars, artists, and the general public - will be known as The Diane Arbus Archive.

The Museum has also purchased twenty of Diane Arbus's most iconic photographs, including such masterpieces as Russian midget friends in a living room on 100th Street, N.Y.C., 1963, and Woman with a veil on Fifth Avenue, N.Y.C., 1968.

Chosen to complement the Metropolitan's noteworthy photography collection, the prints range in date from her earliest 35mm street photographs - such as Masked boy with friends, Coney Island, N.Y., 1956 - to one of her last pictures, Blind couple in their bedroom, Queens, N.Y., 1971.

Philippe de Montebello, Director of the Metropolitan Museum, stated: "These remarkable acquisitions will establish the Museum as the center for scholarship on Diane Arbus, and go to the heart of our mission to collect, preserve, study, and exhibit the highest achievements of artists from antiquity to our own age. The Museum is grateful that the artist's estate has entrusted the Metropolitan with the stewardship of Diane Arbus's legacy."

Many of the original materials in The Diane Arbus Archive were featured in Diane Arbus Revelations, the traveling exhibition (2003-2006) that was organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art with the artist's estate and presented at the Metropolitan Museum in spring 2005. As Doon Arbus, the artist's elder daughter, wrote in the accompanying publication's afterword, she and her sister Amy "kept an awful lot of stuff, partly out of diligence, or superstition, partly out of reverence for the kind of history that survives more or less intact in objects." These items, the residue of the artist's life, will be used by this and future generations to trace the evolution of the photographer's visual ideas through a parallel understanding of the individuals and cultural conditions that molded and stimulated that development.

Jeff L. Rosenheim, Curator in the Museum's Department of Photographs, will oversee the long-term effort to fully catalogue and preserve the collection, and to develop plans for future exhibitions and publications. He noted: "It is rare in any field that one of its greatest practitioners should leave behind her entire output.

Because this is the case with Diane Arbus, as it was with Walker Evans, whose personal archive came to the Museum in 1994, the Metropolitan will now have the opportunity to map the creativity of two great artists in the most complete way. The Diane Arbus Archive will provide a contextual understanding of Arbus's stunning achievement with the camera, and simultaneously offer fundamental insight into what it means to be an artist in modern times."



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EXPOSURE TIME

Diane Arbus's estate opens up her life and work to new scrutiny.

BY JUDITH THURMAN

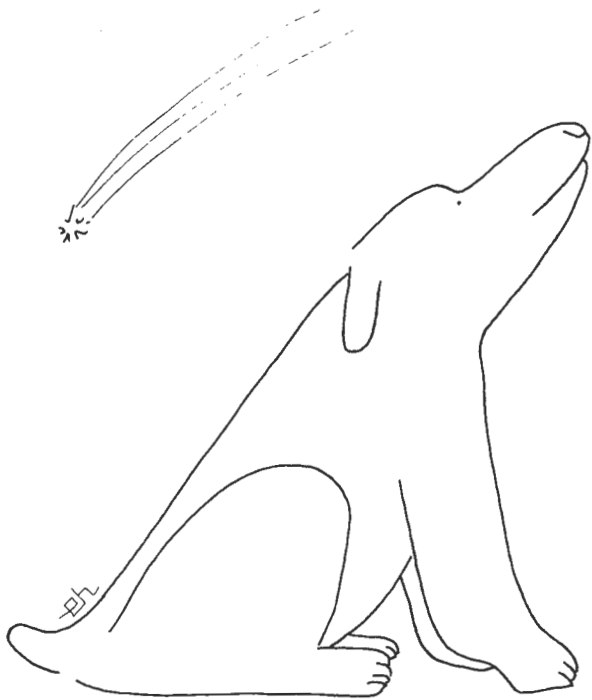
The woman who will stop at nothing was a Fury, a bacchante, and a saint courting martyrdom long before she was a self-immolating modern artist. But she became a heroine in and of the nineteen-sixties, and by going too far she raised the bar of audacity for imagining how far a woman can go. The legends of Sylvia Plath, Janis Joplin, and Diane Arbus all had their roots in that decade. They fed a hunger for narratives of suicidal transcendence that were particularly seductive to the young, perhaps because it takes a lifetime to accept that we have, and are confined to the solitude of, one body.

Idolatry is a form of vandalism that often inspires a violent counter-reaction of antipathy to the idol. Even before her death, in 1971, Arbus was exalted as a genius and reviled as a predator who conned her subjects out of their dignity. The judicious books that accompany two new shows give perspective to her intentions and, in the process, to her character. "Diane Arbus: Family Albums" (Yale; \$35) is the catalogue of an exhibit curated by Anthony W. Lee and John Pultz that is currently installed at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in South Hadley, Massachusetts. An informative short essay by Pultz focusses on specific work, and an erudite, longer one by Lee reconsiders Arbus's portraiture in the context of social and art history. The show takes its premise from a letter that Arbus wrote to Peter

Crookston, an editor of the London *Sunday Times Magazine*, in 1968, announcing that she was embarking on a project whose working title was "Family Album." "All I have is . . . a sort of sweet lust for things I want in it," she told him. "Like picking flowers. Or Noah's ark. I can hardly bear to leave any animal out." The pictures she took for the album, which was never published, were commissioned by magazines or by private clients, and some were made for art's sake. Like all her work, they explored the nature of closeness and disaffection, sameness and anomaly, belonging and exclusion: the tension between our sentimental expectations of what is supposed to be and the debacle of what is. Arbus put it more simply to Crookston: "I think all families are creepy in a way."

Freud thought families were creepy, too, and his essay "The Uncanny," from "On Creativity and the Unconscious," suggests why Arbus's portraits still have the power to disquiet, repel, fixate, or even enrage the beholder out of proportion to their formal content. The German for "uncanny"—the adjective used for horror stories—is *unheimlich*, the grammatical negation of *heimlich*, which is the word for "secret," while *heim* means "home." Freud concludes that a sensation of something uncanny occurs in civilized people when they are suddenly surprised by a home truth they have repressed—a primal fear or desire. Looking at Arbus's work, one has that

"Untitled (7)," from a series of photographs taken in homes for the retarded, 1970-71.



*Without Making a Big Deal Out of It, Dogs Often
Question the Existence of an Almighty.*

• •

visceral shock of the forbidden. It's creepy not because her subjects are handicapped, loony, hideous, bizarre, sad, or perverse (though most of them are) but because there is something fundamentally taboo about the way she bares their primitive substance without their seeming to know it. The beholder's shudder relates to the memory, conscious or not, of that ancient nightmare in which one walks through the school cafeteria besmirched by some human stain while thinking one is safely clothed. Our dignity depends upon continence in the broadest sense of the word, and Arbus's subjects leak their souls.

The other, much more ambitious Arbus show is a long-awaited retrospective that opens at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on October 25th. It is accompanied by an aptly titled compendium, "Diane Arbus: Revelations" (Random House; \$100), which contains a critical appreciation by one of the curators, Sandra S. Phillips, and a technical discussion by the photographer Neil Selkirk, who has been the official printer of Arbus's work since her death. "Revelations" has a number of pictures, and variants of pictures, that have never been seen before, though none of the new material significantly alters one's impres-

sion of the oeuvre. The real revelation is contained in a chronology compiled by the curator Elisabeth Sussman and Doon Arbus, the artist's eldest daughter and her executor. Their narrative punctuates an eloquent assemblage of previously unpublished writings and images: notebook entries, snapshots, contact sheets, passages from letters to family members and friends.

The only previous Arbus retrospective took place in 1972, a year after she committed suicide, at forty-eight. It was a landmark event for its host institution, the Museum of Modern Art, setting an attendance record for a solo photography exhibition and for sales of the accompanying monograph (one of the best-selling art books in history), while roiling a tempest of controversy, moral and critical, not only about Arbus's working methods and subject matter but about her life. Doon Arbus, who was twenty-six when her mother died, and who was revolted by what she describes in an Afterword to "Revelations" as an "onslaught of theory and interpretation," not to speak of scabrous anecdote, that engulfed her mother's legacy, effectively shut down the reactor of the estate.

"Much of modern art is devoted

to lowering the threshold of what is terrible," Susan Sontag wrote in her penetrating excoriation of Arbus in "On Photography," which was first published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1973. With the passage of time, the fresh horrors fabricated like daily bread by art and by history muted the hostility to Arbus's transgressions—her exploration of what Sontag described as "an appalling underworld" of the "deformed and mutilated." Doon Arbus, however, held fast to the high ground of her reticence. She zealously—even perversely, in the estimation of many scholars—refused virtually every outside request to reproduce the photographs or study the papers. The judgment was hers to make, and one can respect it without approving it. But Arbus's lasting contribution to modern art is as a portraitist, and the great questions that portraiture—of which biography is an offshoot—puts to both subject and beholder are "Who are you?" and "How did you become what you are?" It seems fair to interrogate an artist in the same spirit—particularly, perhaps, in the case of a photographer like Arbus, whose problematic intimacy with troubling subjects (or subjects that she renders troubling) and unseen yet palpable presence in the frame generate so much of the mystery that draws one to the images.

This summer, without much notice, five members of the Arbus family collaborated on a play that was performed at the Cherry Lane Theatre as part of the New York International Fringe Festival. Doon Arbus wrote the play, "Third Floor, Second Door on the Right," some thirty years ago, and, like the material in "Revelations," it had been sleeping in a drawer. Her younger sister, Amy, acted as the artistic adviser for the production; their half sister, Arin, directed it; their stepmother, Mariclare Costello, designed the costumes; and their eighty-five-year-old father, Allan—who gave up photography in 1969 to become a full-time actor, and whose move (with Costello) to Los Angeles to pursue a movie and television career jolted Diane Arbus profoundly, for better and for worse—played the central role. In a rambling monologue prompted by a young reporter, an old man living alone, in physical and emotional disar-

ray, whose best friend—a famous figure—has recently committed suicide, examines the impact on his life of the man and his death. Arin Arbus told a reporter that the drama wasn't "autobiographical," but perhaps it helped, like a communal meditation, to steel the family's nerves for an anticipated blaze of scrutiny fuelled by the retrospective, and perhaps it represented a willingness to expose their private feelings of abandonment to their own scrutiny. Or perhaps the timing is a coincidence.

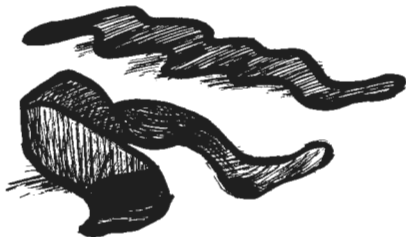
Doon Arbus insists in her Afterword that the new book and show "do not signal a change of heart"—she isn't cured of her ambivalence—"but one of strategy." That strategy is to provide the public with a "surfeit" of documents as an antidote to the junk of myth and gossip, and "Revelations" is, by design, daunting to the idly curious or to the accidental tourist. Anyone serious (and the test of commitment seems a bit imperious) is invited to lose herself in the luxuriant labyrinth of material and encounter Arbus privately, unmediated by a "tour guide." Jay Leyda pioneered the genre of biography as montage in his out-of-print masterpiece "The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson," in which he abdicates the authority of a narrator and transfers the burden (and privilege) of discovering meaning to the reader. The rewards of this approach become apparent when one compares the beguiling, humane, and self-observant character whose poetic wryness reverberates throughout "Revelations" to the stock tragic figure of the tortured artist enshrined in the only biography of Arbus that existed until this autumn.

Nineteen years ago, Patricia Bosworth—with a stubbornness one can admire—dodged the obstacles set in her path by the Arbus estate, including the refusal of any coöperation by Doon, Amy, Allan, and Arbus's former lover and most intimate confidant, Marvin Israel, and published an unauthorized life. Bosworth, who knew Arbus

slightly—she had once modelled for her and Allan when they were employed as fashion photographers—was diligent about filling, or circumventing, the gaps in her research, and she managed to construct a detailed narrative, basing its architecture on published sources and on candid, indeed often mind-bogglingly indiscreet, conversations with other friends and family members, including Arbus's older brother, the distinguished poet Howard Nemerov; her younger sister, Renée Sparkia, a sculptor; her garrulous, elderly mother; her sometime lover and patron, Peter Crookston; and her mentor, the mystical, eccentric Lisette Model. But the biographer ultimately couldn't resist the luridness or the pathology of the material, and her informants apparently couldn't resist playing it up for her. Too many quotes and facts were unattributed, and the biography was widely condemned as gratuitously sensational. I would have said that its main failing was Bosworth's determination to read the work as a symptom. "Many of Diane's photographs," she observes, "had to be taken in order to relieve her mind of the faces and night worlds that were haunting it." The haunted artist embraces her demons and is destroyed by them. This is the view that "Revelations" seems designed to rebut. "Her suicide seems neither inevitable nor spontaneous, neither perplexing nor intelligible," Doon and Sussman write.

One should beware of a biography that follows a too familiar plot. On the other hand, one should probably also beware of a daughter's protective impulse to rehabilitate the image of an artist whose work still has the power to appall, and of a mother who apparently despaired of her life so profoundly that she took it.

Diane Arbus (her preferred pronunciation of her first name was Dee-Ann) was born in 1923 to David Nemerov and his wife, Gertrude, whose wealthy family owned Russek's, the now defunct New York department store. She and her siblings grew up in sprawling apartments on Central Park West and on Park Avenue. For the first seven years of her life, Diane was raised by a "sad" and "lovely" French governess whom she adored. Maids, nannies,



cooks, and drivers came and went. The parents chain-smoked, dressed glamorously, entertained in style, collected art, and took frequent first-class trips to Europe, sometimes with their courteous children, of whom much (though nothing not well-groomed) was expected. David Nemerov worked long hours. His wife told Bosworth that she suffered from paralyzing bouts of depression. There were rumors that he philandered. The milieu of the elder Nemerovs was classically nouveau riche without being cartoonishly crass. "Our bourgeois heritage seems to me glorious as any stigma," Arbus wrote gaily to Marvin Israel—a stigma, she added, that was "just perhaps more hilarious than to have been Negro or midget." The amusement was ephemeral, like the ebullience, which fluctuated, for Arbus, with periods of tenacious gloom that she understood were "goddamn chemical," and for which she sought therapy and medication. Her heritage was, in fact, that of most artistic children of privilege, who feel that their true selves are invisible, while resenting the dutiful, false selves for which they are loved: a dilemma that inspires the quest, in whatever medium, for a reflection.

The Jewish princess burdened by her "immunity" from common suffering sought a quality that she called "aristocracy" in her damaged subjects—the caste consciousness of the changeling and the misfit. The friends of Arbus's youth were always impressed by how "different" she seemed, and part of the difference, particularly as she aged, was her disregard for prudence (a form of immunization) in matters of sex, money, friendship, maternity, personal hygiene, love, and of course, art. The sense of being a special case, which Arbus cherished, albeit guiltily, was probably what fed her self-regard until, in middle age, she found her calling. But it must have been thin gruel for a hungry woman of exceptional intelligence who skipped college and became a mother before she'd had a chance to establish her identity as an adult, much less as an artist. Arbus's greed was never, like her parents', for possessions and status, though she couldn't help treating experience as an acquisition, the more prestigious the higher the price her nerves

had to pay for it. The notes she makes in her appointment books for projects and pictures—"ethnic beauties," "racial pin-ups," teen-agers, the decrepit, diaperderby contestants, female impersonators, gangsters, dwarfs, homosexuals, débutantes, pimps, Boy Scouts, groupies, nudists, strippers, widows, fetishists, ballroom dancers, beggars, rock-and-roll groups, triplets—resemble the lists of a shopper obsessed with multiples who is on an insatiable spree.



There is an interesting link between Arbus's work and the family business. The advent of the department store and the fashion magazine coincide, historically, with the rise of the middle class, but also with the heyday of romanticism, and its repudiation of everything that the bourgeoisie embodied. The sixties was a neo-romantic era that equated intensity of sensation with authenticity of feeling, and Arbus's photographs spoke powerfully to members of the generation then coming to maturity. How many of them longed—and tried—to do what Arbus did: act out the scenario of the coddled child who divests herself of her hollow patrimony and descends into the gutter seeking life's harsh and arduous but vibrant truth? The Arbus photograph that perhaps best captures this alienation, and that of the time, is, ironically, one of the few without any human figures. It shows a barren living room in Levittown, Long Island, dominated by an immaculate expanse of textured carpet and a Christmas tree dripping with tinsel that brushes the low ceiling. Like bickering spouses, two clocks, one on the television, the other on the wall, split hairs about the hour. It's impossible to imagine that the bright jumble of presents on the floor—items on someone's gift list ticked off methodically and wrapped by an underpaid stranger—will provide the recipients with anything but a brief moment of distraction: that sugar high of Christmas morning which, in joyless families, only exacerbates each member's sense of emptiness and futility.

Diane was an exceptionally pretty child, with luminous green eyes, fine bones, and thick hair. She never lost her doelike fragility or her dreaminess, and even in middle age, ravaged by de-

pression and hepatitis, she still had a nubile aura. The coincidence of bleak glamour and waifish loveliness with ferocious drive was a powerful element of her allure. Her creative gifts were encouraged by her mercurial father and well-meaning private-school teachers, but the austere pride of the artist expressed itself precociously as a revolt against being doted on—which is to say, patronized by her inferiors.

In an age when girls of her background “saved” themselves for their wedding night, Arbus—never, in later life, a sexual economizer—married very young. She met Allan Arbus, whom she regarded as a kind of twin, when she was thirteen and he a college dropout five years her senior who was working in the advertising department at Russek's. They married in 1941, less than a month after her eighteenth birthday. Allan gave his bride her first camera, and Diane subsequently enrolled in a photography course taught by Berenice Abbott. The newlyweds began taking advertising photographs for Russek's, and a few years later, after Doon's birth and Allan's discharge from the Army, they formally went into business together, developing a strenuous, improvisational style of treating fashion that earned them commissions from *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Time*, and the *Times Magazine*, among other glossies. Diane was the stylist on the shoots, and Allan operated the camera. An advertising executive interviewed by Bosworth fondly recalled Arbus's work on the “Modess Because” ads, and noted that she “did some terrific documentary stuff on a no-shrink shirt.”

As a beautiful couple with a taste for experiment, the Arbuses belonged to a bohemia of young artists who were planting the charges that exploded in the visual culture of the next decade. It was common, though, for an avant-garde woman to be trapped by an Eisenhower-era notion of her destiny as a female. Allan Arbus was generous about helping his wife cultivate her creative freedom, and the alliance survived their eventual separation. But after years as a helpmate Arbus rebelled, at least professionally, against the claustrophobia of a cocoon she had outgrown. Her *mezzo del cammin* came in 1956. She was thirty-three, furiously frustrated

with her subordinate role in the studio—attending to the models' hair, makeup, and clothes—and chronically dissatisfied with her own pictures, which represented a different kind of woman's work. Many of them were idyllic portraits of parents and children, similar to the photograph of a father and son, commissioned from the Arbus studio by *Vogue*, that Edward Steichen had, the previous year, selected for inclusion in his mammoth exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, “The Family of Man.” It was a show, Steichen wrote, conceived to mirror “the essential oneness” of humanity, a premise to which much of Arbus's mature work is a violent rebuke.

Leaving the business to her husband, Arbus enrolled in a course at the New School taught by Lisette Model. A non-conformist born in 1901 into a rich and cultivated Viennese family of which the Nemerovs were, in a way, a slightly degraded, second-generation image, Model moved to Paris when she was in her late twenties and, a decade later—outrunning Hitler—emigrated to New York. She photographed bathers at Coney Island, Harlem delinquents, the drunks and peddlers of the Lower East Side, and the human oddities at Hubert's Dime Museum and Flea Circus in Times Square—turf that Arbus was shortly to explore, and in a sense to appropriate, though apparently with Model's blessing. She “pushed” Arbus, she told Bosworth, to confront her inhibitions. She criticized her infatuation with grainy images. She helped her to master the mechanics of a camera, conquering what Arbus referred to as her guilt about being a woman. And she urged her to search for the wellspring of urgency that every artist has to tap.

Arbus's friends agree that she had some mysterious conversion in Model's class, and that her style was dramatically purified and focussed after their encounter. Model shrewdly described Arbus as “not listening to me but suddenly listening to herself.” But I also suspect that for an impractical woman “confirmed,” she admitted, “in a sense of unreality,” who had never outgrown a childish dependency on her parents and husband, the example of an older female artist—a survivor both of privilege and of adversity—who had channelled what com-

pelled her into a camera without fear or apology was as galvanizing to Arbus as anything that Model said.

The radical turn that Arbus took in the late nineteen-fifties wasn't political, although in 1968, that year of revolutions, she spent several days in Beaufort County, South Carolina, on assignment for *Esquire*, photographing the patients of the civil-rights activist and rural doctor Donald Gatch. "I had never seen poverty like that," Arbus said later. The accompanying text, by Bynum Shaw, was entitled "Let Us Now Praise Dr. Gatch" and it was, Anthony Lee writes in "Family Album," "meant to liken Shaw's reportage and Arbus's photos to the famous project by Agee and Evans." But the pitiless formal symmetry with which Arbus composes her photograph of the elegant Dr. Gatch, wearing a three-piece business suit with a white shirt and tie, and Addie Taylor, an ageless crone and the epitome of misery standing in the doorway of her windowless shack, is more suggestive of their hopeless inequality than of his compassion. Nor is there any doubt about who is the aristocrat. The picture seems to represent a critique of liberal idealism by a woman without much faith in a better world.

Arbus had met Walker Evans in 1961, counted him a friend, was "whammed" by his 1971 retrospective (though "by the third time I saw it I realized how it really bores me," she confessed), and he cited her in his survey of the eighteen most important photographers in history. While they had qualities in common, including what the curator John Szarkowski, writing of Evans, calls a "willful act of protest against polite society," and the tension that Lee discerns in both bodies of work between modernist rigor and documentary grittiness, their likeness was probably less to each other than to the great German portraitist August Sander (1876-1964). "Everyone today looked remarkable just like out of August Sander pictures," Arbus reported to Israel in the spring of 1960, "so absolute and immutable down to the last button feather tassel or stripe. All odd and splendid as freaks and nobody able to see himself, all of us victims of the especial shape we come in."

The respect and sympathy for her freaks that Arbus expresses in her letters—particularly those to her children—and her apparently solicitous, ongoing engagement with them, is at odds with the view that she was exploiting their credulity. Some subjects apparently used her in their own way, and their portraits were, in part, souvenirs of initiation and trophies of acceptance. Doon Arbus was, she once wrote, "often frightened by" her mother's "capacity to be enthralled, by her power to give herself over to something or to someone, to submit." Portraiture in whatever form is an autonomous art of high-minded betrayal married to a slavish practice of dirty-minded fidelity, and at times—perhaps usually—Arbus was cunning and aggressive, but so are many photographers. Photography was then, and still is, a macho profession, and if she took its machismo to greater extremes than her peers of either sex, it was in part to scourge her native timidity and to prove that she had the balls to join her subjects' orgies, share their nudity, endure their stench, revel in their squalor, and break down their resistance with a seductively disarming or fierce and often sexualized persistence until she "got" a certain expression: defeat, fatigue, slackness, anomie, or demented joy. Richard Avedon has described how he, too, outwits the vigilance of his sitters or waits for their moment of surrender, although the contest hinted at in his portraiture seems fairer. Arbus, it must be said, picked on the helpless and the obscure. But if her pictures make one wonder how she got them, and why her subjects consented to pose as they did, everyone with a true and false self secretly knows the answer. The yearning for love is, in part, a desire to become visible as one really is to the Other, though every time one dares to let oneself be seen one risks being seen through.

Arbus's freaks may have been the objects of her "sweet lust," but she doesn't fetishize them, and they were never a cabinet of specimens to her the way Sander's pageant of anonymous German types was to him. On the other hand, Sander was concerned with class distinctions and social roles, while Arbus harrowed the more subjective, unstable terrain of eroticism and gender. Some of her sitters—in a way, all of them—

seem not to have noticed how far their forms have strayed from those of the creatures they were supposed to be. They are members of a transitional species who inhabit a limbo where young girls wear the blasted look of menopausal women; middle-aged homosexuals pass themselves off as femmes fatales; dyspeptic infants grimace with the bloated rage of old men; and bodies are mortified with pins, fire, hormones, needles, knives, razors, makeup, surgery, and strobe lights.

Perhaps Arbus seems ruthless because she exposes her subjects' naïve faith in their connection with and resemblance to the rest of humanity even as she cuts them from the herd. While they may pose with a lover or in family groups (the Jewish giant and his parents; the dominatrix and her client; the blasé suburbanites on their chaises longues; the blind couple in bed; the Russian midget and his friends; the bespectacled, obese nudists; the woman with her baby monkey), their illusion of belonging is belied by her exposé of their isolation. The depth that Arbus gives to that isolation both as a social fact and as a psychological predicament distinguishes her style from the superficial flamboyance of other photographers (now legion) who specialize, fashionably and forgettably, in the grotesque. It also sinks her subjects into a well so deep that one feels they will never be able to emerge.

The last years of Arbus's life, 1969-1971, were the greatest period of her work. She had begun seeing a psychiatrist, Dr. Boigon, and "one fascinating thing I am beginning to get through my thick head," she wrote ambiguously to Allan and Mariclaire about her therapy sessions, "is that it doesn't matter what you do . . . except to yourself." She seems to have meant that no one cares what you do except yourself, though in the context—her death was a few months away—the very lightness of the remark becomes ominous. Her artistic progress, however, elated her. "I took the most terrific pictures," she wrote to Allan at the end of November, 1969, about a series of portraits made in homes for the mentally retarded: "FINALLY what I've been searching for. And I seem to have discovered sunlight, late afternoon early winter sun light. It's just marvelous." In

one of her masterpieces, "Untitled (7)," the rural landscape seems bathed in the lowering and eerie radiance of an eclipse, and the misshapen figures of her brain-damaged subjects—descendants of Goya's gargoyles—march across the frame with unsteady steps as if to the music of a piper one can't hear. A grave child of indeterminate sex with a painted mustache and averted gaze holds hands with a masked old woman in a white shift. They are oblivious of—and in a way liberated from—Arbus's gaze. After years of posing her subjects frontally, she had begun to prefer that they did not look at her. "I think I will see them more clearly," she wrote to Amy, "if they are not watching me watching them."

In the weeks before her death, Arbus was working steadily on new projects and seeing friends. Crookston was excited about a photographic essay that she had proposed to him on "Loss of Power"—portraits of defeated world leaders like Johnson, Khrushchev, Nkrumah, and de Gaulle. On July 26th, Apollo 15 was launched to the moon. Doon was in Paris, Amy at summer school, Allan on a film set in Santa Fe, and Marvin Israel at Avedon's house on Fire Island. Alone in her apartment in Westbeth, the artists' housing complex in Greenwich Village, Arbus took an overdose of barbiturates and slit her wrists in the bathtub. The medical examiner's report mentioned a diary entry that it referred to as the "Last Supper" note, but the page in question and two succeeding ones, according to "Revelations," were "meticulously excised" from her appointment book "and have never been recovered." The chronology ends with the coroner's flat yet gruesome description of the half-decomposed corpse. No orifice is spared. The inclusion of this document by Doon Arbus at first seems not only unseemly but, given her writerly tact and filial protectiveness, incomprehensible. Perhaps one should read it, though, not as the kind of Judas-like betrayal that Arbus was often accused of but as a savage gesture of poetic justice, as blind to propriety as was the art of the woman it lays bare, and as the final payment, by an honorable executor, of her mother's outstanding debt—a debt of self-revelation—to her subjects. ♦