opacity, whereby the deictic expression *ceci* functions in a similar way as was described in the preceding sections, while the overall meaning of the sentence precisely undermines the conceptualisation which – although unconsciously – prevails as soon as words and images are brought together. Interestingly, shortly after the First World War, having studied at the Brussels Academy of Fine Arts, Magritte drew sketches for advertisements.

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AGNIESZKA SOLTYSIK

# A Secret about a Secret: The Relation between Caption and Photo in Diane Arbus's Work

Diane Arbus's first three albums, published during her life, were notable for the restrained amount of text accompanying the photos. In contrast, the recent posthumous album, *Revelations* (2003), is packed with articles, letters, notes, medical documents, and other written material. Her daughter and editor, Doon Arbus, explains the rationale behind this tactic in terms of her hope 'that this surfeit of information and opinion would finally render the scrim of words invisible so that anyone encountering the photographs could meet them in the eloquence of their silence' (Estate 299). This curiously paradoxical statement seems to echo another equally cryptic assertion made by Diane Arbus the year she took her life, where she describes a photograph as 'a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know' (Estate 278). While Doon Arbus refers to the 'silence' of her mother's photographs, Arbus's much-cited quotation alludes to the tenacious myth that photos 'tell' something, that they produce knowledge or act as witnesses to something real. Yet both mother and daughter insist on the photo's right to remain silent, to be an image that does not need to 'tell' anything in the sense of testifying or producing knowledge. Furthermore, both wish to protect the subjects of the photos, attacking the assumption that the photo necessarily tells something about the subject. The issue of what and how a photograph 'tells' in general is a long-standing theoretical debate, and my goal in this essay is to elucidate one aspect of the relationship between text and photo that informs Arbus's work and its reception.[1]

1 It is notoriously difficult to acquire the reproduction rights for Arbus's photographs, since the Estate of Diane Arbus wishes to avoid over-exposure. I can only refer readers to: http://www.master-of-photography.com/A/arbus/arbus.html,

My focus here will be on the caption, that text that always accompanies her work, and which purports to 'tell' something about the photo and/or its subject. My argument turns on the claim that anything a photo can 'tell' us depends largely on what the caption has *already* told us. As Jefferson Hunter puts it, 'a photograph is always an object in a context, and the context is determined most obviously by the words next to the photograph' (11). In effect, the caption tells us what to attend to and what we can ignore, inviting certain readings and blocking or cropping others. The captions Arbus gave her photos play a large role in directing our reading of her photos, as is always the case with captions, but they also have more complicated effects, including sometimes directing our attention *away* from the photos' most striking features. The captions always participate directly in the most arresting and controversial aspects of Arbus's work: what Susan Sontag calls the contrast between its 'lacerating subject matter' and its 'calm, matter-of-fact attentiveness' (35). One of the unique dimensions of Arbus's work is that her photos engage in a complex dialectic with the viewer's tendency to judge the subjects in terms of their visible 'flaws' or deviancy, a tendency that is reinforced by the way the titles present the subject or matter of the image. Her photos both invite and resist judgment of the subjects, a paradox that can be explained perhaps by the fact that Arbus was as much a product of the straight-laced 1950s as she was the Bohemian chronicler of the 1960s. Moreover, her interest in social role-playing and the line between public and private selves can be traced to a fascination with social psychology which is specific to that earlier decade.

One of the most common clichés about photography is that pictures 'tell more' than words, either because they are 'worth a thousand words' or simply because images can 'speak for themselves,' and therefore do not need words in order to communicate effectively. Doon Arbus explains in *Revelations* that the three volumes of her mother's work published in her lifetime were informed 'by the stubborn conviction that the photographs were eloquent enough to require no explanations, no set of instructions on how to

and http://www.studio-international.co.uk/photo/arbus.htm. Downloaded on 15 January 2006.



read them, no bits of biography to prop them up' (Estate 299). Following this principle, Doon Arbus has sought to 'protect' her mother's photos from critics by denying reproduction rights whenever she disagreed with the critic's reading or use of the photo. She also explains that she objects to the idea that images only become 'visible' when 'translated' into words and so she has sought to safeguard Arbus's photos (and subjects) from an 'onslaught of theory and interpretation' (299). Two different issues are actually at stake here. One is Doon Arbus's (possibly justified) impression that most critics focus unduly and judgmentally on Arbus's subjects, especially on their supposed freakishness and unhappiness. The other issue is the conceit of a photo's eloquence or ability to speak for itself. In attributing eloquence to an object, we elevate it to the status of semi-sacred art object by allowing it to become a subject or agent of sorts. Yet, Arbus did not view her photos this way. Rather, she seems to have considered them as valuable but not indispensable rewards of a complex personal and social encounter with the subject. A letter Arbus wrote to her former husband Allan in 1970 suggests that she liked to talk about her pictures and found the idea of photos needing to be received in silence pretentious. She describes showing her slides during an award ceremony, where 'everyone was roaring with laughter and [where she] talked about each picture, told funny stories' (Estate 211). Bruce Davidson, another photographer who received an award at the same event, 'had insisted on total silence,' wrote Arbus, as if 'the pictures should speak for themselves' (Estate 211).[2] Arbus's tone in this letter suggests that she viewed Davidson's attitude as unnecessarily formal. While it is true that Arbus's first volumes of photos were relatively restrained in terms of accompanying text, it is also a documented fact that she had planned a project on nudists in which the photos would be accompanied by 'lengthy' captions (Bosworth 194). Far from expecting her photos to speak for themselves, Arbus was often eager to speak for and about them, to

2 Patricia Bosworth takes up this issue in her biography of Diane Arbus and concludes that Arbus felt her images were 'meaningless unless she had stories and secrets attached to them' (250).

continue, as it were, the conversation she had begun with the subjects themselves in order to have them present themselves to her camera.

There are roughly four or five ways of grouping Arbus's captions. One category refers to something that is obvious in the photo. These photos appear the most neutrally descriptive: *Couple arguing, Coney Island, N.Y. 1960* or *Triplets in their bedroom, N.J. 1963*. A less neutral but equally descriptive caption refers to something that is not only obvious but also potentially negative, what Arbus describes as the 'flaw' that you notice on a stranger you pass on the street (Arbus 1). For instance, in *Puerto Rican woman with a beauty mark, N.Y.C. 1965*, the beauty mark is large and striking, while in the *Woman with eyeliner N.Y.C. 1964*, the subject could arguably be said to be wearing too much eyeliner. Of course, the problem with even this simple classification is that these two categories can overlap considerably, depending on the reader's attitude toward the features described in the caption. For example, the photo titled *Girl sitting on her bed with her shirt off, N.Y.C. 1968* could be seen as a purely neutral description or a salacious or even judgmental one, depending on how one is disposed to semi-naked subjects being photographed on their beds. The detail of the bed, which is at once obvious and sexual, only increases the tension between the descriptive and potentially seedy in this photo, taken as an *ensemble* with the caption. Similarly, the two titles I listed above as purely descriptive could also be regarded as concerned with a flaw revealed by the image, whether this is the public quarrel of the Coney Island couple, or the potentially monstrous repetition of the three sisters (triplets and twins evoking in our culture some of the unease we feel in the presence of any unusual circumstance of birth or body).

An entirely different category of photo caption would be the kind that *misdirects* our attention from the obvious flaw to a more innocent detail, as if mentioning the flaw would be impolite or indecent. These titles have a tendency to render the tactfully unmentioned flaw even more visible. In *Woman in a rose hat, N.Y.C. 1966*, the most striking feature of the photo is not the hat but the woman's walleye. The photo *A woman with pearl necklace and earrings, N.Y.C. 1967* would also fall into this category, though it is harder to pinpoint exactly what the flaw would be. The photo is a very large close-up (almost life-size, as



Arbus calls it) of a woman's face, and what is arresting about the image is the combination of the plainness of the middle-aged woman's face and her very hard, very direct stare at the camera. Whatever it is that is interesting about the image, it is *not* her pearl necklace and earrings, except insofar as such feminine accessories contrast with the unfeminine expression and appearance of the woman.

A similar kind of diversionary caption turns on the euphemism implied in the title, *Two friends at home, N.Y.C. 1965*, where the word 'friends' belies the relationship visible in the photo. Two people are standing next to their unmade bed; a large woman has her arm around the shoulders of her 'friend,' who seems to also be a woman, but much more androgynous, dressed in what could be male apparel. Whatever ambiguity there is in the image is based more on our cultural blindness to seeing two women as a couple than to the absence of the visible signs of a sexual relationship. The unmade double bed, the embrace, the body language of the two women (one gazing at the other with cocked head, while the smaller 'mannish' woman looks directly at the camera) would be unambiguous if the couple were a man and a woman. The uncharacteristically evasive word 'friends' seems all the more surprising considering that Arbus had no scruples about giving her real-life friends (like 'Vicki') labels such as 'transvestite' or 'midget.' The difference can be explained perhaps by the fact that Arbus worked largely in the pre-Stonewall 1950s and 1960s, where homosexuality represented a still greater taboo than mere transvestism (which, after all, abounds in popular culture of the late 1950s and early 1960s). Moreover, the title *Two friends at home* provides the viewer with a salacious and voyeuristic *frisson* rooted precisely in the rich ambiguity of the word 'friends' that a title like 'Two lesbians at home' would not be able to produce. The fact that the relationship seems to *require* euphemism serves to make it (and the photo, by association) seem 'dirtier' and more interesting than would a public avowal of female homosexuality.

A different category of caption gives information that is not obvious or even visible and which helps us to read the image, often in an entirely different way than we would without the information. For example, the figures in *Four people at a gallery opening, N.Y.C. 1968*

are instantly recognizable as engaged in stiff and polite social conversation, but the fact that they are at a *gallery opening* enriches the image by drawing attention to the white empty walls behind them (where are the pictures?) and to their role as consumers of visual art (who have themselves become subjects, or objects, of visual art), introducing a resonant layer of irony onto the image.

Similarly, the caption *Man at a parade on 5th Avenue, N.Y.C. 1969* helps explain the attitude and position of the man, who is standing on a street corner holding his hat over his heart. There is no visible sign of the parade in the photo, not even reflected in the store window behind him, so we must trust the caption for the meaning of the photo. The man's gesture, which would otherwise have to be read as expressing some deep private turmoil, can be viewed instead as a public gesture of respect toward the institutions, person or values honored by the parade. Nevertheless, the absence of visible signs of the parade renders the photo more interesting because more ambiguous: the man's gesture and distracted facial expression complicate any easy distinction between private emotion and its public expression.

Another photo and caption of this type is the *Widow in her bedroom, N.Y.C. 1963*, where the fact that the woman is a widow as well as that she is in her bedroom are both otherwise invisible facts that effectively determine our reading of the photo once we take them into account. For instance, the massive amount of *chinoiserie* and bibelots in the room are rendered meaningful by the caption's invitation to read them psychoanalytically, as it were, as a form of compensation for her lost husband. The photo itself draws attention to the large number of objects in the room by the fact that the woman is photographed at a distance which allows the object-laden table and Oriental vase next to her to loom over her figure, diminishing it visually.

Finally, there are photos that have captions that have either an unclear or unhelpful, or actually perverse or strange relationship to the image. In the well-known Arbus photo, *A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y. 1970*, there is a combination of the obvious and the irrelevant that makes for a distinctly comic effect. The fact that the subject is a giant is apparent and unmistakable. The



fact that the small elderly couple with him are his parents plays upon the visual contrast staged by the photo. But the details that add a perverse something to the image-caption ensemble are the references to his Jewishness and to the fact that they are in the Bronx. In an essay on Dickens, George Orwell identifies a specific kind of humor that derives from gratuitous detail, giving as an example a passage from *The Pickwick Papers* where Pumblechook has his mouth stuffed up by 'flowering annuals' to prevent him from crying out. The precision (and alliteration) of 'Jewish giant' works something like 'flowering annuals' in the Dickens passage, since his Jewishness is a superfluous detail that does not participate visually in our reading of the image.

A variation of the perverse or comic caption is that which designates time in the nudist photos, such as *Retired man and his wife at home in a nudist camp one morning, N.J. 1963* or *A family one evening in a nudist camp, Pa. 1965*. Here the title works in the following way: the term 'in a nudist camp' helps us to anchor the image in something normalizing and socially acceptable, and thus relieves us from the anxiety that we are looking at crazy people or someone else who might not have consented fully to be exposed naked. The humor turns on the tension created by the seemingly casual and habitual term 'one morning' or 'one evening' and the clearly posed and thus obviously specific moment of the photo. The former terms appear to want to create the impression of regularity, as if the retired man and his couple sat around their living room naked every morning like this. While they probably did sit around naked in their living room every morning, it is also clearly not always *like this*. The defiantly smiling and exposed man with his legs spread open and his demurely posed wife with legs closed and hands folded over her crotch each assume different but equally *posed* attitudes toward the photographer and her camera. The family in the other photo also share the same oddly posed positions, where they attempt to affect a fiercely casual attitude, as if they lounged on the grass behind their car *all the time* rather than for the camera *this time*.

A social marker that is usually more visible, but not necessarily more relevant, and certainly always very complicated, is that of race or ethnicity. As mentioned before, the Jewishness of the 'giant' in *Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y. 1970* is not

visible in any clear way on the giant's features, or on those of his parents, or in their home. The Jewishness of the subjects of *A Jewish couple dancing, N.Y.C. 1963* is entirely different, insofar as it is potentially visible, or at least *appears to be visible* in the context of the title. To understand how this works, we can turn to the contemporary photographer Greg Ligon, who engages with the problematic of ethnic visibility in a recent project where he labels two identical photos of himself, *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My African-American Features* and *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My White Features*. The power of this work is that the caption creates the momentary illusion of difference between the two portraits. One looks for the stereotypical racial traits and finds them, the exaggeration of these traits occurring inside the viewer's head by a process of selection. Similarly, the couple framed by the title accentuating their Jewishness becomes fair game for the attribution of Semitic markers. Anything in the photo becomes potentially a 'sign' for their Jewishness: their noses, their merriment, the woman's pearls, the man's ring, his stained teeth (indicating a non-American, possibly Eastern European, origin) and so on. While the title might appear at first glance merely descriptive (after all, it is not a stigma to be Jewish), the array of stereotypes that it evokes function to produce a strange effect, an overdetermined reading, turning the Jewishness into precisely the kind of 'flaw' that fascinated Arbus.

The use of national identity in Arbus's captions is always odd, because it is never necessary, and therefore its inclusion always functions as a potentially stigmatizing complication. For example, what is the purpose of telling us that the *Mexican dwarf in his hotel room, N.Y.C. 1970* is Mexican? This combination of the obvious (the subject is a dwarf) and the invisible or irrelevant (the subject's nationality) in the caption creates a tension about the nature of identity itself that contributes a great deal to the ambiguity or 'secrecy' of the photo and its subject. Is being Mexican the same as being a dwarf? The same kind of question arises for photos such as *A Puerto Rican woman with a beauty mark, N.Y.C. 1965* and *A Puerto Rican housewife, N.Y.C. 1963*. While the first photo is largely dominated by the beauty mark and expression of the woman, the second photo owes a great deal to the title's identification of the woman as a housewife.



Again, the subject is sitting on her bed and we are allowed to imagine that she has been photographed with the object that most determines her life and identity, that is, her bed. The national designation functions somewhat like the label 'housewife' in that it invites a set of connotations which influence (however fictionally or falsely) our reading of the photo in terms of cultural stereotypes about, say, Puerto Rican culture and the status of women within it.

In general, Diane Arbus described her subjects in the titles according to type or some kind of group classification. Some are classed by what we could call biological or anatomical types: dwarf, giant, twin, young man or woman. Others are classed by occupation: boxer, topless dancer, lady bartender. Most are classed sociologically: widow, housewife, husband, couple. Many would fall in both of the latter categories, or would create a classification conundrum: is 'transvestite' an occupation (defined by something one *does*) or a social identity (defined by something one *is*)? The same question could be posed for nudists. Some captions identify their subjects in ritualistic or occasional roles: muscle man contestant, masked man, flower girl, loser at a Diaper Derby. Almost all the captions indicate something about the social role or performance the subject plays regularly or at the moment of the photo.

Most of Arbus's projects were based on sociological or anthropological conceptions of behavior and social situations. A list of her 'Plans to Do' in *Revelations* includes: 'racial pinups,' 'teenagers,' 'gangster,' 'homosexual,' 'wedding prep.,' and 'old people's club' (Estate 170). What seemed to interest Arbus is the way the subject assumes a relationship to the type, and how he or she plays the role that they have chosen (or been assigned, by birth or otherwise). This helps understand the topless dancer's gesture of cradling a breast with one finger (drawing attention to her profession) and the transvestite's insistence on her feminine corporeality (as she sprawls or sits on her bed, exposing thighs or cleavage). Arbus liked to explore how subjects wore their identities, how they performed the role they chose or were forced to play. In this respect, Arbus's subjects keep their absolutely individual identities within their types. As Arbus termed it, the tragedy of each subject is different and borne or taken up differently. This aspect of Arbus's work differentiates it dramatically from that of

August Sanders, to whom she has been compared largely because of his apparently similar interest in cataloguing 'types' of people. Nevertheless, the difference cannot be greater in intention or in effect: Sanders meant his subjects to represent or exemplify, even incarnate, their specific type or class, in what has been compared to a nineteenth-century form of natural or social determinism. The real estate clerk is meant to *show* what real estate clerks look like or *are* like. In contrast, Arbus's subjects *wear* their type or class like a set of clothes or a theatrical role. There is always some slight form of *décalage* (or mismatch) between the subject and the social performance that betrays the performance's staged nature. The subjects do not represent their types so much as position themselves in relation to them.

Sontag has criticized Arbus in print for 'making equivalences' between 'freaks, mad people, suburban couples, and nudists' (47). Actually, only one of the terms Sontag mentions (nudists) is actually used by Arbus in her captions. Moreover, Sontag seems to be reacting to the classification of the subjects by type as 'dwarf' or 'couple' or 'nudist' more than to the actual photos themselves. It would be hard to imagine Sontag making this criticism if Arbus's photos were titled with the subjects' names instead. Furthermore, Sontag's accusation that publishing photographs of 'freaks' alongside photographs of 'normal' people constitutes a 'very powerful judgment' is itself rather judgmental, not to mention unclear. Presumably, the judgment is being made on the 'normal' subjects (such as the suburban couples or twins) by being lumped with what Sontag calls 'freaks' (a derogatory term rarely used by Arbus in reference to her subjects, which are labeled more specifically as midgets, giants, or in terms of their carnival job). Yet, while a certain leveling effect is created, the result does not necessarily constitute 'a terrible judgment.' While it is true that the 'normal' subjects undergo a kind of estranging effect by being placed in a collection of photos that features a large number of physically deformed and/or socially marginal subjects, the effect seems to work in both directions. In other words, the marginal subjects appear less alien when presented this way. In their concern (or lack thereof) for their public performance of themselves, they appear closer to the implied reader/audience in their position on the spectrum of human suffering and alienation. The important point is



that Arbus's work establishes the relationship between her subjects (and by implication, herself, and inevitably, the viewer) as a *spectrum* rather than as an incommensurable difference, as Sontag accuses her of doing. While the subjects are clearly 'other,' they are ultimately not more 'other' than anyone is to anyone else or even to themselves.

When she does use the term 'freak,' Arbus explains in a famous quotation that she admires the way they have 'already passed their test in life' (Arbus 3). By this she means that while most people go through life 'dreading they'll have a traumatic experience,' the visibly deformed are born with that traumatic experience and have had to learn to deal with it (3). In Goffmanian terms, they have to live with a 'spoiled identity' or compromised presentation of self. While Erving Goffman devoted an entire work to this problem – *Stigma, Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1964) – it is sufficient to consult his first and most influential book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) to understand why deformed or otherwise 'different' people can be said to have passed 'a test' in life. If every social situation involves a presentation of oneself that tends not only to downplay or obscure one's flaws but also to reaffirm the values of the society at large (in the 1950s and 1960s, a middle-class culture that valued able-bodied and socially-integrated heterosexuals in nuclear families), it is clear that many of the subjects of Arbus's photos simply could not make a credible attempt to mount such a performance. Thus, they would be systematically confronted with rejection, unconvincingly hearty acceptance, or embarrassment on the part of other people. This is the non-stop 'traumatic experience' that they have been born with, and the fact that they must have learned to deal with it does in some respects constitute a formidable accomplishment. And yet, normal people *can* empathize with the experience of 'spoiled identity' because everyone feels alienated at times or conscious of their social role playing, and everyone has experienced a 'failed' performance (such as when some unfavorable aspects of their identity are exposed, they fail to maintain control over their bodies or expressions, or inadvertently draw attention to the staged nature of the encounter).

Arbus's particular niche in the world of portrait photography turns on her subjects' compromised or unexpectedly unguarded

presentation of themselves. Thanks to Bosworth's biography, as well as to other more reliable sources, we know that Diane Arbus prowled around parks and public events in search of people who looked unhappy. Yet, the word 'unhappy' implies psychological and moral issues that Doon Arbus rightly objects to. Instead of speculating about the emotional state of Arbus's subjects, it is more accurate and helpful to examine how Arbus's photos work on the principle that their subjects do not quite succeed in the creating the effect they are trying to create. Some subjects are quite explicitly unhappy, such as the dejected couple in *Young man and his girlfriend with hot dogs in the park, N.Y.C. 1971* or the crying baby in *Loser at a Diaper Derby, N.J. 1967*. Others are caught looking harried or distracted, such as the mother of the family with the retarded son in *A young Brooklyn family going for a Sunday outing, N.Y.C. 1966* or the transvestite in reverie in *Two men dancing at a drag ball, N.Y.C. 1970*. The photos of fashionably dressed women such as *A woman with pearl necklace and earrings, N.Y.C 1967* tend to play on the unflattering contrast between their feminine accessories (fur collar, pearl necklace, veil) and their aging faces or unfeminine expressions. In many cases, it is their clothes or other accessories that create the effect of striving too hard for a result that does not quite come off. This is the case for the young couple in *Teenage couple on Hudson Street, N.Y.C. 1963*. The boy and girl in this photo are clearly trying to appear grown-up, with their adult clothes and body postures implying an adult relationship (the boy protectively holding the girl around the shoulders). What makes this picture striking is the number of things that look slightly 'off,' such as the fact that the boy looks too young for this role, or that his trousers are too short, as are the girl's coat sleeves. These are details that appear to 'betray' something about the couple: mainly their youth and poverty.

Much of Arbus's work follows the general principle outlined for the photo just described. For example, the subject of *Boy with a straw hat waiting to march in a pro-war parade, N.Y.C. 1967* is compromised by the sheer excess of the ideologically charged markers he wears: the flag, the two pro-war pins, the American-flag pin, the bow tie, and finally, the straw hat. The accumulated effect of all these signs is to make his 'message' appear shrill and unconvincing. He comes



across as too square, too fanatical, too politically overdetermined, and the final effect undermines the intended one. We wonder what lies behind this frantic pro-war façade. The boy himself, what little we see of his body and almost naked shaved head, looks diminished by the paraphernalia he's wearing, like the widow in her bedroom. Here, Arbus has captured a failure of intended effect that the boy himself has created. In the case of the widow, it is Arbus's artistic choice of staging the photograph in the bedroom that creates the visual effect.

In the case of a photo such as *Lady bartender at home with a souvenir dog, New Orleans, 1964*, it is clear that Arbus intended the dog to relate some vital information about how to read the image, and it is precisely this souvenir dog that undermines the subject's attempt to portray herself as she clearly desires: posed, gracious, and elegant (suggested by her little finger daintily pointing outward as she reclines in an armchair). The souvenir dog 'betrays' the subject by parodying her: it has the same puffy hairdo as the woman as well as the same highly contrasted black and white face. The caption insists that we attend to the dog, and even creates a mirroring effect through its chiasmatic formulation: 'Lady bartender' on one side of 'at home,' with 'souvenir dog' on the other. The information offered by this caption represents the curious blend of obvious and invisible described before. For example, the term 'lady' is in some respects obvious, while the fact that she is a bartender is totally irrelevant to the image except insofar as it invites socio-cultural readings about her class, sexual activity, and personal happiness (the assumption being probably that a woman bartender must be lonely and promiscuous). The very choice of the term 'lady' rather than simply 'woman' points toward the irony in the conjunction, as if 'lady bartender' were an oxymoron.

The staging of these photos speaks of the subjects' (real or fictional) trauma in the same way as do the photos of subjects who cannot hide their 'traumatic experience,' such as the dwarf, the giant, the tattooed man, the hermaphrodite, and others who wear their 'trauma' like masks that both expose and hide their 'true' selves. Of course, the language of 'true self' is a dangerous one in this context. It is inaccurate to posit a true and authentic self that lies underneath the 'false' selves that we present to society. According to Goffman, 'face'

is an 'image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes,' which is not to say a fraudulent performance, but more of a *selective* one (5). People often believe in the roles they play, and feel particularly at ease in some roles rather than others. Goffman's work serves mainly to underscore the staged nature of these interactions, highlighting their complicated balance between compulsion and individual identity, anticipating in many respects the highly influential work of Judith Butler.

Reading Diane Arbus through the dramaturgical psychology of Goffman brings into focus the multifaceted obsession with 'face' that is specific to her work. It helps us think about the uncanniness of the photos of people at masked balls, where we are disconcertingly confronted with faces that are *all masks*. We can somewhat make out the eyes and mouth, but the face as an integrated and visible sign is not available to us. Instead, we are thrown back onto the mask and other mask-like *accoutrements*, such as the dress and hair and jewelry. This is the uncanny power (or freakishness) of photos such as *Lady at a masked ball with two roses on her dress, N.Y.C. 1967* and *A woman in a bird mask, N.Y.C. 1967*. The captions invite us to contemplate the overdone nature of the costumes in question, where the two roses on the dress of the first woman repeat the two roses sticking out of her head. The second woman has what appears to be a dead bird hanging down the side of her nose, with two enormous feathers sticking out on each side of her face. The peculiar genius of Arbus is that these masked faces appear nearly as revealing as the 'unmasked' ones, at least partly because she teaches us to read all the *accoutrements* that compose the strange mix of intended and unintended self-presentation.

Virtually all the non-human photos that Arbus presented in her work can be read in terms of the same problematic. *A house on a hill, Hollywood, Cal. 1963* is actually only a façade of a house, of the kind used on movie sets, and Arbus photographs it in a way that recalls her portraits: we see the front of the house, but with a little bit of the back showing, just enough to make it clear that the house is only its front wall. Only its face exists, as it were. The effect is that kind of uncanniness that comes from a façade that has been exposed, analogous to a social performance that has been exposed as such. The fact that the caption seeks to draw attention to the house's being 'on a



hill' serves on a purely visual and formal level to underscore the mirroring effect between the cloudy sky and the grassy hill. On another level, the information about the location of the house can subtly evoke something like the social status of the house: houses 'on hills' tend to be expensive and distinguished. If this house were looked at from 'below' rather than from the side, it might appear as an imposing mansion.

Similarly, the photos taken at Disneyland play on the contrast between the public persona of Disneyland as the 'happiest place on earth' and the menacing desolation of the landscapes she photographs. In *A rock in Disneyland, Cal. 1962*, the skull-like rocks appear even more threatening because of the stormy sky. Similarly, the dark and lonely castle in the fog in *A castle in Disneyland, Cal. 1962* evokes an ironic behind-the-scenes (or more precisely, after-hours) contrast to the bustling public image of the theme park.

Considering that Arbus is known as a portrait photographer, it is striking how often her captions furnish information about the location, the specific place, of the photo. This information is almost always of a sociological character, informing the viewer about the social event or circumstances of the image, even if it is a specific place, such as Central Park or Disneyland. Often the caption offers information that allows the viewer to determine what kind of role the person in the photo is playing. Perhaps the most important place that Arbus photographed her subjects is the park bench, which is just that kind of ambiguous space between public performance and private moment that constitutes Arbus's particular niche in portrait photography. After all, the park bench is something of a showcase, where one goes to be seen in public, yet there is an understanding that one is 'alone' on one's bench, and approaching someone on a park bench can be an intrusion of that person's privacy. The subjects that Arbus photographed are sitting still, doing nothing in particular, both circumstances being relatively unusual in public spaces and particularly conducive to what Goffman would call 'behind-the-scenes' moments. A photo such as *Young couple on a bench in Washington Square Park, N.Y.C. 1965* is captioned in terms of the ritualistic and generic nature of the 'event' they are performing, that of a young couple on a bench in a park. The title calls attention to the

sociological frame of the photo, as opposed to the subjects as individuals with names, which would have been another way to title the photo. As we are invited to attend to the two subjects in their socio-cultural role as a 'couple,' we are inevitably led to notice the way they assume their respective positions in terms of conventional heterosexuality: the boy adopting a sexually aggressive and territorial position, with his leg draped over his girlfriend's legs, exposing his crotch, which is further accentuated by his hand resting over his fly. The woman, in contrast, seems to be shrinking into herself, hand demurely between her legs, body modestly at a distance from her boyfriend. In this case, it is the faces of the couple that draw attention and create the intriguing discrepancy between the role they want to play and what their faces betray. The man has a hard and concentrated look, while the woman looks bored. Neither looks particularly happy, as we would expect from a 'young couple on a bench.' As the man looks into the distance, the woman appears to look at the camera, but I say 'appears' because she is cross-eyed and only one eye is directed toward the camera. Their faces are actually very hard to read, and what the title does is invite the reader to project the frame of young couplehood onto the image to give it sense and to create the subtle irony that Arbus's work often generates. The anodyne and generic caption also serves to absolve Arbus from responsibility for the fact that the photo works partly thanks to the girl's physical 'defect,' the eye that has come unfocused and wandered into bored distraction.

In order to appreciate how much our reading of an Arbus photo depends on the caption, it is useful to consider one of her few untitled photos. In *Revelations*, there is a photo of a young man with a dirty, ragged handkerchief: *Untitled (42) 1970–71*. Simply the fact that this is an Arbus photograph incites the reader to speculate on whether the young man might not be a transvestite, drug addict, or runaway. Nevertheless, without a title, we cannot make sense of the image. He seems to be wearing a dress or a frock, exposing his legs, but there is no sign of make-up or any other trace of transvestism. He appears to be seated on a chair in a public space, identifiable by the plain large tiles on the wall behind him and the particular kind of spotted marble floor favored for public bathrooms, hallways, and train stations. His hair is disheveled and his lips appear bruised. His eyes could be



bloodshot. He is looking to the side of the camera. The fact that my discussion of this photo consists entirely of descriptive remarks is a symptom of the fact that, without any caption, the image remains superficial and virtually illegible. It is highly suggestive perhaps, thanks to the naked legs, ratty hanky, bizarre dress, disheveled appearance of the subject and the starkly public location of the photo, but it remains completely illegible as far as the subject and situation are concerned. We do not even have the signature Arbus stare of the subject into the camera, testifying to the relationship between photographer and subject. There is no way to tell if this is a friend who posed for the picture or a lunatic she passed in the metro. The photo reveals nothing. It is useless as a point of departure for any kind of sociological or cultural narrative, except insofar as we understand that something is 'wrong' with this picture. We just do not know what it is or what it means. Perhaps the play of 'meaning' (where the image engages with the social and cultural frames outside the photo) is something that finally bored Diane Arbus.

The series of photos that Arbus took at various schools and institutions for the retarded between 1969 and 1971 are all also untitled (titled posthumously only with numbers by Doon Arbus). Writing of these photos in a letter to Allan Arbus, Diane reports triumphantly that she has taken 'the most terrific pictures' (Estate 203). She is particularly happy with the technical aspect of the photos, the particular blend of sunlight and resolution: 'FINALLY what I've been searching for' (203). She describes the effect as 'so lyric and tender and pretty,' startling terms of praise from a photographer known for her clinical matter-of-fact style, described by one critic as 'cold, dead elegance.'[3] *Untitled (1) 1970–71* does not yet belong to the 'lyrical' set. It is a sharp full-body portrait with flash of two retarded women wearing large floppy flower hats. Both are smiling broadly for the camera, one toothlessly. *Untitled (5)* is also a fairly sharp image clearly done with a flash of a young retarded woman gazing directly at the camera while holding a black flower hat on her head. The latter photo recalls best the earlier work of Arbus, and

3 Janet Malcolm quotes this phrase in her review of *Revelations* and *Diane Arbus: Family Albums*, but does not cite the source.

generates that uncanny power of photos of subjects that have an awkward or defiant relationship to their public presentation of self. The woman looks serious, knows she is being photographed and potentially judged, and is facing her audience with sobriety and dignity. The two women in the first photograph are beaming so mightily, so clueless as to their potential appearance to a viewer's eye, that much of the tension of Arbus's best work is simply missing. Yet, there is still some of the Arbus magic insofar as their posed smiles bring them within the frame of the Goffmanian problematic of public self-presentation.

The untitled photos numbered 2 (two retarded girls on a lawn), 3 (a person dressed as a ghost with a Halloween mask), 4 (four masked and disguised people), 6 (three retarded girls doing gymnastics on a lawn), and 7 (a group of disguised retarded people walking) are fundamentally different from the bulk of the Arbus oeuvre. First of all, they share the well-lit but softly focused quality that Doon Arbus described at the time as looking like smoke: 'as if you blew on them they'd disappear' (Estate 203). In only one of these photos is a subject whose face is visible looking directly at the camera. In all the other cases, the subject's face is hidden, obstructed, or turned away. There is a lack of tension in these photos due to the fact that there are no faces and there is no 'face-work,' the effort made by a person during contact with others to present a particular kind of image of him or herself (Goffman 6). The images of what we presume to be mentally handicapped people (since we do not see their faces we cannot be *sure*) wearing home-made Halloween masks are a little disturbing, somewhat grotesque, but not powerful in the way a photo like *Transvestite showing cleavage, N.Y.C. 1966* is powerful. The circulation of information and speculation between text and image in the latter photo generates a tension and richness and an illusion of depth, if you will, that a photo as opaque as *Untitled (4) 1970–71* (of four people wearing masks) simply cannot generate. It is too remote from us … too inaccessible.

Perhaps this is the effect Arbus was finally striving for: an escape into a purely aesthetic realm of 'late afternoon early winter' light and the impenetrable human mystery of what were once called the 'simple-minded.' Perhaps the very simplicity and childishness of these



subjects fascinated Diane Arbus because they had no masks at all, which amounts to being *all* mask, or being indistinguishable from one's mask. Arbus was clearly intrigued by something in these subjects, but the result is so different from the work that made her reputation, and the photos are so much less interesting than those of subjects who have something to hide, or who have a self-consciousness about being photographed, that it is not easy to imagine what Arbus was after in these photos. Perhaps that is the point. Perhaps the fact that they remain untitled allows them to remain what Arbus claimed photos to be: a secret about a secret.

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