Diane Arbus’ ‘Freaks’ Photography: Anti-humanitarian?

“Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot. ... 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.” – Diane Arbus

Diane Arbus, noted fashion photographer during the 1940’s, 50’s and 60’s, is better known for her bold moves in the realm of portraiture. Arbus, who lived and died in New York City, spent much of the tail end of her life taking pictures of the ‘freaks’ of 1960’s society. Labeled by their fellow man, these ‘freaks’ included those with intellectual disabilities, circus performers, even twins and triplets. Arbus allowed her subjects to pose for their portraits, letting their true personality and character shine through the photo. Other photographers and citizens criticized Arbus for her work; one man said, “Giving a camera to Diane Arbus is like putting a live grenade in the hands of a child,” making reference to one of her interesting images of a young boy in Central Park.

Shy and sheltered from a young age because of her family’s wealth, Arbus was able to overcome much of what she feared in her later life, but only to a certain extent. By looking at some of her more controversial images and the stories surrounding them, I wish to gain a new rhetorical perspective on her photographic work. I will look at three images in particular, which I will introduce later in my analysis. I will also investigate some of the reasons critics believed Arbus was anti-humanitarian and a voyeur of the ugly and decide for myself whether or not their thoughts have any merit in the art world. Lastly, I am seeking to answer the question of whether or not Arbus exploited her subjects in order to gain attention through her photography.
Background

Diane Arbus was born Diane Nemerov to Jewish-American parents on March 14, 1923 in New York City. Her mother and father owned the famous fur store on Fifth Avenue known as Russek’s. The Great Depression began when Diane was young, although she and her family were sheltered due to their wealth from the business. At the age of 18, after attending prep school, Diane married her childhood sweetheart, Allan Arbus.

Diane and Allan were both interested in photography. During the early 1940’s, Diane’s father commissioned the couple to take photos for the department store’s advertisement. When World War II started, Allan was commissioned as a photographer for the US Army. When he returned, fashion photography took the couple by storm. Diane and Allan began their own business, the Allan and Diane Arbus Studio.

Diane and Allan divided up the duties of their business, Allan taking care of the technical aspects and Diane looking after the staging and styling of the shoots. While their studio was in operation between 1946 and 1956, the Arbuses had photographic spreads in Harper’s Bazaar, Glamour and even Vogue.

Diane, however, was not entirely engaged in the fashion photography industry. She began to suffer from depression and eventually stepped away from the Arbus Studio in 1957. In 1960, she and Allan separated, although they were both prominent in each other’s lives. He still assisted Diane with her photography and helped her to build and improve her technical skills.
To improve herself as a photographer further, Diane enrolled in a few photography workshops, but none were as successful as a class she attended taught by Lisette Model, an Austrian-born American photographer. A second mentor Diane discovered was Marvin Israel, an American photographer and eventual Art Director of *Harper’s Bazaar*. As Art Director, Israel was even able to publish some of Diane’s work in the magazine. Both Israel and Model became important and influential people in Diane’s life, actively supporting her decisions and pushing her to pursue them further.

With the support of her friends, Diane continued to publish photos in magazines. By using her shyness and fears as fuel, she succeeded in seeing her own photographic interests as an adventure, needing to explore the nooks and crannies of the society mostly overlooked by New Yorkers and the world. Patricia Bosworth, a journalist and biographer, wrote, “Her terror aroused her and made her feel; shattered her listlessness, her depression. Conquering her fears helped her develop the courage she felt her mother had failed to teach her.” (Dorfman)

Because Diane’s mother, Gertrude, suffered from depression most of her life, Diane was prone to episodes of isolation and unhappiness as well. She turned to her photographic work as an outlet and used what she was afraid of as a stimulus for her to keep going. To fulfill her creative vision and to continue conquering her fears, Diane visited gay bars and nightclubs, freak museums and circuses, as well as the homes of some of Brooklyn and Manhattan’s most colorful residents. In these places she found the ‘freaks’ of New York City 1960’s society which she utilized to express her uncommon creative vision.
These marginal individuals carried a multitude of controversy with them following their photographic releases. Many of Diane’s famous images elicited discomfort and other emotions uncommon to the time’s photographs. Sadly, Diane committed suicide in 1971 in her apartment in New York City, leaving a single line as the final entry in her personal diary: “The Last Supper”.

**Ideology of New York’s 1960’s Society**

The 1960’s was a time of transitions and change. In the years following the end of World War II, men came back from war, had children and settled into their lives again. At this time in history, women traditionally stayed home and took care of the household, while the men provided for it. Suburbs were becoming a more common place to live, and the choice to move out of the city was still common during the 60’s.

In the early 60’s, New York was beginning to slow down from the construction boom that happened following the war. With so many people moving out of the city and into the suburbs, much economic and social decay was caused. With the closing of many large manufacturing and other industrial businesses, smaller ones began to fill in the gaps. More and more adult entertainment clubs opened up during the late 60’s.

Using her creative vision and fear as a stimulus to move forward, Arbus visited these places and took many of her most controversial photos of transvestites, gays and performers there. Because of the move out of the city, people were not accustomed to seeing these ‘abnormalities of society’, causing concern. The fact that the ideology of the nuclear family still hung in the air did not help matters, either. Arbus, however, try and she might, sought to expose
the citizens of New York and the world of her ‘freaks’: her friends and acquaintances she encountered during her days in New York City.

In my opinion, Arbus’ toughest critic is Susan Sontag, American writer and essayist. Sontag, who included her opinions of Arbus’ work in her book, *On Photography*, writes, “Instead of people whose appearance please, representative folk doing their human thing, the Arbus show lined up assorted monsters and borderline cases- most of them ugly; wearing grotesque or unflattering clothing; in dismal or barren surroundings- who have paused to pose and, often, to gaze frankly, confidently at the viewer.” (Sontag)

Sontag claims that the photographs convey a message of anti-humanism which “people of good will in the 1970’s are eager to be troubled by…” and that Arbus focused on the victims of society, saying that the photographs do not bring compassion to the viewer’s mind.

**Artifacts and research questions**

Long after her death, Diane Arbus’ unconventional portraiture and subject matter of the people she met still make for much debate as to whether or not she was exploiting the unusual and those living on the edge of social acceptance. As stated before, many of her later photographs featured transvestites, nudists and circus performers as well as other people deemed abnormal or strange. Many of her photographs, however, show people she met on her adventures in Central Park and on the streets of New York City near her home. More ‘normal’ than the other images, it seems as though these are not of disfigured, disabled or otherwise socially unacceptable people, but people simply living their lives.
Because this collection of photographs is different than the others in many ways, I have chosen three of them to examine more closely. Their titles are “Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park” (1962), “Women with a veil on Fifth Avenue” (1967) and “Identical Twins” (1968). By looking at these photographs in greater depth, and to satisfy my own curiosities about Diane Arbus’ life and her images’ histories as well as Sontag’s opinions, I would like to answer the question of whether or not Arbus was anti-humanitarian or a voyeuristic attention seeker. Is Arbus’ use of portrait photography exploiting those subjects of abnormality?

Method of Criticism

Ideology refers to a pattern of beliefs that determines a group’s interpretations of some aspect of the world. For the scope of this project, this method is extremely relevant. Arbus’ photographs are still judged today for their subject matter and their portrayal of the people in them. For this reason, I have chosen to use the Ideological method of criticism to analyze the three photographs.

By looking at them through this rhetorical lens, I will pick through the controversies which surround them. I will also look at the visual aspects of the photographs. The way the subjects pose themselves, their expressions and the other aesthetic details of the photographs are only a few of the details I will look at. I would also like to look at the techniques which Arbus used to achieve her images and the equipment she used including her camera, lens and use of flash.

Using the above ideology and method of criticism as a guide, I would first like to look at each of the photographs as a single entity. Secondly, I want to analyze them as a group in order
to compare and contrast their similarities and differences. I will be examining each of the
photographs in chronological order, starting with “Child with a toy hand grenade in Central
Park”, taken in 1962, and ending with “Woman with a veil on Fifth Avenue”, captured in 1968.
Following my initial analysis of each photograph, I will then look at some of the techniques and
equipment Arbus used to achieve her shots.

Analysis of the photographs

1962- “Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park” (now referenced as
“Child”) is considered to be one of Arbus’ most controversial images. Arbus allowed her
subjects to pose themselves, making this photograph even more fascinating. Why would a child
present himself in this manner? What could Arbus have seen in him?

Included in a portfolio of images consisting of ‘rich kids’, Colin Wood stands in the
center of the photo, more scrawny than skinny in his overalls and checkered shirt, one strap
askew off his shoulder. In one hand he holds a toy grenade, his other hand is empty, but clenched
like he is holding onto something.

In an interview for the San Francisco Chronicle, Wood said, “I have to say, (Arbus) felt a
real empathy with that kid -- with me. My childhood was not a comfortable one. My mother and
father split up when I was very young. I had asthma. I always felt like I wasn't up to snuff, and I
was alone in many ways. I was a troubled boy." Wood said he bought the toy grenades to play
war with his friends in the park. (Hart)
Empathy is a strong emotion and Arbus must have felt a lot of it in her life. A connection can be made between Wood’s life and the photograph and Arbus’ own life. This photograph oozes thoughts of insecurity and fear with the grenade in the child’s hand, a symbol of violence, making the debate even more complex. Arbus, as I had said before, was isolated in her childhood because of her family’s wealth. Like Wood, Arbus was probably socially awkward. Her parents did not send money or help to support her in her adult life, one of the many reasons she felt depression and isolation later on. Because she was dumped into a world she did not know or completely understand, Arbus had many insecurities and it was very hard for her to leave her comfort zone. Wood had called himself a “troubled boy”; Arbus herself was a troubled woman for most of her life.

Being that Wood’s parents were divorced (divorce still being an uncommon and ungodly occurrence in many eyes), Arbus could have seen this little boy’s sadness and gravitated towards him because of it, even though he was playing in the park at the time. Because she had her own insecurities and doubts about herself, Arbus oftentimes took photographs of people she could relate to in some way, people like the “Child with the hand grenade in Central Park.”

1967- Portraits of twins and triplets, even brothers and sisters in general, were not common photographic formats during the 1960’s. Arbus’ “Identical Twins” (from here referenced as “Twins”), taken in Roselle, New Jersey, showcases identical twins Cathleen and Colleen Wade in matching dresses, stockings and white headbands standing shoulder-to-shoulder, connected in more ways than one. Arbus came upon them at a Christmas party held for twins and triplets, most likely products of the baby boom of the 50’s.
The word identical, especially referring to human beings, sparks ideas of identity and the uncanny likeness of the twins, triplets and the like. In the case of this photo, the twins’ only difference is the expressions on their faces, one frowning and the other smiling slightly. The Wades are alike, yet not the same. The twin’s father had said of Arbus’ photograph of his daughters, “We thought it was the worst likeness of the twins we’d ever seen.”

Arbus has struggled with her own idea of identity and who she really thought she was. By using these girls as an example, Arbus may have seen normality in their ‘freakishness’ or perhaps a sense of freakishness’ in their normality. In Arbus’ case, a fashion photographer was more normal than one of ‘freaks’ in the society she lived in. Interestingly enough, many years following her death, Arbus’ famous photo is said to be the first idea or model for the girls in Stanley Kubrick’s version of Stephen King’s novel *The Shining* for the overall fearful feel of the picture.

1968- Walking her home streets of New York City, Arbus came across many of the individuals she eventually photographed. “Woman with a veil on Fifth Avenue” (now referenced as “Woman”) is one of those people she met on her photographic adventures. Seemingly normal, the woman’s face takes on grotesque features with the use of flash and the up-close-and-personal angle, focusing on her face, neck and shoulders with the city’s buildings mostly hidden in the background.

Sontag, in *On Photography*, calls Arbus’ subjects ugly, “wearing grotesque or unflattering clothing; in dismal or barren surroundings…” (Sontag) In my mind, Sontag was
probably talking about this photograph, although one could argue that any of them could be included in the criticism.

“Woman” not only reflects the subject’s wealth, but perhaps her need to show it off. Unless it was a special occasion, why would this woman be walking down Fifth Avenue with her fur collar and big pearl earrings? Although the 1950’s had passed when this photo was taken, the woman here still seems to feel the need to flaunt her wears, showing everyone she has more than her neighbors. Furthermore, Arbus’ photograph of the woman on Fifth Avenue portrays a sense of wealth that Arbus’ family had once held, one that Arbus at the time the photo was taken was absent of.

*Equipment and photographic style*- Each of my artifacts as taken with a Rolleiflex Medium Format Twin-Lens reflex camera, which, when held at waist height, produces a square image. Each of the subjects is also looking directly into the camera and is centered in the frame. I believe this arrangement was done intentionally by Arbus. She photographed the socially unacceptable because she wanted to show the world that they weren’t ‘freaks’. By positioning them in the frame like she did, and with the final square format of the images, Arbus made her subjects become the center of attention.

Arbus also used flash in all of her images, but its use is most easily seen in “Woman”. By using the flash, Arbus was able to bring a new perspective and extra detail to the faces of her subjects, allowing the shadows created to ‘change’ them and make them seem more haunting and curious. Also, never making it easy for herself, Arbus carried around all of her camera equipment all the time, much of which was heavy and bulky.
Each of these photographs captures a different type of person, background and personal situation. Some were said to be ‘grotesque’, while others were the worst likeness of the people their families had seen. Over the course of her own photographic interests, Arbus approached and visited many shy and insecure individuals on the outskirts of the 1960’s society.

Conclusion

In short, no one really knows why Arbus photographed who she did and in the way she decided to. Each of her photographs, in some way, shape or form, could arguably be connected to Arbus’ life. If only she were alive today to enlighten us on her motives and what she was thinking when she photographed her subjects.

Through this analysis, I have learned for myself that Arbus was not exploitive. She was not anti-humanistic. She was a woman who was exploring her own photographic interests because they were so different than the fashion work she had done in the past. She was doing it not only for herself, but to show the world the other sides of society whom she believed were not victims, but “aristocrats” in their own right.
Bibliography


