

Sontag on Arbus

“Photography was a license to go wherever I wanted and to do what I wanted to do,” Arbus wrote. The camera is a kind of passport that annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from any responsibility toward the people photographed. The whole point of photographing people is that you are not intervening in their lives—only visiting them. The photographer is supertourist, an extension of the anthropologist, visiting “natives” and bringing back news of their exotic doings and strange gear. The photographer is always trying to colonize new experiences, or find new ways to look at familiar subjects—to fight against boredom. For boredom is the reverse side of fascination: both depend on being outside rather than inside a situation, and one leads to the other. “The Chinese have a theory that you pass through boredom into fascination,” Arbus once commented. Photographing an appalling underworld (and a horrible, plastic overworld), she has no intention of entering into the horror of those images as experienced by the inhabitants of those worlds. They are to remain exotic, hence “terrific.” Her view is always from the outside.

“I’m very little drawn to photographing people that are known or even subjects that are known,” Arbus wrote. “They fascinate me when I’ve barely heard of them.” However interested Arbus was in freaks or in very ugly people, it would never have occurred to her to photograph thalidomide babies or napalm victims—“public” horrors, deformities with sentimental or moral associations. Arbus was not interested in ethical journalism. She was drawn to subjects that she could believe were found, just lying about, without any values attached to them. These subjects are necessarily ahistorical: “private” rather than public pathology, secret lives rather than open ones.

For Arbus, the camera photographs the unknown. But unknown to whom? Unknown to someone who is basically protected, middle-class, who has been taught to see life in terms of moral response and prudence. Like Nathanael West, another artist who was fascinated by the deformed and the mutilated, Arbus came from a moralistic, inexorably upward-mobile, verbally skilled, compulsively well-nourished, genteel, indignation-prone, well-to-do Jewish family, where minority sexual tastes lived way below the threshold of awareness, and risk-taking was despised as another goyish craziness. “One of the things I felt I suffered from as a kid,” Arbus wrote, “was that I never felt adversity. I was confined in a sense of unreality.... And the sense of being immune was, ludicrous as it seems, a painful one.” Feeling much the same discontent, West was exhilarated by his job as a nightclerk in a seedy Manhattan hotel in 1927. The camera became Arbus’s way of procuring experience, and thereby acquiring a sense of reality. By experience was meant if not material adversity at least psychological adversity—the shock of immersion in experiences that cannot be beautified, the encounter with what is taboo, perverse, evil.”

‘Freak Show’ by **Susan Sontag**. The New York Review of Books 15 November, 1973

- Why does Sontag describe the photographer as a “supertourist”?
- Why are both boredom and fascination “outside” rather than “inside a situation”?
- Why does Sontag accuse Arbus of being unethical?
- Why does Sontag disapprove of a photograph like the one below?



Diane Arbus - A Jewish Giant at Home with His Parents, N.Y., 1970