

Susan Sontag (on photography) has argued that Diane Arbus's photographs suggest "a world in which everybody is an alien, hopelessly isolated, immobilized in mechanical, crippled identities and relationships". Critically discuss this view of Arbus's work.

*On Photography* by Susan Sontag discusses in great length the work of Diane Arbus. Because of this it is important to work closely with the book in determining Sontag's main arguments and observations. In her above statement and in the essay Sontag takes the photographer Diane Arbus and raises her to the level of Artist. This is essential if we are to analyse Arbus' work. Her photography is less about technique and more about an artist concept. Sontag in the essay is very much putting forward photography as an artistic medium. What is essential to note when addressing Sontag's above quote is that she was comparing Arbus' approach to photography with Edward Steichen. Her comparison quite truly sees Steichen's work portraying the human race living and dying in the same way. His "family of man" exhibition is described as "art that could make human beings aware of their common humanity"<sup>1</sup> Sontag is therefore arguing that Arbus is the antithesis of Steichen. This is indeed very true and allows us to use Steichen as an opposite in our analysis of Arbus' "Freaks"

The immediate reaction to Sontag's quote is that Arbus's Photographs display not just the horrors of Western society but the unique horrors. Alien is a strong choice of word, it immediately conjures up the idea that none of us are alike. Because Arbus's work is solely visual, with little or no notes on her photographs it is visual examples of individuality that we look for. Arbus separates people with the camera; she puts them into a separate box away from everybody else. Even her portrait of two twin girls seems to draw a line between them (one is smiling, the other is not). "The Photographs of deviates and real freaks do not accent their pain but, rather, their detachment and autonomy"<sup>2</sup> Additionally it is her technique that individualises each portrait. Her use of flash and using square negatives separates her subjects ever more "Her use of flash both served to isolate the subjects and also to give them a theatrical or even surreal quality"<sup>3</sup> While the latter half of that quote is perhaps not entirely true, surreal not quite being the right word to describe the effect the flash has on her subject. The flash does of course lend to the isolation of the subject which is in Sontag's view Arbus's aim.

To the right is an example of Arbus's use of flash to single out her subject. The man is well lit, his expression captured and he is singled out from the background. Full concentration is on him.



1. Whitney museum of American art, <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/2aa/2aa164.htm>
2. Susan Sontag, *on photography*, penguin, 1977, p36
3. Peter Marshall, *Diane Arbus*, <http://photography.about.com/library/weekly/aa110600c.htm>

Arbus approaches her subjects with a neutral style, allowing for total honesty of the subject. This lack of compassion is so important in her work, as she does not cheapen the image with a forced opinion. It is the viewer perhaps that will draw assumptions, but she does not impose her own. This is due to her face on style, and the usually straight face of her subject. She also made an effort to make her subjects feel comfortable being photographed, almost eager. “Arbus’s work does not invite viewers to identify with the miserable looking people she photographed”<sup>4</sup> This is an important quote by Sontag as it shows that if we cannot connect with a person in a photograph we will indeed agree that they are Aliens and therefore freaks. Arbus’s confrontational style of photographing people makes people inaccessible; Sontag also says that she liked “concentrating on victims”<sup>5</sup>. But does she concentrate on victims or victimise people?

**“Did Arbus exploit her subjects? Well, clearly we all do to some extent when we photograph other people - we make use of them for our own purposes. What leaps out of much of her work is a feeling of exchange - that she was giving her subjects something through her work. Human intercourse is about creating value through such exchanges and can be a situation where both parties gain. Much of Arbus's work seems clearly to be creative and affirming towards its subjects, and it was clearly also meeting some need on her own part.”<sup>6</sup>**

Arbus did exploit her subject to a degree; she chose to make them look freakish and abnormal. An example of this would be the photo shown of the congressman Ogden Reed and his son. The son is perched on the other arm of the chair like a ventriloquist doll, he looks stiff and lifeless. Her choice of positioning separates the father and son, with the father attempting to bridge this gap with his arm. Arbus may have done several different poses with these two, but it is this photograph she chooses to portray them. They are not portrayed as freakish but the oddity is slight and notable.



“immobilized in mechanical, crippled identities and relationships” The latter half of Sontag’s argument suggests something repetitive about the people she photographed. That their lives are dull and meaningless. This side of her argument has its weaknesses, as most of her freaks ways of life could not be called repetitive. Where this side of the argument is most strong is in Arbus’s portrayal of normal people, the people who are not drag queens, midgets or twins. An example would be the Westchester family photo shown here. This shows the Dull banality of middle class suburbia, the relationship between the family is a disconnected one. The boy plays in the pool while mother and father sun themselves.



4. Susan Sontag, *on photography*, penguin, 1977, p32
5. Susan Sontag, *on photography*, penguin, 1977, p33
6. Peter Marshall, *Diane Arbus*, <http://photography.about.com/library/weekly/aa110600c.htm>

While Sontag's argument is strong it can be criticized for being too direct and aggressive in its analysis of Arbus's methods. Arbus had a great fascination for freaks "I just used to adore them. I still do adore some of them. I don't quite mean they're my best friends but they made me feel a mixture of shame and awe." Surely we could then dismiss her style for merely being obsessive and impulsive, less thought out and directional. Sontag in her essay suggests that Arbus was "A photographer venturing out into the world to collect images that are painful"<sup>7</sup>. Yet a lot of the people that Arbus photographed are not in pain of any sort, they are not unhappy, as Sontag contradicts herself by saying "Few of the pictures actually show emotional distress"<sup>8</sup>. It could then be conceived that Sontag in the former quote is actually remarking that Arbus is creating images that are painful rather than finding them, as this critic suggests:

**"She could photograph almost no human being without exposing a dismaying ambivalence; as much as she was interested in the face behind the mask, for those who had no mask, she devised one and imposed it."**<sup>9</sup>

This quote from Brian Sewell makes us question Arbus's methods and whether they were methods of deception. We are reminded that it is her style and choice of photography that depicts these people. Therefore it is her choice to show these people as freaks and she is being cruel and insensitive to their situations.

**"Her own motives come up again and again in interpretation. Critics have seen her work as exploitative or sympathetic, violent or erotic, the projection of a fragile mind or the creator of a family. In reality, she makes one question one's own motives and those of the photographer as much as the subject's"**<sup>10</sup>

Arbus quite effectively makes us think and question herself, ourselves and the subject. Perhaps in her defense her subjects are very willing to be portrayed by Arbus and this is the biggest question we ask of her work "they seem to plead for attention, not as a matter of vanity, but in search of support."<sup>11</sup>

7. Susan Sontag, *on photography*, penguin, 1977, p40

8. Susan Sontag, *on photography*, penguin, 1977, p36

9. Brian Sewell, *Arbus exhibition review*

[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4153/is\\_20051014/ai\\_n15712299/pg\\_4](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4153/is_20051014/ai_n15712299/pg_4)

10. John Haber, *Don't look back*, <http://www.haberarts.com/arbust.htm>

11. John Haber, *Don't look back*, <http://www.haberarts.com/arbust.htm>

Ultimately it is down to Arbus's choice of photograph that depicts her characters, for the photo of a boy with a toy hand grenade Arbus took a whole roll of film (shown below). The boy strikes various poses for Arbus, finally in frustration because Arbus spent so long photographing him, he strikes the pose that he is famous for. What is clear from the contact sheet is that he is a fairly normal child striking typical poses, until he gets tired of these poses and pulls an unplanned pose. Of course it is the most interesting picture there, but it could be argued that Arbus has chosen the photograph intentionally to make him more freakish. It could also be argued that this is a good thing, because in doing so Arbus is showing the natural face of the boy when frustrated. In turn showing him in a natural pose, rather than his own contrived one.



Nobody can really know exactly what Arbus was doing when she photographed her subjects, we can only speculate like Sontag.

**"What im trying to talk about is the irony that nobody will ever know what another person thinks. I could tell you the way I think, if that intersts you, but it just doesnt come. The words aren't the way you think."<sup>12</sup>**

The above quote is by John Steinbeck, spoken the same year that Arbus committed suicide. While it bears no relevance to how she died it bears some significance to the

time that she was working. In many respects the sixties was a time of great optimism, and perhaps we can call Arbus's work part of this optimism. The optimism of artists was that things could be conveyed, through the new mediums that were presented to them. Then with realisation in the early seventies that actually some things cannot be conveyed, they can only be suggested. This idea suggests that Diane Arbus was searching for more than just to portray "a world in which everybody is an alien" that she was perhaps looking to find why these people do what they do, and why it makes them happy. Diane Arbus's quote below strongly suggests this, and I believe this the important part that Sontag has missed. "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."<sup>13</sup>

This quote kills Sontag's argument, as it paints the freaks of Arbus's world as super-human, that they have found happiness in this world. They have found their role in life, as this quote suggests "Arbus's sitters feel compelled to look, compelled by the very roles they assume"<sup>14</sup>

Since the book *On photography* was published many of Sontag's key arguments have been questioned or overturned, and several contradictions between the different essays in the book have been pointed out. This would lead to question even more her views on Diane Arbus. Even with criticism, her arguments are thought out and well defended, and Sontag has perhaps succeeded in at least bringing Photographers such as Diane Arbus into the forefront of Art photography.

12. Richard Avedon and Diane Arbus, *the sixties*, Jonathon Cape London, p72

13. Diane Arbus Quote resource [http://www.masters-of-photography.com/A/Arbus/Arbus\\_articles2.html](http://www.masters-of-photography.com/A/Arbus/Arbus_articles2.html)

14. John Haber, *Don't look back*, <http://www.haberarts.com/Arbus.htm>

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