

Diane Arbus Re-framed: An analysis from a modern feminist perspective

Introduction

Diane Arbus was an American photographer who lived between 1923 and 1971, when she committed suicide. She photographed people in the fringes of society: freaks (in her own words)¹ at a time -the 1960s- when these populations were invisible. John Szarkowski, the director of Photography at MOMA, made her famous alongside with Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander by displaying the work of all three at the 1967 exhibition *New Documents*.² A major exhibition, again at MOMA after her death³ consolidated her fame.

Her portrait subjects and complex personality and life made her an icon for future generations and particularly for queer photographers. She has been the subject of several biographies and many journalistic articles and academic essays. I added another to the list early this year.⁴

Two major critiques to my essay -why I mention it- are relevant. The first is if a reinterpretation of Arbus' work from the point of view of feminism and semiotics is possible. The second is whether Arbus photography was documentary -as Szarkowski believed- or simple photojournalistic portraiture. These two are the object of this essay.

I will describe briefly the status of philosophical and political feminism in America at Arbus' time. I will also deal with the documental value of her photography. Then I will try to apply both to her work, specifically a set of photographs dealing with what she termed "female impersonators" and "transvestites" included in the 1967 exhibition. Because of their number and consistency, they can be analyzed as a whole.

To set the stage, most of the relevant authors involved in the philosophical fundamentals of Queer theory (such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Judith Butler) were not active then and could not be known by Arbus.⁵

¹ Diane Arbus used the word "freak/s" in her own notes and writings. A very probable reason why she incorporated it into her vocabulary might come from the movie of the same title. Released in 1932 without much success, it was screened at the New York Theater in 1961. 'She would watch the film innumerable times, often introducing people she knew to its pleasures' Lubow, p 246

² Although a catalogue was not published at the time, the Meister book (Arbus, Friedlander, Winogrand. *New Documents 1967*) on the exhibition is an excellent source and contains all the plates exhibited. It is, in fact, the catalogue that was never published, and is mentioned as the main publication by the MOMA website reference to the exhibition (www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3487)

³ Again, organized by Szarkowski, it was accompanied by the book *Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph*

⁴ *A Camera to Explore the World. Diane Arbus in Wonderland* (unpublished). University of Brighton, School of Media, January 2021.

⁵ Here's a full excerpt of my response: 'Judith Butler was just entering college when Arbus died. Her first important work, *Gender Trouble*, was published in 1990.

Jacques Derrida started with a relevant publishing career in 1967, but at the time he was more focused on Levinas' idea of 'The Other' (and later, on Heidegger) than his fundamental work in semiotics and his political

Although she photographed some feminist political leaders, there is some consensus that she was not an active feminist. Hence, any analysis on either subject has to be done retrospectively.

The topic of documentary photography is less clear: Diane Arbus started a fashion photography practice together with her husband, Alan Arbus. After divorce, she studied with Lisette Model and became a photojournalist who made portraits fulfilling magazine assignments. Did Szarkowski's *New Documents* exhibition make her conscious of the documentary value of her photographs? For sure, but apparently it did not change her practice. I will defend anyway that her corpus of work has intrinsic documentary value, fits within modern definitions of documentary photography, and can clearly be considered from such perspective.

Feminism

As mentioned, Arbus was not a feminist, but that assertion needs to be viewed in a temporal context -that of the 1950s and 60s -. It is hence relevant to make a brief review of the history of the feminist movement in the United States.

Political feminism has a long tradition in the United States. It started formally at the Seneca Falls (NY) Convention in 1840,⁶ when Elizabeth Stanton and Lucretia Mott agreed to set up a convention to discuss the condition of women.

As in the UK, it oriented itself towards equality of rights -coverture laws-⁷ and suffrage. Coverture law was largely modified by the *Married Women Property Acts* passed in many states during the late 19th century, and female suffrage was approved in 1920 with the *19th Amendment*.⁸

writing, which took place between the 1970s and the 1990s. Foucault obtained his first position of importance, at the *College de France* in 1969. It is true that he published *Folie et déraison* in 1961, but this was his doctoral thesis and caused no short term impact outside French Academia. The big body of his work and his influence in the United States came later.

Finally, Lacan published the *Ecrits* in 1966, which did not have a wide diffusion until the early 70s. Susan Sontag herself, in *On Photography*, does not cite any of these influences referring to Arbus (*On Photography* was published in 1973). Essentially, the Queer movement, so important for further discussion, and AIDS as a catalyst of sorts for its emergence, came later'

⁶ The *Declaration of Sentiments*, signed as a result of the Seneca Falls convention was particularly daring for the time: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights', and 'The history of mankind, is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man towards woman' (Online source, pdf available at https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/coretexts/_files/resources/texts/1848DeclarationofSentiments.pdf)

⁷ - Coverture laws were imported into the US by English colonists. Essentially it means that a woman, upon marriage, merged her interests with those of her husband (based on the principle that marriage made them 'one'), who administered them and could freely dispose. The term comes from the French "couvert" as opposed to a single woman who was a "femme sole".

⁸ Although it was approved in 1920 due to the process of State by State ratification, it was passed by Congress in 1919, right after the War. 'The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation'. The date cited corresponds to when the last State approved it.

A second wave started in the early 1960s. Women, who had contributed critically to the workforce during the war, returned massively in the 1950s to traditional homemaker roles: partly to cede back jobs to men returning from war, but also due to a general social regression to tradition and conservatism, and an emphasis in the nuclear family.

The objectives of this wave of feminism were essentially pragmatic: equal pay -something not quite achieved today in many parts of the West -and the possibility of exerting birth control. Betty Friedan⁹ was her more important representative. This period, the one Arbus lived in, lasted until the early 1990s.¹⁰ Whilst very important, the feminist movement in the 1960s was not particularly exciting, and it is understandable that Arbus didn't feel it as her own.¹¹

On the *philosophical* side, the major sources are Simone De Beauvoir, who wrote *The Second Sex* (influencing Friedan heavily) and three French authors (Lacan, Foucault and Derrida). Neither was a "pure" philosopher. Lacan was a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Derrida defined himself as a historian, and Foucault was also a psychologist and focused on History of Ideas.

Historically women have been considered inferior by society and philosophers. According to Hegel, 'Women are capable of education, but they are not made for activities which demand a universal faculty such as the more advanced sciences, philosophy and certain forms of artistic production. ... Women regulate their actions not by the demands of universality, but by arbitrary inclinations and opinions'.¹²

Kant said similar things. Aristotle, following Plato, saw women as "incomplete" men, and consequently, inferior.¹³ However, there have been many women philosophers, and not only in the modern era. Mary Ellen Waithe documented in *A History of Women Philosophers*,¹⁴ 30 just between 1600 and 1900, but none of them belongs in the philosophical canon.¹⁵

Most of these female philosophers didn't differ from the mainstream male philosophers of their respective lifetimes, which explains the late emergence of a feminist philosophy *per se*. Mary Wollstonecraft, in the late 18th century, is the first precursor of note. Based on

⁹ Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, allegedly based (or inspired) on De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, ultimately defending that traditional roles of women affected equality and degraded women. She also was one of the founders and the first president of NOW (National Organization of Women).

¹⁰ In 1991, Anita Hill, a prominent lawyer and civil rights advocate, testified against Judge Clarence Thomas during the hearings following his appointment to the Supreme Court with allegations of sexual harassment. Hill's testimony marked the commencement of a new era in the feminist movement in the United States

¹¹ Arbus photographed also radical feminists such as Germaine Greer. A literal account of the encounter on note 65.

¹² G.W.F. Hegel, 1973. *The Philosophy of Right*, T.M. Knox (trans), Oxford, Oxford University Press p 26

¹³ A good reference on this topic is M. Horowitz, *Aristotle and Woman*, Journal of the History of Biology, vol 9 n°2, Dordrecht, 1976 pp. 183-213.

¹⁴ Mary Ellen Waithe, *A History of Women Philosophers*. Dordrecht 1991, Kluwer Academic Publishing

¹⁵ "Canon" (one "n") refers to a collection of rules or texts that are considered to be authoritative. The philosophical canon is the set of authoritative authors and texts in philosophy.

the principles of the Enlightenment (the dominant philosophical movement in her era and place) she argued in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* that women are not inferior to men, but rather receive a very different education.¹⁶ That was obvious in the English upper and middle classes then, and still rings very true today in certain societies.

Simone De Beauvoir, a much closer in time precedent, comes from Marxism and Structuralism to write that one is not born a woman, just becomes one,¹⁷ alluding to the reinterpretation of the Marxist “superstructure” made by post-Structuralists. This idea is fundamental, not only because it links the context of femininity to the cultural context of a given time and place, but also because it hints to the *constructed* nature of identity, a direct link to future authors in Queer Theory, and particularly Judith Butler.

Lacan and Foucault contributed to the field by exerting from different angles the importance of the culture -ultimately context, hence disputing the concept of “absolute”, as Claude Levi-Strauss, a distinguished French anthropologist had already demonstrated.

Lacan made a full reinterpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis. One of his fundamental concepts is that of the Registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. Each of these three is a part of the individual psyche. Of these, the Symbolic represents the *language*: the social structure and norms translated into internalized language, and from there into thoughts. Ultimately, the Symbolic is the social-structural component and acts as a mechanism of dominance of the individual because it frames reality.¹⁸

Coming from a different, historicist angle, Michel Foucault wrote that the very configuration of reality, ideology, is determined by the society and the moment. Foucault would go to create an all-encompassing concept named Bio-Politics,¹⁹ but in a very simplistic explanation, social control of the individual is mediated by ideology and language. For Foucault, there is no absolute: reality is mutant.

Jacques Derrida provided an additional concept: deconstruction, an expression he uses first in one of his most important works, *Of Grammatology*.²⁰ published in 1967. On the base of deconstruction -a method of analysis- is language, as no event is identical to other. There is not a simple repetitive mechanical cause and effect, because specific language is mediating everything. Does it sound like Lacan or Foucault? Possibly: Foucault used to attend Lacan’s conferences, and Jacques Derrida attended Foucault’s. Whilst none is the master of the others, there is a thread of connection and influence, with language and relativity at the center.

¹⁶ The Stanford article on the subject is an excellent introduction to Wollstonecraft: Sylvana Tomaselli, "Mary Wollstonecraft", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/wollstonecraft/>>.

¹⁷ *'On ne nait pas femme, on le devient'* in the original of *The Second Sex*.

¹⁸ Lacan’s key piece of work is the *Ecrits*, published in 1966. A good introductory article about Lacan and his most important conceptualizations can be found at the Lacan entry on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Adrian Johnston, *Jacques Lacan*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/lacan/>>.

¹⁹ *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978-79), in his lecture series at the Collège de France. M Foucault *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France 1978-79* (trans. G Burchell, 2008) 21-22

²⁰ J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Corrected Edition) Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998

Semiotics

Female Impersonator: 'A male entertainer who plays the role of a woman, as in Vaudeville'.²¹

Semiotics: 'Action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this trirelative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs'.²²

"Female Impersonator" is the term Arbus (or Szarkowski, we don't know) used for her cross-dressing subjects displayed at the New Documents exhibition of 1967.

It has fallen in disuse, but today sounds derogatory and fake. "Impersonator" means someone who adopts a different role from his/her own, one that s/he is not entitled to, maybe trying to confuse others. But, was Arbus using it in a different context?

Language determines and fixates concepts, but also symbolic connotations. Even politically correct terms, such as "transgender", refer us directly to the culture war between classic or radical feminists and the queer movement. It has a meaning, but it also implies a political position.

Transgender is often used to refer to people who "do not conform to prevailing expectations about gender" by presenting and living genders that were not assigned to them at birth or by presenting and living genders in ways that may not be readily intelligible in terms of more traditional conceptions of gender. Used as an umbrella term, it generally aims to group several kinds of people such as transsexuals, drag queens and kings, some butch lesbians and (heterosexual) male cross-dressers. Talia Bettcher.²³

Professor Bettcher²⁴ in another pivotal article, *Trans Women and the Meaning of Woman*,²⁵ writes about two opposing views of transsexuality: the "Wrong Body Model" (where there is the sensation of belonging to a gender and being trapped in the body of another, a misalignment between body and soul), and the "Transgender Model", where some individuals do not conform to binarism and society attempts to enforce it. The "medical establishment", by using surgery and hormones would play a binarism enforcing role²⁶

²¹ Female impersonator definition by the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

²² Charles Sanders Peirce definition of semiosis.

²³ Talia Bettcher, *Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online). Stanford University, September 2009.

²⁴ Talia Bettcher is a Professor and Chair at the Department of Philosophy at UCLA. She self-defines as a 'trans' woman.

²⁵ Talia Bettcher, *Trans Women and the Meaning of "Woman"* in *The Philosophy of Sex*, Sixth Edition, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Chapter 14, pp. 233-250

²⁶ This "Establishment" reference relates probably to the *Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association*, which was created in 1979 to "reconduct" a problem that was coming out of hand. A famous study published by Johns Hopkins showed that there was little benefit in treating trans patients. Medical practitioners and psychologists feared the possible legal consequences, and the Association was created with

The very term “transgender” can be used as a group identification symbol by one faction and a derogatory one by another. Few things can surpass in derogatory terms what Janice Raymond, one of the mothers of radical feminism -and again a professor of Philosophy-²⁷ wrote in 1979, in this case using the term “transsexual”: ‘All transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves. However, the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist violates women's sexuality and spirit, as well. Rape, although it is usually done by force, can also be accomplished by deception’.²⁸

On her own and opposite side, Judith Butler essentially dismisses the whole idea of biological sex; and gender along the way. The second preface of *Gender Trouble*²⁹ is very telling: ‘As I wrote it, I understood myself to be in an embattled and oppositional relation to certain forms of feminism (...) It was and remains my view that any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences...’³⁰

This is a conflict within feminism itself, between Butler and Raymond, but also opens a completely dissonant perspective from the “born in the wrong body” perspective, as it denies gender binarism. Bettcher describes well Butler’s position in the following: ‘And, so for Butler, feminist identification of all gendered behavior as inherently sexist (as, for example, found in Raymond's work) is nothing short of a heterosexist tendency to attach a primacy to heterosexual gender performance.

Butler's account of gender aims to call into question the pre-existence of a group of individuals (i.e., women, females) prior to the enforcement of gender role. Instead, in Butler's view, biological sex is culturally instituted and, in this sense, “gender all along”.³¹

The dispute is still raging today, as the Queer movement promotes laws that protect gender self-determination. Radical feminism is responding all across the western world in ways and with arguments that bring Raymond back to memory.

Medical science -ignored and blamed- is not completely absent from the debate. There is increasing evidence supporting a biological base to binary transsexuality, and by extension, to those who feel somewhere in between. A host of studies, using PET-Scan imaging techniques³² have showed morphological differences between the brains of adult pre-treatment³³ people who identify themselves as transsexuals and their respective cis-gender control groups. In other words, those non treated brains are somewhere in between male and

strict rules of practice and patients’ admission. It was a protective move. The HB was replaced by the *WPATH* (*World Professional Association for Transgender Health*), which focuses on the creation of standards and education and training of professionals working in the field.

²⁷ At University of Massachusetts, Amherst

²⁸ Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: the Making of the She-Male*, Boston, Beacon Press 1979, p. 104

²⁹ Written in 1999, 9 years after the first publication. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, New York, Routledge, 1990

³⁰ *Gender Trouble*, cit. Preface (1999) pages vii-viii

³¹ Talia Bettcher, *Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues*. cit

³² The first study was published in 2013, by Dr. Guillamon, a reputed Spanish neurobiology professor. A number have followed in the US and Europe. A review can be found here: A. Guillamon, C. Junque, E. Gomez-Gil, *A Review of the Status of Brain Structure Research in Transsexualism*.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4987404/>

³³ Before hormonal therapy

female. One of the medical hypotheses about transsexuality which emerged in the late 1990s is the presence of abnormal sex-hormone levels during pregnancy: boys-in-girl and girls-in-boy bodies. That might explain the typical emergence of gender dysphoria symptoms in childhood.³⁴ The brain imaging studies have observed that these *in-between* brains become indistinguishable from those in the control groups after hormone therapy is administered, giving retrospectively some strength -albeit non-conclusive- to the hypothesis of hormonal imbalances during pregnancy.³⁵

Gender is culturally constructed, but biology may play a role too.

Arbus

Everybody has this thing where they need to look one way but they come out looking another way and that's what people observe. You see someone on the street and essentially what you notice about them is *the flaw*³⁶. It's just extraordinary that we should have been given these peculiarities. And, not content with what we were given, we create a whole other set. Our whole guise is like giving a sign to the world to think of us in a certain way, but there's a point between what you want people to know about you and what you can't help people knowing about you. And that has to do with what I've always called the gap between intention and effect. Diane Arbus³⁷

Peter Bunnell, a well-known scholar and historian of photography, wrote: 'Arbus moved from the unreal world of high fashion to a world composed of people who may seem unreal, or tragic, but whose culture is unfortunately interpreted through the mores of another. *It is this -the configuration and imposition of a society's values- that is the root subject of Arbus' photographs*^{38, 39}.

Three fundamental concepts in my view are necessary to understand any part of Diane Arbus' work: the flaw (the inner imperfection), the gap (people trying to project an ideal image conforming to society's standards, and failing to do so), and the fact that all this happens because of the constraints and roles imposed by a rigid society. Diane always tried to find that secret inner self.⁴⁰ She photographed the enforcers and the transgressors. And she admired the latter.

Was Diane Arbus a documentarist? As I mentioned in the Introduction, she certainly was aware of Szarkowski's definition of her (and Winogrand and Friedlander) as a documentary photographer, but nothing essential in her work changed after the *New Documents* exhibition.

³⁴ Alternatively, from psychoanalysis it could be explained as identification with the wrong parent.

³⁵ Due to ethical and clinical considerations, PET Scan studies were not allowed in children. However, they are now being increasingly used: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4698349/>

³⁶ Italics are mine

³⁷ The Aperture Monograph, p2

³⁸ Italics are mine

³⁹ Peter Bunnell, *Diane Arbus*. The Print Collector's Newsletter, Jan-Feb 1973m Vol 3, N° 6, P 128

⁴⁰ She used to say 'A Photograph is a secret within a secret'.

Even if that exhibition wouldn't have happened, or received a completely different title, Arbus changed radically her subjects and ideas from her fashion years *after* attending Lisette Model's classes at the New School for Social Research, in 1959.⁴¹ Although she worked on assignments, she came with her ideas to the magazine editors she worked for. Ultimately, those assignments were her own projects.

In retrospect, Arbus' work fits rather well modern definitions of documentary photography, which go beyond the 'landscape, portrait, detail' formula. Here's what Michelle Bogre, a specialist in documentaries, has to say about the topic after collecting the opinions of photographers, scholars and critics: 'Maybe by combining these ideas we might arrive at an expansive definition that begins with the idea of 'documentation', onto which we layer the idea that the documentary image is not constructed, although it may be slightly staged or directed; that it can be poetic; that it bears a degree of witness and provides some evidence; that it seeks truth and touches on reality; it involves storytelling; it is often intensely personal; it is democratic; and the photographer's intent is the substrate upon which the image is constructed'.⁴²

Diane Arbus was a photojournalist and a portrait photographer, but her corpus of work has the quality of the best documentary photography. Just like others that would not call themselves such in those years and earlier: Atget, Kertesz, Winogrand, Friedlander. Atget did call his photographs *documents*,⁴³ but his series of Old Paris was an expansion into a new subject for his business of providing images for painters and artists. His work would have remained ignored had not Berenice Abbott bought and taken his archive to the United States. André Kertesz did his personal photographs very much like Winogrand, when free from his magazine assignments. Friedlander, who had studied photography in college, was probably the most conscious, but most of his work was also magazine assignments.

As mentioned in the Introduction, I have made a selection of photographs of female impersonators and transvestites, (or transsexuals?). All of them were displayed at the MOMA Exhibition, and were made after 1960. There are earlier photographs of performers,⁴⁴ though, which indicated that Diane was particularly interested in this group of people.

The first photograph in the series, *Two Young Women, Washington Square Park, N.Y.C.* has turned into *Two friends in the Park*.⁴⁵ Is this just a mistake, someone just taking a shot at naming an image, or deliberate? In Meister's book it appears as *Two Young Women* after the title used in the exhibition.

⁴¹ Lisette model was accused of some of the same things Arbus was later on. Here's a comment on this particular subject made by Berenice Abbott in the Model Aperture Monograph's prologue: 'Realistic images can be deceptive and mean different things for different people. What is occasionally referred to as Model's "fat woman" is a misreading. What she means to say is "This person is vital and strong be she or he thin or fat'. Berenice Abbot, *Lisette Model*, in *Lisette Model*, an Aperture Monograph, New York, Aperture 2007 pp 8-9

⁴² Michelle Bogre, *Documentary Photography Reconsidered*, London, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019

⁴³ "*Documents pour artistes*"

⁴⁴ There is a 1958 photograph with the same title, *Two Female Impersonators, Backstage*, as a 1961 one that appears in the exhibition (p.65 of the catalogue).

⁴⁵ As in this Article in Mashable: <https://mashable.com/feature/diane-arbus-in-the-park> featuring the Exhibition Diane Arbus in the Park, which took place at the Lévy Gorvy Gallery in NYC in 2017.

The photograph depicts two women who don't identify themselves as lesbians, but clearly as men, in plain masculine shirts and slacks, including the white t-shirt American men wear as a uniform under their shirts.

It is difficult to tell -they could be very young men- but the lack of any facial hair, the delicacy of the hand and something in the profile of the faces betray them. That is their "flaw" although the gap between intention and effect may not be as obvious as in other cases. We know they are women because they are labeled as such, but they present as men and want to be seen as such. And only an attentive and suspicious look would give them away, like the very thin bracelet on the left hand of the taller woman, and some softness in the configuration of their faces. This is a consensual shot: they are complicit with the photographer, a conversation has taken place. We, on the other hand, know that Diane "got to know" their subjects at Washington Square⁴⁶ before photographing them. The posture is casual, as if Diane asked "may I take a pic of you two?": they smile, the taller one with her right arm on her friend's shoulder, holding a cigarette.

According to Lubow, 'Although Arbus' portraits in Washington Square in some ways resemble Evans' subway pictures, the personal exchange that took place between photographer and subject before the shutter clicked recalls the work of August Sander'.

⁴⁷Diane always -or almost always- talked her way into a photograph.

This photograph was titled *Two Young Women* when Szarkowski displayed it in the *New Documents* exhibition in 1967. It must have changed title at one point in time, maybe when it became the property of the Arbus Estate?⁴⁸ The Metropolitan Museum also titles it as the article mentioned above, so it is no error. There is, hence, an open question for which I lack an answer: was the title changed by accident, as with *Transvestite NYC 1966*? Or was it because the original might be more palatable to the feminist movement of the 1970s, and hence it was re-interpreted as a victim of the cultural war?⁴⁹ After all, calling two trans men "women" would fit better with Raymond's argument -and the dominant ideology of the day- that trans-men were really women. We don't know. Again, semiotics.

Two female impersonators, New York, 1961, is particularly interesting. It shows two transformation artists -two "female impersonators" as they were called then- who work in a show or vaudeville at a club or a theater. The clubs and balls in the Village and Harlem were

⁴⁶ For quite a while, Diane photographed people at Washington Square Park. They were from very different walks of life, living in separate "tribes" with their own territories. Diane was a familiar figure, who talked, made friendships and eventually took a photograph.

⁴⁷ Arthur Lubow, *Diane Arbus: Portrait of a Photographer*, p. 336

⁴⁸ This might well be the case, as *Transvestite NYC 1966* appears in *Revelations* as *Transvestite showing cleavage*. This discrepancy proves that some titles were changed. If the Estate (that is, Doon Arbus) changed the titles vs. how they had been displayed at the Exhibition, it might have been accidental. But she should have been aware that these images had been shown with a different title at MOMA. This image does not appear in *Revelations* nor in the Aperture Monograph (both earlier to the Meister Exhibition Catalogue which was published in 2017), so we don't have a way to check.

⁴⁹ Raymond, in *The Transsexual Empire*, clearly states that as MTF transsexuals are really men, Female-to-Male transsexuals are really women. The mere depiction of FTM transsexuals might have been politically charged with radical feminists, and defining them as women -as Szarkowski, or Arbus herself, did- the correct thing at the time, the Estate changing that title to avoid confrontation.

popular as part of “the forbidden”. They were clearly countercultural, as the Village has always been, and political. Theirs was a particular portion of the underworld. The two men depicted were performers, at some point along their transformations. They might be preparing for the next show, or just resting. The one at the left side of the viewer shows a dreamy, soft gaze. The other has a hand on the former’s arm and has what seems an expression of closeness and affection towards the other. Both are smiling, maybe at a joke, but neither is looking at the photographer: they seem to be in a private world, and their expression, maybe because of the painted eyebrows contrasting with their closely cropped hair, gives the situation an unreal air. It is not burlesque although they are burlesque performers. The whole scene is ambiguous: we don’t know if they are heterosexual males, transsexual females or something slightly different, gay men who like to dress in drag. Cross-dressing is even today an area where different identities converge. There is a hint that they may be transsexual females on the cleavage half hidden by the raised arms of the -girl? - on the left. The other’s left breast can also be an incipient adolescent development -produced by hormones-. A big risk in the early 60s, more than being openly gay.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, they live their particular private bliss. And Diane was admitted into their world, to the extent that she became a familiar figure they didn’t even look at. It is an absolutely intimate scene. Here’s a fragment of the Tate’s summary about this particular photograph:

Two female impersonators backstage N.Y.C. 1961 touches on the contrast between public and private spaces, as well as the tenuous boundaries between theatrical characters and personal expression. Art historian Thomas Southall⁵¹ has remarked that this image demonstrates Arbus’s “dogged persistence [in] eventually [obtaining] permission to spend time in the dressing room, taking portraits of the performers while they applied their makeup and got into costume for the show” (Southall 2004, p.153). Arbus’s presence in this backstage space implies a level of trust on behalf of the drag queens, as they allowed her not only to witness but also to photograph them in various states of undress as they composed their theatrical personae.⁵²

It is definitely a photograph that requires intimacy and mutual acceptance.

There is a second image, taken also in 1961 -probably part of the same Project-, *Two Female Impersonators, Backstage*⁵³ in which we see two performers -not the same ones- at a club or theater dressing room. Already in drag, a tall robust one with a skimpy dressing gown is standing on heels. The second one, at the left of the photograph, looks away from the camera with a hieratic expression between curious and defiant. He is wearing what looks like semi-transparent briefs and covers his parts with one hand. There is no current of

⁵⁰ Harry Benjamin published *The Transsexual Phenomenon* in 1966. Hormone therapy must have been self-administered, and clearly besides the law.

⁵¹ Thomas Southall, *Diane Arbus Magazine Work*, New York, Aperture 1984. The Tate summary, written by Tessa Rosenstein, from University of Edinburgh, mentions a later edition, from 2004.

⁵² <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/arbustwofemaleimpersonatorsbackstage-n-y-c-1961-ar00521>

⁵³ *The Full circle*, the first work she did for Harper’s Bazaar, published in November 1961, contains none of these performers’ photographs.

sympathy here, no complicity with the photographer. There also seems to be no enjoyment. Neither is young, they might be in their forties. The one standing holds a pair of glasses in her/his hand. It is a troubling image, as if Diane (we) had invaded their backstage intimacy and were not welcome. It is one of those professional photographs made during a documentary where rapport with the subject has not been established. The photograph then becomes a transaction, neither wanted nor stolen, and that is the impression here. Maybe they are a couple, for sure they have a sort of intimacy, but what we see is the confrontation with the photographer, who in a way represents the outside world, and in a way echoes the stigma of their presumed condition and their work.⁵⁴

The rest of the photographs correspond to a series on “Transvestites”⁵⁵, part of a project supported by the Guggenheim Foundation in 1966:⁵⁶

That year, she followed home several transvestites and photographed them making up their faces or sitting half undressed in women’s clothing. Washington Square Park was a good place for her to meet them. Unlike her subjects at the Jewel Box and the 82 club, these transvestites were not entertainers⁵⁷.

The role that her visits to Washington Square and how she gained friendship, and eventually intimacy and access with her subjects, can’t be stressed enough.

Of these photographs, several made it to the 1967 exhibition: *Transvestite at Home N.Y.C. 1966*,⁵⁸ *Transvestite N.Y.C. 1966*, *Young Man in Curlers, West 20th Street N.Y.C. 1966*, and *Transvestite with Torn Stockings, N.Y.C. 1966*. The common characteristic of these photographs is intimacy. Diane was able to get into the intimate part of their lives. At first sight, *Young Man in Curlers* feels extravagant and somewhat defiant; *Transvestite at Home* transmits an idea of sadness and abandon. The woman’s blond wig does not fit well and a dark hairline is visible. She is reclined on the couch, with an expression of despair. *Transvestite with Torn Stockings* transmits the same sensation, although the subject feels more vulnerable and with a different kind of sadness, maybe because the posture does not suggest the same carelessness, despite the torn stocking. The couch is the same, she is the same person on a different attire. Here, with this particular woman,⁵⁹ Arbus displays not only the flaw, but the price these people have to pay for their defiance to society’s rule.

⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that the two images get confused. Although the latter, the photograph of page 65 in the exhibition catalogue is the one with the title “backstage”, the other one is assigned the same title, and is the one that appears on most of the reviews. In a sense, the kinder photograph, the one where love and complicity is evident, has taken the place of the other, submerging the older performers into anonymity, despite both being displayed at the same exhibition.

⁵⁵ Transvestites is the term used in all four images at the exhibition.

⁵⁶ This was her second Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, granted on March 1966, although she didn’t start work in earnest until late summer.

⁵⁷ Lubow, p. 360. This girl, called Vicky, set up a long time friendship with Diane.

⁵⁸ This is called in other places *Transvestite in a couch*.

⁵⁹ The general definition might be transvestites, but we are into real transsexual women, albeit non-transitioned -something that was generally not possible at the time without very ample means-. Lubow, p. 359

Finally, *Transvestite N.Y.C. 1966* is the least reproduced -the least popular- image of the four, but potentially the most interesting. The subject presents dressed very conventionally, hair done and regular female features, looking at the camera with neither fear, nor sadness, nor defiance: just regular, attentive posing. Her arms are crossed over her bosom, and the posture feels natural. No wonder it does not elicit attention: it is neither scandalous nor salacious. In this image, we see Arbus portraying the *woman*, not the *transvestite*. There is nothing fake in it, nothing out of place. She could be an anonymous Italian mom in Brooklyn or Queens, and we only know her condition because of the title.

This⁶⁰ -although called “transvestite”-⁶¹ is a transsexual woman. We don’t know anything about their lives. Each photograph is just a snapshot of intimacy. But we are clearly in a different realm from that of the previous female impersonator images.

‘Backstage at the drag shows, Arbus had been illuminating the artifices of femininity. At home with cross-dressers, she was charting the construction of identity’⁶².

Conclusion

When Diane Arbus, [Lisette] Model’s former student at the New School for Social Research, portraits cross-dressers, their poses seem similarly ridiculous, if not downright embarrassing. She calls her subjects “freaks”⁶³, and even though we can sense a certain respect for them in her notes, her photographs do not give much of that respect away. They frame with enormous precision what seems to be the enormously erratic behavior of individuals crossing gender lines.⁶⁴ Christopher Ribbat

Diane was not a feminist activist. She was probably too focused on problems she considered more important. We must remember that hippieism, the Vietnam war, civil rights for black people, and a rebellion against society were raging then. She probably felt that radical feminists were a relatively minor blip in comparison to all that was occurring in the US

⁶⁰ It is the same (Lubow p 360), named Vicky, but it is not necessarily obvious as the scenes are quite different in tone. It feels as if she was photographing three separate subjects.

⁶¹ Distinction between cross-dressers and transgender or transsexual were not clear in those years.

‘Transvestite’ was a term that engulfed all.

⁶² Lubow, p 359; and also this Arbus quote from *Revelations* : ‘These are... people who appear like metaphors somewhere further out than we do, beckoned, not driven, invented by belief, *each the author and hero of a real dream* [italics are mine] by which our own courage and cunning are tested and tried; so that we may wonder all over again what is veritable and inevitable and possible and what it is to become whoever we may be’. In Sandra Phillips essay *The Question of Belief*, *Revelations* p 50.

⁶³ The use of the word “freaks” by Arbus has been discussed to exhaustion and is a scarlet letter that some critics mark on her body as proof that she wasn’t sympathetic to them. I consider this subject secondary to this essay, although her real attitude is much better reflected in note 60, above. The word itself meant originally [Merriam-Webster] ‘a whimsical quality or disposition’ and a more modern definition, on the same source ‘a person or animal having a physical oddity and appearing in a circus sideshow’, which is exactly descriptive. Another proof of later changes of meaning and a retrospective use of that meaning.

⁶⁴ Christopher Ribbat, *Queer and Straight Photography*, *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, Vol 46 N°1, *Queering America*, 2001, p. 36

society of the time. Her experience photographing Germaine Greer -an argument often used to qualify her as anti-feminist- was not particularly positive, but there she was just following a practice.⁶⁵

But should we follow Christopher Ribbat's opinions about Diane showing transvestites or transsexuals at their worst?

I don't think so. Neither of these images -the ones of female impersonators in 1961, or those of transvestites in 1966- is derogatory.⁶⁶ They are *insightful*. Diane gained her right to be part of their intimacy, but she showed them as they were: she was just documenting, and the photographs, excepting the one on page 65 of the New Documents catalogue seem completely consensual.

It is true that sometimes sessions with Diane were like torture and lasted for hours until she had spent the last roll of film; but after reading the evidence on this topic, I doubt that she was doing anything different than seeking the truth, rather than -as some critics and biographers say- reflecting her own childhood trauma and mental disease.⁶⁷

Diane Arbus was searching for the flaw, and that was the object and the motor of her photography. When she photographed a subject for a magazine or a series, she was pursuing truth. And yes, she could be insistent to exhaustion and sometimes her subjects or her subjects' relatives didn't like the result. But she was not guilty of being derogatory.

Her body of work has clear documentary value and insight. Although I limited myself to just a part of the series on female impersonators and transvestites -those that reached Szarkowski's exhibition- it is a document in itself.

Feminism as we know it today, the Queer movement and Semiotics became mature time after Arbus' death. It can be argued that it didn't start until 1990 when Butler published *Bodies that Matter*. But Diane's work, by exposing naturally and sympathetically what was

⁶⁵ "I did as I was told. Clutching the camera she climbed on to the bed and straddled me, moving up until she was kneeling with a knee on both sides of my chest. She held the Rolleiflex at waist height with the lens right in my face. She bent her head to look through the viewfinder on top of the camera, and waited. In her viewfinder I must have looked like a guppy or like one of the unfortunate babies into whose faces Arbus used to poke her lens so that their snotty tear-stained features filled her picture frame (eg, *A Child Crying*, NJ, 1967). I knew that at that distance anybody's face would have more pores than features. I was wearing no make-up and hadn't even had time to wash my face or comb my hair. Pinned on the bed by her small body with the big camera in my face, I felt my claustrophobia kick in; my heart-rate accelerated and I began to wheeze. I understood that as soon as I exhibited any signs of distress, she would have her picture. She would have got behind the public persona of Life cover-girl Germaine Greer, the "sexy feminist that men like". Germaine Greer on *The Guardian*. Wrestling with Diane Arbus, October 8th 2005.

⁶⁶ It has to be understood that transgender people, then and now, suffer significant stigma and stress throughout their lives. The incidence of mental illness, depression and suicide, not only in Transgender but in LGBT population in general is higher than amongst non-LGBT, but this is due to stress and suffering particularly during childhood.

⁶⁷ William Schultz, in *Diane Arbus: an Emergency in Slow Motion*, defends precisely that.

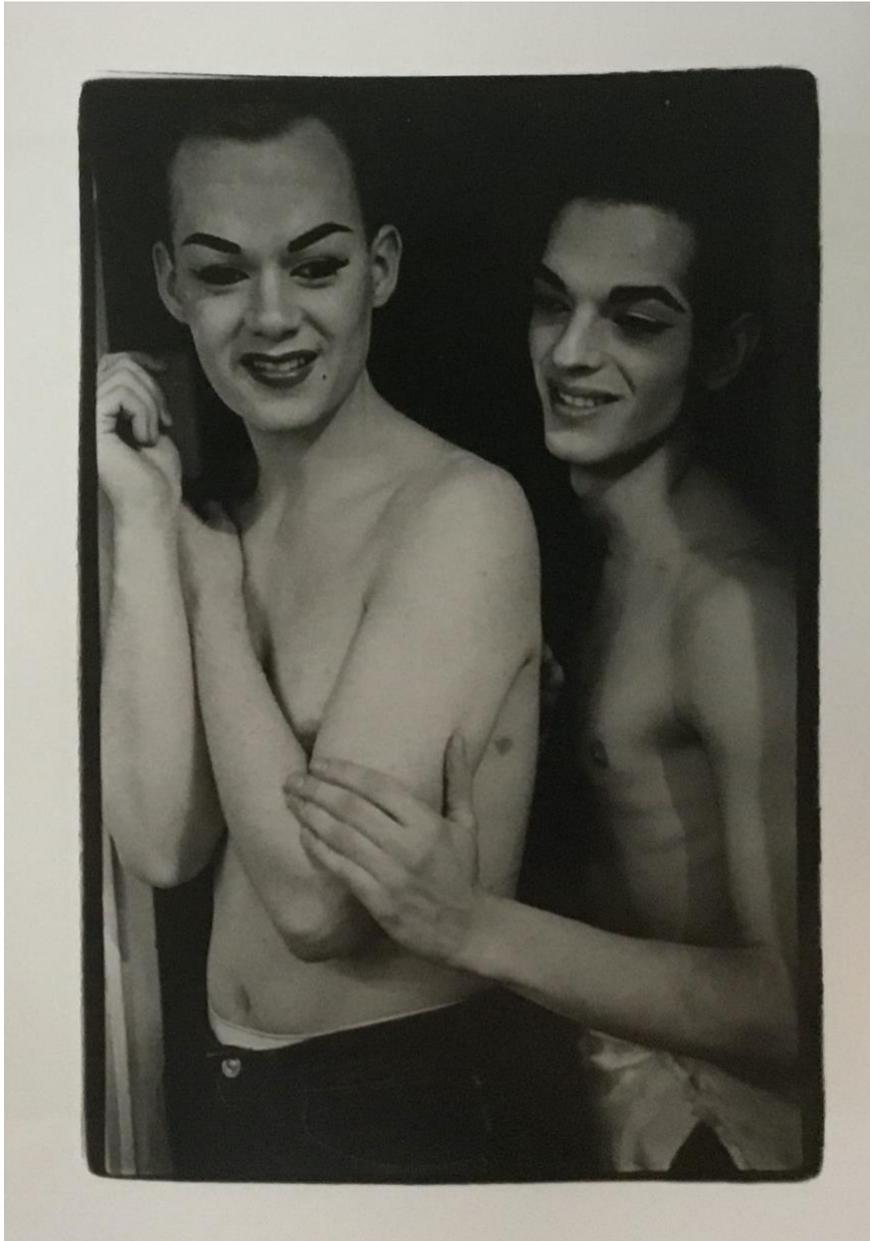
previously forbidden and derided, was fundamental in the later flourishing of queer photography.

Photographs

All images are cited under the original titles displayed in *New Documents* and referred to their respective pages in the exhibition catalogue.



Two Young Women, Washington Square Park, N.Y.C. 1965 p 34



Two Female Impersonators, Brooklyn, New York 1961 p 36



Transvestite at Home, N.Y.C, 1966 p.52



Transvestite, N.Y.C. 1966 p.58



Young Man in Curlers, West 20th Street, N.Y.C. 1966 p.60



Transvestite with Torn Stocking, N.Y.C. 1966 p.61



Two Female Impersonators Backstage, N.Y.C. 1061 p. 65

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