

# AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY ONCE AGAIN

September  
2003

## Diane Arbus Reconsidered

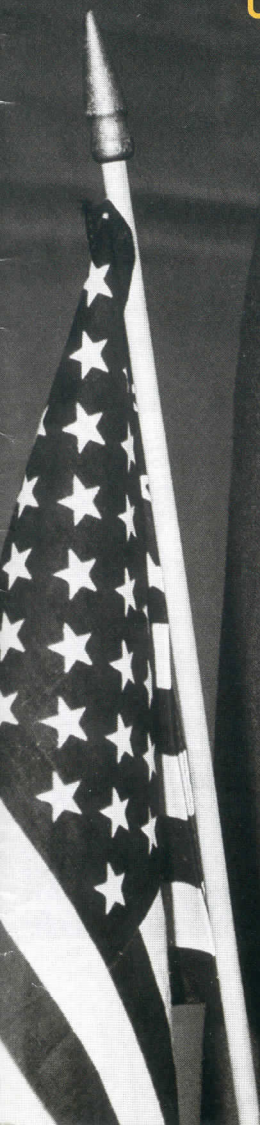
A new look  
at her  
daring, influential  
work

Going  
Digital

Film or Filmless

Special Section

Student  
Portfolios





"A child crying, N.J., 1967."



# ARBUS UP CLOSE

diane Arbus was way ahead of her time. With a blunt force softened by compassion, her photographs anticipated the visual directness of photography's current vocabulary. In this issue, on the occasion of the most important exhibition and book of Arbus's work ever produced, we're pleased to give you a revealing look at this complicated woman and her daring photographs.

Arbus had a powerful influence on the generation of photographers that followed her, and was herself a student and friend of the influential photography teacher Lisette Model, who went on to teach Nan Goldin. So it's only fitting that in this first issue of the school year we devote extra pages to student work. In putting together this special section, we had the skilled assistance of two summer interns, Dan Zilua of New York's Colgate University and Annie Powers of New York's Skidmore College. Take a look at our ten-page Student Portfolios section for samples of their work!

*Russell Hart*

Russell Hart, EDITOR

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**M P A**

**Submissions:** We invite students to submit work for consideration for our Student Portfolios section. Send material to Student Portfolios, *American Photo On Campus*, 1633 Broadway, New York, NY 10019. If you want submitted work returned, supply a SASE. Digital-image files should be accompanied by reference printouts. By submitting your work, you represent that it is your own and publishing it will not violate the rights of any third party. You further agree that we may publish such work and reproduce and distribute it together with this publication at any time in any current or future media, in special editions, on Websites, and in promotions. For more information, please call (212) 767-6273 or fax (212) 333-2439. Contents © 2003 Hachette Filipacchi Media U.S., Inc. (HFM U.S.).

**ABC**





MASTER

This page: "Boy with straw hat waiting to march in a pro-war parade, N.Y.C., 1967." Opposite: "The human pincushion, Ronald C. Harrison, N.J., 1962."

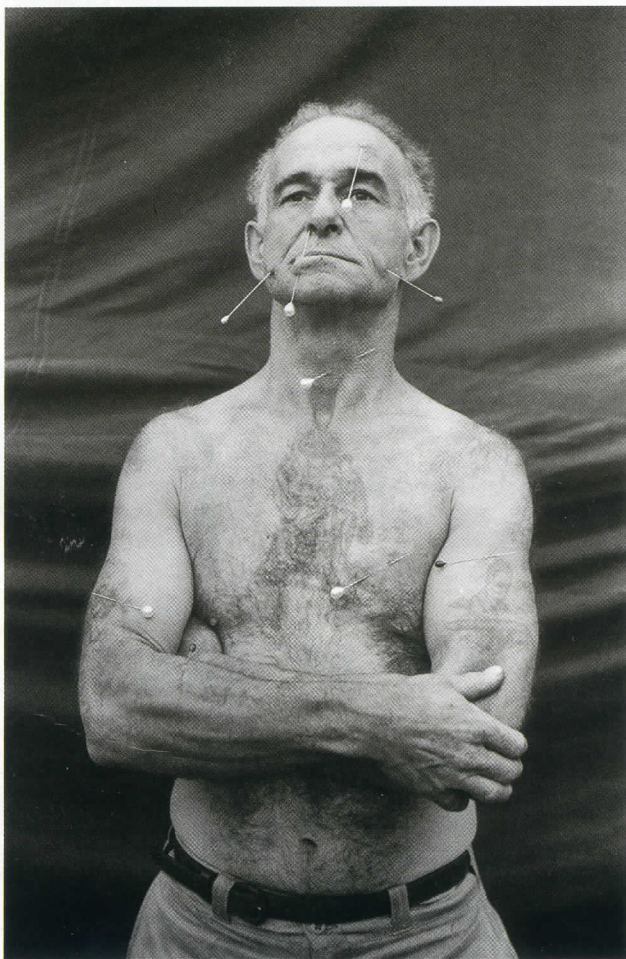


**More than 30 years after her suicide**, a major new exhibition and companion book show just how exquisitely this photographer understood American culture, putting to rest the old controversy: Did Arbus exploit her subjects? Or was she a compassionate observer of people on society's margins? **By Russell Hart**

**A**rt School in the mid-1970s was fertile ground for photographic foment. Students were rejecting many of the medium's acknowledged masters (a term that implied gender) and turning to other, more daring photographers for inspiration. One of those was Diane Arbus. It was a measure of her influence that Nan Goldin, then a student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, coined a facetious adjective for the unsparing portraiture of American subcultures that was then all the rage in photography: Arbusian, with a long "u." Goldin, who would go on to become an art-world star with her own brand of unsparing photography, would laugh whenever she used the term. It sounded to her classmates as if she were describing something from another planet. But in fact, this strange new genre had been influenced almost entirely by the late Diane Arbus.

Looking back from a modern viewpoint, it's hard to imagine how consequential Arbus's work was to emerging photographers of the time—and how controversial her portrait of America was. Shortly after Arbus committed suicide in 1971, two viewers could look at her powerful images of people on the country's social margins and form two very different opinions. One might argue that Arbus's portraits of nudists, drag queens, bodybuilders, strippers, dwarfs, and giants (not to mention feminists and Young Republicans) were sensational, making their subjects look like freaks. The other could assert that her pictures were entirely empathetic, reaching out to these people and presenting them with an honesty that only a squeamish, buttoned-down culture could fault.

In the intervening decades of photographic art and American culture, Joel-Peter Witkin has given new meaning to freakishness, and Nielsen families who left it to Beaver now take pleasure in the human misfortunes of reality



© 1962 ESTATE OF DIANE ARBUS, LLC

# DIANE ARBUS





"A family on  
their lawn one  
Sunday in  
Westchester,  
N.Y., 1968."





"A young Brooklyn family going on a Sunday outing, N.Y.C., 1966."

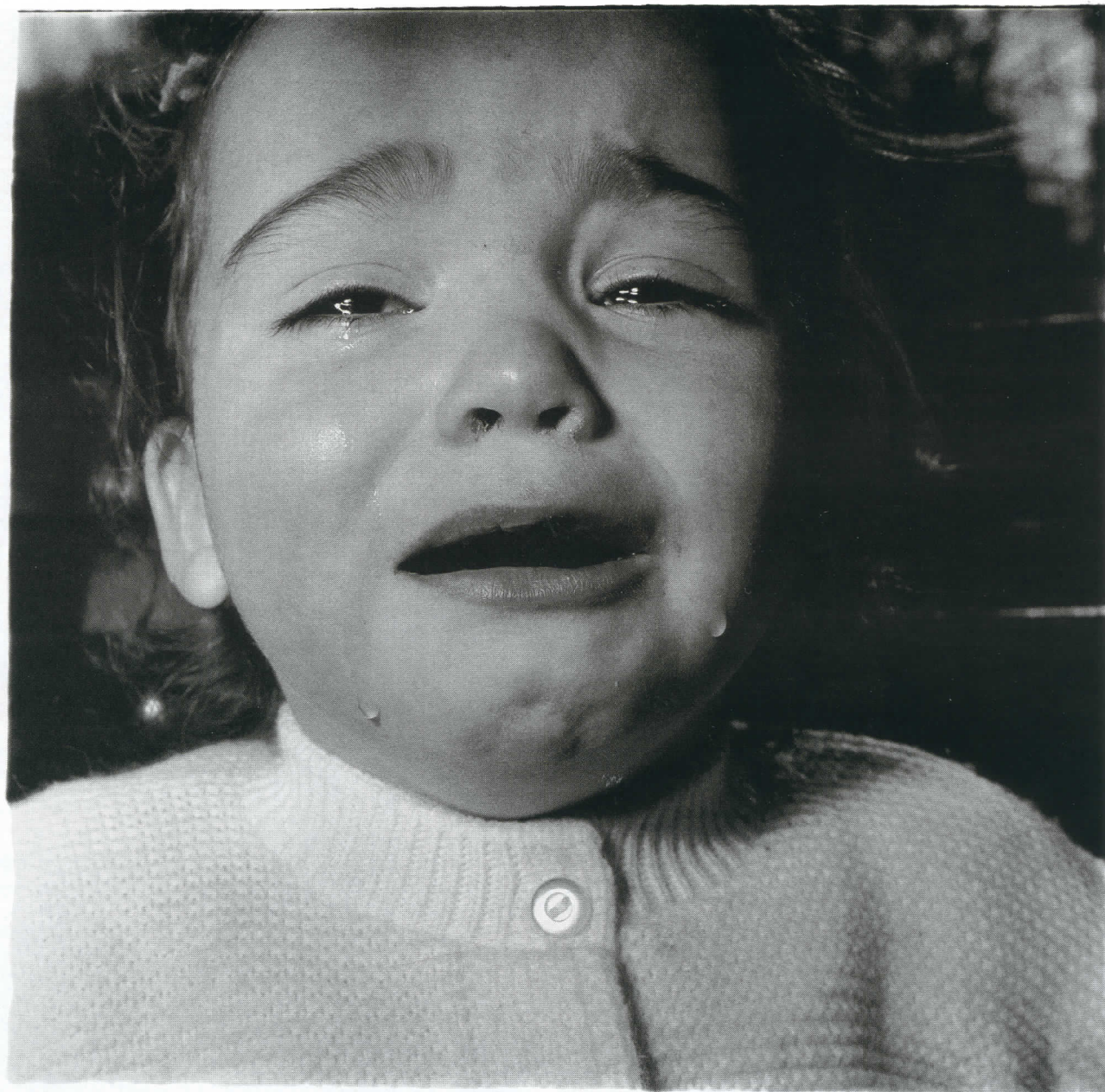




"A Jewish giant  
at home with his  
parents in the  
Bronx, N.Y., 1970."

M A S T E R





© 1972 ESTATE OF DIANE ARBUS, LLC

"A child crying, N.J., 1967."

Time has judged the work of Diane Arbus to be **deeply sincere**.

TV. Time has judged the work of Diane Arbus to be deeply sincere, and the artistic ideas she left behind have shaped the vision of a generation of documentary and fine-art photographers—including Goldin, whose pictures of her own sexual subculture have, in turn, influenced today's young photographers. "[Arbus] was bothered by people who thought she was a photographer of freaks," says Sandra Phillips, senior curator of photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "It's taken us a while to get over that."

The old questions over Arbus's work may rise again on October 25, when "Diane Arbus: Revelations" opens at SFMOMA. Organized by Phillips and guest curator Elisabeth Sussman

with the full participation of Doon Arbus, the artist's daughter, the show is the first exploration of Arbus's work at a major venue since a posthumous 1972 retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art. After its February 8, 2004, conclusion, the exhibition will tour for years, moving on to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (February 29 through May 30, 2004), the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (June 27 through August 29), New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (February through May, 2005), and then to Europe.

Drawn from collections around the world, the exhibition's 200 prints feature many images that have never been shown publicly. Along with the relatively few familiar classics that





This page: "Albino sword swallower at a carnival, MD., 1970."  
Opposite: One of Arbus's notebooks.



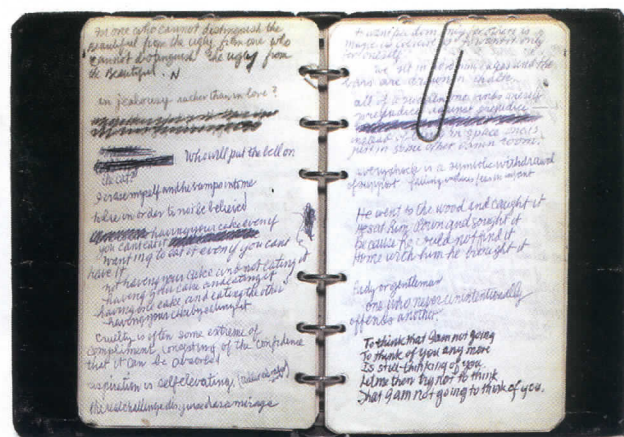
**"Diane Arbus was bothered** by people who thought she was a photographer of freaks," says SFMOMA photography curator Sandra Phillips. "She had an intense interest in the way her subjects saw themselves."

cinched the Arbus legend are early photographs taken in darkened New York movie theaters and an extensive group of portraits made at a home for the retarded, among the last Arbus took. The show includes revealing displays of the photographer's contact sheets; letters; books from her own library; and personal notebooks filled with quotations from literature and her intellectual friends, ideas and plans for projects, and accounts of her conversations with subjects. It even displays some of her cameras, which started with a 35mm Nikon SLR, moved to medium-format Rollei and Mamiya twin-lens reflexes, and finally to late experiments with a 6x7cm Pentax. SFMOMA boasts that it is the most complete presentation on Arbus ever assembled. It is certainly the most *intimate* look at Diane Arbus that photographers and others have ever been offered.

The exhibition is accompanied by an extraordinary Random House monograph, also titled *Diane Arbus: Revelations*, that is richly packed with even more of this hitherto carefully guarded material. Along with Phillips's enlightening essay, the book offers a full chronology of the photographer's life—biography interspersed with Arbus's abundant and eloquent writings—prepared by Sussman and Doon Arbus. If you're a photographer, it's a page-turner. There is also a fascinating remembrance by Neil Selkirk, whom Arbus often consulted for technical advice in 1970 and 1971, when he was assisting fashion photographer Hiro (who was then sharing a studio with Avedon). Hired to print Arbus's negatives for her 1972 MOMA show, Selkirk describes the process of working backwards to reconstruct the photographer's eccentric darkroom practices as he tried to match her existing prints. He was able to determine, among other things, that Arbus never dodged or burned-in her prints.

**W**hat may have led, in part, to the perception that Arbus took advantage of willing, trusting subjects was the unflinching directness of her technique. Normal or not, the people in her pictures usually face the camera and are centered in the frame, often filling it. Though some are photographed by existing light, many—even outdoor subjects—are lit frontally with a portable flash, a tool Arbus began using in earnest around 1965. (Anyone who knows Arbus's work will recall the tight shot of a crying toddler being thrust at the camera by his mother, a flash-frozen string of drool hanging from his mouth.) All are rendered with an eye-popping sharpness made possible by the big, square negatives of Arbus's 2¼ twin-lens reflex camera, which she favored over 35mm (already the stock in trade of documentary photographers) for the last ten years of her life.

The directness of Arbus's approach had a precedent of sorts



in photographer August Sander's ambitious 1920s catalog of Germans of all walks of life, from peasants to politicians. Sander was one of Arbus's inspirations, and she characterized her own work as "contemporary anthropology." But Arbus's photographs feel less methodical, her subjects not just a type but both a type and an individual. "What distinguishes Arbus's work from that of other contemporaries," writes Phillips, "was her intense interest in the way her subjects saw themselves." Arbus put it this way: "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 and what you can't help people knowing about you. And that has to do with what I've called the gap between intention and effect."

Perhaps only Richard Avedon (another Arbus influence) was cultivating a similar directness in his editorial photography, but his portraits were softened and simplified by the contrivances of the studio. Arbus's much less urbane subjects were presented in their natural habitats, whether bedrooms, strip clubs, art galleries, nudist colonies, dance halls, or Central Park.

Arbus didn't only photograph people beyond the pale of convention, of course: She also made portraits of suburban families, high-society ladies, urban lovers, and beautiful children. And just as her pictures of social outcasts captured their subjects' normalcy and dignity, in these photographs Arbus found the frayed seams of the cloak worn by righteous society. Her little boy clutching a toy grenade in Central Park, his face in a grimace and his body stiff with an overacted tension, is scary enough to have grown up into today's disgruntled employee shooting fellow workers with an assault weapon. Somehow, Diane Arbus knew what was coming. ■