

Bringing out the Dead: Inside the Arbus Archive

Rachel Adams

Diane Arbus: Family Albums. Organized by the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum and the Spencer Museum of Art, the University of Kansas, September 2003–December 2005, traveling. Exhibition Curators: Anthony W. Lee and John Pultz.

Diane Arbus: Family Albums. Edited by Anthony W. Lee and John Pultz. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. 168 pages. \$33.00 (paper).

Diane Arbus Revelations. October 2003–October 2006, traveling. Exhibition Curators: Sandra S. Philips and Elisabeth Sussman.

Diane Arbus Revelations. Edited by Doon Arbus and Elisabeth Sussman. New York: Random House, 2003. 352 pages. \$100.00 (cloth).

Archives attract us with the possibility that they might contain the forgotten masterpiece or revealing documents overlooked by a previous generation. Until very recently, the career of Diane Arbus has been inoculated against this kind of speculation by an estate that has micromanaged access to and interpretation of her work. Outside of museum collections, Arbus became known through three monographs, *Diane Arbus*, *Diane Arbus: Magazine Work*, and *Untitled*, sleek, restrained volumes with minimal commentary and large expanses of white space.¹ In spite of the limited canon made available by these books, Arbus has become one of the most well known of all modern photographers. Although they may not shock viewers as they did during her first museum show in 1971, her photographs of identical twins, midgets, transvestites, and giants still have the capacity to inspire an unforgettable mixture of discomfort and admiration. Add to this the mystique surrounding Arbus's short life and death by suicide, which framed her as a tragic figure doomed by the intensity of her artistic vision. In fall 2003 Arbus returned to the public eye with the opening of two exhibits, *Diane Arbus: Family Albums*, curated by Anthony W. Lee and John Pultz, and *Diane Arbus Revelations*, curated by Sandra S.

Philips and Elisabeth Sussman. Together, they present Arbus's life and work as compelling terrain for scholars of American studies. Not only do Arbus's photographs make visible the underworlds and subcultures that have been central to revisionist histories of the 1950s and 1960s, but her legacy, which has been the subject of ongoing debate, should be of interest to critics concerned with the fate of the arts in contemporary American culture.

Arbus's career began in the 1950s as one half of a husband-and-wife team of fashion photographers. When she left the partnership to focus on her own career, she repudiated the aesthetic and social values of the fashion industry. As one of the only women street photographers of her time, she documented the lives of nudists, carnies, strippers, and local eccentrics, and shot portraits of some of the era's most famous personalities. From well-known events and people to those forgotten on the margins of society, her subjects testify to the rapid transformations taking place in midcentury America. Even to those unfamiliar with Arbus's name, her distinctive style is recognizable: the snapshot aesthetic; the large, square format; and the signature uneven black border would have a profound influence on the formal features of modern photography. And many who are unfamiliar with the work are aware of the legend of Diane Arbus. Like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, other famous suicidal women artists of her generation, Arbus rose to posthumous celebrity based as much on the mythology surrounding her life as on the merits of her photography. The notorious silence of those managing her estate only compounded the fascination of fans and critics, who tended either to focus explicitly on formal analysis of Arbus's published work or to posit biographical connections between the photographs and the artist's own psychological turmoil.

The long silence was finally broken by *Family Albums and Revelations*, the first major exhibits of Arbus's photography since a 1972 retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Each is accompanied by a book of photographs containing new essays about her life and work. Almost diametrically opposed in scope and intention, these important shows promise to feed the hunger of Arbus's longtime admirers and attract new audiences. But they also raise unresolved questions about what it means to expand the archive of available images and to flesh out the life of a cultural icon. Revisiting the career and work of Diane Arbus in the context of these exhibits provides an opportunity to further consider the role of her photography in American cultural history, the consequences of her transformation into a celebrity, and the struggle between estates and critics to determine an artist's legacy.

Family Albums opened at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in September 2003 and will tour the United States until December 2005. Its

inspiration came from Mount Holyoke alumna Gay Humphrey Matthaei, who approached the college art museum with a set of portraits and contact sheets made by Diane Arbus when she was commissioned to photograph the Matthaei family over a two-day period in late 1969. These previously unknown portraits became the basis for *Family Albums*, where they were shown in conjunction with a selection of Arbus's better known images and related contact sheets, many of which have never before been available for public viewing. At New York University's Grey Gallery, where I saw it, the exhibit was easy to navigate, thanks to strong curatorial hands and a manageable collection of fifty photographs and fifty-seven contact sheets (fig. 1). The show attracted record crowds during its stay in New York City, where it was accompanied by a series of public programs addressing the technical aspects of Arbus's work, her social and historical milieu, and the history of photography. These events and essays in the accompanying catalog volume enhance the photographs' meaning by situating them in an interpretive framework that includes thick contextual description as well as formal analysis.

The theme of *Family Albums* is Arbus's own. In a 1967 letter to a friend, she described an idea for a book project that would serve as a kind of Noah's Ark, an inclusive record of human creatures preserved against some impending disaster. Pultz and Lee have taken Arbus's vision as an organizing principle, treating *family* in both its literal and metaphoric significance. As Pultz explains, "Judging from the pictures that Arbus made, her 'Family Album' would take family photographs and albums from the personal, nearly private realm into one that is public and aesthetic. Whereas most family pictures, whether made as snapshots or in commercial studios, claim an audience of only the sitters themselves plus family and friends, Arbus's pictures would assert their right to a broader audience, one with no direct knowledge of the persons depicted."² In keeping with this theme, the curators organized the photographs into familial categories. Often these designations press ironically at the boundaries of convention so that Mae West, stripper Blaze Starr, and wartime radio personality Tokyo Rose are gathered together as "mothers," and "fathers" include the southern physician Donald Gatch (posing proprietarily with the black sharecropper he claimed to have revived from the brink of death) and the midget Andrew Ratoucheff.

Although the concept of *Family Albums* comes from Arbus, the exhibit is more an invention of curators Pultz and Lee than the realization of the photographer's own unfinished business. Her notebooks brim with ideas for imagined projects that never went further than jottings on a page. There is little evidence of what Arbus would have included in her own *Family Album*,



Figure 1.
Diane Arbus: *Family Albums*,
January 13–March 27, 2004, Grey
Art Gallery/NYU, installation
view. Photograph by James Prince.

or how serious she was about the project. Curators and reviewers have made much of her remark that “all families are creepy in a way,” which aptly describes the uncanny mixture of intimacy and estrangement that characterizes many of these images. Confronted with Arbus’s unruly canon, Pultz and Lee made an admirable effort to give it a shape that would complement at least one version of the artist’s understanding of her own work. And while at times the notion of “family albums” is strained, the curators’ desire to lend the exhibit an interpretive structure is a welcome alternative to the unrevealing minimalism of the Arbus monographs. The book *Diane Arbus: Family Albums* is a handsome and affordable anchor to the exhibit, with a strong theme and excellent critical essays by Pultz and Lee that effectively establish the significance of Arbus’s photographs to American cultural history. At a moment when many clung to idealized representations of the nuclear family, Arbus showed its fragility with images of single mothers, rebellious children, sex workers, feminists, and biracial couples. *Family Albums* sets the loosely defined concept of “family” in the context of a nation deeply divided by disagreements about civil rights, war, gender equity, and separation of church and state.

Pultz’s essay, “Searching for Diane Arbus’s ‘Family Album’ in her *Box of Ten Photographs*, *Monograph*, and *Esquire Work*,” speculates about the form and

content of Arbus's imagined Family Album on the basis of several other projects. Of particular interest is Pultz's illuminating commentary on Arbus's proof sheets. For the uninitiated viewer, Pultz explains how proof sheets can provide insights about the artist's process and intentions. One telling example is a portrait of Ricky Nelson and his family, which Arbus shot for an article about the cast of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* five years after the show's finale. Ricky was the troubled Nelson son who came of age as part of the perfect TV household, then grew into a rebellious teenager who denounced the Vietnam War and supported the legalization of marijuana. Photographed by Arbus at age thirty-one, Ricky seems to have outgrown his difficult adolescence, looking every bit the successful young patriarch. The family forms a broad triangle with Ricky at the apex, his wife, Tracy, propped smilingly beneath him, and their three children spreading out from this solid parental unit. However, in the contact sheets Pultz finds evidence of Arbus's struggle to construct this idealized image out of an unruly group. The Nelsons did not fall naturally into place, but had to be posed there at considerable effort. Pultz interprets this sequence as evidence of Arbus's endeavor to document the pressure placed on the family by generational upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast to the timeless, archetypal emphases of Edward Steichen's Family of Man exhibit, which represented the values of an earlier era, Arbus sought ways to anchor her subjects in context, "to reread the institution of family and find there a more spacious, less constricting territory."³

While Pultz focuses on Arbus's projects, Anthony Lee's essay, "Noah's Ark, Arbus's Album," provides a broader social and historical frame for her work. Lee situates Family Albums at the intersection of multiple influences: Arbus's career change from magazine to street photographer, the status of Jewish American families in post-World War II America, photographic precursors Walker Evans and August Sander, and the Family of Man exhibit. Although the Matthaëi portraits might seem removed from the social transformations taking place around them, Lee reads them as a document of the pressures experienced by the nuclear family at the time. He notes that Arbus shot an astonishing 322 frames of the Matthaëis, meaning that she would have taken "an average of a picture every two minutes during the nine to ten hours she was on the job" (he contrasts this with the norm in portrait photography, which is five to six shots).⁴ He speculates that she was motivated by identification with this affluent New York family so similar to her own. An alternative reading would be that Arbus was deeply bored by the Matthaëis' banality, her excess a sign of a desperate search for the unexpected. The contact sheets reveal a sustained focus on the two Matthaëi daughters, whose stiffness and

intensity grant an ironic cast to the commissioned purpose of photographing a “family being together.”⁵ Lee concludes that the catastrophe intimated by Arbus’s image of Noah’s Ark is the social upheaval of the 1960s, “when forms of belonging everywhere mattered and were nowhere secured.” Thus the goal of the Family Album was “to organize her people as pictures, to reconstitute them as a family in the simulated world of the photographic archive, and to see them safely to the other side of change.”⁶ Pultz and Lee have arranged the exhibit to honor this goal. While we cannot know how closely it approximates the photographer’s vision, it is certainly provocative enough to invite new speculation about Arbus’s subjects and working methods.

While the theme of Family Albums is new, many of the photographs featured in the exhibit have been shown before and are published in the Arbus monographs. But even when they are recognizable from the pages of books, it is always a revelation to see an Arbus print blown up to exhibition size. Family Albums presents these images in a new context, where juxtapositions on the wall invite viewers to make comparisons between, say, an aging Mae West in her bedroom and an unflattering portrait of a feminist group, the miserable fat girls at a weight loss camp and a magazine series on children’s fashion, or a couple at a nudist camp and a group of Santas in training.

Alongside these more familiar images are the portraits of the Matthaei family, which have never been published or exhibited for public viewing. And it is there that the show makes its most stunning contribution. Amongst numerous prints and contact sheets is a portrait of the eldest daughter, Marcella, that rivals Arbus’s best work (fig. 2). If what we want from the expanded archive is the discovery of a new masterpiece, this would be it. The eleven-year-old Marcella is a stoic nymphet who poses stiffly in the center of the frame, her long face a study in the tumultuous depths of early adolescent feeling. Sharply focused, minimalist in composition, and framed with Arbus’s signature uneven black border, the portrait of Marcella Matthaei is destined for inclusion in the Arbus canon. At a moment when American women like the feminists in Arbus’s photograph were recognizing the origins of gendered inequality in patterns of child rearing and family organization, this image speaks volumes about the ambivalent consequences of affluence, preteen angst, and the constraints of femininity.

Unfortunately, not all of the images featured in the exhibit are included in the book. It omits a number of photos previously published in the monographs as well as some of the contact sheets. The curators explain in their

Figure 2.

Diane Arbus, *Untitled* (Marcella Matthaei), 1969, gelatin silver print. Matthaei Collection of Commissioned Family Photographs by Diane Arbus © Marcella Hague Matthaei Zeismann.



introduction that their request to print all of the contact sheets that appeared in the show was denied by the Arbus estate, which refused them permission to reproduce sheets that remain under its control. To further complicate matters, as the book was going into production, the younger Matthaei daughter, Leslie, decided she did not want her image to be published, forcing the curators to eliminate all prints and contact sheets in which she appears. This is a loss, as the photographs of the squirming, elfin Leslie are an instructive contrast to the monumental Marcella. While Leslie grimaces and contorts her body, refusing to pose politely for the camera, Marcella succumbs. As she confronts the viewer directly, her soulful gaze conveys untapped reservoirs of emotion, a chastening reminder of the limits of portraiture.⁷ The effect of this pairing should not be missed. The only way to see it, as well as the full extent of *Family Albums*' scope, is to visit the show.

Family Albums is a modest exhibit, organized by professors of art history and scheduled to appear primarily at university art museums, where public lectures and programs facilitate an understanding of its contents. Not so with *Revelations*, which opened in San Francisco in October 2003 and will tour the United States and Europe until October 2006. This massive and encyclopedic retrospective is intended to be a blockbuster. Modeled along the lines of the King Tut, Jackson Pollack, and Van Gogh shows, *Revelations* has been highly publicized and packaged to appeal to audiences that might not otherwise visit an art museum. The hype suggests a sea change on the part of Arbus executors, who, having so vigilantly guarded her estate, suddenly made it available for public consumption in a gargantuan exhibit accompanied by an expensive (\$100), glossy, 351-page exhibition volume and such gift shop paraphernalia as Arbus pencils, tote bags, and T-shirts.

Whereas at the Grey Gallery, *Family Albums* allowed viewers to orient themselves in relation to the whole, *Revelations* (as I saw it at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art) consisted of a seemingly endless succession of rooms that made it difficult to gauge the exhibit's size or layout. Its organizational rhythm varied greatly from pockets of overwhelming abundance to restrained minimalism. Some walls contained only a single image. These isolated photographs have a surprising and powerful effect. A portrait of a husband and wife in the woods at a nudist camp looks much different hanging alone in the *Revelations* show than when it is included as one of a series of "Partners" in *Family Albums*. If *Family Albums* is a Noah's Ark, the nudists are the first couple in a series of unconventional pairings that suggest a playful commentary on human intimacy. Viewed in isolation as part of *Revelations*, this couple alludes less to Noah's Ark than to the garden of Eden. A modern-day Adam

and Eve, they attest to humanity's fall from innocence. Less striking than their nakedness itself is the fact that the absence of clothing reveals how far the human body has strayed from a state of nature. In this context, Arbus's couple testifies to the impossibility of prelapsarian return in a world where even nudity has become socialized. As she remarked of her visit to the nudist camp, "It gets to seem as if way back in the Garden of Eden after the Fall, Adam and Eve had begged the Lord to forgive them and He, in his boundless exasperation had said, 'All right, then. Stay. Stay in the Garden. Get civilized. Procreate. Muck it up.' And they did."⁸

Each of Arbus's best portraits merits a wall of its own, but such instances are rare in the massive and labyrinthine Revelations show. Like the Arbus monographs, the arrangement of the exhibit's nearly two hundred photographs resists chronological or thematic organization. Instead, it is carefully orchestrated to convey an impression of randomness. Images from the same shoot may appear in different rooms, with virtually no context other than captions and some quotes from Arbus's own writing. Arbus's exhibition-quality prints hang in well-lit and spacious galleries, which, at three different points, give way to rooms that provide an exhaustive year-by-year chronology of her life. Whereas the print galleries are well lit and capacious, the rooms devoted to Arbus's biography are shadowy and cluttered with copious ephemera. Some of these artifacts provide fascinating glimpses into Arbus's experiences and motivations, such as notebooks in which she made lists of intended subjects, her Guggenheim applications, her own collection of photographs and news clippings, and her postcards to Allan Arbus, Marvin Israel, and her daughters, Amy and Doon. Some are curiosities, like a photograph of Arbus's sleeping alcove in her Westbeth apartment, where her bed was covered by a patchwork made of scraps of fur. As she explained in a letter to Allan and his second wife, Mariclare, "It is a multifold patchwork of every sort of fur, replete with little fox's heads nestled among persian lamb and otter, badger opossum mink fitch ermine seal caracul wolf civet cat ocelot raccoon, swirling, curling twining altogether."⁹ Perhaps the most startling curiosity is the coroner's report on her suicide, which reads like a clinician's blazon as it surveys each region of the body and major organ with chilly precision. So detailed is this document (which is blown up on the wall and reprinted in the book) that its inclusion feels like a defiant rejoinder to those who have been so morbidly fascinated with Arbus's death. But these curiosities are surrounded by a jumble of other objects—Arbus's camera bag, some candleholders, a back scratcher shaped like a hand, books shelved so high that their titles cannot be seen—that have little apparent meaning. The abundance of textual matter forces visitors to crowd to-

gether as they try to read their way through these parts of the exhibit. Because of dim overhead lighting, the shadow of one reader can easily obscure another's view. This excess underscores the judiciousness of *Family Albums*. Whereas the smaller exhibit is the culmination of careful pruning and structuring of available evidence, *Revelations* feels like the kitchen sink. Instead of sending the curators into the archive to select and order its contents, *Revelations* gives the impression that we have been thrown into its chaos and abundance. While *Family Albums* provides a framework for viewing, *Revelations* seems to turn us loose to draw our own conclusions.

On the face of it, there is nothing wrong with this mode. I am a great fan of archives and appreciate the thrill of uncovering evidence that has not been digested by critics or curators. As an author who has struggled to make meaning out of Arbus's ambiguous accomplishments, I would like nothing more than to wade through her writings, possessions, and the complete body of her work. But *Revelations* is not an archive; it is an exhibit. And there is something disingenuous about its apparent refusal to interpret or discriminate. Anyone who has written about Arbus's work is familiar with the draconian control her estate has maintained over the circulation of the artist's work. Because her executors so rarely grant permission for reproduction, the scholarship on Arbus is characterized by a striking absence of visual illustration, accompanied by frustrated accounts of the estate's intractability. Carol Armstrong begins an important 1993 article in *October* with an account of her dispute with Arbus's executors, who responded to a draft of her work with a "five-page, single-spaced" letter demanding numerous changes, the majority of which "clearly did not concern fact, but interpretation, ranging from the small—hair-splitting changes in degree of politeness when writing about human difference (politeness not in keeping with Arbus's own verbal and visual expressions)—to the large—omission or alteration of entire sentences, passages, or footnotes. (Essentially this included everything of what was taken to be negative judgment about Arbus and her subjects)."¹⁰ Unable to reach a compromise, Armstrong was forced to publish her article unillustrated. Her experiences are indicative of the estate's attitude toward scholarship, which it treats as, at best, a distraction, and, at worst, an insult to the photographer's art. After three decades of withholding Arbus from her critics, *Revelations* promises to provide unmediated access to the artist and her work. What critics have twisted and obscured will now be unveiled under the guidance of the Arbus estate.

One unintended revelation of the *Revelations* show concerns the motivations of Arbus's executors. Published in the exhibition volume, their words

provide a fascinating snapshot of the struggle between critics and estates over the interpretation of creative work. The photographer falls into a category that would include T. S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, or Samuel Beckett, whose estates take the legal protection afforded by copyright law to its extreme limits. Each is managed by relatives who have devoted their own lives to regulating the critical analysis of their famous predecessors, transferring the experience of loss into a melancholic attachment to the artist's accomplishment. One can sympathize with the tragedy that confronted Doon and Amy Arbus when their mother committed suicide. Since Diane was divorced and Amy still a minor, Doon became executor of her mother's estate, which she has managed for thirty-two years. With good reason she recoiled from critics who wanted to pry into her mother's personal life and turn her untimely death into a sensation. However, Doon now claims that she was not concerned with privacy, but with preserving the sanctity of her mother's art. In an afterword to the *Revelations* book, she writes that following Diane's death she intended "to do what was necessary to make the work as widely available as possible." All that changed when she realized that Arbus "was turning into a phenomenon and that phenomenon, while posing no threat to her, began endangering the pictures. She had achieved a form of immunity, but the photographs had not. The photographs needed me." The transformation of Diane Arbus from a working artist into a "phenomenon" threatened to violate the photographs by turning them into extensions of her celebrity persona.

Doon's initial strategy for regaining control was to attempt to wrest the images from the tarnished reputation of their creator by withholding information about her life and regulating critical analysis of her work. The new approach represented by *Revelations* is to provide an excess of evidence in the hope that the photographs will emerge unscathed from the critical feeding frenzy that will inevitably ensue. Doon concludes by explaining that "this book and exhibition, by interpreting her photographs and her words with a chronology that amounts to a kind of autobiography, do not signal a change of heart, but one of strategy, and a willingness to embrace the paradox: that this surfeit of information and opinion would finally render the scrim of words invisible so that anyone encountering the photographs could meet them in the eloquence of their silence."¹¹ In calling her version an "autobiography," Doon implies that it is an unmediated view of the artist's life, one that should not be confused with all other attempts to portray Diane Arbus, which can only be inaccurate and speculative.

One obvious target of Doon's remarks is the only book about her mother's life, Patricia Bosworth's unauthorized biography, which has been accused of

inaccuracy and sensationalism.¹² The fanfare surrounding *Revelations* promises that it will show us something new about Diane Arbus. Yet although the exhibit and the exhaustive hundred-plus page chronology of Arbus's life included in the *Revelations* volume provide a remarkable glimpse into the artist's experiences, I am not convinced that they pose a substantial challenge to current biographical understandings of Diane Arbus. We still see a woman of great talent and beauty who is both enabled and crippled by her affluent upbringing. As Arbus famously reflected, "One of the things I felt I suffered from as a kid was I never felt adversity. I was confirmed in a sense of unreality which I could only feel as unreality. And the sense of being immune was, ludicrous as it seems, a painful one."¹³ We see someone whose privileged upbringing drew her to the outcasts and misfits at the margins of society. We see an artist who was capable of intimacy and identification with her subjects, but who also sought to capture their most unguarded moments on film, making them available for public viewing. We see someone who longed for recognition but who struggled with anxiety about her celebrity, her fear of imitation, and the loss of privacy. Whereas Bosworth speculated about Arbus's attraction to freaks, *Revelations* definitively confirms her obsession by publishing lists of the curiosities she planned to photograph, her collection of freak images, and many, many more of her own photographs of freaks at Coney Island, Hubert's Museum, and traveling circuses, sideshows, and carnivals.¹⁴ Whereas Bosworth speculated about Arbus's unconventional sex life, the exhibit offers us visual proof. When we see photographs of couples (including a dominatrix and her client) having sex, we must conclude that Arbus was in the room as an onlooker. In one contact sheet, a picture of a naked Arbus lying across the lap of a black man appears in the middle of a series of shots where he kisses and fondles another white woman. All told, *Revelations* gives us much, much more evidence—much of it provocative and fascinating—but does not necessarily change our conception of Diane Arbus the person. What it does, however, is to highlight conflicts over artists, their legacies, and the ownership of intellectual property that have often shadowed critical efforts to write about American visual culture.

Another place where *Revelations* does provide genuine insight is in its exposure of Arbus's working methods. As with *Family Albums*, *Revelations* includes contact sheets that tell stories about the artist's relationship with her subjects, choices of framing and composition, and the subsequent process of selecting images to print. For example, much has been written about her portrait *Naked man being a woman*, in which her male subject poses with his penis tucked out of sight between his legs. In *Revelations* we learn that this

image is part of a series that Arbus labeled “Catherine Bruce and Bruce Catherine.” The sequence begins with “Catherine Bruce” dressed as a woman, shows her in various states of undress during which she morphs from male to female, and ends with “Bruce Catherine” again seated on a park bench, this time dressed as a man. If the caption *Naked man being a woman* suggested that Arbus was preoccupied by the performative qualities of gender, the contact sheet drives this point home by illustrating the literal process of becoming. Revelations also gives us the contact sheets that generated Arbus’s famous portrait of the giant Eddie Carmel. In the photograph she chose to print, Carmel’s parents stand back from their son, looking up at him with expressions of awe and concern. This image is unique among the shots on the contact sheet, most of which show Carmel posing with his arms around his parents, all three facing the camera. In the enlarged print, the parents and child stand apart, the distance between them illustrating the terror and isolation of Carmel’s plight. Like the viewers of the photograph, Carmel’s parents contemplate the giant without touching him, their body language expressing their inability to penetrate the extreme loneliness of his condition.

Further insight about Arbus’s working process comes from an essay by Neil Selkirk, who became acquainted with Arbus when he was an assistant for the Japanese photographer Hiro. After Arbus’s death, Selkirk was hired by Marvin Israel and John Szarkowski to produce exhibition prints for her upcoming retrospective. His task was monumental. He describes the laborious work of sorting her negatives and discerning her idiosyncratic darkroom procedures so that he could generate prints that were as close as possible to the artist’s own. One puzzle to be solved was how Arbus created her trademark uneven black borders; another was to figure out her exacting but highly unconventional developing methods. He writes, “Again and again Diane’s technique would enable me to effortlessly generate a print that would have won accolades from the academic printing establishment, only to have her comparison print command me to dilute the richness of the result . . . If she ever had the urge or knowledge to make the print beautiful in a conventional sense, she resisted it.”¹⁵ Irregularity was Arbus’s trademark. In the darkroom she veered away from beauty and perfection, just as she did in her choice of subjects. Knowledge about Arbus’s darkroom techniques can enhance an understanding of the effects of her photography.

But Selkirk’s essay is not only an account of painstaking detective work; it is also a story of death and resurrection. Just as Sussman and Doon Arbus describe their reconstruction of Arbus’s life as an autobiography, Selkirk believes he has channeled the dead photographer. He tells a fascinating story of self-

effacement, in which he learned to suppress his own mastery of darkroom technique in order to *become* Diane Arbus. He concludes, “Over the last thirty years, most of the materials Diane used have either changed or simply disappeared, but my task remains the same as it was the day I first entered her darkroom. It has been to discover the essence through pursuit of the surface, and whenever necessary, to reinvent the process in order to remain true to the essence: that no one doubts a Diane Arbus photograph.”¹⁶ Selkirk presents us with a bizarre twist on the work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction. So long as we have the negatives, Diane Arbus’s photographs are reproducible. But this does not mean they have lost their aura, as Walter Benjamin announced as the fate of modern art.¹⁷ For they can be reproduced only by someone who claims to have captured her essence, preserving the auratic qualities of the Diane Arbus photographs by becoming a medium between the dead artist and her work. The Arbus estate thus claims its privileged capacity to convene with the dead artist—allowing her posthumously to write her autobiography and produce new photographic prints—as a superior alternative to those critics who have damaged the art by turning the artist into a phenomenon.

Despite their overlap in subject matter and content, *Family Albums* and *Revelations* are a study in contrasts, each of which presents new opportunities for situating Diane Arbus more firmly in the context of American history. In the former, the curators play an active and highly visible role. Through a thoughtful combination of biographical, formal, and historical analysis, they demonstrate how the discovery of new artifacts can lead to a deeper understanding of Arbus’s place in the culture of her time. Not only does *Family Albums* make a compelling case for viewing the Arbus photographs as documents of social change, but also the events and essays it prompted identify promising directions for the further incorporation of visual materials into American studies scholarship.

The organizers of *Revelations* hope to resist such contextualization by positioning themselves as mediums who channel the dead artist’s life and work. Reacting against the kind of hagiographic criticism that turned Arbus into a phenomenon and read her photographs as tragic self-expression, the curators intend to provide a definitive view that will silence critical analysis. Instead the exhibit offers both a great quantity of new material and an opportunity to consider competing understandings of artists, celebrities, and intellectual property in contemporary American culture. The disputes over Arbus’s posthumous reputation are emblematic of broader debates about the meaning of artistic celebrity and visual culture in an age of mechanical reproduction and

blockbuster exhibits. Far from muting her critics, they promise to open up avenues for more varied critical commentary. While the estate's attempt to resurrect the dead artist is doomed to failure, together these exhibits should do a great deal to resurrect critical interest in Diane Arbus as both an incisive documentarian of American culture and a controversial cultural icon.

Notes

- Thanks to Sam Adams, Sara Blair, Jon Connolly, Maura Spiegel, and Marita Sturken for their comments on earlier drafts of this piece.
1. *Diane Arbus* (New York: Aperture, 1972); *Diane Arbus: Magazine Work* (New York: Aperture, 1984); *Untitled*, ed. Doon Arbus and Yolanda Cuomo (New York: Aperture, 1995).
 2. John Pultz, "Searching for Diane Arbus's 'Family Album' in her *Box of Ten Photographs, Monograph, and Esquire Work*," in Anthony W. Lee and John Pultz, *Diane Arbus: Family Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 3.
 3. *Ibid.*, 5.
 4. Anthony W. Lee, "Noah's Ark, Arbus's Album" in *Diane Arbus: Family Albums*, 53.
 5. *Ibid.*, 57.
 6. *Ibid.*, 62.
 7. See Janet Malcolm, "Good Pictures," *New York Review of Books* 51.1 (January 15, 2004) online edition (www.nybooks.com) for an insightful comparison of the portraits of Leslie and Marcella.
 8. *Diane Arbus*, 5.
 9. Cited in *Revelations*, ed. Doon Arbus and Elisabeth Sussman (New York: Random House, 2003), 218.
 10. Carol Armstrong, "Biology, Destiny, Photography: Difference According to Diane Arbus," *October* 66 (fall 1993): 28.
 11. Doon Arbus, "Afterward," *Revelations*, 299.
 12. Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus* (New York: Avon, 1984).
 13. *Diane Arbus*, 5.
 14. On Arbus as a photographer of freaks, see "Freak Photography," in Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 112–37.
 15. *Revelations*, 274–75.
 16. *Ibid.*
 17. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968), 217–52.