


THE ANTAGONIC IN THE PROGRAMMING OF DIANE ARBUS'S LOOK IN TWO PHOTOGRAPHS¹

 <https://doi.org/10.56238/sevened2024.041-017>

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ABSTRACT

This essay proposes as an object of study to reflect on the antagonistic concept in two photographic series by Diane Arbus, "Mexican dwarf in her hotel room in N.Y.C. 1970" (ARBUS, 2003) and "feminist in her hotel room, N.Y.C. 1971", (ARBUS, 2003). To this end, it is chosen as a foundation the theoretical discussions of relational aesthetics developed in the 1990s by the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, the critique of Bourriaud's relational aesthetics by Clarice Bishop in his *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* (2006), the concept of the dark coined by Susan Sontag in the work *On Photography* (1986) and the concept of estrangement by Sigmund Freud developed in the work "The Unsettling" (1919), and the work *Inside the white cube*, the ideology of the art space, by Brian O'Doherty. The intended objective is to establish conceptual and imagetic approximations and distances between the artist's aesthetic approach, the photographic act and the influence of the curator/museum. The question that motivates this work is elaborated as follows: what narratives about antagonism are present in these photographs? How does Diane Arbus construct her relational aesthetic? What is the influence of the curator in the construction of the new narratives inserted in the museum's art circuit?

Keywords: Diane Arbus. Nicolas Bourriaud. Photography. Photo essay.

¹ Paper presented at the Art City Space Course (IAU5917) of the IAU.USP Postgraduate Program (Doctorate) under the supervision of Professor Dr. Fábio Lopes de Sousa Santos.

² Dr. in Sciences obtained in the Architecture and Urbanism Program – Concentration Area: Theory and History of Architecture and Urbanism at IAU. USP (2024).
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Figures 1, 2, (left), "Mexican dwarf in her hotel room, 1970), (right), "feminist in her hotel room, 1971).



Source: ARBUS, 2003.

TRAJECTORY OF DIANE ARBUS

Photography, as a disseminator of the image and one of the languages of communication, has its apogee at the end of the 1950s in the USA, a time when illustrated magazines such as *Glamour*, *Vogue*, *Seventeen* and *Life* determine the hegemony of visual information. It is exactly at this moment that Diane Arbus and her husband Allan market their photographs to be disseminated in the advertising campaigns of these magazines.

Allan encourages Diane to study photography with Austrian photographer Lisette Model. This will become an essential reference for Diane Arbus's future personal work. In Diane's words, Lisette "finally clarified (me) that the more specific you are, the more general the result will be (ARBUS, 2003, p. 141). With the end of the marriage between Diane and Allan, Arbus dedicates himself to the works of art photography and aims at a somewhat uncomfortable theme for the standards of social behavior of that time. The photographer focuses on themes of physical and psychological disorders of people who did not fit the aesthetic standards of beauty socially constructed, especially by magazines.

During lessons with Lisette Model, Diane follows her teacher's advice to be more specific in her speech to entangle her desires. It is in this aspect that Arbus gets to know "Hubert's Museun", a concert hall of the horror circus type, the "Club 82", a concert hall for transvestites, goes to the cinema countless times to watch "Freaks, a film by Tod Browning (1932), with dwarf actors, giants, conjoined twins" (KURAMOTO, 2006, p. 146). This conscious act of programming the photographic gaze in search of other themes and other invisible places entangles a narrative that is more woven in the construction of his poetics.

A photograph by Diane Arbus originally published in *Vogue* is selected to be part of the exhibition "The Family of Man", containing five hundred and three photos by two hundred and seventy-three photographers from sixty-eight countries – organized by Edward

Steichen in 1955, chief curator of the photography section of MoMA (KURAMOTO, 2006, p. 143). In this exhibition, the curatorship builds the narrative about ethnic, social and human condition diversity through the image, and allowed the North American spectators to have diverse images of the peoples portrayed in their country and other places in the world, that is, the photographs "imposed a feeling of reassuring affection (...) in whose appearance he pleased (...) the honorable human affairs" (SONTAG, 1986, p. 23). By doing this operation, the curator refused to criticize history, and accepted historical determinism, because the photographs did not show certain sacrificial realities of peoples and their miseries, only images that were beautiful to see.

Subsequently, a retrospective exhibition of Arbus was organized by John Szarkowski – curator of the photography section of MoMA/NY between 1962 and 1991 – in 1972, consisting of 112 organized photographs. This exhibition reveals that "all the people in the photos have (in a way) the same appearance" and profile select monsters (...), revealing that humanity is not "one" (SONTAG, 1986, p. 23). In other words, both in the exhibition *The Family of Man* and in Arbus's retrospective exhibition, the narratives are planned by the curators, and they take the use of photography as a support for the discourses. Both plan their narratives and use photography to buy their hypothesis, that is, these curators make history and politics irrelevant by "universalizing the human condition in joy" (for Steichen) and "atomizing it, in horror" (for Szarkowski) SONTAG (1986, p. 24).

In relation to Diane Arbus's two photographic series of portraits, the photographer maintains some ordering principles that suggest the programming of her photographic gaze in the act of carrying out her photographic essays. The first of these is the classic principle of the pictorial genre of registering the dwarf and the feminist, opting for their frontality in the composition of the scene, as well as placing them in the centrality of the image. Another principle is the realism of the image.

In the art history of realism, for example, representing dwarfs in human situations and not as a fool is no more than it is new to represent a person widely recognized as ugly³. In the specific case of the dwarf and feminist photographs, the photographer seeks to overcome familiar aesthetic images. In this photographic process, Arbus cultivates an intimate relationship with her models, associated here with relational aesthetics (coexistence between photographer and model).

³ The Spanish Baroque artist Diego Velázquez painted in 1645 Sebastián de Morra and Don Antonio, the Englishman, both dwarfs. The dwarfs have traditionally been recognized by portraits of jesters, for being represented as puppets or puppets, but Velázquez shows both Sebastián, of few possessions, and Don Antonio, of many possessions, with a certain dignity; It is sympathetic to their physical deformities and gives them a strong sense of realism. The artist of Spanish Romanticism Francisco de Goya portrayed King Ferdinand VII, a painting from 1808, and the representation of the king's ugliness is put on display.

MUSEUM – STRANGE IMAGES INSERTION

In 1963, Diane Arbus, a candidate for a scholarship from the Guggenheim Foundation at MoMA/NY with the project called "American rites, manners and customs", is accepted by the institution and awarded US\$ 5,000. The president of the Guggenheim Foundation, Moe, requests a response letter for the artist to show interest in starting the project. Arbus writes:

Dear Mr. Moe. Along with my notification, my deep thanks." Moe replies, "Your notification is the shortest of all, and it couldn't be better." (ARBUS, p. 166, apud KURAMOTO, 2006, p. 150).

It is in this objective, clear and distant tone from the museum that Arbus relates to this institution. Diane does not alienate herself from the museum, in the sense that it influences her work, nor does she alienate herself to the space of the white cube to set her themes. On the contrary, the museum, as an exhibition device, is only the receiver of the photograph, it is the space of visibility of his work, but it is also the place where Arbus inserts the freak in the art circuit.

In 1964, his research granted him access to the group exhibition at MoMA entitled "Recent Acquisitions", curated by John Szarkowski. According to him,

I didn't really like them (photos) but they were very strong and you could feel that she [Arbus] was a very ambitious person, really ambitious... There was something untouchable about that kind of ambition.... I think she wanted every word she said, every photo she took (ARBUS, 2003, p. 165, apud KURAMOTO, 2006, p. 152).

Even if Szarkowski did not appreciate Arbus's photographs, this gives us the clarity that it is in the ambition, vigor and desire of the photographer to photograph strong themes, that the curator does not question the artist's creative process.

In 1965, Arbus requested the renewal of the project American Rites, Manners and Customs, justified it through the exhibition Recent Acquisitions and was awarded a scholarship from the Guggenheim Foundation in the amount of US\$ 7,500. Two years later, John Szarkowski held another exhibition at MoMA entitled "New Documents" and selected, in addition to Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand. The curatorial craft is decisive in this exhibition when Szarkowski inserts the concept of "social landscape" related to modern photography, strengthening the use of social photography in the art circuit of the American museum (KURAMOTO, 2006, p. 155).

During the 1960s, MoMA/NY acquired some photographs by Diane Arbus, among them "two transvestites, N.Y.C. 1961", "child with a toy grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C. 1962", "retired man and his wife in a nudist camp one morning, N.J. 1963", and "widow in

her room, N.Y.C. 1963". As a result of this, Diane Arbus's photographs are inserted into the art circuit – New York's Metropolitan, Smithsonian Institution, Whitney Museum and Pratt Institute – with the exhibitions New Photography U.S.A.; and Human Concern/Personal Torment: the Grotesque in American Art and Thirteen Photographers. (KURAMOTO, 2006, p. 155). In this social and artistic landscape, Arbus' poetics in the museum inserts the concept of estrangement and antagonism permeated in images of social behavior, marginalized culture, physical appearance and psychological aspect, converging against the socially constructed hegemonic discourse.

RELATIONAL AESTHETICS – PHOTOGRAPHING THE OTHER

Nicolas Bourriaud understands the new direction of contemporary art through relational aesthetics, a

artistic practice (which) is now concentrated in the sphere of inter-human relations, as proven by the experiments underway since the beginning of the 1990s (BOURRIAUD, 1998, p. 39-40).

For the philosopher, the "intrinsic relational character of the contemporary work of art" rests in the sphere of human relations. The work of relational art establishes intersubjective encounters (literal or potential), in which meaning is elaborated collectively and not in privatized spaces of individual consumption. (BOURRIAUD, 1998, p. 39-40). The confrontation between subject and artist and between object and audience participation is valuable:

The supreme "separation", that which affects the relational channels, constitutes the last stage of the mutation towards the "society of the spectacle" as Guy Debord wrote. A society in which human relationships are no longer "lived directly", but they distance themselves from their spectacular representation. It is where the most burning problems of current art are located. (BOURRIAUD, 1998, p. 22),

Second Guy Debord,

The spectacle is not a set of images, but a social relationship between people, mediated by images. The spectacle (...) normally finds in vision the privileged human sense that in other times was touch; the most abstract and mystifiable vision, the most abstract meaning, corresponds to the generalized abstraction of today's society (DEBORD, 1991, 14, 19).

In turn, the relationship between the society of the spectacle and Debord's image converges with the thought of SONTAG (1986, 14), since,

In the end, people may learn to stage their aggressions more with cameras than with guns, but the price of this will be a world even more drowned in images... a photographic safari... Guns have metamorphosed into cameras in this serious

comedy, the ecological safari, because nature has ceased to be what it has always been – something that people needed to protect themselves from.

Diane Arbus's hypothesis to build her poetics in inter-human relations is in line with the relational aesthetics proposed by Bourriaud, because the photographic act depends on the dual relationship between her and the people photographed during the photographic essay, on the interdependence of her being subject between the self/photographer and the other/photographed, on the collective and shared construction between the photographer and the people photographed, in the social relationship developed during the photographic essay, in the relationship of involvement and in the rapport demonstrated in Arbus' practice of annihilating the other, just as we notice in capitalism, when money transforms people into commodities. Diane never explored her models in this way.

But, according to Diane, "I always thought of photography as evil – and that was one of her favorite points for me (...) and when I photographed for the first time, I felt very perverse" (SONTAG, 1986, p. 13). Her perception between photographing and assaulting occurs in the same context as Sontag, when she associates the photographic device with the firearm. In view of this, are the photographic essays of the feminist and the dwarf of Arbus part of a spectacle analogous to the society of the spectacle, where people are transformed into commodities?

Following this reasoning,

being a professional photographer can be seen as something evil, to use Arbus's term, if the photographer looks for themes considered unseemly, taboo, marginal (SONTAG, 1986, p. 13).

Unseemly, taboo, marginal and malicious are qualities associated with Arbus's photographs and photographic behavior, because, "in fact, using a camera is not a very good way to approach someone", the camera can "dare, intrude, cross, distort, exploit ... murder" (SONTAG, 1986, p. 13). In other words, the photographer's practice is associated with daring, meddling, exploiting and murderous. And a killer needs a hunt, a trophy.

According to Marvin Israel, Diane's friend and editor of "Harper's Bazaar" magazine, for whom the photographer provided services,

a photograph for Diane was an event. It can be said that for her the most valuable thing was not the photograph (the result), it was the experience - the event (...) she was moved by adventure and her life was based on that... photography was like a trophy - it was what he received as a prize for his adventure (BOSWORTH, 1984, p. 193).

Arbus is not interested in becoming neutral in the photographic essays, on the contrary, she seeks to enhance her relationship with the one she allowed to be recorded.

She is concerned with relating people's images to build an authentic poetics, and more than anything, she is not concerned with the concept of participation of the photographed person in the construction of the image, on the contrary, Arbus depends on the person. However, it is the photographer who directs the scene, it is she who extracts from the photographed the essential image programmed by her. That is why his photo essays become an event, and they are different from the art event of performances anchored in relational aesthetics, where the participation of the public is important for the works to develop.

THE PHOTO ESSAYS BY GREER GARSON AND LAURO MORALES

Diane Arbus's photographs of the English-born American actress Greer Garson and the Mexican Lauro Morales demonstrate that she had intense and trusting relationships with her models, when we notice the gazes of Greer and Laruo directed at the photographic lens.

However, in Greer's view, she claims to have been the victim of an ambush created by the photographer:

Diane arrived and immediately asked me to lie down on the bed. I was tired, God knows how tired I was, and I did what she asked me. Then, suddenly, she knelt down and leaned over me with a wide-angle fixing on my face and started clicking nonstop. It was like a duel between us, because I **resisted** being photographed that way – in close-up with all my pores and wrinkles showing! She asked me all kinds of personal questions and I realized that she would only fire when my face showed tension or concern or annoyance (...) It was a tyranny. Really a tyranny (...). Finally, I decided, 'You're not going to do this to me. I'm not going to be photographed as one of your grotesque *freaks*. So I stiffened my face like a mask' (BOSWORTH, 1995, p. 314-315, emphasis in original)

The more Greer Garson – British winner of the Oscar for Best Actress with the film “Mrs. Miniver”, from 1942 – tries to represent socially accepted images, the more Diane is busy acting in the opposite, antagonistic way, as if the photographer wanted to make the actress strip herself of social archetypes. The more Greer recognizes himself in the aesthetic standards of beauty disseminated in magazines and cinema, the more Arbus deconstructs his will. The close-up, right-angle image, in addition to recording the pores, the dark circles, the static eye and the tired, reveals an aged, exhausted, exhausted and consumed woman. When he sees himself in the photograph chosen by Diane, Greer does not recognize his imagined image in the dominant standards, published in the main magazines and newspapers. For Greer, Arbus is tyrannical and evil, just like Diane claims to be, because the actress didn't want to look like the image of some freak. And in the photograph constructed by Arbus, the photographer achieves her trophy, for having managed to make the feminist strip off social masks, although the actress claims that, in the

final image we see, she wore another mask as a form of resistance.

On the other hand, Arbus' relationship with Lauro Morales, a circus professional, took place in two moments (1960, 1971), both in a hotel room. Diane's concern is to remove the *freak* image of a circus dwarf. The close-up portrait, at right angles, shows Lauro naked sitting on the bed dressed in a towel and a hat, resting, next to a bottle of whiskey.

The narrative of the two images operates in the relations between estrangement and antagonism in the sphere of socially constructed masks in the 1960s and 1970s. Arbus deconstructs the realities of the images of the actress and the dwarf, on the one hand, the fatigue of the film actress commonly portrayed as an actress with an impeccable image, on the other hand, the human side of the dehumanized dwarf in the circus story. While the image of the actress is socially constructed to be a movie star and the image of the circus dwarf is constructed in the *freak*, when Arbus focuses on the physical aspect of the body, Arbus' perverse side with the ugliness of the feminist and her humanist side is noted by removing the social stigma of the physical aspect of the Mexican dwarf. The inversion of the social narrative in the two photographic essays is the antagonistic present in the two photographs. The aging Greer and Lauro's humanization guarantee a relational aesthetic, a new way of seeing a movie actress stripped of beauty masks, while revealing the nakedness of a body considered ugly for its physical appearance. This is the novelty of Arbus's modern photographic narrative.

To FREUD (2003, p. 331),

you can only say that something new easily becomes frightening and unsettling; some new things are scary, certainly not all. Something has to be added to the new and unfamiliar in order to make it unsettling.

Following Freud's thought (2003, p. 329, 340), the "unsettling" is related to the "terrible", which arouses "horror" and "anguish". While some aesthetic investigations are concerned with "beautiful", "sublime", "positive" images, others are concerned with "contrary", "repulsive", "painful" images. Diane was concerned with this second aesthetic investigation, more related to the unsettling, recalling that "aesthetics can be defined in the qualities of our feeling amalgamated in people and things, impressions of the senses, experiences and situations ... veiled". In this sense, between the familiar image of man and woman, and the new element for the standards of the time – humanization of the dwarf and the exhausting aspect of the feminist – it is possible to adhere the unsettling to Arbus's images.

The antagonistic relationship of the photographer in the construction of these images takes place in the action of demystifying the image of the actress and her beauty standards

and removing the perverse side of Lauro's image associated with the circus profession, respectively, built in the relationship of estrangement, savagery, discomfort and exhaustion, and in the aspect of home, coziness, rest and empowerment. For the actress we have relationships of restlessness and carelessness and for Lauro the relationships of peace and care. If Greer felt deceived by Diane, the image expressed by Lauro is one of full trust by Arbus.

For Clarice Bishop (2006, p. 6), Bourriaud's relational aesthetics "does not *reflect* society, but *produces it*", because it is "the social forms that produce human relations". In this reasoning, it is the social images of the 1960s and 1970s that produce the relationships between Arbus and Green, between Arbus and Lauro, between Arbus and the art circuit, and between Arbus's images and the curatorial discourse on *social landscape*. There were two exhibitions that Arbus participated in during his lifetime at MoMa. The result in the art circuit.

The reception of Arbus's photographs always causes strangeness, because

his work shows pathetic, pitiful, as well as repulsive people (...). His acceptance of the horrible suggests a naivety that is at the same time timid and sinister, because it is based on distance, on privilege, on a feeling that what the spectator is asked to see is in fact *another* (SONTAG, 1986, p. 24).

Sontag presents an exaggerated discourse strongly influenced by the Marxist discourse reinstated after May 1968 and by the photographs of the horrors of World War II, when she perceives the people photographed by Arbus as pathetic and repulsive, and when she tends to believe in a certain naivety of the photographer linked to a certain sinister aspect.

Theoretically, Greer and Lauro's photographs are social forms staged in front of Arbus's photo essay. The experience of seeing the other in Diane's photographic lens is instigating, not only because the images allow us to contemplate the people photographed, but also because it allows us to understand the intentions established by the photographer, not in the sense of establishing an antagonistic and estranged systematic method, but of intense and objective involvement, because the panorama of the photographic set demonstrates a deep imagetic unity.

For Bishop, relational works are social behaviors created, produced and represented, because the public, the artist and the work coexist. The antagonism is precisely in the relationship between living the experience and representing the experience. In this sense, another intention in Arbus's relational work is the reconstruction of his identity in the presence of the other. Her photographic process takes place in the intentionality of an



artist who dives headlong into complex, strange and unsettling relationships and perhaps this relational process was one of the reasons for her suicide.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The fundamental difference between the photographic production in the 1960s and that produced in 1990 lies in the emphasis that the latter creates a model of sociability in an exhibition space where the spectator is invited to actively participate in the exhibitions together with the artists, tending to stage socially, and in the photographic images of Diane Arbus, the participation of the models is closely related to the action of the photographer, by building the scenes from her involvement, participation and experience with those involved, especially in her immersion in the routine of those who inhabit her photos. The artist's distancing from the museum leads to the creative freedom of the poetic process and the approximation with the museum occurs in the financing of her art projects and in the possibility of inserting a strange, antagonistic and familiar social landscape into the art circuit. And in this process, the reception of photographs in art criticism always causes discomfort and repulsion, perhaps because the presence of various marginalized (or not) social groups in his works is always permeated in a relationship of trust when the people recorded look directly at the photographic lens, suggesting a shared, so-called relational relationship. Reflections on portrait photography in the construction of the diversity of the social landscape with the intention of destabilizing socially accepted standards are also in line with the rise of the North American counterculture in that period.



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