DIANE ARBUS: THE *WONDERFUL WIZARD OF ODDS* OR THE POETICS OF THE I (EYE)

José Duarte
Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa
Portugal
joseaoduarte@gmail.com

Abstract

Diane Arbus' photographs are mainly about difference. Most of the time she is trying '[…] to suppress, or at least reduce, moral and sensory queasiness' (Sontag 1977: 40) in order to represent a world where the subject of the photograph is not merely the 'other' but also the I. Her technique does not coax her subjects into natural poses. Instead she encourages them to be strange and awkward. By posing for her, the revelation of the self is identified with what is odd.

This paper aims at understanding the geography of difference that, at the same time, is also of resistance, since Diane Arbus reveals what was forcefully hidden by bringing it into light in such a way that it is impossible to ignore. Her photographs display a poetic beauty that is not only of the 'I' but also of the 'eye'. The world that is depicted is one in which we are all the same. She "atomizes" reality by separating each element and 'Instead of showing identity between things which are different […] everybody is shown to look the same.' (Sontag 1977: 47).

Furthermore, this paper analyses some of Arbus' photographs so as to explain this point of view, by trying to argue that between rejecting and reacting against what is standardized she does not forget the geography of the body which is also a geography of the self. While creating a new imagetic *topos,* where what is trivial becomes divine, she also presents the frailty of others as our own.

Key-words: Diane Arbus, photography, freaks, identity, performance

Resumo

As fotografias de Diane Arbus são, na sua maioria, sobre diferença. Em grande parte delas ela tenta, nas palavras de Susan Sontag, suprimir ou reduzir "[a] moral and sensory queasiness" (Sontag 1977: 40) de forma a apresentar um mundo onde o sujeito fotografado não é apenas o 'outro', mas também o 'eu'. A sua técnica não envolve a persuasão dos seus sujeitos para agirem de forma natural. Muito pelo contrário, ela instiga-os a agir de forma estranha e distraída. Ao posarem para ela, a revelação do 'eu' identifica-se com aquilo que é estranho.

Este artigo pretende compreender esta geografia da diferença que, ao mesmo tempo, é também uma geografia da resistência, uma vez que Diane Arbus mostra aquilo que está forçosamente escondido, revelando-o de tal forma que é impossível ignorá-lo. As suas fotografias desvendam uma beleza poética que não pertence apenas ao 'eu', mas também ao olho que observa e fotografa. O mundo que é mostrado é um em que todos somos o mesmo. Ao atomizar a realidade e separar cada elemento, ela apresenta um mundo onde todos somos iguais, de uma forma ou de outra (Sontag 1977).

Para além disso, este artigo analisa algumas das fotografias de Arbus de forma a poder exemplificar melhor o argumento aqui apresentado. Aquilo que tento argumentar é que entre a rejeição e a reacção contra aquilo que está institucionalizado ela não esquece uma certa geografia do corpo que é também uma geografia da representação do eu. Ao mesmo tempo Arbus também cria um novo *topos* imagético, onde eleva o trivial ao banal, apresentando, no fundo, a fragilidade dos outros como sendo nossa.

Palavras-chave: Diane Arbus, fotografia, *freaks*, identidade, performance

I really believe there are things nobody would see if I didn't photograph them.
Diane Arbus

I work from awkwardness. By that I mean I don't like to arrange things. If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself.
Diane Arbus

In an essay untitled 'America Seen Through Photographs, Darkly' taken from the book *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag calls our attention to the fact that the generalization of beauty is still a quest for humanity:

> *In the mansions of pre-democratic culture, someone who gets photographed is a celebrity. In the open fields of American experience, as catalogued with passion by Whitman and seized up with a shrug by Warhol, everybody is a celebrity. No moment is more important than other moment; no person is more interesting than other person.* (Sontag 1977: 28)

This may be another way of expressing what Lavoisier's maximum 'nothing is lost, everything is transformed states, an idea followed by some photographers, such as Steichen with 'The Family of Man' (1955): where beauty and ugliness are the same and art is an instrument of identification with the community.

Nonetheless, American photography has suffered a change from affirmation to erosion.If 'The Family of Man' was trying to show a homogeneous assembly and bring to the fore the idea that we all are citizens of the world, the exhibition "New Documents", as mentioned by Patricia Bosworth, marked:

> *[…] the end of traditional photography and introduced a new approach to Picture making, a self-conscious collaborative one*

> *in which both subject and photographer reveal themselves to the camera and to each other. The result is a directness that pulls the viewer smack into the life of the image.* (Bosworth 2005: xi)

One of the most controversial cases in this exhibition was the work of Diane Arbus because it represented a cut with the standard values. Later, in a retrospective of her work, the shock was even greater.

Her photographs imposed an awkward feeling, as Sontag observes: 'Arbus's work does not invite viewers to identify with the pariahs and miserable looking people she photographed. Humanity is not 'one'.' (Sontag 1977: 32) She 'atomizes' reality, separating each element to show us that, in our differences, we are all the same, as Sontag further highlights:

> *The subjects of Arbus's photographs are all members of the same family, inhabitants of a single village. Only, it happens, the idiot village is America. Instead of showing identity between things which are different […] everybody is shown to look the same.* (Sontag 1977: 47)

This way she is trying to go against an almost Hellenistic vision of the world. In its essence, her photographs depict a world where people are alienated and isolated, circulating between uncertain identitary geographies. It is in this world of (self) revelation that the camera becomes the free element, like a passport erasing the social inhibitions, suppressing, or at least reducing 'the moral and sensory queasiness' (Sontag 1977: 40).

The ways in which her characters are depicted suggest a certain sinister innocence based upon distance and the feeling that we are watching the 'other'. There is the attention from the photographer to the object photographed, helping the artists in the creation of a 'moral theater', as Sontag comments: 'The authority

of Arbus's photographs derives from the contrast between their lacerating subject matter and their calm, matter-of-fact attentiveness.' (Sontag 1977: 35).

This is why the viewer can find a close relationship between subject and artist: the subject relaxes, and poses, representing his/her role, as suggested by Sontag:

> *Instead of trying to coax her subjects into a natural or typical position, they are encouraged to be awkward – that is, to pose. (Thereby, the revelation of the self gets identified with what is strange, odd, askew. Standing or sitting stiffly makes them seem likes images of themselves*. (Sontag 1977: 37)

Of course, this is due to the use of specific instruments, like the camera Arbus worked with. The Rolleiflex, a small camera that she used not at the level of the eye, but at the level of the chest, allowed her to talk with her subjects, getting to know them, earning their trust, making possible a portrait (one of her favorite forms) and exploring its infinite possibilities. The asymmetry of her photographs constructs ambivalence in her subjects, showing some secret experiences within people and, at the same time, revealing the grotesque, surreal or cubist side of her art. She experimented with painterly effects in order to capture the encounter between the 'happening' and the geometry called *kairós:* the moment, the opportunity, the chance. What is more important is that she was reacting against what was 'plastic', boring and standard (e.g. 'Two men dancing at a Drag Ball'[1], NYC, 1970), ignoring, most of the time, the geography of names but never the geography of the body, this way creating a new visual *topos*, as I shall explain.

One of the main virtues of Diane Arbus and her work was the fact that she was aware of her condition, first as a woman and, second, as an artist, something, I believe sometimes, cannot be dissociated. As a sort of 'daydreaming creature',

[1] See photo at:
www.mcah.columbia.edu/dbcourses/item.cgi?template=submagnify&id=22349&table=items

Arbus revealed herself and revealed her subjects at the same time, '[exploring] not only their collective memories but the relationships between role-playing and cultural identity' (Bosworth 2005: 20) in order to search for alternatives and 'A photograph suggested alternatives – choices. The act of photography was ambiguous and contradictory – like herself.' (Bosworth 2005: 67).

She was aware of the fact that identity and gender are something in constant transformation as Butler refers:

> *…gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space trough a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced trough the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.* (Butler 1990: 140)

That is why she tried to capture illusion vs. reality, becoming interested in people that are trapped in a space where they no longer feel secure or comfortable in. In a very sober way, more than interpreting the world, she examines it, walking through the endless paths of ritual, myth, contradiction and ambivalence. In her subjects, and in herself, she intends to eliminate any stereotyped notions of the self. At the same time she also questions the very notions that the society was based upon, showing us several [constructed] identities, because as Woodward comments:

> *Identity gives us an idea of who we are and of how we relate to others and to the world in which we live. Identity marks the ways in which we are the same as others who share that position and the way in which we are different from those who do not. Often, identity is most clearly defined by difference, that is by what is not.* (Woodward 1997: 1-2)

Bearing in mind these questions of the 'stylization of the body' and identity, Arbus believed that 'masculine' and 'feminine' are no more than transcendental realities, this way re-arranging our way of seeing images in the world – and images of the world – just as if everything we looked at was simply a construction of the real. One may consider, for instance, the picture 'A Young man with curlers at home on West 20th Street'[2] (NYC, 1966) in which, as Adams suggests:

> *The illumination of the flash divides the frame into dark and light, a visual metaphor for the subject's embodiment of male and female attributes. The hair in curlers, the eyebrows plucked into delicate arches just beginning to grow around the edges, the half-smoked cigarette, the long, painted fingernails and their contrast with the masculine set of the mouth and jaw line: every aspect of this young man's appearance bespeaks process rather than permanence. Gender, this portrait suggests, is an elaborate combination of costume and gesture that has no predictable relationship to the sexed body.'* (Adams 2001: 124)

The more she photographed these figures, the more she connected their sexual identity with 'nature', 'personality' and 'style' (Bosworth 2005: 257). The camera had the power of showing that the body is only a 'cage' if such is the way we want it to be. The way in which most of these figures were represented did not follow a heteronormativity. Bodies suffer transformations; they can metamorphose themselves, being everything and nothing at the same time. To photograph was to unite bodies, almost like copulating – the camera representing the phallus; the body is open to new experiences, where all the borders are eliminated. The camera is the

[2] See photo at:
http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/dbcourses/item.cgi?template=submagnify&id=22329&table=items

complement of the eye/I, the images working in the mind as Hirsch suggests: 'The camera is like psychoanalysis. There are optical processes that are invisible to the eye: they can be exposed by the mechanical processes of photography. The camera can reveal what we see without realizing that we do, just as psychoanalysis can uncover what we know without knowing that we do: what is stored in the unconscious.' (Hirsch 1997: 118)

By doing so, the subject becomes interiorized not only by the viewer but also by the photographer, as for example, in the pictures she took in sideshows, '…a space of identification in which the viewer projects her own most hidden perverse fantasies onto the freak and discovers them mirrored back in the freak's gaze.' (Adams 2001: 8)

What happens is that Arbus creates a space of identification where she affirms that the body differences can be suppressed in the interest of a common humanity, as Sontag comments: 'The photographs of deviates and real freaks do not accent their pain but, rather, their detachment and autonomy.' (Sontag 1977: 36) And as Bosworth notes:

> *Diane longed to talk to these strange people – find out – their thoughts. She sensed that the cultural gap between them and herself was enormous, but still she identified with these strange, sad people's isolation – their aloneness. They were the same in some basic way – exactly the same.* (Bosworth 2005: 30)

In doing so she is bringing into reality beings that, most of the time, were circulating between fantasy and the subconscious, just like Goya, Vélasquez, José de Ribera or Picasso did in their own epoch. They converted what was considered wonder and horror into something that would seem (and is) intimate, natural, eliminating the stigma attached to these persons. Indeed, Arbus does not forget this cultural legacy and tradition.

Moreover, in replacing distance by intimacy she is aware of the effect that the 'other' has upon us. Throughout her work she questions our way of seeing the 'other' and also the way the viewer relates him/herself with the photographed object, because by approximating those subjects to the viewer, it is to confer them great importance and reveal that we can also fall in the emptiness of our human condition.

What Arbus is implying is that '[…] the virtue of the photograph is a permanence that allows the viewer to overcome the initial shock of the extraordinary body and invest the freak with human qualities.' (Adams 2001: 122). The human condition is something that is vulnerable, mutable, frail and, above all, monstrous. The 'other' is now looking at us and, therefore, we incorporate this figure.

Think for instance of images like 'Child with a toy hand grenade'[3] (NJ, 1962) where the viewer identifies himself with what is unique and peculiar. The boy is the centre of attention, demonstrating the paradox of human individuality, in several cross-cultured references: war, tension, childhood, innocence, satire. The picture has something of the emotional, and spontaneous. The viewer cannot help but identify himself with the aura of the referent (the picture in itself) and through her question his/her own identity.

In another case, like in 'A Jewish Giant at home with his parents in the Bronx'[4] (NY, 1970), the body of the giant is disproportional when confronted with the space and the furniture. His situation is highlighted because of the banality of the context: his house cannot accommodate his body and his freakishness results from the pain and suffering due to the incongruence between his body and what surrounds him. However, one should not forget the parents, because they also

[3] See photo at:
http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/dbcourses/item.cgi?template=submagnify&id=22377&table=items

[4] See photo at:
http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/dbcourses/item.cgi?template=submagnify&id=22345&table=items

seem like freaks in this picture. This duality is one of Arbus's main features. She believed that taking a picture involved the risk and danger of seeing ourselves as others see us, what could be called in Bosworth's words, 'the freakishness in normalcy and the normalcy in freakishness' (Bosworth 2005: 248). As Stiker reminds us:

> *[S]ocieties have never succeeded in integrating difference as such. Either the social group integrates difference in order to make it disappear or integrates partially while excluding certain forms even more or it excludes radically while paying up the service to the concept of integration. We cannot take any one of the formulas that history has chosen at a given moment and erect it into an ideal.* (Stiker 1999: 192)

What is curious about Diane Arbus is her ability to be perverse in her picture taking. She integrates the unusual into the realm of everyday life. In fact, the objects and the sets she uses to photograph are always from everyday life:

> *Arbus penetrates the intimate domestic spaces of bedroom, boudoir, and kitchen, turning environment into an extension of individual personality. Like her human subjects, these interiors are not composed for the camera, but unmistakably in use, cluttered with garbage, kitschy decorations, appliances, shabby furniture, and other paraphernalia of everyday life.* (Adams 2001: 126)

This way she elevates the banal into the almost sublime, demonstrating that the frailty of others may also be ours, therefore, echoing what Lisette Model once said: 'The camera is an instrument of detection. We photograph not only what we

know, but also what we don't know.'[5] (Model). This is what we do not know, but perceive or suppose in the visual reading that reaches us in Arbus's photographs.

Take for instance the picture 'A naked man being a woman'[6] (NYC, 1968), where the subject of the photograph poses like a model for a magazine. The *mise-en-scène* is very well organized; the axiality of the subject inside a space "painted" with a *chiaroscuro* allows us to commemorate this cherished figure long after the curtains have closed at their final performance (Adams 2001: 121). The pose is a reference to *The Birth of Venus* (1485-1486) from Alessandro Botticelli. We are confronted with a stage (after all, photography is also theater) where the open curtains reveal the splendor of this figure: the left side darker and the right side more illuminated highlighting the duality of the body. As the title indicates this is a construction: the photographic composition has its strength in the duality of the masculine face with a feminine body language.

This is also something that can be found in 'A Mexican Dwarf in his hotel Room'[7] (NYC, 1970) with his *dandy* pose. The almost palpable erotic tone of the photography denies the fact that only the bodies with conventional proportions are sexy when naked: 'Poking out from beneath the towel, Morale's slightly swollen foot is foreshortened so that it appears just below is groin, where it intimates an erect, phallic virility.' (Adams 2001: 129). Instead of trying to normalize the body, the relaxed position of the subject instigates the world that sees it as a monster, so as to demonstrate that there is not a unique version of the I. After all, we can also be the 'other' as Adams suggests:

> *We are all familiar with the prick of misrecognition that comes from looking at a snapshot that catches us at an odd angle; Arbus had an especially acute talent for translating*

[5] *http://www.photoquotes.com/printableshowquotes.aspx?ID=481*

[6] *See photo at: http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/dbcourses/item.cgi?template=submagnify&id=22386&table=items*

[7] See photo at: http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/dbcourses/item.cgi?template=submagnify&id=22335&table=items

> *that uncanny experience into something concrete and communicable to others.* (Adams 2001: 132)

Arbus had this power of creating strange fissures, an atmosphere where not only the subject is revealed but also the photographer. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to escape the fascination of this visible/invisible (Diane Arbus) presence that pulls us to the 'other side'. In the case of Arbus, taking pictures was an act of catharsis, a way of looking for the 'alterity of the instant' recording it afterwards in the visual memory. She represented herself through the strangeness of the other, in a poetics that belongs not only to the eye, but also to the I.

For Diane Arbus the camera was the chisel that allowed her to carve her work of art, excavating inside the subject. Each photo is a constellation of different gestures, situations of the human condition and the construction of mental and affective environments, because, as Adams proposes:

> *Freaks are so clearly created as much from imagination as from the blunt matter of the body that they are always in danger of becoming merely symbols of the artist's own dark interiority. Any image that too readily allows us to move from the fact that freak is a constructed identity to conclude that everyone has a freak within threatens to erase the lives laid by the camera's eyes.* (Adams 2001: 132)

In conclusion, Diane Arbus's photographs promote a landscape where the viewer can see himself as the other (Barthes) and also as a place for the expression of the several selves that the photographer and the subject inhabited as Barthes comments in his book *Camera Lucida*: 'In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.' (Barthes [1989] 2000: 13). In Arbus's world the characters are constantly revealing themselves, thus creating new

identity maps or, better yet, an atlas that changes our perception of the world. If in the beginning I talked about the maximum of Lavoisier: 'nothing is lost, everything is transformed' to talk about 'The Family of Man', it is because I cannot dissociate this idea from her photographs. Nonetheless, I believe that when talking about Arbus this motto is applicable only to be reviewed probably according to the words of Goethe: 'Every form correctly seen is beautiful.'

Bibliography:

ADAMS, Rachel. (2001). *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

BARTHES, Roland. ([1989] 2000). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography*. London: Vintage Books.

BOSWORTH, Patricia. (2005). *Diane Arbus, A Biography*. 2ª Ed. London: Vintage.

BUTLER, Judith. (1990). *Gender Trouble*: *feminism and the subversion of identity.* New York: Routledge.

HIRSCH, Marianne. (1997). *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory.* Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press.

STIKER, Henri-Jacques. (1999). *A History of Disability*. Trans. William Sayers. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

SONTAG, Susan. (1977). *On Photography*. London: Penguin Books.

WOODWARD, Kathryn (Ed.). (1997). *Identity and Difference.* London: Sage Publications.