

Diane Arbus

a personal snapshot

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When a photographer's name crops up in print or in a conversation, I do not think of biographical facts, the stuff of data sheets. Instead, if I have met the photographer in person, a specific and personal event of the past, linked to that photographer, slips through my consciousness, tinting my response with a feeling for the memory. These mental "snapshots" may not be the truth about a photographer but they are *my* truth.

I have just finished reading a biography of Diane Arbus, full of dates, facts, exhibition lists, publications and so on. All very useful - but lifeless. The author might as well have been listing the features of a camera as of a human being. My own mental "snapshot" of Diane Arbus may not be as factual but, for me, it is more truthful.

In 1968 I wrote from London to her address in New York saying that I planned to visit the city and would like to meet her. She mailed back a curt and succinct three-line scribbled note which said: I don't want to see anyone, but if you insist come on.... And then she added the date and time.

On that morning in September I walked to her apartment building and climbed the stairs. The day was just beginning but already I felt like a wrung-out dishrag from the sweltering New York humidity. I rang the bell and a voice shouted "go away," which was disconcerting. So I rang again. Same shout. I rang a third time and the door opened to the limit of the security chain and a mouth told me to beat it. Hastily, I said who I was and that we had an appointment. The voice was silent for seconds and then said: all right, you can come in, but only if you do not talk about photography! Now I was the reluctant one, but agreed. The door closed and a lot of scuffling took place. Then I was admitted, and the iron bar reattached to the steel-plated door and braced on the floor, the locks turned and the chain attached. This was New York.

The apartment was surprisingly airy and spartan, with whitewashed walls and very few pieces of furniture in large open spaces. Diane Arbus was small and

slim but looked very energetic. I guessed she could be extremely explosive and hot-tempered. She had short dark hair and didn't smile, or observe the usual pleasantries. As she led the way into the kitchen, containing a long wooden table, and benches, I noticed she was wearing a black roll-neck sweater and leather miniskirt. It was quite sexy and she looked a lot younger than her age, which was 45. Although I did not make the analogy at the time, she reminded me in retrospect of a small cuddly animal which had a ferocious bite. She was dangerous.

Diane Arbus noticed my bedraggled look and asked if I would like a jelly. The idea of a cold fruit dessert on such a day was appealing. While she mixed up the contents in a dish, she constantly needled me with remarks like: photographers are so boring I can't imagine why you would want to see them, or, all magazines tell lies and yours is no exception. The jelly prepared, she placed it in front of me on the table and straddled the bench so that her skirt rode up her thighs, revealing a clear view of her panties. She either did not know, or care, and looked at me belligerently. I took a mouthful of the jelly, and thought I would vomit. It was the most foul-tasting stuff I had ever encountered, like a mixture of dishwashing liquid and gravy. Arbus' eyes were on me. By this time I had had enough, both literally and figuratively. I spat out the mouthful and said: that's the most disgusting stuff and if I have any more I will spew all over your table. I was angry.

Then Arbus astonished me. She suddenly burst out laughing. And at the end of her outburst, said: O.K. Now we can talk about photography.

To this day, I have no idea whether I passed some sort of bizarre test (of what?) or whether she actually enjoyed the "jelly" concoction, and expected me to eat it. Whatever changed her mind about discussing photography in general, and her own work in particular, also radically changed her personality. For the next few hours she was full of charm, warmth and good humor. And she was articulate, if not voluble, about answering all my questions with disarming frankness. She was delightful. Her bedroom walls were plastered with prints that she was "living with" before deciding if they had merit. I remember she was agonizing at that time over the image of the child playing on a lawn while a couple are spread out on lounge chairs in the background. Eventually she must have decided that it "works" because since then the image has been frequently published.

Subsequently when I called on other well-known photographers during the same trip I found out that Diane Arbus had called ahead to smooth my way. At the

Museum of Modern Art, she was waiting for me in person and was anxious to show me "the best things in the whole collection." From a brown parcel in the back of a cupboard she drew out a stack of prints depicting vaginas with teeth and other equally grotesque and fantastic imagery. "These are from the Kronhausen collection of erotic art," she said, "but they have not been accessioned in case the trustees would object." "Aren't they fantastic," she kept saying, "They're really great," "the best photographs in the place," and so on. So that is my mental snapshot collection of Diane Arbus. I remember a sensual volatile woman with extremes of mood, but most of all I remember an enigmatic photographer who was already a legend, but who took the time to encourage and assist a young photo-magazine editor.

A few weeks later, back in London, I received a large envelope from New York. Inside was a 16 x 20 inch print of one of her "doubtful" photographs which I had urged her to "accept." Her gift asked me to accept it too.

I never saw her again. Diane Arbus committed suicide in 1971.

I have no record of this piece having been published but it must have appeared somewhere because Patricia Bosworth used the anecdote in her biography of Diane Arbus. I have since heard that the incident of the jelly was indeed a "test."