Diane Arbus: A Biography Study Guide

Diane Arbus: A Biography by Patricia Bosworth

Contents

Plot Summary

Diane Arbus was a tragic figure in the Shakespearean sense. Like Shakespeare's heroes, Diane suffered a fatal flaw—mental illness—and in the end was destroyed by it. Born to wealthy parents, Diane enjoyed a protected, cloistered childhood, attending a secularized Jewish elementary school and being attended by maids, cooks, and nannies. By the time she was in high school, however, Diane began a dual lifestyle, one of an intelligent and artistic girl of privilege, the other of a risk-taking adventurer, seeking excitement by observing and participating in "seedier" sides of New York life. Falling in love at fifteen, she married her first love, Allan Arbus, at age eighteen, and began a career partnering with him as a fashion photographer. Finding the work unfulfilling, Diane set off on her own, creating series of photographs with society's freaks and outcasts as subjects. To complete these studies, Diane often traveled to dangerous and strange setting, such as slum areas of New York, the subways at night, freak shows, and institutions. She photographed midgets, giants, transvestites, nudists, and retardants, as well as individual portraits of those involved in all of the sub-cultures of Central Park, a place growing increasingly dangerous in the 1960s. When some of her photographs were displayed at the Museum of Modern Art, her work shocked viewers of the time, but she continued undeterred.

Diane suffered depression most of her life, and this condition was exacerbated by the loss of her husband, the withdrawal of love and attention on the part of several lovers and/or mentors, bouts with hepatitis and financial difficulties, and, ultimately, lack of fulfillment from her work. She attempted to juggle motherhood as a single mom after Allan moved to California with his new wife while working in fashion because she needed the money, and pursuing her first love: portfolios of the aberrant. She became increasingly manic in social relationships, and her depressions increased in severity as well. The comparative success and happiness of her brother, Howard, as a poet, and her sister Renee and husband, as sculptors, moreover, seemed to diminish her own achievements. with this stress and disappointment weighing heavy, Diane committed suicide in July, 1971, at age forty-five.

While most of Diane's work was considered inappropriate and even disgusting, her legacy in photography grew after her death, both because of her techniques and because she moved the realm of acceptable subject matter to new limits. Most professionals recognize that the genius of Diane Arbus lay in her ability to capture psychological depths of her subjects, which others, though they try, are unable to do. Indeed, in her own words, Diane claimed that others might perhaps never see certain things if she did not photograph them.

Chapters 1-8

Chapters 1-8 Summary and Analysis

Frank Russek immigrated to America from Poland, eventually settling in New York with his two brothers. Successful bookies, they saved enough money to open a small fur shop in Manhattan. Frank married Rose Anholt and produced two children, Gertrude and Harold. The business grew and was moved to Fifth Avenue. By this time, a young window dresser, David Nemerov, had caught the eye of young Gertrude.

David Nemerov was the son of Jewish immigrants from Russia and, with his three brothers, sold pencils and shined shoes to help with the rent. He studied hard and became quite valuable to the Russeks, though they opposed the romantic relationship between him and their daughter. Nevertheless, Gertrude and David were married, and he became an integral and important part of Russek's furs, expanding the business by adding women's clothing and accessories. It was David's idea to copy the famous designers of Paris and sell cheaper "knock-offs" in the moderately priced sections of the store. The furs and expensive clothing lines drew the wealthier residents of New York. Two children were born to the Nemerov's, Harold and Diane, and they settled into an opulent lifestyle on Park Ave., complete with maid, cook, chauffeur and a nanny for each child.

Gertrude Nemerov was a bit self-absorbed, and David was consumed by work. Raising and disciplining the children fell to the nannies and maids. Howard and Diane were inseparable during their early years, voraciously reading and creating marvelous tales to tell one another. From a very young age, it was apparent that both would lean toward artistic rather than practical business pursuits. They were studious, intellectually gifted, and not comfortable with the more social, even raucous, lifestyles of the Nemerov and Russek clans. A third child was born, Renee, upon whom Diane lavished attention, and Howard took up the piano. Diane continued to excel in school and was enrolled in the Ethical Culture School, affiliated with a larger movement founded by former rabbi Felix Adler. The basic philosophy was "deed, not creed," is what matters.

During the Depression, Russek's store had many lean times, but always the "front" was maintained, and Diane's father continued to put all of his energy into the business. Diane and her friends, all daughters of wealthy Jewish businessmen, were raised like Jewish princesses, with every cultural and educational advantage possible. Unique, however, was Diane's fascination with the supernatural and her creativity, which she exhibited in art classes at school. There was also a duplicity within her that allowed her to be quite popular and outgoing but then suddenly independent and solitary.

Growing up in the Nemerov household was not always a "fairyland." Father David worked long hours and mother Gertrude played bridge with her friends. While both parents obviously loved their children, there was generally a more formal relationship founded on the traditional philosophy of respect for one's elders. In general, the children

were "spoiled and ignored" (p.28). As a teen, Diane attended Fieldston School, an extension of the Ethical Culture Elementary School, and was significantly influenced by teacher Algernon Black, who taught the philosophy of ethics. Through her studies, Diane developed a sense that her life was too sanitary, that she had been kept in a cocoon, immune to the real world of suffering and pain. To understand this "real world" more fully, she would often embark on "adventures," riding the subway for hours, simply watching strange, unique people. Many of these she sketched in her art class at school. Diane's father arranged for additional art lessons from Russek's illustrator, who introduced her to the works of Grosz. His subjects were unusual - depictions of "lechery, drunkenness, and overeating," and Diane was fascinated.

Also at Russeks was Allan Arbus, a copy boy who attended college at night. The son of Polish immigrants, Allan was artistic and wanted most of all to be an actor. At fourteen, Diane was immediately in love and, in direct disobedience to her parents, managed to see him secretly for almost four years. She developed some strange habits as well, such as not wearing underwear and masturbating in the bathroom at night, in full view of neighborhood men. She was not at all ashamed of her body, as most girls her age were taught to be in those days. Life at home was not without its troubles. Diane's mother suffered from depression, probably exacerbated by her husband's philandering. David had a number of extramarital affairs, and Diane knew of them. Years later, Diane also developed depression, as well as hepatitis, and suffered from their effects until her death.

Diane and brother Howard both worked in the stockroom of Russeks, and both hated it. Howard knew his father intended for him to assume management of the business after college, but he could not bear the thought of it. Diane, meanwhile, continued her romance with Allan, and seeing him provided the motivation for her to continue working at the store. In an attempts to foil the romance between Diane and Allan, David Nemerov sent Diane to summer school for art in Massachusetts. There, she met Alexander Eliot, who later became the art editor of Time Magazine. Alex immediately fell in love, but Diane remained faithful to Allan. Alex became a close friend of both but continued to pine for Diane throughout his early adulthood. Eventually, he married a woman ten years older, and she and Diane became close friends. Howard, meanwhile, was excelling at Harvard and becoming involved with a few close friends who enjoyed writing.

Diane's senior year filed her with ambivalence. She announced that she would not attend college, but, rather, marry Allan as soon as she turned eighteen. Despite her parents' objections, she believed that once they were married her parents would see that she was living the life they actually wished for her: "on the wing of man." At the same time, she knew that to marry was to give up any independence she desired and that her art would be a subordinate activity. This conflict caused a severe bout of depression, and Diane withdrew from both her friends and her art. Her parents finally succumbed, and Diane and Allan was married in a small ceremony in April, 1941.

Alex and his wife Anne moved back to New York, when Alex realized that he could not make a living as a painter in Boston. He obtained an assistantship with a famous

documentary film maker and he and Anne moved into an apartment right across the hall from Allan and Diane. The foursome was inseparable, Alex continually reminding them that he was in love with both Diane and his wife. No one seemed to mind. Diane remained aloof from Alex's comments and committed herself to being a dutiful housewife, struggling financially and asking her parents for nothing.

The fur business at Russeks flourished until the War began. Howard joined the Royal Canadian Air Force, became a pilot, and then joined the U.S. Air Force, flying fifty-seven missions over the North Sea. Allan joined the Signal Corps and ended up at photography school in New Jersey. Diane joined him, setting up a darkroom in the bathroom, and Allan taught her everything he learned. When Allan shipped off to Burma, a pregnant Diane moved into her parents' new apartment. She gave birth to a daughter, Doon, upon whom she lavished all of her attention and care. Howard sent his new British wife there as well, even though his parent were furious about his having married a gentile. Soon, the new bride's mother arrived as well, and she was given a job at Russeks, where her British accent was used to advantage in serving famous and wealthy customers. Howard returned from the War and announced that he would become a writer, much to his father's dismay, and Diane and Allan made plans to become a team of fashion photographers.

Chapters 9-20

Chapters 9-20 Summary and Analysis

The careers of Diane and Allan as fashion photographers began at Russeks. Eventually they branched out, obtaining some work for Bonwit Teller and hitting the street for additional accounts, ultimately landing a solid one with Glamour Magazine. They seemed to complement one another, Diane being the more introspective day dreamer and Allan the organized, rational one. Diane still fought depression, however, and certainly sought to hide it from everyone else, especially daughter Doon. Diane was extremely good at designing the "set" and placing the models in poses, while Allan was the technician with the camera. Diane began to branch out personally, developing her own friendships apart from Allan.

Cheech McKensie, a model, entered Diane's life in 1947, having met her as a result of a modeling interview with Allan. Cheech dabbled in everything artistic, though she was often destitute and lived in an abandoned house in Greenwich Village. She and Diane became fast friends, sharing their most intimate secrets and discussing all that they voraciously read. Cheech adored Diane because she never expected anything of her. Of the few intimate relationships in Diane's life, Cheech perhaps knew her best, knew that within Diane there was a longing to be more than a wife, mother and partner to her dominant husband. Allan resented Cheech's influence over Diane and banned her from their home on many occasions, only to give in later on. Undaunted, Diane would meet Cheech secretly, despite her husband's feelings.

Diane and Alex eventually had an affair, begun when the two couples vacationed at Martha's Vineyard. Diane confessed the infidelity to Allan and Anne. Allan appeared to understand; Anne ran off in hysteria and was eventually hospitalized with severe depression. Alex was guilt-ridden but Diane seemed to feel that it was simply one more of life's adventures to be experienced. Anne never again saw Diane and Allan, though Alex continued to be a part of their lives. When the affair ended, Alex threw himself into his work for Time Magazine. Shortly after, he and his wife divorced, largely due to Anne's drinking, depression, and frequent hospitalizations. For a time, their daughter May lived with Diane and Allan. Eventually, Alex met Jane Winslow, also employed by Time. Jane was not interested in the intimate foursome that had existed before, and so the two couples, while remaining friends, had their separate lives. Diane admitted to being jealous of Jane and Alex's apparent devotion to her.

In 1951, Allan decided that he, Diane and Doon would go to Europe for a year. They were tired of fashion photography and needed a break. An assignment for Vogue Magazine in Paris would help fund the trip. The year in Europe significantly changed Diane, who came home filled with the sights and colors she had endlessly photographed abroad, often with the seedier sides of life for subjects. From this point on, Diane knew that photography could be a legitimate art form, and she was determined to try it independently of the business she and Allan had built. The birth of

another child, Amy, and the continuing need to make money, slowed Diane's goals, however, and she continued to design fashion sets to be photographed by Allan. During this time, Russeks went into an anticipated decline. As people continued to move to the suburbs and adopt a far more casual lifestyle, the demand for furs and elaborate accessories tumbled. David sold Russeks to a group from Chicago, and he and Gertrude retired to a smaller apartment, their flamboyant lifestyle taking an additional downturn after David was named in a "call girl" scandal.

Diane's continued dislike for the stress and constant hustling involved in the commercial photography business led to more severe bouts of depression. To add more pleasurable excitement to her life, she began to push the limits in her personal photography, even snapping pictures of her dead grandmother in her coffin. Following a small breakdown at a dinner party, Diane and Allan decided to separate their professional lives. Allan would continue the fashion photography, but Diane would pursue her own career, choosing subject matter far removed from the fashion world. She began with a thorough study of the history of photography, and became fascinated with those who photographed the grotesque, images of poverty, suffering, old age, etc. One of her favorites was Lisette Model.

Model photographed human "extremes," that is, individuals who were fat, skinny, very rich, very poor, horribly disfigured or completely gorgeous. She was born in Vienna and became a photographer by accident while living in Paris. Coming to the U.S. in 1941, she received immediate acclaim and began to work regularly for Harper's Bazaar. She did unusual photographic studies as well, but barely kept her head above water financially. Diane enrolled in a class taught by Model, and came away from it determined to photograph what, in the eyes of polite society, was forbidden. She and Model became quite close, because they had common backgrounds and, now, common interests. Lisette Model's influence on Diane was obvious, for she taught her that photography was just as much art as was painting. Further, she said, "Photographs that demand admiration have a power to disturb...the best photographs are often subversive, unreasonable, delirious" (p.34).

While Diane honed her skills in photography, brother Howard continued his college teaching, writing novels and poetry and hoping to win national acclaim. His failure to do so was a source of periodic depression, and he envied Diane and Allan their apparent success and wealth. Diane, on the other hand, envied Howard's lifestyle, for she viewed it as less stressful and more open to the needs of a creative person. To widen her own experiences, moreover, she welcomed a widening of her social circle, to include off-Broadway actors, artists, and musicians, whom she and Allan entertained every Sunday evening. One such guest, contemporary photographer Robert Frank, traveled the country photographing a completely different America than that experienced by New Yorkers, specifically, rural scenes of poverty, junk yards, broken, idle equipment, and dying towns. Frank and his wife, along with several other couples from Greenwich Village and Allan and Diane, began to frequent clubs and parties. The group was comprised of a number of aspiring artists in a variety of venues - authors, film makers, painters, and sculptors. Their marriages were not particularly strong, and there was a great deal of exchange of partners, along with drugs and alcohol. Diane participated in

the sex, to be certain, although she did not drink and used marijuana only occasionally. The risky behavior, however, appeared to be a catalyst for Diane, as she continued to pursue the "forbidden" in her art.

By 1958, Diane and Allan were leading quite separate lives. Allan continued fashion photography for the money, but continued to hate it. All his life, he aspired to have an acting career, and so he enrolled in an acting class as a beginning. He began to socialize with the younger crowd in the class, and Diane was typically not invited. For her part, Diane continued to photograph odd subjects but was unable to generate any interest when she presented her portfolio to publishers. She felt that her life was in a stagnant phase and worried that Allan might be falling in love with a young girl with whom he was practicing scenes for class.

Chapters 21-32

Chapters 21-32 Summary and Analysis

Diane and Allan were estranged but attempted to stay together for the sake of the children. They moved to Greenwich Village and opened a photography studio in the new place. Eventually, Diane and the girls moved into a different apartment, although she and Allan continued to see one another and periodically entertained together. Allan was getting small parts in off-Broadway plays and loving it. They maintained their partnership in the studio and shared a collaborative relationship in it, but the passionate love was gone. More than anything, Diane wanted to sell her photographs, or at least get them displayed.

Bent upon photographing the unseen and often grotesque elements of New York, Diane began to ride the subways at night, taking pictures of the homeless, the exhibitionists, bag ladies, prostitutes, alcoholics and drug addicts. She developed a longer-term relationship with one of the riders, Moondog, a musician who begged on the streets and slept in a fleabag hotel at night. She even accompanied him to his hotel room in order to photograph him in his filthy environment. In rough parts of the city, she was able to find "freak shows" and relished photographing these aberrant humans. She traveled to New Jersey and Pennsylvania where "mud shows" (small carnivals) featured freaks, fortune tellers, and escape artists and became thoroughly fascinated with weirdness. At about the same time, she met Marvin Israel, a painter of "grim visions" (p. 169), who was to become her mentor and occasional lover. Israel had at one time been the art director at Seventeen Magazine, but now taught at the Parsons School of Design. He and his wife were a quiet, almost isolated couple, both working on painting projects for long periods. Diane was drawn to Israel because of their common backgrounds and their joint interest in the macabre and dangerous. Israel's paintings were described as "sinister," and he encouraged Diane to delve deeper into the darker sides of New York City.

Israel's influence on Diane was the dominant factor during her life for almost eleven years. Because he controlled her artistic endeavors, Diane's old friends were often critical of him, and Diane was forced to choose between these friends and Israel. She chose Israel. In return, he began to promote her whenever possible, though her subject matter was not appropriate for mainstream publications of the 1950s. Toward the end of the decade, however, magazines began to experiment with more avant garde subject matter, and Israel believed it was time for Diane to show her portfolio to the changing, more liberal publications.

Esquire was one such publication. By 1959, the editors had decided to discard the original format as a men's publication and adopt a more contemporary approach to both text and art. When Esquire decided to devote an entire issue to New York City, Diane was given the assignment of photographing all parts of the city both "posh and sordid." The specific assignment was "night life" in New York City, and she was told to photographic contrasting events, people, and places. The result was hundreds of rolls of

film, including pictures of corpses in the morgue, flophouses, cheap hotels and brothels, and society's throwaways in various parks. By contrast, she photographed popular and trendy night clubs, wealthy personalities, and Boy Scout meetings. Ultimately, only six of her photos were selected for actual publication, but Diane had nevertheless experienced her first success as a paid photographer, and it thrilled her.

Throughout the 1960s Diane was forced to vacillate between her first priority of photographic studies of aberrant groups of individuals, which were difficult to market, and the less important priority of making ends meet by taking assignments from major magazines, which involved more traditional photography. She collaborated with famous fashion photographer Richard Avedon to produce fashion layouts for Show and Esquire Magazines. In between these assignments, she spent two years photographing midgets and giants. She then moved on to nudists, capturing their "earthiness" in nudist camps in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Some of her assignments with Avedon and others involved photographing famous people, and, in many instances they were unhappy with the results of her work, claiming that she developed and presented for publication the least flattering shots. Diane's approach to portraiture, whether the subject was a famous model or actor or one of her "freaks," was to engage the subject in continuous conversations, hoping to get emotional responses which she could then capture on film. To her, this was the only method to achieve a true portrait of any individual, one that revealed his or her true nature.

During the early years of the 1960s, Diane was also dealing with the end of her marriage. While she and Allan remained business partners and shared a dark room, they lived separately and were clearly moving in different directions. The eventual divorce and Allan's subsequent marriage to an actress took its toll. Diane was also attempting to be "super mom," helping her girls with homework, caring for their other needs and then rushing off to assignments. Her life was busy, but she managed to find time for relationships with a number of men. It seemed to her friends that Diane was filling the void of the loss of Allan with lots of casual sex and adventures into risky social scenes, in order to photograph strange and sometimes dangerous cultural sub-groups.

As Diane's personal life became more complex, she suffered more serious bouts of depression and began exhibiting symptoms of mental illness. When her father was diagnosed with lung cancer, and the family gathered for the final stages, Diane showed none of the typical responses of a grieving family member. Instead, she photographed her father's decline and death and stated, "I didn't really adore him." Soon after the funeral, she received a Guggenheim grant, completing it by traveling across the U.S. in a Greyhound Bus, photographing "Americana," both the beautiful and the ugly. She then completed a study of children, published by Bazaar Magazine, in which she developed captions from Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, a favorite piece of literature. Diane seemed to love Carroll's "blend of humor, horror, and justice" (p. 219), a work which may have motivated her own adventures into the bizarre.

By the middle-1960s, Diane was well-known among photographers in New York City, some later characterizing her as the "first paparazzi." At demonstrations and other large gatherings, she aggressively moved through the crowd, snapping pictures and facial

close-ups, sometimes angering her subjects. Photography became an extremely competitive business, given the turbulence of the decade, and the sale of pictures to the news media became a new and lucrative venue. Diane was operating in a profession dominated by men, and this fact perhaps increased he sense of urgency, her aggressive nature, and her need to achieve perfection in what she produced. Her photography and choice of subjects, moreover, ushered in a new type of life depiction. In the 1930s and '40s, photographers acted as "benevolent" recorders of society and were "serene in their technique." Diane, however, chose the seedy, the freakish, and even the mainstream, and her strategy was to break down the normal facade of her subjects until she was able to capture their inner personalities. Such technique was not benevolent, and soon other photographers were behaving the same.

In 1965, a number of Diane's portraits were displayed in a show at the Museum of Modern Art. Specific photos included female impersonators and nudists, and public reaction was "violent." She was not deterred, however, and began to wander about the Lower East Side, snapping beatniks, gangs, and "Slumming" suburban teens attending rock concerts. At Washington Square Park, she found runaways and local teens from poverty, who played loud music and splashed graffiti on the edifices. Junkies, winos, and homosexuals had their territories in the park as well, and this was fertile territory for Diane. She spent hours observing and conversing with these groups, capturing what she believed to be their psychological make-ups in her pictures.

Her return to traditional money-making photography during the late-1960s involved a second Guggenheim, photos of a number of artists featured in Bazaar Magazine, and additional work displayed in the Museum of Modern Art. Another major achievement during this time was her work on a children's fashion portfolio for the New York Times, set in Jamaica. Given these successes, Diane reached the high point of her career. Her specific methodology, "photographing in square format with direct flash," influenced documentary photography into the 1970s, though Diane would not be alive to see this influence. While her subjects were now more "normal," she still liked the shock value of snapping pictures of people by surprise, usually on the streets of downtown New York City. She was almost manic in her professional efforts while her personal life continued to fall apart.

Diane began to express fears of growing old alone. Allan was moving to California with his new wife, Doon was away writing for fashion layouts, and Amy was in boarding school. At the same time, an earlier bout with hepatitis recurred, and she was taken off all medications, including those used to combat her depression. In spite of her physical and mental conditions, however, she continued to work in order to pay her bills, including accepting magazine assignments to photograph Mia Farrow, Eugene McCarthy, and Coretta King. Allan sent money when he could, and she accepted requests for paid lectures, although she despised giving them. Some of her assignments took her to London where friend Peter Crookston was "shocked" by her appearance. Other friends began to notice and comment on her almost schizophrenic behavior. Mentor Lizette Model observed Diane's abrupt personality shifts and her obsessive demands for attention. She talked incessantly about her sex life, to both

friends and strangers, although most believed these tales to be exaggerated and/or imaginary.

In 1969, Diane moved to Westbeth, a converted warehouse, in which many artists lived. She was happier there, as there were always opportunities for conversation and gatherings. The feminist movement had resulted in an emergence of female artists, although Diane remained averse to being "clumped" into this group. Her new focus became "retardates" and she traveled to Vineland, an institution in New Jersey, to photograph as many as possible. "She was fascinated by their extreme innocence, their total lack of self-consciousness. They paid no attention to her as she photographed them" (p. 299).

As 1971 approached, Diane had to again earn income, and she did so by teaching a class in photography in a vacant apartment at Westbeth and completing a photographic series for Time-Life Books. As well, she composed a series of photos to put into limited edition portfolios, which she planned to sell for a thousand dollars each. By spring, she was forcing herself to continue to move, even covering Tricia Nixon's wedding for the London Sunday Times. She contacted her siblings and close friends as the summer heat descended, a season Diane hated. Her friends left for the beach or the mountains, and Diane was left alone in the city, depressed and increasingly despondent. Clearly, Diane was "tying things up," though her friends did not realize it at the time. She began to give things away and make statements, such as, "My work doesn't do it for me anymore."

On July 28, 1971, unable to get an answer on her phone, Marvin Israel went to Diane's apartment and found her dead in the bathtub. She had cut her wrists, and the autopsy stated both barbiturate poisoning and blood loss as the causes of death.

Afterword

Afterword Summary and Analysis

Diane Arbus, like many artists, enjoyed far more fame after he death than during her lifetime. She can be considered an iconoclast within her field, as she forever altered documentary photography in both technique and subject matter. Following her death, an exhibit titled, "Diane Arbus Revelations" toured the United States and Russia, with the same ambivalent reactions as exhibits during her lifetime. Nonetheless, her insistence on capturing the realities of the turbulent decade of the 1960s through the faces of every social and cultural sub-group provides a thorough study of the times.

The release of Arbus photographs has been carefully controlled by the estate, Doon being the executrix. It is the family's belief that, in order to maintain the value of Diane's work, items should be released over time rather than all at once. The photographs continue to escalate in value, and those individual who are lucky enough to have been given photos by Diane, have priceless objects today.

Author Bosworth saw Diane for the last time during a fundraiser for the "Chicago Seven Defense Fund," in the summer of 1970. Diane was on the roof doing what she always loved - this time, photographing Abby Hoffman, using rolls and rolls of film until she ran out. Later she said to author Bosworth, "I really believe there are things which nobody would see unless I photographed them."

Characters

Diane Arbus

Diane was born into an affluent Jewish family in New York City. She attended private schools, where her artistic talent became obvious, along with a tendency toward adventurous and risky behaviors. She fell in love with Allan Arbus at age fifteen and married him soon after high school graduation, at age eighteen. She became fascinated with both photography and the aberrant sub-cultures of society, which became the subjects of much of her photographic portraiture. She partnered with her husband in fashion photography but found it unfulfilling. Eventually, the marriage failed, and Diane struck out on her own, alternating between two types of work. First, she accepted assignments from popular magazines in order to provide for herself and two daughters, Doon and Amy.

Second, she pursued her first love, that is, photographing portfolios of strange and bizarre groups of people, including giants, midgets, beatniks, runaways, carnival freaks,. transvestites, and retardates. When some of her work was displayed in the Museum of Modern Art, public reaction was hostile. Undeterred, she continued to pursue this subject matter, suffering from increasingly severe bouts of depression. Diane's personal lifestyle was a dichotomy. She was a typical good mother, involved in the lives of her children, and yet engaged in promiscuous and occasionally dangerous sexual exploits. With her ex-husband re-married and living in California and her most important mentor and occasional lover increasingly unavailable, Diane could fine no solace or enjoyment in her work anymore. On July 28, 1971, she committed suicide by an overdoes of barbiturates and cutting her wrists. She was found in her apartment bathtub. Posthumously, she has enjoyed significant fame with world tour exhibits and the acknowledgment that she significantly altered the art form of photography.

Allan Arbus

The descendant of Polish immigrants, Allan Arbus secured a position as a copy boy at Russeks Fur Salon while attending City College at night. Allan was interested in music and acting, playing the clarinet and receiving awards for his school stage performances. Though five years older than Diane, he was determined to marry her and did so when she turned eighteen. Allan never lost his desire to be an actor, but settled into fashion photography, with Diane as his partner, because it provided great income. Allan photographed fashion models for most major magazines of the time, and continued to do so even after his professional partnership with Diane ended. He enrolled in an acting class, meeting a much younger group of people and began to move in his own "acting" social group, of which Diane had great jealousy and contributed to her continuing issue of depression. Eventually, Allan and Diane divorced, and he re-married, moving then to California, so that he and his wife could pursue acting careers. He managed to snag

some small parts for television shows but never became the famous actor he wished to be.

Howard Nemerov

Older brother of Diane, Howard also preferred the arts to any other professional career. He and Diane were quite close growing up, attending the same schools and working part-time at Russeks during their teen years. Howard attended Harvard University and then disappointed his father by choosing not to join Russeks management. During World War II, he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force and then the U.S. Air Force, flying bombing missions. Howard embarked upon a career in writing, specifically novels and poetry, though he was unable to gain initial success and earn a living. He joined the faculty at Bennington College and, later, Washington University in St. Louis. He is now recognized as a gifted poet.

David Nemerov

David was Diane's father and the son of Russian immigrants. He became a part of Russeks Fur Salon, first as a window dresser and, ultimately, by marrying the owner's daughter, Gertrude. He was not heavily involved in the raising of his three children, Howard, Diane and Renee, but was, nevertheless, a typical Jewish patriarch. In his later years, David was implicated in a "call girl" scandal and eventually retired, with Gertrude, to Florida. There, he took up painting, a lifelong interest, and sold some of these to both friends and strangers. David died of cancer prior to Diane's death.

Gertrude Nemerov

The daughter of immigrants, Gertrude grew up in New York City. Her father and uncles made money as bookies, eventually saving enough to open Russeks Fur Salon. Gertrude married David Nemerov, a window dresser at Russeks and, together, they had three children. As her husband moved into management at Russeks, their wealth grew and Gertrude was able to employ a maid, cook, and nanny for each of the children, while she played bridge and took dancing lessons. Gertrude suffered from depression throughout most of her life, and it is believed that Diane inherited this condition from her.

Alex Eliot

Alex met Diane at a summer camp for art, during their teen years. Alex immediately fell in love with Diane and remained in love long after both he and Diane had married others. Alex and his wife, and Allan and his wife remained an inseparable foursome for many years. Diane and Alex had a brief affair during these years, and Alex eventually divorced and re-married. His new wife did not wish to continue a close relationship with Diane and Allan, and so Alex and Diane saw one another only infrequently. Diane's loss

of Alex's devotion was a source of sadness for Diane, and she was clearly jealous of Alex's love for his second wife.

Lizette Model

Model was born into a wealthy Viennese family and, by the 1920s, was living in Paris, where she married a Russian Jewish immigrant, Evsa Model. He was a painter who struggled financially, and Lizette decided to take up photography, in order to make a living for them both. When Hitler came to power, Lizette's family lost its millions, and she and Evsa immigrated to New York. She was an immediate success as a photographer and began working for popular magazines of the time. Diane Arbus was intrigued by Model's photos and begged to purchase one. Instead, Model suggested that Diane join her class at the New School. The class was successful, Diane learned a great deal, and she came to see Lizette as a great mentor. Model encouraged Diane to travel around the "seedier" parts of New York City, in order to capture unique subjects.

Marvin Israel

Diane Arbus met Marvin Israel in the later-1950s, a painter of "grim visions," who was to become another strong mentor and influence in her life. Israel had been the art director of Seventeen Magazine and then taught at the Parsons School of Design. Diane came to worship Marvin and severed some of her relationships with good friends when they expressed their dislike of him and his strange hold on Diane. Israel was married to an introverted painter and was clearly devoted to her. He and Diane had a sexual relationship for quite some time, however, although Diane was frustrated and depressed that he was not available as much as she desired. Israel promoted Diane throughout New York City and managed to get her several assignments. It was Marvin Israel who found Diane after she committed suicide.

Cheech McKensie

Originally a model, Cheech first met Diane when she modeled for a fashion photography shoot. They became fast and long-term friends. Cheech had a non-traditional lifestyle, living for a time with gypsies in a bad section of New York City, and bent upon experiencing every culture she could. She married first a Chinese and then a Black, saying that these were "just the beginning." Diane was obviously attracted to another woman who shared her interest in risk-taking and experiencing all that life had to offer. Cheech often encouraged Diane to seek out the dangerous more exciting part of New York city and believed in reincarnation.

Renee Nemerov

Youngest of the Nemerov children, Renee always felt ignored and dismissed by her older sister Diane. Renee became an artist and married one as well, and they

experimented with a variety of forms of sculpture, using newer synthetic materials and plastics. While their father was dying, they reconciled somewhat, but were never close throughout their adult lives. When Renee's husband's sculptures were permanently placed in New York, Diane did not even attend the unveiling—an act that both angered and saddened Renee.

Objects/Places

Russeks

Fur store on 5th Avenue, originally owned by Gertrude Nemerov's father and uncles.

Park Ave

Upscale street in New York City with luxurious apartments. Diane Arbus lived on Park Ave. growing up.

Ethical Culture School

Elementary school attended by Diane Arbus, founded by a humanist rabbi.

Fielston School

High school attended by Diane Arbus where she developed as an early artist.

Alice in Wonderland

Favorite book of Diane Arbus, verses from which she used to caption a portfolio on children.

Central Park

Huge park in New York City and favorite haunt of Diane as a teen.

Mud Show

Small carnival which travels from town to town, featuring rides, games and freak shows.

Bennington

College at which Howard Nemerov taught for twenty years.

New York Museum of Modern Art

Large and famous museum in New York City and site of two exhibits in which Diane's photos were included.

John Robert Powers Agency

Modeling agency in New York that supplied models for fashion photography during the 1950s and 1960s.

Parsons School of Design

Art school in New York City.

Esquire Magazine

Originally a magazine for men, it altered its format to appeal to a wider audience in the 1950s. Some of Diane's photos were featured in Esquire.

Greenwich Village

Section of New York City inhabited by artists and beatniks during the 1950s and 1960s.

Westbeth

Warehouse by the Hudson River renovated into an "artist colony" of apartments. Diane lived there for the last few years of her life.

Vineland

Institution in New Jersey for mentally retarded individuals. Diane traveled there many times to photograph the residents.

The Twins

One of Diane's most famous photographs.

Themes

Mental Illness

Mental illness is often more debilitating than many physical impairments or diseases, because it can render one unable to function productively. The biography of Diane Arbus is as much a study of the effects of mental illness as it is the story of a talented photographer who significantly influenced her art form. In the case of Diane, the diagnosis was depression, a condition which can manifest itself in inertia, fatigue, listlessness and feelings of inadequacy. Certainly, Diane suffered with this, and the condition was exacerbated by her bouts with hepatitis. As well, however, she experienced periods of mania, during which she seemed unable to curb the excesses of both professional and personal endeavors. Thus, she rode subways all night long in search of photographic subjects; thus, she engaged in promiscuous behaviors which she then recounted to friends and strangers in lengthy, rapid conversation. Ultimately, a severe episode of depression caused her suicide, as she believed that she was misunderstood by the public and abandoned by those she loved. Mental illness is often an affliction of artistic geniuses. One need only recall such people as Mozart, Van Gogh and Edgar Allen Poe to understand that artists can produce amazing works despite their illnesses, but that their illnesses ultimately impact their lives in irreversible ways. Most often, after death, such individuals are credited with major influence in their fields.

Posthumous Recognition

It is almost standard fare for artists that their work, and specifically the influence of their work upon their fields of artistic endeavor, is not recognized until after death. During their lifetimes, therefore, they often suffer financial difficulty and public disdain, because their work is considered too radical or bizarre for contemporary society. Such was the case for Diane Arbus. Up until Diane's time, photography was limited to fashion, formal portraiture, and American scenes of life for traditional societal groups. Documentary photography(photojournalism) began in earnest in the 1950s, with depictions of the "seedier" sides of American society and both domestic and international events and conflicts. Diane's subject matter of freaks and other non-mainstream individuals, however, was still considered inappropriate, and public reaction to her displayed photographs was generally disdainful. After her death, Diane's contribution to the field of photography was recognized, both in technique and in subject matter. Diane opened photography to the depiction of the ugly, the extreme, and the bizarre, and thus moved it from the rather stylized commonplace to the freer more emotional art form it has since become. Diane's specific ability to capture an individual's personality and inner, more secretive nature is something that others have attempted to emulate, with varying degrees of success. As to the value of Diane's photographs, the estate has carefully released them over periods of time, and they are now quite pricey. As well, a posthumous exhibit has traveled the world, with far more acceptance than she received in her lifetime.

The Universality of Change in Art

From the early drawings of cavemen on the walls of their homes, art has been an integral part of the society in which it is created. In all of its forms - music, literature, and various forms of art - reflect the culture and the times of the artists' world. Early art was heavily stylized and certainly primitive by today's standards. With the advent of new mediums, and the development of secularization, art moved into the mainstream of society and began to imitate life outside of religion. Color, perspective, nudity, landscapes, romanticism and impressionism pushed drawings, paintings and sculpture to new levels, as creativity and risk-taking flourished. Technology certainly impacted art significantly. The advent of sophisticated methods of artistic endeavors often assaulted the societies in which they were created. Photography as an art form was not accepted until the twentieth century, and its beginnings consisted of stiff portraits and scenes. As camera technology improved, photographers began to experiment with new techniques and subject matter. When technique and subject matter surpass the acceptability of a society, however, the conflict between artist and public can be difficult and hostile. Such was the case when photography moved into the arena of making statements about society and politics. Graphic depictions of war, cruelty, society's castoffs, and "underground" sub-groups shocked American sensibilities, but certainly pushed complacent and "traditional" individuals to confront their own prejudices and "hang ups." As is always the case, public acceptance eventually catches up with the art, and this cycle will continue as long as creative individuals push their art to new heights.

Style

Perspective

Author Patricia Bosworth was not an intimate friend of Diane Arbus, although she was employed as a fashion model on three occasions. As she states in the preface to her work, she ran into Diane on several occasions and had some conversations with her. Bosworth admits that the information obtained for this biography came from many others who knew Diane intimately, including relatives, friends, and business associates, but not from Diane's children, former husband, or Marvin Israel, who perhaps had the most significant impact on Diane's adult life after her separation from husband Allan. Bosworth, then, was forced to rely on dozens of close friends and Diane's brother Howard, all of whom provided comprehensive depictions of Diane at various stages of her life, in order to gain a complete picture of this complex and, ultimately, mentally ill artist. The book is not an objective account by any means. Throughout its pages, Bosworth injects her own interpretations of the information she is given, and comments specifically on the importance and influence of Diane's photographic techniques and her controversial subject matter. As Bosworth states, Diane altered the world of art and photography by altering what was considered acceptable subject matter. During the rebellious, cultural shock wave of the 1960s, then, Diane was the reflection of the artistic response to a new era.

Tone

The overriding tone of this work is tragedy, and Bosworth alludes to Diane Arbus' deteriorating mental health and her professional frustration throughout the book. From a protected, "immune," childhood, Diane throws herself into an early marriage, to professional fashion photography which she despises, and then into a forbidden world of freaks, deviant cultural subgroups and sexual promiscuity, in order to achieve some type of catharsis and meaning for her work and life. Against this backdrop is the continuing deterioration of her physical and mental health, characterized by bouts with hepatitis and depression, as well as obvious manic behaviors. Some characterized her as schizophrenic. Constantly doubting her own worth as a person and an artist, Diane was significantly affected by her belief that she had gained the reputation that she was simply an aberrant individual who photographed freaks and was thus not to be taken as a serious artist. Despite her obvious success as a mainstream photographer for a variety of national magazines, she saw this type of photography as merely something to pay the bills, so that she could continue her work capturing the seedy and forbidden aspects of American society. As is the case with many artists, Diane's influence on art and photography was not recognized until after her suicide, although her subject matter remained highly controversial.

Structure

Bosworth has divided the book into three sections, each dealing with a chronological depiction of Diane's life. Section One, Russeks Fifth Avenue, treats Diane's early childhood, growing up in wealth and privilege on Park Avenue. Even during these early years, however, Diane had a flair for the deviant, planning risky adventures with her friends and engaging in rather outrageous behavior. As well, at age fourteen, she fell in love with an employee at Russeks and determined that she would marry him, against her parents wishes, when she turned eighteen. This she accomplished, despite her parents' attempt to quash the romance. Section Two, The Fashion Years, recounts the years in which Diane and her husband Allan were partners in the fashion photography business. During this time, Diane had begun to experiment with photographing socially "inappropriate" groups and individuals, but remained a strong supporter to her husband and gave birth to two daughters. By the end of this section, however, Diane and Allan are growing apart, and the earlier inseparable nature of their marriage and work was gone. The third section, The Dark World, explores Diane's continuing need to capture the freakish and forbidden and her attempts to get her photographs sold or at least displayed. While she achieved some success, albeit controversy over her subject matter, Diane continued to accept fashion photography assignments in order to meet expenses. Husband Allan moved on with a new wife and a move to California, Marvin Israel was not available as she wished, and Diane exhibited manic behaviors in between bouts of severe depression and hepatitis. She committed suicide, overdosing on barbiturates and slicing her wrists in the bathtub of her apartment.

Quotes

They were part of a 1967 show called "New Documents," a crucial exhibit because it marked the end of traditional documentary 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. (pp. x-xi)

What Faurer did, and then Robert Frank, was to forget about elegance and experiment with exaggerated scale and light and shadow. This style ultimately became known as the "snapshot aesthetic," which hooked right onto the modernist sensibility. (p. 114)

And she had a special ability to seek out peculiar subject matter, and then her way of confronting it with her camera, well, it was like something I'd never seen before. She seemed to be able to suggest how it felt to be a midget or a transvestite. (p. 172)

Diane admitted to being exhilarated by danger. Her obsessive search for adventures, for strangeness, was a way of escaping both boredom and depression; she suffered a lot from depression, she said. (p. 210)

If she had a need to exaggerate the physical and psychological horror in her subjects, it was because she saw that beyond these exaggerations might lie transcendental worlds of absolute value. She would always go on exploring the question of identity versus illusion in her photography. (p.225)

She was making very little money, but she was developing a rather fearsome reputation with magazine art directors - as a photographer who laid bare in her portraits ghostly psychological trust. For Bazaar, she did an essay on relationships - the Gish sisters, friends Rudi Nureyev and Erik Bruhn, poets W. H. Auden and Marianne Moore - and she seemed to catch the ambiguities within these couples - the acute discomfort they all had in posing for the camera. (p. 237)

Collecting and exchanging secrets was a private bond between herself and her subjects; it was actually at the core of her work. Making something a secret was a way of giving it value. (p. 250)

And nobody except possibly Marvin Israel and John Szarkowski understood or cared about what she was trying to do. Not until the 1980s would her style and content be called significant and a major influence in photography, and even then her work would still be sometimes compared to a "horror show." (p. 275)

"It might be historical, it's embarrassing. I can't defend this position, but I think I take photographs because there are things that nobody would see unless I photographed them." (p. 279)

"But now I'm seeing with double vision, with what I learned as a kid and what I've since learned. It seems to me the only pleasure about getting old is if you come through with more understanding than you had in the first place." (p. 280)

Somehow for her work to live - to flourish, to grow - it could not be contained between pages or hung on walls were it would be judged, scrutinized, interpreted by strangers. She preferred to give her work to friends - to Nancy Grossman, Harold Hayes, Robert Benton, Tina Fredericks, Peter Crookston, Bea Feitler, Richard Avedon. (p. 306-07)

I thought this must be the most devastating thing to happen to an artist - to lose one's need to discover. What does it mean when suddenly, inexplicably, we're no longer nourished by our work and it gives us nothing back? (p. 319)

This is characteristic of Diane's radical vision: portraying the extraordinary as ordinary and acceptable, and there is as well a mix of extreme concentration, eerie detachment, and belief in the photography. Diane's spirit is mysteriously present too, looking steadily on. (p. 323)

Topics for Discussion

It is perhaps a stereotype that the average person views artists as odd or "off center." Describe the specific aspects of Diane's personality and behaviors that fit this stereotype.

One of the overriding depictions of Diane Arbus in this work is her need for attention and love. Give specific examples of these traits from her life.

Promiscuity on the part of females is often psychologically related to their lack of a loving relationship with their father. Discuss Diane's relationship with her father as it might relate to her adult promiscuity.

What do you believe were Diane's contributions to photography as an art form? Cite specific examples or statements by the author to support this.

Diane's subject matter shocked and at times disgusted mainstream society. What societal groups might still find this true today? Why?

In what ways can Diane Arbus be compared to the general beliefs and activities of the hippies of the 1960s? Support your comparisons with specific examples.

It is said that Diane Arus attempted to live in two separate worlds and that the ultimate failure of her ability to do so contributed to her mental illness. Is this contention valid? Why or why not?