

Voyeur or Visionary:

Exploring Representation of Intellectual Disability in Diane Arbus' *Untitled* Series

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Of the myriad of portrait photographers that have woven their artistry through the United States' history, one that stands out in notoriety and controversiality is Diane Arbus. Born in 1928 into a wealthy family, she grew up in the epitome of upper class, white American privilege. While her socioeconomic status enabled her to pursue her artistic endeavors to begin with, Arbus differed from her well-off counterparts in that not only did she recognize her privilege, she resented it (Lane). This resentment manifested itself in her art—while she started as a fashion photographer, working commercially alongside her husband, Allan Arbus, she quickly grew tired of this photographic *mise en scène* and instead transitioned into photographing the marginalized individuals who were regarded as the oddities of American society. From dwarfs to transvestites to nudists, Arbus's film photography captured images the American public was not willing to look at and yet struggled to look away from.

In 1969, Arbus entered yet another new scene for her photography, exposing nearly 2,000 frames of film in two institutions for people with intellectual disabilities. However, her suicide in 1971 deemed these images her last, leaving many

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undeveloped, unedited, and untitled, hence the series' name, or lack thereof (Lane). It was up to her daughter to compile and print what she could find. As was the case for much of her work, Arbus' *Untitled* images were met with immense controversy, evoking the question of who has the right to depict individuals with disabilities. On one hand, Arbus' critics claim that the *Untitled* series is unethical in that it demonstrates voyeurism – the practice of taking pleasure in observing something scandalous. These opposers claim that Arbus was a woman of the bourgeoisie, manipulating and profiting off of vulnerable humans whilst molding them to her creative will. On the contrary, Arbus' supporters argue that rather than demonstrating a manipulative superiority complex, Arbus worked to dismantle such othering mindsets, and that the series is instead empathetic and inclusive in its representation of those with intellectual disabilities. This paper comes to the conclusion that through the lens of disability as something unfortunate or inferior, *Untitled* could be justly accused of voyeurism. However, this perception of disability is subjective and dated, and therefore the lasting impact of the images was actually ahead of its time.

In considering *Untitled*, it is important to also acknowledge the context surrounding twentieth century views on intellectual disability, which have been stigmatized since their emergence in the medical realm. This stigmatization is evident in the surrounding terminology: labels such as imbecile and idiot were used throughout the nineteenth century, the latter deriving from the Greek word *idios*, meaning peculiar, and serving as the official term for those with an intellectual disability (Abergel and Werner 386, VanDetta-Smitherman 11). These classifications, which are now considered synonymous with stupidity and lunacy, transitioned to mid-twentieth century vocabulary such as mental deficiency, subnormality,

and retardation, each of which respectively implied “defect” of the mind,” “inferior performance” and “mental slowness” (Wehmeyer 166-167). These notions of peculiarity, deficiency, and inferiority showcase that the nature of these societal understandings of intellectual disability were rooted in prejudice, ultimately suggesting that by being subnormal, these individuals are consequently subhuman. This conceptual alienation of those with intellectual disabilities catalyzed physical alienation: “as the name and classification changed, it continued impacting how society not only identified and described the condition, but now it was significantly affecting how society addressed intellectual disability in forms of treatment[,] . . . justifying practices such as involuntary sterilization and institutionalization practices” (VanDetta-Smitherman 18). And such was the socio-cultural environment that set the scene for the *Untitled* series; Arbus began her project in 1969, amidst a time where the expectation was for people with intellectual disabilities to be sent to state-run institutions for the “mentally retarded,” a norm demonstrated by the fact that just two years previous, the mental institutionalization census reached its historical peak (Wehmeyer 192).

This contextual vernacular allows for a very specific analysis of the series. Consider *Untitled (10)* – the photograph situates its subject nearly at its center. As are all of Arbus’ images, the photo is in black and white, and the resulting contrast garners increased attention to the fact that the subject has Down syndrome. However, the contrast also brings attention to the angular, almost jagged composition of her body – the shadowy contortion of her ankles and the outwards jut of her arms making her appear anatomically contorted. The achromatic nature of the photo also lends itself to the sea of grass becoming a dark void of negative space that the subject seems to swim in, her fair skin and bright clothes standing out

against the dark tones. In conjunction with this, the horizon line that dissects the photo turns the grassy expanse into an almost perfect square so as to essentially frame her. The photo is shot with a shallow depth of field, effectively blurring out the background so that the subject is clearly the focus of the photo, the happenings behind her obscured by softness. However, parts of the field remain in focus, specifically the blades of grass near her body, whose sharp, pointed textures appear to guide the eye towards the subject and further spotlight her. All of these elements work together to singularize the subject, emitting tones of isolation and ostracism which are conducive to the notion that this girl, and those with Down syndrome in general, are the other.

Considering both Arbus' seemingly isolating techniques and the contextual lens that intellectual disability was regarded as something worthy of ostracism, arguments that the *Untitled* series was unethically photographed gain merit, and traces of accused voyeurism grow evident in *Untitled* as well as Arbus body of work as a whole. The consistent presentation of her subjects "dead-center in the foreground of the square picture plane, against a soft-focused ground" and "the uneven edges and the occasional black line that borders the abstract ground literally and figuratively frame the subject and push them out to confront and envelop" the viewer, conveying a sense of loneliness but also a sense of intimacy, that the audience would be able to witness the subject in such a lonesome state (Goldman 30). Critics frequently accuse this intimacy to be one rooted in exploitation; Susan Sontag, one of Arbus' most famed faultfinders, wrote of her images as ones "concentrating on victims, on the unfortunate" from a perspective "based on distance, on privilege, [and] on a feeling that what the other is asked to look at is really the *other*" (Sontag 35). Many a critical analysis of Arbus' oeuvre draw on this claim, asserting that

“there is something dishonest about Arbus' intimacy . . . [through which] an air of complicity and misplaced trust escapes from the framed subjects . . . made by someone who had the upper-hand (Goldman 33). It must be conceded that this paradox of distant intimacy exists, and the underlying notion of a betrayal of the defenseless subject by a domineering photographer, or even the mere presence of an “upper-hand” at all, lends itself to immense potential for unethical depiction.

This exploitation of the vulnerable can be said to turn people with intellectual disabilities from subject matter to spectacle, the photographs becoming a “means of enacting thrilling and sensuous transgressions” and “self indulgence[s]” (Charrier). Sontag claims that her images become “art that is a self-willed test of hardness” –inviting audiences to come partake in viewing something that makes them feel uncomfortable, to see how long they can stare at something that is traditionally hard to look at (Sontag 40). Therefore, by definition, this potential for such entertainment at the hands of something so supposedly private and deplorable as disability in the twentieth century is at its core a legitimate demonstration of voyeurism in the *Untitled* series. As Sontag writes, “One has the right . . . to give voice to one’s own pain – which is, in any case, one’s own property. One volunteers to seek out the pain of others” (Sontag 40), suggesting that in the images’ temporal framework, Arbus volunteered herself to represent these individuals without having the right to do so.

With this being said, the issue with claiming that the *Untitled* series is definitively composed through a voyeuristic lens is that this perspective demands the assumption that the subjects, or rather victims, of the voyeurism are in some sort of painful state, that their existence itself is something wretched, in which lies a sense of scandal in bearing witness to the supposed misfortune. For example, Sontag bases her argument

on the “pathetic, pitiable, as well as repulsive” nature of Arbus’ subjects, claiming that the *Untitled* series are some of her “most disturbing” photographs (Sontag 33, 34). Copycat critics follow suit, calling the images “a most harrowing set of photos, a series left untitled as if they portray the unnamable [—] . . . the jarring realization that these people are retarded” (Mayer). These opinionated descriptions are demeaning, politically incorrect and dated; therefore, while critics at the time might find photographs of those with intellectual disabilities offensive, today we consider the vernacular with which these critics discussed them offensive, showcasing that this underlying notion of intellectual disability as such a horrifically taboo concept is not only subjective, but grossly antiquated.

For the photos to constitute voyeurism, the subjects would have to be portrayed in the state of “unfortunate victimhood” that society already perceived them to be in. But when stripped of this victimizing pretense of “the other,” *Untitled* actually appears to do quite the opposite. While the photo is shot with a wide-open aperture, the depth of field is deep enough that the viewer can easily distinguish the background. The apparent swing set adds a sense of playfulness to the image, and the person on the swings de-isolates the subject by physically giving her company. Although the darkness of the achromic field stands out from her light complexion and attire, she is also accompanied by the brighter flowers speckled throughout the field, their similar, bright tones likening her to them. Her positioning, though at first peculiar, also further weaves her into the setting of the photo; rather than standing in the field, posed and detached, she lies in it, blades of grass intertwined between her fingers and the wrinkles of her clothes, anchoring her to her surroundings and suggesting a sense of belonging. The blurred edges, off-kilter horizon line, and black line along the top

border convey the nonchalance of the snapshot. Perhaps the image's most striking feature is the subject's utter glee, which works in tandem with these other mechanisms to portray this subject with Down syndrome in an undeniably positive light.

This positive light is evident in the *Untitled* series as a whole. The images vary from her former works, which were typified by Arbus' tendency to single out her subjects. Rather than freezing their subjects dead center, the *Untitled* images convey movement, companionship, and spontaneity. As you can see in the book and in these images, ordinary backdrops are evident, making the photos less about the subject and more about the subjects as members of their environment. The use of natural lighting and grainy blemishes that emulate amateur photos serve as a step away from Arbus' typically strict adherence to the techniques of flash-photography perfection, as though "Arbus deliberately sought to enhance the sense of 'realness' or veraciousness of her pictures by introducing flaws that anchored them more firmly in the photographic vernacular" (Charrier). But as a result of these imperfections, the images introduce "flavor of 'total ordinariness,'" as if to say that the depictions are less pieces of art and more quick capturings of candid silliness and joy (Charrier). The naturalness of the setting and what the subjects are doing suggest that Arbus is merely depicting everyday life, and yet the happy nonchalance of the subjects suggests that it's not something scandalous or voyeuristic being portrayed, and that having an intellectual disability isn't something that needs to be privatized in the first place. With this being said, it is also important to acknowledge that this same casualness could also be attributed to the setting of the photos; in potentially suggesting that institutions are cheerful and normal environments, this could normalize institutionalization itself and allow for eschewing the innate injustice of the practice.

This potential bifurcation is not the only shortcoming of the *Untitled* series in terms of ethical representation. The photos do not display particular effort in giving the subjects agency in their depictions; perhaps Arbus could have titled each image with the name and hometown of the subject, or maybe she could have accompanied every photo with a biography about each individual to convey their fellow humanity and portray people with intellectual disabilities as peers and equals. While the images have irrefutable room for improvement, it is paramount to analyze them not only in respect to similar media of its time, but in respect to the progress in standards for discussing intellectual disability today. The twenty-first century has been marked with strides towards inclusivity; as the mental institution census dropped, the number of smaller, community-based residential settings increased dramatically (Wehmeyer 192). The latest version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders redefined “mental retardation” as “intellectual disability” in an attempt to banish the demeaning stigma from the surrounding vernacular. Empowering and inclusive advocacy programming such as “spread the word to end the word,” Best Buddies, and Vanderbilt University’s own Next Steps are of growing prevalence in modern day society. Despite the growth still to be had, the notion that those with intellectual and developmental disabilities are incapable and inferior individuals is an opinion rooted in falsehood and antiquity. Although the world is nowhere close to where it should be in terms of inclusion, the progress it has made so far is reflected in the implementation of each and every special education program, inclusive higher education program, complete and integrated employment system, specialized care structure, and advocacy policy. The fact of the matter is that, while it has a long way to go, the nation is in the process of cultivating a culture of inclusivity. Therefore, while we can’t

truly speak to Arbus' inherent intent for the series or any of her former images, if we analyze *Untitled* with respect to the progress societal perceptions of intellectual disability have made, it appears that Diane Arbus's *Untitled* series was on the right side of history, and that her images were a revolutionary portrayal of this widely underrepresented and misrepresented community.



Untitled (10)

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