

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Handbook of Psychobiography* (editor)

*Tiny Terror: Why Truman Capote (Almost) Wrote Answered Prayers*

# AN EMERGENCY IN SLOW MOTION

*The Inner Life of Diane Arbus*

*Best wishes!*

William Todd Schultz

*William T. Schultz*

12/20/2013

BLOOMSBURY

New York Berlin London Sydney

## CONTENTS

Introduction	I
<i>Chapter 1</i> Essential Mysteries	10
<i>Chapter 2</i> The Secret	30
<i>Chapter 3</i> Fairy Tales for Grown-ups	68
<i>Chapter 4</i> Shame Erasing	110
<i>Chapter 5</i> The Black Knot	140
<i>Chapter 6</i> Sweeping Back the Ocean	166
<i>Chapter 7</i> The Hole in the Ground Where Secrets Lived	202
Acknowledgments	217
A Note on Sources	219
Notes	221
Index	235

part handmade, primitive, and thus even more eerie. They stand in pairs or threes, in groups headed for some unearthly rite, some darker oblivion. At first Arbus adored these subjects. She went back to photograph them over and over. "FINALLY what I've been searching for," she exclaimed.<sup>2</sup> Then she reversed her position. The pictures were no good. Her art was not doing it for her anymore, she said to a friend.<sup>3</sup>

Why the reversal? What weren't the photographs doing?

Shortly after this about-face, Arbus was dead. She was found on the evening of July 28, 1971, by her friend, mentor, and lover, Marvin Israel, who had been unable to reach her by phone. She was, in the words of the medical investigator, "crunched up in bath tub, on left side, wearing red shirt, blue denim shorts, no socks." She weighed one hundred pounds. The skin of her face had sloughed off "due to decomposition." Hair could also be pulled out readily. Final cause of death was listed as: "Incised wounds of wrists with external hemorrhage. Acute barbiturate poisoning."<sup>4</sup>

Arbus left little to chance, it seems. She wanted to die. Or did she? There had been no known prior attempt of any kind—no acts of self-harm, no grim practice runs, no suicide "rehearsal," as one often finds in such cases. By hurting herself so severely, had she really aimed to punish? But if so, whom? On the July 26 page of her appointment book she had written, ambiguously, "Last Supper." Perhaps, like Christ, she imagined a resurrection.

"Nothing about her life, her photographs, or her death was accidental or ordinary," Richard Avedon said. "They were mysterious and decisive and unimaginable, except to her. Which is the way it is with genius."

## Chapter 1

### ESSENTIAL MYSTERIES

ONE OF PHOTOGRAPHER Diane Arbus's first pictures, she says, was of a dog. She was living at the time on Martha's Vineyard. A big mutt with Weimaraner eyes—gray eyes—arrived every day at twilight, as if to signal the oncoming night. "It was very haunting," Arbus said. "He would come and just stare at me in what seemed a very mythic way."<sup>1</sup> He did not bark, scratch, fetch, lick. His intent was not to play or get petted. He had little doggishness. All he did was witness. All he did, Arbus said, was look right through her. He wasn't, that is, the least bit interested in seeing what was really there. She did not think he liked her. She took a picture of him, but it wasn't very good. Or so she said.

One of Arbus's last series of photographs was of the institutionalized mentally retarded, whom she found "the strangest combination of grownup and child" she'd ever seen. These pictures were later assembled posthumously for the book *Untitled*. The light is again crepuscular. In many shots it is Halloween, so her subjects wear masks and costumes that look for the most

After years of seeing what no one else could or would dare to, Arbus suddenly found herself in the awkward and probably enormously disorienting position of interrogating a kind of absence: the un-self-conscious mentally retarded. All Arbus's other subjects had seen her into being. They gave her something back. They reacted to her presence. The camera made them pliable. She defined them and they returned the favor. They *were* self-conscious, and they had the effect of increasing Arbus's consciousness of her own self. The mentally retarded took far less interest. They did not meet her gaze. They exchanged no secrets. There were no intimacies. They gave off no reflection. Arbus was left alone with her single self, and it was not enough to sustain her. Her art, as she said, was not doing it for her anymore, and in crucial respects *she was her art*.

The photographer Diane Arbus is a sort of shape changer or mobile Rorschach. She was many things to many people. She came from immense wealth yet dreamed of throwing it all away, finding it loathsome and humiliating. She was more afraid than anyone else but also strangely daring, especially when it came to getting the pictures she wanted. She hated falseness and masks, yet always felt a little two-faced as she seduced her many sitters, got them to do things they later regretted. Arbus was a different person depending on what she was doing, as we all are. Even her name suggests multiplicity—some called her Diane, some “Dee-Ann.” Psychologists refer to this as “domain specificity.” Arbus might be tenacious and full of certitude in one endeavor—tracking down a person she wished to photograph, for instance—but unsure and insecure in another. Often there is no unifying

template that provides a solution to the myriad things we do, feel, think.

Data on Arbus is relatively scarce. There is the one full-length biography, written by Patricia Bosworth and published in 1984. Bosworth interviewed a great number of people, many of whom, especially Arbus's mother, brother (poet Howard Nemerov), and sister, had plenty interesting to say; others, notably Arbus's daughter, Doon, and her ex-husband, Allan Arbus, apparently declined interviews. The portrait is slightly lopsided. The scales tilt toward Arbus's weaknesses. These no doubt existed (as they do for anyone), but they take a definite backseat to the uncanny art she made, the photographs and—an area of artistry very much neglected in Arbus's body of work—her writing, which was edgy, poetical, densely metaphoric, and startlingly accomplished.

Sylvia Plath is an interesting contrast. In her case the data is almost dauntingly abundant. Numerous full-length biographies can be consulted, as can letters, journals, hundreds of books and essays by people who became intimate with her, even a book of poems, *Birthday Letters*, by her husband, Ted Hughes, that amounts to a kind of symbolic psychobiography. The poems often aim at illuminating Plath's psychology and the motives behind her art. Though in many interesting respects very much like Plath, Arbus has been spared her degree of posthumous scrutiny and speculation. Simply put, there is quite a bit less to go on.

A hefty portion of the perplexity surrounding Arbus—who she was exactly, what she was like—comes from the artist herself. When she talked about her life, or about her work, comments

tended toward the cryptic. She was gifted at creating Möbius strips of language—mini-koans. Comments like “a photograph is a secret about a secret, the more it tells you, the less you know” and “I get to keep what nobody needs” are endlessly interpretable. They leave the mystery intact. There may have been some canniness to this. Arbus, that is, may have known what she was doing. In her work she created legends; she did the same for her life. As Oscar Wilde once said, the best thing anyone can hope for is to be misunderstood. Misunderstandings only intensify the need to know more.

Then there's the Arbus estate—famously closefisted, notoriously obstreperous if not outright adversarial. It is impossible to pick up any one of the small number of books about Arbus and not find some bitter footnoted remark concerning the firm obstructionism of those tending her legacy. It must be difficult to live as the daughters of a famous person with a definite cult status who also committed suicide, for reasons that can only be guessed at. The hurt would be very deep. One might want, utterly understandably, to guard the memories one has, to fight off the invasions of the biographical body snatchers. Who, after all, owns Arbus's life? How much needs to be known, and for what purpose?

One recent event has intensified and deepened the Arbus legend: the 2003 mounting of a traveling exhibition combining some new with mostly old work, and the publication of an accompanying book, *Revelations*, the only published source containing lengthy quotes from Arbus's letters and workbooks. The book includes a partial facsimile of a childhood autobiography, contact sheets from some of Arbus's more famous shots, dreams, thoughts on psychotherapist visits, self-portraits including a nude

with Arbus lying across the lap of a swinger. This is not to say, however, that much has not been withheld. Thirteen detailed and content-heavy appointment books exist covering the years 1959 to 1971, when she killed herself, alongside a total of thirty-nine notebooks spanning the same years. *Revelations* samples cautiously from this treasure trove, yet how much has been left out, and for what reason, is impossible to determine. Arbus, for her part, was not always and inevitably coy. For instance, in 1970 she readily responded to a series of questions from a Georgia State University student she had never met, a woman named Gail Lineback who expressed interest in Arbus's work. The estate, however, has been far more chary, to a degree Arbus herself might have found excessive.

It is hard deciding what to make of this cache of new primary material anyway. What revelations did *Revelations* contain? Not a great number. The total effect is to lend substance to what had been guessed at already. Funnily enough, although the book was obviously intended as a corrective to Bosworth's melancholic subtleties, it actually winds up confirming her vision. As the always trenchant Janet Malcolm observed in her review, “Arbus comes out looking just as brooding and morbid and sexually perverse and absurd.”<sup>5</sup> But she's no less a puzzle, and the reasons for her perversity, her absurdity, remain intriguingly obscure.

The core mystery, of course, is Arbus's immediate and abiding interest in subjects she called “freaks.” These were people who had passed some supreme test in life, who had stood up and answered a difficult question, solved a potentially soul-shattering riddle. The latter lent them, in Arbus's eyes, a certain glamour; they were, in her estimation, “anonymously famous.” We all possess this anxiety, Arbus once explained, about whether or not we

can be strong enough, secure enough, when the time comes, to face off against an adversary, to conquer fear, to take on vexing moral questions. To her, freaks had proved their mettle. They had demonstrated their resolve. They passed the test. So partly for this very reason—along with numberless others, no doubt—they became her foremost occupation. She tracked them down with ferocity. She joked about being Jewish and rich and from a good family and running away from it all giddily. In a Guggenheim application of 1962 she describes her subjects: sideshows, secret photos of steam bathers, female impersonators. Locations include Times Square, Central Park, Automats, Grand Central Station, the Roller Derby, rodeos, circuses, Harlem dance halls, wax museums, pool houses, and, above all, a place that would bewitch her mightily, Hubert's Dime Museum and Flea Circus.

In October 1959 Arbus started work for *Esquire* magazine on an issue devoted to New York. This gave way to an independent photographic essay, a project on the city ranging from "the push to the sordid."<sup>6</sup> She visits Mother Cabrini, a disinterred saint. She checks out the Mr. Universe Health Parlor. She loiters in meat markets waiting for the heads. She meets Walter Gregory, "the Madman from Massachusetts," a legendary Bowery character. The mad man waved his finger in her face saying "who was I?"<sup>7</sup> He had just one eye, and his nose was folded over. "I don't press the shutter," she tells Marvin Israel. "The image does. And it's like being gently clobbered."<sup>8</sup> Around the same time she wonders, "I think it does, a little, hurt to be photographed."<sup>9</sup>

In July 1960, Arbus's "The Vertical Journey: Six Movements of a Moment Within the Heart of the City" appeared in *Esquire*,

along with captions of Arbus's devising. The spread signaled her arrival. Already she was interested in blurring boundaries between the fantastical and the mundane. The closer one looks, the odder one's objects of perception get. Flaws, always a particular fascination, have their way of rising to the surface. Hezekiah Trambles, "the Jungle Creep," comes off as far more affrighted than creepy. His position suggests he's under attack. Mrs. Dagmar Patino, photographed at the Grand Opera Ball benefiting Boystown of Italy, is no less degraded. The photo is grainy. Her black eyes float pellucidly beneath a jewel of some sort holding her hair in place on top of her head. Her arms cross stolidly, a look of faint disapproval on her face. The scene is one big hallucinatory swirl. Nothing achieves clarity. We also meet Andrew Ratoucheff, a dwarf actor known for his imitations of Marilyn Monroe and Maurice Chevalier; a shirtless, tattooed Walter Gregory, his right eye sealed shut, lips oddly asymmetrical; the meditative Flora Knapp Dickinson, Honorary Regent of the Washington Heights Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Then there is "person unknown" from the city morgue, tag affixed to his right big toe. The fact is, these are all persons unknown. Or if we think we know them, we know less than we think. What is freakier, anomalousness or normality?

All these human oddities Arbus compared to characters in a spooky fairy tale for grown-ups. Rumpelstiltskin-like, they stopped you in your tracks. If Arbus's clicked image constitutes an answer, it applies equally to her subjects and to herself. "There are always two things that happen," she said. "One is recognition and the other is that it's totally peculiar. But *there's some sense in*

which I always identify with them."<sup>10</sup> The pictures are Arbus's internal world externalized. The secrets she exposed were hers—theirs too, but hers.

The most significant early work on freaks appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* in November 1961 under the title "The Full Circle." Here we discover not only photographs but a great deal of written text composed by Arbus herself. In July 1961, Arbus writes to her sixteen year-old daughter Doon, "I spent the weekend of the fourth holed up writing about twelve hours a day on the rest of the Odd People."<sup>11</sup> *Esquire* passed on the piece, asking Arbus to destroy or return her letter of accreditation—a credentials statement regularly provided to members of the media who are present at events. Concerns were raised about publishing pictures of people for the sole purpose of showing them as eccentrics. *Harper's Bazaar*, then guided by the twin visions of Marvin Israel and Richard Avedon, both of whom apparently wished to push the magazine into uncharted territory, saw its way around such legal landmines. Arbus was both relieved and troubled. "I'm glad to stop thinking about it," she confessed, "because praise is very unsettling."<sup>12</sup> This reaction proved to be a common one: "I'm not as good a photographer as people think except sometimes and in my head."<sup>13</sup> Her work mattered most to her; she could not stop working. Yet success unnerved her.

Whatever the case, the publication marked Arbus as an artist of distinction and promise. Her subjects she calls metaphors. She sought out the ideal eccentric, the man who ties himself in knots. She shot the Backwards Man who sees where he was. Such people are beckoned, not driven. It is their fate to be who they are: heroes of a real dream, constantly tested and tried.

As Arbus told *Newsweek* in 1967, "It's irrational to be born in

a certain place and time and of a certain sex. It's irrational how much you can change circumstance and how much you can't. The whole idea of me being born rich and Jewish is part of that irrationality. But if you're born one thing, you can dare—venture—to be ten thousand other things." Arbus pursued a supplemental life, an abundance of selves instead of the one she'd been stuck with. The life she had been thrown into struck her as irrational in the sense that it seemed so much at odds with what she felt inside. It was not something she could live with.

Freaks, to Arbus at least, are notable for their absolute certitude. These people are miraculously undaunted in Arbus's idealizing eyes. Jack Dracula, the marked man, embellished with 306 tattoos, lies on his side in a field of grass. His tattoo mask comes at a price, like any mask, for the dye covering his body turns poisonous on prolonged exposure to the sun. He can outstare any stranger, we learn. He looks large, proud, aloof. Friends and enemies alike respect him "but there is no one he cannot do without."<sup>14</sup> Arbus calls him a privileged exile. It's a posture they obviously share. As Arbus herself observed, "overprivileged children of tycoons are almost toomuchblessed as freaks."<sup>15</sup>

William Mack, another early subject, is an awesome figure even at age seventy-two. He must be fearsomely strong, Arbus notes, carrying as he does great sacks of bottles on his shoulders. Sometimes people give him money, though they seldom dare to. Life makes no sense, he intones. He calls it a pack of lies, it means nothing. Another powerful, brave man is Prince Robert de Rohan Courtenay, his Serene Highness, surnamed the Magnificent. He lives in a bejeweled, encrusted, embellished, bedizenized six-by-nine-foot room called the Jade Tower, under a ceiling of orchids and painted butterflies. Arbus singles out this

passage from his writings: "The facets of a man's life so vary, in a seeming and rapid inconsistency, that he appears to live his life as a succession of characters . . . The personal history of anyone is merely a legend, imperfectly understood." Max Maxwell Landar, or Uncle Sam, shot in front of a group of blurry children (laundry drying on a makeshift line above their heads) who look to be following Maxwell in the direction of some alternate America, makes a similar point about self's multiplicity: "I am what I call a Personality . . . I could be other people . . . I am a Phenomenon."

These are the "Odd People" whom Arbus always found ir-  
repressible. Together they constituted a mutual support sys-  
tem, all trying to be somehow more than they were, all—like  
Arbus—in search of ten thousand other possible lives. The one  
self they had was not enough. Their portraits were "the prod-  
ucts of a kind of mutual seduction which Arbus instigated by  
being herself seduced," according to daughter Doon in the  
October 1972 issue of *Ms.* magazine. She began her artistic life as  
a "huntress, and it seemed that the more she discovered, the more  
she became her own prey. She was like someone pursued." The  
pictures weren't so much about what she drew from people but  
what people drew from her. "Even if she was only with them  
for a few hours, she exchanged secrets."

This need to expose hidden territories carried with it cer-  
tain paradoxes that would give Arbus trouble. Her sitters were  
both masked and embodied, somehow more real *because* of their  
costumes—authentically phony. But they are, at the same time,  
divided. They are who they are, but they are other people besides.  
Each life is a congress of characters, personality a multiplicity. I  
could be other people, Maxwell declared pompously. Arbus

would go on to shoot hundreds of pictures of twins and triplets,  
couples, siblings, look-alikes. In a series of portraits taken of  
Arbus by Saul Leiter in November 1970, the wall in front of  
which she sits is plastered with dualities, side-by-side faces dif-  
ficult to tell apart. These people were eccentrics too. In fact,  
she refers to a twin convention as the perfect eccentric event.  
Even her last major series of pictures focusing on the mentally  
retarded returned to the topic of masks and masklessness. These  
subjects grabbed her partly because of their total absence of self-  
consciousness, their guilelessness, and, in a sense, emptiness.  
They don't seem to possess a self, not at least in the sense of  
something one actively constructs. They are masked *and* mask-  
less, nothing and something at the very same time.

The publication of "The Full Circle" was not, per usual for  
Arbus, an altogether happy event. She tells her brother in De-  
cember 1961, "I been gloomy. Publication . . . felt a little like an  
obituary . . ." She can't seem to figure out why she feels no sense  
of triumph, no sense of achievement or accomplishment. All  
there is is sadness, directionlessness. Her visions of the world  
everyone else seems to find obscene. Not quite one year later  
she calls herself a "tightrope walker who might fall if somebody  
screamed."<sup>17</sup>

Sex is a mystery in Arbus's life too, but it's left mostly  
marginalized—and all the more mysterious—in biographical  
writings. A stunning absence, given the clear sexual content of  
much of her work. Even when sex isn't front and center, it in-  
sidiously works its way into shots, a whispering directorial voice.  
Patricia Bosworth refers to acts of erotic adventurousness but  
fails to ask what the sexual behavior *meant* for Arbus or what



function it may have served, nor does she explore its presence in the art, an omission I try to remedy here. But the work speaks for itself. Couples of all types enthralled her, as did nudists, swingers, transvestites. In May 1968 she speaks of her work going along obsessively, and of wanting to shoot "empurpled whores."<sup>18</sup> Photography, she confesses, "is a . . . private sin of mine."<sup>19</sup>

April 1969 finds her in London on assignment; in her imagination the town must conceal hordes of nasty secrets. But they prove next to impossible to find. The world and the people in it obstinately refuse to live out her fantasies of darkness and misery. "Where have they hidden it," she wonders?<sup>20</sup>

All this is in keeping with Arbus's primary agenda: seeing what others have not, finding what has been covered over. Life was a kind of Potemkin village. Her business was to expose the hoax. Sex is *the* most brilliant unknown territory, in some ways the final, inevitable frontier, Arbus's manifest destiny. An example of this interest (among many) is the 1970 photo called "Dominatrix with a Kneeling Client." The man looks middle-aged. He wears black socks up to his knees and a black hood on his head. The woman stands above him in a bustier and latex boots, black mesh nylons barely concealing an imperfect triangle of heavy black pubic hair. *Revelations* also includes a contact sheet, number 4457, of a couple sitting on a couch. In most shots she is naked; he has his shirt off. They kiss and cuddle. It all seems perfectly harmless, playful. Yet a single image stands out, taken, it would seem, by the woman or someone else on hand. This time it is Arbus who is naked. She lies across the man's lap as he smiles broadly, his hand on Arbus's right thigh. Arbus grasps his knee, her expression a little uncertain, more bland than aroused.

In 1968 Arbus shot the filming of a pornographic movie. It's an endlessly comic affair. The men are enormously self-conscious and "turtlenecked." Their eyes, in a kind of crazed nystagmus, roll over Arbus's body like "balls on a pinball machine."<sup>21</sup>

Arbus mentions a 1969 contact she made with erotologists Phyllis and Eberhard Kronhausen, editors of collections of erotic art and promoters of sex causes. Apparently they had private patients whom they analyzed by living in their homes. Arbus calls the couple self-appointed apostles of sex. Though she records their eagerness to be photographed by her, in the end the idea leaves her feeling squeamish: "It gives me a funny eerie sense of mutual exploitation."<sup>22</sup> Later I explore in detail how this particular session came to its very revealing conclusion. Arbus, it seems, found herself suddenly aroused. She confessed wanting to have sex with the couple, and because of this, she could not shoot. It was to be one of the very few occasions when the camera failed her.

The pursuit of this taboo domain was not, then, merely intellectual or limited to its assembled imagery. Arbus also tested her own limits. In her therapy with Dr. Helen Boigon, she spoke of picking up "queer-looking" (i.e., odd-appearing) men on the street and having sex with them.<sup>23</sup> She wasn't always successful. What she was searching for, according to Boigon, was *experience*. "That's all she could name it."

The role played by sexual desire in Arbus's art, and the effect of her sexual life on her personality, call for some kind of elucidation. If the doing of art always siphons a quota of its energy from sexuality, then by way of reverse causality creativity makes of the artist a sexualized being. Certain writers, poet Philip Larkin

for instance, have spoken at length about this very nexus. The vision required of the artist, Larkin figures, has "got something to do with sex. I don't know what, and I don't particularly want to know. It's not surprising because obviously two creative voices would be in alliance. But the vision has a sexual quality lacking in other emotions such as pity . . . Ovid, for instance, could never write unless he was in love. Many other poets have been and are the same. I should think poetry and sex are very closely connected." It's important to keep in mind the fact that Arbus was always working at the very limit of her zone of comfort. Her art was one way of dealing intensely and publicly with the forbidden. It was, as she said, a sin that she confessed to the world. There was always something perverse about it. It was a means to experiences denied or off-limits to the less adventurous. Seeing as she made little distinction between her life and her art, it makes perfect sense that the one would transform and make demands on the other. Boundaries were breached. She was, with her camera, a participant observer, but she also put her camera down and became pure participant. This was, for her, a deeper mode of knowing her subject.

One of the most encompassing mysteries of all about Arbus concerns how she managed to convince people to let her take their picture in the first place. The images themselves can be hard to figure; but so can the question of how she got them. What she liked best was to go "where I've never been," she says—such as the homes of total strangers.<sup>24</sup> She compares the process to a blind date. There's a queasiness to it, no means of control. She finds it annoying the way she comes off. "I'm kind of two-faced . . . I'm . . . too nice. Everything is Oooo."<sup>25</sup>

Many of Arbus's sessions ended up in bedrooms. People she only slightly or just accidentally knew allowed her access to their most intimate, private geographies. They were sometimes fully nude, their lovers lying beside them. Sometimes they had just awakened, in states of relative disarray. Lonely naked men might be clasping bathetically their paid consorts, with little left to the imagination. Cross-dressers and prostitutes sat in the midst of the residue of their disordered lives, ashtrays, beer cans, crumpled papers and the like strewn across the floor and the bed. Arbus obviously realized something important very early on: Just like her, people wanted to be seen. The camera provided a kind of harsh yet undeniable attention people believed they deserved. It was a scrutiny to which they felt entitled. They wanted someone to make legends out of them, and Arbus obliged. No doubt they sensed her sympathy. She must have made it clear that she understood, in precise terms, their unique predicament, the challenge they faced. She must also have had an enormous talent for eliciting trust—it would be okay, these people may have reasoned, to show this woman things I've never shown anyone else, and to let her keep a part of me, and then perhaps to show this part to the world in general.

The sharing of secrets played a vital role. Secrets were what Arbus coveted. She kept them, and bore down on them in others. The theme of the secret—what it meant to Arbus and how it featured in her life and art—is another core mystery. A feature common to every Arbus shoot was confession. She bared select secrets. She provided that context. The picture was to be all about honesty, authenticity, messy repressed reality. Her subjects bought the assumption and either offered up what she wanted them to or else found themselves, a little or a lot

against their will, getting "Arbused." In the end, after all, it was always Arbus who decided which secret was most real. The miracle is that her sitters felt understood enough by her to accept that devil's bargain.

Many have marveled at the fearlessness of this small woman risking life and limb in dark, dangerous places in order to get the kinds of photos she assiduously collected, but it was precisely her vulnerability that made the art possible. It was her smallness, her femaleness, and more than anything else her terrible obsessive earnestness that made her so seductive and so disarming. She was a sympathy genius. And if part of that genius was phony, part of it was also agonizingly sincere. She became the mirror that she never had. She was the secrets holder—she illuminated the things never seen before, suppressed needs and identities.

Last is the fact of Arbus's suicide, an inevitable terminus, the product of converging reasons and needs—some more pressing than others. The art had temporarily stopped exciting and inspiring her; she was depressed. Both daughters were away (Amy at summer school in Massachusetts; Doon in Paris). Arbus was at odds with her lover Marvin Israel (who was vacationing with his wife, Maggie, on Fire Island); ex-husband Allan was in Santa Fe filming a movie (*Greaser's Palace*). Her sitters at the time, the mentally retarded, gave her nothing back, they did not relate, they did not share intimacies. As Arbus herself said to friends, her art was not "doing it for [her] anymore."<sup>26</sup> There were also money troubles. She was taking jobs that she found dispiriting. Boigou calls Arbus "schizoid," a term suggesting a personality disorder marked by oddness, eccentricity, and magical thinking.

Lisette Model, her mentor, found her work full of "neurosis" and "schizophrenia."<sup>27</sup> But whether Arbus was in some sense mentally ill when she took her life is another possibility to consider, not that it amounts to any kind of explanation. Disease labels are just that—labels. Merely names for sets of behaviors, they can't, by definition, render those behaviors psychologically understandable.

It is always a temptation, in the life of an artist who suicides, to scan the art for clues, omens. But such correlations can be purely illusory. Contiguity does not equal causality. In what follows, I do not argue that the pictures of the mentally retarded had something essential to do with Arbus's death, but they did present a dilemma for her. They increased her awareness of conflicts centering on self, conflicts that had always been present but not consciously so. One point deserves some mention in passing. Art is not intrinsically therapeutic. It doesn't always allow us to rise above. Instead, it can be an immersion in products of self-expression that mirror our troubles back at us so that we see them metaphorically, but still glaringly. Then it's a matter of what we do with this information, what we make of it. We can turn away again, re-repress what we've inadvertently discovered, or try some means of assimilation. My guess is that Arbus was working to assimilate the meaning that the photos of the retarded revealed to her in the months and weeks before she died. Her death cut the connection-making process short. The psychological business was left unfinished.

A question about Arbus's suicide is whether or not she wanted to die. That she both slit her wrists and took what appears to be an overdose seems to rule out any possibility of doubt but, on the other hand, things are never quite that simple. Though it may

sound paradoxical and even illogical, plenty of people intend *and* don't intend to die when they make an attempt on their own life. They are ambivalent. They also often have no way of knowing if the act will succeed, and some frankly don't care, because either way their situation will be radically altered. Was Arbus in emotional pain at the time of her death? Yes. Did she want the pain to end? Yes. Did she want her *life* to end? That question takes the discussion to a different level. One can also ask about Arbus: Did she want her art to end? Here I'm certain the answer is no.

The fact of suicide always seems to require the articulation of a dark motive. It waves the reading of a life down morbid avenues. My goal, however, in investigating Arbus's death is to understand the behavior's *function*. In other words (and this can't sound anything but a little preposterous on its face), what was she hoping to get out of it, regardless of its success or failure?

In 1959 Arbus recorded a dream in her first notebook, one she repeats in May 1971 for an *Artforum* spread titled, simply, "Five Photographs by Diane Arbus." Like many dreams, this one tells of an undeniable psychological reality.

She finds herself on an ocean liner resembling "Ship Beautiful," the one she wrote about in a childhood autobiography. It's decorated ornately, flamboyantly. All at once she notices smoke and registers the fact that the ship's on fire. It seems as if they must be sinking, but no one appears to care. The party obliviously continues. Though all hope fades, Arbus is euphoric. "I could photograph anything I wanted to."

In the original iteration, from 1959, she is hurried, and she wants to photograph "most awfully." The setting is not an ocean liner, but a hotel. Her grandmother is around. She has no clue

how to proceed, how to behave. She continues: "It's like the sinking Titanic . . . My whole life is there . . . I am strangely alone although people are all around. They keep disappearing . . . It's like an emergency in slow motion."<sup>28</sup>

This dream is yet another mystery. Her life's on fire, her life is sinking, but everyone is gay and dancing and singing. If she does not know exactly what she's looking for, one thing is certain: She has to photograph. She may be alone among people, people may be disappearing, there may be no hope, but she's terribly elated. Her art will put out the fire. Her art will save her.