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### **Picturing Herself: On Diane Arbus's Revelations**

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The author argues that the extensive inclusion of material souvenirs of Diane Arbus's art-making process and life history in her 2005 exhibition, *Revelations*, defines Arbus's work as verb rather than just a collection of art objects. She suggests that the power of good art is an illumination of the processes that constitute the seeking subject, and furthermore, that Arbus's work reflects the urgency of this search.

Entering Diane Arbus's *Revelations*, I found my attention shifting between the well-lit gallery rooms filled with Arbus's framed final prints and the three darker rooms filled with installations of the material traces of her life and souvenirs of her art-making process.

**Peter Schjeldahl (2005)** was critical of the inclusion of all this biographical material. He feared that all this documentation would feed the cult of a spicily neurotic woman and confuse her work with her life—a criticism that has left a certain alienation and anxiety between the arts and the psychoanalytic community. And given the extreme variables that constitute the lifework of Diane Arbus, exquisitely beautiful photographic objects of such provocative transgressive images, a seemingly privileged and protected childhood

and an eventual suicide—the temptation was certainly there to enlist her lifework for a postmodern inquiry into the nature of the shifting swirl of multiple selves. As official guardian of Arbus's photographic estate, Doon, Diane's oldest daughter, had similar concerns but thought differently about these three rooms. She hoped that “this surfeit of information would finally render the scrim of words invisible so that anyone encountering the photographs could meet them in the eloquence of their silence” (Arbus, 2003, p. 299).

And although I am in agreement with Schjeldahl's position to allow viewers their own unmediated relationship with Arbus's photographs (as I would like to believe Arbus had with her subjects) and understand Doon's imperative to preserve the photographs as they exist in their own right, I experienced these installations not as a potentially harmful or a strategy to undue harm but as a legitimate exhibition of Arbus's art in itself. For me, the power of good art is an illumination of the processes, which constitutes the seeking self.

Arbus's huge body of work, including exhibition photographs, 7,000 rolls of developed films (notebooks, dreams, things-to-do list, contact sheets, and rough prints) gives us a peek at art as verb, that is, how the self seeks to find and recognize its own experience through a visual rendition and reading of the objects around us. In their decision to exhibit these material souvenirs of Arbus's art-making processes, the curators and guardians of her work recreated and gave a material embodiment of her profound urgency, which Thurman as brilliantly suggested is “the well spring ...that every artist has to tap” (Thurman, 2003, p. 107).

Wanting to let Arbus have the last word about her work, I conclude with a fragment from a dream inscribed in one of her notebooks.

I do not know what I am looking for, what I must save, how soon  
the building will collapse, what I must do, how long I may  
photograph [1959, Notebook 1].

### References

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