

## [Exceeding the Frame: The Photography of Diane Arbus](#)

By: [Ann Millett](#)

“Exceeding the Frame: The Photography of Diane Arbus” in *Disability Studies Quarterly* 24, n.4 (Fall 2004).

Made available courtesy of University of Hawaii at Manoa, Center on Disability Studies:

<http://www.cds.hawaii.edu/>

**\*\*\*Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Center on Disability Studies. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document.\*\*\***

### Article:

Metaphors for vision overwhelm the English language. "To see" is to know or to understand; "to envision" is to create or innovate; "to gaze" is to project desire, possess, and control; "to watch" is to study, examine, or take heed; "to witness" is to take part in history. Looking invokes embodied interest; glancing is unconscious; staring is deliberate and sometimes unsanctioned. Viewing proves dubious at best, especially when it comes to looking at other people, ourselves, and being looked at. Photography intensifies these metaphors for vision, turning human acts and appearances into images. Through various genres and conventions, photography frames human bodies for viewing and assigns meaning to them. Photographer Diane Arbus exploits the dynamics of viewing through her medium and form, transgressing the frames between representation and everyday life. Her work is often criticized because it defies photographic conventions and social norms for seeing and being seen, as it frames the viewer in the leery acts of looking. Best known for her distinctive style of portraiture, Arbus's oeuvre is about people watching and the people who capture the eye, who attract the gaze and stare, and who become questionable metaphors by being seen, watched, photographed, and publicly displayed.

Reactions to Arbus's work seem polarized as some are seduced to partake in her pleasure of looking, specifically at people who stand out in a crowd (Arbus, 1972; Hart, 2003; Butler, 2004), while others, unable to escape similar temptation in spite of themselves, criticize the pictures as exploitative, disturbing, and pessimistic (Goldman, 1974; Sontag, 1977; Bosworth, 1984). The strongest assaults on Arbus's photography target the certain kinds of people she features and what the viewer assumes about them through Arbus's frames. For example, art critic Judith Goldman writes: "Her subjects were people on the edges – the physically malformed – dwarfs, midgets, giants, twins, and transvestites with sideshow relationships to society, and physically normal people, whose edge was a fact of their social class and whose condition, like the malformed, was loneliness and the psychological despair of boredom" (1974, p. 30). Like Goldman, many recognize Arbus's almost extra-sensory peripheral vision – her magnetic attraction to the peripheries or margins of mainstream society. Arbus is often said to show, indeed hyperbolize and glorify, that which is not normally seen – what, or who, goes unnoticed by the assumed "normal" viewer (Arbus, 1972; Prose, 2003); whereas others recognize that her subjects capture attention precisely because they are a striking visible disturbance in artistic and social fields of "normal" human subjects (Butler, 2004). The subjects of Arbus's gaze are widely characterized as deviant, grotesque, and freakish, as Arbus has become known as the freak photographer. Yet, these labels may reveal more about the assumptions of the viewer than about the subjects themselves. The camera's gaze, according to Susan Sontag, makes any subject extraordinary in the act of making it an image (1977), yet what are the additional powers and moral/ethical implications of photography when the human subjects featured, as in Arbus's work, are always already public spectacles?

Goldman writes further: "Though trained not to admit it, we are fascinated by the aberrant, the violent, and the perverse. When we are assured no one's watching, we stare at cripples and auto wrecks" (1974, p. 30). This quote stands out to me for several reasons that lead into visual analysis of images: 1. What exactly is the association between so-called "cripples," and auto wrecks as spectacles – as awesome objects of a questioning, captivating, and fearful gaze? 2. What are the implications of looking without being seen and without anyone

looking back at you? 3. Does photography somehow offer an anonymous, disembodied gaze for the viewer versus other spectacle venues, particularly live ones? I would argue no, particularly in the case of Arbus's photography, for many of her images foreclose the possibility of looking without being seen and looking at oneself. If nothing else might be agreed upon in judgments of her work, it defies disinterest – it solicits and manipulates subject and embodied, multi-directional and multi-dimensional gazes of the photographer, the viewer, and disabled subjects.

Disability studies theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has articulated well the relationship between the theoretical gaze and the everyday lived experience of the stare for disabled subjects. She explains how this operates in visual culture, arguing that photography presents a medium for a largely nondisabled audience to stare, in attraction and repulsion, at the disabled "Other" and, according to the predominant medical model of disability in society, evaluate and diagnose them (Garland-Thomson, 2001). Disability studies scholar and photographer David Hevey, in discussion of photography of disabled subjects, has charged Arbus specifically with "enfreakment" (1992), informing Garland-Thomson's assertion that such representations construct and circulate stereotypes of disability (2001). According to Hevey, Arbus's images problematically frame disabled people as freaks, outcasts, and derogatorily abnormal "Others" (1992). Hevey reduces Arbus's images to one dimension, whereas I would argue they exceed even two dimensions as they exaggerate, overlap, and grotesquely combine photographic genres. Her images add to the history of disabled bodies on display and under scrutiny of the gaze in cultural representation and everyday life, yet self consciously.

In this paper, I will focus on three Arbus photographs that feature subjects engaged in distinct sets of dynamic gazes. These images and the bodies displayed in them personify representations of disability found historically in venues such as art, theater, mythology, freak shows, medicine, ethnography, pornography, and various forms of popular culture. My chosen examples embody layered metaphors for looking and disruptively exceed the frames of conventional representations of bodies on display. I will place Arbus's work in broader contexts of visual culture through formal and discursive comparisons to images from art history and the American freak show of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I attempt to re-frame Arbus's so-called freakish or disabled subjects as performative agents through interpretive readings of their portraits.

In 1970, the petite Arbus transported her weighty, twin lens Rollieflex camera, an instrument she strategically employed since the mid-1960s for its square-frame format, intense details, and exaggerated distortion of image edges, to the home of Eddie Carmel and his parents. Carmel, at 34 years of age, 8 feet tall, and 300 pounds, had been born with acromegaly, a tumor on the pituitary gland that produced excess of growth hormones and made his lips, jaw, hands, and feet swell. From birth, Carmel never ceased expanding. He had learned early in life that his excessive body was the bane of his existence, his greatest asset, and in the eyes of most "normal" people, his defining characteristic, and he pursued a career in show business (Carchman, 1999). Carmel tried stand up comedy and voice-overs, recorded the song "The Good Monster," played a bit part in the film "The Brain that Wouldn't Die" (1963), and did circus and sideshow appearances and advertising. He became a local celebrity and established freak. Eventually, Carmel's body outgrew his fame and overcame him; he died two years after the Arbus photograph was shot. Arbus's portrait serves as a memorial to Carmel and was the inspiration for the biographical radio program, now available on compact disc, researched and narrated by one of his cousins (Carchman, 1999).

See photo at: <http://www.temple.edu/photo/photographers/arbus/arbusp3.htm>.

Arbus shot a series of images of Carmel and his parents; the one developed into *Jewish Giant at Home with His Parents in the Bronx, NY* (1970) is a black and white image featuring Carmel in the center of a working class family's living room leaning on one cane, towering over and gazing down at his two comparatively miniature parents, who stare back up at him with facial expressions of awe, amazement, and perhaps a bit of fear. The grainy quality of Arbus's technique and the detail captured by her camera emphasize this non-idealistic atmosphere in an amateur style family photo. The compositional arrangement and exchange of gazes may be interpreted as an ominous family album snapshot of parents confronting the monster they have created. The

blurred and shadowed edges emphasized by the Rollieflex camera implicate the viewer as peeping at the spectacle of Carmel's body, as if they place their face against cupped hands and gaze through a neighbor's window. Or perhaps the viewer is stationed in the foregrounded armchair, appearing only partially in the frame, and placed at eye level with Carmel's massive legs. The viewer is uncomfortably present in this private scene and partly transgresses the frame, quite differently from looking at Carmel on stage, in a crowd of separated audience members. The photo displays how Carmel is inevitably subject to a social stare. He stands out by standing head and shoulders above others and does not fit in, even in his own home and context of his family. Contrary to the law of science that like produces like, here, two who are alike have produced physical difference.

A desire to view the photograph – to stare at Carmel – engages the association of looking at cripples and auto wrecks. Carmel, common to many of his stature or condition, was indeed impaired by his excessive and relentless physical growth – the cane in the image eventually became two and then a wheelchair, followed by Carmel's death. Yet Carmel is also "crippled," or "disabled," in the photograph by definition of disability as a socially-constructed, oppressed identity; he is made into an abnormal "Other" by environments, architectures, and social attitudes that exclude and reject him, seen here in the form of his living room and the disconcerted family with whom he shares it. Freak show performer and biographer of freaks, Daniel P. Mannix, also points to financial burdens that disable individuals with "abnormal" bodies, like Carmel, due to their need for "specialized" clothing, shoes, personal items, vehicles, environmental adaptations, etc. (1999). The spectacular image perhaps capitalizes on Carmel's tragedies – Carmel frequently lamented his status as social outcast, far more than complaining of his physical aches and pains (Carchman, 1999) – similar to staring at an auto wreck. However, Arbus's image in this way also incriminates the viewer in Carmel's personal pain, as their stares contribute to his freak status. Many narrate this image as a tragic tale of a gentle giant. However, Arbus's photographic composition, emphasizing graphically Carmel's physical oppression, tells additional stories, as Carmel's body, literally and figuratively, exceeds the frame.

Arbus's framing of Carmel exceeds conventional photographic frames for viewing bodies, thus disrupting established means for viewers to examine, diagnose, interpret, and judge a spectacular body, such as Carmel's, on visual display. Literary theorist Rachel Adams has compared Arbus's images with nineteenth and early 20th century carte de visites, widely popular, postcard size, collectible portrait photographs that marketed eccentric freak show performers as celebrities (Adams, 2001). One example of a nineteenth-century cartes by Charles Eisenmann of the *Texas Giant Brothers* (c. 1880) features a trio of tall brothers in distinguished period suits, lined up and flanked by two compositional props – a book on a table ledge at the left side of the photography and a sculpted wood banister on the right. Below the image each "giant's" age and height is displayed, ranging from between 7 and 8 feet tall. Adams points out formal characteristics of early photographic venues for spectacular bodies on display, such as this cartes, that Arbus's photographs echo: grainy quality; strongly contrasting blacks and whites; and frontally lit, central framing of the full body (2001). Freak show images and venues also share with Arbus's work a combining and overlapping of various genres for representing "abnormal" bodies, as I will explain through formal and thematic comparisons.

Adams relates Arbus's characteristic form to clinical elements of freak show cartes, drawn from the genre of diagnostic medical photography. Clinical photographs and diagnostic texts offered medical "legitimacy" to extraordinary spectacle anomalies. The bodily remains of individuals exhibited as freaks often became medical displays after they died, as was commonly the case with giants. Photographer Rosamund Purcell has illustrated and narrated books on visual collections, medical displays, exhibits of human curiosities and anomalies. In *Special Cases: Natural Anomalies and Historical Monsters* (1997), based on a Getty exhibit she curated, Purcell includes a photograph of the skeleton of a 7'6" man who died in his early twenties in late 19th century, displayed in the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, Penn., (p. 103). In the appropriate conventions of clinical photographs, Purcell frames the white skeleton in profile against a dark, voided background (here from the torso up, rather than the full body) to highlight the unique curvature of his spine, a consequence of his tall stature which caused impairments – a pose that Arbus's image of Carmel likewise utilizes to accentuate his spectacular body.

In *Jewish Giant*, we are presented with a full body, profile view of Carmel, characteristic of freak show and medical photography; albeit hunched over, Carmel's full magnificence is further exaggerated by pairing with his noticeably dwarfed parents, in a dualism of the miniature and the gigantic. An example of this is a black and white publicity photograph of *Jack Earle, Giant Poet*, which features a giant performer photographed at pelvic level to emphasize his height, and in particular, the length of his legs. In the space between his tree-like spread legs stands an ambiguous man/child little person wearing a tie, whose smallness accentuates the massive body that poses above him. The image appears humorous in its irony of sizes. Such offsets of opposites are characteristic of freak show venues and photographs. Carmel was a known freak performer, yet little information is offered in Arbus's image about his "condition," or what caused his so-called monstrous freakishness, thus rejecting a medical, diagnostic gaze. He is not posed in a characteristic clinical (most often minimal or absent in background) nor freak show carte setting, which were conventional studio settings with a few highly iconic props and scaled environments. This is not a formal studio portrait – the image places Carmel in his home environment, indication of his social and economic identity, as Arbus's images often highlight bodies in personalized, even idiosyncratic settings, yet less strategically staged than studio portraits (Mitchell, 2002). Carmel is "at home," rather than featured in a freak show venue or carte de visite, medical, documentary, or anthropological image of an "exotic" – all forms that conventionally motivate, justify, and mediate a viewer's gaze.

Arbus's work is said to either "enfreak," construct subjects as freaks and make them abnormal (Hevey, 1992), or "normalize" them through private viewings (Adams, 2001), adding another layer of confusing oppositions to the images. Arbus chose this image for public display, rather than a number of others from a contact sheet that show the family embracing, smiling, and posing frontally for the camera, as conventional for a family photo. In the final image, Eddie is enfreaked – his largeness exaggerated – in the image Arbus selected of him, compared with these others, as well as normalized, or "at home." In this final image, Carmel does not offer the viewer a compliant returned gaze, as perhaps one would if engaged in freakish self-display, and instead turns his gaze to his parents, withholding knowledge from the viewer as to why they should be so entranced by staring at him and what benefit or information they receive from it. He refuses to acknowledge the viewer in his performance, perhaps transforming staged spectating into unsanctioned staring or peeping.

Shortly before taking this photograph, Arbus wrote in a postcard to friend Peter Crookston in May 1968: "One more thing, perhaps too exotic...I know a Jewish giant who lives in Washington Heights or the Bronx with his little parents. He is tragic with a curious bitter somewhat stupid wit. The parents are orthodox and repressive and classic and disprove of this carnival career...Once many years ago I photographed them but I don't know where it is...They are a truly metaphorical family...(sic)" (*Revelations*, 2003, p. 90). For Arbus, Carmel's family was a metaphor, but for what? Her own conservative Jewish family and feelings of being a black sheep or freak? Or an "average" American family? Arbus had a fascination with family groupings at this time, and perhaps in this context, the grotesque Carmel family points to the inevitable freakishness of families, relating to Arbus's tendency to portray the freakishness of everyday life in her suite of idiosyncratic subjects. Perhaps the Carmel family, dynamically staged in the photograph, represents human relationships in general – always eccentric and grotesque in pairings. Or perhaps Arbus recognizes the metaphors conventionally associated with such extraordinary embodiments such as Carmel's. The image is not titled with Carmel's name, which would suggest a particularized portrait, rather he is presented as the "Jewish Giant" in an iconic epithet, or like *Texas Giant Brothers*, a freak show stage name, often hyperbolized and recycled for various actors, that highlights markers of bodily configuration, race, or regional origin.

The "monstrosity" or "freakishness" of Carmel constructed in Arbus's photograph engages a much longer history of such spectacular bodies on display, and particularly the cultural mythologies surrounding giants. Michel Bakhtin's study of the grotesque body in literature narrates the giant as a metaphoric embodiment of cosmic forces; thus giants are imagined in myth and lore as means for "normal" sized humans to confront and conceptualize unexplained phenomena (1968). Freak shows capitalize on this association, as in the example of the "Chinese Giant," Chang Yu Sang, who appeared at various sideshow venues in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Born in Peking in 1847, Sang was over 8 feet tall and embodied Chinese mythological and

cosmological beliefs that giants were present in rocks. Extending beyond cultures that believe in animated nature, associations of giants with the natural environments, particularly mountains, is common in fiction, freak personas, and various forms of display, as giants become worthy of natural history. Literary scholar Leslie Fiedler's extensive study of freak show performers points to the number of civilizations that, according to origin myths, arose from a society's defeat of giants: (Greeks, Hebrew, Norse), as literature often features giants as a race of people, not singular "freaks" (1978, p. 91). Like myths, freak shows present ethnic giants, as in the example of the Chinese Giant, as stock characters, exploiting cultural associations of giants with place or race. The "Irish Giant" was Charles Byrne, whose bones are now in the Royal College of Surgeons of London on medical display, and was later played by Patrick O'Brien; Barnum's American Museum featured Angus McAskill, the "Scottish Giant"; and the "Icelandic Giant" was a character played by Johann K. Peterson, who came to the United States in 1948, did many sideshows, and progressed to a very profitable, one-man show, in which he wore a Viking costume, large headdress to emphasize his size, and long beard. These actors performed as cultural/historical characters tied to their ethnic heritage and in stereotypical, fictional costumes. In these examples and many others, freak show giants come from cultures that have rich traditions of myths and legends, and these origins are exaggerated in their presentations. As racial/cultural "Others" to an American audience, they were enfreaked in size and ethnicity, whereas in other contexts (among others physically and culturally like them), they were "normal."

Individuals of extreme stature combat a history of fictional characters. From Dante's inclusion of giants in Hell, to Cyclops, to Titan, to painter Francisco de Goya's mythological *Colossus* (1808) (a painting of a massive male body from the waist up, emerging from the clouds and threateningly towering over a small village in the bottom half of the painting), to the antagonist of Jack and the Beanstalk, giants are cannibalistic, tyrannical, and feared – constructed as monstrous, like Carmel, and offset by the vulnerable (often, in fiction, little people). Often likened to perhaps the most infamous Jewish giant of all, Goliath, Carmel becomes the subject of a history painting, an allegorical image like Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Children* (1821-23) (a horrific image of the mythical giant with bulging eyes and blood dripping from his jaws as he eats a miniature being from his hands), consuming his vulnerable family members in an overpowering gaze. In addition to cosmological embodiments, giants also represent, according to Bakhtin, wealth and abundance through excessive consumption and were often featured at celebratory feasts (1968). The fictional giants Gargantua and Pantagruel, the main characters of Rabelais' text, from which Bakhtin derives his metaphors and theories, are consuming and hedonistic, metaphors for the celebration of life through excess and bodily pleasure, rather than threatening or horrific. In present day contexts, giants are prized, such as athletes who, like Carmel, reach celebrity status through embodied performances. In addition to numerous basketball players, a poignant, "freakish" example is the subcultural phenomena, Andre the Giant, who performed as a film actor after his career in the somewhat burlesque theater, or arena, of professional wrestling. Featured in a publicity photo (c. 1980s) that recycles the pairing of opposites found in myths, fairy tales, and freak shows, Andre, again shot at waist level to enhance his largess, supports admiring female fans on his massive shoulders. Across a suite of historical, sometimes contradictory images, societies assess and assign labels to bodies such as "abnormal" or "freakish" according only to frameworks of presentation. Arbus's image of Carmel thus exceeds the frames and contexts of visual representation, displaying Carmel in an image repertoire of historical giants and suggesting his status in 1970 as always already on display, even "at home." The image exceeds the frames of fictional representation, as Arbus highlights some of Carmel's "larger than life" embodied experiences; for example, posed with his cane, Carmel displays impairments and mortal complications common among individuals with giantism, contradicting the mythological persona of the giant as a beast of formidable strength. Arbus's image is appropriately excessive and embodies contradiction – Carmel's body is confined to her frame as he hunches over, yet his potential power to exceed the frames is overwhelming to the viewer, while he turns away from them.

In Arbus's *Mexican Dwarf (a.k.a Cha Cha) in His Hotel Room*, (1970) a dwarf, or little person, consumes the frame. See photo at: [http://www.masters-of-photography.com/A/arbus/arbus\\_dwarf\\_slide.gif](http://www.masters-of-photography.com/A/arbus/arbus_dwarf_slide.gif). His body is aggrandized in a freak show fashion by Arbus's image (again like a freak show cartes in certain formal qualities). Cha Cha, like Carmel, was a self displayed and thus self proclaimed "freak" (due to his chosen profession), which drew Arbus to him. He becomes part of a long history of little people on public display in

western culture. Little people were traditionally displayed as supernatural and medical monsters, like giants, and uniquely kept at royal courts as prodigies, jesters, comic fools and clowns, and caretakers and entertainers of royal children. They performed their amusements before the family and guests, portrait artists (most popularly Diego Velasquez), and before society at large in private quarters ("at home") and in public spectacles, fairs, festivals, and celebrations. In historical portraiture, dwarfs are included iconographically as miniature offsets to reinforce the authority, austerity, and power of an often elaborately costumed king or queen, as exemplified in Alonso Sánchez Coello's sixteenth century painting *Magdalena Ruíz with Doña Isabel, Clara Eugenia and Monkey* (here also with a monkey), or often paired with other symbolic subjugates like dogs and particularly female children, as in Diego Velázquez's canonical *Las Meninas* (1656) (a portrait of the Spanish royal family which ironically foregrounds the assumedly disempowered: the princess (*infanta*) Margarita, her attendant female servants, two court dwarfs, and the loyal pet dog, lying down to accentuate his submission). In the heyday of the American freak show (nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), many little people performed in venues of display, sometimes alongside amiable giants, as mentioned earlier, to exaggerate their caricatured smallness. To further enhance the miniature body, little people were assigned larger than life personas and names, in what Robert Bogdan has termed an aggrandized mode of presentation, a method that also exploited historical and iconographic connections between little people and ironic parody (1998). The most famous was P.T. Barnum's General Tom Thumb (born Charles S. Stratton). Tom Thumb, as he was constructed through his public performances, marketing materials, and souvenir photographic portraits (the most profitable cartes of all time), embodied long traditions of mythological, literary, and historical little bodies on display, particularly as performers. So does Arbus's photograph of Cha Cha, physically aggrandized and made a metaphor again as the non-particularized "Mexican Dwarf," yet with significant twists on convention.

Comparing a characteristic, black and white wedding cartes of Charles Stratton and his wife, Lavinia Warren (c. 1863) (who shared a popular public spectacle wedding orchestrated by Barnum in 1863) and Charles Eisenmann's black and white cartes *Admiral Dot, Midget* (c. 1881) to Arbus's photograph, we see similar strong frontal lighting, an Arbus trademark, and similar staging of props to characterize the little people and their shared bodily, performative magnificence. Stratton and his wife are paired as sentimentalized miniatures in miniature costumes and presented as children, set to scale by a compositional mantelpiece. They are infantilized as in many historical royal portraits, although their "owner" (here Barnum versus a king) is more specifically subtracted from the photograph by use of standard early portrait conventions. Carte de visite images often drew attention to the performer's bodies, charming and entertaining public appeal (sometimes including instruments or props for musical numbers or comic impressions), and celebrity personas rather than their status as freaks. *Admiral Dot* is featured in top hat holding a baton against an arched doorway with Corinthian columns, a stage setting used repeatedly by Eisenmann to accentuate "little" subjects' statures. In Arbus's image, Cha Cha's body fills the frame in a stylistically distinctive square format with darkened, blurred edges created by the Rollieflex, which perhaps condenses and exaggerates his physical smallness, placing the image in the traditions of dwarf bodies as caricatures and tools of parody.

Velázquez's painting of a dwarf kept at the Spanish court, *The Dwarf Sebastian de Morra* (c. 1645), like Arbus's photograph, frames and aggrandizes (in a close-up perspective) the full body of its subject in historical costume, here seated on the floor with his hands curled under suggesting that he may have physical impairments. His ambivalent return gaze, as compared with Cha Cha's, seems reluctant, almost vacant, or stereotypically idiotic. Mannix states that historically, by being or *behaving* idiotic, court dwarfs were able to speak freely to royalty, criticize, and mock them, such that performative gestures which manipulated their subordinate and comic reputations gained them the status as royal sidekicks and prodigies (1999). Velázquez' painting suggests to the privileged status of Sebastian de Morra at court, for it is a conventional, individual portrait, perhaps commissioned, rather than a composition that presents a dwarf as a domesticated offset to reinforce royal power. The portrait, like Arbus's of Cha Cha, showcases and strongly lights the body, in what perhaps could be a clinical, full body format that accentuates his "abnormality," yet also follows certain formal portrait conventions. Is he seated because he cannot stand? "Normal" portraits may have included a chair, and unlike Arbus's photograph, Velázquez places the dwarf against a voided, chiaroscuro backdrop, characteristic of period portraiture; however, due to the "abnormal" subject this may be read in other contexts as a clinical or natural

history style that excludes surrounding props to identify him as an individual social subject. This could work to represent de Morra as a generic or stock character, an often comic, performative persona whose function or popular draw for the audience could be played by successive actors, as was often the case in freak shows. Conversely, Arbus's image includes props, in photographic portrait convention to hint at a narrative surrounding Cha Cha as a historical subject and perhaps at his personality. Such inclusion of props places Arbus's photograph again in both comparison and contrast with early photography, specifically the freak show cartes, a form that exploited this convention to construct the popular personas of little people and other remarkable bodies.

The props in *Mexican Dwarf*, like those in freak show cartes, tell stories about the centered man, and here specifically occupy the margins of the image as if to suggest their deceptive staging within the frame. We cannot help but take notice of the dwarf man's body dominating the image, as would likely be the case beyond the frames public display (in everyday life, for little people stand out as they stand up in a "normal" crowd), yet do we not also notice the hat that could place him fashionably in specific socio-historical context, as well as indicate his social status? And what of the half-empty bottle of liquor, a potential phallic symbol or marker of masculine or deviant behaviors, on the table top beside him, half evading the frame (is he tragically drowning his sorrows for his own freakishness or celebrating his body, or perhaps he is on vacation in this hotel? Is he preparing for a visitor?) In relationship, what is the significance of the bath towel pulled up to cover the suggested nakedness below his revealed torso (did he just get out of the shower?), and the one ambiguous human appendage peeking out from his shroud, strategically shadowed in the off-centered foreground?

David Hevey, a formidable critic of Arbus's and others' photographic "enfreakment" of disabled people, recognizes that this small dwarf foot is a not only an iconographic phallus, but may be visually misrecognized as a corporeal, miniature penis (1992). Hevey uses this as evidence of Arbus's so-called "negative" depictions and exploitations of disabled bodies, yet fails to unpack the layers of possible implications of Arbus's constructed image of a sexualized "little" person. As well known from fairy tales like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, male dwarfs are asexually "innocent" and childlike, or in the case of Rumpelstiltskin, childishly mischievous, and in some versions of the story, hypersexual and immature, like horny adolescents. Contrary to sentimentalizing, infantilizing, and parodying traditions, Arbus presents a virile "Man," albeit gender hybridized due to his positioning as a conventionally feminine, sexualized object of an erotic gaze. He is "at home" in his body and its powerful allure – perhaps in command of his sexual display. Similarly, the 2003 film *The Station Agent* (Thomas McCarthy, dir.) presents a little person protagonist as an "agent" – a narrative hero and the object of an erotic gaze, as well as the victim of social stigma. The film transgressively places a little person actor in a role that is both conventional for an average size, attractive leading man and specific to lived experiences of people with small stature. In *Mexican Dwarf*, the public (freak spectacle) is made private (in his hotel – an already provocative setting) and eroticized, as Arbus's image traffics between high art portraiture, documentary, and pornography. Hevey remarks on the lore that Arbus was in fact sexually involved with this "freak," suggesting that what many viewers find disturbing about the image is the relationship between the viewer's perspective and the subject's body. Arbus first photographed Cha Cha in 1963, 7 years before this image was produced, and they kept in touch between shooting sessions and until Arbus's death, as was common for Arbus with many of her subjects. She prided herself on her relationships with her subjects, a biographical fact that may be reproduced in her photographic framing of them, and that some see as exploitative, while others view as an attribute to the establishment of her popularity.

This point may be reinforced by comparing *Mexican Dwarf* with contemporary Chicago painter Reva Leher's portrait of theater actor and performance artist, little person Tekki Lomnicki, *Tekki Lomnicki* (1999). The painter and her performing subject share agendas for disability rights, pride, and freedom of expression of and with the body through the arts. Both ally with disability studies – one a woman with spina bifida and the other a little woman who uses canes. Their friendship pervades the colorful painting, as it features a close-up of Lomnicki's full body similar to Arbus's portrait of Cha Cha, emphasizing her shorter than average, compacted and striking form. The performer smiles broadly and suggestively and stands tall, stabilizing herself with one crutch, while the other has been allowed to fall, or perhaps cast off, angled in the shallow perspective of the

foreground. Dressed (or undressed) in a suggestive white slip and yet to be costumed (in the background is a closet full of apparel), Lomnicki is viewed here behind the scenes of her staged performances, performing in a private setting before her colleague. The image blends sentimentalization with seduction, and the up close and personal viewing level creates a relationship between the subject and the viewer, like *Mexican Dwarf*. In Arbus's image, as Cha Cha's body spills over the frame, his hat and foot visually escaping it, an intimacy and sense of touch invades the separation between spectator and spectacle. The dynamics of distance in conventional gazes are confused, as are the binaries of normal/freak and average/little.

In trans-historical myths, literature, fairy tales, and side show displays (such as Coney Island), little people known as dwarfs, munchkins (from the *Wizard of Oz*), leprechauns, elves, pygmies, Lilliputians (from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*), hobbits and the multiple societies of little creatures created by J.R.R. Tolkien, etc, are often featured in colonies in which average size people are made monstrous, such as Gulliver. These societies are significantly colonized, as in the connections made by freak show anthropological displays between little people and various races of colonized people. Like dwarfs, racial groups share biological characteristics and certain aspects of physical appearance, qualities often used to stereotype them (most often derogatorily) in character and behavior. Such assignment of social value based on bodies functions to subjugate and marginalize groups that "stand out" from the dominant group. Yet, in their own contexts and accommodating, scaled environments, little people are "normal," as in the example of giants as a race of beings. Arbus was broadly interested in multiple "miniature" societies like the Hubert's Museum that, like such colonies, by definition existed on the margins of the mainstream and operated by their own rules, norms, and standards for appearance and decorum; examples are nudist camps, freak shows, twin conventions, dancehall contests, annual picnics for the Federation of the Handicapped, institutions for the developmentally disabled, etc. Arbus would "stand out" in these environments, as did Gulliver, perhaps like an interloper, although she often wrote with joy about being embraced by such communities, made to feel "at home," or normal, and felt comfortable participating in the alternative lifestyles. For example, many of Arbus's images of people in nudist colonies, as in *Retired Man and His Wife At Home In A Nudist Camp One Morning* (1963), a black and white photograph of a naked man and woman posed casually in their living room, quite comfortable and "at home" in their nudist affiliations and display of nudity. This scene would be unremarkable if they were clothed. Many of Arbus's nudist subjects were photographed while she was in the buff, thus the power dynamics of the gaze were destabilized, at least off the page. This could make the subjects more comfortable and "at home," as in this image, in the couple's living room, as they pose for the camera. If nudity/nakedness *always* means vulnerability to an objectifying gaze, what are the implications when the photographer is unclothed, or otherwise sharing the same status or position as the subject? Does the viewer of Arbus's photograph feel a part of these communities or excluded from them, like a freak?

*Mexican Dwarf* and many other images were shot with Arbus's chosen twin lens Rollicflex, a camera type specifically held at waist level. This camera angle, which Arbus used in numerous portraits, enhances the intimacy between subject and spectator. It also dwarfs all the subjects it frames, including the average sized, such that *Mexican Dwarf* is not necessarily constructed as "abnormal" in the context of Arbus's oeuvre, although the camera angle functions distinctively in this photograph. She photographed Cha Cha at the height at which dwarfs stand, enacting a kind of identifying perspective (as if Arbus were "like him" – a dwarf). Photographer Ricardo Gil's images present examples of such a "dwarfed" viewpoint and are similar to Arbus's as a family album series. A little person, Gil photographs his wife and daughter, both little people, from the perspectives at which he views them – literally, in terms of his height, and figuratively, as intimate close-ups that establish affectionate, familial relationships between the subject and the camera's gaze. In *Johann's Kiss* (1999), Gil features his smiling wife centered in the frame, embraced by an average-sized, kneeling man, whose head is cropped at the top of the image. Here, "normal" size people that don't fit in the little woman's privileged, compositional space. A similar, lower-than-average point of view functions in *Mexican Dwarf*; the viewer is not only dwarfed or "enfreaked" through this perspective, but put at eye level with the Mexican dwarf as to be entranced and entrapped by his returned stare. This would not be as prominent if Arbus had chosen one of the other images of Cha Cha from her contact sheet, many that dwarf him in the middle of a larger frame of the room, often playfully (childishly?) lounging on the bed in his casual clothing; these alternative images



contextualize Cha Cha is miniature compared to his "normal" scaled environment, like the cartes of Tom Thumb and Admiral Dot, and in many he appears childlike in his setting. Arbus chose a more aggrandizing image, soliciting viewers to stare at the full glory of his body and its possible historical and metaphorical implications. Is his body and his identity as a "Mexican Dwarf" enfreaked or normalized? Must he be *either* a freak *or* the normal? The designation as Mexican may make him "exotic," further eroticized, according to conventional representation, as well as hint at his social status in 1970 New York City as a self-displayed "freak." Also, combined with designation of his stature, Arbus's title points out that dwarfism is trans-racial. He shares with all humanity a layered identity and background. He is subject to trans-historical and contextually-specific oppression. Like everyone, he is always already a freak *and* normal, considering that only context, rather than embodiment, defines each.

Arbus's portrait displays how Cha Cha, like others of his stature, embodies a history of cultural representation in myths, fairy tales, legends, and visual images. As expressed repeatedly in film documentaries and written accounts, social subjects with small stature combat the stereotypes and stock characters constructed of them by culture, which impact their social statuses and the impressions/assumptions made of them by society "at large." Cultural images may also be internalized, impacting self image. Often patronizing, such images disable individuals. The Little People Societies all over the world work to change diminutive and limiting stereotypes of people of small stature and instill pride and group solidarity; the term "little people" affirms their status as real social subjects rather than creatures of fiction. Arbus's image points to the power of images of little people in cultural representation and contemporary life, and further points to its own place in that history. Arbus printed all of her own images, and her distinctive technique of printing negatives in bold black frames, a characteristic begun in 1965, exaggerates the edge between image and everyday life. It suggests the false "objectivity" of photography as scientific or documentary evidence as it calls attention to the manipulations of the photographer through developing and cropping. In Arbus's portrait of Cha Cha, as in other works with this feature, an irregular frame articulates the unstable line between real and representation, as the printed image points to its own existence as a staged construction that self-consciously traffics in various representational forms.

Significantly, Arbus's image enables Cha Cha to stare back. Although his full, miniature body dominates the frame, Cha Cha's eyes elicit immediate attention. *Mexican Dwarf* may present a more clinical format than *Jewish Giant* due to the subject's frontal position, associated, according to artistic convention, with being subject to a mastering and diagnostic gaze, and because the returned gaze is fairly compliant. Yet, Arbus's image exceeds such frames, for Cha Cha not only resigns himself to being viewed, stared at, and perhaps examined, rather the intensity and ambiguity of his eyes reverse the traditional power dynamics of the gaze; soliciting the stare in a blend of confrontation, provocation, and flirtation, Cha Cha masters the viewer with his embodied returned gaze. Like the photograph itself, Cha Cha teases the viewer. This multi-directional gaze offers means for interaction between subject, viewer, and photographer, perhaps both disturbingly and optimistically. When one stares at another and is seen in their act of staring, a disruption occurs in spectator/spectacle distance and opposition. Gazes, or stares, may be faced by uncomfortable glares, or just as likely by smiles. Forcing the viewer to confront their own visual attraction and repulsion, the image asks what motivates staring/gazing and perhaps shakes up a viewer's sense of identification and misrecognition. Cha Cha performs before the camera in the tradition of a little person as an object on display, but here enacts his own disappearance from an exacting viewer's gaze by offering a facade – a sly withholding, an illusive appearance that maintains anonymity (as aided by the ambiguous props in the margins), holds secrets, and transgresses the frames through shadows.

In a review of the Arbus's retrospective now touring the U.S. and Europe, "Revelations," Judith Butler presents poignant commentary on gazes and facades in the photographs as means to suggest agency on the part of subjects often considered disturbing, pathetic, and objectified. Butler writes about subjects with their eyes closed, such as *Women on the street with her eyes closed, NYC* (1965), as not "freaks or performers," but rather revealing something about the "ordinary performance of obduracy" (2004, p. 120). For Butler, a viewer's exacting, possessing, or subjugating gaze is rebuffed and refused; invasion is rejected by a subject's refusal to

acknowledge himself or herself as on display. Butler furthers her discussion with the theme of masks in Arbus's oeuvres, arguing that masked subjects invite, block, and mock the viewer's gaze.

In *Masked Woman in a Wheelchair* (1970) (a photograph made specifically for colleague and friend Richard Avedon), we see a disabled woman in a wheelchair posed outdoors, in front of an indistinguishable building and a few trees and wearing a Halloween mask. See photo at:

<http://www.temple.edu/photo/photographers/arbus/arbusp4.htm>. This woman is one of Arbus's co-called "cripples" (perhaps the victim of auto wreck?) who attracts attention in the photograph as she would beyond its frames – in the realm of everyday life. She stands out in social life, specifically by not standing. A manual wheelchair, the universal symbol of disability, stages and poses her body, serving as a prop or costume device to tell stories about the woman. The mask she wears becomes another costume piece that accentuates the ultimate failure of the viewer to know, identify, or size up the woman based on her embodiment and based on this image of her; despite the static posing and somewhat institutional building in the blurry background, we are not sure if she is a medical patient, unless we assume this based on the wheelchair, nor do we know "what happened," if anything, to her. Arbus's pseudo-clinical photograph is insubordinate, like its masked subject, as diagnostic evidence. As Arbus's portrait of the anonymous subject and generic title make vivid, the masked woman's specific impairment, identity, history, social status, etc. exceed the frames of the photograph and the wheelchair that frames her body in it. The mask shields her face – the most common bodily feature used to identify and distinguish individuals. The face is considered the visual marker of who one is, and facial features are common targets of exaggeration and manipulation in readings of character from visual images. Here we "see" only her body, although also veiled in consuming clothing and blanket, isolated, centered, set off as characteristic of Arbus's human spectacles. More prominently, we see the wheelchair, which might hint at what dominates attention when the woman is stared at by viewers. Due to the mask she actively holds to her face, we are refused the knowledge of whether she glares at, smiles back, mocks us, or closes her eyes in reaction to the stare. She may stubbornly look away, like Carmel, or return an inviting and challenging gaze, like Cha Cha. Here, the woman withholds in an obdurate performance of invisibility, despite that she is on display in the photograph.

Griselda Pollock speaks of masked balls in nineteenth-century France as a public space in which women gained unsanctioned access through identity concealment (1992). With masks, women could live dangerously, transgressing social boundaries and restrictive norms for bodily presence and public visibility. Bakhtin's construction of the grotesque body, particularly an abnormal body, as a metaphor for similar social and bodily transgressions identifies the mask as "essentially grotesque." He states: "The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphosis, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames" (1968, p. 39). The use of a Halloween mask in Arbus's photograph (identified by a small pointed hat at the top with an orange circle that frames a cartoonish black cat) brings Bakhtin's discourse on the mask as a secular performance into contemporary, familiar realms. Halloween, like the carnival of the Middle Ages in Bakhtin's text, is an event with its own alternative subculture and rituals – a time when we escape the confines of our identities and our bodies. The masked woman may be stereotypically "confined" to a wheelchair, according to the conventions of language surrounding wheelchairs and their users; however, the mask, according to Bakhtin's metaphor, mobilizes her agency. The mask enables her becoming and shape-shifting, such that identity is never fixed in the frames or confines of the image, of the wheelchair, or of the body. The mask signifies masquerade; a game of trick or treat; and a means to act, act up, and misbehave, while maintaining a certain level of strategic invisibility. A witch's mask in particular places this woman in a history of legendary deviant and magical female figures. In a display of alchemy, she bewitches, casts spells, and makes objects appear and disappear.

In the relationship between cripples and auto wrecks as spectacles, a viewer may desire to look and stare, combined with indignant rejection of identifying with the bodies on display. The viewer, confronted with the "tragedy" of the abnormal "Other" or with the threat of physical difference and mortality, strives to set limits and frames between bodies. The viewer may aim to maintain distance and stare at the spectacle to see, in its

most exaggerated form, what the viewer is not, and hopes they will never be. In one sense then, *Masked Woman in a Wheelchair*, by representing Arbus's characteristic formal and compositional strategies, turns the tables on the traditional spectator invisibility versus hyper-visibility of the spectacle on display. The photograph grants the subject on display the privilege of withholding visibility while staring back; on the other hand, she is on visual display, and in the eyes of many, exploited, in the act of being photographed, as well as in the realms of everyday life due to her impairment. The photograph allows us a format in which to stare (Garland-Thomson, 2001). It then ironically frames the failure itself of seeing without being seen – the inevitable reversibility of the gaze through performative bodily and artist acts. The mask may be a metaphor for Arbus's oeuvre of portraiture: trafficking in the various metaphors for vision, playing with the viewer's expectations of seeing, disrupting multiple conventions for displaying the body, and endlessly exceeding the frames. Arbus's images, like the mask, point to the irony of the gaze – we look at the "Other" in attempts to see ourselves more clearly, and perhaps may see ourselves best in the eyes of others. For me, Arbus's work exhibits how the richest moments of discovery result from the appearance of extraordinary disturbances in the visual field of "normal" and in exchanges of embodied, subjective gazes.

### References:

- Adams, R. (2001). *Sideshow U.S.A : freaks and the American cultural imagination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arbus, Doon. (1972). *Diane Arbus*. Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture.
- Arbus, Diane., & San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. (2003). *Diane Arbus : revelations* (1st ed.). New York: Random House.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1968). *Rabelais and his world*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press.
- Bogdan, R. (1988). *Freak show: presenting human oddities for amusement and profit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Butler, J. (2004). Surface tensions. *ArtForum international*, 42(6), 118-124.
- Carchman, J. (1999). *The Jewish giant: a sound portrait*. New York: Sound Portraits Productions. (Premiered on NPR's *All Things Considered* 10/6/99)
- Fiedler, L. A. (1978). *Freaks: myths and images of the secret self*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Garland-Thomson, R. (2001). Seeing the disabled: visual rhetorics of disability in popular Photography. In P. K. Longmore & L. Umansky (Eds.), *The new disability history: American perspectives* (pp. 335-222). New York: New York University Press.
- Goldman, J. (1974). Diane Arbus: the gap between intention and effect. *Art journal*, 34(1), 30-35.
- Hart, R. (2003). Diane Arbus. *American photo*, 14(5), 56-63.
- Hevey, D. (1992). *The creatures time forgot: photography and disability imagery*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Mannix, D. (1999; 1969). *Freaks: we who are not as others*. New York: RE/Search Publications.
- Mitchell, M. (2002). *Monsters: human freaks in America's gilded age, the photographs of Chas. Eisenmann*. Toronto, Canada: ECW Press.
- Purcell, R. (1997). *Special Cases: natural anomalies and historical monsters*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Pollock, G. (1992). Modernity and the spaces of femininity. In N. a. G. Broude, Mary G. (Ed.), *The expanding discourse: feminism and art history* (Vol. 2, pp. 245-267). New York: IconEditions.
- Prose, F. (2003). Revisiting the icons: the intimate photography of Diane Arbus. *Harper's Magazine*, 307(1842), 84-88, 90.
- Sontag, S. (1977). *On photography*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux.