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Diane Arbus: Documenting the Abnormal

The late Diane Arbus once said, “Everybody has that thing where they need to look one way but they come out looking another way and that’s what people observe. You see someone on the street and essentially what you notice about them is the flaw...there’s a point between what you want people to know about you and what you can’t help people knowing about you.”¹ Arbus was aware that no one is exempt from others’ gaze, including herself, a theme repeated throughout her work. In this essay, I will be examining the work of Diane Arbus that showed intimate snippets of the lives of those that would be labeled as “freaks”, “disabled”, “handicapped”, “grotesque”, and other terms that were often used to be degrading or dehumanizing. I will be specifically focusing on her photographs that depict subjects with visual bodily ‘abnormalities’ as well as disabled bodies. Diane Arbus, according to her critics, is one of the first key figures to have focused her work on people with such visual differences, living their daily life, through the evidential medium of photography. I argue that the criticisms Diane Arbus faced from art critics, institutions, and the public for her work were unfair. Those who criticized Arbus did so unjustly, for they compared the people Arbus photographed to a traditional standard of beauty found in art. Her critics also failed to examine Arbus’ own personal struggles as well as her intent to document her participants. Arbus purposefully photographed her participants functionally and contentedly living their own lives. To fairly analyze Arbus’ work, I will be examining the many factors that played into her personal life, career life, the world she and her participants lived in, and the effect they all left on art and ethics today.

It is first important to familiarize oneself with the life of Diane Arbus. Diane Arbus was born in March 1923, to a Jewish immigrant family who built a life for themselves in New York City.

¹ Diane Arbus, *Diane Arbus*. (Millerton, N.Y: Aperture, 1972.), 1-2.

As shop owners on Fifth Avenue, the Nemerov family climbed their way up in social status by means of the fashion industry and the fur trade. With their newfound wealth, Arbus's parents heavily pushed the idea of being proper and beautiful on her and her brother. Neither she nor her brother, Howard, had affectionate relationships with their parents, since Howard explains, the parenting style made them fearful, for they were under constant pressure and control.² This proved detrimental to Arbus's mental health as she is reported having suicidal ideation from a young age, while teachers and family noting catatonic states and Arbus's detachment from reality.³ Because of her family background, Arbus was introduced to and familiar with the fashion industry. She married Allan Arbus, who at the time was a fashion photographer. Their relationship was not enthusiastically approved of. Once married, Arbus felt the freedom to rebel against her parents upper-class lifestyle and rules, such as not dressing in Fifth Avenue apparel she was once forced to wear.⁴ In a discussion of Arbus's early work in the fashion industry, Budick described her job as the stylist and choreographer who chose the subjects and settings.⁵ Allan was the one to take the photos. They worked with successful companies such as *Seventeen*, *Life*, and *Vogue* through the means of creating advertisements. As her depressive episodes continued and increased, Diane Arbus retired from fashion photography around 1957 and began to focus on her own photographic career, starting off by going to photography classes and workshops. She also used her connections to magazines and editors she had worked for to jumpstart her personal career. Some of these publications included *Harper's Bazaar*, *Esquire*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. Arbus became close to well-known photographer Lisette

² Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus: A Biography*. (New York: Knopf, 1984), 12.

³ Bosworth, *Diane Arbus*, 32.

⁴ Bosworth, *Diane Arbus*, 39.

⁵ Ariella Budick, "Factory Seconds: Diane Arbus and the Imperfections in Mass Culture." *Art Criticism* 12 (2) (1997): 62.

Model while taking a class taught by her in 1958.⁶ Almost all of Arbus's colleagues and peers in Patricia Bosworth's book, commented on her shyness.⁷ Arbus sought to overcome this shyness by asking people on the street if she could take their picture. The camera became her way of connecting to real-life as well, as coping with her seemingly constant mental state of detachment and depression. Ultimately, Diane Arbus took her own life in July of 1971.

When Diane Arbus' photographs were first shown in exhibition in museums, the public reacted strongly. In the 1965 exhibition "Recent Acquisitions" hosted by the MoMA, Arbus's photos of nudists were displayed. Goodwin records that a museum employee, Yuben Yee, would wipe clear the spit left behind by angry museum goers every morning.⁸ Negative and hostile reactions from museum goers brings us to a fascinating concern of photography ethics. Why would these photographs invoke such strong emotions? Author Aleksandr Sukonik suggests that perhaps the realism and naturalism in these photos frighten viewers from the possibility of themselves being on display.⁹ Diane Arbus, as we know, intentionally photographed those in marginalized groups. If Sukonik's assertion is valid, we can assume these hostile reactions are a reflection of the viewer, not a reflection of the subjects. To quote the psychologist Louis A. Sass, "the camera has filled the world with reproductions of itself, forcing the world to become self-conscious"¹⁰. The criticisms of Arbus' work suggest public museum members as elite and photographs showing the other side of the public were not worthy to be shown in such a space, supporting negative and aggressive responses. As some art critics suggest, museums have a

⁶ Bosworth, *Diane Arbus*, 129.

⁷ Bosworth, *Diane Arbus*

⁸ James Goodwin, *Modern American Grotesque: Literature and Photography* (The Ohio State University Press, 2009), 171.

⁹ Aleksandr Sukonik, "The Productive Limitations of Art Photography." *Raritan* 23, no. 2 (2003): 138.

¹⁰ Louis A. Sass, "'Hyped on Clarity': Diane Arbus and the Postmodern Condition." *Raritan* 25, no. 1 (2005): 3.

certain responsibility in molding a public's attitude and appreciation of art. As a result of the public reaction, Diane Arbus faced reactions from institutions that showcased her work.

In recent years in art history as a field, there has been an increase in the awareness and concern surrounding ethical portrayals of disabled and abnormal bodies in art. Some of these concerns deal with the medium being used, the subjects' awareness of their bodies used in the work, and the effects on the audience of the work. Scholars have noted there is a major difference concerning ethics in mediums such as painting and photography in terms of the real-life connection one has to the work, for painting reflects what the artist sees, but photography acts as evidence of the subjects' existence in our real-life world.¹¹ Another major difference between the two mediums is the social view of photography being connotated as a lower art form and inferior to painting.¹² However, compared to other mediums, photography seems to have more criticism of its ethics due to the process of creating photographs.

Some writers have discussed the photographer's role, claiming that it ranges from service professional, a collector of images, and an information processor; acknowledging that any person who reports information has a duty and it is up to them whether they will be subjective or objective.¹³ The well-known critic, Susan Sontag, claimed that photographers are constantly "imposing standards on their subjects" since they are responsible for choosing which exposure frame is to be included in their body of work.¹⁴ In terms of the subjects' participation, the major concerns deal with the subjects' awareness of their role and the issue of the photographer objectifying the subjects. Some scholars suggest that not as much responsibility should be placed

¹¹ David Davies, "Susan Sontag, Diane Arbus, and the Ethical Dimensions of Photography." in *Art and Ethical Criticism* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 213-14.

¹² Sukonik, "The Productive Limitations of Art Photography." *Raritan* 23, no. 2 (2003): 131-34.

¹³ Halla Beloff, "Social Interaction in Photographing." *Leonardo* (Oxford) 16, no. 3 (1983): 171.

¹⁴ Davies, "Susan Sontag," 215.

on the photographer for, they are simply capturing a moment in time of what was already there to be seen.¹⁵ Many argue that Arbus alienated, objectified, and commoditized the subjects in her photographs to deal with her personal struggles. Shelley Rice, another passionate critic, claimed that Diane Arbus only produced photographs showing “an assertion of power over her sitters”¹⁶ while others called her narcissistic, devious, and uncompassionate. Sontag supported her assertion that the photographs are uncompassionate and predatory with her assumption that the subjects are not aware of how they appear and that they all appear grotesque in their honest image.¹⁷ On the other hand, Sontag believes viewing photographs of subjects such as those with disabled bodies may lead to a lack of compassion in a sort of desensitizing process. Diane Arbus, however, used photography as a means of a familiarizing process to connect with the real-world, a world she often felt distant from. I disagree with Sontag that Diane Arbus was searching for a world outside of what she was exposed to with a malicious intent, for Sontag ignored the evidence of an outside world allowing Arbus inside.

In a class with a well-known art director, Alexey Brodovitch, Arbus quickly learned from him to not capture an image of what has already been seen.¹⁸ This advice would become pertinent to her independent work. With Arbus’ sheltered childhood, photographing the unseen came easy to her. After starting her own career, Diane filled her body of work with depictions of taboo living, bodily abnormalities, and disabilities that are visually present. Goldman described Arbus’ subjects as having sideshow relationships to society.¹⁹ Diane Arbus became a regular at

¹⁵ Davies, "Susan Sontag," 223.

¹⁶ Goodwin, *Modern American Grotesque*, 160.

¹⁷ Susan Sontag, "Freak Show", *The New York Review*, November 15, 1973, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1973/11/15/freak-show/>

¹⁸ Bosworth, *Diane Arbus*, 122-23.

¹⁹ Judith Goldman, "Diane Arbus: The Gap between Intention and Effect." *Art Journal* (New York. 1960) 34, no. 1 (1974): 30.

what was commonly known as freakshows, or carnivals, literally documenting the people in sideshows. Jack Dracula, The Marked Man (Fig. 1), lies on the ground shirtless, revealing some of his over 300 tattoos. He proudly looks at the camera and allows himself to be seen.

Transvestite at a drag ball (Fig. 2) shows another way of life that was still extremely taboo in the mid-1900s. While Arbus sought to escape the extravagance of her wealthy family, she encountered a cross-dresser proud in their own display of extravagance. While they are not making direct eye contact with the camera as seen in Jack Dracula, they are in a pose like stance with their body open to the camera. There is a sense of confidence and comfortableness within themselves to be captured candidly. This sense of comfort is repeatedly found in other works by Arbus. In A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx (Fig. 3), Arbus is placed in the intimate space of a family's living room. This is one shot off of a contact sheet containing nine images of this man with his parents. These images were a series done after originally photographing the family in 1960.²⁰ Similarly, Arbus photographed Lauro Morales, aka Cha-cha-cha, in 1960 and again 1970 as shown in Mexican dwarf in his hotel room in N.Y.C. (Fig. 4). Morales is depicted as confidently looking into the camera and back at the viewer. He is naked under a sheet that is draped across his lap and wears a fedora that seems to be an artistic addition by Arbus. An intimate setting of a space of living and sleeping is also repeatedly documented throughout Arbus' body of work. In Blind couple in their bedroom (Fig. 5), the couple embraces while lounging on their bed. Not much information is given on this couple in MoMA's book published in 2003, *Revelations*, that accompanied an exhibition of the late photographer's work, but the fact remains they had to put full trust in Arbus to respectfully capture this moment.

Untitled 1 (Fig. 6) shows a different kind of intimacy. Arbus visited the Vineland State School

²⁰ Diane Arbus, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. *Diane Arbus: Revelations*. 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2003), 153.

many times during her career. This was a residential campus for mentally handicapped persons whose mental handicaps also presented visually due to the genetic nature of the disability. Arbus went not to just take pictures, but to build rapport with those she would eventually photograph. As seen in Untitled 1, the women excitedly pose for Arbus, smiling at the opportunity to have their picture taken. This series of photographs were never published nor titled by Arbus and have been noted as some of her last photographs.

As seen in the images, most of the titles lack the name of the subjects and only include a description of their abnormality. This was partially due to Arbus keeping their identities safe and the participants from harm, but also as a way to comment on the fact that despite abnormalities, these people existed and conducted everyday life. They are shown in ways that even those who were accepted to the social norm could identify with the activities that Arbus showed her subjects partaking in. It is also important to note that out of the images I have chosen to highlight, three of them are performers; Jack Dracula, Eddie Carmel, and Lauro Morales, none of whom Arbus publicly discloses as performers. Eddie Carmel and Lauro Morales are photographed by Diane Arbus in intimate spaces of living while Jack Dracula's background shows no sign of the carnival, just the grass in which he lies. Arbus methodically chose intimate, private scenery to highlight the fact that even the performers are just people who carry out ordinary tasks.

While Arbus was working for *Esquire* in 1961, the editor Harold Hayes wrote to Arbus that due to "a legal ruling that under no circumstances are we [Esquire] entitled to publish photographs of people...for the purposes of showing him as an 'eccentric' unless that person

knows he is being shown in that light.”²¹ It is clear that Diane Arbus was aware of ethical standards of photographing as well as institutional repercussions if such standards were not followed. Diane Arbus’ photographs of marginalized people may have been shocking compared to what some describe as museums tendency to show “profoundly banal” images.²² Diane Arbus was not interested in producing more photographs of those who were placed in the high and elite groups of society. She believed there were groups of people, of everyday life, who were more deserving of positive attention for in life they had only received negative attention, if any. As stated earlier, Susan Sontag was not only a well-known art critic, but one of Diane Arbus’ biggest critics. Some scholars and critics suggest that Sontag only supported her claims by few statements made by Arbus, some of which were taken out of context.²³ Claims against Diane Arbus are repeatedly placed without proper analysis and mostly based on assumption. These assumptions are widely based on the standards of photography and beauty of those in photographs and paintings that were in exhibitions before Arbus.

Work by Arbus can and should be criticized in parameters of art that came before and after her work. Diane Arbus was not the first person in art history to portray taboo living, abnormalities of the body, or disabled bodies. However, she was one of the firsts to do so in the medium of photography and outside the realm of war photography. Because she lived relatively recently, we have more detailed records of her life and creative process than those before her. Letters to friends and family documented in the exhibition catalogue, *Revelations*, show the planning and intent behind her work. Goodwin made a strong point concerning the photography that came after Diane Arbus’ death. He argued those who shot in a similar style, or were

²¹ Davies, "Susan Sontag," pg. 225.

²² Ashley La Grange, *Basic Critical Theory for Photographers*. 1st ed. Jordan Hill: Routledge, 2005. 57.

²³ Philip Charrier, "On Diane Arbus: Establishing a Revisionist Framework of Analysis." 423.

influenced by Arbus' work, took it in a different direction which could validly be labeled as predatory and manipulative, especially those by some street photographers that followed.²⁴ Their work captured those unaware of their participation. It should be noted that these photographers' intent behind their art was different than that of Arbus. One thing that most people agreed on was Diane Arbus' straightforwardness in her depiction of her participants.

Diane Arbus is recorded being afraid of people misinterpreting her intent to photograph for she was just, as a close friend put it, more open about her fascination with that society labeled "perverted" or "forbidden" and no more voyeuristic than other artists.²⁵ In effort to fight against the idolization of the elite that mass media created, Arbus focused on the preservation of individuality. She is quoted, "Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats."²⁶ Arbus did not so much focus on the severity of her subjects' abnormalities rather she focused on how they presented as individuals and as Sass describes "questions about selfhood".²⁷ Diane Arbus was aware of their apparent differences as well as the social contradictions and anxieties that existed in her time. She felt her purpose was to explore them. When looking at the exhibition catalogue *Revelations*, it is apparent that she was methodical in terms of planning thematic photographs. Critics argue that she put effort into discovering self-representation and identity and how they connected to larger patterns found in her society.²⁸ This seems to be a result of her mentor and friend, Lisette Model, encouraging her to make her

²⁴ Goodwin, *Modern American Grotesque*, 156.

²⁵ Bosworth, *Diane Arbus*, 250.

²⁶ Sass, "'Hyped on Clarity'", 21.

²⁷ Sass, "'Hyped on Clarity'", 21.

²⁸ Charrier, "On Diane Arbus:", 426.

photographs more focused and specific for “the more specific you are, the more general it’ll be.”²⁹

To capture these moments of life, Diane Arbus used many different cameras throughout her career which led to a variety in her final prints. Arbus created her earlier works using a Nikon 35mm film camera, which allowed her to explore cities and capture the contents more rapidly. Switching from a Nikon to a Rolleiflex in 1962, and a few years later adding a Mamiya C33 to her collection, Arbus was able to depict her subjects in a more realistic manner. The detail on 6x6 cm frames of Rolleiflex and Mamiyas was a huge improvement. But with this increase of detail of a medium format came a much smaller shot count. A Rolleiflex for example would allow for about 12 frames per roll of film. This meant Diane Arbus had to be methodical and meticulous when taking photographs of her participants. She is quoted saying, “If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself.”³⁰ This being said, she was conscious of the fact that some photographs will not turn out how she expected nor as ‘good’ as others. She, however, did not see this as an issue, for the purpose of her photographing her interactions was to document people in their natural lives. She spent time with her participants before clicking the shutter which meant she had time to wait for a moment to speak to her. She strived to portray her participants as the real-life people they were, while having her photographs also capture the tone of the setting she and her participants spent time in. A person taking photographs of her friends. There are even photographs that her hosts took of her in their private spaces such as their living rooms as seen in this casual snapshot.³¹

²⁹ Arbus, *Diane Arbus: Revelations*, 141.

³⁰ Sass, “‘Hyped on Clarity’”, 11.

³¹ Arbus, *Diane Arbus: Revelations*, 166.

Arbus's daughter Doon Arbus and her close friend Marvin Israel said photography was Diane Arbus' way to meet strangers for that was one of her biggest fascinations in life.³² Her work clearly shows the relationships she worked hard to build with her participants. Arbus received a letter of gratitude from the Vineland State School for her donation of a camera for the residents like the ones shown in Untitled 1 (Fig. 6) furthering the notion that Arbus truly cared for those she photographed.³³ Israel is quoted recalling, "And then there would be a contact sheet from several years later with one of those same faces in which you can trace Arbus's progress from the street to their home, to their living room, to their bedroom. These are like a narrative..."³⁴ In a page from her 1960 planner, Eddie Carmel's, the Jewish giant (Fig. 3), address as well as notes about his family can be found. Ten years later, his name would reappear in her planner for a photograph session at the same address after his return to the east coast.³⁵

While looking at her body of work, I found myself reflecting on the way her participants posed. While some critics claimed it was the same photograph over and over, I saw it as a pattern in humans, a pattern that showed their proudness in their being. Eye contact, confidence, and vulnerability repeat in Diane Arbus' photos supporting the argument that her participants confided in her and had a mutual comfortability. Lisette Model supported her former student against the critics of Arbus' work. "And we're afraid to look at them because deep down in ourselves we feel that we are still crippled somewhere, even if it isn't outside. And she photographed them humanely, seriously, and functioning in their lives."³⁶ I think it is extremely important to note Model's acknowledgment that Diane Arbus was showing people living their

³²Charrier, "On Diane Arbus:", 424.

³³ Arbus, *Diane Arbus: Revelations*, 123-24.

³⁴ Goldman, "Diane Arbus:," 33.

³⁵ Arbus, *Diane Arbus: Revelations*, 153.

³⁶ Goodwin, *Modern American Grotesque*, 147.

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day-to-day lives as who they were, functionally. Research on the depiction of disabled bodies is fairly new to the field of art history and is far from over. It is important for us to evaluate what artists have already produced and their effect on artists to come in order to advance an ethical and morally strong field. For this reason, Diane Arbus remains a key figure in modern art for the portrayal of real-life people who lived in taboo ways, faced public scrutiny for their existence, and were labeled in dehumanizing ways for their appearance.

Images

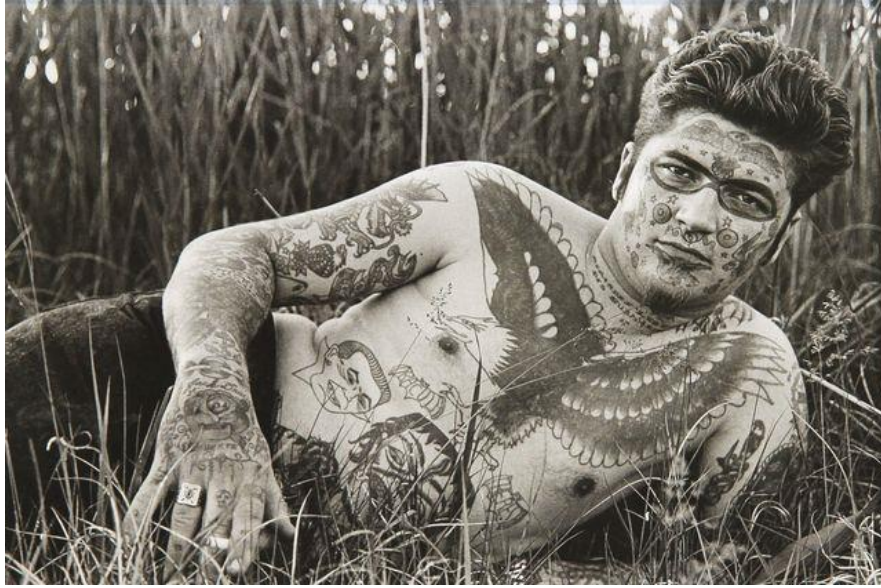


Fig. 1, Jack Dracula, The Marked Man, N.Y.C. 1961

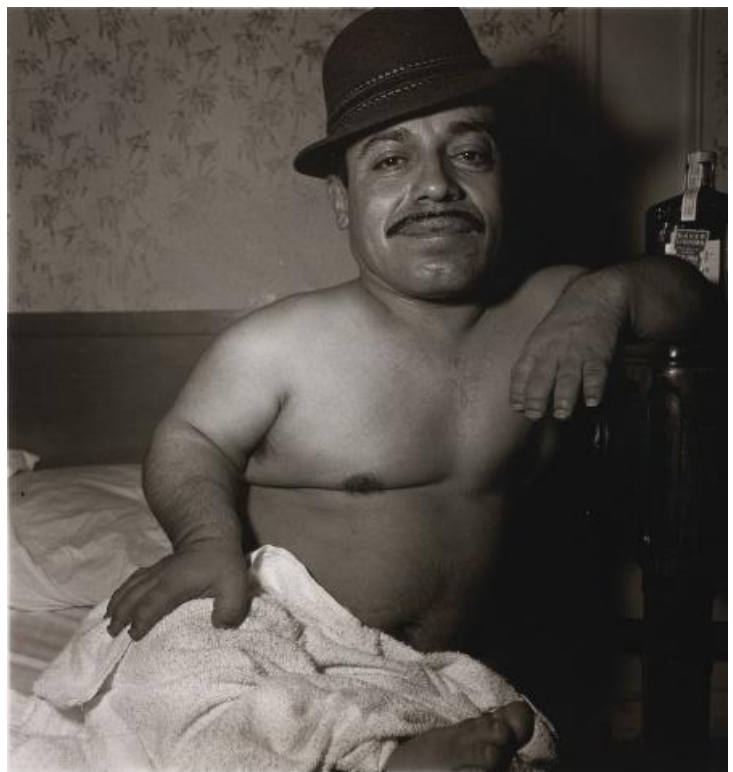


Fig. 2, Transvestite at a drag ball, N.Y.C., 1970



Fig. 3, A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y., 1970

Fig. 4, Mexican dwarf in his hotel room in N.Y.C., 1970



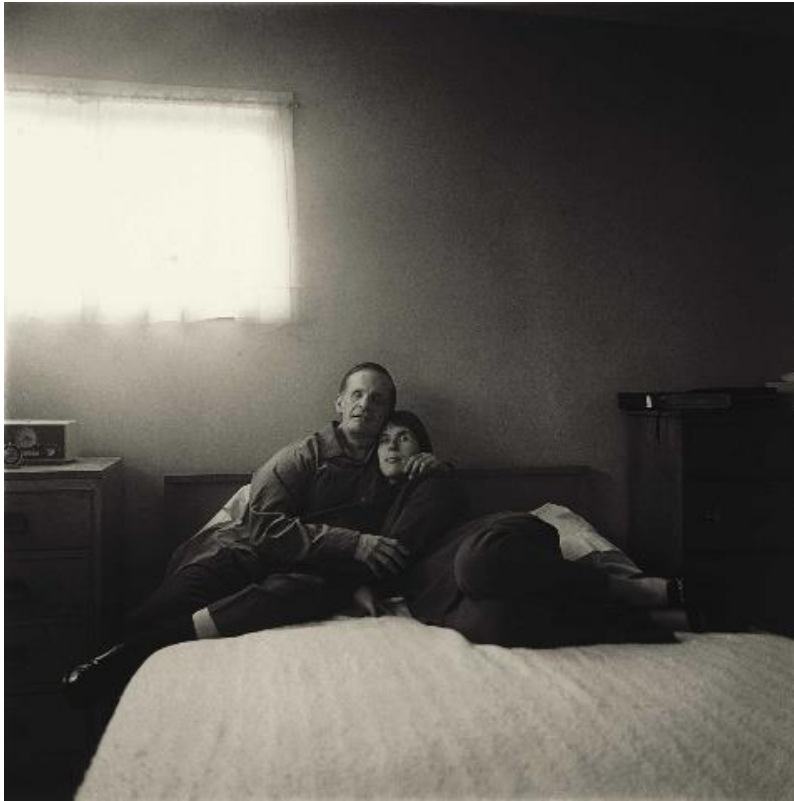


Fig. 5, Blind Couple in their bedroom,
Queens, N.Y. 1971



Fig. 6, Untitled 1, 1970

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