



# The Dual Nature of Diana Arbus's Photographic Art

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**Abstract:** Diana Arbus is a photographer to be criticized for unethical practices, yet her unique photographic style has left a lasting imprint on civilization. She's good at capturing marginalized societal groups, confronting the harsh realities and ugliness. Her work influenced people's contemplation of photographic art, while simultaneously subjecting her to significant ethical controversies. Arbus's photographs evoke feelings of terror and discomfort, but at the same time, she shed light on the people and experiences hidden in the shadows, revealing the greatness and sacredness of suffering and its essence. This gave rise to an aesthetic of alienation that contradicts traditional aesthetics. In Arbus's photographic works, there is a juxtaposition and fusion of oppositions between art and morality. Traditional aesthetics pursue happiness, harmony, and beauty, whereas Arbus's photographs present pain, distortion, and ugliness. Consequently, some argue that Arbus violates the moral principles of beauty. However, on the other hand, Arbus's works also bring visibility, attention, and understanding to marginalized groups, achieving a fusion of art and morality in a divergent way.

**Keywords:** Diana Arbus, photographic art, duality

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## 1. Introduction

On July 26, 1971, Diana Arbus committed suicide. No one can interpret her choice of death. However, the study of Arbus' photography has never stopped. Her photography style is often described as showing the duality of purity and evil, composed of normality and deformity at the same time. She chooses to use her camera to document people and groups who are marginalized, unconventional or unusual, and to show what makes them unique. Behind Arbus' photographic art style is the social diversity development and transformation in the United States in the middle of the 20th century. During this period, many marginalized groups appeared in society, including homeless people, homosexuals, transvestites and so on. Photography began to emphasize the true reflection and presentation of real life, and Arbus keenly captured these changes, revealing the real life and emotional state of human rights on the edge of society, as well as their contradictions and conflicts with mainstream society through his own lens. Although Arbus's work had already received attention at the time of her emergence, it was the Diana Arbus retrospective held the year after her death that really made her famous, and people began to rediscover Arbus, to see and understand her uncomfortable works. We have to admit the eccentric and painful impact and long lasting influence of Arbus's photography.

In modern society, where photography is ubiquitous, it is easier for people to perceive photography as a means of documentation and nostalgia. However, the essence and significance of photographic art begin to be overlooked. People tend to engage in aimless shooting and recording, with a broader and more diverse range of photographic subjects. Contrasting with the present trend, more than half a century ago, Diane Arbus demonstrated a profound artistic concern for human suffering and morality in her choice of photographic themes. This concern shattered the framework of mainstream photographic aesthetics, bringing the ugliness of morality onto the stage and revealing the binary opposition between art and morality. Even today, humanistic care in photographic art does not disappear. Instead, it manifests in a more complex and chaotic photographic language environment. Delving into the duality of Arbus's photographic art is a questioning of contemporary photographic art morality. Arbus's works, characterized by her unique perspective and attention to marginalized groups, are filled with contradictions. These contradictions primarily manifest in the duality between human nature and societal norms, subjectivity and objectivity, beauty and ugliness, as well as normalcy and abnormalcy. However, it is the opposition of values in her works that reveals the complexity and diversity of the human psyche.

## 2. Duality of arts

Susan Sontag wrote "By getting us used to what, formerly, we could not bear to see or hear, because it was too shocking, painful, or embarrassing, art changes morals — that body of psychic custom and public sanctions that sets a vague boundary between what is emotionally and spontaneously intolerable and what is not" (223). It's difficult to explain and define the "vague boundary" that doesn't appear physically but mentally. We are not born to have this "boundary" but develop it in our

life while never considering whether it's a protection or not. How should we act after realizing such a "boundary"? What can we get after crossing the line and facing straightly towards the things that we "emotionally and spontaneously intolerable"? Something

shocking, painful, or embarrassing happens every day, but everyone would resist facing it since it always creates negative emotions. However, these things exist, they are valid, and they are perpetually present.

Diana Arbus's photographs have been considered abnormal and deviated from traditional aesthetics for a long time. Most of the scenes she chose make people feel cold, and she catches indifferent or even painful moments. Ourselves and people around us may face the same thing one day, and looking at these pictures may build something inside, resilience or courage, in our minds. This may become another reason why Arbus took her photographs. She's doing something abnormal but meaningful while revealing our lives' gray or even dark areas.

Diana Arbus's artifacts let the audience look closely into the "freaks" eyes and the black and white color intentionally makes the audience feel sincere and cold. This kind of feeling usually is not welcome by everyone and makes people feel uncomfortable. The primary essay makes me question "should people actively confront depressing or scary situations? Is there any beneficial change in ourselves, mentally or physically?" Combined with Maggie Nelson's essay "The Art of Cruelty," readers can better understand these strange artifacts more openly. The traditional idea for living is to live a better, happier life and avoid as much pain as possible. This may be because everyone must encounter some unsatisfied things in their daily life. It's almost inevitable to feel pain and depression. Since we have already had the feeling of scarceness and being overwhelmed, we know that the sense of relief is precious and rare. But since we have our pain and scars, we are restricted from feeling others' struggles. Many people don't choose to look at or care about the "freaks" they see. This is because we know that we will have a sense of sympathy. However, on many occasions, we accept others' inhibitions and emotions calmly, and we feel relieved instead of infected by the pain of others. The process of "healing" others may also be a process of "healing" ourselves. Experiences always give us a sense of duality. We may learn from the misfortune of others how lucky we are or sigh that the reality of life is always like that and not struggle with ourselves anymore.

### 3. Duality of existence

Although Arbus's works are gifts for some people that inspire them to live a better life, Susan Sontag claims that Diana Arbus's work is "without the compassionate purpose" and "their aggressiveness toward the public has been turned into a moral accomplishment" (221). Sontag criticizes Arbus's work for forcing the audience too close to the subject, the "freak", and only looking at them. This photography perspective forces the viewers to look straightly at what is abnormal and strange in the subjects and directly expose the flaw or depression. However, the subjects themselves may not view themselves as "freaks". Arbus is turning them into freaks with her camera. Since everything is black and white, the photos are motionless, and she just took the moment that makes people feel strange. We may assume that people will feel ashamed or embarrassed about their flaws, but it's not a done deal, everyone has the ability to accept, accept others and accept themselves. As one example, homosexuality has suffered prejudice over the past centuries but has gradually been understood. An important message Diana Arbus gives us through the whole process of her work is braveness. First, she's brave enough to take pictures and do something others would view as weird. As Nelson says in "The Art of Cruelty": "the artist standing bravely in the face of the (inconvenient, brutal, hard-won, dangerous, offensive) truth, the artist who refuses to "evade facts," or who can stare down "what the world really looks like" — what could be more heroic" (664)? Some people criticize her work because they can't be strong enough like her or "freaks" themselves to face the flaws. Absolute morality is not eliminating those pictures but persuading ourselves to treat them as usual since they are not normal to most people. Only we, who are considered normal people by society, are used to seeing so-called "freaks" without being surprised or horrified, we are genuinely kind and respectful to them. People's minds are not as fragile as we thought. People can heal their flaws just as they heal wounds. It is the strange eyes of passers-by that open their scars again.

Arbus's photos appear to have moral knowledge and unconsciously arouse inner emotions in the audience, but Susan Sontag questions the motivation and claims "Arbus's interest in freaks expresses a desire to violate her own innocence, her sense of being privileged" (224). The environment of Arbus grew up in has some credit for her personality and why she would choose to be such a photographer. There's a sense of duality of experiencing. The self-made businessman came from poverty to learn that nothing is easy and wants a stable life; A well-protected life makes people feel mentally deprived and want to take risks, to feel the ups and downs and the excitement of life. The perception of everything is produced after the comparison. Everyone is searching for the missing part of himself. People have seven feelings, the lack of one may make the other feelings disappear. There doesn't exist total empathy in the world, not even between your present self and your past or future self, let alone between strangers. The distance between space and time is an unbridgeable gap. We may look at the

photos of "freaks", but we can't feel their thoughts; we don't know them; we are not close; we only have a kind of ethereal feeling from the photographer. This feeling is vital for us, and it's our soul fragment. As the author writes in "The Art of Cruelty": "much of the work that has no designs on eliciting compassion or bringing about emancipation can be the most salutary, the most liberating" (662). Arbus' works calm the audience down thoroughly and let the audience look directly into the eyes of the subject as an equal identity. She gets rid of the prejudice caused by all colors and environments, then lets the audience feel the differences between themselves and the subjects by heart. If there are only two people in the world, the viewer and the "freak", we must not have the word "freak" anymore. Besides, we are all born to be human beings, and are we really different?



Figure 1. *A Castle in Disneyland* taken by Arbus in 1962 in California

Diane Arbus is most famous for her photos of "freaks", but many of her photos of landscapes are also unique and abnormal to others. People see the same view while having different thoughts and inspirations. Diane Arbus' works show her dark romance and interpretation of a place. "A Castle in Disneyland" was taken by Arbus in 1962 in California. Disneyland is one of the most popular tourist attractions. It's impressive that the visitors usually have lots of lights on, using bright colors, and playing romantic music. It feels like the happy ending of a fairy tale full of happiness and good wishes. Most of the Disneyland castle posts online are in color, and even at night, the castle is illuminated with brilliant lights. However, the castle photographed by Arbus is black and white, without the usually crowded pedestrians, giving people a glimpse of a castle they can't see with a ticket. The photo is taken from the front of the castle to the left. In the lower part, the dark lake reflects several white points of light. The white swan on the lake strongly contrasts with the black background, which adds a sense of story to the whole picture. The white light points on the castle do not make people feel gloomy but are relatively peaceful. It depicts not the scene of lively reunion in fairy tales but the real midnight in fairy tales, which makes people feel the real in the unreal, and is a different kind of romance. Disney could be a freaky place invented by humans but have the impression of being dreamy and full of love, but Arbus destroyed this impression and showed the reality behind this unrealistic place. It's Arbus's style and illustrates that she can explore something deeper behind the appearance of life and the creations of humans.

There are similarities and differences between this photograph and Arbus's other works. The same is a black and white form and a different style and angle from other photographers; the difference is that this photo does not make people feel terrified, and it's a normal seemingly landscape. If the subject is human, we can't know what the person is really like in his/her daily life, but we can compare this castle to thousands of other shots. This may help us to understand Arbus's motivation for photographing better. Arbus went beyond the ordinary cognitive and thinking restrictions to create some perspectives others could not observe. She could represent an independent perspective of the world. Without her photography, no one would have seen these pictures.

#### 4. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Diana Arbus is a unique individual and artist. While many may feel uncomfortable with her work and criticize it, there is an unconscious element in their ideologies. Duality Arbus always exists between any objects and events. No artwork itself can be appreciated by everyone; it can only resonate with a minority. Diana Arbus's photographic works exhibit significant duality that goes beyond mere representation. It is a profound reflection and exploration of societal realities and the human psyche by the photographer. This contemplation and exploration aim to challenge traditional moral norms,

dismantle people's inherent perceptions of reality, and thereby provoke reflection and resonance in the viewer. Compared to previous studies, the in-depth analysis of Diana Arbus's photographic art's duality provides a deeper understanding of her unique charm and profound impact. It interprets her works and the essence of photographic art on a more profound level, enriching the research content and perspectives on Diana Arbus's photographic art in the domestic context. It offers new insights and methods for future understanding and appreciation of Diana Arbus's photographic art from more diverse angles. Simultaneously, the study of the duality in Diana Arbus's photographic art holds practical significance. In the development of contemporary photographic art, Diana Arbus's unconventional approach undoubtedly serves as a spiritual symbol, injecting more social and humane expressions into modern photography. Exploring Diana Arbus's works from the perspective of artistic duality will undoubtedly stimulate contemporary photographic art's reflections on truth, pain, tradition, and rebellion, infusing more humanity and soul into the realm of photographic art.

Certainly, Diana Arbus's works are undoubtedly meaningful, acting as a healer for some viewers and transforming the perspectives of others on freaks and differences. As an artist, she was brave and independent, bringing vitality to a part of society and the diversity of photography. However, despite the progress made in studying the duality in Diana Arbus's photographic art, there are still many questions worth further exploration and research. For instance, how did Diana Arbus employ duality in her photographic works to express complex thoughts and emotions? Future research can unfold from multiple angles and levels, further enriching and expanding our understanding and appreciation of Diana Arbus's photographic art.

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