Unaccommodated Man

The Photography of Diane Arbus

by Michael Tatham

It is of course, a fruitless—if interesting—speculation, to ask oneself what would have happened to Christianity if the camera had been invented during Christ's lifetime. Most of us probably find it pretty well impossible to picture Divinity trapped between the stiff pages of a family album or to conceive of a God crying out on a cross while, a few yards away, someone discards a flash or fiddles with a light metre. As we actually experience it, the problem arises in muted form, and is largely a matter of reconciling noble architecture, the tourist industry and religious sentiment. We have all seen those glossy volumes with coloured plates of pilgrim multitudes, a white figure with hand blessingly uplifted and that better-looking, younger nun, smiling instamatically over her own viewfinder. Granted then that the camera creates curious problems of credibility, it is perhaps not too outrageous to suggest—at least very tentatively— that if this medium had existed two milennia ago Christianity as we know it with its mystery and its historicity simply would not have happened.

If, however, there had been a photographic record dealing with the beginnings of Christianity, I believe that an American, Diane Arbus, who committed suicide in 1971, would have been better equipped than most people to salvage something meaningful from a past that we have magnified and isolated, and interpreted repeatedly into the patterns of our preconceptions. Quite recently her work has been on view at the Hayward Gallery and in March 1974 *The Sunday Times* ran an illustrated article on the exhibition in its supplement and asked several well-known critics to give their opinions.[1] Despite considerable disagreement about the merit of her work the critics differed very little in their attitude to her technique. They agreed that Diane Arbus was not, and never had been, a photographer's photographer and that her work lacked technical brilliance and artistry. At its most hostile this criticism suggested that not only were her achievements plain ugly, but that she actually had the ability to make things nastier than, in reality, they were. This absence of technique—this shedding of artistic personality was however seen by Terence Donovan as a deliberate method of freeing herself from dependence on circumstance. The sheer appropriateness of this emptying must be immediately apparent when one considers the demands and responsibilities of photographing an event such as an execution. Diane Arbus explained very simply that she preferred to work 'from awkwardness' and that rather than arrange her subjects she arranged herself. As Simone Weil remarked. 'In emptying ourselves we expose ourselves to all the pressures of the surrounding universe'. It is a position which clearly seeks to extend the significance of whatever is before the camera far beyond aesthetic considerations of form and design.

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[1] *The Sunday Times Magazine,* March 17th 1974. (From which the vast majority of quotations have been taken and which printed several of the photographs discussed.)

Her other obvious characteristic, her preoccupation with affliction and degradation and suffering, was also seen by some critics as a weakness. It was a vision which she could rationalise by saying that when you see people in the street 'what you notice is the flaw'. But beyond this one senses the self-identification with affliction which seems most likely to have been related to her own early death and which was the inescapable price of recognising human wretchedness.[2] Yet Sir Cecil Beaton thought that her pictures showed she lacked compassion and was actually making fun of the people who posed for her. Rather similarly one critic complained that he was disturbed 'by the use of deprived people to make pictures which people look at in smart galleries'. The point was worth making oddly enough because it immediately reveals its irrelevance. Of course it may be a form of sacrilege to juxtapose suffering with smartness, just as it may be sacrilege to worship in a particular church with a reputation for smartness.[3] But if someone is really worshipping it becomes meaningless to protest that the building is fashionable in the same way that it would be absurd to object on the grounds that it was in normal use as a brothel or torture chamber. Certainly, the pictures are painful and introduce a sign which, in every generation we prefer to be without, but if anyone remains aware of the smart gallery as he looks at Diane Arbus' photographs he is bereft of sight. Equally mistaken is the idea that such a vision is somehow a consequence of sheer will power—that Diane Arbus 'steeled herself to face the intolerable'. This is not the experience of vocation and love, and fails to understand how she would have had to strain perversely against herself to do otherwise.

To change the terms, it is possible to see Diane Arbus' preoccupation with affliction as her recognition of a comprehensive underlying dislocation in which Natural Order is warped and frustrated and the whole reverberant disharmony of Lear must be recreated in black and white. In one way or another we are constantly reminded that Nature needs redemption from 'the general curse', and, as in Lear there is madness and darkness, corruption and distortion—what V. S. Naipaul has called 'the disgustingness of the flesh'. There is also a parallel which we cannot fail to notice between the enlightenment and illumination which suffering brings with it and Diane Arbus' conception of the value of affliction. Gloucester loses his eyes to see and Lear his wits to understand, and men, she thought, go through life dreading they will have a traumatic experience—but freaks are born with their trauma. They have already passed their test in life ...' About this theme her work revolves: the distortion, the wrenching from 'the frame of nature', the isolation and the absence, the perversion and the manipulation. God is absent. We must supply whatever we can in compassion with our own tears.

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[2] The contemplation of human misery wrenches us in the direction of God. *Gravity and Grace*. Simone Weil. English translation published by Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1952. Also other quotations.

[3] *Letters to a Friend*, Rose Macaulay. Miss Macaulay's attitude made thoroughly depressing reading but I think she was taken off guard by the whole correspondence and clearly didn't anticipate publication.

The breakdown in the Natural Order which is most in evidence in her photographic work has several aspects; at its most fundamental we see a complete separation from normality; at its least serious, a recognition on the part of the victim that something is wrong and an attempt to come to terms with the problem. There is also an interesting area in which the attempt to achieve harmony or to find compensation is too strong and produces a powerful sense of alienation. In all except the first group we are aware of some serious flaw either in the individual or in society and of the interaction of the one on the other. Most unmistakable are various asylum pictures in which groups of patients grin or posture, vacuously and grotesquely caparisoned as for some carnival. Frequently they are masked and we are aware of the curious relationship between the mask we observe and the mask within. There are overtones of acting and make-believe, of the chorus of a Greek tragedy, and these overtones contain our anxiety. Almost in the same category are studies of major physical deformity like that of a Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx. They stand together in a middle-class apartment and the son—slightly bending at the knee and stooping at the shoulder to avoid touching the ceiling—looks down towards his parents. These both wear glasses and turn towards their son. Everything about the parents is unremarkable and normal; the father's breast pocket shows the edge of a handkerchief, and yet they stand beside this Kafkaesque creation, this monstrous cuckoo who stoops towards them and supports his weight on a huge walking stick. There is an absoluteness about these pictures which precludes rationalisation and discussion.

At the furthest remove from such finality there are pictures which invite all the theorising in the world and ask for nothing more than intellectual analysis. Two children dressed as adults pirouette in a Junior Interstate Ball Room Championship; a child cries in its mother's arms; a young family walk out on Sunday. A widow is seen in a comfortable bedroom. She is trim and prosperous and the room is exuberant with life: the life, that is, of curling Chinese dragon on lacquered cabinet. On the carpeting we see a piece of slightly crumpled paper. In a similar vein, but more chilling, a young couple rest on their Westchester lawn one Sunday afternoon. They are a good-looking pair. The lawn is wide and empty except for the garden loungers placed two or three feet apart. Nothing moves and the couple lie in parallel isolation. Here is the ultimate in life-style. Another couple are daunting in a different way because, whereas the Westchester pair are apparently unaware of the camera, or indifferent to it, these people—King and Queen at a Senior Citizens' Dance—are looking directly into the lens. They sit wearing cardboard and tinsel crowns and carrying their regalia in a preposterous semblance of dignity as if they really believe in the roles they are playing. Their legs disappear in a pile of heaped parcels. By rights they should be children, but they are not children and so one wants to break in and protect them from their appalling dignity. Dignity is something Diane Arbus is particularly good about; both seeing where it is absent and also where it is. She recognises it where it has no right to be and where violations and distortions proclaim it cannot exist so that one can imagine the understanding she would bring to the Passion or to the elder who would not throw the first stone. A picture of a topless dancer in her dressing room is remarkable for its bravery. The dancer sits facing directly towards the camera; both elbows jut back over the sides of her swivel chair and rest on the dressing table behind her. She had obviously just turned away from this table. A slit in her dress enables her to cross her legs. On the floor to her right is a fan heater and a shoe rack and behind her in the dressing table kneehole are her handbag and a parcel. The floor is not particularly clean. Above the dressing table is a glass with three lights and it reflects a dress rack which the girl must be facing over Diane Arbus' head. The dancer's breasts are large and absurdly white where the sun tan is missing and they spill out of the cut-away top of her spangled dress which gathers in again over her shoulders and presumably gives her some support. She raises the left side with the first fingers of her left hand so that the nipple tilts gently upwards and the sphere loses its symetry where the skin takes the pressure. From her right elbow her arm extends forwards and upwards so that the tip of her fingers just touches her chin. It is a gesture of delicate balance and equilibrium. One also notices the small snapshot of a man's head and shoulders fastened to the top of the glass where she will normally see it. But none of this protects the dancer from the inevitable distortion which is partly physical exaggeration and partly the manipulation of this exaggeration. The girl looks into the camera without expression and this very absence of expression appears to indicate both understanding and acceptance.

Very different from this is Diane Arbus' picture of a patriotic boy at demonstration in support of the war in Vietnam. At first sight the impression one has is of mockery and anger and these qualities remain in the background even though they are superceded. The youth wears a Bomb Vietnam badge in his lapel and has an absolutely square-set boater resting on top of his ears. His ears protrude to support it. His mouth is a thin line and runs parallel to the rim of the hat. Everything about him reveals complete incomprehension and impoverishment. His physical ugliness alone is a matter for compassion and his stupid innocence gives him too a slight crazy dignity. Despite this, he is perverted in a way the topless dancer is not.

Several photographs explore the world of the nudist colony and are particularly interesting because they deal with an area in which people are consciously seeking to regain harmony and to escape the distortions of modern life. Diane Arbus seems to suggest that their apparent escape is fraudulent and involves an even more profound unnaturalness and dishonesty than that inseparable from our customary disguises. In one plate she shows a man and his wife sitting in their chalet on either side of a television cabinet. A central table lamp stands on the cabinet supported on either side by framed photographs and fronted by a clock shaped in a flattened oval resembling a fish. On the largest wall space there is an 'art' print of a shapely female. All the furniture in the place is solid and dull and probably uncomfortable. It is quite impersonal. Only the two lamps are rather pretentious as if they had been made with some other destination in mind. The husband smiles complacently at the camera with a sly expression and keeps his legs and hands well apart against the sides of his chair so that we shall see he has nothing to hide. He is a stubby-fingered, square man. Opposite him, his wife sits forward with her knees together and her hands crossed in her lap so that her privacy is as much preserved as possible. Her breasts sag forard and she smiles less confidently, showing her teeth. The wife is not without undertanding and humility and the camera notices this, just as it exposes her husband in a way his mere nakedness does not.

One picture more is worth particular mention. Perhaps more than any other it conveys something of Diane Arbus' quality as a photographer and her ability to see something at once deeply sad and deeply beautiful as one would expect it to be if the pattern is flawed. A woman sits on a flowered couch in a drab room in New Jersey and nurses a baby monkey on her lap. The little creature is wearing baby clothes and stretches one arm towards her for reassurance as it looks at the camera. The woman has thin, scrawny arms and a long, sad face. She, too, smiles towards the camera with a wistful expression that has something of tenderness and apology, and something of pride about it.

Talking of her work Diane Arbus said modestly: 'Nothing is ever the same as they said it was. It's what I've never seen before that I recognise'.

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