

## LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – PHYLOGENESIS

### A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

# 18. AVEDON (U.S., 1923), DIANE ARBUS (U.S., 1923-1971)

## Photonic turmoil

Irving Penn and Bert Stern have just given us a foretaste of the 1950-1975. These years take up with the extreme photographic adventures of 1900-1930 – the era of Man Ray, Moholy-Nagy or Kertész – whose ‘human’ photography of the 1930-1950’s had allowed us time to rest, somehow. Modernism, re-launched by the economic and scientific miracles of the fifties is about to fire its last sparks. Over a few years, cinetism, colour field, action painting, pop art, land art, body art, minimal art, support-surface movement, the ‘art and language’ current, conceptual art as ‘art as idea as idea’ will all have been tried and will all have ran out of breath.

Most of the photographers that we are going to encounter from now on will be more or less excessive, going to the end of a party that is generally quite a long way away from daily life. Or at least those who took their run up before 1975, when post-modernism begins.

### 18A. Photonic atomisation: Avedon

Avedon is a good introduction to these extremes. Firstly, he could deceive, mislead, as he is an incredible virtuoso. He has such a way of playing with every parameter of external light, fixities and movements that are characteristic of the cinema, and of conditioning the models so that it would seem that he ‘writes’ certain photos, the word photography taking a completely etymological sense with him. Yet, his writing is at the service of what he wants to do, without making any concessions to what others expect of him. If he pleases – therefore remarkably well functioning in fashion publications – it is because he surprises – as testify his shattering covers for ‘Vogue’ from 1967 to 1970 – never by complacency. However, what he wants is radical, and nothing will ever turn him away from that goal, despite appearances.

This radicality best shows himself in his black and white *Portraits* on a white background, which were particularly well published by Le Chêne in 1976 (AV). We shall work

with these illustrations. The conclusion consists of seven photographs of Avedon's father, all taken between 1969 and 1973 as the octogenarian was dying of cancer. We have reproduced the fifth (\*PF, 29). The photographer has stated that these photographs did not represent his father – the Russian immigrant who became a clothes salesman in New York, Jacob Israël Avedon – nor his feelings towards his father, but '*what it is, is anyone of us*'. The '*what*' deserves attention: it is not a '*nothing*', nor a '*little something*', nor '*mortality*', '*decay*', nor even '*the dying process*'. The latter was photographically rendered by Nicolas Nixon in a series where he photographed his wife and two sisters (PHPH, 112) before resuming it into a sole photograph, the stupefying *Tom Moran* dated 1988, which ends *Photography Until Now* (PN, 297). No, Avedon's '*what it is*' refers to the irremediable chaos, the turmoil that no other medium – not even the painting of the last Rembrandt – could approach as well as the texture of the photonic imprint, with its nearly-ostensible quantum conditions. Avedon's photographic subject culminates assuredly in a sort of photonic atomization of the show, without reducing itself to it.



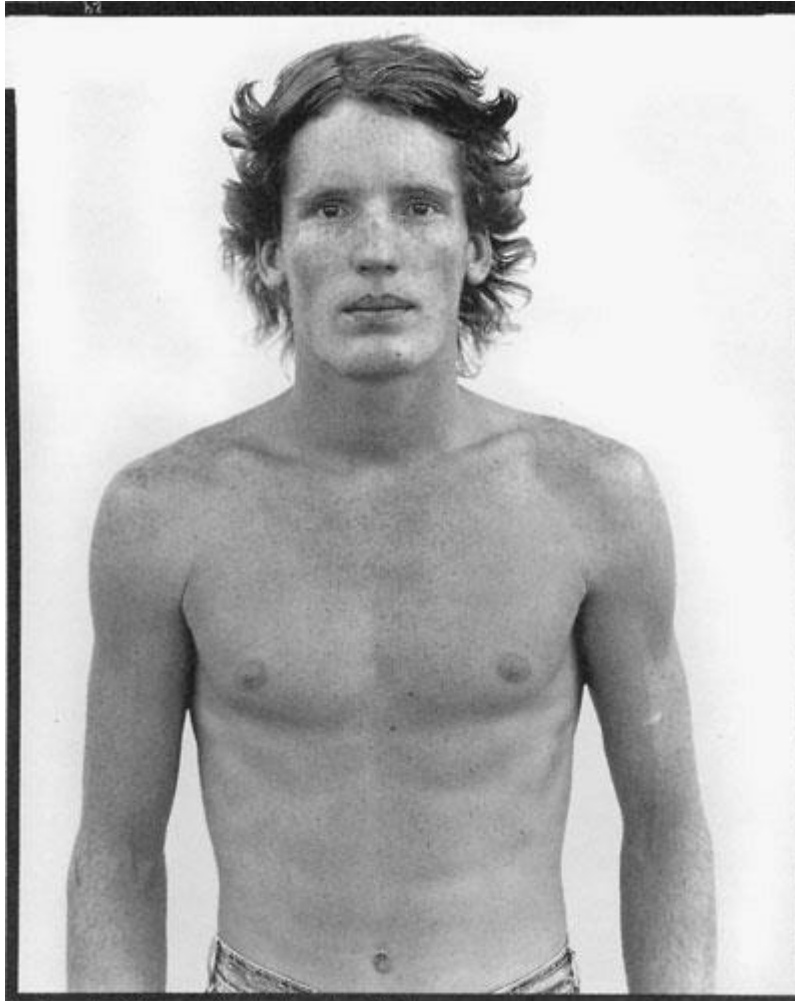
Avedon, *Portraits*, PF, 29

In the *Portraits*, what first hits us is the faces. For our visions of primates that are particularly apt at capturing faces, these are the most structured. If they are atomized, the rest is too, a fortiori. When Cartier-Bresson takes a photograph of a face, of the ‘first impression that this face gives’, he pursues a result that he deems ‘just’. Avedon does not believe in a possible justness, not even one that would be wished as just. ‘My father would have liked to be shown as being wise, yet my photos demonstrate his impatience’. But, let us not be mistaken. The faith of the photographer did not take over the faith of the portrayed. Both psychological options mutually shatter each other, dissolving the ordinary psychology into metaphysic. Duration went from the instant to the moment with Cartier-Bresson. With Avedon, it turns around from the moment to the instant. De Kooning remembers that Avedon briskly asked him ‘are you ready?’

Struck down to its thread, the universe is then a succession of unnameable, aberrant, quantum interactions. In the work of others, this thread holds in the thickness of the grain. Here, in its fineness. The mechanism does not vary much. A solid white background, a Deardorff camera (8 x 10 inches) – almost Sander’s, praised by Walker Evans – sometimes the help of assistants to reload the plates and adjust the aperture; the photographer besides the camera; the main function of his presence being that the body (at least as much as his mind) of the portrayed should reach the conclusion that the situation expect (we do not say wants) from him. These are the conditions required for nudity, detail, speed, and psychological pressure to be filled, for the event to escape our subjective space and time.

*In the American West* (AW) was published in 1985. This time around, there was not a previous familiarity between him and those he photographed as he experienced with the stars of his *Portraits*. However, sailing in the American West, where everything is possible (strictly everything, said Norman Mailer), here and there, he encountered *someone* in which he glimpsed at *something* apt to give something extraordinary in a photograph, something that was previously unseen (according to Brodovitch’s precept); something that had to happen in our universe because – at a certain moment – it would happen, not assuredly outside, but on a film. The monumental, wide edition of *The range of Light* by Ansel Adams is at ease next to the monumental, high edition of *In the American West*. Perhaps because both sides play on an internal multi-frame and a cosmology that is way beyond our understanding.

We knew the spectres of the night, here come the spectres of the day (\*\*AW, Jay Greene, 8/19/83). Never has photography stood closer to Reality – the capture of the bodies of the fellows – to have us fall so violently into the abyss of the ‘what it is’ of the Real. Before a photograph by Ansel Adams or Robert Capa – also radicals – we can attempt to reassure ourselves by putting forward (falsely) a supposedly splendid landscape with the one, and with a supposedly moving human situation with the other. Avedon’s photographs – unless one hides away in the unbearable party of seeing caricatures – will not leave any escape to des-ontology, which, we shall insist, is that of photography, and not of those it photographed.



Avedon, Jay Greene, in *In the American West*

## 18B. Photonic cellularity: Diane Arbus

Calculating her stride on the Golden Sixties – as she starts photographing in 1960 and dies in 1970 – Diane Arbus does not dissolve, nor does she create explosions or implosions. She has the amazement and the terror of the proliferation of the Same.

She sees in a cellular manner, in the sense of Vladimir Weidlé when he speaks of the *plastic cell*, meaning a portion of space – a few square centimetres in a picture, a few cubic centimetres in a sculpture – whose topologic, cybernetic, logico-semiotic field effects repeat themselves in any equivalent cell of the work. Almost every painting – as it comes from the same hand and the same brain – is therefore cellular. This is rarely the case for photography, and very little, since it is a photonic imprint conveying heterogeneous *indicia*. This explains the singularity – and a sort of transcendence – of Diane Arbus. In her environment, her vision immediately grasps every circumstance when a plastic cell repeats itself enough to fill the entire film. Simultaneously appears an element of global composition underlining this cell, it triggers.

And all this dazzles – to use a word we previously used for the woodburytype of Nadar’s *Taylor*. Nadar, like Sander, had something of this cellularity (would it be distinctive to great portraitists?)

To see exactly what we are dealing with, let us choose an almost classic example in the book *Diane Arbus*, published by her daughter Doon Arbus and her husband Marvin Israël in 1972 (An Aperture Monograph). It is *Girl in a shiny dress*, dated 1967 (\*\*DA). As the starting cell, we shall conveniently choose the portion of the left highbrow, and will be penetrated by the inflexion RATES. Then, we shall see how these RATES (topological, cybernetic, logical) are repeated via equivalent cells, that of the eyelid, the palpebral fissure, the mouth, the ear, and also the chin, the clavicle, the pectoral muscle, the breasts, the fallen braces, and each of the shining, broken pleats of the dress. However, all that – which is already a beautiful miracle – would not have been enough to trigger. The girl had to – for an instant – break in two at the waist and at the neck, according to the same RATES. And also that – at that ‘decisive moment’ – a background shadow had to continue the curve of the hairstyle, and another the brassiere. She probably learned this type of compositional achievement from Lisette Model (the constant professor and friend), and nearly compulsorily verified it at a Walker Evans exhibition.



Diane Arbus, *Girl in a shiny dress*

The cell of our *Girl in a shiny dress* offers RATES that are hard, tense, broken. However, ten pages before that, in *A naked man being a woman*, another cell engages, almost at the other extreme, a topology-cybernetic-logic of the soft and the hesitant pilosity, in the fake vulva of the transsexual but also in each pleat and inflation of the environment. However, Arbus's choices are not unlimited, but diverse. Her eye takes out a cell that is hard or soft, shiny or matte – it is irrelevant – but one that is 'odd', meaning uneven, lopsided, lacking. In such a way that her repetition engenders a multiplication without fecundity or plenitude, and give way to the stupor of the Same.

We can put her essential themes in order. 1) The 'Freaks' are beings that offer an 'oddity' in each plastic cell of their body, which also proliferates 'oddity' in their fellows and their environment. Diane Arbus' main theme is 'freaks' of every type, mentally retarded, persons with Down's Syndrome, dwarves, giants, but particularly dwarves since giants break - through their projections – the cellular repercussion. In any event, we shall not translate 'freaks' into 'monsters', because the monster is what is pointed (monstrare) by the finger to be rejected as being Other, whilst the 'freak' (origin of the word unknown) is not an Other, but proposes an 'imparity' that – at the opposite - designates in each of us the Real, which Bataille called the Continuous – behind the Reality, which Bataille called the Discontinuous – reassuring. 2) It can also happen that each cell taken apart offers a RATE that is sufficiently irradiating of opening/closing and that its identical reproduction creates the unusual, as in too-assorted couples, both homosexual and heterosexuals, and like the *Identical twins* in particular (\*\*\*\*DA). In the *Triplets in their bedroom* – whose purely numerical multiplication finds a repercussion in their three beds – but also in the blisters of the duvet above and the lozenges of the curtain above the horizontal common mass of their three black skirts. 3) Sometimes, the plastic cell is neither too tense nor too identically multiplied, but is only the too-strict reflection of an exterior, congealed model, as we find in transsexuals, moralizing nudists, transfigured patriots. 4) There are also those whose corporal and environmental cells are shaky because their pattern is half absent, such as widows and widowers: 'she is half alive, and I'm half dead', says the Booz of Hugo. 5) Finally, there is the 'oddity' per se, which turns around sexual differentiation. To Arbus the Jew, the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' seem to be 'transcendent realities' and sexual difference is 'unfathomable'. Hence, homosexuals, transsexuals, but also everyday couples (when they appear as couples) are the most troubling 'freaks'.

It is not impossible that the young Diane Nemerov heard her Russian immigrant father utter the incessant Russian exclamation for every daily 'oddity' – whether it be physical, behavioural or moral – and that summarizes every anthropology : biez-obraznie 'without-image', meaning : 'by your oddly action you shake up the image of mankind, which itself is an image'. Nearby her at that moment, Rothko, who came from the same background, initiated the most radical problematization of the icon.



Diane Arbus, *Identical Twins*

Arbus's protocols follow her perception. The flash plays a predominant role, because it congeals the cell to the profit of juxtaposing and ossifying repetitions. The night is better than the day because it cuts the cells, because the flash is stronger, because, in the most ordinary way, it is the moment where everything that is 'odd' emerges in a society and in things, perhaps because the Semitic day goes from night to night. Arbus was greatly inspired by Weegee, nocturnal New-York detective photographer.

As to the spiritual climate of the photo session, the 'sitting' with Viva, the famous model of Warhol's gang, gives an extreme – yet enlightening – example. The night before the 'shots', Diane makes love with Viva and Viva's husband. However, in the morning, she comes back to the apartment and finds Viva barely awake. She asks her to remain naked to be 'relaxed that way' while she only photographs her head. She gets her model to lie on a sofa and turn her eyes to the ceiling. Then, she photographs her fully. While the model, photographed by Dick Avedon appears gorgeous in 'Vogue', the plastic cell taken by Arbus' eye falters her breasts. Viva protested: 'These photographs were totally faked. (...) Diane Arbus lied, cheated, and victimized me. She acted like a martyr, a saint, about the whole thing. Jesus! Underneath she was just as ambitious as we all were to make it – to get ahead'. (Bosworth, 263)

Things went better with the 'freaks', which were titillated and flattered, in any case cooperating, but the result is the same. Brassai's *Masked women* who wore their mask like a weapon against their watchers, who were visible on the photo, are, in the work of Arbus, in the 1970-1 *Untitled* (PN. 260), the ultimate derision of the confounded watched according to the suppression of every ambiance, every softness, and assuredly every watcher of the front scene between the watcher and the retarded. Their hands, situated on an almost-horizontal line, conclude their transformation into puppets. Avedon created a relationship with the portrayed, consenting victim. Here, the portrayed is provoked into a parade, where his 'oddity' stands out increasingly as he tries to surmount it in dramatization. The peacock is pinned as it fans its tail. The environment is subject to the same treatment. The city is a zoo, and each portion of it (bit of pathway, bedroom) is a biotope so consuming that it becomes artificial. Never before has the expression 'a batch of shots' held so many connotations.

In a word, the endless, daily and nightly New-York strolls of Diane Arbus, loaded with the weight of her room and her tripod in a sort of vertigo of danger, conclude an absolute flow of the mind and body, testified by an ever-present sexuality. Nowhere have photography and sleeping-with been so confounded. Diane did not only make love with Viva and her husband, but with dwarves too. This confrontation, simultaneously clinical and transcendental of the Same and the Difference. A sexuality, which is more heroic than purital [in the sense of a skin infection], it has been said. About a 'group sex she was into', she speaks of an 'out of body experience almost like death', with her customary eloquence.

Because Diane Arbus' 'intercourse' of speech is as intense and violent as the 'intercourse' of heroic sex and the 'intercourse' of photographic action. She does not write, but she speaks, she speaks her life and her photos confounded with a rage of exactitude, crudeness, of strictness of the root of things. This means that her long interview with Studs Terkel – in which the interviewer's voice is not heard, but only hers, punctuated by 'sorts of' about everything, substantives and verbs, testify of a use of the language that, through its speed, its abrupt leaps, its metaphysical intransigence – is reminiscent of Pascal.

The consequences of this endless and precise eloquence is that we are very well aware of the details and moods of Arbus' life, and that they were perfectly assembled and 'participated' by Patricia Botsworth in her 1983 biography. We saw with Nadar that a photographic subject was never heaven-sent... Here, we shall remember the window of the apartment with a view over Central Park, where the little girl sat for hours, looking. When she turned inside, she saw the rich apartment of her parents, wealthy fur merchants, where the signs of a new fortune and taught manners gave way to a ritual execution of social life, perfectly 'odd'.

And when – still seated on the windowsill of the eleventh floor – little Diane looked outside, Central Park – seen under that angle, that height and that distance – was indeed a zoo where passers-by worked not as *forms on* a background, but as *cells in* a background... Particularly since the park gave onto the Museum of Natural History, where the world's most beautiful artificial biotopes are kept.

Finally, between internal and external, between architecture and skin, clothing reigned everywhere in the family. In this case fur, the cellular proliferation per se, even more when it is punctuated with jewels, in turn cells. The shining stings of the metal on the continuity of the fur can be found right to the sparsely furnished space of the last duplex. She invited students to



her place after a lesson, and ‘someone noticed sharp prickles or mirrored chips embedded in the furs and animal skins draped across a huge bed set up on a platform. Someone else noticed black satin sheets covering the mattress.’ Truly, our *Girl in a shiny dress* is an archetype.

Her suicide, with strong barbiturates and slashed wrists in an empty bathtub, finds its explanation in Diane’s prolonged depressions. Her mother too had suffered a three-year long depression. But an existence so intense could not be extinguished quietly. During the burial service, Avedon (with whom Diane talked for nights on end in her darkest hours, Avedon who was then recording his dying father) murmured ‘Oh, I wish I could be an artist like Diane!’ To which Eberstadt in turn murmured ‘Oh, no, you don’t’ (p. 321).

Diane Arbus was worried that her photos could be deemed interesting. She declared that her success in widely distributed publications rested on a misinterpretation. She was convinced that she would remain ‘the photographer of the freaks’ in the trivially psychological and sociological sense, whereas it was in fact metaphysic, that of the Same, of the Other, of the Difference and the Indifferentiation that she had encountered, felt, and trapped. She sincerely believed that her photographs were only visible to her outlook. And indeed, one probably needs a conversion of the outlook, beatifying and terrifying, to see them.

In Patricia Bosworth’s biography, there is a notation that could not go unseen. Garry Winogrand (FS, 356-358) declared one day: ‘The best photographers are Jewish’ (p. 20). This should not be too surprising. The Jewish turmoil, Tohu Bohu, is not the Greek Chaos. The latter soon resorbed in the Logos and the eurhythmic of Apollo, and only came out once a year, at the occasion of the Dionysia; in the same way as the tabula rasa of the Cartesian doubt is immediately repopulated with gleaming evidences. The turmoil of the Genesis is at the beginning but is there every day too, at every hour, an invincible indifferentiation that gnaws at and permanently shakes the order, always only local and transitory. Jewish music is ‘odd’, like the hat and word of the Hassidim. This is partly why the ritual, sole differentiator, aims at being so scrupulously observed. However, photography – photonic imprint, gnawed by the Real, even when it pretends to show Reality – never escapes the photonic turmoil, which is both its milieu and its food.

Jewish genius and photography. Hungarian genius – nomad and digitalizing – and photography. This deserves two doctorate thesis. Robert Capa was rooted into both geniuses.

**Henri Van Lier**

**A photographic history of photography**

in *Les Cahiers de la Photographie*, 1992

***List of abbreviations of common references :***

*PN: Photography until Now, Museum of Modern Art.*

*FS: On the Art of Fixing a Shadow, Art Institute of Chicago.*

*PF: Kozloff, Photography and Fascination, Addison.*

*PHPH: Philosophy of Photography.*

*The acronyms (\*), (\*\*), (\*\*\*) refer to the first, second, and third illustration of the chapters, respectively. Thus, the reference (\*\*\*) AP, 417) must be interpreted as: "This refers to the third illustration of the chapter, and you will find a better reproduction, or a different one, with the necessary technical specifications, in The Art of Photography listed under number 417".*