

*Diane Arbus: A Box of Ten Photographs*

October 2018

I visited the *Diane Arbus: A Box of Ten Photographs* exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. I was excited to visit this exhibition after having read Sontag's remarks of Arbus in *On Photography*. According to Sontag, Arbus sought out subjects that probably wouldn't have otherwise entered her world. Arbus, in Sontag's view, was exploitative of her subjects and incapable of making artful portraits of marginalized or otherwise eccentric people. Sontag wrestled with the question of the medium being a bona fide art form and dragged Arbus along for the ride.

Despite the criticisms lodged against Arbus, I still found her portfolio to be honest about its intentions and presented in a compelling way, worthy of its spot in any reputable museum. After all, the very location of the exhibition settles that pesky middle-brow question.

The photos were framed behind a transparent box, with the handwritten cursive caption on the left hand side on an aging piece of paper and the photograph presented on the right. Per the museum's description, the "transparent box works as a frame, demanding that viewers encounter the photographs in their silence."

A king and queen for the night at a senior citizen center, a mother with exaggerated brows carrying her newborn, a woman sitting with her pet monkey — these photographs, along with the rest of her portfolio, invite us to stare in a way that would be intrusive in real life. The underlying voyeurism defined Arbus' style, and the distance between the subject and viewer, as Sontag aptly noted, consisted of privilege; the greater the distance in privilege from the subject, the more stark the impact.

We are still looking at Arbus' work in shock in 2018, which isn't so much an indictment of us as it is a strength of Arbus' work: it hasn't lost its novelty in a world saturated by images.

A young family in Brooklyn going for a Sunday outing. Their baby  
is named Oscar. Their son is recorded. 1911.

