

Tanya Bagnato

Professor Yarden Stern

Topics in PS: The Archive

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The Otherness Archive of Diane Arbus

Reframe. Reclaim. Radicalize.

~a performance narration of Radical Empowerment~

by Tanya Bagnato

To become intimate with the archive in "Wayward Lives and Beautiful Experiments," author and scholar Saidiya Hartman employs a unique method of narration in which she "places the voice of narrator and character in inseparable relation" (p. 1). I feel that her creative insight is particularly relevant to becoming intimate with the provocatively groundbreaking work of photographer Diane Arbus. To enter into the archive of Arbus, I am therefore going to employ Hartman's narration method and perform an imaginary staged reading which explores how Arbus' work reframes, reclaims, and radicalizes individuals in 1960's

New York City and whose existence at that time would certainly have been subjected to **Otherness**.

Narrator: So what is Otherness? French author and philosopher Simone De Beauvoir expresses it like this: "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself." Otherness therefore as separation, as one versus the other, as conflict, as exclusion.



Arbus: Humans have always had the urge to label things they do not understand and hence a desire to invent Otherness. As an artist I'm quite interested in rewriting the colonialist narrative of labeling by exposing/making the Other itself public. What do I mean by this? Well, I want to radicalize labeling by using my photography to reframe the Other in a new light: the spotlight. My friend Sharon Hayes once shared with me how "TO BE AN ARTIST IS TO HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF MAKING THINGS

PUBLIC...TO MAKE PUBLIC PROFESSIONS ABOUT THE WORLD AND THE THINGS IN THE WORLD." I couldn't agree more. What I attempt to do as an artist is not only acknowledge the Other, the denied, and the pushed aside, but to defy *the historic censorship of colonialism, homosexualism, racism, sexism, all the -isms of "cis normal" archives* by equalizing and elevating Otherness through portrait mode, ultimately centering our humanity. I'd like to consider my photographic work as **The Otherness Archive**. My Otherness Archive represents the multiplicity of experiences that exist beyond what I like to call "cis normalcy." By reclaiming and reframing the Other, I hope to make for a richer archival intimacy and interaction between the public and both the voiced and voiceless ghosts housed within the Otherness Archive.



A Young [Hu]Man in Curlers at Home on West 20th Street, N.Y.C.

Photo © Diane Arbus, 1966

A Young [Hu]Man in Curlers: Really, you think I'm a **revolutionary**? I'm just simply being myself. **But** I'm also being me. Me. Does it surprise you? What's your definition of different? Let me get a look at you. Do you like cigarettes? They help me relax when I'm getting ready. What is this Otherness about? You look like me, hey maybe you're the Other! Just joking, welcome to my home, my dressing room. Well, maybe sometimes I'm a little bit tired of the unnecessary distractions, the stares, the comments, the insults, so I just switch that **stuff** off. That's their Otherness, their pathetic little world. I like to exhale slowly when I smoke, I think Jacques Derrida would call it my **archival trauma** of the day, my archive fever. That's funny, right? You know last night I was out walking around the Village, and a stranger said I had beautiful eyes. My friends say I have an amazing face. One of them did my nails this afternoon, they turned out very nice. It takes time to look good! Sorry if I look a little bored waiting for the hair. I think my curlers look like a crown, don't you? Actually, my friend Diane, she's a photographer, and she says her favorite people have **the bravery to be themselves in a world that cares not for them**. Yeah, some of the people I see staring at me when I go out could use that advice, maybe I'll tell a few of them later tonight...

Works Cited

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