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VISUAL WORK

A Revolutionary Promise of Justice: Diane Arbus' *Self-Portrait, Pregnant*, 1945, NYC

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My critical musings on this little-known maternal self-portrait are meant to reconceive its meaning as an uncanny predecessor to contemporary feminist embodied knowledge. This knowledge holds the potential for articulating new strategies of respect for the maternal and for the real mother, in other words for thinking m(o)therwise. This portent photograph not only presented a non-normative concept of pregnancy during its cultural moment; it continues to challenge the deep patriarchal "embarrassment" that pregnancy carries. Arbus' performance of the maternal was crafted within her creative practice and deeply embedded within a new maternal structure of projected work and self. Picturing herself as artist/photographer, other, lover and projected mother, she embodies a creative interplay between the passion of theory and the thinking body.

This photograph can be viewed at <https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/photographs-diane-arbus/self-portrait-pregnant-n-y-c-1945-1/222>.

Through my critical maternal musings I hope to conceive new meaning for Diane Arbus' *Self-portrait, Pregnant*, 1945, NYC, a little-known maternal self-portrait that stands as a vital predecessor to new forms of feminist knowledge. This knowledge holds the potential for articulating new strategies of respect for the concept of the maternal and for the real mother, in other words for thinking m(o)therwise. I consider the radical possibilities for such embodied knowledge embedded within this generative maternal self-portrait. This exquisite photograph articulates maternal portent and power: it is self-reflective, self-embodied, self-confident. It decidedly challenges self- and cultural effacement. Such effacement of the mother, or lack of societal acknowledgement of and respect for all matters maternal, is precisely the perverse tableaux against which Arbus presented her strategically designed self-portrait.

Feminist artists' maternal self-portraits strategically revalue traditional characteristics of the maternal such as curiosity, empathy and passion for one's awaited child and for one's newly forming self. Such crucial images project these supposedly "sentimental" maternal traits outside of their previously limited range, troubling the boundaries between the public, the private, the political, the intimate, the masculine, the feminine and the taboo. Thus, critical maternal self-portraits can be seen anew as loving, corporeal *and* political actions. Indeed, Arbus' *Self-portrait, Pregnant* poignantly embraces such incorporations, becoming a critical site where maternal thinking bodies and voluptuous minds collide and coalesce.

In thinking about maternal bodies and self-portraiture, their very bodily presences create annoyances in a patriarchal culture's strategies to silence the mother's body, mind and her self-representation. The word itself, "embarrass," carries in its common usage in Latin-based languages the meaning of "pregnancy." I want to use it here in its metaphorical sense and within its cultural implications. The embarrassment of pregnancy, its very visibility, its announcement, exceeds its bodily state and becomes a metaphor for woman, sexuality and painfully, if not ironically, a metaphor for silence. Thus the mute pregnant body has no place. Reconceiving maternal self-portraits as new bodies of knowledge offers revolutionary ways for rethinking voice and visibility, inviting compassionate forms of justice and human relationships.

Diane Arbus' dreamy photographic *Self-portrait, Pregnant* doubled as her birth announcement made in 1945. She sent this photograph to her husband, a GI in Europe during World War II. We can only imagine the shock of the real that this ethereal image must have created, its gentleness and solidity so profoundly distanced from the realm of destruction, death and genocide where it was destined. Years later Arbus wrote "a photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know."¹ This photographic secret presents a pictorial puzzle laden with complete normalcy and the surreal. Arbus interpreted similar qualities of the mundane and the extraordinary in her photographs of both ordinary people and others who lived on the fringes of society in New York City, especially those who lived mixed codes of sexuality whom she so deeply embraced. She regarded all the people she photographed with enormous and judicious curiosity and respect. Turning her gaze upon herself, Arbus' self-portrait was taken in affinity with her embrace of all modes of being that are similarly non-conformist, ambivalent and wondrous. Indeed, this self-portrait is laden with her perceptions of her pregnant state as both marvelous and banal. Similarly, her pondering gaze seems to belong to another world apart from her decidedly earthy body. Approaching her transforming self as a fascinating conundrum, Arbus poses in a full-length mirror that frames her barely pregnant self within the intimate space of a bedroom, presumably hers. She stands in front of the edge of the bed that appears as a quiet monolith, a landscape, a dreamscape, an ocean – as if to say that within this private domestic space, "I am awakening to a new beckoning state."

Arbus presents herself as a complex subject: nubile, child-like, erotic, just barely, wistfully with child. This complex and profound image conveys Arbus' detached sense of self in relation to her new sensual state, a new form of being that evokes her curiosity. Indeed, her projection of self embodies a quiet, self-contained eroticism. This is an eros embodied in her secret announcement, an eros that can only be detained, a stately and quiet self-portrayal that awaits the acknowledgement of her revelations, a lingering, an enticement, a deferred offering. Arbus' self-contained

¹ *Artforum*, May 1971.

eroticism speaks softly yet defiantly of a self comfortable within the self, a *bien dans sa peau*, a comfort and well-being within her skin, her soul, her self.

Her full breasts are but a visual sign of fecundity and sexuality. Arbus counterbalances these culturally constructed markers of eroticism with her own sensual eros filled with a curiosity and a bewilderment signaling that her transformed self is, indeed, a space of contemplation and curiosity. She gazes at her sexed erotic self with a quizzical expression made coquettish by the perfect tilt of her head. She projects her new self as voluptuous woman and little girl—note the no-nonsense undergarment she wears. Yet Arbus holds the camera and tripod firmly, perhaps filling in for the distant phallus and partner. Her steady hold on the photographic equipment and, in turn, the image is generative and in her control. She was in full charge of the production of this multifaceted photograph.

This multidimensional feminist eroticism recalls philosopher Rosi Braidotti's ideas on subjectivity, the sexed subject and bodily knowledge:

The "body in question" is the threshold of subjectivity; as such it is neither the sum of its organs – a fixed biological essence – nor the result of social conditioning – a historical entity. The "body" is rather to be thought of as the interface between the biological and the social . . . between the socio-political field of the microphysics of power and the subjective dimension."²

Arbus' *Self-portrait, Pregnant* is filled with curiosity, self-questioning, erotism and a gaze directed inward. It is precisely these qualities that powerfully generate a sense of self-possession in this stately self-portrait. This image-letter was indeed her self-acknowledgement of her new ensuing maternal state of being. This is an image of a woman reflecting on her own subjectivity at the very moment when a new being was on the verge of changing her sense of self. Arbus' photograph is especially provocative because it addressed pregnancy so profoundly on her own terms: practically naked and forthright. Furthermore, Arbus made her rich and rightful photographic

² Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of Ontological Difference," in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Teresa Brennan, 89–105 (London and New York: Routledge) 1989, p. 89.

observations from the artist-mother's intellect and sexed subjectivity. This multivalent image opened up the intersubjective realm of self to new imagined self.

Looking at Arbus' *Self-portrait, Pregnant* from 1945, it is difficult to imagine that the concept of a woman taking her own photographic portrait as a pregnant thinking subject was conceivable. Arbus's self-portrait is a revolutionary work, produced well before the early 1970s in the United States when even then only a very few works addressed the risky subject of pregnancy. Pregnancy was, and it can be argued still is, the metaphorical bastard of the already taboo subject of maternal representation. Yet for Arbus there was no such taboo. As her infamous and voluminous photographs of people culturally labeled as taboo subjects attest, Arbus made no distinction between what was considered proper and normal from what she considered valid and beautiful. She perceived and imagistically interpreted the world close to her in New York City as inhabited by delicate and intricate souls, and in so doing aligned herself with an underworld of those whose lives called for empathy and social justice. Her overall photographic production suggests a level playing field, where no one individual is more or less important than another.

Arbus' sublime secret is a photographic self-inquiry into the marvelously surreal and simultaneously quotidian aspects of pregnancy conducted by an image maker who was profoundly drawn to people labeled as oddities, misfits and outcasts as well as to those firmly based in the wonderfully commonplace. In a 1963 project proposal for a Guggenheim Foundation grant application, from which I quote, Arbus wrote,

I want to photograph the considerable ceremonies of our present. . . its inscrutable habits lie in wait for their meaning. . . . There are the Festivals . . . the Conventions. . . the Masquerade . . . These are our symptoms and our monuments. I want simply to save them, for what is ceremonious and curious and commonplace will be legendary.

In her *Self-portrait, Pregnant*, Arbus' expansive embrace of humanity is drawn within, to the mysteries that await, the unspoken beauty of the unknown, the everyday monumentality of being. Her performance of the maternal was crafted within her creative practice and deeply embedded within a new maternal structure of the

transforming self. Picturing herself as artist/photographer, lover and projected mother, she embodied a creative interplay between the passion of theory and the thinking sensuous self. Envisioning and communicating powerfully and poetically from that unexplored realm, Arbus theorized a new revolutionary space for the maternal.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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