We Have to Talk About Diane Arbus: An art-as-research perspective of visual arts representations of intellectual disability

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The way we understand and define ourselves is often mediated by the way other people express their perceptions of us either as individuals or as representatives of a social group, in a range of genres including literature, film, the visual arts, photography and graffiti. In this article, I examine the identity implications and socio-cultural impacts of the persistent visual absence or narrative misrepresentation of people with disability. My discussion centres on the works of American photographer Diane Arbus and her 1968-1971 series of duotone photographs of institutionalised intellectually disabled people. Diane Arbus was a photographer in thrall with her own art, rather than an artist who sought to better understand the people she photographed. Nevertheless, visual art works offer viewers fresh ways of understanding disability and the experiences of disabled people both historically and currently. My art-as-research drawing project is a memorial of sorts for those people with a disability who have been oppressed, marginalised, excluded and mocked. My revised images provide a new narrative for Arbus's photographic subjects, and evoke fresh ways of regarding historic images of people with intellectual disability.

'Othering' Disability in Literature and the Visual Arts

The way we understand ourselves and define our personal hopes and dreams is often mediated by the way other people express their perceptions of us either as individuals or as representatives of a social group, in a range of genres including literature, film, the visual arts, photography and graffiti. But what if we find our lives are either persistently absent from the visual frame or persistently misrepresented in literature to the extent that we do not recognise ourselves, do not know ourselves? More specifically, what are the identity and socio-cultural impacts of this invisibility or misrepresentation on us, individually and collectively, if we have a disability?

I explored some of these questions in my 2011 doctoral thesis, 'Hearsay: how stories of deaf people and deafness are told' (See also McDonald 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014) and found that people who are deaf have historically been used in narratives as metaphors or leitmotifs for loneliness, alienation, shame, evil and other exclusionary qualities. The reasons for, and the impacts of, this distortion still puzzle me in many ways. However, it has become clear that we each have the right to reclaim our lives by expressing our individual stories, either orally, textually or visually. Equally, we have the right to challenge the way others purport to describe our lives and experiences. More than this, we have the responsibility to redress, where possible, the impact of historic misrepresentations when we encounter them.

This is why I have come to talk and write about American photographer Diane Arbus and her 1968-1971 series of duotone photographs of intellectually disabled people. These men and women were institutionalised residents of the American Institute for Mental Studies (or the AIMS, since renamed the Vineland Development Centre) in New Jersey in the United States. The series of photos were later reproduced in a monograph, 'Untitled', by her daughter, Doon Arbus (Arbus and Cuoma 2011). In my art-as-research project, I revisited three of these photos, with the aim of restoring the individual dignity and humanity of the people captured in the frame of the unblinking photographer's gaze.

A Confrontation

In September 2014, during a Sunday visit to the Queensland Art Gallery by the wending Brisbane River, I browsed through one of its bookshops. I enjoyed the contemplation of sifting my way through the beautifully produced art catalogues, books and miscellany such as scarves, calendars and journals for the aspiring artist. I fell into a meditative reverie.

I was in this pool of calm when I chanced upon an oversized hardcover book wrapped in a sepia-grey cover. Centred on the front cover was a grey and cream coloured photograph of four women and a man standing on a pavement adjacent to a park. The women were

dressed in white, crumpled, ill-fitting attire; one wore a discarded floor-length ball-gown and the others wore what appeared to be knee-length hospital nightgowns. The man was dressed in dark long trousers which crinkled around his ankles, a long-sleeved shirt with white buttons and a bowler hat. All five wore eye-masks. Above them, the bough of a leafy tree loomed heavily, even threateningly. In the distance, the blur of a stand of trees can be seen. The sky is ominous with clouds; the long shadows on the footpath indicate that this photo was taken either early in the morning or late in the afternoon. At the top was a single word in white typeface, Untitled. Beneath the photo was the inscription, Diane Arbus.

I gazed at the cover photo for several moments, trying to make sense of what I was looking at. I could not understand the image. Who were these people? Why were they wearing masks? And what was it about the photo that was making me feel uncomfortable? I opened the book to see what lay inside and found a grotesquerie.

On page after page – fifty pages, in fact – I saw a single, square-shaped duotone photo of a person or several people who evidently had cognitive or intellectual disabilities. Apart from the photo on the frontispiece facing the title page, the pages to the left of all the photos are blank, thus heightening the sense of otherness, alienation and noirish quality of drama which imbues all the photos. None of the photos are titled. None of the people in the photos are named. Viewed together, the photos are a chilling triumph of collective anonymity over individual humanity.

The details of this anonymity are compelling. Boys and men feature only rarely (See Arbus 2011: Photos 21, 32 and 47). Across the span of those fifty photos, most of the girls and women who gaze out towards the viewer look dazed. 'Poignantly, the images [also] frame the viewer in the act of staring' (Millett-Gallant 2012: 115). Indeed, Millett-Gallant notes that 'Arbus's work traffics in the dynamics of the gaze/stare'.

Many of the people in the photos are masked; their masks vary from simple eye-masks to garish Halloween-style masks, obliterating not only their identity and history, but also their unique personhood. Several are freakishly costumed, wrapped either in oversize blankets, coats or sheets (See Arbus 2011: Photos 7, 17, 26, 39, 44) or in too small, too tight fairy-dresses (See Arbus 2011: Photo 25). One woman is dressed in patchwork garments to resemble a scarecrow, with straw in her hair (See Arbus 2011: Photo 46). Some women are stripped down to their underwear (See Arbus 2011: Photo 5) or swimming costumes (See Arbus 2011: Photos 31, 48); they look vulnerable. A few of the other women have lipstick smeared crudely across their mouths, with little regard for finesse, style or beauty (See Arbus 2011: Photos 30, 41, 44). Indeed, one woman's lipstick has been applied with a gesture towards a clown's smile and she has been posed with a dunce's hat on her head (See Arbus 2011: Photo 43). The irony signals a casual cruelty towards the woman. Hardly any of the girls or women are smiling.

The rare visible expression of joy – e.g. three young women playing in a park (See Arbus 2011: Photo 4) and two women wearing Easter Parade bonnets as they stand arm in arm (See Arbus 2011: Photo 41) – attenuate the sombreness of the other photos. Similarly, there are only rare examples of casual poses: two women wearing summer frocks hold hands as they smile shyly towards the viewer (See Arbus 2011: Photo 37) and another woman is dressed neatly in a spotted top, knee-length shorts and sneakers as she smiles a bashful smile, gripping her own hands (See Arbus 2011: Photo 38). These more informal photos attenuate the grotesqueness of the contrived postures – wilfully ugly masks and ill-fitting costumes draped on so many of the other men and women (See Arbus 2011: Photos 10, 16, 17, 20, 27, 34, 35, 42).

But perhaps the most heart-breaking photos are those that reveal with unadorned simplicity the raw vulnerability, sorrow, confusion and bewilderment of those men and women with intellectual disability who were shut away from the world between 1968-71 (See Arbus 2011: Photos 3, 6, 9, 12, 14, 21,30). In all these fifty pages of photos, I not only saw the work of an artist in command of, and in thrall to, the aesthetics of her photographic craft. I also saw the alienating distance between the photographer and her subjects. Diane Arbus had transformed these men and women, made vulnerable by their intellectual disabilities and hidden from the public in their segregated residences, into freakish objects for the voyeuristic gaze.

I put the book back on the shelf in the Art Gallery bookshop. At first, I felt merely shaken. And then, I felt angry with Diane Arbus and sad for the defencelessness of those long-ago secluded men and women with an intellectual disability. For several days immediately following my visit to the Queensland Art Gallery, and then on and off in the ensuing months, I flashed back to those disturbing, confronting portrayals.

Arbus's Focus on 'The Flaw'

I turn now to provide some context to Diane Arbus's 'Untitled' photos. I am mindful that we unconsciously bring our own contemporary cultural histories to our viewing responses, without realising how our personal experiences influence our appraisal and interpretation of art works of other cultures and from earlier times (Panofsky 1955). I could not help comparing Arbus's photos with the benignly sentimental publicity photos that had been taken in my childhood days when I attended the Yeerongpilly Oral Deaf Pre-School and the Gladstone

Road Deaf School in Brisbane. I imagined the co-mingled hurt and anger that I would feel today if Diane Arbus had dared to take such cruelly dehumanising photographs of my classmates and me.

Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assert that Diane Arbus's photographs in 'Untitled' are disturbing, confronting, and transgressive. Arbus had prior form in producing transgressive works:

> 'What you notice about people', Diane Arbus said, 'is the flaw'. Arbus turned flaws into great photographs. During the 1950s and '60s, she pointed her camera straight across polite social boundaries, at dwarves, nudists, disturbed children, the ugly, the afflicted, the uncertain, the caught-off-guard (Higonett 2016: np).

In 1961, *Esquire* magazine rejected a photo-essay by Arbus because of concerns 'about publishing pictures of people for the sole purpose of showing them as eccentrics' (Schultz 2011: 18). Arbus's transgressive photography was influenced by her affiliation with a group of photographers, including Gary Winogrand, Lee Friedlander and Robert Frank, who rejected the humanist-realist photography of the 1950s, as exemplified by the seminal *The Family of Man Exhibition* in New York in 1955 (Hevey 1997). These photographers introduced 'reportage portraiture showing the human race as an alienated species bewildered by its existence' (Hevey 1997: 509). David Hevey notes that the 'appalling' outcome is that their surrealistic realism 'anchored the new forms of a fragmented universe (to a greater or lesser extent) in new, even more oppressive images of disabled people' (Hevey 1997: 509).

More than this, Arbus's photos are entirely absent of the social-cultural and political contexts of her times. Millett-Gallant (2012: 116) claims that 'Arbus's photographs add to the history of disabled bodies on display' but such a claim is contestable. After all, Arbus took the 'Untitled' photos well after the rise of the disability rights movement in the US and UK, and yet she anachronistically constructed her photos so that they were redolent of the freakery movement from a much earlier time. Why would she do that?

Part of the answer lies in Arbus's fascination with 'freaks' and their history:

> From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century in America, the public exhibition of people with real and alleged physical anomalies in museum, circus, carnival, world fair, and amusement park sideshows for amusement and profit was widely popular and for the most part respectable ... the people on exhibit sold photographs of themselves to patrons to supplement their income and to advertise their appearances (Bogdan et al. 2012: 7).

At that time, the 'freak' was portrayed either as 'an upstanding person with conventional or highly regarded social status' (Bogdan 2012: 11) or as an 'exotic person' with an emphasis on their 'strange features and their alleged alien backgrounds' (Bogdan et al. 2012: 15). Their disability was shown as the source of their greatness. 'Pity was not part of freak photography … [and they were not] presented as needy, weak or destitute' (Bogdan et al. 2012: 20-21). Significantly, these early 'freaks' had some control over their image. It is interesting to note that some contemporary disability performance activists such as Australian circus performer, Sarah Houbolt, are seeking to reclaim the term 'natural born freak' with pride, as a way of asserting some control over their identity-making.

In contrast, the intellectually disabled people in Diane Arbus's photos had no control over their images. Indeed, Arbus 'spoke of "pursuing them", which implies an aggressive hunt for the right image' (Bosworth 1984: 246, cited in Bogdan et al. 2012: 134). She was certainly active in seeking access to photograph people residing at institutions, and in 1968 she wrote to a friend, 'I would like to photograph mentally retarded people, idiots, imbeciles and morons (morons are the smartest of the three) especially the cheerful ones' (Arbus 2003: 196).

Her flippant tone here is unsettling to say the least. Between 1968 and 1971, Arbus wrote several letters and kept detailed diary notes about this photography project. Facsimiles of, and excerpts from, some of her writing are reproduced in Revelations (See Arbus 2003: 64, 66, 196, 198, 202-5, 212-15, 223). Her persistent refrain is that of a photographer entirely focused on her struggle with photographic aesthetics, techniques and technicalities. She provides little evidence of attempting to get to know or understand the people she is photographing; her writing evinces no interest in the individual circumstances of these institutionalised people. Her descriptions of the people she meets are reductionist and cartoonish: 'They are the strangest combination of grownup and child'; 'Phyllis is the one with glasses and large eyes. Solemn intelligent mongoloid'; 'I think Johanna is the one with the cowboy hat' (Arbus 2003: 202-204). However, she did notice that 'Some of them are perturbed and miserable. One of them says over and over again, "Was I the only one born?" '(Arbus 2003: 202).

Arbus 'exulted over the photographs she made at Halloween of the residents of the Vineland facility in masks and costumes' (Lubow 2016: 484-485). She wrote to her husband, Alan Arbus, 'FINALLY what I've been searching for … I have discovered … late afternoon early winter sunlight … JUST like snapshots

only better' (Arbus 2003: 66). Sociologist and disability studies scholar, Robert Bogdan et al. (2012: 135) abhors Arbus's photographs and writes with concern on behalf of her subjects, 'None of them is dressed in clothes that would be considered appropriate for the situations'. In bleak contrast, journalist Arthur Lubow (2016: 485) overlooks the physical reality of these people, instead noting Arbus's attention to the 'weak, watery light that arrives in late afternoon at the end of autumn …' and further claims, 'Illuminated in this filtered sunshine, figures and landscapes evoke the gradated tonal range of an aquatint etching'. Lubow continues,

> Many of these photographs recall particularly the aquatints of Goya's *Disparates* … Women with beaky noses, imbecilic grins and disguising masks appear in both artists' visions … [Arbus] too was creating tableaux that seem to emerge from dreams or nightmares … her photograph of a procession of women dressed for Halloween, holding hands and looking in various directions, strikingly resembles Bruegel's depiction of the blind leading the blind (485).

In short, Lubow unwittingly calls out the grotesqueness of Arbus's photos. Like Arbus, and perhaps in thrall to Arbus's fame, he appears to be focused only on the end-product i.e. the photograph, and thus reveals an unreflective approach to the inherent lack of humanity in her photos. Or as Bogdan et al. (2012: 135) so astringently noted, 'Their world was always the world of the freaks, and hers was always the world of art'.

Ethics in Creative Practices

Some people might argue that the role of the creative practitioner – writer, artist, musician, performer – is to challenge and contest norms. That is right; I agree. But a key ethics question is 'how do we interact with each other?' As Higonett (2016: np) observes,

> In the liberal democracies of the early 21st century, we aspire to assuage everyone's sensibilities and treat no one as an "other". I am reminded of a three-step speech protocol written on the windows of a Los Angeles private school: "Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?"

Higonett (2016: np) applies this protocol to the Arbus photos and decides, 'Arbus's photographs may be true, but they are not kind, and only necessary to the extent that we believe unkind art is necessary'. Higonett (2016: np) continues, 'Though she lived her personal life without boundaries, her own work perpetuated social boundaries … with something verging on contempt, certainly a conviction about difference'.

It is refreshing to read Higonett's critical comments addressing the simple, humanist issue of people's feelings. Scholarly criticism taking into account the individual humanity of the intellectually disabled people institutionalised in a residential facility is rare. Instead, writers such as Patricia Bosworth (*Diane Arbus, A Biography*) and Susan Sontag (*On Photography*) ignore Arbus's 'oppressive representations of disabled people' (Hevey 1997: 510). They either extol the aesthetics of the photographs; unquestioningly accept Arbus's presentation of her subjects as 'people who are pathetic, pitiable, as well as repulsive' (Hevey 1997 citing Sontag: 510); or collude with Arbus by writing patronisingly about her 'gentle and patient way with "them" ' (Hevey 1997 citing Bosworth: 510). Sontag wonders, 'Do they see themselves … like *that*?' (Hevey 1997 citing Sontag: 510). As Hevey (1997: 510) points out,

> Neither of these critics … considered asking the observed what they felt about the images in which *they* figured. … the entire discourse has absented the voice of those at its centre – disabled people.

Even the accomplished disability-in-art historian and disability studies scholar, Ann Millett-Gallant (2012: 117) invites us to regard the 'disabled subjects as performative agents', thus implying the disabled residents in Arbus's works were acting with fully informed, purposive volition. In doing so, Millett-Gallant sidelines the reality that the residents were institutionalised at a time when they would have had little to zero agency in making choices about even benign daily events such as meal-times, sleep schedules, selection of clothes and social activities. How then, would these residents have had the skills to freely, knowingly, and purposively agree to participate in Arbus's sophisticated photographic project?

Moreover, Arbus's photos raise ethical dilemmas about the consequences of her access to those intellectually disabled people, beyond the immediate act of taking their photos. Even if the intellectually disabled participants consented to have their photos taken, how could they have understood or imagined the likely consequences across time and space (e.g. through the global reach of the internet)? In any case, having taken those photos, Arbus lost control over their distribution both in her own time and into the future. Indeed, in 1971 she reportedly confided her regrets in taking the photos and did not want them to be published (Lubow 2016). She certainly could not have foreseen how all those women and girls, men and boys in her photos would feel in the years to come; nor how their families would feel.

Their history and our present day historical perspective matter because looking back on our history (or various histories) helps us to understand why things are as they are today. Reflecting on history can also help us to see how things could be better or different today. Thus, just as the name of the institution changed from American Institute for Mental Studies to Vineland, so have social

values changed. But those people are forever trapped in the Arbus photos, like insects fossilised in amber.

'Talking Back to Diane Arbus': My mixed-media response

While I was exploring the potency of visual arts narratives of disability in general and mulling over my distress about Diane Arbus's photos in particular, I enrolled in a drawing course with the idea of sketching my own responses to and about disability. I was inspired by the oft-cited mantra that 'drawing is research'. With the encouragement of my ebullient art tutor, I produced a series of six mixed-media images, titled 'Talking back to Diane Arbus', in which I expressed my dismay about the way Diane Arbus portrayed – and perhaps even betrayed – the intellectually disabled people in her photos.

In my drawing-as-research project, I aimed to challenge the photographic ethics of Arbus's photos, and restore the individual dignity and humanity of those long-ago secluded men and women by 'revising' Arbus's images. I wanted to inject Arbus's historic perspectives of people with intellectual disability with contemporary relevance. This was to be achieved by an act of memorialising them within the contemporary context of my work, i.e. working with and for people with disability.

With these aims in mind, I used a black pen to trace images of three Diane Arbus photos onto fragments of transparent paper: a masked woman in a wheelchair (Arbus 2011: Photo 10); two sad-faced girls in a park (Arbus 2011: Photo 3); and three girls, one of whom appears to be attempting a handstand, playing in a park (Arbus 2011: Photo 4). I glued these fragments onto crayoned photos of scenes from my workplace: a colleague typing, a seat bench, and my office bookshelves with a floral cup. To accompany these images, I made photocopies – heightened with excess red toner ink – of Arbus's original duotone photographs, tore their edges, and rubbed them with charcoal and chalk to create an aged effect. Along the edges of each image, I wrote excerpts from an Alden Nowlan poem, 'He sits down on the floor of a school for the retarded', a poem infused with Nowlan's affectionate regard for the intellectually disabled people he meets. His poem begins:

> I sit down on the floor of a school for the retarded,
>
> As a writer of magazine articles accompanying a band
>
> that was met at the door by a child in a man's body
>
> who asked them, 'Are you the surprise they promised us?'
>
> Nowlan goes on to recount his experiences with the people he meets that day. One of them is a young woman who
>
> sits down beside me and, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, rests her head upon my shoulder.
>
> He admits his discomfort with this gesture, doesn't know what to do, until
>
> 'Hold me,' she whispers. 'Hold me.'
>
> I put my arm round her. 'Hold me tighter.'
>
> I do, and she snuggles closer …

Nowlan remains anxious; he imagines that he will be remembered as a 'sex-crazed writer' who 'publicly fondled the poor retarded girl.' Then he thinks about children, old people, and soldiers at war and realises

> It's what we all want in the end,
>
> to be held, merely to be held …

In the poem's final stanza, Nowlan movingly invokes the universality of our individual need to be loved and to be held:

> She hugs me now, this retarded woman, and I hug her.
>
> We are brother and sister, father and daughter,
>
> mother and son, husband and wife.
>
> We are lovers. We are two human beings
>
> huddled together for a little while by the fire
>
> in the Ice Age, two hundred thousand years ago.

In this deeply reflective poem, Nowlan draws the reader into the lives of people with an intellectual disability, and invites the reader – you and me – to not only reflect upon, but also to recognise, our shared humanity across all boundaries of time and circumstances. Nowlan's humanistic empathy is in sharp contrast to Arbus's chilly detachment and deliberate 'othering' of her photographic subjects. (refer images gallery on pages 63-66).

Conclusion

When I look at Diane Arbus's photos, I see a photographer in thrall with her own art, rather than an artist who sought to better understand the people she photographed. At the same time, I believe that visual art works offer viewers fresh ways of understanding disability and the experiences of disabled people both historically and now. This is why I undertook this art-as-research drawing project as a memorial of sorts for those people with a disability who have been oppressed, marginalised, excluded and mocked. I hope that my revised images provide a new narrative for Arbus's photographic subjects, and evoke fresh ways of regarding historic images of people with intellectual disability.

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Donna's publications include two books – *Jack's Story* (Allen & Unwin 1991) and *The Art of Being Deaf: a memoir* (GUP 2014), several book chapters, peer reviewed journal articles, research reports and essays. She has also co-edited two journals; exhibited research-based art works in two art shows; published several commentaries in various media outlets including 'The Conversation'; and written over 14 commissioned policy submissions and reports. Her book chapter, 'Visual Narratives: Contemplating the Storied Images of Disability and Disablement', is currently in press.

Donna's disability research priorities include exploring the intersections between the creative arts and disability, including the implications of the NDIS for the arts sector in Australia. In her creative arts research and practice, Donna considers the works of other visual artists to find new ways of re-presenting and understanding the history and experiences of people with disability. In 2016, Donna exhibited a suite of her mixed-media drawing works, 'Talking back to Diane Arbus', at the Logan West Library's Artists' Walk and WAG Upstairs Gallery in Brisbane.

Footling

I was born feet first, a footling breech.
My mother says they tried to turn me
by pressing her tummy, but I refused
to stay where they put me. My father lifted
the foot of the bed with bricks, and blood
pooled in their heads while they slept.

I was born three weeks early, at 10:53
on a Wednesday morning. My father
was drunk the first time he saw me.
a foundling on the other side of the window.
When I was one month old, my mother
preserved my tiny feet in black ink.

According to folklore, a footling
has the power to heal others by walking
on them. I used to walk on my father's back
and listen for the crack of vertebrae popping
like corn. For those fleeting moments,
I may have felt foolish, but not trivial.

Laura Kenny,
Brisbane, Queensland