

The Camera is Cruel

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Lisette Model, Diane Arbus and Nan Goldin took interest in the social dimensions of cohabitation, people at the periphery of society, extraordinary personalities and the eccentric. Through the lenses of their cameras they cast a very personal eye on human beings and their disparate living environments, thus constantly questioning the validity of conventions.

Their works, which cover three generations, are on the one hand expressions of the times and the different social milieus in which these women lived, while on the other hand they represent homages to the diversity of human existence and its various manifestations. Last but not least, Model, Arbus and Goldin also redefined — each of the three in her own, personal way — the dialogue between photographer and subject in a completely new way, combining a documentary aspect with a subjective approach.

After her emigration to the United States in 1938, Lisette Model continued her work, which she had already started in France, by taking photographs of the heterogeneous American society in its various cultural and social manifestations.

In a very programmatic and self-assured manner, Lisette Model demanded: "Never photograph anything you are not passionately interested in."¹ And Lisette Model took particular interest in everyday life, in hidden, not overt beauty, in human weaknesses and eccentricities and the world as it is and not as it should be. Her settings were the streets, hotels, bars, parks and restaurants, the catwalks of exclusive fashion shows, as well as the omnipresent poverty of urban everyday life, the nightlife in Manhattan, the beaches of Coney Island and, in her early days, the streets and promenades of Paris and Nice.

Lisette Model was born as Elise Amelie Felicie Stern in Vienna, Austria, in 1901. She studied music but after her father's death and the family's relocation to France she turned to photography. She became known through a series of photographs she took in Nice in 1934, in which she portrayed the upper-class vacationers on the *Promenade des Anglais* in ironic pictures of cautiously cheery, uptight, unhappy, angry, unpleasant and hardened representatives of a fading bourgeoisie society, pictures which already reveal her later artistic approach and personal trademark. Some of these pictures can also be seen in the exhibition.

Following her emigration to the United States, she was supported by commissions from the influential art director of *Harper's Bazaar*, Alexey

Brodovitch, who admired her radical work. By 1940 the Museum of Modern Art was purchasing and exhibiting her photographs. Instead of depicting luxury and fashion, the pictures Model delivered were extraordinary, even eccentric, focusing on the evidently ugly, the run-down and shabby as well as on outsiders and losers. In the beginning of the 1950s she lost her job and from that time on worked as a free-lance photographer for various magazines. Even if her pictures might sometimes appear unfriendly, with Model portraying people who are disadvantaged by nature and circumstances, yes sometimes even intensifying these portraits towards caricatures, her portraits are still testimonies to these people's urban living environment, a vibrating, constantly changing metropole, for which Model felt true passion and affection. And yet her work not infrequently encompasses a quite expressive dynamic, which she brought, via motifs and perspective, to perfection by often radically cropping her negatives in order to show the essential core of her pictures. She took her photographs while on the road, they are snapshots taken quickly and with a sure eye of impressions and inspirations of the moment, pictures, that today would be categorized as street photography. Model said of herself, "I am a passionate lover of the snapshot, because of all photographic images it comes closest to truth."² Her works, in particular her jazz impressions, as well as the *Reflections* and *Running Legs* series are ultimately also an homage to a vibrating, dynamic metropolis that is fast, magnificent, outrageous and bursting with a lust for life, but at the same time also merciless and misanthropic. From the millionaire on the French Riviera via the jazz singer in one of her beloved jazz clubs to the beggar in the street canyons of Manhattan, Model's photographs not only tell personal stories of the individual's passions and interests, but also create social portraits of the society of her time that go beyond the portrayal of the individual. Her photographs could be characterized by a sentence by Oscar Wilde, which Susan Sontag used as the introductory quote to her book *On Photography*: "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible..." In the mid-1950s Model quit actively working as a photographer, because the American authorities accused her of being involved in communist activities, hindering any new engagements or even preventing them altogether. The artist, whose works are today considered icons of 20th century photography, started to teach photography at the California School of Fine Arts as early as 1949 and

she resumed her teaching activities in 1953, lecturing at the New School for Social Research in New York City until her death in 1983. Diane Arbus was to become one of her most famous students.

While Lisette Model created a shimmering kaleidoscope of various social classes and urban hustle and bustle, dissolving the borders between beauty and ugliness and between society and its margins by means of her radical artistic intervention into everyday life, Arbus was mainly interested in the “other”, the surreal and bizarre aspects of everyday life, the purportedly ugly and marginal, and by portraying all of this, she broke both artistic and social taboos. Diane Arbus’s photographic cosmos was populated by people with physical abnormalities and mental disabilities, by vaudeville and circus artists, nudists, dwarfs, twins, transvestites and prostitutes. Even when she artistically dealt with ‘regular people’, they appeared in their positioning and poses strangely alien and far away from their reality.

After attending the classes of by then well-known Lisette Model at the New School toward the end of the 1950s, Diane Arbus increasingly began to photograph her work on the extreme and the abnormal and looked for her models in New York locations such as Hubert’s Museum, a sideshow venue in New York’s Times Square, and the Club 82, a *drag* cabaret in downtown Manhattan. “And Lisette shook up my puritan hangups. Photographs that demand admiration have a power to disturb.”³, said Diane Arbus. Contrary to Lisette Model, Arbus focused on her work in the studio and combined the deliberation of well thought-out composition with the esthetics of the snapshot. Her subjects know that they are being photographed and have time to present themselves before the camera. Susan Sontag commented on Arbus’s artistic attitude and approach in *On Photography*: “In the world colonized by Arbus, subjects are always revealing themselves. There is no decision moment. [...] Instead of trying to coax her subjects into a natural or typical position, they are encouraged to be awkward — that is, to pose [...] Standing or sitting stiffly makes them seem like images of themselves.”⁴ Sontag assumes that “Arbus’s interest in freaks expresses a desire to violate her own innocence, to undermine her sense of being privileged [...]”⁵.

Diane Arbus was born Diane Nemerov in New York in 1923. Her family owned Russek’s, a famous Fifth Avenue fur and fashion department store. Her father soon recognized and fostered her artistic talent. From 1941 onwards, after brief initial studies with Berenice Abbott, she cooperated with her husband Allan Arbus whom she had met working at her father’s company and had married against her father’s wish. They worked as free-lance fashion photographers, first for Russek’s and then for Condé Nast. After 1955 the most successful period of their joint photo studio started. They worked for *Harper’s Bazaar*, the *Esquire* and even for the *New York Times*, formed part of the *Vogue*’s editorial staff and also received orders for commercial shootings from advertising companies like Young and Rubicam. Even though the couple was highly appreciated particularly for their experimental and completely

unusual style, breaking the usual conventions with their unorthodox and eccentric pictures, both she and her husband, with whom she had ceased to work by 1957, always distanced themselves from the fashion business. Their increasing artistic success — in 1967 their works were presented to the public alongside works by Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand in the *New Documents* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art — went hand in hand with a growing financial decline in their commercial business. Subsequently Diane Arbus also assumed teaching commitments at the Cooper Union, the Parsons School of Design in New York and the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island. Throughout her entire life, Diane Arbus suffered from severe depressions, which eventually culminated in her suicide in 1971. In 1972 she was the first female photographer to be presented at the Venice Biennale. Her monograph *Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph*, which made her an icon and is one of the top sellers in photography history, was released in 1972.

Even when Diane Arbus went beyond the limits of the ‘normal’ and the ‘beautiful’ and the esthetics tolerated by society and radically illuminated the psychological dimension of the picture as well as of the portrayed persons, she nonetheless never exposed or compromised her protagonists. Regardless of how irritating and grotesque Arbus’s parallel worlds might appear, she has always addressed them with great sensitivity and respect.

What Nan Goldin and Diane Arbus have in common is their respect for the margins of society; people who they made visible by their work and their life and positively celebrated. However, unlike Arbus’s often distanced view and staged photographs, Nan Goldin focused on snapshots of her life, pictures full of empathy and affection for people and scenes she herself belonged to. In doing so, she succeeded in taking deeply sensitive, often intimate pictures of the life, but also of the death, of her friends. A life she shared with them, a life that was at the same time also her own. For instance, she composed an impressive portrait of the New York subculture of the late 1970s and early 1980s, characterized by the LGBT community, AIDS and drug addiction, in a collection that comprised some 800 pictures and is called *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986). Thus her photography was expanded to the filmic and the narrative, a sort of graphic or rather visual novel, which, in combination with her favorite music became not only a touching testimony of her personal surroundings and way of life but also an impressive visual document of an entire generation. Picture by picture Nan Goldin tells us about her personal experiences, about her friends, her loves and losses, she talks of ecstasy and pain, sex and drugs, dependency, violence and illness, of the heights and depths of her life over all those years. Beyond this ballad, whose title was taken from a song in Berthold Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* and for which she herself together with her friends chose the music, from Maria Callas to The Velvet Underground, the entire artistic work of Nan Goldin can be seen as the composition of a very personal, visual diary. Or, as Nan Goldin herself puts it: “The diary is my form of control over my life. It allows me to obsessively

record every detail. It enables me to remember.”⁶

Nan Goldin was born in Washington D.C. in 1953. Today she lives in New York, Paris and Berlin. Her childhood was overcast by ongoing conflicts between her parents and the suicide of her sister, who was four years older. As a teenager, Goldin began to smoke marijuana and she left home at the age of 13 to study at the Satya Community School in Lincoln. In 1974, after having initially started as an amateur photographer with a first exhibition of her pictures, Nan Goldin began to study at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Influences from Andy Warhol's early films, but also from Jack Smith and Federico Fellini were to become essential for the development of her imagery.

In 1978, after graduating, she went to New York, where she predominantly lives and works to this day, alongside Berlin and Paris. For Nan Goldin the camera not only became an instrument of self-definition and self-discovery, but also a political tool which helped her to inform the public about important issues which have hitherto been completely silenced in the US. In her first exhibition, she therefore made her photographic journeys through the gay and transgender community of Boston a subject of discussion. Goldin “fell in with the drag queens,”⁷ living with them and photographing them. “For her, her photographs were not about psychologizing, let alone about social analysis, her intention was her homage to these people, her respect for their life culture and their form of sexuality: Goldin said, “My desire was to show them as a third gender, as another sexual option, a gender option. And to show them with a lot of respect and love, to kind of glorify them because I really admire people who can recreate themselves and manifest their fantasies publicly. I think it's brave.”⁸

Therefore, she did not find ‘her’ scene bizarre or strange, abnormal or exotic. It was her normality and her life. In this context she wrote: “Everything I did — that's who I was all the time. And that's who I wanted to be.”⁹ Convincing arguments, which she later successfully put forward when countering accusations of voyeurism. Even when she accepted commissions from fashion companies such as Dior and when others copied her style, she rejected any form of commercialization of esthetics summarized under the keyword “heroin chic” as being “reprehensible and evil”¹⁰

With her snapshots Goldin immortalized the *zeitgeist* of New York, Manhattan's drug scene (particularly in the Bowery neighborhood), the post-punk new-wave music scene and the post-Stonewall gay subculture. Often working with insufficient lighting and taking pictures while moving, she created the images so typical of her work, images of women, drag queens, gays and lesbians, of herself and her milieu, in front of mirrors, in bars and bathrooms, during sex and drug use, as part of a culture of exuberance and fear, of obsession and dependency. Her intentions and artistic approach are probably best described by the sentence “I'll Be Your Mirror” taken from a song by The Velvet Underground, which she had also used as the title for one of her picture series.

It is not only the themes, but also the attitude and approach towards social and existential issues that these three extraordinary photographers have in common. Beyond the fact that Model and Arbus met in person, Model's work, as already explained above, had a significant influence on Arbus. In the same way, Nan Goldin's work is not imaginable without Arbus and her predecessor Model, even though Goldin initially separated herself from the cautious distance and coldness of Arbus' pictures, so typically reflecting the spirit of the time. Model, Arbus and Goldin radically widened and enhanced, each of them in different times and social contexts, artistic photography by a new perspective, which leaves social and esthetic limits behind and shows people and the world in all their diversity and colorfulness; when Diane Arbus claims, “the camera is cruel”, it is meant to provoke. The works of these artists show that it is not the camera that is cruel — but people.

¹ Lisette Model, quoted in: Ann Thomas, ed., *Lisette Model*, exhibition catalogue National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 1990), p. 44

² Lisette Model, in: “Snapshot Aesthetic”, in: artsynet, <https://www.artsynet.com/gene/snapshot-aesthetic> (version dated 20.05.2018).

³ Diane Arbus, in: Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus. A Biography*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1984.

⁴ Susan Sontag, *On photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), p. 37

⁵ Ibid., p. 43

⁶ Nan Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, New York: Aperture, S. 6.

⁷ Nan Goldin, in: Stephen Westfall, “The Ballad of Nan Goldin”, in: *BOMB* Nr. 37 (1991), 27–31. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/nan-goldin/> (version dated 22.05.2018.)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Nan Goldin, in: Sheryl Garratt, “Interview with Nan Goldin”, in: *The Guardian*, January 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2002/jan/06/features.magazine27> (version dated 22.05.2018).

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