

# REGEN PROJECTS

Wearing, Gillian, "The Eyes Have It, Gillian Wearing on Diane Arbus," *Artforum*, February 2004, p. 125, ill.

## THE EYES HAVE IT GILLIAN WEARING ON DIANE ARBUS

Gillian Wearing has always emphasized her work's affiliation with the field of documentary—for instance, with Michael Apted's sequence of films beginning with *Seven Up* (1964)—over its roots in fine art. But her penchant for subjecting its documentary content to an alienating formal displacement (hiding the faces of the speakers behind masks in *Confess all on video . . .*, 1994, or arbitrarily mismatching face and voice in *10-16* and *2 into 1*, both 1997) reflects her fundamentally poetic recognition that truth does not necessarily lie in unveiling or exposure but that concealment carries a truth of its own. No wonder, then, that she recognizes an affinity with Diane Arbus, whose ruthless exposure of her subjects was always paradoxically entwined with a sense of the psychological opacity of both subject and observer. Most recently, in remaking six portraits from among her family photos in *Album*, 2003, but using herself to depict her parents, siblings, uncle, and herself at age seventeen, Wearing has brilliantly rephrased questions about who and what is exposed in portraiture—questions that Arbus contended with in her time. To hear a contemporary artist's take on Arbus, I met with Wearing earlier this winter.

—Barry Schwabsky



I came to Diane Arbus's work through my sign series after it was suggested that they looked Arbus-like. I think it was meant in the sense that people might be revealing something negative about themselves, in a very confrontational way, and you might be made uneasy about some of the things they said and how they presented themselves. So I went and looked at her work, and I realized that I had seen an Arbus photograph in my first year at Goldsmiths. One of the tutors, Ian Jeffrey, showed her *Identical twins, Roselle, N.J., 1967*, and pointed out that what's striking about the image is the slight differences that make the one face extroverted and the other introverted. That struck me, because I saw that a photograph could have stronger metaphorical

meaning than you normally see. I also liked the duality, the way it represents a relationship. Those twins could be any type of relationship: a man and woman, two men, siblings, relatives. That must have sunk in.

In Arbus's work people see things that they see in themselves, and I respond to that reality. I understand that reality more than I understand a Hollywood movie. When I look at her work I see something there that I recognize from how I look at things. Photographs are part of your memory of people, so you don't imagine them in action, you imagine them sometimes as a still, almost a sculpture, static, defined by this one moment. It becomes an icon of that memory. So if you think you remember someone, it's probably that you've fixed some of their physical attributes from a photograph. I was looking at *Revelations*, the catalogue to the current exhibition, the other day, and I thought, This is a book about eyes, really. It's about how people are looking at you. There's no way you can disengage from them. It's as if Arbus wants to hold you there, by means of these other people. They're not grabbing you in an alluring way—quite the opposite. At the same time that they look so real, they look half fictitious. Arbus has come to an emotion that we know is there but that we don't normally engage with. We don't engage with strangers to that extent, and they wouldn't engage with themselves in the same way either. But she manages to engage with them on another level.

Arbus talked about her interest in families as a subject, which is something I've been concerned with as well. In *A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y., 1970*, where the parents are looking up at their son with a kind of horror, she's obviously capturing an emotion she partially feels herself. She said that the family kind of nagged at one another and had lots of arguments; she knew that and brought that aspect into the work. There's a reversal of scale, with the diminutive parents looking up at their son.

One thing that stands out for me in Arbus's work is the use of masks and artificial faces. But there is also a more general sense of the secret, of something withheld, so that faces look masklike because they hold back as much as they reveal, especially when the face is not animated—when it is just staring, or without that engagement you're familiar with in photographs. It's interesting how she used the mask in the untitled 1970–71 series of mentally handicapped people, in which the subjects have young minds trapped in mature bodies. There's the idea of role-playing but they're adults.

The idea of the fictive, of the play between fiction and reality, is present in a lot of Arbus's work. Part of our lives is playing out our own fictions. Sometimes it's something that comes out in a detail, like the vulnerability of the crossed legs in *Seated man in bra and stockings, N.Y.C., 1967*—where the illusion starts to break. The way the stocking seems held by a thin thread and everything could just fall apart. □