

Tamao Narukawa

Is the documentary photographer always a 'Super tourist' (Susan Sontag, On photography p42) in the world of others?

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Photography has been the extremely fascinating medium and in the entertainment, the propaganda, the economic, the political and the ideological, it is greatest 'instances'¹. This means that photography is not only practice, but also in its relation to society as a whole. In other words, photography might be able to catch the 'real'² that is more than than people's real.

When we look back on the history of photography, not all photos were necessarily fine art. The earliest pictures were really just experiments. Photographs as actual art forms need to be clearly defined in order to do more than just holding visual memory. Does photography more than represent? it reproduces "real", or at least it appears to?³ Susan Sontag said that photographs seem to be pieces of reality, it can change the scale of reality and in turn have their context.⁴ Louis Althusser argued that 'pictures were mirrors'⁵ which means that both the subject and its experiences are constituted in representation.

Is this true? Can to collect photograph collect the world? Can put into oneself into a certain relation to the world?⁶ What is the relationship between world and our own world? Sontag claimed that '[t]he photographer is supertourist, an extension of the anthropologist, visiting natives and bringing back news of their exotic doings and strange gear.' What does it mean to be tourist? Is it a simple meaning of person who is travelling or visiting a place for pleasure?⁷ Through the travelling, people can intervene in reality of native life? Sontag regards this as evidence of the world's photo colonization. Photographers are "supertourist" fascinated by strange and wonderful things.⁸

¹ Burgin, V. *Thinking Photography*. p5

² Toibin, C. 'Buy birthday present, go to morgue' *LONDON LEVIEW OF BOOKS* 2 MARCH, p7

³ O'Brien, G. and L. Dinse 'Nan Goldin's Rebellion and Realist Romance' *Nan Goldin; Diving for Pearls*. p77

⁴ Grange, A. L. *Basic Critical Theory for Photographers*. p30

⁵ Burgin, V. (1982) *Thinking Photography*. p6

⁶ Sontag, S. *On photography*. p4

⁷ Oxford Concise English Dictionary (1995) Definition of 'tourist'

⁸ Sontag, S. *On photography*.

Furthermore; it seems to me that “supertourist” has a meaning of ‘inside and outside’.⁹ Sontag criticized a photographer named Diane Arbus and stated: Her work holds an outsider's point of view that leads to cold, objective, peeping attitude to what was filmed. What does it mean of voyeurism? How does one tell if a particular photograph represents an insider or an outside viewpoint? Where is the difference between inside and outside.

I am going to explore this issue by focusing on two artists comparing works of Diane Arbus. These are Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* exhibition, Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, in terms of the former artist, it seems to me that might be able to show about the contrast between cold and warm. As for the latter one, illustrate of the relationship between distance and intimacy.

The theory of “supertourist” by Sontag influenced for realm of art, symbolized by many photographers and exhibitions. After Almost 1970s, the number of photograph exhibition are significantly increasing.¹⁰ In 1979, a controversial exhibition held at the MOMA. Organized by John Szarkowski, Director of the Museum's Department of Photography and entitled *Diane Arbus Photographs On View*: selected and installed 125 pictures after she dead in 1971. It seems to me that this exhibition produced that no attempt to encourage the viewer to identify with outside of society.¹¹ This is because her photographs instead of showing things they are different, everyone is shown to looks like same. Therefore, the viewer can see that all her subjects are ‘equivalent’.¹²

To illustrate this point, most of Arbus's subjects were dwarf or a transgender people, nudists, transvestite, and others: anybody Arbus photographed was a freak. One of her prominent work was *Retired man and his wife at home in a nudist camp one morning, N.J.* (1963) which the couple's habit was captured. As

⁹ Documentary style and ethnography p202

¹⁰ Burgin, V. *Thinking Photography*.

¹¹ Grange, A. L. *Basic Critical Theory for Photographers*. p35

¹² Sontag, S. *On photography*. p47

can be seen in figure 1, it is observed that the difficulties to distinguish the boundaries between 'normal' and 'freakish'¹³. This is because although the both old couples had no clothes on, it can be seen that we visited their ordinary as they were really natural and relaxed in this picture. Hence, this contradiction makes the viewers confused because boundaries between normal and freakish are blurred.



Figure.1. *Retired man and his wife at home in a nudist camp one morning, N.J. (1963)*

Sontag's comments are intriguing. She claimed that Arbus was not interested in ethical journalism. In other words, Arbus chose subject who do 'unconscious or unaware in relation to their pain, their ugliness'¹⁴ instead of taken subjects who already know they are suffering, such as victim of the specific incident or war. Hence, her works allow to break into their imperviousness which had been going on since they were born.

According to Colm Tóibín, 'Arbus had a way of making even the most ordinary people seem frightened, or uneasy, or garish, so that the line between who was a freak and who wasn't in her work became thin.'¹⁵

¹³ Gross, F. 'Introduction Between Intention and Effect.' *Diane Arbus's 1960s: Auguries of Experience*. p13

¹⁴ Sontag, S. *On photography*. p36

¹⁵ Tóibín, C. 'Buy birthday present, go to morgue' *LONDON LEVIEW OF BOOKS* 2 MARCH. p3

In order to confront the horrible with equanimity, Sontag said that Arbus tried to make an equivalences between freaks, suburban couple and nudist¹⁶ by dissociated point of view. To view from always outside can provide audience to the authority of Arbus's photographs because of the making contrast between their 'lacerating subject matter', 'their calm', and 'matter-of-fact attentiveness'. Therefore, this exhibition gave an impact with having a terrific to public as it showed that humanity is not 'one'. So viewer is really 'other', her work does not invite them to identify with horrible people.¹⁷

On the other hand, the exhibition in 1955, attempt to show that humanity as one, entitled '*The Family of Man*' organized by Edward Steichen at MOMA. This exhibition arranged and selected 503 photographs of the gamut of life from birth to death. These photographs were gathered from all parts of the world where are 68 nations and from 273 people. Edward Steichen said that 'It was conceived as a mirror of the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life-as a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world.'¹⁸ This means that it is obviously observed that through the exhibition, audience can recognize the community, the family, the person himself, and how he live in. Moreover, the subjects of people are from primitive atmosphere to Councils of United Nations. Why does this exhibition be called potential to compare with the former exhibition *Dian Arbus Photographs On view*? How to connect into Sontag's theory of 'super tourist'?

Steichen's exhibition at MOMA was called 'culmination of his career'¹⁹ as "The Family of Man" was wildly successful by circulated to thirty-eight countries and was viewed nine million people. Most people of photographs at his exhibition proofed that world is one. In other words, it is possible for viewer to consider about the possibility of that humanity is one. This is because there were all races, classes physical types and ages in this exhibition. Furthermore, it was grouped by themes all cultures such as

¹⁶ Sontag, S. *On photography*. p41

¹⁷ Also Sontag, S. *On photography*. p32-p35

¹⁸ Steichen, E. *The Family of Man*. Introduction.

¹⁹ Hoogland, R.C. *A Violent Embrace: Art and Aesthetics after Representation*. p97

birth, joy, labor, love, and others. Therefore, the exhibition can create an aesthetic visualizing ideas of peace which is 'the essential oneness of mankind.'²⁰

Interestingly, this may be refuted by Sontag: although the image of Steichen's exhibition was contrary to the Arbus's one, there are not much difference. As she argued, Arbus's show was a 'down' and Steichen's one was an 'up'²¹, but either experience render history and politics irrelevant. In other words, the Arbus's anti-humanism might undermine politics by showing opposite the thought of world is one. In terms of Steichen's *humanism of the Family of Man* exhibition create a sense of unity by ignoring weight of history.²² Moreover, Sontag claimed that one does so by atomizing it, into horror; the other by universalizing the human condition, into joy.²³ Thus, even though the feeling of both exhibitions were different, it makes politics and history ineffective by opposite approach.

However, Roland Barthes who was French Philosopher put forward a compelling analysis in his book *Mythologies*. He argued that Steichen's exhibition emphasized differences in human morphology and created exoticism with exaggeration.²⁴ This is because despite the fact that a piece of photograph was respectfully presented as a portrait of living people, it also appeared as being exposed to a suppressive like anthropology photograph. This is convincingly as Sontag claimed that 'photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention.'²⁵ What is the meaning of "non-intervention"?

Allan Sekula who was an American photographer pointed out that the system of representations of photographs can function respectfully and repressively. This means that Steichen's exhibition might held a suppressive gaze to record and collect 'individual' as managed objects such as criminals and primitive

²⁰ Reznik, E. *Steichen's Family of Man Restored: New Life for a Photographic Touchstone*. TIME.

²¹ Sontag, S. *On photography*. p32

²² Grange, A. L. *Basic Critical Theory for Photographers* p34

²³ Sontag, S. *On photography*. p32

²⁴ Barthes, R. *Mythologies*. Translated by Lavers, A. p181-182

²⁵ Sontag, S. *On photography*. p12

human beings.²⁶ This might happen simply because in his exhibition, not only the reading of the common sign 'family' but also the viewpoint of the 'comparison' of the viewer is evoked.

For instance, in the theme of family portrait at *The Family of Man*, photos of family living in Sicily, Japanese, Botswana, and the United States were lined up. Photographs were collected according to as a sign of "universal value", such as couples, marriage ceremonies, pregnant women, labor, and starving people. As can be seen in figure 2 and 3, Japanese families were photographed with the emergence of farm work. On the other hand, family in the United States of America were smiling with carpets, portraits which hung on walls that show affluent life. As a result, it is naturally observed that the viewer is imposed to compare the photos unconsciously. Hence, this exhibition illustrated that the eyes of photo journalism have the risk of exoticism and curiosity.



Figure.2. Japan (Carl Mydans, Life)



Figure.3. U.S.A. (Nina Leen, Life)

²⁶ Sekula, A. *The body and the Archive* in Bolton.

Hence, Steichen's exhibition indicated "non-intervention" which can be shown different aspect of documentary photo. Although his exhibition had the intention to express a warm message saying "human being are essentially one throughout the world" toward the world after the Second World War, it was emerged the risk of photo journalism by being located outside.

Nevertheless, the photo series of Nan Goldin makes the valid point that is indicate about intimacy. People to compare Goldin with Arbus who captured similar subjects, but Nan's photographs show intimacy, while Arbus's work feels sense of distance. In the case of Nan Goldin, American photographer, was born in 1953, her pictures come out of relationships, not observation.²⁷ In other words, she could be said to signify effectively the intimacy of the relation between photographer and subject. For example, one of her notable series of photographs entitled *Ballad of sexual dependency* (1986) was the product of an insider position that came out of this time, is the archetypical insider documentary. This is because the subjects of her photos are described as they really are because Goldin herself is not a bystander.

As can be seen in figure 4, it is observed that capture a moment in the flow of time from her photographs. The people in this figure are specific. For example, although the subjects who worn clothes irregularity and beyond the boundaries of gender transvestites, it seems to me that looks calm and seems not strange. According to Abigail Solomon-Godeau, this picture acknowledges Goldsin's emotional and indeed romantic investment in the transsexuals and transvestites.²⁸ Likewise, in this image, were over lit which is called "snapshot aesthetic"²⁹, hard flash or blurred and casually composed. As Goldin said that she was not taking photographs with the intent to publish, this was a 'desire' to take the picture.³⁰ Therefore, Goldin might was able to share that moment with the subjects. Namely, she herself is present in the picture.³¹

²⁷ Heiferman, Marvin. and M, Holborn. et al. (eds.) *Nan Goldin; The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. p6

²⁸ Solomon, G. A. 'Inside/Out' in Johnstone. S. *The Everyday*. p198

²⁹ Middlehurst, S. *Inside/Outside and Documentary Photography*. Steve Middlehurst Context and Narrative.

³⁰ Mazur, A. and P. S. Krajewska. *If I want to take a picture, I take it no matter what*. Foto TAPETA.

³¹ O'Brien, G. and L, Dinse. 'Nan Goldin's Rebellion and Realist Romance' *Nan Goldin; Diving for Pearls*. p79



Figure.4. *Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston* (1973)

‘people in the pictures say my camera is as much a part of being with me as any other aspect of knowing me. It’s as if my hand were a camera. If it were possible, I’d want no mechanism between me and the moment of photographing. The camera is as much a part of my everyday life as talking or eating or sex. The instant of photographing, instead of creating distance, is a moment of clarity and emotional connection for me.’³²

—Nan Goldin, March 1996

In the city of America in the 1980s and 1990s which were infected by AIDS, Goldin kept shutters at the everyday appearance of themselves. After her sister committed suicide, she had a fear that memory of her sister would fade away from her memory. As Goldin said that ‘I don’t really remember my sister. In process of leaving my family, in recreating myself, I lost the real memory of my sister.’³³ Due to these trauma, Goldin attempted to preserve eternity by taking photographs.

³² Heiferman, Marvin. and M, Holborn. et al. (eds.) *Nan Goldin; The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. p 6

³³ Also Heiferman, Marvin. and M, Holborn. et al. (eds.) *Nan Goldin; The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. p9

Glenn O'Brien argued that '[e]ternity doesn't mean forever; it means a moment that does not end.'³⁴ It seems to me that using a photograph as a trigger of real memory, can Goldin herself 'co-exists' with flavor of life. Thus, this provides us how it reality was. Goldin said that we all tell stories which are version of history- memorized, 'encapsulated'.³⁵ The subjects of her photographs are dead as her community had been deeply impacted by both AIDS and drug abuse. Goldin claimed that She would never loss the memory never loss the place as she believed that pictures can preserve life rather than kill life.³⁶ Instead of imposing a feeling of distance in the Arbus's exhibition, reassuring inside of Goldin's photographs were observed. From Goldin's insider relationship might be able to acknowledge sense of intimacy of the relation between photographer and subject.

Meanwhile, Badger Gerry rebutted that Goldin 'photographs like a predatory voyeur'³⁷ as most of Goldin's works treated the themes of transsexuality and drag queens. It is true that to compare her with Arbus who captured similar subjects, however these example might be dismissed the similarity between Arbus and Goldin. As for Arbus, most of drug queens hate her because 'she stripped them of their identity and showed them as men'. On the other hand, in terms of Goldin, she considered that '[t]hey weren't women either, by the way, they were "another species."³⁸ Goldin might put a great value on the ethic of respect for them. However, regardless of the intimate relationship between photographer and subject. So that is the conclusion voyeuristic? Is voyeurism determined by the photographer or the viewer?

We shall be a good deal closer to an answer to this question, if Arbus does not emphasizes this point that her subjects of motivate and the distance of us that are impossible to as an outsider. According to Sontag, this is a huge difference to consider is between Goldin the 'sympathetic insider' and Arbus's the

³⁴ O'Brien, G. and L, Dinse 'Nan Goldin's Rebellion and Realist Romance' *Nan Goldin; Diving for Pearls*. p80

³⁵ Weintraub, L. 'Disclosing Biography-Unabridged and Uncensored.' *Making Contemporary Art: How today's Artists Think and Work*. p198

³⁶ *Nan Goldin; The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. p146

³⁷ Badger, G. *The Genius of Photography: How Photography Has Changed Our Lives*.

³⁸ O'Hagan, S. *Diane Arbus: humanist or voyeur?* 26th July. The guardian.

'ultimate outsider' that is 'a middle class voyeur'.³⁹ In the essay about Arbus in 2003, Judith Thurman discussed that 'Arbus was exalted as a genius and reviled as a predator who conned her subjects out of their dignity.'⁴⁰ Is all photography potentially exploitative? Why Sontag view Arbus as being indisputably on the side of the Devil?

As can be seen in figure 5, *A Jewish giant at home with his parents, in the Bronx, N.Y.(1970)*, which is awkward and funny, the Jewish giant was a sideshow entertainer. This subject was able to arouse Arbus's interest because she was indicated as a voyeuristic and deeply morbid connoisseur of the horrible.⁴¹ This Jewish giant is tragic and loom over his small parents in their room, supporting himself with two canes. In addition, the photograph might go above particulars his unhappy home life as it is observed that the curtains are drawn shut and the lampshades are protected with cellophane which shows that their anguished. Sontag claimed about Arbus that 'certain forms of photographic depiction were especially complicit with processes of objectification that precluded either empathy or identification.'⁴²



Figure 5. *A Jewish giant at home with his parents, in the Bronx, N.Y (1970)*

³⁹ Middlehurst, S. *Inside/Outside and Documentary Photography*. Steve Middlehurst Context and Narrative.

⁴⁰ Wender, J. (2014) *The subject of an Arbus*. The New Yorker.

⁴¹ Grange, A. L. *Basic Critical Theory for Photographers*.

⁴² Also Grange, A. L. *Basic Critical Theory for Photographers*.

Moreover; the view from outside like distant alienated, unsympathetic, and alienating of Arbus's photograph might be able to reveal the possibility that people draw an ambiguous line between 'what is emotionally' and 'spontaneously intolerable and what is not.'⁴³ In other words, the people's reaction of shocking, painful televised and first look at Arbus's photographs are not so much different. This is because familiarity with terrible things makes it hard to react to the real life.⁴⁴ Her photographs is a good example of leading tendency of high art in capitalist nations: by getting viewer used to we could not bear to see, art changes morals.⁴⁵ Therefore, to see from outside can confront the horrible with equanimity. Goldin and Arbus's works are that might show people's attitude towards individuals who are ultimately at the perimeter of our society.

To conclude is the documentary photographer always a 'super tourist'? The Supertourist, can see the subjects of photographs from either 'inside or outside', both might have an aspect of "voyeuristic". Supertourist can be a voyeurism, an 'invader', an 'anthropologist'⁴⁶, a reality, and a mirrors.

Susan Sontag's view is based on the theories of that certain forms of photographic depiction are particularly concerned with the objective process of eliminating sympathy and identification.⁴⁷ Arbus 'collect'⁴⁸ horrible terrifying pictures to attempt to gaze familiar subjects with new ways from outside. Most of her photographs, by treating 'freak and normal'⁴⁹ equally, it might emphasize smashups, most of which have been going since the time the subject was born. Thus, I would agree with this view that to see from outside is an inseparable relationship in order to be a documentary photographer.

⁴³ Sontag, S. *On photography*. p41

⁴⁴ Gross, F. 'Introduction Between Intention and Effect.' *Diane Arbus's 1960s: Auguries of Experience*.

⁴⁵ Sontag, S. *On photography*. p41

⁴⁶ Morton, C. and E, Edwards. *Photography, Anthropology and History*.

⁴⁷ Solomon, G. A. 'Inside/Out' in Johnstone. S. *The Everyday*.

⁴⁸ Sontag, S. *On photography*.

⁴⁹ Gross, F. 'Introduction Between Intention and Effect.' *Diane Arbus's 1960s: Auguries of Experience*. p12-14

The exhibition of *The Family of Man*: struggle with the showing about the possibility of different aspect of documentary photos. What can be assumed here is that might exposure of relationship with 'non-intervention' rather than being one throughout the world. In other words, it might be seen to represent outsider's view by comparing unavoidable differences.

In order to seek the possibility of the position of insider, Goldin attempted to accomplish intimacy using close relationship rather than observation. However, it is still questionable whether documentary photographs are a predatory voyeur or not as being predator might be able to be determined by the viewer, not photographer.⁵⁰ Furthermore; The observation of Arbus by Solomon-Godeau are thought-provoking. To draw the ambiguous line between spontaneously intolerable and what is not might be able to make react terrible things blurred. Hence, the documentary photographer can be both insider and outsider. However; it might be possible that still goes on to question the 'binaristic view'⁵¹ which has meaning only in the context of a specific practice and it might not have meaning as an ontological one.

⁵⁰ Grange, A. L. *Basic Critical Theory for Photographers* p125-

⁵¹ Solomon, G. A. 'Inside/Out' in Johnstone, S. *The Everyday*. p202

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Appendix

Figure, 1. *Retired man and his wife at home in a nudist camp one morning, N.J.* (1963) from <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O125684/retired-man-and-his-wife-photograph-arbus-diane/> [accessed 18/04/17]

Figure, 2. *Japan (Carl Mydans, Life)* from Steichen, E. (2002) *The Family of Man*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Figure, 3. *U.S.A. (Nina Leen, Life)* from Steichen, E. (2002) *The Family of Man*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Figure, 4. *Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston* (1973) from Heiferman, Marvin. and M, Holborn. et al. (eds.) (2014) *Nan Goldin; The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. New York: Aperture.

Figure, 5. *A Jewish giant at home with his parents, in the Bronx, N.Y* (1970) from <http://dianearbusart.blogspot.co.uk/2009/11/jewish-giant-at-home-with-his-parents.html> [accessed 18/04/17]