

America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly

Susan Sontag

Early Photography

- Early photographers ought to take beautiful photographs of beautiful subject matter
- From the 1900's on, photographers increasingly photographed the ordinary
- Sontag argues that this endorses Whitman's claim

Anything as a Subject Matter

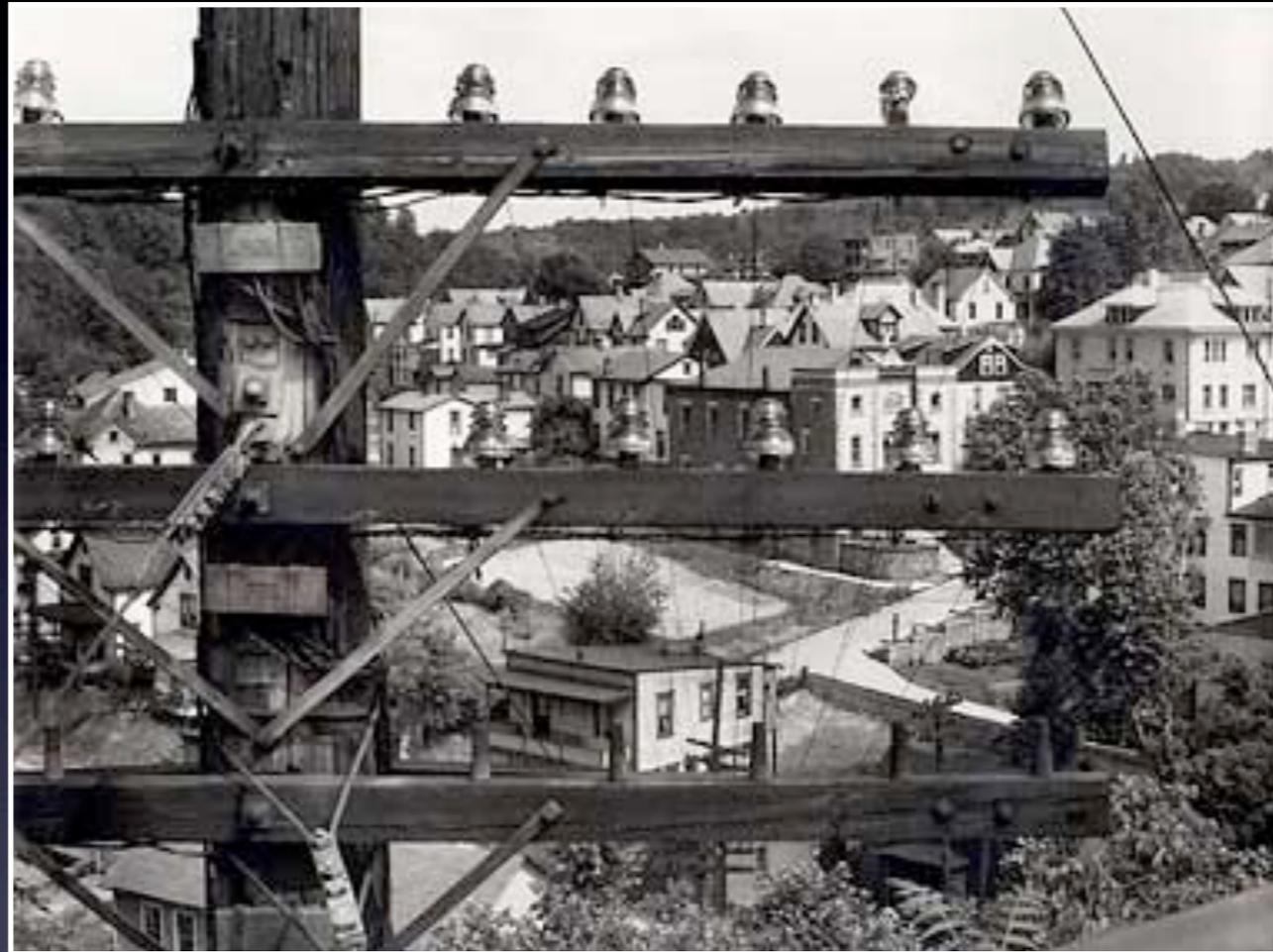
- In Walt Whitman's *In Leaves of Grass* he argues that all things whether beautiful or ugly, important or trivial, were of equal value and opportunity to be an artistic subject matter
- Whitman claimed that art would be demystified by reality

Walker Evans

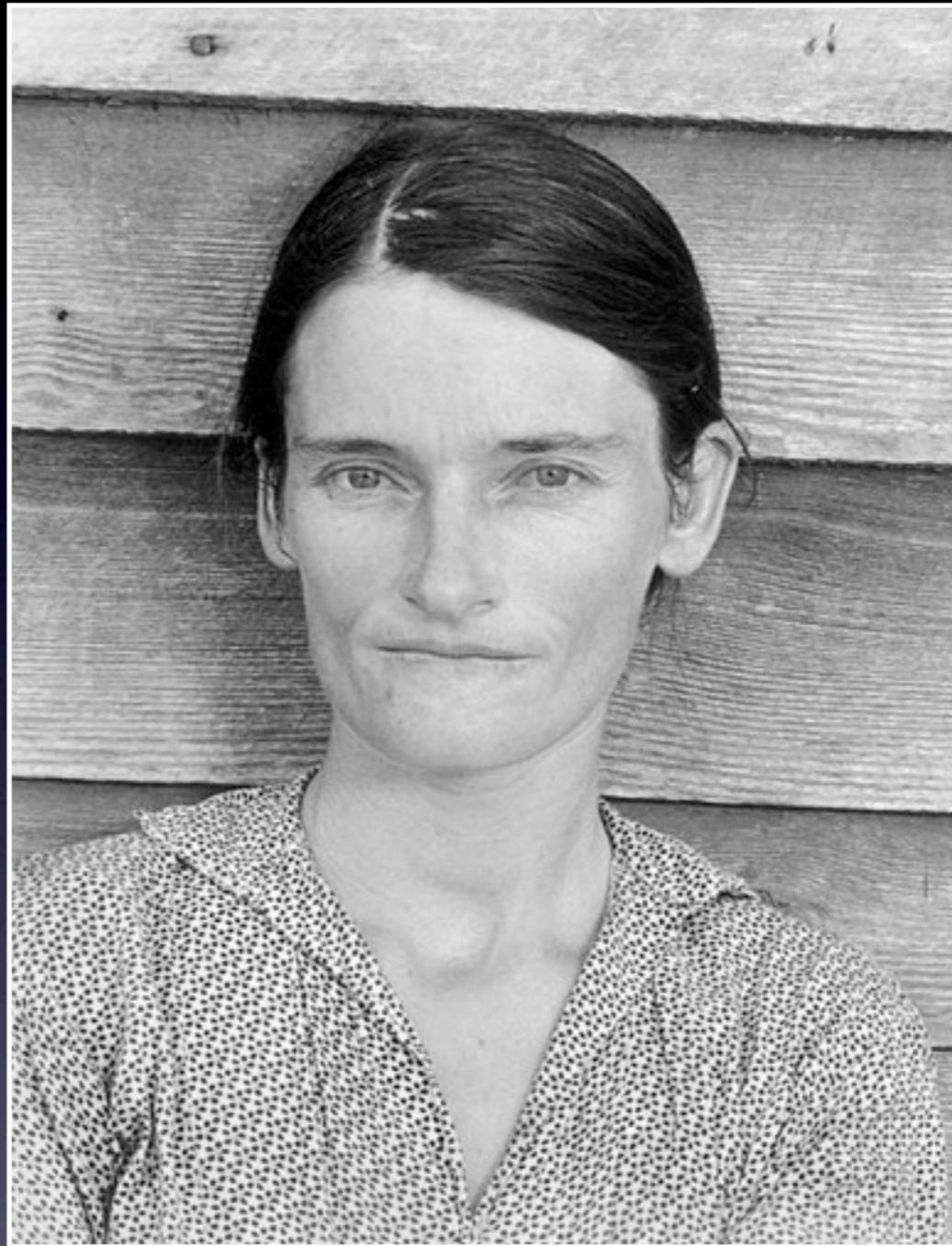
- Sontag names Walker Evans as the last great photographer to affirm Whitman's humanism
- His subject matter aimed to be “literate, authoritative, transcendent”

Walker Evans

- An American documentary photographer (1903-1975)
- Best known for his work for the Farm Security Administration documenting the effects of the Great Depression
- For much of his work, he used an 8x10 camera



Miner's Homes



Allie Burroughs



Floyd Burroughs



Burrough's Kitchen



Auto Parts Store



Roadside Stand



Steel Mill & Company Houses



Fireplace at Burroughs House

Inclusive Intentions

- Whitman and Evans wanted Americans to identify with one another
 - Leading the viewer to identify in things that are different
- Sontag feels this is an alien concept to Americans now

Diane Arbus

- An American documentary photographer (1923-1971)
- Best known for her portraits of people on the fringes of society
- Transvestites, prostitutes, dwarfs, giants, and ordinary working-class citizens in unconventional poses and settings

Diane Arbus as the Insider / Outsider

- Sontag uses Diane Arbus' photography as an example of the opposite: images of outsiders that do not encourage the viewer to identify with them
- Arbus' work is frank and forces intimacy between the viewer and the subject

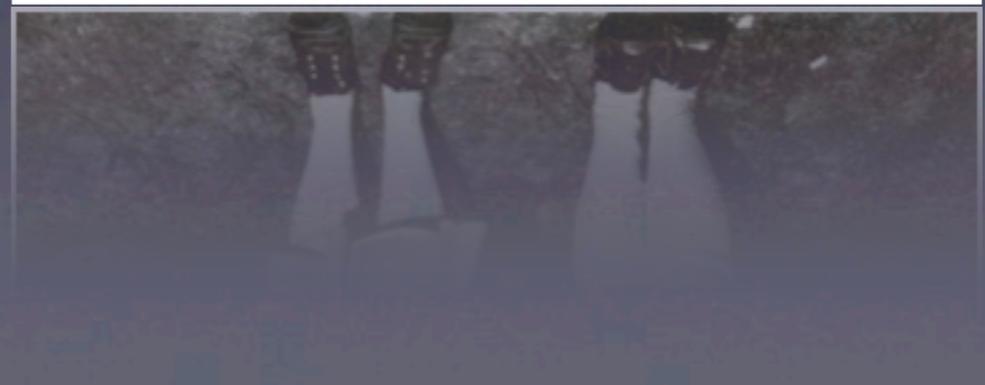
Diane Arbus as the Insider / Outsider

- Sontag sees Arbus' style as an aggression on the public done to prove both the viewer and photographer's hardness
- Depends on the separation between the viewer and subject's world
- No compassionate motive

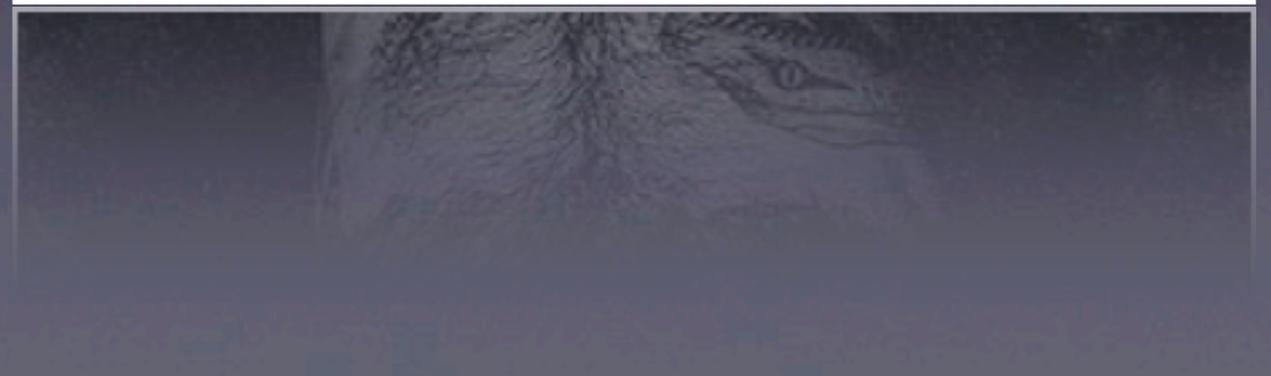
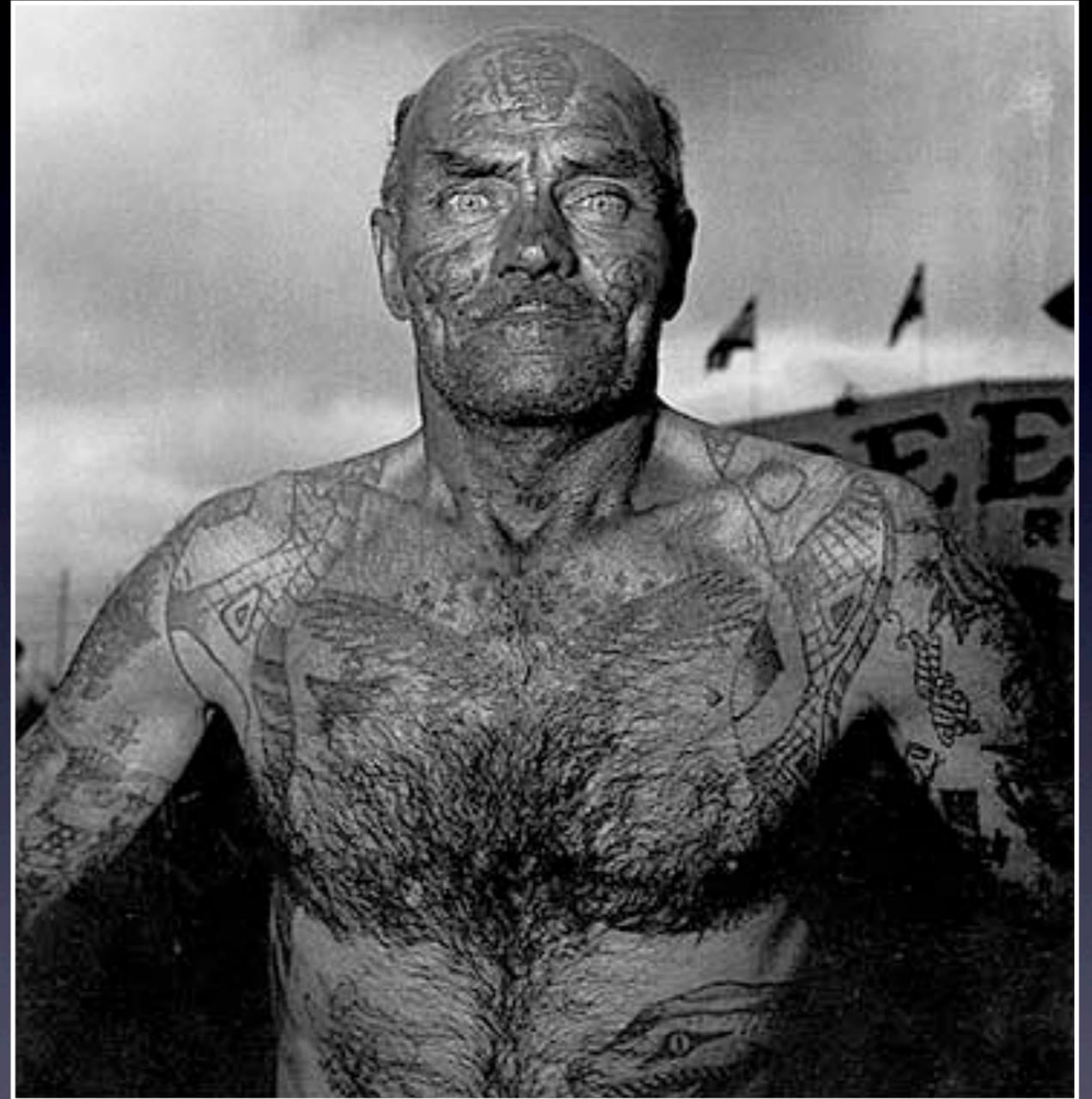
Diane Arbus as the Insider / Outsider

- Arbus awkwardly posed her subjects, often adding a sense of flaw where there was none
- Her subjects posed willingly because Arbus had become their friend
- She was an insider depicting outsiders

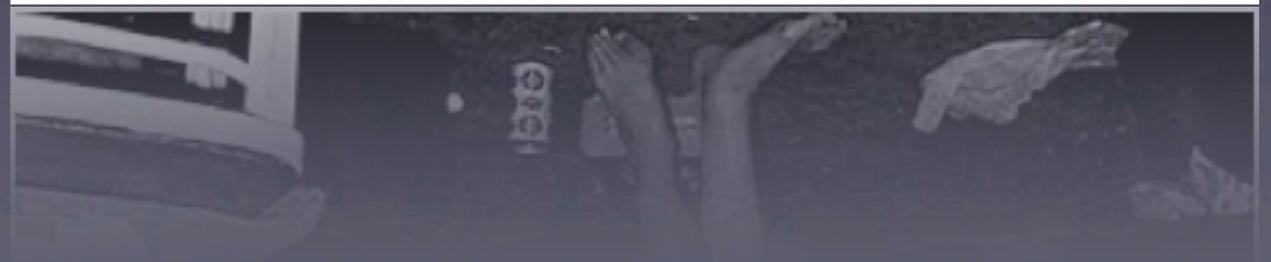
Untitled



Tattooed Man at Carnival



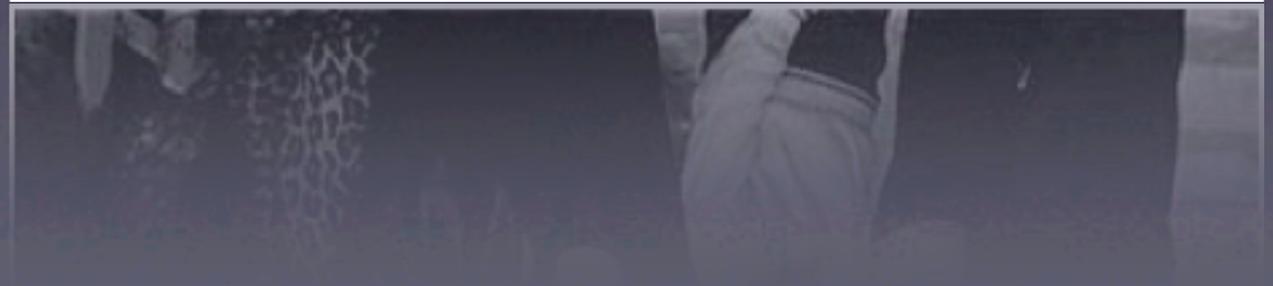
Naked Man Being a Woman



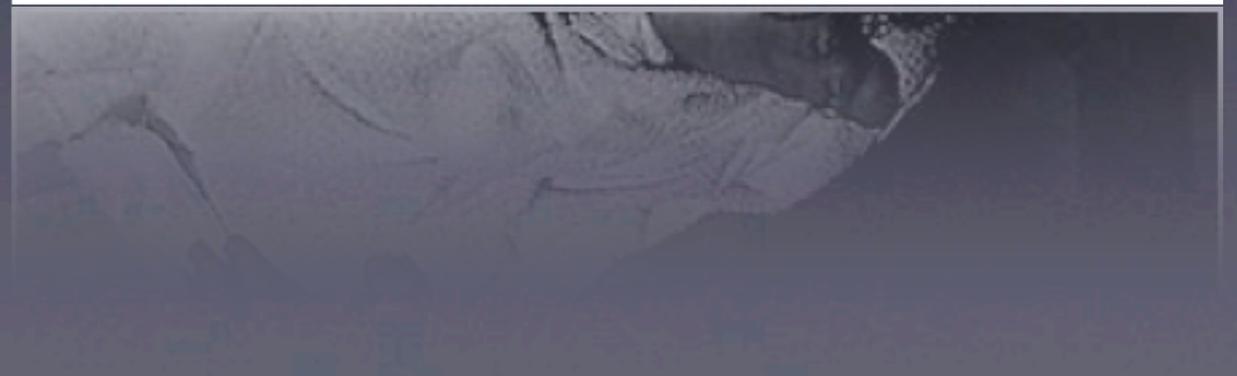
Identical Twins



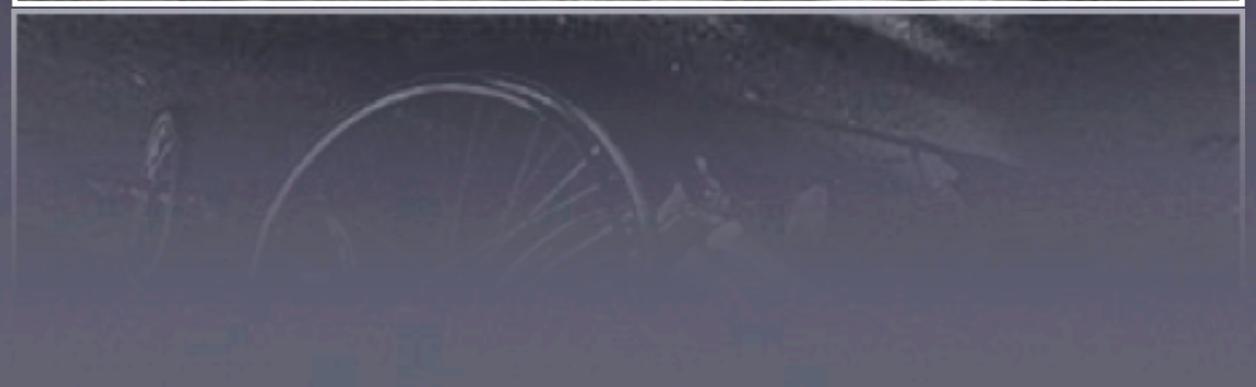
Young Family on a Sunday Outing



Mexican Dwarf in his Hotel Room



Masked Woman in Wheel Chair



Insider

- Subjects appear comfortable with the photographer
- Photographer has access to intimate details of the subject's life / residence
- Photographer can interpret the subject based on their understanding of them
- Subject is a willing participant in the photograph

Outsider

- Photographer does not have access to the person / subject directly, or on a personal level
- Photographer is an observer, not a participant
- The photographer interprets the subject from an outsider's point of view

Extra Credit

- Take a series of portraits, one set in which you are the “insider,” and you know the subjects, and one in which you are the “outsider,” and the subjects are strangers to you.
- Turn in four final portraits, two of each.