***Diane Arbus*** *Identical Twins, 1967*

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| **Denotative** | **Connotative** |
| A literal record | Mirror image- photography itself |
| Few clues to a wider context, social or personal background. | Neutralised their existence |
| The background is white: a painted wall and a path run across the bottom of the image. | And yet the path, as a presence, establishes the terms by which we can establish, both literally and symbolically, the basis of our reading of the image. The path runs at a slight angle, and that 'angle' reflects precisely Arbus's approach to her subject-matter. This photograph does not meet its subject in a parallel sense, but looks at it askew, even askance. |
| Identity: All, it seems is similar …. | ...but equally all is different.  Difference and the act of looking (judgement)  Eyebrows, fringes, hair, and hairbands are different. |

*Far from identical, these are individuals in their own right. They are, as it were, very different twins.*

*Identical Twins, then, recalls us to a consideration of the implicit complexity of the photographic message. But it also underlines the extent to which we must be aware of the photographer as arbiter of meaning, and namer of significance. Every photograph is not only surrounded by a historical, aesthetic, and cultural frame of reference but also by an entire invisible set of relationships and meanings relating to the photographer and the point at which the image was made. Part of any reading of this image would involve a knowledge of the work of Arbus and, in turn, her photographic philosophy.*

***Diane Arbus*** *A Family on Their Lawn One Sunday in Westchester, New York, 1969*

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| **Denotative** | **Connotative** |
| An image of an average New York suburban middle-class American family. An image of family relaxation. | Seems to have been inverted and emerges as a psychological study of estrangement and loneliness which, in its compulsive effect, speaks about a whole culture's condition. |
| The lawn takes up two-thirds of the photographic space | indicates precisely the sense of emptiness, sterility, and dislocation that pervades the image. |
| Trees at the back | have a looming presence that suggests a haunting otherness. Even at this level the atmosphere seems gloomy, empty, and depressing. |
| The parents | are separate and alone, and every detail of their figures and bearing adds to this sense of difference. The man is tense (rather than relaxed, as we might expect) and holds his head in his hand. His right hand looks to touch and make contact with his wife, but remains inert and separate. The mother also 'relaxes' but in a seemingly 'fixed' mode, just as she is dressed in a stereotypical bikini and wears make-up. Their separation is made obvious by the way in which their lounge chairs are presented formally to the camera. |
| The round table | A circular reminder of unity and wholeness, although the slatted lines imply a rigid familial and psychological geometry |
| The child | Solitary child who stares into a circular bathing pool. |
| On the left is a picnic table, in the background a swinging seat and see-saw, and on the right a swing. | Obvious items of play and pleasure have been pushed to the borders of the image, all abandoned and ignored. |

*We could continue such a reading, noting (and explaining) the significance of the cigarettes, the glass, the portable radio, the washed-out sky, the father's dangling feet, the abandoned plate to the left of the mother, and the way the child is closer to his mother than his father: all compounded by the square format of the photograph and the way the family seems unaware of the photographer's presence.*

*Arbus's image, which is typical of her photography, both plays with and questions codes of meaning. It inculcates a dense play of the denotative and connotative in relation to its subject, and compounds its textual reference within a geometry of the straight and the circular. It is a static image which resonates with multiple meanings and ultimately retains a complexity which resists paraphrase and description.*