

This is an abridged transcript of an online chat session, hosted by V&A Photography Curators Martin Barnes, Kate Best and Anne-Marie Eze which took place on Thursday 12 January 2006. To make the questions and answers somewhat easier to follow certain system messages have been removed and one or two exchanges moved closer together. As the session is in the form of an online chat, responses to some questions overlap with later contributions

2006-01-12 13:37:06 VAModerator

Welcome to the V&A's Photography chat session. Our team of Photography curators are here to answer as many of your questions as they can.

2006-01-12 14:09:45 nat

hello, could you mention some of the V&A's criteria for acquiring photographs?

2006-01-12 14:09:59 Wesley

Hello, Unfortunately I missed the past two sessions concerning Arbus's work. I'm a photography A-level student, and currently comparing Diane Arbus and Bill Brandt. I was wondering if you felt there were any similarities between their personal lives and their actual work, and if so to what extent? Regards Wesley

2006-01-12 14:13:18 KateBest

Nat - the V&A holds the National collection of the art of photography. It is international in scope and ranges from the earliest photographs to the most contemporary. So, when we acquire photographs we are looking for work that is exemplary in its use of the medium. As the museum's collection is already very strong in 19th century photographs, we tend to focus on acquiring contemporary work.

2006-01-12 14:15:49 nat

Is the V&A interested in photographs of established artists only or would it also buy work from emerging photographers?

2006-01-12 14:16:16 Anne-MarieEze

Hello, I'm here too now. I'm Anne-Marie Eze, Assistant Curator of Photographs.

2006-01-12 14:17:36 Doc_mabusa

Hello, I'm doc_mabusa, photograph enthusiast

2006-01-12 14:18:25 KateBest

We're interested in both - but because our funds are limited, and we like to support emerging artists, we more often aim to acquire the work of photographers at an early stage in their career.

2006-01-12 14:18:27 Anne-MarieEze

Hello Doc, do you have a question for the V&A Photography team?

2006-01-12 14:19:11 Doc_mabusa

well miss Eze, may be too much questions for a single event.

2006-01-12 14:19:52 MartinBarnes

Hello Wesley – Martin Barnes here – I was the V&A contact for the Arbus show. The personal life of Bill Brandt and the connections to his work have been explored recently in the biography by Paul Delaney. There is a good deal of biography also in the Diane Arbus Revelations catalogue. I suppose the essential difference between them is that Arbus lived and mostly worked in the city in which she was born, while Brant emigrated from his native Hamburg, Germany, coming to settle in London in the 1930s after European travels. One could say perhaps that Brandt approached his English subjects with the foreigners' eye for what is typical or unusual about another culture. Arbus brought a similar level of enquiry to her own nationality. Both I suppose managed to photograph in a way which seems at first like documentary, but use this approach to invest the images with personal concerns and a unique artistic vision. What do you think?

2006-01-12 14:21:08 Doc_mabusa

I wish to all the people here Good work.

2006-01-12 14:21:21 Doc_mabusa

Bye Bye!!

2006-01-12 14:22:12 nat

Is it possible for a member of the public to view photographs from the V&A's archive?

2006-01-12 14:26:43 Anne-MarieEze

Yes, members of the public are welcome to view works from our collection that are not on display in the gallery by visiting the Prints & Drawings Study Room. It's open Tuesdays to Saturdays, from 10am-5pm. To get an idea of what we have in the collection you should look at our website www.vam.ac.uk/collections/photography where you can find information on photographers, processes and techniques, different genres, etc. You can also see our catalogue online at www.vam.ac.uk/pdcatalogue

2006-01-12 14:27:26 SleeperService

Can someone tell me how you decide which photographers to feature in exhibitions? thanks

2006-01-12 14:29:04 Wesley

First of all thank-you for your response. I think there is truth in what you suggest; certainly I have no disagreement with it. Whilst at the exhibition 'revelations' I was confounded, reading Arbus's notes, that she seems to explore her identity, or certainly enjoys in other people identity perhaps? Brandt on the other hand I feel tried to create an identity in which he could escape, perhaps create is too strong a word but I believe he used his camera, like Arbus as a vessel to achieve this? I also feel that this view might explain why some people see Brandt's work as sympathetic, because he admired perhaps 'Englishness' or certainly its characteristics. Furthermore I feel that in the same sense, Arbus's work is viewed by some as 'unsympathetic' because an exploration of identity involves facing the cold reality of its characteristics. Would you agree or have I come to the wrong conclusion here? Regards, Wesley

2006-01-12 14:31:49 KateBest

Hi Wesley. Are you saying that Brandt used photography to create - or impose - an identity that fitted his preconception of 'Englishness', whereas Arbus uses the camera to expose people's identities?

2006-01-12 14:33:55 MartinBarnes

Sleeper Service: We try to show a broad range of photographers' work – from the well-known to upcoming talents. We often relate exhibitions to our permanent collection. In our permanent collection gallery, we select works that illustrate a variety of photographic processes as well as photographic styles and applications – from fashion to journalism. We regularly see new work, go to portfolio viewing events and visit galleries to keep up with what is going on. We have a relatively small space to display works, and photographs are light sensitive so we rotate them regularly. What is not on display is available through our Print Study Room.

2006-01-12 14:35:22 nat

I visited the V&A last weekend and the photography gallery was closed. When is it reopening and what kind of photographs will be exhibited?

2006-01-12 14:38:09 Wesley

Hello Kate – I hope I've not caused offence. It's difficult to explain....Brandt left Germany in fear of being 'found out', later developing persecution mania. He also went to great lengths to conceal his true origins and how he came to be the man he is renowned for. I feel Brandt used photography as a way to help him feel he was English, to help him, personally, escape as it were. Arbus I feel too used photography to explore identity, but instead to explore her own identity perhaps, or to sample other identities as it were. This is where the two photographers meet, and why their work is so similar but yet so distant. Arbus I believe used Brandt as inspiration, indeed her early grainy prints bear testament to this. Does this make sense, what would you propose?

2006-01-12 14:42:26 nat

What would you suggest to someone who is thinking of starting collecting photographs?

2006-01-12 14:46:57 Anne-MarieEze

Yes, the gallery space was given over to Diane Arbus Revelations which closes on the 15th January. The Photography gallery will reopen on the 20th February with a display of highlights from the V&A's collection illustrating history of photography and John Riddy: Views from Shin-Fuji (closing on the 7th May).

2006-01-12 14:48:27 MartinBarnes

Hi Wesley: What do you think Brandt feared was to be 'found out'? The approach of psychological analysis is useful but always a grey area and often speculation. Perhaps 'persecution mania' is too strong. I prefer to think that Brandt relished and thrived on mystery which is evident in the photographs. It is plain, I agree, that both Brandt's and Arbus's images show the world through the filter of their own identity and also 'sampled' those of others. I think Arbus had a copy of Brandt's 'Perspective of Nudes' in her library – so clearly knew and admired his work.

2006-01-12 14:48:55 KateBest

In answer to your question about collecting. There is a good book by Gerry Badger called 'Collecting Photographs' that gives an introduction to the types of photographs that one might pursue, where they might be purchased and what to look for.

2006-01-12 14:53:14 KateBest

Visitors to the Prints and Drawings Study Room can see a selection of photography topic boxes, which have been selected to give a general introduction to the history of photography, contemporary photography, processes and techniques and so on. These photographs have accompanying information sheets, so are a useful starting point to anyone wanting to develop a knowledge of the history of photography.

2006-01-12 14:54:09 Anne-MarieEze

Nat, there is an article on collecting photographs by Juliet Hacking in the current issues of International Auctioneers Magazine. You can also get advice from photography galleries, see Pluk (Photography in London and the UK) magazine for listings, and fairs such as PhotoLondon, Paris Photo, Arles photography month, AIPAD in New York.

2006-01-12 14:55:38 nat

Why do you think there hasn't been a Museum of Photography yet in London?

2006-01-12 14:55:49 SleeperService

Hi Anne-Marie, you mentioned that the gallery reopens on 20 Feb with a display of highlights from the V&A's collection illustrating the history of photography. Can you tell us how you make a selection of this sort? Do you focus on known photographers works or do you try to expose the work of lesser known photographers? And do you include material that demonstrates both evolution of photographic styles and techniques?

2006-01-12 15:01:05 Wesley

Hi Martin – From reading about Brandt I gather his early childhood experiences were interesting, and that this 'persecution mania' grew over time from unkind words offered by his school master and of course peers, in relation to his origins, made significant because of the war. Certainly I agree that Brandt's images contain an element of mystery, but I cannot move past the idea and feel that there is a certain 'fondness' perhaps in his images. I acknowledge that any image, any drawing etc, will always encompass the artist's perception to a degree, even when producing commissioned work etc. however I am troubled at the thought that Brandt's images alone have less personal 'quest' than I originally imagined. Like Brandt's work, I too see a gradual refining in technique and character to Arbus's work as she explores the median, or more so the subject, in more depth. Interesting too is that both photographers really found their direction when they encountered new technology, for Brandt the Police camera with the unusual lens, and for Arbus her 'swap' between 35mm to large format (I believe...). Do you think this is typical of most photographers, for their work to advance in the presence of technological developments? Regards Wesley

2006-01-12 15:10:06 Anne-MarieEze

Well, we try to illustrate a history of photography by displaying a variety of processes and techniques – such as daguerreotypes, platinum prints, photograms, dye-destruction and c-type prints – styles – such as pictorialism and modernism, and uses of photography – such as fashion, photojournalism and portraiture. We also try to make the display as international as possible, so, for example, in the display opening on the 20th February we have works by artists from The Netherlands, Canada, China, America and France. We also

display photographs in albums, carte-de-visite format and in books to give an idea of the context in which photographs have been used and disseminated.

2006-01-12 15:10:25 MartinBarnes

Hi Nat: There are numerous institutions that collect and display an enormous range of photography in London: the Photographers' Gallery, Tate, National Portrait Gallery, the National Archives, Hayward Gallery, Whitechapel, Barbican etc. So between them there is much to see. And there is of course the National Museum of Photography Film and Television in Bradford – in the heart of the country. Historically, these institutions have each had different and complementing remits for collecting and/or display. Museums of photography are a fairly recent phenomena. And the public demand for the study and appreciation has increased greatly and incrementally since the 1970s. Sometimes photographs benefit from being seen together and at other times within a broader cultural arena, such as with other items in the collection at the V&A. A major national museum for photography in London would need perhaps to pool the existing national resources – and possibly private collections – and find a suitable building. As ever, time and money are at issue ...

2006-01-12 15:20:02 nat

Is it possible for someone who has started collecting photographs to send them to the V&A in order to get an opinion from the curators?

2006-01-12 15:22:10 Paula

Hello, sorry I joined a bit late. Have you already talked about how you chose the artists for this exhibition?

2006-01-12 15:23:24 KateBest

Maybe I should use this opportunity to mention the next big photography exhibition - Twilight: Photography in the Magic Hour, that will open in the V&A's Contemporary Space on 11 October. This will be a group show, including bodies of work by seven international photographers, all of whom have explored the state of twilight in their work. More information will be posted about this on the 'Future Exhibitions' section of the website very soon.

2006-01-12 15:23:52 Anne-MarieEze

Nat, you can bring your photographs to our opinions service which we hold on the first Tuesday of the month, from 14.30-17.00 in the Prints & Drawings Study Room. Alternatively, if you can't get to London easily, you can send an image of them to us via e-mail or in the post.

2006-01-12 15:23:54 KateBest

Hi Paula. Welcome to the chat. Which exhibition were you referring to?

2006-01-12 15:24:37 Paula

oh, sorry, I was referring to past and future

2006-01-12 15:26:30 Wesley

What do you think the role and responsibility of the photographer is when they capture their images of subjects? Regards, wesley

2006-01-12 15:28:24 KateBest

Between Past and Future is a travelling exhibition, that originated in the USA and was curated by Christopher Phillips of the International Center of Photography in New York and Professor Wu Hung of the University of Chicago. They selected the work for the show and you can see video clips of interviews with them talking about the background to the exhibition in the 'exhibition overview' section of this microsite. They had both been travelling to China a lot and been following the burgeoning contemporary art scene there, and decided to put together a survey exhibition that explored the exciting developments in photography and video in China from the early 1990s to the present day.

2006-01-12 15:30:00 nat

Ann-Marie, could you give a price estimate, for a collector's photographs, if they bring them on the V&A's opinion service?

2006-01-12 15:30:27 MartinBarnes

Hi Wesley – Does what you have read suggest Brandt's peers and school master persecuted him for perceived Jewish origins during the run up to wartime? As far as I know Brandt was not of Jewish origin. What is the nature of the persecution you have read about? Does 'fondness' have negative connotations

for you – a certain softness of approach, an affectionate distance, a lack of grasping the nettle in the way that Arbus does? Maybe these are more ‘old world’ values? Good point about the discovery of new camera technology providing new impetus for inspiration – which I imagine is often the case for photographers.

2006-01-12 15:31:25 Anne-MarieEze

No, I'm afraid that we are unable to provide financial valuations for photographs but we can recommend reputable auctioneers and dealers who will be able to help you in that respect. We can also give you details of reputable photograph conservators.

2006-01-12 15:38:33 Wesley

The accounts I have read come from a variety of books, most notably one with a big eye on the front similar to an elephant (an artist I believe). No not that he was of Jewish origin, but because of an incident concerning his father which ultimately changed the families allegiances to the British, his time at a British school, perhaps a boarding school, lead to him covering up his identity? if you follow...I think I perceive Brandt as being distance – yes, I suppose that's how I'd like to describe my perception of his work, although this in no-way reduces the value of the work itself to me. Whereas Arbus refuses to stand on the side lines

2006-01-12 15:38:40 Paula

Many thanks, Kate.

2006-01-12 15:41:00 Wesley

Hi martin, what is your position on the role and responsibility of a photographer indeed that of Brandt's and Arbus's or just in general. Regards Wesley

2006-01-12 15:42:16 nat

Are there guided tours for students for the contemporary photography exhibitions?

2006-01-12 15:44:33 Anne-MarieEze

Groups can book for guided tours by calling our bookings office on +44 (0)207 942 2211.

2006-01-12 15:46:11 MartinBarnes

Wesley, the book you refer to is the one I mentioned by Paul Delaney. There is much of value in here but also some speculation and some errors of fact. Mark Haworth-Booth's reviews of this book (I think in History of Photography journal?) point out the errors. I think that both Arbus and Brandt had varying levels of distance and engagement in their imagery depending on what they wanted to convey. These positions are powerful tools that I think both were aware of.

2006-01-12 15:46:27 KateBest

Wesley - here's an answer to your question about the role and responsibility of the photographer who makes images of other people. We've been discussing this amongst ourselves here and don't think there is any one answer to this as it all depends on context. There are many debates for instance about the ethics of war photography, or of pictures of famine where some might feel that the subjects are not adequately involved in or aware of the images being made of them. (The Guardian did an exhibition exploring this last year called 'Imaging Famine' that explored some of these issues). In other areas of photography, such as fashion, there are much stricter rules relating to copyright and model release. But of course the harsh reality is that since the invention of hand-held cameras in the late 19th century pretty much anyone with a camera can take a photograph of anyone else without them knowing it.

2006-01-12 15:49:22 VAModerator

I'm afraid we are running out of time for this session. So get any last questions in quickly!

2006-01-12 15:52:39 Wesley

Thank you Martin I will look for the errors, no one had pointed this out to me before. I have really enjoyed this experience and am sure both my study of Arbus and Brandt, and my own perception of the photographers will have been

greatly enriched. Thank you also Kate for your reply; hope I've not started a debate that can't stop..... Thank you for you time. Finally the Arbus exhibition was brilliant, I really benefited form seeing Arbus's notes, what a wonderful consideration to included them! The Brandt exhibition was equal rewarding. Regards Wesley.

2006-01-12 15:54:00 MartinBarnes

Wesley,

2006-01-12 15:55:22 MartinBarnes

Wesley - thanks for your engagement with this session and for your kind comments. Delighted you enjoyed the exhibition and best of luck with your studies from us all.

2006-01-12 15:56:23 Anne-MarieEze

Thanks and bye, Anne-Marie

2006-01-12 15:56:32 KateBest

Bye bye chatters, thanks for your contributions.

2006-01-12 15:57:03 Wesley

Thank you once again, good bye. This forum will be of great value to many another student i'm sure!

2006-01-12 15:58:42 VAModerator

Thank you to the Photography Curators and those of you who contributed questions and opinions. Time's up.