In late 1969, Diane Arbus (1923–1971) began to work on a portfolio. She titled it *A box of ten photographs*. Its case designed by Marvin Israel, the selection of photographs by Arbus, her exquisite prints, and her inscribed vellums—every component was carefully conceived to stage an intimate encounter. She had printed eight known sets of a planned edition of fifty, only four of which she had completed and sold at the time of her death in 1971. Little known due to its rarity, the portfolio bridged a lifetime of modest recognition with a posthumous career of extraordinary acclaim.

After seeing *A box of ten photographs*, Philip Leider, editor in chief of *Artforum* and a photography skeptic, admitted, “With Diane Arbus, one could find oneself interested in photography or not, but one could no longer... deny its status as art... What changed everything was the portfolio itself.” In May 1971, she was the first photographer to be featured in *Artforum*, which also showcased her work on its cover. Leider’s admission of Arbus into this critical bastion of late modernism was instrumental in ushering photography’s acceptance into the realm of “serious” art.

In June 1972, the portfolio was sent to Venice, where, in another pioneering breakthrough, Arbus was the first photographer included in a Biennale, at that time the premiere international showcase for contemporary artists. Writing for the *New York Times*, Hilton Kramer declared it a sensation. SAAM, then known as the National Collection of Fine Arts, organized the American contribution to the Biennale that year, thereby playing an important early role in Arbus’s legacy. This exhibition traces the history of *A box of ten photographs* using the eleven-print set that she made for Bea Feitler, art director at *Harper’s Bazaar*. It was acquired by SAAM in 1986 and is the only one of the portfolios completed and sold by Arbus that is publicly held.

*Diane Arbus: A box of ten photographs* is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Generous support has been provided by:

- The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation
- Nion McEvoy and Leslie Berriman
- RayKo Photo
- Bernie Stadheim Endowment Fund
- Trellis Fund
- Robin Wright and Ian Reeves
What changed everything was the portfolio itself. It then seemed to me that any definition of art that did not include such a body of work was fatally flawed. -- Philip Leider, 2004

This timeline was adapted from the chronology developed for the 2003 exhibition Diane Arbus: Revelations. All letters cited were written by Diane Arbus to Allan Arbus.

November 1969
At the suggestion of Marvin Israel, Diane Arbus begins to think about making a portfolio. It will be “a box of 8 or so prints (actual photographic prints),” she writes, and will include “the twins, xmas, etc. no text except maybe a paragraph by me, an edition of a hundred or two, selling for, I dunno, 4 or 500 dollars or 3... it'll be a business proposition but pristine... I mean its like an edition of etchings or lithographs.”

January – June 1970
Arbus works on the design of the portfolio with Israel. She covers a twenty-four-by-twenty inch vellum practice sheet with handwritten titles and commentary.

Handwritten practice sheet, 1970
facsimile of ink on vellum
Diane Arbus
Courtesy Diane Arbus Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
A twenty-four-by-twenty-inch vellum practice sheet offers insights into Arbus’s thinking about the portfolio. Several lists of titles, all incomplete, indicate alternate photographs originally under consideration, as well as title variations.

July – October 1970
The box’s production is plagued by technical difficulties. In July she writes, “Dick [Avedon] said he’d buy the first one,” and in October states, “Bea [Feitler] is buying a box too (and that’s just Dick’s public relations. ... I haven’t begun to hussle them. ...in fact they still aren’t done. the manufacturer made them wrong for about the fourth time.”

November – December 1970
She makes a flyer with 35mm contact strips of the ten prints stapled beside a typewritten description of the portfolio. “Mainly the boxes had better get done,” she writes, “and I had better peddle them in real earnest.”

Promotional flyer for A box of ten photographs, 1970—1971
two gelatin silver contact sheet strips affixed to paper support, with Arbus's typed offering information
Diane Arbus
Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
In late 1970, Arbus made a flyer to announce A box of ten photographs. The copy contact strips previewed the ten photographs while typewritten text described the portfolio and gave instructions for purchasing it.

January – April 1971
The first sets of the portfolio nearing completion, she looks for other ways to promote it, meeting with Philip Leider at Artforum and being interviewed for New York magazine. “The box looks very good I guess,” she writes, “it’ll be in Art forum in May and New York will do two pps I think.”

May – June 1971
Boy with a straw hat waiting to march in a pro-war parade, N.Y.C. 1967, appears on the May cover of Artforum. Five images from the portfolio are reproduced inside with a short text written by Arbus.

Leider forgot to run an announcement for the portfolio, so it appears in the June issue with the photograph A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y. 1970.


Interest in the portfolio arrives from an unexpected source. “I had a call from some art dealer to say that jasper johns wanted a box. how terrific, first one who doesn’t know me,” she writes, adding “four are sold, 2 1/2 paid for. the owners are out of who's who. my confidence is absurdly on a roller coaster.”
Case for A box of ten photographs
1970–1971
plexiglas
designed by Marvin Israel
born Syracuse, NY—died Dallas, TX 1984
Courtesy Fraenkel Gallery
Marvin Israel designed the portfolio’s case to double as a container and a frame. Two holes were drilled at the back for hanging on a wall. The case held ten twenty-by-sixteen-inch photographs printed by Arbus, with annotated vellum sheets between them, and a cover sheet. The cover sheet here, inscribed to art director Bea Feitler, indicates Arbus added an eleventh print, A woman with her baby monkey, N.J. 1971.

A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y. 1970
accompanies an advertisement for the portfolio in Artforum, vol. 9, no. 10, June 1971
Courtesy John Pelosi
Philip Leider, a cofounder of Artforum magazine, saw the portfolio in 1971 and immediately committed to publishing it. In May, Arbus was the first photographer to be featured in Artforum, which also showcased her work on its cover. Leider also agreed to run an announcement for the portfolio, which was published in the next issue as a full-page advertisement.

A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y. 1970
Courtesy New York Magazine/New York Media LLC
Through her contacts at New York, Arbus arranged for the portfolio to be featured in its Best Bets column. “The Arbus Perspective” appeared in the May 31st issue with Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx.

Letter from Diane Arbus to George Fry, c. 1971
three gelatin silver contact sheet strips affixed to typed and handwritten letter by the artist
Diane Arbus
Courtesy George B. Fry, III
George Fry, a photography student fascinated by Arbus’s work, wrote to her in 1970. In reply, she offered to sell him one of the portfolios. The price was beyond his reach, but he saved her letter, which included the same copy contact strips that she used for her flyer for A box of ten photographs.

When Diane Arbus took her life on July 26, 1971, she had sold and signed four portfolios and completed four other known sets of prints. The first in the edition was purchased by Richard Avedon. Arbus crossed out the word “ten” in the title, replaced it with “eleven” and added the note “especially for RA.” As his eleventh print, Arbus selected Masked woman in a wheelchair. Avedon also bought the second in the edition as a present for his friend Mike Nichols. Bea Feitler’s portfolio was numbered 5/50. As she had done for Avedon, Arbus noted “especially for BF” and included an eleventh print—A woman with her baby monkey, N.J. 1971. The portfolio purchased by Jasper Johns was numbered 6/50.

After Bea Feitler died in 1982, Sotheby’s, New York sold her portfolio at auction the next year for the then breathtaking price of $42,900 to Baltimore-based dealer G. H. Dalsheimer. The Smithsonian American Art Museum purchased this portfolio, the only one printed by Arbus ever to appear at auction, from Dalsheimer in 1986. Of the four Arbus printed and signed, the Feitler portfolio at the Smithsonian is the only one publicly held.
Every component of the portfolio helps stage the viewer’s encounter with it. Before each print Arbus inserted a vellum sheet, on which she hand wrote captions. They offer “small pertinent details” about the people she photographed.

The transparent box works as a frame, demanding that viewers encounter the photographs in their silence. The box can hold multiple photographs but displays only one; likewise, the vellum is intended to be lifted, the scrim of words receding so that each portrait can be encountered uniquely. As Hilton Kramer rightly observed, “The spectator, like the photographer herself, is not allowed to stand at a distance, but is brought directly into the life of the subject. . . . [and] will not soon forget what they have seen.” Impossible to forget, Arbus’s photographs persist in personal and cultural memory, retaining the shock of an original intimacy while seemingly possessed of a life force of their own.

A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know. -- Diane Arbus, 1971

In Venice, a portfolio of 10 enormous photographs has proved to be the overwhelming sensation of the American Pavilion. -- Hilton Kramer, 1972

From 1964 until 1972, American contributions to the Venice Biennale were organized by the Smithsonian Institution’s National Collection of Fine Arts (NCFA) for the United States Information Agency (USIA). In 1972, after closing in Venice, the U.S. artworks circulated to three additional venues in Germany with the title Venice XXXVI.

March 1972
Joshua Taylor, director of the NCFA, invites Walter Hopps to organize the American contribution to the Venice Biennale. To the press, Hopps states that due to time and financial constraints the exhibition would be limited to works by four to six painters. According to Taylor, “We decided that we wanted a show that was small, provocative, and choice.”

April 1972
The press responds with shock to Hopps’s selection. “In a radical departure from tradition, the United States will include in its exhibition ... the work of a photographer and a filmmaker. The photographer is the late Diane Arbus, an important influence on younger artists and photographers who regard the medium as an art form.” New York Times

May 1972
Doon Arbus signs contracts on behalf of the Arbus Estate for the loan of ten prints by Diane Arbus to the NCFA for the Venice Biennale.

June 1972
Opening of the 36th Venice Biennale.

Reporting from Venice, Hilton Kramer writes, “By far the most audacious thing about Mr. Hopps’s selection is the inclusion of Diane Arbus. Her ten photographs, which concentrate on extreme oddities of personality and physique, have a power that nothing else in the American show---and little in the biennale as a whole---can match.”

July 1972
Doon Arbus sends Kramer a draft of the words and photographs by Diane Arbus that will be included in the forthcoming monograph by Aperture. Later that summer, she also sends typescripts of her article for Ms. and Marvin Israel’s article for Infinity.

October 1972
Doon Arbus publishes “Diane Arbus: Photographer” in Ms magazine, where Bea Feitler now works as art director. The article is illustrated by seven of the photographs selected for A box of ten photographs, the only time that the photographs are published with the extended captions handwritten by the photographer for the portfolio.

Closing of the 36th Venice Biennale.

Venice XXXVI on view at the Hamburg Kunstverein. 2,987 visitors attend.
November 1972
Marvin Israel publishes “The Photography of Diane Arbus” in the November issue of *Infinity*.

The monograph *Diane Arbus* is published by Aperture.

The retrospective *Diane Arbus* opens at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

December 1972
*Venice XXXVI* is shown at Amerika Haus, Berlin. 873 visitors attend.

January 1973
*Venice XXXVI* opens at Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg. 2,710 visitors attend.

February 1973
The *Venice XXXVI* tour closes. The ten prints loaned for the Venice Biennale are returned to Doon Arbus in New York City.

*They are the proof that something was there and no longer is. Like a stain. And the stillness of them is boggling. You can turn away but when you come back they’ll still be there looking at you.* —Diane Arbus, 1971

**XXXVI International Biennial of Art / Venice**, brochure, 1972
Courtesy Smithsonian Libraries

**XXXVI International Biennial of Art / Venice**, brochure, 1972
Courtesy Private Collection

*A box of ten photographs* broke new ground at the 1972 Venice Biennale. In early planning, curator Walter Hopps spoke of choosing artists “whose careers have had important recent developments, a ‘vital emergence.’” Photography was not mentioned. When the six U.S. artists were announced, the press release included a brief biography of Arbus that excluded important achievements such as her publication in *Artforum*. The press described the selection of a photographer as “a radical departure from tradition.”

**Letter from Doon Arbus to Hilton Kramer**, undated
Courtesy George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine

**Typescript, article for *Infinity* magazine by Marvin Israel**, September 1972
Courtesy George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine

**Typescript, article for *Ms.* magazine by Doon Arbus**, undated
Courtesy George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine

In Venice, arts writer Hilton Kramer became an important early champion of Diane Arbus. “By far the most audacious thing about Mr. Hopps’s selection is the inclusion of Diane Arbus,” Kramer enthused. “Her ten photographs, which concentrate on extreme oddities of personality and physique, have a power that nothing else in the American show---and little in the biennale as a whole---can match.”

*A box of ten photographs* conveyed Diane Arbus’s legacy to the world during the period between her death and her first retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. On behalf of the Arbus Estate, in July 1972, Doon Arbus sent Kramer a dummy of the forthcoming *Diane Arbus* monograph. Kramer was writing a profile of the artist for the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*.

Doon Arbus also sent typescripts of two forthcoming articles. Her piece “Diane Arbus: Photographer” was published in the October issue of *Ms.* magazine. Marvin Israel’s article, “The Photography of Diane Arbus,” appeared in the November issue of *Infinity*. Kramer’s favorable review of the MoMA retrospective, shown here in typescript, was printed in the *New York Times* with the title “125 Photos by Arbus on Display.”