Diane’s darkroom was in the West Village at 29 Charles Street, just off Seventh Avenue South, in the basement of an old apartment building. It was approached by going through an opening in the front wall, down a flight of steps from the sidewalk, and through a tunnel that ran the depth of the building. Emerging into a courtyard, you turned sharp left and there was a battered black door.

If the room was the right-hand page of a book, one entered on the bottom edge, by the page number. The room itself was perhaps twenty feet long and fourteen feet wide. On the right as you entered were shelves filled with two-hundred-and-fifty-sheet, 11x14 Dupont paper boxes. They were mostly red, but some were green. In these boxes, apparently in the order in which they had been shot, were all of Diane’s more than seven thousand rolls of film, the negative sleeves stapled to matching contact sheets. In the center of the room was a long table, perhaps twenty-four inches wide, at the far end of which sat a very dilapidated flatbed print dryer. Along the left wall there was first a table on which stood a late 1940s Omega “D” enlarger, and then a resin-coated wooden sink long enough to hold four or five 16x20 developing trays. Another sink, lower, shorter, and of stainless steel, sat across the end wall. On the right, beyond the shelves of negative boxes, against the wall and abutting the stainless steel sink, was a narrow table with three plastic five-gallon drums for storing chemicals.

One is always an intruder in someone else’s darkroom. As the lights are turned on, one is blinded; then, when the eyes and mind accommodate each other, the effect is merely garish and unkind. Light itself is an intrusion, harsh and unwelcome.

No matter how fresh and pristine they may be when first built, all darkrooms soon acquire a tired and careworn quality. While obvious to a visitor, this shabbiness is invisible or irrelevant to the owner, for whom the room has become a very personal and intimate place, never intended to be scrutinized by strangers. This darkroom was no exception; it was very much Diane’s space. The month was November 1971. In this recently dead, private person’s private place, my task was to figure out, using only her materials and equipment, how to duplicate Diane’s prints.

I had arrived in New York in the spring of 1970 to work as an assistant for Hiro, a Japanese photographer, who at that time occupied a studio adjoining Richard Avedon’s. Marvin Israel, an artist, art director, and Avedon’s friend and colleague, was a frequent visitor to the studio, usually at lunchtime. Diane was an occasional visitor, who dropped
in sometimes with Marvin, and sometimes alone to seek technical advice from Hiro or one of us assistants. She arranged with Hiro to borrow his new Pentax 6x7, a camera she was considering buying and wanted to try out. She had suggested that she was restless with her twin-lens Mamiyaflex, and in the case of the big Pentax was intrigued by the prospect of working again with the 35mm-like eye-level viewfinder. She was troubled, however, by the camera’s limited capacity for taking flash pictures outdoors. I showed her how to load the camera and operate it, we put a strap on it, and, with almost childlike enthusiasm, she rushed off to try it out.

Later, having decided that she wanted to purchase the camera, Diane undertook to pay for it by offering a series of private classes to be held at Westbeth, a subsidized artists’ housing complex, where she lived in Greenwich Village. She rounded up a group of interested neighbors and acquaintances, including myself, and advertised for more students in The New York Times. In the end, approximately twenty-four people came in to be interviewed. While Diane was unexcited by many of the applicants, she despaired of a means of fairly eliminating any individual, and, needing the cash, she accepted them all. The class met once a week in a public room at Westbeth and ended in the spring of 1971.

I left Hiro’s in June, and shortly thereafter went to Europe; Diane had called a few times for technical advice, but I did not see her again. She committed suicide in July 1971. On hearing of her death, and assuming that her work would be memorialized in some way, I wrote to Marvin Israel, offering my services to help however I could.

By late fall of 1971 plans were under way for a book—to be edited and designed by Marvin with Diane’s eldest daughter, Doon—and a retrospective show at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, curated by John Szarkowski. Although Diane had made exhibition prints of most of the images to be included in the book, they were judged to be too rare to be subjected to the rigors of the reproduction process. In the case of the show, Szarkowski made his selection, not only from Diane’s exhibition prints, but also from images of hers for which only a damaged or rough print existed. Marvin and Szarkowski concurred that new prints were going to be needed for each of these projects.*

*Out of 112 prints in the 1972 MoMA retrospective, 40 were new prints made by me especially for the show. All of the images in the monograph were reproduced from prints I made for the book.
I returned from Europe in November, and being otherwise unemployed and eager to help, was put straight to work, looking for negatives.

The process went as follows:

At the time of her death, prints of several hundred of Diane's images were found, mostly stored in boxes in a closet in her Westbeth apartment. These ranged in quality from flawless exhibition prints to scraps of torn images that had once been pinned to a wall somewhere. The existing prints were gathered together and one example of each different image that had been found was re-photographed. I was presented with the results: fifty-two, twelve-exposure proof sheets of these copies, which constituted a visual inventory of all images then known to have been printed by Diane.

There was no clue as to the location of the negative for any given photograph. Each negative sleeve was stapled to its corresponding (contact) proof sheet, numbered, and filed sequentially, but there was only very rarely any indication of date or subject. The process of locating the negatives for the images we wanted to print thus consisted of my memorizing all of her photographs on the new copy proofs, and then searching for each image from amongst the more than seven thousand filed contact sheets in Diane's darkroom.

It took all winter to repeatedly go through Diane's original contact sheets. With the exception of three images that stubbornly refused to reveal themselves until much later, we eventually located the negatives for all the photographs we were seeking. (Subsequently, prints of another five hundred, mostly early photographs, were found and added to the inventory of images that she had printed.)

We have never found any indication as to how Diane located her own negatives when she wanted to make a print. She must have either retained in her memory just where all those pictures were, or she must have spent a lot of time looking for them.

In the spring of 1972 I started to print, trying to match the exhibition prints that Diane had made from the same negatives. Each time I began to print a negative I had Diane's corresponding exhibition print sitting on the long thin table, beguiling and taunting me to match it identically. There were no notes, no clues as to how the prints were actually made, just a thin blue binder containing instructions and formulae for the developers that Allan Arbus had left for her.
A routine soon developed whereby I would print one negative in various ways until I was satisfied that I had made a sufficient range of prints so that one would be bound to come close. I would then stick the prints in Diane’s old blotter rolls and crawl home, somewhere between two and four in the morning. I would meet Marvin Israel back in the darkroom each morning at 8:00 A.M. to go over the results.

Between 1961 and 1963 Marvin had been the art director of Harper’s Bazaar while it was still very much a cultural icon. In addition to Richard Avedon, he had published Bill Brandt, Walker Evans, Lee Friedlander, and Diane. He had meanwhile become her friend, ally, and most discerning and committed critic. Although since 1963 he had been pursuing a career as a painter he remained very close to photography and to the photographers he admired.

In the darkroom, as Marvin led me through the differences between Diane’s prints and mine, he was pointing out the same visual elements, their relationships and their consequences, that he must in turn originally have discovered with her. The language he used when explaining the differences between prints was never in terms of color, density, or contrast, but rather of aesthetic function. This was often a revelation. In the case of the line of trees in the back of Westchester family on their lawn, he said the trees needed to look like a theatrical backdrop that might at any moment roll forward across the lawn.

It was apparent that Diane had only made prints as she needed them, and as a consequence, virtually no two were exactly alike. The most obvious issue was the borders. Marvin had decided that the images in the book should uniformly reflect the way that Diane had made her most recent prints sit on the photographic paper. While exhibition prints existed of most of the images selected for the book, their borders were not consistent.

Starting around 1956, Diane began to print her pictures, which were shot on 35mm film, on 11x14 paper. These prints had broad white borders and hard edges to the image, which were created by the blades of the masking frame that held the paper flat underneath the enlarger. In 1962 she started to shoot some pictures on 120 film, which she also printed on 11x14 paper, with wide borders and hard-edged images. By 1963, she had stopped shooting 35mm altogether and was taking square pictures with a
wide-angle Rolleiflex and a twin-lens Mamiyaflex, and, around 1965, had begun to surround her square images with broad, irregular black borders.

The negative carrier for the Omega "D" enlarger consists of two pieces of aluminum with a rectangular hole cut out of them, which lock together, sandwiching the negative between them. As provided by the enlarger manufacturer, the carrier had an opening that was smaller than the image area of the negative, and consequently cropped part of the image. To overcome this, the aluminum negative carrier of Diane's enlarger had been crudely filed out to increase the size of its opening. This allowed the entire image area to be printed. It also left an uneven band of clear film, which printed black, between the edge of the image and the white paper border of the print. Since the actual size of the image on the film varied depending on whether the picture had been made using the Rolleiflex or the Mamiya, which lens was used, and the focusing distance, each image came with its own unique border.

Diane printed with these bold black borders until around 1969. Then, when she began to print her limited-edition portfolio—first offered for sale in late 1970—she reduced the black borders to a vestigial condition. Everyone is using black borders now she told us in her Westbeth class, as an explanation for what had driven her to make the change. Traces of the old borders still occurred in the prints however, sometimes to define the edge of the picture area, sometimes not. But the new borders were scarcely borders at all.

Simply placing the negative in the filed-out carrier and exposing and developing the paper inevitably resulted in a print with the old thick borders. The newer edges with their soft, unpredictable characteristics meant that the carrier must have been masked down to dimensions much closer to the size of the negatives themselves. But how?

To match the most recent existing prints, I reckoned that I would have to try taping strips of cardboard to the carrier to constrict the opening. Then, as soon as I had figured out what they should look like, I saw them! Dangling from the enlarger columns, little scraps of cardboard about two and a half inches long by a quarter to five sixteenths of an inch wide, with a little tab of masking tape on one or both ends.

The nature and thickness of the vestigial border was dictated by the precise position of the cardboard pieces, the length
of the exposure, and the enlarging lens aperture. The bits of cardboard were taped to the top surface of the aluminum carrier, slightly intruding over the edges of the rectangular hole, and thereby masking and reducing the area of clear film that had formerly created the black border. The thickness of the aluminum (about that of a kitchen match) made a space between the cardboard strips and the negative. This meant that the edges of the cardboard—which were creating the transition on the print from image to white paper—were out of focus. The quantity of light that squeezed between the out-of-focus cardboard and the sharp negative dictated the breadth and nature of the softening process.

The uncoated cardboard strips deteriorated quickly with handling. Replacing them with better-quality cardboard made it impossible to duplicate the prints. Further exploration in Diane's darkroom revealed that the source of the right cardboard was the cheap boxes containing the negative sleeves. When the boxes were cut up and the cardboard trimmed to the correct size the edges became hairy, but when the hairs were suppressed with a saliva-wetted finger, the resulting slightly uneven edge was perfect!

By employing this method to mask the negative carrier, Diane had created on each occasion a unique controlled accident at the edges of her photographs. Trying to precisely replicate that accident was a near-absurd exercise that often took me several hours and a lot of paper.

Diane had very little technical knowledge, but she had a very strong sense of what she wanted and was relentless about getting it. A key element in the unique look and feel of her photographs lay in her choice of film. She had tried all the film types available in the United States, and had made it very clear to me that she disliked them relative to the films of two German manufacturers. Since the Adox company had gone out of business, she had switched to Agfa films, but the very slow, grain-free types she preferred had ceased to be available in the States. She resorted to pressing friends and acquaintances into buying Agfa IF for her in Germany and bringing it back with them.

She developed this 50 ASA Agfa film in a two-solution developer called Beutler. She painstakingly mixed the two elements from raw chemicals and stored them separately until just before use. The compensating nature of the Beutler (which allows shadow detail to increase without harming highlights), combined with the slow, silver-heavy Agfa films, produced negatives with a huge tonal range and great detail, which was a good thing, since Diane’s exposures tended to be erratic. Nonetheless, when printed on pre-cadmium-purged Agfa Portriga Rapid paper developed in Beers (also a two-solution developer mixed from raw chemicals), her negatives produced prints with deep blacks and everything else she wanted.

Her technique originated with her former husband and partner, Allan Arbus. Allan and Diane ran a commercial photography studio together from 1946 until Diane quit the business to go her own way in 1956. She continued to share a darkroom with Allan until 1969, when he moved to the West Coast. Prior to leaving, he designed and equipped the Charles Street darkroom for her. Diane had always done her own printing but up to that time an assistant of Allan's had processed her film. From late 1969 Diane did all her own darkroom work using as a reference the blue binder containing neatly typed formulae and instructions that Allan had prepared for her.

Allan had introduced her to the process of mixing the proprietary Kodak print developers Dektol and Selectol-Soft in differing proportions in order to control contrast. At some point, she may have switched to the similar, more thoroughly controllable but time-consuming Beers developer.*

As the process of my trying to precisely match her prints proceeded, the most unexpected fact emerged, namely that she apparently never dodged or burned a print. The sole quality that she chose to exercise control over was contrast. Using contrast-controlling developer, all of Diane's prints sat happily on either Portriga 3 or 4 (which were subsequently renamed 2 and 3 to align them with other manufacturers). Fully developing Portriga took at least two minutes, but in some extreme cases prints that needed reduced contrast and were pulled from the developer after as little as forty-five seconds still had a beautiful black. Out of the eighty prints made for the monograph, only one needed a burn for it to match Diane's previous version.

The process of establishing the right contrast for the print was lengthy. A developer mix was first guessed at, then a gallon was prepared by combining the two developer solutions and water in precise proportions. Test strips were then made at various exposures. Once an approximate exposure had been ascertained, a range of full-size prints was made, washed, and dried on the ancient print dryer. These were then compared to a print that Diane had made. Once the new print that most closely matched Diane's print for density had been established, it was compared for contrast. A decision was then made to either increase or decrease the contrast of the developer. The first developer then went down the drain, and the next one was

* At the time of my arrival at the darkroom in late 1971, there were labeled containers and chemicals for the making of Beers print developer, but nothing suggesting the presence
Diane’s prints do actually look different from the prints of other photographers. The reason, of course, is both radiant and opaque. It lies in what she didn’t do that everyone else did. The complete lack of dodging and burning, to lighten or darken specific areas of the printed image, is extraordinary in the field of black-and-white documentary photography. If she ever had the urge or the knowledge to make the print beautiful in a conventional sense, she resisted it. The unique quality of Diane’s prints seems a direct response to what is required if one is extremely curious and utterly dispassionate.

The pictures look raw. The way she achieved this lay in the way she used only moderate contrast and density control (neither of which trigger notions of manipulation in the viewer) to suppress information she didn’t want, or emphasize that which she did. By otherwise leaving the photograph alone, she compels the viewer to believe what he’s looking at.

Beautiful as they are, the prints are only about what the lens projected onto the film, not about the philosophy of the technique or dogma about the process, or about the skill of the print maker, be she the photographer or her surrogate. Diane’s aesthetic roots were based in her instinctual responses to everyday images, rather than to conventional academic ideals of print excellence, about which she cared little. Her intent may have been to make the final image owe something to the limited range of the snapshot or the newspaper photograph, perhaps to borrow from their inherent credibility. Her use of film unavailable in the United States and fussy, time-consuming developers was a deeply sophisticated response to her need to make prints that conveyed the authenticity of the moment without getting in the way of the picture.

Over the last thirty years, most of the materials Diane used have either changed or simply disappeared, but my task remains the same as it was the day I first entered her darkroom. It has been to discover the essence through pursuit of the surface, and whenever necessary, to reinvent the process in order to remain true to the essence: that no one doubts a Diane Arbus photograph.
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tried in its place. Each cycle took at least two hours and there were rarely fewer than four cycles before the closest match was achieved. Thus between getting both the borders and the contrast right on one print it was easy to spend twelve hours just fiddling.

Again and again Diane’s technique would enable me to effortlessly generate a print that would have won accolades from the academic printing establishment, only to have her comparison print command me to dilute the richness of the result. On the other hand, she would often print far harder than would optimize the rendering of the information in the negative. In Man at a parade (p. 303), the first image to appear during development is of a man who turns out to be inside a storefront. He rapidly darkens and is replaced by a second man standing against a building. This man in turn darkens as a third man—the man standing beside the garbage container, who came to watch the parade and whom Diane wanted us to see—finally materializes. In the fully developed print, the first figure to appear has become invisible.

The easiest misjudgment for me to make related to washing time, which substantially affected both color and density. A test print washed briefly and then dried in the dryer emerged both warmer and darker than its twin, conceived identically, but washed fully and dried in a blotter roll. Judging this phenomenon blind was a tricky call. It was not unusual to arrive in the morning to meet Marvin and unroll the blotters only to find that I had simply missed and had to start again. I always approached this moment of disclosure with trepidation. Still, I never found reason to question Diane’s certainty (expressed to her Westbeth class) that her technique, tedious as it was, enabled her to make better prints than those of her peers.

After several months of printing, I had worked down the pile of existing prints to the few images that we needed for which only a rough print existed. To make these I worked with whatever intrinsic qualities there were in the negative and Diane’s existing rough print along with the principles I had absorbed from the process of learning to match the prints we knew she prized.