

# Anti-Pornography

## André Kertész's *Distortions*

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### I. Introduction

One striking feature of most pornographic images is that they emphasize what is depicted and underplay the way it is depicted: the experience of pornography rarely involves awareness of the picture's composition or of visual rhyme. There are various ways of making this distinction between what is depicted in a picture and the way the depicted object is depicted in it. Following Richard Wollheim, I call these two aspects, the 'what' and 'how' of pictorial representation, 'recognitional' and 'configurational', respectively. Some pictures emphasize one of these aspects while underplaying the other. Pornographic pictures typically evince little concern with drawing attention to their 'configurational' aspect (Levinson 2005: 232).

Instead of examining pornography, where the 'configurational' aspect of experience is underplayed, I focus on a historical attempt to create images of the female body where the 'recognitional' element is the one that is underplayed and the 'configurational' elements of the picture form an essential part of our experience. The pictures I have in mind are André Kertész's series of photographs from 1933 called *Distortions*.

I argue that Kertész's *Distortions* are in this respect the counterpoint of pornography: they may be the least pornographic representations of the female nude that exist. Instead of ignoring the configurational aspects of the picture, making the picture transparent and fully at the service of showing the female body and thus the triggering of arousal, Kertész aims to achieve the exact opposite. His photographs strip the female body of all its sexual

connotations and draw our attention to the formal features of the picture—which is quite a feat in light of the subject matter of those pictures, which normally draws our attention away from the formal features of pictures.

The opposition between pornography and Kertész's *Distortions* may help us to characterize the 'configurational' aspect of our experience of pictures. It is relatively clear what the 'recognitional' aspect of our experience of pictures is: it is constituted by what is depicted in the picture. It is much less clear what the 'configurational' aspect of our experience is. Is it constituted by our awareness of the picture's surface properties? If so, could we use reference to the depicted object in order to characterize it? Or is it constituted by our awareness of the way the depicted object is depicted? If so, what is the relation between the 'configurational' aspect of our experience of pictures and our awareness of formal properties? By examining pictures that aim to direct our attention to the 'configurational' aspect of our experience of them in spite of the fact that they are of the female nude, I hope to answer some questions about the experience of pornographic pictures where the 'configurational' aspect is typically underplayed, as well as some general questions about picture perception.

## 2. *Distortions*

The 206 photographs that constitute the *Distortions* series are not among the best photographs by André Kertész. In fact, they are among the least carefully composed ones (if we do not consider the commercial work Kertész did for various fashion magazines in the 1930s and 1940s and for *Home and Garden* in the 1950s). Nonetheless, they are considered to play an important role in the history of twentieth-century photography as well as in the history of twentieth-century depictions of the female nude. The *Distortions* photographs were admired by (and arguably also influenced) Calder, Picasso, Sergei Eisenstein, Henry Moore, Francis Bacon, Jean Arp, and Giacomo Balla (but frowned upon by Alfred Stieglitz).

The art historical importance of these pictures can be attributed to two factors. First, Kertész's photos bear clear resemblance to some important nude paintings of the same period, notably, Matisse's *Pink Nude* (1935) and Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* (1932), as well as to Henry Moore's early reclining figures. Thus, it seems that the same compositional principles

appeared at the same time in different arts (this point was made in Kramer 1976, for example). Further, Kertész's *Distortions* can be seen as an influence on a number of later works, such as De Kooning's *Women*, Dubuffet's *Corps de dames*, and maybe even Giacometti's sculptures (again, see Kramer 1976).

It is much easier, of course, to distort parts of a female nude in a painting or a sculpture than to do so in a photograph. Kertész used two distorting mirrors from an amusement park and employed two models, Najinskaya Verackhatz and Nadia Kasine (although Kasine was sent home after a couple of shots and only Verackhatz is visible in almost all of the 206 photographs).

We have reason to believe that Kertész did the shooting in a relatively short period of time and in a not particularly conscientious manner (see e.g. Guégan 1933, Browning 1939, Brassai 1963, Jay 1969, Ford 1979, Phillips 1985, Lambert 1998, and Esquenazi 1998 on various aspects and circumstances of the shooting). While he himself remembered taking 'about 140 photos' (Kertész 1983: 82), he in fact took 206 photos. Many of these use the same distortion effect. One recurring effect—where the lower part of the photo is undistorted and the upper part is stretched horizontally—can be seen in nineteen different photographs (*Distortion* #59, 160, 167, 52, 172, 68, 63, 159, 165, 164, 61, 163, 157, 174, 53, 142, 176, 169, 77).

There is a significant variation with regards to the degree and nature of these *Distortions*. Some photos are only very slightly distorted, so they could almost be taken to be veridical depictions (*Distortion* #167, 119, 6, 16, 21, 68, 74). Others are almost impossible to recognize (especially, *Distortion* #200, 73, 48, 136, 149). As Kertész himself says in a gallery flyer (for the exhibition Andre Kertész: *Distortions*. Pace MacGill Gallery, New York City, November 1983), 'I would develop glass plates and make prints for myself. When I showed them to the model, she told me she was quite sure that it was not her in all of the photographs' (quoted in Phillips 1985: 50–1). There is also a wide variation in which parts of the female body are distorted and which ones are not.

Twelve of these photos were published in September 1933 in *Le Sourire* (the magazine that approached Kertész with this idea) and a couple more in *Arts et métiers graphiques* some months later. The rest remained unknown until 1976, when all the surviving *Distortions* were published in a book format (something Kertész had been pursuing since 1933).

The *Distortions* photos were not the first distorted photographs: Louis Ducos du Hauron made distorted portraits as early as 1889. They were not

even the first distorted photographs in Kertész's oeuvre. He made a couple of distorted portraits of a woman's face in 1927 and of Carlo Rim in 1929. His early *Underwater Swimmer* (1917) could also be seen as the first in this genre in Kertész's life—this photo was included as the first photograph in the *Distortions* volume in 1976. Nor was *Distortions* the last attempt at using this method. He experimented with distorted 'nature mortes' in the late 1930s and early 1940s—often in the context of advertisements, and, ironically, these shots are often more in tune with Kertész's general compositional principles than the 1933 series. But those less than twenty *Distortions* that were known before the publication of the 1976 volume had a lasting impact both on Kertész's reputation and on the history of nude photography.

### 3. Pornography in 1933?

All of these photos depict a female nude and in most of them the model is in positions that are strongly sexually evocative. Do they then count as pornography? They were certainly considered as such when they first appeared in print. The *Distortions* photographs were commissioned by, and published in, the magazine *Le Sourire*, a magazine known for the frivolity of its content, and even described by some as a 'soft porn magazine' (Armstrong 1989: 57). It seemed clear that they were commissioned not so much for their aesthetic value as for their erotic interest.

Later, when Kertész emigrated to the United States, he did not manage to sell these photos or have them published in book form precisely because they were taken to be too pornographic. As Kertész himself says later, 'When I came to New York the publishers said to me, "In the United States this is pornography and we will go together to prison if we publish it"' (Kertész 1983: 90).

In fact, even Beaumont Newhall, photography curator at the Museum of Modern Art, had reservations about whether these pictures could be exhibited. As he allegedly told Kertész, 'With the sex, what you have done is pornography; without the sex, it is art' (Colin 1979: 24). In fact, Newhall asked Kertész to crop the photos above the pelvis, but Kertész was not willing to do that. He remembers: 'I was furious. It is mutilation, it is like cutting off an arm or a leg' (Kertész 1983: 90).

On reflection, there are at least two odd things about this controversy. First, in about half of the *Distortions* photographs either the pelvis is not visible, or else it is distorted to such a degree that it is not recognizable (though may be imaginable). Second, *Distortions* was actually not that provocative compared to some other photographic material that was circulating at the time. There were much more explicit and offensive pornographic photographs in that period. One important example is Man Ray's series of *Automne, Été, Hiver, Printemps* from 1929, four years before *Distortions*, which are straight photographs of himself having intercourse, presumably with Kiki de Montparnasse. This series was intended for a special issue of a Brussels-based magazine, *Variétés* on erotic poetry. The special issue consisted of two poems, one by Aragon, one by Benjamin Péret, and the four photographs by Man Ray. It was in fact published in 215 copies (one of them is up for sale for 23,000 USD on the internet as I write this).

The controversy over the pornographic nature of Kertész's *Distortions* is especially ironic as I will argue that these pictures constitute one of the least pornographic representations of the female nude. Thus, I agree with Charles Hagen, who said that 'these pictures themselves are never sexually charged' (Naef 1994: 129) and with Sylvia Plachy who was of the same opinion: 'I don't think those pictures are very sexual' (Naef 1994: 130).

In the introduction to the *Distortions*, Hilton Kramer wrote that 'Kertész's transformations of the female anatomy are at once erotic and aesthetic' (Kramer 1976: n.p.), but even this is an exaggeration—I aim to show that the erotic aspect of these pictures is almost nonexistent, especially in comparison with the aesthetic one.

A related important question is whether these pictures objectify their subjects. And it is difficult to disagree with Kramer, who says that

They do not victimize but celebrate their subjects [...] there is humor in these pictures but it is the humor of love. They are sometimes funny, but they are never mean or detached or disingenuous [...]—the love songs of a photographer. [...] They preserve a fondness for their subject that is lyrical and loving. (Kramer 1976: n.p.)

Not everyone agrees. Rudolf Kuenzli has reproached Rosalind Krauss for being too tolerant regarding Kertész's *Distortions* (Kuenzli 1991: 23). According to Kuenzli, there is 'obvious misogyny in these works' (Kuenzli 1991: 24). Carol Armstrong, in contrast, argues at length that the claims of

feminist art criticism fail to apply in the case of *Distortions* (Armstrong 1989): there is no ‘male gaze’, she claims, only the gaze of the female subject directed at herself.

In short, there are open debates about whether these photographs are pornographic, erotic, neither, or both, and if they are, how offensive they are. I do not here want to engage with the complex issue surrounding objectification, but if, as I argue, these photographs are the antithesis of pornography—as different from it as possible, then the charges of misogyny against them are surely unmotivated.

#### 4. The Recognitional and the Configurational

The starting point of my analysis is Jerrold Levinson’s account of pornography. Levinson argues that there is an important difference between the way we experience pornographic pictures and the way we experience other pictures. (I put non-pictorial forms of pornography to the side as they are irrelevant from the point of view of the assessment of Kertész’s *Distortions*.)

To put it simply, some images are ‘erotic images’. For Levinson, this means that they are ‘intended to interest viewers sexually’ (Levinson 2005: 230). Not all images of sexual organs or acts are erotic images in this sense—for example illustrations in an anatomy textbook are not. Some, but not all, ‘erotic images’ are pornographic images. These are ‘centrally aimed at a sort of reception [that] essentially excludes attention to form/vehicle/medium/manner, and so entails treating images as wholly transparent’ (Levinson 2005: 239). In short, ‘transparency of the medium is [. . .] a virtual *sine qua non* of pornography’ (Levinson 2005: 237).

I am not endorsing this as a definition of pornography or of pornographic images, which is how Levinson intended it—there may be other ways of defining pornography, not in terms of its intended reception, but in terms of its content, for example. Nor am I endorsing the more specific claims Levinson makes about the incompatibility of pornography and art (see Kieran 2001 for some skepticism). What I do want to take from Levinson’s account is his claim about our responses to, or experiences of, pornography. How and whether we can get from this type of response to a characterization of pornography is a question I put aside.

The response that pornography aims at, according to Levinson, excludes 'attention to form/vehicle/medium/manner, and so entails treating images as wholly transparent' (Levinson 2005: 239). However, the term 'transparent' brings with it a number of potential confusions. There is a large body of literature on whether our experience of photographs is necessarily transparent in the sense Levinson claims our experience of pornography is (Walton 1984, 1997; Lopes 2003). Levinson takes this alleged similarity between the transparency of photographs and the transparency of pornography to be an encouraging sign, as reflected in the fact that 'photography is the prime medium for pornography, that which has displaced all other such media in that connection' (Levinson 2005: 232). According to Levinson, the transparency of photographs and of pornography explains why this is the case.

The problem is that not everyone agrees that our experience of photographs is transparent: that we see through them the way we see through binoculars (see e.g. Warburton 1988; Currie 1991; Carroll 1995: 71; Currie 1995: esp. 70; Carroll 1996: 62; Cohen and Meskin 2004; Meskin and Cohen 2008; Nanay 2010b), and if any of these arguments are correct, then Levinson cannot use the experience of photographs as an analogy for the experience of pornography. However, I do think that the gist of Levinson's proposal is right: our experience of pornography is transparent in some sense of the term. But he cannot use the alleged transparency of photographs as a way of elucidating what is meant by the concept of transparency. Levinson is deliberately vague when characterizing the transparency of our experience of pornography: he says that it 'excludes attention to form/vehicle/medium/manner' (Levinson 2005: 239). But of course these four concepts, 'form', 'vehicle', 'medium', and 'manner', are not synonyms, and depending on which one of them we take a transparent experience to exclude attention to, we end up with very different concepts of transparency.

In order to make this formulation of the transparency of the experience of pornography less ambiguous, I will add two more concepts to these four. I borrow Dominic Lopes's concept of 'design-property': a picture's design is constituted by 'those visible surface properties in virtue of which a picture depicts what it does' (Lopes 2005: 25). I take this concept to be equivalent to Richard Wollheim's concept of the 'configurations aspects' of pictorial

representations.<sup>1</sup> Many philosophers make a distinction between what is depicted by a picture and the way the depicted object is depicted in it. Wollheim calls these two aspects, the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of pictorial representation, ‘recognitional’ and ‘configurational’, respectively (Wollheim 1980, 1987, 1998; see also Nanay 2004, 2005, 2008). Lopes calls the latter ‘design’.

Now we can reformulate what I take to be Levinson’s main claim about the experience of pornography: we experience pornographic pictures as transparent if our experience does not involve attention to the ‘design’ or ‘configurational’ aspect of these pictures, but only to the ‘recognitional’ aspect. I will analyze what this claim entails and show how it rules out pornographic responses to Kertész’s *Distortions* in the next section.

## 5. Inflection

We have seen that pictures have ‘configurational’ and ‘recognitional’ aspects: design-properties and depicted properties. Sometimes we are attending to one, sometimes, the other, sometimes both. It is the ‘attending to both’ that I want to analyze a bit further, with the help of the concept of ‘inflection’. It has been suggested that sometimes, but not always, our experience of pictures is *inflected*. As Dominic Lopes says:

Features of the design may inflect illustrative content, so that the scene is experienced as having properties it could only be seen to have in pictures. (Lopes 2005: 123–4)

Note that this does not happen each time we see something in a picture. Most of the time, our experience of pictures is uninflected. But sometimes it is inflected. Inflected pictorial experiences then are special. The question is what makes them special. The most important feature of the inflected experience of pictures seems to be that when we have experiences of this

<sup>1</sup> Wollheim uses the terms ‘configurational’ and ‘recognitional’ somewhat ambiguously: he sometimes talks about the ‘configurational’ and ‘recognitional’ aspects of our experiences and sometimes about the ‘configurational’ and ‘recognitional’ aspects of the pictorial representations. I’m assuming that the relation between these two ways of using these concepts is the following: an aspect of an experience is ‘configurational’ if it attends to the ‘configurational’ aspects of the pictorial representation, that is, to its design properties.



kind, the perceived object is experienced differently from the way it would be experienced face to face. Here is Lopes again:

Design seeing transforms the content of seeing-in so that it no longer matches the content of seeing the scene face to face. Design is 'recruited' into the depicted scene so that the scene no longer looks the way it would when seen face to face. (Lopes 2005: 40)

Michael Podro, who introduced the concept of inflection, also says that in the case of the inflected experience of pictures, the picture's design is 'recruited' into the depicted scene and this is why the scene does not look the way it would when seen face to face (Podro 1998: 13, 26). It is not clear, however, what it is supposed to mean that the picture's design is 'recruited' into the depicted scene. Podro's other formulations of inflected pictorial experiences are equally metaphorical: he says that when our experience of pictures is inflected, then besides seeing the scene in the design, we also see the design in the scene (Podro 1991: 172). He also says that inflected pictorial experience straddles the boundary between the marked surface and the depicted object (Podro 1998: 17, 28). If we want to understand the difference between inflected and uninflected pictorial experiences, we need to make sense of these metaphors.

Robert Hopkins goes through a couple of possible interpretations of inflected pictorial experiences and settles for the following:

Sometimes, what is seen in a surface includes properties a full characterisation of which needs to make reference to that surface's design (conceived as such). (Hopkins 2010: 158)

I have myself defended the following concept of the inflected experience of pictures: when our pictorial experience is inflected, we attend to a relational property that cannot be fully characterized without reference to both the picture's design and the depicted object. I called these properties that we attend to in the case of inflected experience of pictures 'design-scene properties' (Nanay 2010a: 194). Another appropriate term would be 'configurational-recognitional' properties. The point is that both aspects of the picture (both the configurational and the recognitional, both the design and the depicted) show up in our experience.

There are many ways of unpacking the notion of 'design-scene property': it could be referred to as the property of how features of the picture's design

give rise to or undergird the experience of the depicted object; or of how the depicted object emerges from the design, etc. What is important is that when our pictorial experience is inflected, we are consciously attending to ‘design-scene properties’.

Not all ‘design-scene properties’ are particularly interesting, and attention to ‘design-scene properties’ does not guarantee the aesthetic appreciation, let alone the aesthetic experience, of a picture. But this concept is general enough to accommodate the main candidates for, and intuitions about, inflection. When we have an inflected pictorial experience, we experience how the depicted object emerges from the design. We see the depicting design ‘undergirding’ the depicted scene: ‘seeing a picture as a picture amounts to seeing its undergirding—to seeing, as it were, the process of depiction and not merely its product’ (Lopes 2005: 39). Design seeing, which is necessary for inflected pictorial experiences, ‘amounts to seeing design features as responsible for seeing-in’ (Lopes 2005: 28). Or, as Hopkins says (summarizing the view he himself disagrees with): ‘inflection [ . . . ] offers us the opportunity better to appreciate how the one emerges from the other’ (Hopkins 2010: 165). It is hard to see how these properties we see in surfaces would be capable of all this if they were not relational: if they did not make reference both to the picture’s design and to the depicted object.

If this analysis is correct then the way we experience pornography cannot be a case of inflected pictorial experience. The experience of pornography, as we have seen in the last section, excludes attention to the ‘configurational’ or ‘design’ features of the picture, whereas in the case of inflected experiences, we attend to a relational property that cannot be fully characterized without reference to the ‘configurational’ or ‘design’ features of the picture. The experience of pornography and inflected pictorial experience are incompatible.<sup>2</sup>

And now we can return to Kertész’s *Distortions*. A crucial feature of these photographs is that they force us to have an inflected pictorial experience. More precisely, it is not possible to see the depicted object in these pictures without attending to the ‘design-scene properties’ of these pictures. In the case of most pictures, we can attend to a variety of different properties of the picture while seeing the depicted object in the picture. When I am looking

<sup>2</sup> Like Levinson, I use the term ‘the experience of pornography’ as a shorthand for ‘the experience pornography intends to trigger or has the function of triggering’.

at Cézanne's *The Bay from L'Estaque*, I can attend to smoke coming out of the chimney on the right without paying any attention to the design properties at all. Or, I can attend to the ways in which just a couple of brushstrokes give rise to the depiction of swirls of smoke. The latter experience is inflected, the former is not. And it is up to us which kind of experience we have while seeing the smoke in the picture.

But in the case of the *Distortions* photographs, if our experience is not inflected, we have no chance of seeing the depicted nude in the picture. In order to know whether we see a woman with slender arms (distorted) or with very thick arms (undistorted), we need to also attend to the way the nude is distorted in the mirror. In many cases, in order to even be able to recognize which body part is in the upper left corner of the picture, one needs to attend to the way the nude is distorted in the mirror—to the 'configurational' or 'design' aspects of the picture. In short, the *Distortions* photographs force us to have an inflected experience: if we want to see what is depicted at all, we need to see it in an inflected manner.

But if, as I argued, inflected experience and the experience of pornographic pictures exclude each other, then this makes it extremely difficult to experience Kertész's photographs as porn.<sup>3</sup> This makes Kertész's *Distortions* photographs examples of anti-pornography: pictures that, rather than being disposed to trigger reactions normally associated with pornography, are carefully constructed in such a way that they make any such reaction extremely unlikely.

Hilton Kramer notes in his introduction to *Distortions* that 'Kertész's images [are] often close to the frontiers of abstraction' (Kramer 1976: n.p.). This is true of Kertész's photographs in general, but also true of the *Distortions* photographs. They are indeed close to the frontiers of abstraction, but they are also careful not to trespass those frontiers. As Kertész emphasized in his piece 'Caricatures and *Distortions*' in the third volume of the *Encyclopedia of Photography*, 'the viewer must not be left in a state of bewilderment which so often results from seeing the unrelated mass of curves, angles, lights and

<sup>3</sup> I said this makes it extremely difficult to experience these pictures as porn. It does not make it strictly speaking impossible to do so—I do not want to deny that, in some sense of possibility, it is possible to experience nude photographs as porn. It may be possible, for example, to experience the configurational features of these photographs as simply an obstacle to having a pornographic experience. This is clearly not the experience Kertész's photographs are intended to trigger.

shadows which compose the poorer distortion pictures. There must be an emphatic governing theme in every picture' (Kertész 1970: 569–70).

The *Distortions* photographs, like most of Kertész's photographs, make sense both as figurative photographs and also as abstract compositions. But, and this is what is unique about this series, we cannot see these photographs as figurative photographs without *also* seeing them as abstract compositions of 'unrelated mass of curves, angles, lights and shadows'. It is only the attention to the 'unrelated mass of curves, angles, lights and shadows' that make it possible to see the female nude in these pictures. And this experience is the exact opposite of the experience associated with pornography.

## 6. Conclusion: Kertész's *Distortions* versus Man Ray's *Mr and Mrs Woodman*

In conclusion, I want to contrast the radical nature of Kertész's experiment with the anti-pornographic depiction of the female nude with another, equally radical attempt but in the opposite direction. Man Ray's photographs in his *Mr and Mrs Woodman* series depict two small wooden mannequins without faces making love in various (quite suggestive) positions. Man Ray first experimented with these pictures in 1926–7 (Mr Woodman made his appearance, all alone, even earlier, in 1920), but made a series of 27 photographs in 1947, which were later published in 50 copies by Editions Unida (1970). (He used the same wooden mannequins in other, self-standing photos, for example in his *Mr and Mrs Woodman in front of the TV* (1975), which are not particularly erotically charged.)

Although Man Ray's *Mr and Mrs Woodman* photographs are not of human bodies, but rather of pieces of wood stuck together, they manage to achieve the result that the 'recognitional' aspect of our experience effectively ousts the 'configurational' one: we are prompted to experience these photographs as pornography—the design is very unlikely to show up in our experience.

In short, there is a striking contrast between the way we naturally experience Kertész's *Distortions* and the way we naturally experience Man Ray's *Mr and Mrs Woodman* series. What makes the contrast between these works of two great modernist photographers, Kertész and Man Ray, especially striking is that while Kertész uses the naked female body, the erotic subject *par excellence*, he manages to make the 'recognitional' aspect of pictorial

representation irrelevant, whereas Man Ray uses pieces of wood, something that is *par excellence* not erotic, and manages to make the 'configurational' of the pictorial representation irrelevant.

Kertész makes anti-pornography with female nudes, whereas Man Ray makes pornography with pieces of wood.

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