Art 496 Research Paper

Andre Kertesz

Martin De Vita
3/6/2011
Thesis Statement

Although the early work of Andre Kertesz had profound implications for the future of photojournalism, the Distortion series of photographs that he produced in 1933 did the most to reflect his identity as an artist. The majority of Kertesz’s work consists of photographs commissioned by magazines. This is how Kertesz earned his living for most of his life (Budnik, Capa 76). During his four distinct photographic periods, the artist matured while developing a style unique to himself. The formal qualities of his Distortions contain similarities to the rest of his work but remain visually distinct as well. He is often times associated with the surrealist movement, although he was never quite a surrealist exclusively. Despite this, the Distortions of Andre Kertesz are both innovative and timeless; worthy of being appreciated from both traditional and contemporary perspectives.

Art Historical Influences and Cultural Context

The photographic career of André Kertész can be divided up into four periods. Each of these periods can be distinguished by significant transitions in the artist’s life. In consecutive order, they are known as Kertesz’s Hungarian, Parisian, American and International periods. André Kertész’s Distortions are sometimes considered in a separate category within the time frame of his Parisian period. It is worthwhile to discuss each of these periods in brief, for often times Kertesz would print photos decades after he had originally taken them (Getty 8).

André Kertész’s Hungarian period and its characteristics are intrinsically linked with the artist’s life. Born in Budapest on July 2, 1884, Kertesz was the son of middle-class parents. At
an early age, young Andre lost his father to tuberculosis. The role of his father was filled by his eldest sibling, Lipot Kertesz (named after their father). Andre Kertesz’s family consisted of two siblings and his mother, whom he cared a great deal about. His older brother was in charge of the younger two’s education and employment. In 1912, Lipot had arranged for Andre to take up employment at the stock exchange. However, Andre Kertesz had little desire to pursue a career in business, let alone the mundane drudgery involved in scholastic education. Instead, Andre preferred a country lifestyle. He spent a lot of his summers in a country residence owned by his family. It was here that he encountered illustrated magazines depicting scenes (often photographs) of country homes and interiors. In fact, upon encountering illustrated magazines, Andre Kertesz immediately had an epiphany. He immediately became infatuated with photography. His new found interest would lead Kertesz to look at the world from the perspective of a photographer until he obtained his first camera, an ICA 4.5 x 6 cm glass-plate model, later in life (Bohran 10).

During his Hungarian period, Kertesz was developing his skills as a photographer while remaining employed at the stock exchange. His occupation prevented him from embracing photography in full, for he could only take photos during his leisure time. Nevertheless, Kertesz used this time to hone his craft. His early work contains images of gypsies and peasants. Kertesz found these groups of people to be the most interesting subjects at the time due to their humble yet complex lifestyles. He was later deployed to war in 1914, where he brought his camera with him. He took photographs but was never interested in idealizing war with fictional representations (Kertesz, Szarkowski 3). Kertesz was wounded and sent to hospitals in Budapest and Esztergom. During his time at these facilities, the young photographer continued
to develop his camera technique. It was during this phase of his life where he encountered a particular visual scene that would have profound implications for the developments of his Distortions. The scene consisted of a man swimming in a pool; his body appearing slightly distorted because of the refractory properties of the water. Although Kertesz took a series of photographs of this scene, only one survives. The photograph, entitled, “Underwater Swimmer” has been reprinted from a negative developed in 1917 (Figure 1). After the war, Kertesz returned to his stock market job. Against the desires of his family, he continued to pursue photography in his spare time. Due to his familial obligations, he remained unable to dedicate himself fully to photography and suffered because of it. While living in Hungary, Andre Kertesz would continue to be inspired by poems, paintings and no less than 21 newspapers being published in Budapest at the time (Kraus 214). Nonetheless, it became evidently clear that in order to embrace his passion for photography, he would have to leave Hungary and his family.

Despite having to leave his family, Andre Kertesz decided to move to Paris, where he entered into his second photographic period. He had saved up enough money to live in France for a couple of years. His plan was to establish himself as a photographer in Paris, and then have his companion join him. Kertesz’s decision to move to Paris was an act of confidence. Although the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire solidified his decision to remain in Paris, it was not the main reason for his departure. Kertesz’s photography saw a huge amount of success during this time. For the first time in his life, he was able to embrace his passion. He began to mingle with circles of artists. Dada and Surrealism were both in full effect. He began to revisit the visual anomalies that he witnessed in his underwater swimmer photographs. It is during his
Parisian period that he created his *Distortion* series for the magazine *Le Sourire*. He would later publish this work in a book called, *Distortions* (1976). Although these photographs were made for a commission, Kertesz was able to supersede their original purpose by creating visual masterpieces that could communicate their own unique aesthetic. It is almost tragic to consider what may have happened had World War II not broken out and forced Kertesz to emigrate to the United States (Kraus 214). Kertesz would never be able to produce with the same passion as he had during his Parisian period.

Upon arriving in the United States, Kertesz found that he could no longer pursue photography exclusively as a passionate artist. His American period is characterized by commissions for several publishers. He was forced to earn income by fulfilling the photographic desires of inconsiderate publishers who did little to acknowledge Kertesz’s artistic merit (Kertesz, Lifson 8). Nevertheless, Kertesz treated every photograph as he had in the past. In a book edited by Pierre Borhan entitled, *André Kertész, His Life and Work*, the editor writes, “The photographer had no financial worries, and he did succeed in giving meaning to each image; the publishers of the magazine and the owners of the apartments that he photographed were satisfied (as much with his way of looking at architecture as with the warmth he brought to the interiors conceived more often than not by professional decorators); but he never counted this commission work as part of his oeuvre, in contrast to the work he had done previously in Paris. He resented the loss of his photographic individuality” (Borhan 30). Kertesz remained in this state until the 1960’s.

In 1962, Kertesz had a breakthrough on an international level. Very successful exhibits in Venice and Paris celebrated Andre Kertesz as one of the most influential photographers of all
time. The artist would continue working with photography until his death. He experimented with distortions again in his late years, but never was able to replicate the masterful effects captured in his 1933 works (Borhan 31).

Formal Analysis of Works of Art

Kertesz’s Distortions contain quite the paradox. Despite the uniqueness of each of the photographs, there is a distinct uniformity in the entire collection. Having made over 200 photographs, Kertesz’ seemed to treat each piece with a unified sense of sincerity. He had stumbled upon an ingenious method for creating interesting works of art and was able to exploit it to his benefit. However, there are a few pieces from this collection that most certainly stand out from the rest of the Distortions.

Distortion #168 (Figure 2) is unique for a multitude of reasons. Although it isn’t precisely symmetrical, this particular photograph is centrally balanced; at least more so than the others. The light figure cuts through the dark background creating a unique type of contrast. The inclusion of his model’s face gives the photograph a heightened degree of complexity. Humans naturally look to faces to assume identity. Kertesz plays with this by capturing a manipulated face instead of a recognizable one. By doing this, Kertesz doesn’t allow the face of the model to dominate the figure. He connects the distortion of the figure to the rest of the body by capturing the hands of his model being exaggerated into the shoulders. This creates a sense of visual movement where the eye initially focuses on the center of the body and moves up into the portrait. This movement is complimented by the line quality that is created by these distortions. The manner in which Kertesz’s mirrors elongate shadows gives his
work a line quality that would normally be ignored in photography. Read from the bottom up, these lines originate from a single one between the thighs of the model that diverges at the pubis. These lines follow the body upward until they meet the arms and continue up into the fingers. The lines of the figures and clavicles seem to connect with the lines of the heater in the background, creating a framework that houses the unique portrait. At first glance it does seem that the lower half of the body acts as some type of vestigial appendage. Nonetheless, when one covers that section they realize that it does bring an upward flow to the composition.

Kertesz returns to the portrait again in Distortion #70 (Figure 3). Unlike Distortion #168, this photograph is asymmetrically balanced. Once again, the distortion of the model’s face dominates the composition and creates a visual oddity that captivates the viewer. At first glance, one contemplates the number of models actually present in the photograph. Kertesz captures three portraits of the same woman within one picture. To make things even more absurd, all three of them are linked. Despite this connection, the portraits are confined to two separate structures. There is the structure with two faces on the left being connected to the one face on the right via the nose. This connection creates an intense focal point. It seems that at any moment the faces could separate completely from each other given the frail and thinly stretch quality of this nasal passage. Kertesz captures what appears to be a conversation of glances in his composition. The portrait on the right has been reflected over a vertical axis and the reflections engage one another in a sensual gaze. Although it is a powerful conversation, it is devoid of any specific emotion, something Kertesz was famous for being able to produce. The portrait to the far left is also full of movement. The composition reads right to left, where the left most portrait strains the hardest to be removed from the middle one. Once again the
line quality created by Kertesz’s mirrors is remarkable. The way that the mouth is connected to both of the left side portraits gives the photo a fantastic degree of structural complexity. Also, it is worthwhile to mention that Kertesz has captured a perspective that allows the leftmost structure to be completely separated from the body via the contrast of the cloth. The right hand portrait connects with the lightly toned body, enhancing the contrast of each portrait with one another. Finally, the breast acts as neutralizing agent when it breaks up the stark and visually flat contrast between the black cloth and the upper chest. This is an essential property of the composition. Distortion #70 is one of Kertesz’s most engaging photographs.

As a collective, Kertesz’s Distortion series contains his models for the most part. However, Kertesz gives the viewer a unique opportunity to engage the creator of these Distortions in #91 (Figure 4). In this specific photograph, the model dominates the composition. Yet, we see something present that remains absent from the rest of the Distortion series; a self portrait of the artist himself. The model in #91 is by far one of the most complex in regards to the degree of distortion that has been applied to her. It is as if the model is asexually reproducing via some type of budding process. This fantastic image is full of movement in several directions, the most prominent being the figure in the bottom left hand corner. Here, variations of value within the hair act as indications of movement where the viewer can literally see a figure about to separate from its original form. Kertesz’s presence in the photograph seems to be more than a coincidence. Notice how he uses contrast to separate himself from the figures on the left of the composition. Kertesz is enveloped by darkness while his model is illuminated by the fairness of her skin. She is bereft of any manmade object (ex. clothes), creating a sense of timelessness; whereas he is fully clothed and has his camera. He also
makes use of scale in order to make the figure and its distortion the primary focus in his work of art. Nonetheless, it is obvious that he is orchestrating the event. It is the current author’s belief that this photograph could act as a personal statement for the artist.

**Evaluation through Selected theory of Art Criteria (Expressionism)**

In each of the photographs described above, as well as in his other Distortions, Andre Kertesz treads a thin line between control and spontaneity. His work demonstrates a conscious decision to capture certain compositions. In an artistic sense, Kertesz was able to explicitly create works of art utilizing this process. The process was spontaneous in how it distorted the figures. Nonetheless, the arrangement and the decision to capture certain compositions on film were left up to the artist. It is in this sense that one could argue that Kertesz’ Distortion series was the profound statement of an artist, not simply a photographer. In regards to a conceptual basis, Kertesz’ did not try to apply a specific meaning to the imagery that he created. Instead, he was simply amused by the visual anomalies that were created when his models were distorted. This is where he departs from the Surrealists. The Surrealists were deeply influenced by psychoanalysis and their imagery often alluded to subconscious meaning. Kertesz never attempted to apply such meaning to his own work. Instead, he was quoted as saying, “One can give what explanations one wishes of this work; all I can say is that making them was very exciting, very amusing” (Kertesz, as cited in Borhan 19). Although Kertesz shared the Surrealists’ enthusiasm for creating unconventional imagery, he cannot be considered a surrealist. After all, the images in his works were simply authentic reflections. In and of themselves, they were not manipulated by the artist in any direct way. Kertesz simply
found a way of capturing a Surrealistic Realism; a visual oddity that was present in the real world, despite our unfamiliarity with the subject. As Bohran puts it; “Even the Distortions are not manipulations but, rather, pure and simple reflections, suggesting that photography in its purity can be self-sufficient” (Bohran 19).

Kertesz’s work may also contain aspects of Expressionism as well. The artist’s work creates an alluring image in his photographs. The effect of the anomaly becomes the central aspect of Kertesz’s artwork. Realistic portrayal becomes secondary. According to Terry Barrett, Expressionism is a type of art where the artist uses the work as a vehicle for communicating inner emotions, senses and feelings. As Barrett states, “It is their business to express themselves vividly so the viewer may experience similar feelings” (Barrett 103). Kertesz’s work most definitely communicates certain emotions and feelings. However, his work lacks a quality that is inherent to expressionism; the intentional aspect. Specifically, Kertesz isn’t explicitly trying to communicate specific emotions. His work may elicit feelings after the fact, but the photographs weren’t necessarily printed to elicit them. Nonetheless, the work does contain qualities of expressionism although it should not be labeled exclusively as such.

Self-Reflection

The current authors’ work is somewhat compatible with the Distortions of Andre Kertesz. Like Kertesz, the current author is distorting the figure in a slightly surrealistic manner. Similarly to Kertesz, he is also creating a visual anomaly without necessarily trying to allude to any particular narrative or motif. They are both working with the female nude (Figure 5).
Although there is most certainly an erotic quality in both of these individuals’ work, it never takes center stage; nor was it ever supposed to. However, the current author differs from Kertesz in that his method of distortion is explicitly directed by the creator. Kertesz uses spontaneity to manipulate his imagery and captures it when his masterful perspective decides that the image is interesting enough. In contrast to this, the current author applies the manipulation to his figures until they produce an interesting quality (Figure 6). It is important to stress that there is no right or wrong way to go about this process. It is the belief of the current author that he and Kertesz share an interest in this type of imagery because of its aesthetic qualities rather than any theoretical or philosophical conception. Figural distortion creates compelling imagery that entertains and engages the mind and is therefore artistic in its own right.

Conclusion

Andre Kertesz and his photography have been cited as a major influence by countless generations of photographers and artists. His photojournalism set the tone for the future of this genre for years to come. However, as an artist, his most profound statement can undoubtedly be seen in his Distortion series. For it is here that the artist was able to balance spontaneity and control in order to capture a body of work that allows one to glimpse into his personal aesthetic as a photographer and maker of art.
Works Cited


Appendix

Figure 1, Andre Kertesz, “Underwater Swimmer” 1917

Figure 2, Andre Kertesz, “Distortion # 168”, 1933
Figure 3, Andre Kertesz, “Distortion # 70”, 1933

Figure 4, Andre Kertesz, “Distortion #91”, 1933
Figure 5, Martin De Vita, “Figural Distortion- Emma 2”, 2011

Figure 6, Martin De Vita, “Figural Distortion- Adriana”, 2010