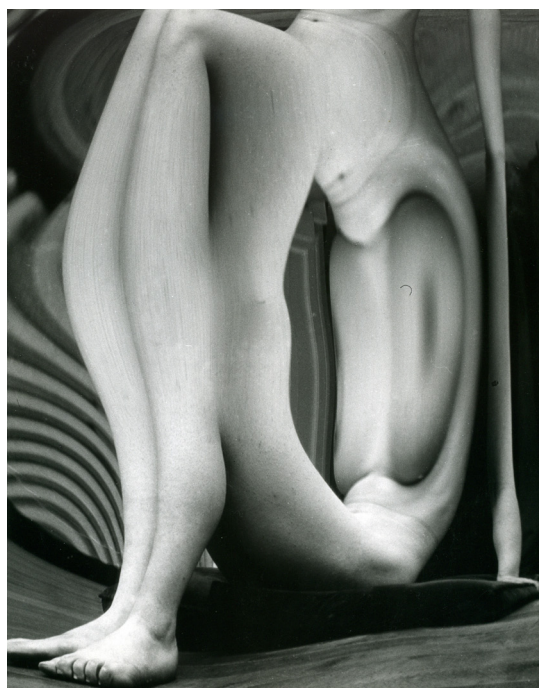
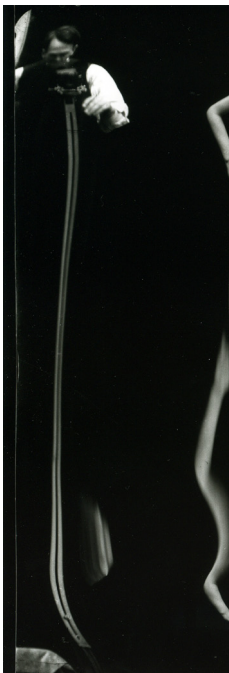


PEDER LUND



ANDRÉ KERTÉSZ • DISTORTIONS

ANDRÉ KERTÉSZ



Peder Lund has the pleasure of presenting photographs by the artist André Kertész from the series “Distortions” from 1933. The exhibition offers its viewers an insight into a unique and central aspect of Kertész’s career as a photographer. The photographs on display have gained a central position within the art historical context since 1933. The exhibition “André Kertész: Distortions” is unique as it is the first time the photographs are displayed in Norway; they thereby offer their viewers a unique encounter with Kertész’s meaningful and iconic photographs.

André (or Andor, its Hungarian equivalent) Kertész was born in Budapest in 1894 by Hungarian-Jewish parents. In 1909, his father, who had made a living selling books, died. His mother ran a pastry shop. Kertész’s background can be characterised as one burgeoning from the lower middle class; he studied at the Budapest Academy of Commerce, from which he graduated in 1912. The same year he received his first camera and began photographing together with his younger brother. His brother is the sitter in a number of Kertész’s most celebrated photographs from the period ending in 1925.



When Kertész was draught for military service during the First World War, he brought his camera with him. He never photographed war scenes or soldiers in military action. He photographed landscapes, portraits of soldiers, and soldiers performing leisure activities such as swimming, fishing, and moving troops. He was wounded in 1915 at the front in Ukraine. After rehabilitation he continued, amongst other things, as adjutant until the army was dissolved in 1918. Some of his pictures from this period were published in Hungarian magazines.

Around 1920, Kertész joined a group of young artists, primarily painters, who worked within the then contemporary Classicistic and New Objective (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) style. The formal language in Kertész’s pictures moves from Pictorialism’s imitation of painterly effects to a stricter, more objective and documentative reproduction of the motifs. The compositions are instilled with the neoclassical ideals of a pure and lucid arrangement of forms and plains to accent geometrical patterns. The motifs were rural and pastoral idylls and physical assuagement in nature. It was at the same time an art that referred to a healthier and better life outside the jungle of modernity, and alluded to a national Hungarian identity. Throughout this entire period Kertész held a variety of occupations without settling in any permanent position.

He left for Paris in 1925 with a three months’ residence permit, but stayed until 1936. He built a circle of friends consisting of fellow Hungarians who met at Paris’ many cafés. Through acquaintances, Kertész quickly obtained various enterprises as a photographer. As part of this milieu, Kertész met the journalist Brassáí, also a Hungarian, who gradually began following Kertész on his enterprises. Through the avant-garde in Paris, Kertész was confronted with different artistic ideals than he had previously encountered in Hungary. The avant-garde of the times either endorsed the Surrealists or such nonfigurative artists as Léger and Mondrian. Kertész acquainted himself with both milieus.

Kertész was lucky enough to see the tremendous upswing of illustrated magazines in the 1920s, followed by an insatiable demand for illustrations. A system of agents had yet to develop and photographers were closer to the editorial offices than what has been the case later on. Kertész frequently publishes in the most far-reaching periodicals that portrayed Paris as the capital of modern life. He made photographic



reportages about a variety of subjects, from portrayals of artists' studios to Parisian vagrants. His most famous reportage was published in *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* in 1929. The photographs were the first published pictures of life in the Trappist monks' principal monastery. This order's idiosyncrasy is that its members cannot converse, and Kertész's photographs impart the experience of how the individual finds its place in a collective. The tension between the individual and the collective is one of the central themes in Kertész's photography, as it was in the social discourse during the interwar period. Many of Kertész's photographic reportages were given an experimental graphical formulation, in concurrence with the tendency of the times to explore the graphical potential of visual material.

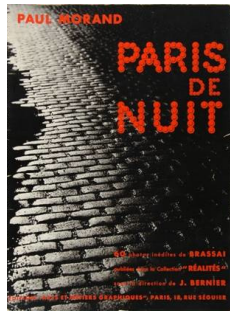
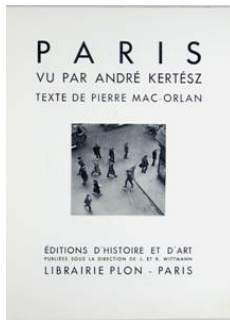
The publications ranged from actuality-, travel-, fashion-, and literature magazines to scandal-, beauty-, and humour magazines. Kertész's list of publications shows an enormous thematic spread and reflects his attitude to the photograph as a medium that was to impart the photographer's experience of people, events, and objects. A number of pictures were used as covers. Kertész came across as one of the times' leading European reportage photographers with his contribution to the development of the modern reportage, and he was a trendsetter with his formal language. The form of reportage that Kertész venerated divorced itself from photojournalistic images by not primarily aiming to convey an actuality content that changed from day to day, but rather to impart a more general content independent of whether it was tied to current themes or events. The genre that he was a part of developing is, in scholarly literature, referred to as the photographic essay. The photographic essay was also concerned with the creation of an internal analogy between the images, so that they, when assembled, could be read as a narrative. In these years, Kertész offered grounding impulses to photographers such as Brassai, Henry Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa. His position was acknowledged through his participation in the groundbreaking exhibition "Film und Foto" in Stuttgart, which was also shown in Paris. His pictures gradually found their way into collections.

At the same time as Kertész was acknowledged through his photographic reportages, he was met with understanding and admiration amongst artists. In 1927, he had his first exhibition in gallery *Au Sacre du Printemps*, which was counted as one of the avant-garde galleries. Typically enough, he exhibited together with a nonfigurative painter and the pictures were mounted as a demonstration of the equality between the two media. An effect of the mounting is that the abstract formal qualities of Kertész's photographs were highlighted.

One of Kertész's most well known pictures is *Chez Mondrian*, 1926. The picture came about as part of an "at home with" reportage on the artist's combined residence and studio, but ended up as one of Kertész's most popular pictures. Artistically, the picture is considered an icon within 1920s' formalist photography with its exquisite balance of compositional elements, which simplifies natural forms and creates a suspenseful interchange between geometrical figures such as circles, rectangles and triangles, and the refined treatment of light- and shadow effects that come to underscore this interchange.

The Belgian poet Paul Dermée (1886 – 1951), author of a treaty on poster art, active Dadaist and Surrealist, and co-editor of the periodical *L'Esprit Nouveau*, 1920-25, together with the architects Amédée Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, had equipped the exhibition with a poetic instruction where the two final lines go:

"In our home for blind monks and beggars
Kertész is a seeing brother"



This portrayal of Kertész indicates that his photographs were not primarily considered within a formalist context. The idiosyncrasy he was attributed with in his milieu rested on the recognition of how he, with his individual look at his surroundings, withdrew a universal human content from situations and environments.

During the 1930s, the market for Kertész's form of photography decreased. News journalism occupied a larger space in the media landscape. There was also a politicization of the photography Kertész was a stranger to. His portrayals of everyday life were grounded in a humanistic ideal, which tied the humane to the individual, and not to class or ethnic belonging. After 1933 the prospect on the German market had almost disappeared.

A way to get around the declining demand was to publish one's own photo books. Between 1933 and -37 Kertész published four books on different subjects. The best known is Paris vu par Andre Kertész with texts by the prominent author and reporter Pierre Mac Orlan (1882 – 1970), who at the time wrote tenacious anti-Nazi articles about the development in Germany. He was interested in photography and the relationship between text and image in reportages. Mac Orlan had previously written the text for the publication of Atget, photograph de Paris, from 1930, which was the first publication in book form with Eugène Atget's photographs. Atget's photographs, which were well known amongst the avant-garde artists in Paris from the mid-1920s, can be thought of as the model for the type of portrayals of Paris that Kertész and a number of other photographers executed in the 1920s and -30s. Brassai's book, with pictures of Paris photographed at night, came out in 1933. With its far more theatrical pictures, this is a book that differentiates itself from Kertész's book. What these portrayals had in common was that they both focused on the photograph's function as documentation and saw this aspect of the photograph as the point where the photograph separated itself radically from other forms of visual art. In this sense, the photograph, rather than simulating the effects of contemporary painting, was concerned with the development of its own formal- and iconographic language out of the idiosyncrasy of the medium.

The composition in Kertész's pictures is closed, something that contributes to the experience of intimacy. Kertész's photographs have been described as "miniatures," which underlines the intimacy in his pictures. He also avoids grand gestures and the monumental, and addresses details in everyday scenes and situations, which through surprising viewpoints, are disconnected from their context. This enables us to discover and experience these situations as surprising and new. He consciously composes through the formal effects that arise in the interplay of geometry and organic form, structure and chaos. The image germinates with the help of the distribution of lightness and darkness, through which the photographic medium's basis in the fixation of shadow effects on a material is underlined.

A characteristic that runs through Kertész's work, which can be identified as an element that creates style, is his use of large and dominating shadows. The shadow in a number of Kertész's works captures an almost emblematic function that points out the medium's origin in light- and shadow play. The play of forms, which is created between a lighted object and its shadow, is a formal touch in Kertész's photographs. The shadows can play the role of ambience-generating effects; in some images, they can create a ghostlike incantatory atmosphere, which can be used in a pure formal game. He has a strong predilection for the abstract ornaments that can emerge in the shadow of people, rods, benches, chairs, tree trunks, pipes, and balusters. The shadows often make up the main motif of the pictures, achieved by not including the shadow's reference.



Kertész's best-known self-portrait, characteristically enough, only shows the photographer's shadow. What is implied by the shadows is tied to something presumptively unpleasant and mysterious in the shape of a deformed doppelgänger. Within the art of Surrealism, it is often this role that is attributed to the shadow.

An important dimension of Kertész's documentative works was the important role he assigned to minute details and fragments, as means to communicate a greater whole. When people are included in the pictures, they are usually lonely wanderers, like isolated individuals in a mass, or entirely absorbed by an act such as washing their feet in the Seine, unaffected by or perhaps not attentive to, the photographer's presence.

From 1928, Kertész used the small-format camera Leica and developed an aesthetic where spontaneity in the perception of the motif is central. He isolates the important moments in a chain of events in the same manner as he isolates graphical moments in a motif, giving it a specific meaning. This concentration on "the settling moment" has later been seen as the typical attribute of Cartier-Bresson's pictures, but was developed as a methodical move by Kertész much earlier on.





DISTORTIONS

The nudes from 1933, which are now presented under the title “Distortions,” are united with Kertész’s production as one of a number of experiments he conducted with optical distortions, as the result of mirroring in various materials. Kertész’s awareness of how distortions of natural forms could create interesting abstract and confusing patterns that dissolved an object was raised when he photographed a swimmer in 1917. He made use of the effect in a humorous fashion for the first time on a cover for the magazine *Vu* in 1920, on which the magazine’s editor was portrayed in a convex funfair mirror.

The first description of this type of pictures as “Distortions” is from 1939 and is found in an article called “Paradox of a Distortionist” in the photo periodical *Minicam*. In the critique, the pictures are upheld as those, which had established Kertész as a recognised master. Kertész describe the images as “Distortions” himself when he publishes the article “Caricatures and Distortions” in the periodical *The Complete Photographer* in 1941. Kertész’s “Distortions” was published as a book in 1977 with a preface by the critic Hilton Kramer, who at the time was the chief critic at the *New York Times*. In a span of 35 years, the pictures had thus wandered from appearing as a humorous addition to a magazine, to be appreciated as some of the most highly artistically appraised and discussed photographs of the 1900s. That Kertész had yet to finish the subject can be seen from that he as late as in 1984 created another series of “Distortions” while staying in Paris, this time there is an empty room that is exposed to optical distortions.

Kertész had a well-developed sense for oddities and often gave his pictures a humorous turn. It is therefore not surprising that he in 1933 published two photographic series in the humour magazine *Le Sourire*. The first was printed March 12, and consisted of twelve images. They were printed with a text by the relatively unknown writer A. P. Barancy with the title “Fenêtre ouverte sur l’au-delà” (window open (on) to the other side), a title that is to reflect the uncertainty we as spectators experience when an object, or in this case – a body, is extracted from the surroundings in which we are used to see them and adopt forms that distort their natural proportions. The reality we meet is, in other words, “surreal.” Later that same year, in September 1933, Kertész published another five of the pictures under the headline “Kertész et son miroir” in the periodical *Arts et Métiers Graphiques*.

That Kertész placed the pictures highly amongst his production is evident as he included a selection of them in his first solo show in New York at gallery PM in 1937. The pictures were grouped together with images where he had photographed objects as a clock and a vase with a flower distorted in a mirror, under the collective title *Grotesque*. The pictures immediately raised adoration and were plagiarised by a number of photographers. The plagiarism irritated him to such an extent that he considered to take out a patent on the method. The great amount of plagiarism resulted in a decline in the interest in Kertész’s own “Distortions” to the benefit of the often far more humorous gimmicks the technique was used for, amongst them humorous portraits by Wegee.

The series emerged in a short span of time in the spring of 1933, and it is one of the few times in which Kertész worked in a studio – his preferred fields of production were streets, parks, public places and interiors such as scenes where life played itself out in all its ordinariness. Kertész only exceptionally photographed nudes, and characteristically enough, the nudes he is most known for are not traditional nudes in the extension of the painterly tradition of classical portrayals of the body.

The pictures were taken with the help of three mirrors and an older and a young model. He used a large format camera with a zoom lens. Kertész took two hundred takes. At the same time as the pictures can be argued to constitute a particular event in Kertész's production, the images include all those elements that we can connect with what is idiosyncratic with Kertész's style in his use of light and shadow, distortions and deformations as a result of reflections, mirroring and shadow play and the isolation of details that function as eye-catchers. The interpretations of these elements in Kertész's pictures can be connected to the experience of the destabilisation of a realistic image of the world, in the manner of traditional photography. Kertész's use of mirrors contradicts the traditional understanding of mirrors as something that recreates a motif – reflects it. In Kertész's mirrors, the motifs are rather partly unrecognisable, even if you don't lose touch with the recognisable, as bodily details are recreated with utter precision and draws the spectator back to the motif. Kertész plays with, and partly ionises, the idea that what we see in photographs is real. Rather than seeing the images as studies of the body, we may see them as studies of how the conditions in which we study an object affects our perception of it and how vulnerable we are also in our meeting with the photograph.





Kertész's nudes can be read in a range of different discourses. One of them is to read them as comments on the nude photograph's traditional functions, which to a considerable extent highlighted the female body as the incarnation of harmonic and beautiful form. The pictures may also be seen as an ironic comment on how the female body depicted as a sexual object, had been a primary motif for photographers through the history of photography.

In the captions that accompanied the pictures published in *Le Sourire*, the photographs' relationship to contemporaneous painting and sculpture are pointed out, and the forms in Kertész's pictures can be associated with the rubber- and amoeba like bodily forms to be found in the work of artists that worked with organic forms in the 1930s, the most known being Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Constantin Brancusi, Henry Moore. Salvadore Dalí had painted objects and natural forms that undergo metamorphosis. Also Hans Arp's organic sculptured objects are a relevant reference. As early as 1926, Kertész had created one of his most famous photographs, where a model that lies on a couch, imitates the distorted forms in a markedly abstracted sculpture on a pedestal next to the couch. In a photo historical context, it is natural to place Kertész's nudes in line with later experiments by Brassai, Hans Bellmer and Paul Strand, wherein different forms of manipulation created distortions of forms.

Kertész never became a member of the Surrealist movement, but it is natural to see his "Distortions" in line with the movement. We find one of the few direct contacts with the Surrealists when Kertész in the May issue of the periodical *Bifur*, which was edited by Georges Ribermont-Dessaigues, who was an opponent of André Breton, published three photographs.

It is naturally not a coincidence that Kertész uses the female body for his experiment, and in several of the pictures, he focuses on details, that to a considerable extent, identify women's gender in a metaphorical and literal sense. Representations of bodies are never neutral, but express comprehensions of the body either from an anthropological, social, functional, psychological or an aesthetic perspective. Kertész shows an awareness of what there is of both emotional and social dimensions with which bodies that are chosen for representation in another line of pictures where he has photographed men with amputated limbs who performed as beggars in the streets of Paris.

Kertész's "Distortions" has been frequently used by writers who have dealt with the portrayal of women in modern art, often from a psychoanalytical or feminist perspective. It is undoubtedly interesting how Kertész uses the body as an object in exploration with optical effects. By detaching the body from the usual perception of it, the body is estranged and perception itself is thereby placed in focus. They are also anonymised by the fact that the pictures can hardly be understood as psychological studies of the models' states of mind or personalities. The psychological aspect of the pictures rests on the photographer in the question – what is his intentions with the distortions – is it to say something about a comprehension of women, being either his own or a comprehension in society that he wishes to convey, and possibly comment on? It is well known that Kertész, as a young man, nourished an almost voyeuristic relationship to a girl that lived right across the street from him – is it from a voyeuristic perspective the pictures should be interpreted? Or are they to be understood as fetishes; objects that gets between the male reflection and diverts his attention from the male – according to Freud – unstoppable circling about the experience of the mother's lack of a penis? One cannot overlook that the thought may have crossed Kertész's mind, as Freud's ideas had already become clichés kneaded in innumerable literary publications and images. A series of pictures Kertész took of rag dolls were used as illustrations in an article by



the same A. P. Barancy, who for that matter also published in the magazine *Sex Appeal* about fetishes, in the July edition of *Le Sourire* in 1933.

Kertész's pictures can also be read as a comment on the space women occupy; a space which is completely destabilised due to the use of mirrors. Usually, we have no problem with identifying the physical frame around the body, but here it is not the body that is photographed, but the reflection of it in its physical surroundings. In that sense, one may argue that the pictures are not at all about the body, but about the disintegration of a spatial perception to which one has become accustomed. In that sense the pictures can be argued to have developed from the Cubists' deconstructed and fragmented spaces. The ruling disorder becomes an attack on the endeavour to instil the human body in a lucid space, which provides it with a defined place. The body is, in Kertész's photographs, transformed into an object we no longer have a firm grasp of; the body avoids us as a slippery bar of soap. Consequently, it escapes the kingdom of the gaze.

Few photographs from the 1900s are better suited to provide one with an understanding of the different means to treat the photograph than "Distortions." They are photographs that almost demonstratively place the question of what it is that the pictures represent; why they are taken; how they are taken; in which context they have been presented and, not least, how the context in which we see them can affect how we understand the pictures.

Between 1928 and -32, Kertész was married to Rózsa Klein (1900 – 1970). She took the name Rogi-André as homage to her husband, and devoted herself to portrait photography, a field wherein she specialised on pictures by leading artists and culture personalities of the times. In 1931 Kertész resumed his connection to Erzsébet Salamon, who he had been in a relationship with in Hungary between 1920 and -25. She had thrown him out with the message not contact her until he was making a living for himself and was able to offer her marriage. They were married in 1933. In Paris, she worked for Helena Rubenstein, and later established her own perfume factory in New York, which eventually developed into a fine business. She came to play a considerable role in Kertész's life, both as a urger privately and as the one who provided for their livelihood through large parts of the difficult years Kertész was to experience after the couple moved to New York in 1936. When Kertész stayed in New York after the war had finished, it was most likely because his wife's enterprise had become a well-established business.

In 1936, Kertész secured a contract with the photography agent Keystone. In light of the anti-Semitic atmosphere that spread through Europe, the relocation to New York was an act that probably saved his life. Despite of this, Kertész came to describe the following years as one long disappointment.

He worked as a studio photographer for some time, producing fashion reportages and advertisements, but he broke the contract and tried to gain entry into American reportage magazines, without much luck. A reason for this was changes in the graphical production, where image bureaus, and not least the magazines' editorial offices with the head of photography playing the lead, procured a far more controlling role than the photographers, who were increasingly anonymised. The form of personally involved photojournalism Kertész had stood for was no longer modern.



Kertész's name was known in the USA before he got there. Photographs were shown for the first time in New York in 1932 at gallery Julien Elvy in the exhibition "Modern European Photography," where he showed 23 photographs. Through the exhibition and through his extensive publishing, he was a well-known name in the inner circles of the world of photography and he had all reason to believe that he could establish himself in New York. The first years in New York, he became close to Baumont Newhall, who worked for the Museum of Modern Art and arranged the important exhibition "Photography 1839 – 1937" where Kertész was represented. The book, which accompanied the exhibition, is one of photo history's most central publications. The same year, Kertész held a solo show in New York and published his works in as central periodicals as Harper's Bazaar and Vogue. In 1941 he was represented at the Museum of Modern Art with a picture he bestowed from the exhibition "Image of Freedom," which was curated by Edward Steichen, the most well-known and powerful photographer at the time.

When the book *Day of Paris*, which was a new selection of pictures with motifs from Paris that was given a dynamic and contemporary layout, was published in the USA in 1945, it was well received, and in 1946 Kertész was given his first solo show in an American museum; the Art Institute of Chicago.

Kertész resumed contact with Europe when he in 1948 travelled to Paris and Budapest without it causing any immediate impact neither on his personal life situation, nor on his work as a photographer. In 1949, he secured an exclusive publication contract with Condé Nast, and was working primarily with architecture- and interior photographs. He travelled around in the USA and photographed celebrities' homes. The photographs were competent, but ordinary interior photographs. After some time's illness in 1961, he decided that he wished to spend the rest of his life photographing out of his own interests and terminated his contract from 1962. From now on, he called himself an amateur photographer. With this epithet, he wished to distance himself from commercial photography and give the impression that he no longer worked on commission, but was a free artist – a photographer who followed a personal project, independent of patrons and the changing interests and trends of the times.

His nearest surroundings was from now on the most important motif. He bought an apartment after accurate calculations of the visual angle of Washington Square, and pictures of the park and the life that developed within and around it, became his main motif from 1952. In 1975, a selection of the pictures was gathered in a book.

Kertész belongs to a generation of photographers who are first and foremost associated with classical black-and-white photography, but he also photographed in colours from 1951. He has also made a small number of Polaroids.

The rediscovery of Kertész began in 1962, when he participated in the International Photography Biennale in Venice and had a solo show in Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, which was hidden in South-France during the war. Consequently, the bridge back to his heydays as a recognised European photographer was re-established. His definite rehabilitation came in 1964, when John Szarkowski organised an exhibition with Kertész at the Museum of Modern Art. The following decade, he exhibited all over the world; in Tokyo, Stockholm, Budapest, London, Helsinki. In 1976, he was appointed as commandeur des Arts et Lettres, and in 1983, Légion d'honneur. He had an exhibition at Centre Georges-Pompidou in 1977. In 1984, he transferred all his negatives and his correspondence to the French state. Mission du Patrimoine Photographique in Paris, which is now a department of Jeu de paume, www.jeudepaume.org/, administers the

archive. In New York, he established the foundation “The André Kertész and Elizabeth Kertész Foundation.” Through the exhibition “André Kertész of Paris and New York” shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 1984, his important historical position was fortified. Later on, the exhibition “André Kertész” at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and Los Angeles County Museum of Arts, in 2005, with its accompanying publication, was the most important event and introduction to a renewed international interest and publication of his works.

Kertész is one of the great developers of style in 1900s photography. For many, the terms “style” and “photography” are almost contradictory. For most people, a photograph is identical to the motif that is portrayed. Nonetheless, similar to any pictorial medium, the increasing awareness of the importance of the pictorial medium itself, and our interaction with it, is applicable to photography; which technical premises are present; what is photographed at different times in different societies; how do we interact with the pictures in different ways and out of the different functions pictures fulfil, is amongst the questions it is relevant to ask in addition to focusing on the characteristics that are tied to the pictures’ technological and physical conditions, material qualities, duplication processes, and their composition and form. In such a turn from one-sided attention directed at the motif, to viewing the picture in a broader artistic, cultural, social and historical context, Kertész’s pictures are clarifying examples.

The example of Kertész provides us with an excellent introduction to the different institutional regimes 1900s photographers worked under: the early 1900s’ attempt to integrate photography into the arts on painting’s premises; the interwar period, and the first decade after the war, with its emphasis on photography as a medium for documentation and reportage, until the 1960s, when photography is integrated into the field of arts. Kertész lived through these phases in his enterprise as a photographer and it is not before Kertész’ *Distortions* is placed within a larger art- and photo historical context that it is possible to understand the exceptional position the works have achieved.



The text is written by professor Øivind Storm Bjerke, University of Oslo

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