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Geoffrey James

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by Geoffrey James



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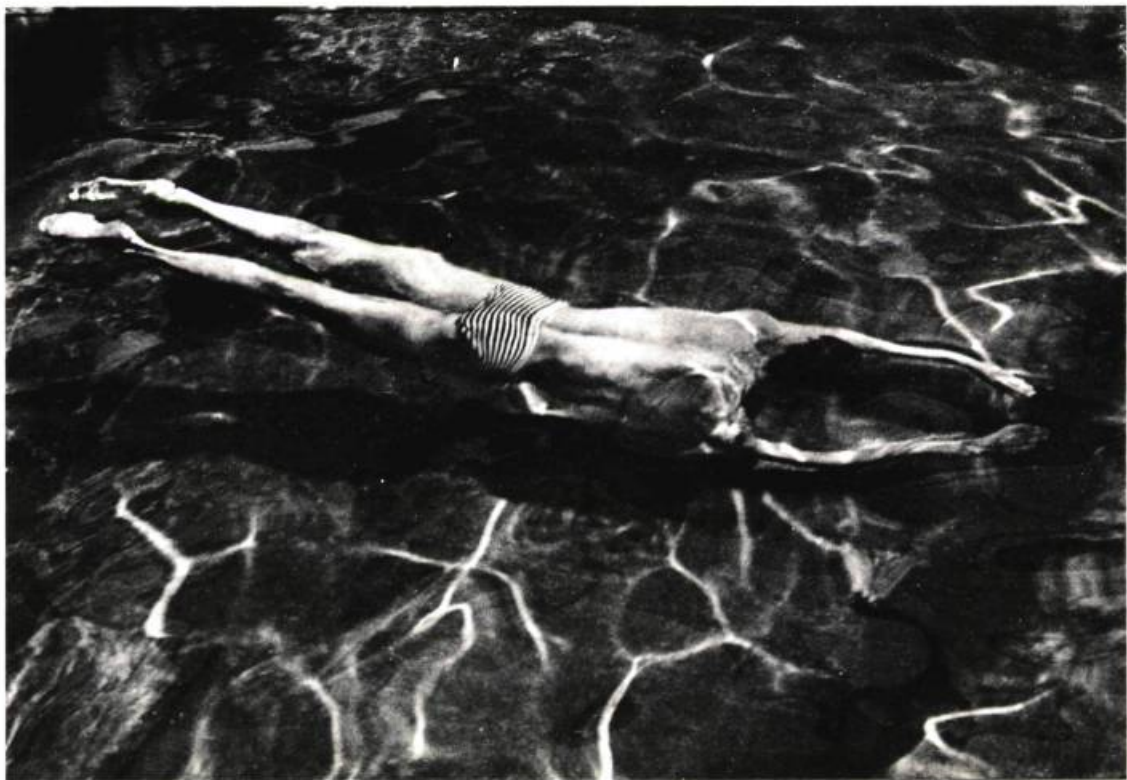
THE FIRST MEETING. January, 1968, at the Riverside Museum in New York, where Kertész is showing work with five other photographers. The Kertész room comes as a revelation. The photographs span 50 years, yet all the images are fresh, engaging, intensely humanistic. There are the early photographs of Kertész's Hungarian days, portraits and street photographs from the Paris of the 20's and 30's, chairs, chimneys, cityscapes, distorted nudes and hauntingly fragmented images of

New York. My wife and I are entranced; there are prints on sale and we buy three. "You must meet Kertész, he would enjoy talking to you," says the director of the museum. "But we are leaving soon," we reply. No matter. An hour later, André Kertész, now in his 70's, travels all the way across New York on a cold Sunday afternoon to talk to two complete strangers. In the gallery, he stops in front of a photograph of Mondrian's studio. "I tell you something funny about Mondrian," he says. "When I was photographing him I noticed his face was not symmetrical—and that he cut his mustache to balance it. I mentioned it and he said: 'Kertész, you have uncovered me. No one has ever noticed before.'" Before we leave, Kertész signs our prints and sees that we have a photograph of chairs taken in Paris in 1926. "You must have my Luxembourg chairs, too," he says. With characteristic generosity, he sends us the Luxembourg chairs within a week.

Photography has been ill served by the magazines supposedly devoted to it. There are few good critics, little understanding of its history, little critical superstructure. In some ways this is a blessing, since people approach photographs without awe, enjoying them in much the same way they enjoy cartoons. It also means that few photographers are given the recognition they deserve. Among his colleagues, Kertész is lionized. Listen to his pupil, Brassai, artist, sculptor, photographer and filmmaker: "When I met André Kertész (about 1926), I looked down on photography and almost despised it. It was a lucky meeting because, looking at his photographs and discussing them with him, I also discovered how this 'spiritless and soulless mechanism' had

enriched man's means of expression. I was trapped by photography. But the bird catcher was exceptionally good." Henri Cartier-Bresson put it even more succinctly. "Ah, Kertész. We all owe him a great deal." The debt becomes all the more apparent when one looks at the dates on Kertész's photographs. In the 20's, at a time when the small camera was considered to be about as serious an artistic tool as an Instamatic is today, Kertész taught a whole generation to go out into the street to capture the contingent and the unforeseen.

THE INTERVIEW. With Kertész, l'appartement, c'est l'homme. He and his wife Elisabeth live 12 floors above Washington square, looking down on a jumble of trees, rooftops, chimneys and fire escapes from which, with the aid of refined eye and a long lense, Kertész extracts order, geometry, even humor. His apartment is a European place, crammed with books, paintings, photographs, mementos and birds. There are birds everywhere—a fine metal rooster on a window sill, a wooden pigeon on a table and a wonderful, ornate bird cage full of carved birds. ("I like frogs, too," the photographer says parenthetically.) Kertész remains very much a European—courteous, gentle, always refusing to be hurried, as happy in French as in English. "I have always done things absolutely my way?" he says of his work. "There have been no influences. In Hungary I had not heard of any other photographers. We were pretty isolated. My only inspiration were the drawings in children's magazines. I was always dreaming of doing something in photography, but I did not know exactly what." It was in Paris that the dream was fulfilled. For 11 years, from



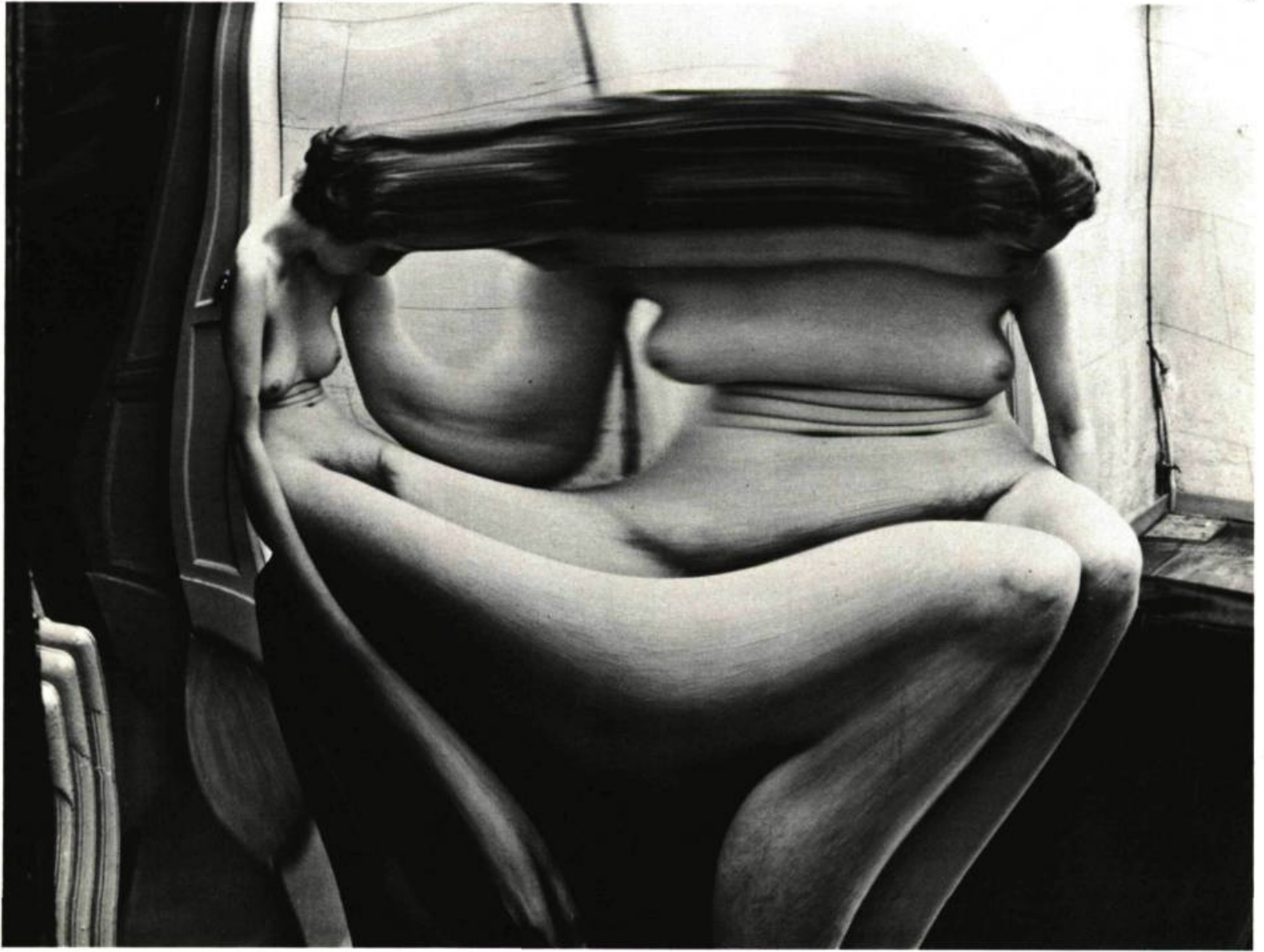
- 1—Man diving, 1917.
- 2—Budafok, 1919
- 3—Distortion 73, Paris, 1933

1925 to 1936, he lived a life that was "very poetical, very idealistic. We were not working for money, you know, just to make enough for everyday life. At the center of everything was the Café du Dôme—everybody was there, journalists, writers, artists, sculptors, painters, and we made their connaissance." In a period and place that was extraordinarily receptive to new ideas, Kertész had little trouble having his deeply individualistic photographs published: his highly personal reportages appeared in *Bifur*, the magazine of the intellectual avant garde, and in Roger Vogel's *Vu*, "the first intelligent weekly photomagazine. At this time I was creating something. Photojournalism? No. I did honestly what I felt, that's all. And it was accepted." In 1936, Kertész accepted an invitation to go to the United States on a one-year contract. In recounting his subsequent career, he will often as not begin a sentence with the word "malheureusement": "Malheureusement, Kertész received neither encouragement nor support from the large corporation picture magazines. Malheureusement, he spent 14 years of his professional life shooting house interiors. Happily, he has never stopped photographing for himself. "I am an amateur," he once



2

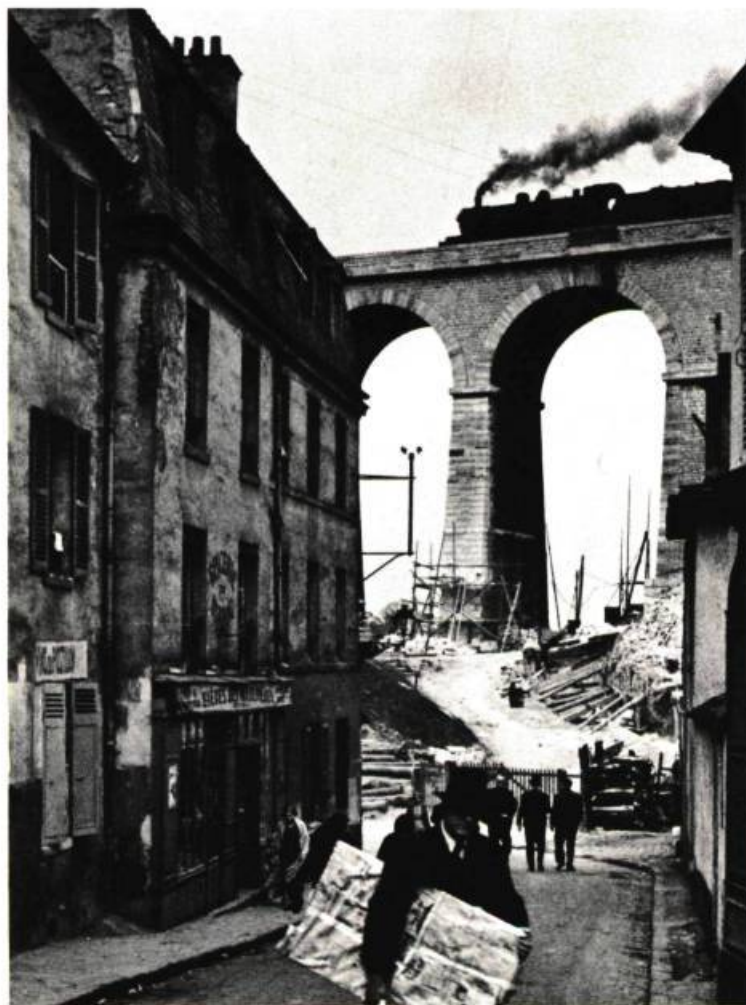
3



said, "and intend to remain one my whole life long." Kertész still takes photographs with the same obvious enthusiasm of old. Opening boxes of prints, he shows work that is only a few months old: pictures taken through a telescope from his apartment window, life in Washington square and a horrifying sequence of a black drug addict collapsing in the street. "I was perhaps cruel to have taken these," he says, "but there was someone there to help. Otherwise I could not have done it."

THE PHOTOGRAPHS. "A photograph," says Kertész with magnificent understatement, "is no more than the subject." In a poem about Kertész, the poet Paul Dermée wrote: "His child's eyes see each thing for the first time." Take for example, the *Man diving*, 1917. A simple enough subject, yet it took a Kertész to perceive it. The photographer was in an army convalescent home, recuperating from a wound that had paralysed one hand. "It was noon, a beautiful blue sky and reflections on the water. The others said: 'You are crazy, what are you doing?' I said: 'It

exists, it is interesting for me.'" *The bridge at Meudon*, 1928, a classic street photograph. "A nice quartier," says Kertész. "I was vagabonding, little camera in pocket. You feel something, you act. There is no time for contemplation." *Marc Chagall*: "A very warm man. Look at the picture—absolutely natural, no chichi." The distorted nude is part of a 1933 series that Kertész executed for a magazine called *Le Saurire*. A book, to be published in Germany, was planned, but was postponed "temporarily" when Hitler came to power. American publishers felt the pictures could be misconstrued as pornographic. Nowadays, the series has become something of a cult among young photographers. *Untitled*, New York, 1962. Kertész and Elisabeth were visiting a young friend at a mental asylum. The man in the foreground had recently lost his sight. "Yes," says Kertész, "a disturbing picture." *New York*, March 2, 1966. "I liked the wall, and the pigeon was flying up and down. The third time I got it just right." *New York*, 1969. "The first time I ever saw anyone use the fire-escapes. I like it."



- 4—Marc Chagall, 1933.
- 5—Meudon, 1928
- 6—New York, March 2, 1966
- 7—Untitled, 1962
- 8—New York, 1969.



7



8