The Reflexive and the Possessive View: Thoughts on Kertesz, Brandt, and the Photographic Nude

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12. The Museum of Modern Art canvas was acquired in 1969 from Marlborough Gallery, Krasner's dealer at the time. I am grateful to the Robert Miller Gallery for their courtesy in showing me the many Krasner works in their possession.
13. These phrases are taken from the following reviews of Krasner's show: R. G. [Robert Goodnough], *Art News* 50 (November 1951): 53; D. A. [Dore Ashton], *Art Digest*, 1 November 1951, 56, 50; Stuart Preston, *New York Times*, 21 October 1951; undated clipping, "Abstract and Real," October 1951, frame 123, Betty Parsons Papers, Archives of American Art. It should be said that Krasner was not the only abstract expressionist artist to receive poor notices following a solo show that year; the response to Newman's exhibition was equally disastrous. And of course the issue of being other than Pollock confronted male artists too. My emphasis here falls on the ways the "normal" phenomena of careers in art—criticism, exhibitions, and influence, for example—can become more problematic when the artist is female.

CAROL ARMSTRONG

The Reflexive and the Possessive View: Thoughts on Kertesz, Brandt, and the Photographic Nude

PABLO PICASSO IS WELL KNOWN for the equation between drawing and sexual capture established in his nudes, where pencil or pen, etching needle, or paintbrush circle continuously around the forms of the female body, turning it on its axis in a kind of virtual sculpture, providing simultaneous views of front, back and side, breasts, belly, crotch, and buttocks, confident in the ability to have and to hold it all, graphically. Possessive and unabashedly phallocentric, his drawing, so it has been claimed, equates visual and carnal knowledge, the artist's linear gesture and the lover's (or the rapist's) tactile grasping and physical breaching of the body of his mistress (or when it is more violent, of his victim).[1] In 1933 a photographer who was friendly with many of the Parisian avant-garde, including Picasso, undertook a series of photographs of two nude models for a soft-porn Parisian magazine. The photographer was the gentle André Kertesz, and the photographs were his anomalous *Distortions*, made with the aid of a glass-plate view camera and a fun-house mirror.[2] These images have the look of photographic equivalents of Picasso's possessive graphics. To take one example, *Distortion #147* (fig. 1) relies on the distorting mirror to push and pull the body about in as aggressive a manner as any of Picasso's images. The model's spine is stretched like taffy and curved over in an impossibly pliant arc, her breast thinned and elongated next to her diminished arm and lolling head, her hip and buttocks narrowed to a pelvic hinge suggesting the brittle, easily fractured shape of a wishbone, both thighs lengthened, the one beneath the other bent outward from a

FIGURE 1. André Kertesz, *Distortion #147*, 1933. All Kertesz photographs are reproduced from *Distortions* (London, 1977), courtesy the Estate of André Kertesz.

smooth shaft, dislocated, warped and widened, half liquefied and half ossified into a cancerous, elephantine growth of a knee. And to stretch it further, the total shape of that thigh and knee is phallic, suggesting, with the painfully acute apex of the hip joint resting atop it, that this body is violated by some monstrous phallic intrusion, distorted, precisely, by its own fetishization. With her back and her breast both visible, the inner and the outer portions of her hip suggested, *Distortion #147* is an optical approximation of Picasso's virtual sculpture, inadvertently articulating within itself the violent phallicism of the photographic gaze. That at least is one way of seeing it.

One might take the series of nudes made in the 1940s and 1950s by the German-born English photographer Bill Brandt in the same way. Equally the outcome of a brief encounter with French Surrealism (Brandt had worked in Man Ray's Paris studio), these photographs are also the products of optical distortion—in this case, that of a wide-angle pinhole camera.[3] Even less than Kertesz's *Distortions* do Brandt's nudes show all sides of the body—in a 1953 *East Sussex* nude (fig. 2), all we really see is an inflated backside. Yet in the suggestions of tactile apprehension found in the skin pores of the near view of the buttocks, which lie almost

in our viewing space, and in the dramatization of perspective—the aggressive visual grasp of the extreme poles of near and far—this photograph also suggests a possessive, manipulating gaze, a sculptural optics in which sight is given the power to almost-touch. It also implies a phallocentric perspective—sight as an intrusive, prosthetic extension of the body. To stretch a point yet again, this particular nude may even be seen as a phallic shape turned on its side, contrasted in its whiteness to that which it displaces, the black hairiness of a head that cannot be seen.

These are rather lurid fantasies about some anomalous views of the female nude. Yet the optics of these photographs merely dramatize a viewing situation that has often been ascribed not only to the nude as a genre but also to photography as a medium. The camera has frequently been named as a phallus; "shooting" films and "taking" photographs have often been described as acts of predation and violation, forms of symbolic possession.[4] Writers on film and photography have also tied the camera to the psychoanalytic constructs of fetishism and scopophilia, and to a phallocentric notion of sexual difference, in which the photographer assumes the position of dominating "male gaze" and the photographed object that of a passive other, a fetish whose meaning turns on its "lack."[5]

FIGURE 2. Bill Brandt, *East Sussex*, 1953. All Brandt photographs are reproduced from *Bill Brandt: Nudes, 1945–1980* (Boston, 1980), courtesy Edwin Houk Gallery, Chicago.

I too wish to address myself to the notion of the "male gaze"—but from a different perspective. The two sets of twentieth-century photographs that I have chosen to consider would seem, on first appraisal, to confirm these claims about the violent and violating phallocentrism of the photographic gaze, and its inevitable implication in the structure of sexual difference as it is usually rehearsed. Indeed I have chosen them precisely because of their seeming exaggeration of these claims. Yet I also believe that as sequences both series complicate, and even to a certain extent negate, those claims—it is the complication, the space between the exaggeration and the negation of the so-called "male gaze" that I would like to explore here.

To begin with exaggeration: one of the ways in which both Kertesz's and Brandt's distortions seem to exaggerate photography's "male gaze" is by dramatizing certain properties of the medium. In experimenting with the optics of the fun-house mirror, Kertesz, for one, seems to highlight the reflecting and refracting capacities of the camera's lenses, mirrors, and glass surfaces. The effects of reflection and refraction that the *Distortions* announce include the phenomena of doubling and dividing (fig. 3), as well as the fragmentation of the body into a set of isolated parts, the elision of those parts with their doubles, and the exclusion of other parts and of the body as a whole in the process (fig. 4). Each of these effects exaggerates properties of the medium: its division of the world from itself, its creation of duplicates, and its partialization of the visual field—*as well as* properties of the manipulative, fetishizing gaze. Thus the medium and this notion of the gaze seem to be equated with one another—the virtual sculpture that I mentioned earlier is declared to be a specifically photographic phenomenon.

Brandt's pinhole camera nudes exaggerate other properties of the photographic medium—not its optical equipment but its attachment to a point of view, to apertures, camera interiors, and frames; its world of light and dark; and its transformation of the visual field into print. Again each of these announced properties of the medium seems to promote the possessive, grasping, violating view.

To take the point of view first, Brandt's interior shots dramatize the outside presence of the viewer by their foregrounding of looming elements that threaten to spill into the viewer's space, and by their bold juxtaposition to distant and diminished elements. In addition, the presence of windows and doors and sometimes picture frames seems to provide mirror images within the photographs of the framing that produced them (figs. 5 and 6). Moreover, the dramatic photographic *chiaroscuro* of these nudes seems to strengthen the link between these ingredients of photographic seeing and voyeurism. Indeed, with their frequent alternation between front and back views, close and distant objects, inhabited and uninhabited foreground elements, these photographs problematize the relations between photographic subject and photographed object.

Brandt's views of the nude also partialize the body quite drastically, this time

FIGURES 3 and 4. Kertesz, *Distortion #49*, 1933 (*top*); and *Distortion #46*, 1933 (*bottom*).

attributing its fragmentation not to reflection and refraction but to the viewer's radical point of view, a point of view that seems to be granted the power both to encompass more than humanly possible at a given instant and to dismember the spaces and bodies that it sees (fig. 6). The empowered eye is also a cruel and killing eye, it would seem—and in these fragmented views of the female body the detached pleasures of voyeurism and fetishism are attached to the violent pleasures of mortification: the eye indeed as a kind of weapon.

Brandt's beach views of the 1950s move in closer to the body, focusing on the fleshy, vulnerable undersides of arms and torsos, on the pores and textures of skin, on folds and creases and points of contact, either contrasted to or equated with the forms and surfaces of nature—witness the elbow in *Vastérival, Normandy* (fig. 7) as it is likened to the rocky beach formations behind it, and the goose-flesh of the back and the underside of the arm as they are contrasted to the out-of-focus cliffs and pebbles of the beach.

Brandt's close-ups suggest the tactile, as much as the visual, apprehension of the body. While we may not know initially just how to identify the visual forms of elbows and knees and such as they appear within the frame, we are invited to feel, vicariously, the sensation of flesh resting on flesh, bone against bone, the warmth and cold of air striking sunlit and shadowed skin, the stretch of flesh across bone, the porous grain of human skin. In short, we are offered the fiction of a visual field transforming itself into a tactile one, and in that way too suggesting the possessive capacities of the eye, a suggestion that is enhanced by the faint insinuations of punishment found in the vision of flesh forced to lie against pebbles or sometimes against thistled fields of grass. But whether cool or warm or slightly cruel, these photographs' tactile allusions are always elided with their pronouncement of the grain and black-and-white flatness of the photographic print, as if the visual fiction of tactility were a specifically photographic one.

I have said that this is one way of seeing it, and have thus far tried to enact that way of seeing—as a female viewer who in the act of viewing must symbolically

take on another gender. Or must she? There is another way, and both sets of photographs in their different ways provide it. I want to turn now to their complication and negation of the structure of gazing.

To begin with, both sets of photographs announce quite loudly that the photographic capture of the body is only and irrevocably fictive. Kertesz accomplishes this with his emphasis on the ephemeral, dimensionless surface of the mirror, while Brandt does so with his stress on the artificial and distancing construct of the frame, and with his obvious transformation of flesh into contrasty, grainy photographic print. Thus the same qualities that equate the medium with the possessive gaze also declare the powers of that gaze to be only symbolic and never actual.[6]

Moreover, both sets of photographs also disturb the phallocentric construct of sexual difference. In the writing on film and photography, the concept of narcissism has had an important place—as the complement to the pleasure in looking at female others, that which helps to define the self this side of the camera as the subject, the "I" which is prior to, in control of, and different from the object, the female "it" that side of the camera. The narcissistic gaze, so it goes, identifies with mirrors of its (male) self, while the scopophilic gaze locates the (female) other as its object, subject *to* and different from the mirrored self with which it identifies. Thus the identificatory process of narcissism has been judged to serve and to

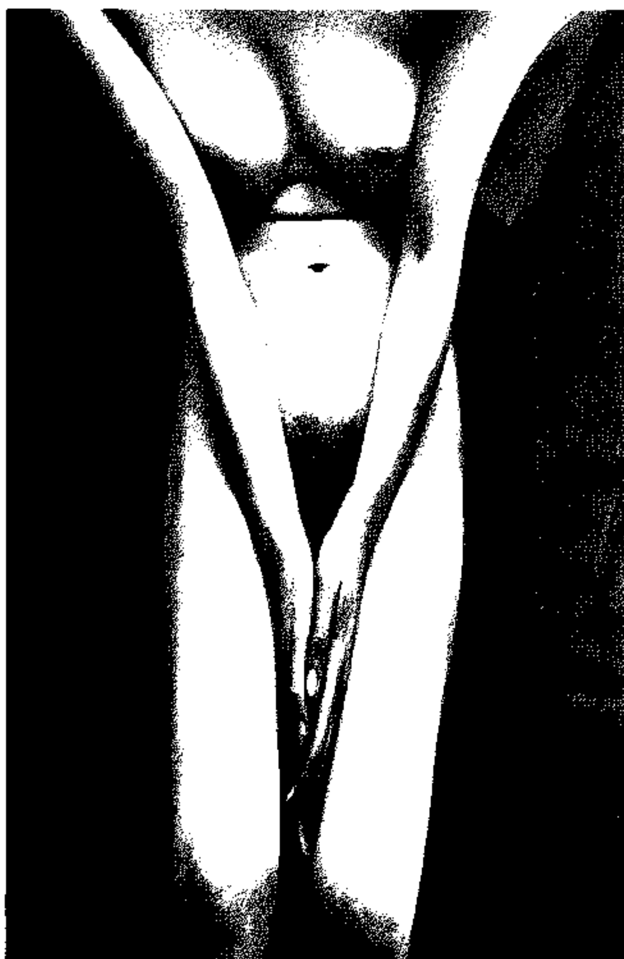
FIGURES 5, 6, and 7. Brandt, *Belgravia*, 1951 (*opposite left*); *Hampstead*, 1952 (*opposite right*); *Vastérival, Normandy*, 1957 (*right*).

FIGURES 8 and 9. Kertesz, *Distortion #52*, 1933 (*right*); and *Distortion #167*, 1933 (*opposite*).

underscore the scopophilic structure of sexual *difference*.[7] Kertesz's use of mirrors, which mirror the equipment of the camera, would seem to reflect the narcissistic gaze (fig. 3). And yet it is the female model, and not the photographer's self, that is caught in those mirrors. Where one might expect to be confronted with one's own identical shape, instead one faces in the mirror the reflection of a different shape—the body of another. So here where we might *expect* to find sameness we find difference. Moreover, the reflection of that other body is so distorted that it is not even identical to itself. Nor does the mirror provide an *identical* reflection of the camera's equipment—instead, the mirror makes the camera different from itself, different from the optics of its lenses and glass plates. So while in Kertesz's originally tiny prints the reflection on the warping surface of the mirror is elided with the impression left on the fine glass surface of the photographic plate, it is also *other* than it—large, curved, and anamorphic rather than small and rectangular, flat and fine, and optically "normal." Now whereas all of these effects of reflected difference might seem to enhance the situation of otherness by carrying difference so far that it even stands in for identity, at the same time the meaning

of difference is disordered by being equated with a reflected likeness. The relationship between sameness and difference has been fundamentally confused.

There also seems to be no room for the photographing subject here—no place for what we have been calling the "male gaze." In certain of the *Distortions* (figs. 8 and 9), the female model seems to be gazing at herself; indeed, the warp of the fun-house mirror distends her reflection toward the top of the frame, and thus seems to depend on her leaning close to look. It is she who would seem to be the possessor of the gaze, her eyes that seem to travel from her own distended face and shoulders and chest to her breasts and belly and thighs. She mirrors herself and in so doing stretches and diminishes and alters *herself*—it is after all the mirror and her position in relationship to the mirror that alter the look of her body, and *not* the controlling outside gaze of the photographer and his



camera (which merely wait upon, and in turn reflect, hers and the mirror's reflexive reordering of each other's surfaces). Even in a *Distortion* like *#147* (fig. 1), which *looks* so much like an illustration of the phallocentric, possessive gaze, the model's availability is *to* the mirror; she exists in relationship to it, deflecting the viewer's relationship to her *through* it. So the relationship between a body and its own reflection displaces the relationship between a viewer and a different body—the passive process of mirroring and reflecting replaces the active process of looking and possessing. Or to put it differently, scopophilia is on the *same*, not the other, side of narcissism: the (male) love of looking at a (female) other is collapsed with, rather than complementary to, the love of looking at one's (in this case, female) self.[8] The gender of the viewer is made uncertain: seeing in the masculine case is deformed into seeing in the feminine case and back again. And what of fetishism in all of this—the active transformation of the *informe* into form, of absence into objectified presence, of the other into an image of the same?[9] The fetish has turned itself around and become a wavering reflection—form reflected as the *informe*, presence become its own absence, the same mutated into the other. This is the other way of seeing that the *Distortions* propose, and they say something to the effect that scopophilia is not the only way or love of looking.

It would be difficult to see Brandt's nudes in the *same* different way—they seem to embody the more usual, complementary relationship between the positions of identification and voyeurism. Film-inspired and dramatically voyeuristic in their peep-show vantage points, their props and settings complement the drastically foreshortened and fragmented bodies within them—here it is the windows and doors and other frames juxtaposed to body parts that serve as the mirrors of the photographer's viewing self, symbols of the barrier between him and the bodies he views, the difference between his controlling absence and their controlled presence, between his framing and their objectification. Yet here again there is another way of seeing that Brandt's *Distortions* suggest—more powerful, to me, than the "straight" way of seeing them, and more powerful than Kertesz's off-the-cuff, once-in-a-lifetime series. For across the barrier suggested in them there also flow strong identificatory currents—possibilities of identification *within* rather than *against* difference. In Brandt's nudes there are almost always body parts looming up in the foreground so close to the viewer's domain that they almost seem to belong *to* the viewer—to be "his" own body parts, extensions of "his" own body. This is suggested with particular force in Brandt's 1951 *Belgravia* interior (fig. 5), where distended thighs bend up and out and back from the frame into the photograph's distance, pointing away to the window in the background, which mirrors the image's frame. Doubly depending on the frame, those legs suggest a view *from* as well as *onto* the body. Patently female legs, they also suggest the photographer's own limbs, as if he has changed sexes and become the model he photographs, thus eliding the positions of male subject and female object. The apparent tactility of the nearest thigh enhances that effect, calling upon tactile

desires that are as reflexive as they are possessive, as self-oriented as they are outwardly directed.

It is true that most of Brandt's nudes constitute views of the body that we rarely or never have of our own, from the *East Sussex* nude with which we began (fig. 2), with her back and buttocks turned to us, to close-ups such as those of the undersides of feet and the like (fig. 6). Yet so forcefully tactile are they and so implicated in the *chiaroscuro* of Brandt's dreamscapes that they seem to bypass their existence in a visual field separate from the viewer's corporeal domain, and to relocate themselves in a phenomenological space where tactile memories are wedded to visual apprehensions, no matter what the sex of the body seen or of the body doing the seeing. To use Brandt's own words, they "convey the weight of a body or the lightness of a moment"[10]—indeed they seem not to exist in visual space at all but in a groping tactile field blind to the differences between subject and object, between bodies and separate selves. Even Brandt's habit of eliding the microstructure of skin with that of the photograph (see, for example, fig. 7) tends to support this blind vision, focusing the gaze on what is normally a blind spot, a surface where the "what" and the "how" of photographic representation are impossibly conjoined—where the fiction of touchability is fused with the impossibility of touching, and where the blindness of close-up vision is matched to the visibility of photographic means. In short, we are asked to gaze at a subvisual place where the difference between touch and sight, subject and object, between the corporeal domain of the viewer and the visible domain of the viewed, is barely perceptible (or at least where it just begins to split apart, which is about the same thing, so these photographs seem to suggest).

Views of bodies that seem to belong to, or to reflect back on, the corporeality of the viewer might well seem to enhance the possessive power of the viewer—his (or her) capacity to *think* the body of the other as his (or her) own. But that is not what I mean. For it is precisely the power actually to possess the other through the image that is negated in the emphasis on barriers, frames, and photographic means and that is, precisely, *replaced* by the desire to reflect upon one's own corporeality, and upon the peculiar, spectral corporeality of the photograph. (The two kinds of reflection allow for and support one another—where the perception of photographic means ends by deflating the project of corporeal possession, it seems to encourage the activity of corporeal reflection.)

With all the slight suggestions of a cruel vision that could be discovered in these photographs, it might also be argued that I am really speaking of empathy for the *object* of a kind of sadomasochistic regard—that one really crosses the boundary of difference by identifying with the object of that regard, by changing places, effectively, and imagining oneself as the (female) object rather than the (male) subject of a possessive gaze. Such an argument, of course, would simply maintain the structures of gender difference and "male gazing"—for all it really means is cross-undressing.

FIGURE 10. Brandt, *London*, 1956.

But that is also not what I mean—for I am attempting to speak and to look from the point of view of the subject, not of the object, and to do so in such a way that it alters the "normal" relationship between the two. Besides, there are photographs much better suited to illustrating an argument about empathy than those I have chosen: from the sophisticated plays on gender in the photographs of the Parisian Surrealists,[11] to the vigorously phallocentric nudes of Edward Weston,[12] to Brandt's own campy works of the 1970s, caricatures of the sadomasochistic gaze and to my mind much less powerful than his earlier nudes. Such images of the female body admittedly represent the dominant trend in photographic viewing. So the claims I am making have to do with particular cases—though I do want to use them to show that neither the genre nor the medium are always or necessarily or *ever* totally described by the construct of the "male gaze." (It is only with too great a faith in a theoretical premise—in this case Freudian discourse, which is itself fundamentally phallocentric—that the one way of seeing is the only one, rehearsed over and over, proven with every illustration chosen.)

Brandt's nudes, I want to claim, ultimately place us in a different relationship to the female body than that of the "male gaze." Not entirely free from it—for they do frequently announce its characteristics—they also offer us another love

besides the fetishistic, objectifying one of scopophilia, another pleasure besides the distanced one of voyeurism, and another power besides that of possessing and dominating another. Instead, or also, the love of our origins, of our tactile memories and moments of physical absorption; the pleasure of being descended from, connected to, and identified with the body from which we are also separated; the power of the female body quite specifically, and of our own corporeality, over ourselves—the power, one might say, of the so-called pre-Oedipal stage—not, however, as a regressive moment but as a long-lasting residue that accompanies other drives. That is the sum of the difference, I think, between the power of the spread-eagled, available, muscular physicality of certain nudes by Weston, for example, and the power of the great, self-contained, maternal body of this 1956 nude by Brandt (fig. 10), whose blinding, looming flesh is barred to, but dominant over, our diminished gaze,[13] a gaze that wants to forget itself in touching. (Such an image might even suggest that the straight, Freudian structure of scopic difference—where the meaning of the female body is its difference from the male—is itself an inversion of a more fundamental, a more *original* order of being, one in which it is the masculine, more than the feminine, that became different.)

That is a hesitant suggestion. This is by way of an unsatisfactory conclusion. Where Kertesz's odd distortions make difference visible across the barrier of identity, Brandt's pinhole views make identification rememberable across the barrier of difference: these are just two possible permutations of the reflexive view, and inversions of the possessive view that the photograph may pronounce as part of its very means. Even if they are anomalous sets of images, or perhaps because they are, I also want to claim that Kertesz's and Brandt's permutations and inversions of "straight" viewing are as specifically photographic as is the so-called "male gaze." They differ from, say, the graphics of a Picasso in their means—it is their means that allow for the different relations between corporeality and visibility, identification and eroticism that they propose. It is photographically that they find a place for differently gendered viewers and permit viewers to occupy different places. And it is photographically that they offer an alternative to the always repeated scenario proposed by Freudian discourse, something else *beside* that. Rather than the "male gaze," a "female" gaze? Well, no, but perhaps something more interesting than either, in the liminal area between the two.

Notes

1. Leo Steinberg, "The Algerian Women and Picasso at Large," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York, 1975), 174–92.
2. André Kertesz, *Distortions* (London, 1977); Sandra S. Phillips, David Travis, and Weston J. Naef, *André Kertesz: Of Paris and New York* (Chicago, 1985), 46–55.
3. Bill Brandt, *Nudes, 1945–1980* (Boston, 1980); *Behind the Camera: Photographs, 1928–1983* (New York, 1985), 62–69; *Shadow of Light* (New York, 1977).

4. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1977), 14–15.
5. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Philip Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York, 1986), 198, 200–202; Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish," *October* 34 (Fall 1985): 81.
6. See Sontag, *On Photography*, 13.
7. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."
8. It was suggested to me that Kertesz's *Distortions* simply share a familiar pornographic fascination with women in narcissistic, or even lesbian, situations. Certainly that is a dimension of these photographs; moreover, such a view of them fits with their magazine destination. But I also believe that the *Distortions* distort, invert, and generally play around with the topos of female narcissism as well.
9. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in *Collected Papers*, trans. James Strachey, 5 vols. (New York, 1959), 5:198–204.
10. Aaron Scharf, *Bill Brandt Photographs* (New York, 1970).
11. See Rosalind Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism" and "Corpus Delecti," in *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York, 1985), 15–112.
12. See Hollis Frampton, "Impromptus on Edward Weston," *October* 5 (Summer 1978): 49–69.
13. The perception of this nude as a dominating female body is encouraged when the image is blown up on a screen, approaching cinematic scale, as in a slide presentation; it is, granted, rather diminished when seen in normal book- or exhibition-print size.