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Pushing Boundaries: The Variable Concept of Identity in *Satiric Dancer*

The subjects depicted in André Kertész's *Satiric Dancer* (1926)—a woman on a couch, a statue on a side table, and pictures hung on walls—are commonplace and ordinary in the context of everyday life, yet they appear exceptionally strange within the context of each other and in the context of the photograph as a whole. The woman, statue, and images on the wall are comprised of different matter, physically separated in space, and visually distinct from one another. These elements, however, are strikingly interrelated through their formal and thematic qualities.

Kertész's subjects represent myriad facets of the concepts 'body,' 'gender,' and 'art.' Through the embodiment of contradictory or seemingly illogical attributes, each subject defies any singular definition of its existence. Instead, any one of these entities can be understood as being simultaneously human and inorganic, masculine and feminine, voluminous and flat, work of art and decoration. The thoughtfully juxtaposed elements of *Satiric Dancer's* composition encourage the viewer to question the solidity of the perceived boundaries between each physical component in this image. Kertész's photograph suggests that identity is a transmutable characteristic that is determined by context; the distorted interior space is a metaphor for the elasticity of matter's essence and the difficulty that humans face in attempting to frame and define it.

Satiric Dancer presents a view into the corner of an unremarkable interior room. The two visible walls and wood floor are not well maintained; patchy stains and streaks of discoloration cover the surfaces. An upholstered couch and carved wood side table are nestled into this corner, yet they seem out of place. A white sculpture of a male torso rests on the table.

Two two-dimensional decorative images hang on the wall: one drawing on an unframed sheet of white paper (the subject matter of which is indiscernable due to its small size), and one framed reproduction (mostly likely a photograph, lithograph, or other printed illustration) of what appears to be a stone statue of the female form. The state of the room's disrepair and the lack of homey details (such as carpet, wallpaper, or moldings) hint that this is not a domestic space; the high presence of art objects and possible paint smears covering the room are characteristics which suggest that this space may be an artist's studio. The bright light sources, aiming directly onto the couch and emanating from near where Kertész and his camera would have been, are similar to studio lighting. The starkness of this space provides a non-distracting backdrop against which the subjects are emphasized and dramatized.

The visual evocation of a studio space is a telling choice for the setting: Kertész guides the viewer into a venue where the contemplation of art and form is expected and encouraged. The photographic medium allows the viewer to directly identify with the artist's point of view—the viewer sees exactly what Kertész saw the moment he looked through the viewfinder of his camera and released the shutter. The viewer looks at *Satiric Dancer* as if from within the physical environment of an artist and from the actual visual perspective of the photographer. Thus, the viewer is empowered to draw upon his or her own creative and intellectual capacities when analyzing the subject matter of this image.

Kertész's perspective on the scene renders a distorted view of the interior space. Because the viewer looks down into the corner from an oblique angle, the camera seems to have been positioned fairly high off the ground. The floor seems to slope downwards toward the bottom of the picture plane, which is inconsistent with how the space would appear if the camera were set up parallel to eye level. The space opens up—the angles between floor and wall seem to exceed

ninety degrees. This unusual point of view thwarts expectations of how the space might actually exist (as a rectangular enclosure defined by right angles). The manipulation of perspective disrupts traditional approaches to reading and analyzing the space. By placing the viewer in an unexpected vantage point, Kertész encourages the viewer to figuratively approach the conceptual content of the image from a similarly unconventional angle.

The woman on the couch is positioned close to the center of the photograph, and thus she becomes a central focus. She lies across the length of the couch, maximizing the volume of her body through the splayed positioning of her limbs. She commands lots of visual attention. She actively engages with the artist—and consequently with the viewer—by looking directly into the lens of Kertész's camera. With her high heels, revealing black dress, and inviting smile, the woman exudes an alluring, sensual quality. Despite her enticing appearance, the viewer is somewhat unsettled by the woman's peculiar placement in the context of the photograph. The soft curves of her breasts, buttocks, and hips are contrasted by the sharp angles and points of her arms, legs, and shoes. Her voluptuous feminine qualities mirror those of the framed statuette image, and her more aggressive, angular qualities are echoed in the pose of the masculine torso sculpture. Her pose seems freakish and her relationship to space unnatural; her left arm looks oddly long and practically deformed because it extends off of the couch and nearly grazes the floor at an angle that the viewer cannot visually reconcile. The inherent contradictions that describe this woman's nature are representative of the many perplexing issues of identity that characterize *Satiric Dancer*.

The grayscale tonal range in this gelatin silver print causes the subjects to appear very similar in color, which enhances their visual relationship. The tones of the sculpture, drawing paper on wall, reproduction of the statuette, and the woman's skin are all very pale. They stand

out against the darker walls, floor, and furniture. Visually, these light-colored objects form a pastel ring around the upper section of the composition, across which the viewer may trace formal and conceptual interactions. The four constituents of this ring play off of one other, lending new understandings of their individual essences through their connection to the others’.

The concept of ‘body’ is a significant theme in three of Kertész’s subjects. The formal echo is explicit between the woman, sculpture, and framed picture of a statuette. Each manifestation of ‘body’ is entirely different, yet they share obvious formal qualities. In each instance, the shape and form of the body are somewhat distorted. The smooth, white sculpture on the table shows the strong, dynamic lines of a body in motion. The maker of this statue has chosen to not include a head or most of the arms and legs. The torso stands on its own, and thus the actual potential for power and movement is negated by the absence of necessary body parts. The contrast between the woman’s black collared dress and her milky white skin gives the uncanny illusion that her legs, arms, and head are separate, floating entities. Strangely, the woman’s body looks less vivacious than the inanimate torso beside her; her bodily components are strewn awkwardly and lifelessly on the seat. Following this reading, the sculpture’s missing appendages could be replaced by the corresponding severed parts on the couch. When combined, the sculpture and the woman would form one complete, fully-abled body.

The framed image on the wall depicts a statuette that looks as if were carved out of stone. Its pose mirrors that of the sculpture on the other side of the room—both white figures have one raised arm and one arm down by their sides. The statuette also seems to have unnaturally short arms. Although they share several formal similarities, these sculptures also represent completely opposite bodily characteristics. The sculpture on the left is an athletic, muscular male figure; the statuette is a representation of a curvy, fleshy female body. The male sculpture exists in three-

dimensional space, and the statuette is merely an illustration on a two-dimensional surface. The former is physically present in the room, while the latter is a printed image of a sculpture that exists somewhere else in the world. The statuette's image may hang on the wall, but her essence is elsewhere.

This displacement and duplication of the statuette's identity exemplifies Kertész's suggestion of variable reality as expressed in *Satiric Dancer*. The statuette's utter flatness in contrast with the strong material presence of the male sculpture highlights the dislocating effect that reproduction has on an original work or art—or on a body in space. The statuette's image is highly evocative of space and volume, yet in reality it occupies no more space than the drawing on the opposite wall. This same paradox is inherently imbedded in the photographic medium; Kertész's use of photography further emphasizes the complicated nature of identity, which is already present in the objects depicted in the photograph itself. The viewer must acknowledge that, for example, the torso sculpture is actually equally as flat as both the drawing and the image of the statuette because they are all merely likenesses generated by chemicals and light. The sculpture is both two-dimensional and three-dimensional, depending on the context in which it is being discussed (as the object exists in reality, or as its image appears in the photograph). Thus, every entity in *Satiric Dancer* can be described as simultaneously present and absent in the viewer's space. Photography as a medium confounds the notion that identity is a single, clear-cut, or objective concept.

As a group, the four subjects are representative of many types of artwork. As suggested by the title, the woman can be understood as a dancer—a person whose body becomes art through conscious poses and movements. However, this woman mimics the torso sculpture to the extent that she becomes akin to a sculpture herself—Kertész has frozen her in this position

indefinitely. Because the viewer cannot make out the subject matter of the drawing, it becomes little more than abstract decoration on the wall. Similarly, the image of the statuette becomes little more than decoration since it is exhibited in a picture frame. It represents a three-dimensional artwork, but the frame that encases the picture negates this illusion of depth. The statuette is both sculpture and illustration at the same time. The torso sculpture expresses duality because it is partly realistic yet highly abstract in its treatment of the human form. With the multiplicity of artistic attributes present in each subject, the viewer questions the traditional understanding of art forms and styles as mutually exclusive categories.

In *Satiric Dancer*, objects do not have to be characterized as simply one thing or another—the subjects of the photograph take on many properties and attributes that expand beyond the narrow, conventional definitions of ‘woman,’ ‘sculpture,’ ‘drawing,’ or ‘statuette.’ These entities exist as many different things at once, each forming a collective, comprehensive identity that defies artificial and physical boundaries such as language and space. By grouping the interrelated subjects together in this composition, Kertész encourages the viewer to freely make observations about the ways in which they relate to each other, both formally and conceptually. As the viewer discovers, much of the subjects’ meaning and significance is derived from the presence of the others—it would therefore be insufficient to discuss identity as something isolated from the context of the photograph as a whole. With *Satiric Dancer*, André Kertész suggests that identity is a subjective notion that cannot be clearly defined. The outer limits of the subjects’ identities meld, stretch, and swell as the objects interact with each other—and thus the walls and floor visually bend and open up to accommodate them.



André Kertész, *Satiric Dancer*, 1926, gelatin silver print.