

Twisted Bodies

Aspects of Female Contortionism in the Letters of a Connoisseur

Karl Toepfer

Contortionism is an ancient, eerie mode of bodily performance whose pleasures invariably disclose a domain, and degrees within it, of the perverse. It is a category of acrobatics and gymnastics, and nearly all contortion acts are exaggerated expressions of common gymnastic stretching exercises (such as those illustrated in Bott 1989:93–105). But only some bodies, with genetically designated muscles and ligaments, can achieve the pliancy required to fascinate a spectator. Success as a professional gymnast, dancer, or trapeze artist is much more accessible than amateur success as a contortionist. Yet despite the powerful impression aesthetically contorted bodies leave upon audiences, published commentary on such performances remains very obscure and largely incidental, perhaps because any serious discussion of contortionism cannot escape the urge to explore “disturbing” expressions of erotic pleasure in the performer as well as the spectator. The spectacle of a body twisting into “unnatural” configurations invariably haunts the spectator, for it appears as if the contorted body transcends either a normal threshold of pain or an acceptable juxtaposition of body parts: it is not possible to place the feet next to the mouth without magnifying perception of the pubic zone, and of course, when the head moves very close to the genitals, the spectator observes a “creepy” displacement of the “proper” distance between the brain and the sex organ. Contortionism therefore constructs a complex, contradictory image of the body as a site of extreme pliancy, extreme strength (or boldness), and extreme vulnerability, and it is this tension between extremes of physical expression that accounts for the visceral *excitement* of the spectator—which has the power to make love of the performance drift into convoluted realms of *obsession*.

Contortionism is an ancient entertainment. Evidence of it dates from ancient times, when contortionists in Egyptian and Greco-Roman cultures apparently performed with acrobats, tightrope dancers, and athletes in theatrical companies dominated by star performers. These companies presented tragic pantomimes in monumental theatres, stadiums, and villas (see, for example,



1. Salome dances before the banquet of Herod in a frieze sculpture ca. 1410. (Photo in Daffner 1912; courtesy of Karl Toepfer)

Tani 1954; Lexová [1935] 1964). During the ensuing centuries of the Christian era, contortionism severely declined as a popular entertainment and became an occasional feature of bizarre aristocratic amusements, along with jesters, dwarves, dancers, acrobats, and magicians. A superb representation of a medieval contortion act appears in a nave sculpture (by an unknown artist, ca. 1410) of the great cathedral in Rouen. It depicts Salome dancing before the banquet of Herod; Salome dances on her hands while coiling her upside-down body so that her feet dangle just over her head as she stares away from her audience toward the ground before her (Daffner 1912; see plate 1). Contortionism did not revive as a popular entertainment until the 18th century, but only in the 20th century has female contortionism completely eclipsed male contortionism for the favor of audiences. In the 1890s, Mademoiselle Bertoldi, the “serpent woman,” opened up the field of female contortionism by performing in tights at European variety theatres (Holmes 1899).¹ Commentary on contortionism was entirely the work of connoisseurs and mostly anecdotal, when it was not fixated on technical and physiological procedures of performance, as in Emilio Baumann’s *Meccanica umana* (1882) and Zucca’s *Acrobatica e atletica* (1902). Female contortionists favored signifying practices that turned performances into intense emotional dramas involving skillful manipulation of lights, music, props, glamorizing costumes, and voiceover narrations to create a mysterious atmosphere of voluptuously twisted bodies. Occasionally, female contortionists performed with a male partner (who was often not a contortionist himself), but audiences seemed just as impressed with female pairs, especially if both women were contortionists. Contortionism consequently became a “dark” mode of performance offered primarily in nightclubs and concert halls. The 1930s and ’40s were perhaps the most glamorous era for contortionism. The American contortionist Barbara La May, based in Paris during that time, was possibly the greatest of all artists in this performance genre because of the “tragic” nature of her aesthetic. She combined heroic, dangerous stunts with a voluptuously melancholic display of vulnerability. Her daughter also became a contortionist and performed pair acts with her mother. In Berlin during the winter of 1992, Mauricio Kagel presented his music theatre piece *Variété*, which featured a pair of female contortionists, Les Mandragores (Claire Joubert and Ericka Maury Lascoux). These women wore beautiful dark, skintight body stockings and masks designed to emulate the shiny scales of snakeskins (plate 2). They performed their act in luminous pools of green and blue light, to the accompaniment of Kagel’s strange music. The spectacle of Joubert and Lascoux coiling serpentine around each other excited me violently, but some spectators found the performance frighteningly “unnatural” and even repulsive; the sight of some contortions caused numerous spectators to utter a squeamish cry of “Eccuuuuw!” That the desire to feel repulsion is sometimes the motive for seeing contortion acts should not be underestimated, as is clear from an auto-

biographical statement on “Contortionists” from an old, undated pamphlet, *Vive le Cirque Serge*, in the Burns Kattenberg contortionism collection (box 21, folder 6):

Now-a-days the public want the nightmare. [...] “[A] woman fainted before my eyes. [...] The public is terrified when they hear the cracking of my bones, and is disgusted when I make myself entirely [sic] soft. Impossible to invent anything that might be pleasing to the public. Once, in my home, I came down the stairs like a frog. Seeing me thus my housekeeper had a fit. Ever since she is afraid to look me in the face.

Less disturbing, perhaps, is the contortionist act depicted in the *Cirque du Soleil* video *Saltimbano*. This 1994 production features a trio of contortionists: a man, a woman, and a boy about ten years old. These performers wear Spandex-type body stockings, orange for the man, dark blue for the woman, and white for the boy. The body stockings cover the feet, necks, and hair of the performers; only their ears, hands, and faces are naked, creating an impression, as with Les Mandragores, of alien humanoid creatures. But in this case, the alien aura does not project such an intense “reptilian” quality; rather, the effect is a hybrid image of lithe wetsuits and medieval jester costumes. This consuming differs significantly from the conventional consuming practice of contortionists in the 1930s, which favored the exposure of the performer’s flesh: men wore trunks and women wore spangled or sequined bikinis. For the devout contortionist fan, the advantage of the scantier costume is that it enhances the spectator’s pleasure in seeing the contraction of muscles, the blushing of the skin, the sweat, the sense of strain on the body.

The *Saltimbano* trio obviously constructs the image of a “family.” The act lasts only about three minutes (whereas Les Mandragores were onstage for nearly ten minutes) but the act is nevertheless rich in emotional complexity. A gentle, haunting song accompanies the trio without rhythmically punctuating any of their movements; it is sung by an extravagantly costumed woman sitting on a throne bathed in blue light. The contortionists, however, perform in a very bright white light. Although the “family” does not perform any of the really sexy contortionist configurations nor any of the voluptuous entwinnings of Les Mandragores, the act does exude an intriguing erotic glamour.

The man does not perform contortions; he is, so to speak, the pedestal or pillar of strength upon which the other two display their contortions. He lifts, swings, and balances the woman and the boy; he loops their bodies around his

and positions them so that they can loop around each other. He balances them on his hand, back, and chest; his body is a kind of kinetic tower that elevates the contorted body from undulating reptile on the ground to balletic angel in the air. The woman performs the most “serpentine” movements. She coils and undulates around the man’s body, around his shoulders, between his legs, across his chest. He lifts her high, one hand firmly set between her genitals and thigh, the other against her calf, while she stretches and bends so that her toe touches her forehead. She wraps herself around his body by gripping her ankles, then slides down him to the floor. She contorts and undulates on the floor while he works with the boy.

The boy performs the most complex contortions. The man lifts the boy, who presses his hands against the man’s hands. The boy bends backward so that

2. *The female contortionists, Les Mandragores, wore body stockings designed to emulate snakeskins.* (Photo by Patrice Bouveret; courtesy of Karl Toppfer)



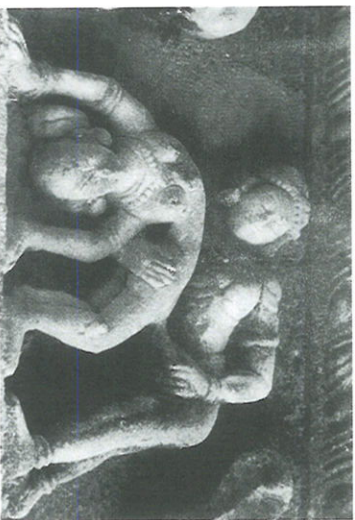
his feet touch his head, then he loops forward into the lotus position on the man's head. The woman joins them, and the boy swings himself to the floor between her and the man. The man lifts him from the floor again, but this time the boy holds his body rigid as the man grips him by the ankles and raises him parallel to the floor, as if levitating him. Then the boy loops himself into a bizarre position in which his legs are behind and outstretched while his arms hang forward between his thighs. In this position the man swings him around, then wraps him around his own body. The woman slithers through the loop. At one point, the woman stands on the man's shoulders and the boy stands on the woman's shoulder to perform a split.

The act adopts a distinctive dramatic structure. It begins with the man and woman kneeling before each other; the woman lunges onto the man's arched chest in a momentary (and unconventional) miming of sexual intercourse. They separate to reveal the boy on the floor sleeping in a fetal position, which in itself appears to be a contortion. The man raises the "baby" and hands him to the woman, who cradles him for an instant before setting him aside to join the man for her first contortionist display with him. The spectacle of female contortion makes the boy "grow up," and he leaps between man and woman to test his agility with the man. In one setup, the man raises the boy on his hands, while the boy bends backward to touch his head with his feet; the man slowly lowers the boy and kisses him. After the boy has demonstrated his contorting skill, the trio sinks to its knees on the floor and performs a kind of happy, worshipful bow to each other, before moving to the final series of stunts.

With this act as a whole, the spectator encounters an idealized notion of the family developed through an intricate interplay of bodies. Conditions of superior trust, strength, agility, balance, vulnerability, and freedom emerge from the act of contorting the body and urging it into "unnatural" positions. Indeed, the happy, ideal family is in a sense "unnatural," and develops out of a somewhat perverse organization of pleasure in itself: the procreative act occurs with the woman on top of the man; the child witnesses the man's elevation of the mother's voluptuousness; the boy emulates the mother's contortive pleasure rather than the man's stabilizing strength; the woman enjoys contorting herself without the support of the man; the man sustains his strength through his power to intensify the urge to contort in the woman.

The beauty of the family derives from the strange ways in which bodies become connected in a twisted form of "togetherness." The contortions of the trio signify that ideal familial love is the contortion of an initial, perverse, erotic feeling. A reinforcement of the erotic dimension occurs when the video editors cut to close-up shots of circus performers watching the contortionist act. These performers, male and female, who make up the pole-climbing act which follows, slither in reptilian fashion at the edge of the huge arena and wear striped jester costumes. They gaze languorously and hypnotically at the contortionists.²

However, the contortionists of Cirque du Soleil display further uniqueness by selecting a circus context for their performance (although, of course, Cirque du Soleil is itself an anomaly as a circus). In Western cultures, contortionists have generally preferred to appear in venues other than circuses; they manifest a subtle aversion to appearing in the same milieu with animal and clown acts and favor performance environments such as the nightclub and music hall. These venues permit the relation between contortionism and perverse eroticism to achieve more dramatic expression. The appearance of contortionists within conventional theatre productions of literary drama is extremely rare, and I cannot even recall a single feature film that provided opportunities for contortionist display. In 1975, theatre director Henri Ronse had a contortionist, Murielle Mingarelli, perform in his production of Schoenberg's *Pierrot*



3. & 4. Temple structures from the 13th and 14th centuries engaging in sexual acts. (Plate 3 courtesy of Director General, Archeological Survey of India, New Delhi; plate 4 by André Martin in Flory and Martin 1965, courtesy of Karl Toepfer)

understanding the meaning of contortionism and the “center of attraction” lies in the face of the contortionist (Blokkamp 1982: n.p.).

The perception of contortionism as erotic performance is by no means unique to Western cultures. In India, Southeast Asia, and China, female contortionism has for an unknown number of centuries been associated with idealized expressions of erotic happiness. Some archaic erotic sculptures in India explicitly represent female contortionism as a sexual act, dramatizing the perception that “since Desire permeates the entire body, contact at every point is pleasure–yielding” (Lal 1966:94). These sculptures all appeared in temples, thus bestowing upon the image of contortionism a spectacular religious significance. The tradition of erotic temple sculptures in India dates from at least the second century BCE, when artists already exhibited a degree of sophistication in their representations of erotic relations between bodies in emphatically dance-like poses. But the introduction of obviously *contorted* bodies, always female, perhaps did not occur until several centuries later. Most of the examples available to us present contorted bodies engaged in sexual acts (cunnilingus, fellatio, intercourse); sometimes contorted females engage in combinations of these acts with more than two bodies (Lal 1996; see plate 3).

The grand period of erotic temple sculpture was between the 11th and 13th centuries CE, with the most spectacular and refined productions belonging possibly to the gigantic temple complex at Khajuraho, in central India, construction of which began in the 10th century. Here as elsewhere (for erotic temple sculpture was pervasive throughout India up to the 13th century), contorted bodies appear in the friezes with a vast swarm of undulant bodies and ornate architectural embellishments. The immense slabs of stone are suffused with a stupendous, vital energy and are transformed into living entities that do not even recognize the presence of real human beings:

Columns of stone fill the somber space behind the glowing torches and moving shadows. Silence reigns as if one had entered, not an architecture of stone, but the primordial womb, as if in truth the umbilical cord had become a thread of the gathering light. [...] All movement is a movement of return to oneself, but in the temple and there alone the march [toward God] clarifies itself by the effect of an architecture in dissolution. Each step [of the march] seems to reject an envelopment within a body and to penetrate into the plenitude of bodies even less distinct. (Rao 1965:23; plate 4)

It may seem from the abundant sculptural evidence of Khajuraho, Cudappa, Belgavi, Ramgarh, Bhubaneswar, and other temple sites, that Indian culture had elaborately institutionalized female contortionism within a cosmic, pan-

oramic image of life which glorified the erotic potency of the contorted body without linking this eroticism to *periversion*. Contortionism may therefore appear as a “natural” expression of the ecstatic experience of life when suffused with divine energies, as proposed by Tantric merging of both Hindu and Buddhist doctrines. But this explanation is too simple. While erotic temple sculpture was pervasive in India, the religious rationale for it was cultic and circulated primarily within the Brahman social domain. Moreover, Kanwar Lal has observed that these sculptures fall into four categories: (1) beautiful females, “ornaments” of the temple and of “any other house”; (2) couples, human and divine, “portrayed in serene and blissful company of each other”; (3) copulation scenes, which, “though passionate and expressive of scarlet desire, are not objectionable”; and (4) “shockingly obscene and complicated poses, images of “disgusting and unnatural lovenaking” involving orgies, female homosexuality, cunnilingus, fellatio, or bestiality (1966:64). With this mode of analysis, images of contortionism would consistently fall into the fourth category, whose function within the great panorama (usually toward the base rather than the summit of temple architecture) was perhaps didactic: to indicate “unnatural postures [which] should not be indulged in” or to suggest that “an age of degeneration and loose living had begun” (95).

But Lal himself hesitates to accept this view. He contends that the Tantric belief in the body as a microcosm of the universe emerged as a reaction against Buddhist asceticism, which promotes transcendence of “worthless” life and the sexual desire that creates it or amplifies attachment to it. At the same time, the Tantrics sought to reclaim the authority of ancient Hindu mythology, which focuses on the eternal metamorphosis of all being and thus links the expression of divine energy to ecstatic processes of physical creation, including procreation, eroticism, worship of goddesses, and the transformative beauty of female bodies. But Tantrism remained attached to Buddhism insofar as it proposed multiple paths to ecstasy, redemption, and nirvanic states; it favored difference rather than unity of identity in responses to manifestations of the divine: “it should be made clear that the Tantrist believes that human beings are not equal. He does not distinguish them by creating an artificial caste system, but classifies them with reference to each person’s temperament and capacity” (1966:73). This attitude encourages the proliferation of sects. Lal therefore contends that “unnatural” images of erotic pleasure in the fourth category of erotic temple sculpture refer to the presence within a vast cultic image of society of a particular sect, the Vamacharis, whose tolerance and appreciation for orgiastic submission to divine energies far exceeded that of other sects (71). Thus, in spite of its institutionalization within the temple culture, contortionism within Indian society most likely remained an emblem of perverse eroticism. Indeed, the extent to which the temple culture itself “defines” Indian culture as a whole is not altogether obvious, for Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic reactions against this opulent mode of worship succeeded in destroying far more of it than we can even imagine and severely marginalized the taste for such art by the end of the 14th century.

That contortionism remains a highly marginalized entertainment in Indian culture today appears evident





5. & 6. Young Indian girls practice contortions for performance in the circus. (Photos by Mary Ellen Mark)

from several photographs taken by Mary Ellen Mark in India between 1989 and 1990, which she published in her book *Indian Circus* (1993) and which led to her work on the National Geographic television film about Indian circus life, *The Amazing Plastic Lady* (1992). For Mark,

the Indian circuses were reminiscent of a purity of days gone by, an innocence impossible to find in Western cultures. In an attempt to head off the demands of the contemporary world, each circus clings to a simpler, older way of life, but the circuses, which were introduced from Europe in 1880, are disappearing quickly. In the mid-sixties there were fifty-two big tops. Today less than half that number remain. There is a great fear that the Indian circus, like the American circus, is a dying art. The circuses are being closed down by a rapidly changing modern India that considers them old-fashioned—even an embarrassment. (1993:13)

The book shows several females between about eight and fifteen years old practicing contortions for performance with Indian circuses. Mark presents images of older female circus performers, but not as contortionists. In the Indian circus, female contortion acts appear on programs complemented by grotesque dwarf clown acts, bizarre animal acts, magicians, musclewomen, trapeze artists, gymnasts, and freaks. The photographs expose rather nakedly the poverty and lawdiness of the circus milieu without, however, diminishing the exquisite erotic beauty of the contortionists even in the drabest conditions of rehearsal. Oral testimonials from the girl contortionists reinforce the perception that they entered the circus, often after being sold by their parents, to escape a life of oppressive destitution and provincial constraint upon their sexuality. They tend to speak of their life in the circus with a strange, genital detachment, as if it were somehow a blessing. Mark does not include any of their comments on the contortionist acts themselves. These frequently present duets, trios, or even quartets of girl contortionists achieving poses of a complexity and sophistication that are aesthetically equivalent to those of gifted professional *woman* performers. The contortion of their bodies permits the girls to display an enchanting *voluptuousness*, but what separates girl contortionism from woman contortionism is the intense power of the girl body to equate this voluptuousness with the expression of innocence, even in the rather sleazy milieu of the circus. It seems that in all cultures, it is difficult for spectators of women contortionists to associate the voluptuousness of their poses with the embodiment of innocence; a woman couldn't contort herself "like that" without being aware of the rich ambiguity of desire and self-perception she creates. But this voluptuous innocence of the girl contortionists clearly operates within a highly marginalized subculture and thus functions as another mode of the perverse. Unlike girl and woman ballerinas, girl and woman contortionists do not appear with any regularity on mainstream television in any culture, except, perhaps, when they are the objects of exotic, ethnographic curiosity, as in *The Amazing Plastic Lady*.

A different perspective emerges when we examine the contortionist scene in China. There, as in the West and in India, contortionism enjoys an extremely ancient tradition, which evolved largely as an entertainment for imperial and aristocratic audiences. In the 20th century, however, the Chinese have tended to treat contortionism as a category of gymnastics and athletics, and in doing



so, they cherish contortionism as an intensely competitive activity. Contortionist acts generally appear within the programs of athletic troupes that also feature jugglers, tumblers, pole climbers, plate spinners, hoop leapers, diabolo players, bicycle balancing acts, or elaborate chair, springboard, or rope stunts.

In the West, audiences usually evaluate contortionist acts on the basis of the performer's ability to dramatize ideas, symbolize emotional values, and mobilize an innovative narrative structure that motivates the action. Chinese audiences tend to evaluate contortionist acts according to how well the performer masters a set of technical devices, which invariably involve the use of props such as plates or bowls. Innovation in Chinese contortionism depends entirely on the perfection of ever more difficult technical feats, and contortionists enter acrobatic troupes as a result of their success in winning contests in which they display their superlative skill in executing a variety of complicated traditional and new stunts. For example, in 1981, Dai Wenxia, of the Guangzhou Acrobatic Troupe, won a gold medal at the Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain, in Chartres, for her traditional act "Rolling with Cups of Water";

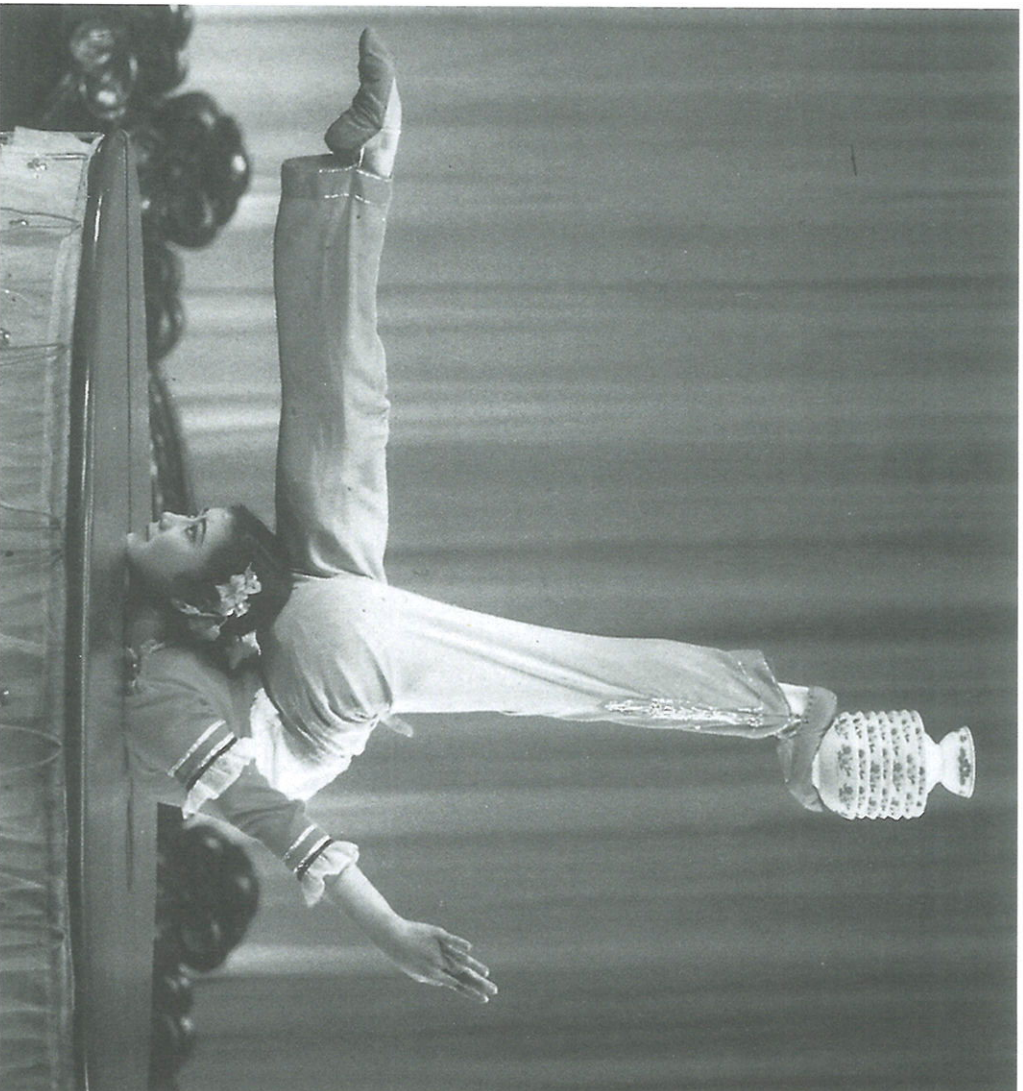
[B]alancing [glass] cups of water on her forehead, hands, and feet, [she] rolls through a number of different positions adopting various beautiful poses on an oval table. No matter how she moves, the cups always stay in place, never spilling a drop. [...] In another display beginning on her stomach, her body rolls nimbly with six pagodas of glasses remaining still while her head, right arm, and leg are gradually raised to turn her on her back. (Yan 1989:16–18)

Even more stunning is the "One Person Bowl-Balancing Act," which entered the Chinese contortion repertoire only in 1960, when Xia Juhua, of the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe, introduced it and spent the next four years perfecting it. In 1983, another member of this troupe, Li Liping, won a gold medal at the Ninth Festival International du Cirque Monte Carlo for performing this amazing act:

Li lies on her back on a round table and, to the accompaniment of music, her left foot lifts a pile of china bowls with colored patterns. Gently lifting her hip, she performs 360° rolls without pause and the pagoda of bowls, as if glued to the sole of her foot, remains in place. This highly difficult act, rolling so quickly and in dramatic turns, is called "twisting around an imaginary pillar like a dragon." (Yan 1989:30–33; plate 7)

In the "Double Bowl-Balancing Act," the contortionist works with a partner; she balances a stack of bowls on her head or feet while balancing her body on the head or feet of her partner (59–62). Contortionists may also appear in such fantastic stunts as "Juggling Benches with the Feet," in which "three performers on top of [a] pagoda of benches stand upside down by gripping supports in their teeth" (45–50).

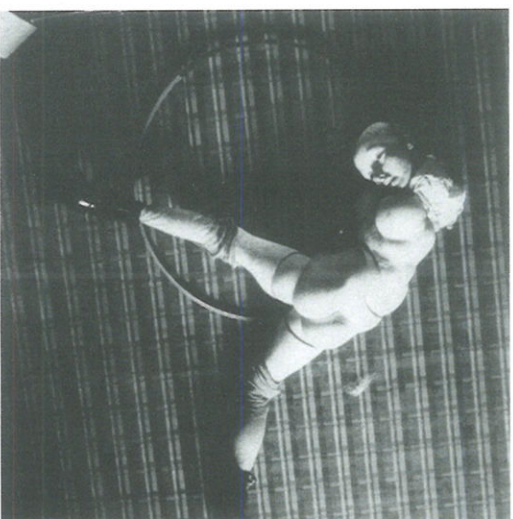
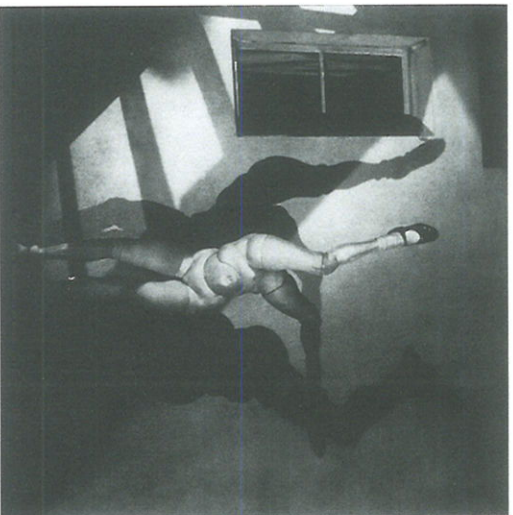
Perhaps it seems that the Chinese, by focusing on technical devices, the manipulation of props, decorative but unrevealing costumes, and conformity to contest categories of performance, have succeeded in depressing the perverse erotic value of contortionism. But this perception is misleading. First of all, Chinese contortionism is an art dominated almost entirely by female bodies, even though, genetically and physiologically, contortionism is no more accessible to female bodies than to male. Contortionism is therefore mostly "about" defining the nature of highly competitive, idealized femininity. Secondly, it is a mistake to assume that the complicated manipulation of props somehow eclipses or contradicts perception of the contortions themselves.



7. Li Liping performs her
“One Person Bowl-Balancing Act.” (Photo in Yan
1989:32; courtesy of Karl
Toepfer)

Voluptuousness derives, not from the body’s attachment to things or costumes, but from peculiar poses and movements of the *body itself*, and the repertoire of contortionist poses in the Chinese scene is neither wider nor narrower than the repertoire of poses employed by women contortionists in the West. Sexual identity supersedes cultural identity in establishing the voluptuousness of the contorted body. What is culturally specific to the Chinese approach is the message constructed out of the relation between voluptuous contortion and manipulation of props. The “One Person Bowl-Balancing Act” idealizes the image of a woman who can maintain perfect poise and balance, maintain the fragile order of *things*, in spite of all the convoluting pressures of her body and beauty. In the West, female performers tend to stress the power of their contortions to *disrupt* the “normal” relation between their bodies and the order imposed upon them by things, objects.

The extreme competitiveness of the Chinese approach produces a feminine ideal that is very exceptional, a rare phenomenon indeed, but is it perverse? My best response to this question is to recall remarks made by a close friend of mine from Taiwan, Wu Yi-Chun. Wu told me that she enjoys contorting herself while performing routine tasks, such as talking on the phone, reading, listening



8. & 9. Hans Bellmer's book *Die Puppe* contained 18 photographs of a large, strange female doll he himself had constructed. (Photos by Hans Bellmer; © 1999 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris)

to music, or writing letters. But she always contorted herself when she was alone because in Taiwanese culture (and surely elsewhere in Chinese culture) such configurations of her body would appear quite “improper” or “unladylike” if witnessed by *anyone* in the domestic context, including her parents (Wu 1996). It seems that the voluptuousness of Chinese contortionism therefore belongs as much to the performance of the perverse as Western contortionism insofar as its expression remains accessible only within the strictly regulated, expertly judged, and super-competitive atmosphere of a contest.

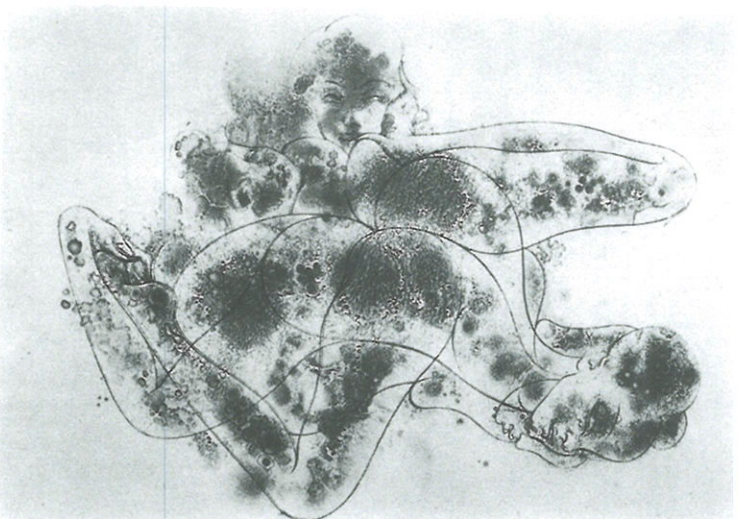
Some insight into the erotic appeal of female contortionism, at least from a Western perspective, may come from examining artworks by Hans Bellmer (1902–1975), a German graphic artist and photographer who after 1936 pursued his career in Paris, where he maintained close connections with prominent surrealists. Bellmer was perhaps the greatest of all illustrators of female contortionism. He first attracted serious attention in 1934, when he published, in Karlsruhe, a book of 18 photographs, *Die Puppe*. These hand-tinted prints showed different views in different settings of a large and strange female doll Bellmer himself had constructed. This doll represented a girl of about 12 or 13 years old, and different poses distorted or displaced body parts, while some configurations featured the “multiplication” of body parts with the omission of many others, such as two pairs of legs attached to a torso with no head or arms (plate 8). Bellmer “dreamed of turning the desired woman into an object capable of infinite metamorphoses” (Webb and Short 1985:103), and in the ensuing years he produced several other doll sculptures, such as the one shown in plate 9, from 1935, in which the overhead shot of the twisted body of the pubescent doll conveys the perception of a mechanical device, a toy, distorted, deformed, and perhaps broken by the desire of the spectator to see the body defy the “natural” logic of its construction without losing its desirability. Desire does not arise in relation to a “perfect” apportionment and proportioning of body parts, but fragments itself across body parts, thus projecting a complex of tensions and conflicts. Desire does not “unify” the body; it transforms it by magnifying body parts and “recombining” them according to a mysterious emotional rather than anatomical logic.

Not only did Bellmer regard the contorted female body as “the best toy” for revealing “the incessantly mobile world of these inner body patterns, of which one superimposes itself on all others and whose simultaneous description has hardly ever been practiced” (Webb and Short 1985:164), he saw that,

susceptible of [sic] infinite verbal and plastic displacement in the recesses of the imagination, [the body] becomes an anagram: The body is comparable to a sentence that invites us to disarticulate it, so that, through a series of endless anagrams, its true contents may be recomposed. (Bellmer in Webb and Short 1985:172)⁵

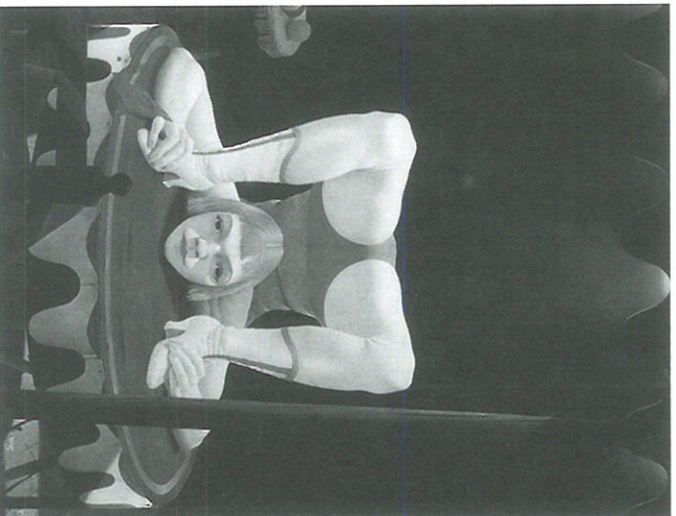
In his graphic art, Bellmer constructed numerous images of contorted bodies which went beyond the power of the dolls to represent. In these works, the artist amplified his perception that the pleasure of seeing contortions derives from recognizing that “the most violent but also the most insignificant bodily reflexes” constitute a “displacement of pain and a delivrance from it,” so that the more numerous or complex are the “unnatural” juxtaposition of body parts, the more intense are the “virtual centres of excitement” created by the body (Webb and Short 1985:164; plate 10). Contortionism appeals to *erotic* feeling because it exposes the power of a body part to dominate the attractiveness of a body, and this attractiveness emerges most intensely when the body part is self-consciously “out of place” and the performer treats this displacement as a pleasure in a spectacle. The fetishization of this displacement is sometimes the basis for pornographic fantasy of a sadomasochistic nature, in which the pleasure of contortionism dramatizes the power of a spectator (rather than the performer) to coerce it and employ it as a punishment, as in plate 11 (see Norgaard 1985:124–130; Uebelmann 1988).

Equally complex are the images of female contortionists painted by the Dutch artist Pyke Koch (1901–1991), a lifelong exponent of so-called “magic realism” or “Neue Sächlichkeit,” between 1955 and 1963. His efforts to produce an archetypal image of the contortionist involved prolonged struggle and considerable uncertainty about what the viewer should see in the way of performance context. He exhibited the first version (originally entitled *The Circus*



10. Bellmer created numerous images of contorted bodies which went beyond the power of dolls to represent. (Photo by Hans Bellmer; © 1999 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris)

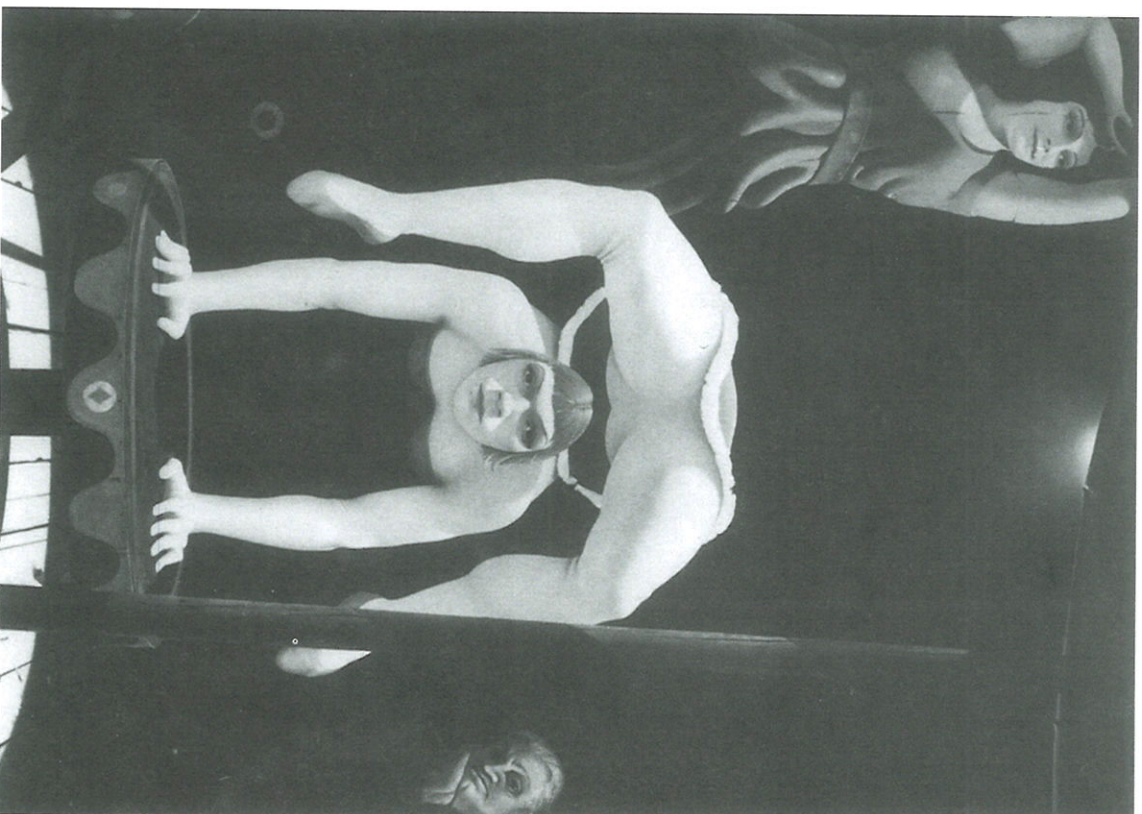
11. A sadomasochistic contortionist fantasy which illustrated a French pornographic novel. (Illustration by Carlo; courtesy of Karl Toegler)



Parade) in 1955, but then withdrew it until he completed the second version in 1963 (plate 12). In the second version, the contortionist remains largely unchanged from her appearance in the first version. In the 1955 version, Koch amplified the circus context with background details of a striped curtain and banners. In the second version, he eliminated these details and introduced foreground details, such as a portion of a balustrade and a tent pole. The background became a dark brown void only faintly suffused with the light from red and white lamps concealed by the undulant frame above the woman, which echoes the undulant decorative motif of the podium. The severe reduction of depth in the image projects the contortionist closer to the spectator than in the earlier version. She seems bathed in an eerie, unnatural light, which makes it difficult to distinguish between the white of her skin and the white of her tights and boots. The contortionist pose “frames” her body as the archetype of theatre—or rather, through the contortionist pose, one sees the theatrical “essence” of the female body; one doesn’t see so clearly how the institution of the circus “frames” the identity of the female body. The face of the contortionist is “smooth, inexpressive, like that of a Mongolian. The remote eyes do not have the same form and squint slightly; they look at nothing within the image, they do not gaze at the spectator, they are fixed on the infinite” (Blotkamp 1982:n.p.). It is a deeply melancholy image of a woman calmly embodying a lonely, infinite, contorted “essence.” But this now famous painting was not Koch’s only statement on the subject of contortionism. In the early 1950s, he worked on another painting, *The Great Contortionist*, which he finally completed in 1957. In a 1956 study for this painting, the contortionist assumes a pose somewhat similar to the one in the final version of *The Great Contortionist*, and on a similar podium, except that here she raises herself up on her arms to “present her act with a certain assurance, conscious of her power” (Blotkamp 1982:n.p.). The pose also conveys the sense of the performer lifting the powerful weight of her own body. The foreground pole clearly indicates that the act takes place in a tent, with a painted theatrical backdrop of mountains, including an erupting volcano. The face of the contortionist, which resembles that of the Danish silent film star Asta Nielsen (whose portrait Koch painted in 1929), stares straight at the spectator. In the final 1963 version of the painting, however, the artist eliminated this highly theatrical perception of “background” and reverted to the notion of a dark void penetrated by an eerie, concealed light from above. But within the haunting chiaroscuro void appear two other figures. To the left of the contortionist a wooden statue of a woman in a chiton, a caryatid, poses on a pedestal, in classical heroic style; she gazes upward into the “infinite.” To the right of the contortionist sits a middle-aged man, the “valet,” who, with his chin propped on his palm gazes languidly at the spectator, “as if to judge the reactions of the audience before the troubling apparition of the acrobat” (Blotkamp 1982:n.p.). Koch modified the gaze of the contortionist to make it more ambiguous: one eye stares directly at the spectator while the other eye glances to her left, as if trying to read a cue or sign unnoticed by her companions and invisible to the spectator. This mysterious painting seems to be about the difficulty of seeing the contorted female body, which, as a focus of perception, overpowers the wooden

heroic pose of the classical goddess. The contortionist, again bathed in an artificial white light, assumes a “less resigned, less tragic” (Blockamp 1982:n.p.) aspect than in *The Contortionist*, almost an aggressive, confrontational stance, on her hands, with her pelvis, thighs, and legs draped over her head. But the effect is still that of a woman steadfastly displaying the theatrical “essence” of the female body (plate 13).

Serious insight into the aesthetic significance of contortionism probably arises only out of an obsession with it, and the most obvious manifestation of an obsession is an inescapable impulse to collect. The largest collection of material related to contortionist performance is the Burns Kattenberg Archive deposited in the Harvard Theatre Collection. Kattenberg was a hotel clerk in Chicago and New York whose great passion was (mostly male) contortionist performance. In the 1930s, he began a correspondence with another man obsessed with (female) contortionism, a Chilean corporate executive, who wrote under the pseudonym of Eduardo Titus. Kattenberg and Titus continued the



12. & 13. Pyke Koch's efforts to produce an archetypal image of the Contortionist involved prolonged struggle and considerable uncertainty about what the viewer should see in the way of performance context. (The Contortionist [plate 11] and The Great Contortionist [plate 12] by Pyke Koch; courtesy of Karl Toepfer)

correspondence until 1967 without apparently ever meeting face to face. The archive contains many letters from Titus to Kattenberg, along with a considerable number of pictures that Titus had included with his letters. Kattenberg and Titus were actually members of a worldwide, underground network of contortionist fanatics committed to sharing the most refined details and secrets of contortionism and responses to it.

Titus was a cultivated, reflective man whose letters reveal a strong inclination to theorize his obsession with the help of remarkably insightful performance analysis and sometimes rather startling curiosity about the nature of his life-long pleasure. He graduated from Chilean State University in 1927 and spent his entire career working for a utility company as some sort of project analyst and then as a high-level executive. Titus always wrote to Kattenberg in English, which is often idiosyncratic, but in addition to Spanish he was fluent in French and German. He never published any statement about contortionism, nor seems even to have considered the idea of publishing anything on the subject, although he claimed that one of his correspondents, in Edinburgh, was preparing a book on contortionists, which he expected “would be a success” (31 Jan. 1964). This book, however, never appeared. Titus’s collection of photos and materials related to contortionism was immense—he never stopped adding to it—but his ambition even very early in his life was to take his own photographs of contortionists. In one letter (3 Feb. 1960), he explained that he had acquired in the previous year several books from Russia on the circus in addition to 28 books from Germany, 10 from England, and an assortment of circus books from other countries. He collected many issues of *Das Programm* (from the 1920s and ’30s), *Die Deutsche Artistik*, and *Acrobatia*, which are now extremely rare sources of information about professional contortionism between 1926 and 1960. Very late in the correspondence (3 Feb. 1966), he announced that he had initiated correspondence with Paula Mallerup, the publisher of *WPC*, a magazine devoted to muscle development in women. Titus also cultivated a stamp collection, which, in 1934, contained 16,000 items.

When Kattenberg initiated the correspondence in 1934, Titus had recently married; his wife strongly disapproved of his fascination with contortionists. Titus therefore kept his collection and even his enthusiasm for contortionism secret from her and from nearly everyone within his social circle. In a letter of 28 December 1938, he explains that he had stopped writing to Kattenberg for awhile, “because my wife was against my contortion hobby. But I cannot resist to go [al]head collecting contortion pictures of feminine acrobats and when Mr. Wagenans wrote to me, I had to reply and talk about this fascinating hobby.” Earlier he had confessed that he had no friends in his immediate social environment who shared his interest in contortionism: “They always think of benders as monstrosities” (21 March 1936). In 1945, however, he announced that his secretary, an English woman, 46 years old and single, had seen all his contortion pictures and was even thrilled with the nude images, a situation which resulted from her having mentioned that she once visited the Liverpool Circus, the home of the contortionist Rebecca Salasar: “She is extremely broadminded and we discuss freely the nudity in contortion acts and about muscular dance acrobats and strenuous contorting” (4 April 1945). But even this friendship did not last long; a couple of years later the woman had to return to England for health reasons. In any case, his capacity to share his love of contortionism remained confined to correspondence with fellow contortionist devotees in other countries, to exchanges of pictures with cult members, and to attending contortionist performances. Love of contortionism was therefore a “secret” passion on his part, at least in relation to those who supposedly knew him most intimately.

Why such secrecy? “What people like about contortionism is a complicated matter, a mixture of curiosity, appeal of the uncanny, and fear, something simi-

lar to what a kid experience[s] when he breaks a beautiful toy, with the additional pleasure to see it restored" (17 April 1936). Titus communicated with numerous female contortionists, but although he found them overpoweringly attractive, he seems never to have pursued a romantic liaison with any of them. "I have not fallen in love for Miss La May or any other woman contortionist in my collection" (21 March 1936)—an attitude he maintained throughout the correspondence. However, his wife's rigid aversion to his "hobby" was perhaps not altogether unreasonable, even if she apparently had no understanding of his obsession or its origin. In an undated letter written sometime in the mid-1960s, he explains in detail a disturbing experience that he never confided to his wife. In his mid-twenties, while serving as an army officer, he fell in love with a young woman, three years older than himself, the most passionate love of his life, and planned to marry her, for she was deeply in love with him. But he could not resist the idea of seeing her in contorted poses. One day they went to a circus featuring the American contortionist Mabel Rae. Later they went to a hotel room in Valparaiso, where she agreed to try out some contortionist poses in the nude. "I told her I wanted to see her with her body twisted [like] the acrobat I had admired [in the circus]. She was surprised but was willing to cooperate." She experienced great difficulty performing almost every pose he proposed, but even her clumsiness in trying to contort herself excited him violently, and he started to force her to adopt poses which were intensely painful; when she resisted and complained, he struck her and insisted that she obey his desires. "I made her groan with pain when I arched her body, perhaps for over an hour. She was so tired and bruised that she refused to copulate." He then retrieved a picture of Mabel Rae and, holding it before himself, masturbated in front of his girlfriend. "Well, that ended our romance"—and perhaps his greatest opportunity for happiness in life.

Titus was 12 years old when he first saw a contortionist at a circus in Chile: "Miss Edmond [...] was as strong as a man" (4 March 1935); from then on he organized his life around his passion for contortionism. Over 20 years later, he acknowledged that from the beginning, the act of watching contortionism was a powerful erotic experience:

When I was 14 or 15 years old, I got an erection every time I saw a male or female contortionist. It was only when I saw backstage of the Ship and Filter circus Edna Mar, wife of Paul Brachard, and Mabel Rae of the Cordona Circus, and could watch there in every detail, that I found [myself, please let me say it as I found it, repulse[d]—[by] the display of the sex organs of the male contortionist." (6 Dec. 1956)

At that point, somewhere in mid-adolescence, his attention focused primarily on the performance of female contortionists, although he retained a lively curiosity about the sexual habits of male contortionists and always showed intense interest in (rare) male-female contortionist acts. Kattenberg's great enthusiasm was for male contortionists, and Titus supplied him with photos of male contortionists that Kattenberg had not been able to acquire. Early in the correspondence, Titus sent several photographs of himself wearing swimming trunks on a beach south of Valparaiso. These show a handsome, muscular, athletic man who delights in showing off his body in a cheerful, playful manner. He quotes a couple of "heroic" poses and displays parodies of contortionist acts. He was never seriously able to contort his body, but it is evident that he tried to explore the limits of his body's pliancy and *envied* the pliancy of both men and women in his "collection."

The richest writing in the correspondence deals with female contortionism. Numerous letters describe in elaborate detail not only the performances of fe-

male contortionists but the author's responses to them. One senses frequently in the correspondence that female contortionism enormously strains the power of language to describe and explain what is seen. Titus describes poses in pictures as well as performances in language that is sometimes quite technical, as if finding the right words to articulate his perception was in itself a form of intellectual contortion. But Titus consistently strives to go beyond mere description into analysis and theoretical mapping of a strange performance *culture*. He traveled great distances to see female contortionists, whom he sometimes referred to in earlier letters as "adagio dancers," "benders," "acrodancers," or "contortion dancers." At any rate, he regarded contortionism as a mode of dance and favored performances that integrated sensational and innovative dramatic effects over those that stressed purely virtuosic complexity. He observed of the contortionist Hilge in New York: "One could hardly believe the satisfaction of this smiling dame having her wonderful body distorted and twisted as a rubber doll" (25 May 1934). Of a contortionist at the Casino de Paris he wrote: "She writhed and squirmed her body in a way that was not only uncanny but very sensual. She appeared to exult and delight in her elasticity and even to take a sexual pleasure in contorting herself" (26 Jan. 1952). This sort of tension between smile and contortion interested him more than technical comparisons between women performing the same stunt, although he liked contortions performed rapidly rather than slowly. He definitely favored acts in tragic or daring moods with expressions of violence over those rare acts that pursued comic effects. In Panama, he saw a Swedish brother and sister, between 20 and 24 years old, produce exactly the kind of tension he persistently anticipated: "She started a violent swinging of the head back and forth as if her neck was dislocated. This feat was so terrifically unhuman that there were many voices in the audience [saying] in [Spanish: 'Basta, Basta']" (12 Nov. 1934).

In 1939, Titus visited Europe for five months and attended (without his wife) numerous variety shows featuring contortionist acts. His letters describing these acts are probably the most engaging performance analysis of the halcyon contortionist aesthetic of the 1930s yet available. The Eve Cabaret, the Folles Bergere, and the Casino de Paris in Paris integrated contortionist acts into fantastic narratives featuring monsters, temptresses, and devils. In an Adam and Eve act the performance of voluptuous contortions allowed the sinful couple to recover its "lost" innocence: "He changed his hands to the woman's knees and she raised her legs, showing the most sensational muscles of her neck and chest lifting the weight of the man" (Dec. 1939). The erotic element in these contortionist performances was glamorously dramatic:

The crudest and most satiric contortion was one in which the dance[r] was standing up, raised one foot as in [a] frontkick, and the man placed this leg over the woman's shoulders and forced it down her back, then he raised her in the air handling the other leg and swinging her back and forth. The shape of the contorted leg in her back was something hard to forget. They finished the dance with Magrita in a backbend, her legs wide open in a side-split and the man kissing her in her cachesexe. (Dec. 1939)

At the Théâtre de l'Alcazar, all acts were "performed by naked women." These included trapezists, a lion tamer, acrobats, dancers, magicians, and singers. Titus's favorite performer was perhaps the Czech contortionist Erni Ertkay, whose performance at the Théâtre de l'Alcazar exemplified the trend to situate contortionist acts within extravagantly dramatic contexts. Titus described her sensational and rather pornographic act with lively affection and in breathlessly convoluted language. The scene was a boudoir containing a polar

bear rug upon which she slumbered until strange music awakened her. She wore a transparent black dress, in which she performed several lurid contortions. Then she

performed a backbend with her arms tied around the neck, lowering the head till she kissed the bear's mouth. Suddenly she loosened the pin that fastened her dress in the back, the gown fell to the ground and she appeared in her marvelous white nakedness, except the dark spot of her *cache-sexe*. At the sound of the applause, she walked to the front part of the stage and exhibited her body, then she projected her chest, bended backwards, closing more and more the backbend while her arms were handled in snakelike fashion. She bended then her knees and lowering the head she placed the top of the head against the floor and slid her feet farther from her face, she stretched herself at full length. She opened then her legs and when they were in a perfect side-split she raised to normal. After some coiling and bending over the bear's skin, with the intention of exciting the bear to copulate (this was the leitmotiv of the dance) she came to her last posture, something marvelous not only for the difficulty of the trick, but because of the nakedness and beauty of the woman and the way absolutely boneless she handled her body. She performed an elbow stand over the bear's head; first her legs were stretched horizontal over her face, then she folded the legs, projected her chest and bended the body joining the buttocks to the top of the head, body in zigzag—then lowered the feet, opened the legs making room for the head that was coming through the thighs, and raised the head placing the back of the head against her sex in the closest backbend I have ever seen!

The reversal of this position was “so exciting that none was surprised when the bear skin started to move, raised up and walked over the acrobat to copulate while the curtain was lowered.” In the “second act” of the show, Erikay performed on a “gigantic piano” and walked off the stage “backbended, legs stretched, hands over ankles” (Dec. 1939).

Titus's enthusiasm for Erikay was such that he made her personal acquaintance and began to correspond with her. A few months later, he remarked that she had written to him saying that she would send him a new set of photographs “taken especially for me, performing her best contortions and wearing her smallest *cache-sexe*” (29 April 1940). But soon he worried that the German occupation of Paris had broken his contact with her: “she must have run away [because she was Czech] so I'm afraid she must have a hard time with the Germans” (10 Dec. 1940). Nearly a year after his request, however, Titus reported that Erikay had sent him 20 photographs of herself, “mostly in the nude” (17 July 1941). But it is not clear from the correspondence how long he maintained his contact with her. He compared her to the American contortionist Barbara La May, who had settled in Paris around 1933 and who was perhaps the most famous of all female contortionists during the 1930s and '40s. Her career continued into the 1960s, after some time performing contortion acts with her daughter.

Titus claimed it was impossible to determine who was the better artist, Erikay or La May. Erikay was “more naked, more feminine,” but La May possessed more “effective muscles” and “[k]e[pt] to horrify the audience” (8 July 1940). One of La May's most spectacular acts was her “Horror Dance.” In this piece, the blonde La May wore a black brassiere, black panties, black stockings, black high heels (which contortionists rarely wore), black elbow-length gloves, and a tatra. She apparently danced more on her hands than on

her feet, but the distinctive feature of the piece, I gather, is that she performed several contortions, including looping (both forward and backward) her head between her thighs, on a stage or large table gleaming with treacherous knives, spikes, and candles. She experimented with mirrors in some acts, but it is not clear if the “Horror Dance” employed any mirror effects. A haunting violin melody accompanied her contortions, with completed stunts or abrupt movements punctuated by cymbal crashes.

The “serpentine” movements of the contortionist implied that the pressures of “temptation” were no longer external to woman’s body, in the snake of biblical myth, but within the modern woman’s body, where desire, desirability, and temptation become entwined.

La May did not project a smile of effortless pleasure while performing contortions: rather, she displayed a kind of voluptuous agony or luxurious masochism, in which her body seemed alternately or at once the victim of a violent transgression and the demonic perpetrator of the transgression (see *Paris Music-Hall*, March 1935, in Katzenberg). Her powerful muscles she showed by kneeling, arching back, and raising a female assistant on her chest and allowing her to perform a handstand on her breasts. In an undated letter from the mid-1960s, Titus described La May’s “New Eve” act at the Lido Theatre, which he saw during a five-week visit to Paris: La May was by this time in her early fifties, “but her body looks beautiful like a 20 year old woman.” Her entourage consisted of eight women who performed a “dance and some acrobatics.” La May then withdrew “images of Hercules” from her purse before “remov[ing] piece by piece her costume... when she was naked she raised one foot up” and began a complicated series of contortions, while the entourage stared at her in amazement. Finally the eight girls “removed their bikinis and in the suave nudity as Miss La May performed acrobatics of all types.” Thus the “New Eve” signified the acrobatic power of an older woman’s body to inspire younger women to emulate her in becoming figures of optimum desirability for a critical audience. The “serpentine” movements of the contortionist implied that the pressures of “temptation” were no longer external to woman’s body, in the snake of biblical myth, but within the modern woman’s body, where desire, desirability, and temptation become entwined and difficult to separate from each other.

In 1939, Titus also visited Berlin, where plate-spinning and acrobatic dances at the Scala and Wintergarten theatres struck him as less impressive than contortionist acts available in Paris. Señorita Carnara, appearing at the Zoo Cabaret, was obviously “the best backbender seen in Berlin”:

Slowly she headed backwards raising the head, reaching with the legs the horizontal [position], and flexing the arms she lowered the body until her chin touched the floor, then she raised up her body to the pause position she had before. It was a feat requiring great arm strength, something I have seen done by few women, and it was sensational to watch pretty Señorita Carnara’s arms become swollen with heavy muscles and also showing muscles in her chest and shoulders. (12 Dec. 1939)

The muscles of her arms and chest were amazing and they made a thrilling contrast with her feminine beauty. (28 March 1940)

Of peculiar interest to the Berlin contortionist scene was the enthusiasm of female spectators. “Something that surprised me a great deal was that the women in the audience were in every place those that cheered and applauded the woman contortionist, men remaining quite [quiet]” (28 Dec. 1939). In Berlin cabarets, female spectators appeared more naked than the performers and watched contortionist acts in groups:

I often found in Berlin a table in a cabaret with four or five women around completely naked under their gowns talking, smoking, and drinking and giving little attention to the men. They were heavy in their applause!, making a lot of noise when a woman was contorting. When I saw Señorita Carnara at the Zoo cabaret, three women that were seated at a first row table got so excited when Miss Carnara got her head through her thighs in a handstand, and placed the back of her head against her cacheexe, that one of them jumped over the platform and started to kiss and caress the body of the acrobat and had to be taken away by the waiters. (28 Dec. 1939; see also 28 March 1940)

In Hamburg, Titus saw a contortionist calling herself Original Mimi, who performed her convolutions with astonishing, unprecedented speed (12 Dec. 1939). Titus now had a crude basis for categorizing contortionists: “Most supple and thrilling: Erikey; Best looking: Magrita; Most elastic: Original Mimi; Best muscles: Señorita Carnara” (28 Dec. 1939). The Sphinx Cabaret offered an unnamed woman contortionist who was “completely naked without even a cacheexe!”

[Her] act was designed with a satiric intention and she performed as [if] she were struggling with her body to get it bended and folded into backbends and splits. Though I liked her very much and [it was] the thrill of my life watching her contortion, I was shocked to see her expose from such short distance her most intimate anatomical details. (28 March 1940)

Another act Titus saw in Berlin was an “adagio contortion” featuring a muscle man and a nude woman: “They ended the act with the man holding the woman up in the air, the woman resting on her breasts, each breast on one hand of the man and closing backbends into sensual shapes” (20 June 1940). The Germans specialized in such “combined contortionist acts” involving (mostly female) pairs of contortionists: the “incredibly strong” Marion and Irina “were the first to develop a complicated act of this type,” and it was “really surprising how many new effects” they achieved, “in spite of the shapelessness of their bodies” (17 July 1941).

Titus also saw a lot of dance during his European adventure, particularly ballet (“a very pretty art”). He saw Serge Lifar perform at the Opera and the Jooss Ballet in London, which impressed him greatly, but not as much as Marion Daniel’s “acrocontortion dance” at the Ball Tabarin (10 Dec. 1940) nor even Rola-Rola’s acrocontortion dance at the Tabaris Club in Buenos Aires. The latter featured the pairing of “a negro and a white woman [who] practically came in the raw” (15 April–23 May 1943). In Paris, however, a performance of the ballet “the Party of the Spider” [*The Spider’s Feast/Le festin de l’araignée*; music: Albert Roussel, 1913] enchanted him above all other dance concerts: a woman in black tights “with four extra legs” played the Spider, and “with her dance she attracted smaller insects” until killed by her attraction to a black beetle.

Titus apparently collected a huge amount of material on contortionism during his European trip, including photos and even movie film he took himself, as well as many issues of *Die Deutsche Artistik*, a rare journal devoted entirely to contortionist entertainment. But the trunk containing these materials never

reached Chile, and Titus was never able to locate it. He therefore could not send Katzenberg a great deal of the imagery and documentation he had collected for him (28 March 1940). Nevertheless, he managed to list 100 female solo and pair contortionists operating in Europe and South America (17 July 1941). In subsequent letters he provides some data about this curious enterprise, such as that contortionists in Brazilian casinos earn \$300 (U.S.) per week for two shows a night, a rather impressive sum for the time (4 April 1945); that a decade later contortionists in Buenos Aires could earn between \$100 and 200 (U.S.) per night for nude performances (6 Dec. 1956); that in Santiago the male contortionist Rola-Rola performed “very nude” and “his body [was] carefully free of hair” (4 April 1945); that the Ba-Ta-Clan Club in Buenos Aires permitted strictly regulated all-nude contortion performances between six and ten at night (18 April 1942); that “one notices the lack of pretty women” in the Buenos Aires nightclub culture; and that contortion acts in South American clubs lasted about 15 minutes (18 April 1942).

Contortionist acts drifted emphatically toward pornographic performance in the post-war years, as is evident in undated letters from the mid-1960s in which Titus described shows he saw in Paris during a five-week vacation. “Useless to tell you how much I enjoyed these acts, every one giving me an erection.” Total nudity prevailed at the Palais du Christel, which presented an elaborate program of acts by anonymous performers for male-only audiences; here cabaret girls took customers to a hotel room “where one felt that sexual excitement was reaching the limit” in relation to acrobatic displays of the body. The program featured an “oriental” dancer who twisted her arms around her neck “in snake-like fashion,” followed by tumbling acts involving “some difficult splits.” Then “Love at Lesbos”: a nude woman performed stretching exercises, when another nude woman entered and “kissed her between her breasts.” After “kissing their most intimate parts [...] they fell from the sofa to the ground in this acrobatic love knot and the curtain was lowered.” Several naked women then appeared to create “A Harem”: “they paraded around the stage, returning to the original pose like in a picture.” “On Top of a Table” featured an 18-year-old nude female contortionist on a glass table, where she displayed her “wonderful” muscles. “Acrobatics” consisted of four girls all under 16 performing a “fast tumbling act,” while “Circus in Paradise” presented two nude women performing a muscle act on rings. In “Torture Room,” “several naked women were exhibited in torture devices of the middle ages”; “some of the performers were contortionists and made the exhibition more sensational.” “Sodoma”:

A very pretty brunette was over a platform in the center of the room surrounded by three Russian greyhounds. She caressed the dogs and made them rub against her body, kissed them and worked with her hands on the sexual parts of the dogs and finished the act with legs wide open, one dog licking her breasts, another laying on her sex and she had in her hands the organ of the third animal. It was a repulsive act that I did not like.

“The Nightmare” impressed Titus more than any other contortion act he had seen, and his description of it is the longest for any contortion act in the entire correspondence. But the language is so convoluted in its effort to articulate his perception that it is practically impossible to get a clear image of what he actually saw. Apparently the contortions performed by the solo nude woman, between 25 and 30 years old, were incredibly complex and at one point involved “placing the calves of her legs against her breasts.” He declared her the best contortionist he had ever seen and saw her act three times. “But I could not get her name. Pictures were forbidden to take in this place and she refused to pose for me. All I know about her is that she came from Chekoslovakia [*sic*] and had been in Paris not over a year.”

At the Lido Theatre, where he saw La May's "New Eve" act, he watched Tosca du Lac, daughter of Gaby Marcés (whom he had seen in Paris in 1939), perform a trapeze contortion act and the Eddy Seiffert Circus contortion act; "but I did not find it so thrilling because the day before I had seen the same posture performed by two women at the Cabaret des Nudistes and the women were able to get their heads through their thighs, something the Seifferts did not do." Le Tomate offered an interminable striptease show which started at 4:00 p.m. and ended at 3:00 a.m. Not surprisingly, the most impressive act for Titus belonged to a Swedish dancer-contortionist. She performed an idol dance in a snake costume, then, nude, various contortion acts, including a complex position which she held for two minutes. Barbara La May supervised this act, in which the contortionist's "body was folded to the limit of physical endurance, her breathing could be seen in her hollowed waist, ribs protruding, her neck seemed to be crushed and her face showed the strain and determination of this beautiful woman [...] to show how flexible she was." The act prompted tremendous applause, and the stage revolved, "giving the chance for everybody to look at this beautiful knot from every angle and inspect the most intimate details of her anatomy."

At the Folies Pigalle, the fusion of sex and contortion acts assumed an even more elaborate theatrical context: a "strong negro" raised a nude woman from a large shell:

She refused to be caressed at the beginning but she was forced to coil her body around the chest of the negro, who lifted her up and holding her by one leg, made her contort and twist her body. He caressed then her breast and body and placed her on the floor, believing she was willing to let him copulate [with] her. But she tried to run away, so he got a rope, tied it around one of her ankles and lifted her up from the branch of a tree. The negro then got a fire, and started to work as a fire-eater, blowing flames from his mouth. He came closer and closer to the woman, and she had to contort, coil her body and limbs, twist her body and go into knots trying to escape the flames.

Here, in an allegorical format, contortionism becomes a visceral metaphor for the convolutions of feminine response to the imprisoning strength of male desire: male strength in itself provides no basis for desire in the woman, but contortionism, no matter how expertly executed and no matter how beautifully representative of female strength, cannot overcome the imprisoning power of the male body. Moreover, the contortionism of the undesiring imprisoned woman only intensifies the possessive man's desire for her.

"Love in the Park" opened with a man and woman on a park bench. They kissed and fondled and he took off her clothes. Nude, she performed contortion acts until a policeman appeared. The man covered her up with a newspaper and sat on her, until the man and the cop left together. Alone, the woman "kept on contorting and leaning on her chest over the bench":

She caressed her limbs, chest, and breasts while a storm broke out, and the trees appear to be as living things or ghosts with eyes. She looked to be near the orgasm and started to caress the tree while kicking backwards, then she pulled herself up from a branch and got her legs around the trunk, then bended backwards and embraced the tree and kept on wriggling like a snake then fell to the floor [and] remained coiled while the curtain covered her.

In this act, however, unlike the previous one, contortionism expressed not only the woman's "improper" desire for the man; it expressed a pleasure in

her body, which exists independently of men (or even other women), and situated her drive toward ecstasy within a strange natural/supernatural domain of masturbatory action.

The Cabaret des Nudistes did not feature acrobatic dances, but it offered a good contortion act by two nude Spanish women, in which one woman “placed her chin against the sex of the lower woman” while they coiled around each other’s bodies. It’s clear that contortion acts involving a pair of women constitute the highest or most prized genre of contortionism for the connoisseurs. (Male performers always seem to assume a “supportive” role in relation to female star contortionists, and it is extremely difficult, as Katzenberg apparently indicated in letters to Titus, to locate examples of male contortionist duets.) And if Titus’s experience is representative, the great pleasures of contortionist performance depend on an amplification of contortionist displacement through the multiplication of contorted bodies. Rare contortion acts involving *three* performers did not fail to fascinate him. The American contortionist Emilie Winsette started her career in the late 1930s by working with her older brother and another girl in a complex act which apparently involved the brother scooping up the contorted women while dangling and swinging from a trapeze bar. When the brother fell in love with the other woman, the act ended, and Winsette embarked on her own with a world tour which led her to reside in Buenos Aires (6 Dec. 1956). In Santiago, Titus saw a complex Swedish contortion act performed entirely in the nude: a woman opens a trunk with a man inside; she contorts inside the box, and he contorts on top of her; then a second woman enters the box and contorts herself so that the spectator sees a woman sitting on her face, a man sitting on her face, and another woman sitting on his face, while stretching her own body to bring her face close to the other woman’s (17 March 1960).

Contortions of the female body seriously disrupt the power of language to transform femininity and masculinity into readable “texts.”

By the 1950s, the link between contortionism and erotic pleasure had probably become so blatant that the search for new sensations in contortionism depended on moving beyond the performances offered by the clubs, even in an era of expanding permissiveness. The latter part of the correspondence concerns itself less with performances in the nightclub world than with Titus’s obsessive efforts to observe and record contortionist stunts that he could not see performed in the nightclubs. While attending a performance of Verdi’s *Rigoletto* at La Scala in Milan (“Marvellous!”), he discovered that box seats accommodated prostitutes the spectator could pick up in an alley behind the theatre. One such prostitute apparently acquainted him with a clandestine male-female contortion show that included acts of copulation and masturbation “never seen” in the particular poses they demonstrated (12 March 1963). The search for more complex and pornographic contortionist performances arose out of Titus’s desire to experience ever greater or more powerful thresholds of sexual excitement. But these new thresholds depended on his capacity to document contortions photographically and to add more and more images to his endless archive of contortionist iconography. Moreover, the most important photographs were always those which showed women performing contortions nude, because nudity is the optimum condition for displaying both the strength and vulnerability of the contortionist’s body, the

ambiguous combination of which, during contortion, is the inflammatory catalyst for male excitement. ("For a contortionist the real hit of his [sic] performance comes from the exhibition of his body and they should make a generous display of bare skin" [3 Dec. 1936].) It's clear from the correspondence that Titus became quite excited just by the diplomatic rituals and modes of seduction required to persuade a contortionist to pose for him. Photography was obviously the preferred way to articulate a male response to the contorted female body, since Titus had little faith in language to describe his perceptions or explain his obsession accurately. The limitations of language are evident in his convoluted descriptions of contortion acts: despite the precision of the writing, it remains very difficult for the reader to *see* clearly what the writer has witnessed. Contortions of the female body seriously disrupt the power of language to transform femininity and masculinity into readable "texts."

Early in the correspondence Titus disclosed his interest in nude contortionism (17 April 1936)—"my passion for naked contortionists" (3 Dec. 1936)—which Katzenberg apparently found quite congenial with his own enthusiasm for male contortionism:

You have not told me how did you find the glass plates of that naked woman I sent you. They are very realistic. [...] Do] you know of any other woman contortionist of the backbending class [who] will pose for us [and] make our collection perfect? [...] I am sure [Cinda Glenn] will care to pose for us in the nude, because she wore a dress that scarcely weighed an ounce. Will you try to find her address? (22 Oct. 1936)

He corresponded with the contortionist Cora Laffont in Brazil, sending her photos in the hope that "she gets new ideas of how to contort" for her high-wire and trapeze acts. "I always wait for the naked pictures she promised to send." His New Year's wish for 1937 resonates with contorted syntax: "Get in touch with a woman backbender that will let us have all the pictures we want of her body twisted and contorted as being made of rubber and without a single bone in its composition" (3 Dec. 1936). Cora Laffont seems to have kept her promise and sustained the correspondence with him, for on 28 March 1940, he wrote that Laffont, now in Buenos Aires, had sent him pictures of herself nude ("except for cacheexe") and that she performed "in the French style" (i.e., nude) "with great success." He also mentioned that he obtained pictures of a 13-year-old girl from Santiago, Elvira Duarte, sitting on her face. The 25 December 1939 issue of *Life* magazine published a photograph of a 10-year-old contortionist, Imogene Winchester, and Titus initiated a correspondence with her. She sent him pictures of herself hanging from rings "wearing only a very small girdle" (8 July 1940), and then she sent him another batch of pictures (10 Dec. 1940), but it's not clear how long this correspondence continued. Even late in the correspondence with Katzenberg, he announced that his "best new source of [contortion] pictures" was a Finnish teenager, Alla Carola, who was "a dream" (29 Jan. 1965). Meanwhile, he had made friends with the contortionist Emilie Winsette, in Buenos Aires, conversed with her in her apartment, and taken nude pictures of her at the Tabaris Club (10 Dec. 1940); in a later letter (6 Dec. 1956), Titus asserted that he met Winsette when she was 22 and still a virgin, although she had enjoyed masturbating while contorting since her early teenage years. The friendship endured for quite awhile, judging by the familiar reference to her in a letter of 6 December 1956, in which he describes two sisters, 12 and 10 years old, capable of performing nearly all master contortionist poses. Winsette had trained these girls, her daughters, since they could walk, "and she promised several times to let me see them in complete nudity if I go to Buenos Aires." She sent pictures of

the girls performing stunts and classical dance movements. A few years later, however, Winsette's marriage was not going well and she was "alone." Titus arranged a "rendezvous" with her in which she "let me watch her in complete nudity [...]. She noticed my excitement and my erection and with her hands made me ejaculate [...]. She refused to let me enter her, but let me kiss her body and muscles that were a dream to me" (3 Feb. 1960).

By the 1950s, the correspondence contained more and more references to shadowy correspondents with whom Titus became increasingly more open about confiding the idiosyncracies of his erotic attachment to contortionism. Through Katzenberg, Titus had initiated a correspondence with a mysterious "John Meredith" or "Merritt," another American, whose wife was a contortionist, though perhaps not professionally. Merritt liked to describe his peculiar sexual relations with his wife:

I assure you that all information I got from John Meredith has been obtained without any pressure from me. He sent me pictures of his wife in acrobatic poses, then in complete nudity; then one day he sent me a note [...] asking if I knew he could enter her while doing a contortion pose. [...] She loves to display her beauty [and] she was willing to have pictures taken to record the sensational and unique ways they coupled their bodies in search of sexual pleasure. (6 Dec. 1956)

"Meredith" wanted to exchange pictures of his wife for pictures in Titus's collection. The correspondence with Meredith/Merritt apparently sustained this level of intimacy for several years. Merritt continued to send photos of his wife in the nude performing contortion tricks he had taught her: "She is a very pretty woman and I do not know how John managed to convince her to have pictures taken in such nudity" (7 July 1962). Soon Merritt informed Titus that his wife "surrenders" completely to his "contortionistic way of copulating and masturbation"; "she and John read my letters together and get such terrific sexual desire that sometimes John ejaculates without having the time to copulate" (12 March 1963). Theoretically, in the letters Titus wrote to Merritt, the power of language to articulate and explain the erotic pleasures of contortionism achieved greater complexity than in the letters to Katzenberg.

Titus corresponded with another American man whose wife was a contortionist, Don Lazaroff, and the language became even more sensational. Lazaroff explained how he copulated with his wife while she assumed a complex contorted position "sitting on her face" with her legs split. She masturbated and excited him with her repertoire of "wriggles and squirms," and provoked Titus to compose one of his more contorted passages:

This makes him frantic, erects once more and masturbate himself reaching the ejaculation then he goes to her and leaning on her cruch [crotch] her spine into closest backbend, holding her legs down with one hand and arm and introducing the other hand in her sex, he gets this hand in and out producing in her the orgasm. (18 Feb. 1956)

Lazaroff had been married for five years when he spied his wife masturbating while contorting herself. He consulted with Titus: "It was then that Don wrote to me, and I suggested that he let her contort and masturbate and he doing the same... It is the cause of his being so grateful with me" (18 Feb. 1956). Although Titus regarded Lazaroff as a "common friend," his wife "resent[ed] his rough handling"; "After he gets her in the closest backbends he copulates her by the back, and when she refuses to use her mouth he lets her go and contort-

ing alone goes into masturbation in front of her and asks Olga to masturbate herself" (3 Feb. 1960). But Titus apparently saw that female contortionism had awakened in Lazaroff an urge toward violence and desecration which differed strongly from his own perception of contortionism as an idealization of female identity: "Women want always to be admired and worshipped and they feel guilty and don't want to cooperate when this is not taken into account." Yet Lazaroff was a "common friend" to the extent that his "rough" relation to his wife echoes Titus's account (a few years later) of his tortuous contorting of his girlfriend in the Valparaiso hotel room back in the late 1920s. References to Lazaroff in the correspondence subsequently disappeared, but Titus soon found another husband eager to confide his sexual excitement in his wife's contortionism: Walter Spranger, he thought, was ashamed to make it clear to his wife that he wanted to teach her acrobatics with an erotic purpose; "he recalls with a thrill every *detail* of her body when she contorts" (29 Jan. 1965).³

With Kattenberg, Titus showed no inclination to discuss sexual relations with his own wife, who in any case derived no pleasure of any sort from contortionism, but as the years rolled on, he took greater delight in revealing the power of other female bodies to excite him in unusual ways and in describing the "sexual excitement that comes from contorting [through which] one can well obtain unlimited pleasure" (6 Dec. 1956). He once remarked that the naked arms of 12- or 13-year-old female contortionists consistently provoked erections in him (4 June 1965). At the Silver Slipper Club in the United States, he photographed "in complete nudity" the contortionist Alice Lee, who "allowed me to touch and caress her gorgeous beauty while in amazing contortion knots." Her "muscular legs and powerful shoulders and arms" excited him wonderfully; moreover, "I got a terrific thrill watching her pubic bone and the way her ribs protruded when she placed her head between her thighs. She never allowed me to copulate her, as she wanted to stay virgin, though she let me kiss her pubic hair, body and limbs" (6 Dec. 1956). Eventually, he explained in detail the complexity of his procedures for controlling and harnessing his sexual pleasure in contortionism:

Every time I go to a show in which a woman will show muscles or contort, I prepare myself placing a large size rubber over my phall[us], and as I always get a hard erection, I can ejaculate without any discomfort. In strong women I get the acme of pleasure with the display of the muscles in the armpits and when the veins in the forearms and biceps can be seen in full action, swollen and in full definition. In contortion acts, the naked legs around the neck, the rib carriage in full display and the crotch naked or scarcely covered, the naked breasts, the folded neck, every detail I watch is a cause of pleasure and ejaculation. When I see an act for the second or third time, I wait till the most thrilling position is performed and I try to hold ejaculation till it is impossible to hold it any longer. (4 June 1965)

At this time he had a friend who was a schoolteacher in Valparaiso. She knew how to contort herself and that he had an erection while watching her contort. This situation excited her enough that she started masturbating him while contorting. After his orgasm, "she went on with her contortions and displaying her sex. [...] All I could do was to caress her" and masturbate her. "When I did not do it [bring her to orgasm?], she masturbated in front of him while in a contorted pose. She was so

enthusiastic about [the] German girls [...] she was teaching acrobatic dancing and contortion that I am inclined to think she had sexual plea-



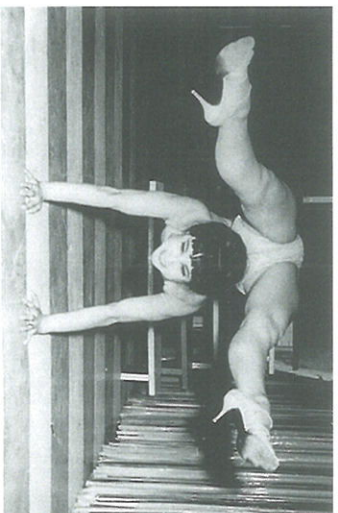
sure while watching them contort. Also when we went to see a contortion act in the movies or nightclubs or circus she shivered with the performer [whom] was female and never thought of saying something encouraging for a male acrobat. (4 June 1965)

This passage is especially interesting for suggesting that the urge to contort arises out of a narcissistic urge to see oneself as an erotic object. Contortionism is a supreme objectification of the body as an erotic object, for the spectator *and the performer*. But because it is a self-objectification rather than other-objectification of the body's erogenous beauties, masturbation emerges as a persistent and perhaps even favored expression of pleasure in contortionism. His friend, Emile Winsette, "told me confidentially" that contorting, "rolling on her breasts [...] gave her such pleasure that she ended her exercises completely exhausted." Her teacher in California inadvertently stimulated her masturbatory pleasure in contorting herself. The teacher had the female students in the class work in pairs; Winsette discovered that she liked the pairing exercises "and she teamed with an older girl who was an expert in heavy contortion but also in caressing her breasts and pubes" (6 Dec. 1956). Since that time, and since her marriage, Winsette continued to enjoy combining contortionism and masturbation.

The themes of narcissism and masturbation seem to link the pleasures of contortionism, for connoisseurs and performers, to expressions of bisexuality, insofar as the collapse of difference between physical strength and vulnerability in acts of contortion echoes the dissolution of difference between masculine and feminine identities defining bisexual desires. "Male contortionists have told me that they have never been with a woman but that they could get erections and the sex orgasm while contorting and the same is true with female contortionist[s]" (6 Dec. 1956). "Is there any contortion performed only by a male bender that has not been shown by a woman?" (21 March 1936). For this reason, perhaps, Titus enjoyed touching now and then upon a male homosexual dimension to contortionism. In any case, Katzenberg's obsession with male contortionism provided Titus with opportunities to comment blithely on homoerotic aspects:⁴

I certainly would like to hear of your experiences with contortionists and what you have been able to obtain in sexual pleasure. A male contortionist is always proud of the ways he can twist his body and your sexual pleasure must make them very proud. They look at the female partners as competitors and I understand why male and female benders very seldom want to copulate with their bodies contorted. (6 Dec. 1956)

However, the spectator, such as Titus, or the performer, such as Merritt's wife, may enjoy copulation between a contorted and an uncontorted body.



I certainly hope the lad [who] will show contortions for you will be of interest and [a] thrill. I am sure if you handle him properly he will tell you of the pleasure he finds in masturbation and perhaps he will allow you to watch him naked contorting and going into strange sexual satisfactions. (18 Feb. 1959)

A friend of Titus's in Spain informed him of peculiar qualities in the performance of the contortionist Rocky Rendall: "My friend said Rocky performed a frontbend so close that he removed his trousers and sucked his phal[li]us without trouble" (12 March 1963).

But intimate and graphic as all these details may seem, they constituted only a component of an enduring correspondence that included an extensive exchange of contortionist pictures. For the global contortionist cult, the exchange of contortionist images was as much an expression of the collector's passion as anything written in the letters. Unfortunately, however, only some of the many pictures Titus sent Kattenberg are identifiable, and it's obvious that pictures identified in the correspondence do not appear at all in the archive. Nevertheless, the archive does contain a lot of curious memorabilia (in addition to pictures) which Titus sent Kattenberg. Especially appealing is an unsequenced series of photographs that Titus himself took in Buenos Aires sometime in the early 1960s.

The performers in this male-female pair act are not identified. Individually, the pictures lack a strong dramatic-theatrical context, but if one reads them in a particular order, they assume an engaging narrative structure. Plates 14 to 17 show the woman alone. Plate 14 presents her in a conventional contortionist position on the floor with her right heel pressed against her shoulder. This pose, which knots the entire body into a kind of coiled spring, easily dramatizes the perception that it is the twisting of the body, the displacement of body parts, which above all magnifies female voluptuousness. But the pose also reveals exciting tensions within the body. The performer's uplified head seems tense with rapturous expectation, amplified by an exquisite straining of the neck muscles, yet the curvaceous limpidity of her right arm and hand provide a charming sign of relaxed composure. Of all the images in the series, this one constructs most overtly the perception that a body which "defies the laws of anatomy" necessarily obscures distinctions between pain and pleasure.

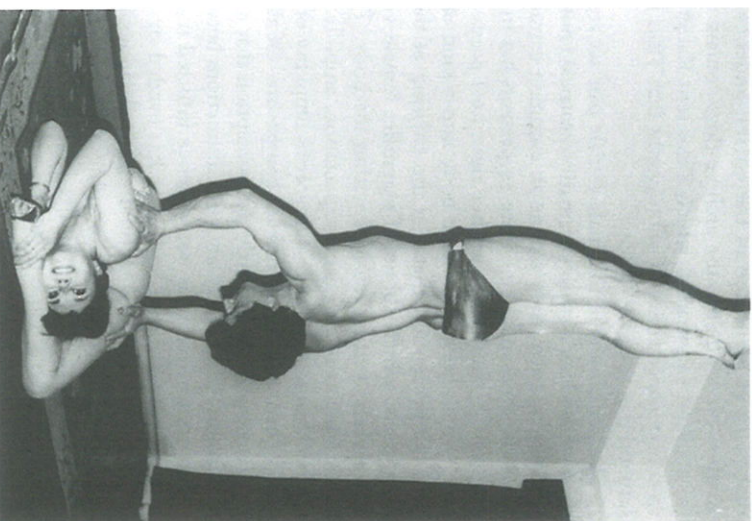
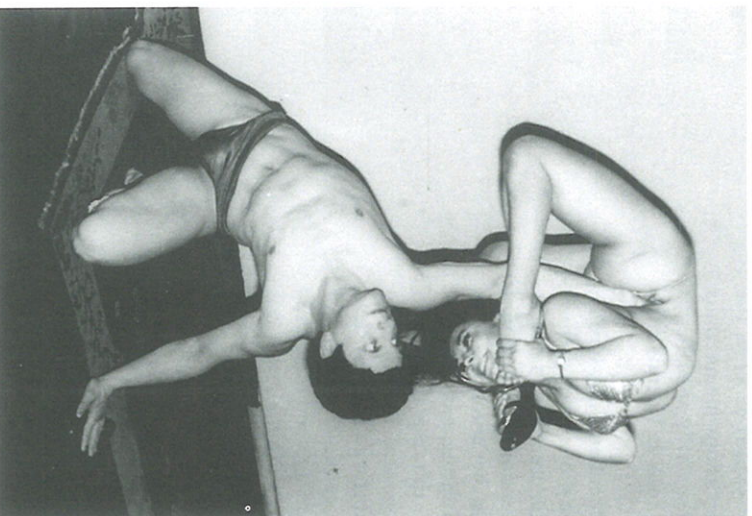
But contortionism is not violence inflicted masochistically upon the body; it is the pleasure of a body that has evaded or transcended the violence to which a "normal" or "natural" body is vulnerable. In plate 15, the woman displays a pose of supreme vulnerability by performing the very difficult backbending act of pushing her head between her thighs, although her head does not come as close to her genitals as with performers like Barbara La May and Erni Erikay. The curiously oblique angle of the picture does not produce

14–21. Taken together, this series of photographs by Eduardo Titus produces a beautiful little drama depicting the self-sufficiency of the woman in contortionism, the oscillating tension within her body between vulnerability and strength, pliancy and poise, and the authority of these qualities to define her relation to the man. (Photos by Eduardo Titus; courtesy of Kattenberg Archive, Harvard Theatre Collection)

quite as voluptuous an image as a frontal shot might, but Titus seems to have favored the angle because of the way it emphasizes the tautness of the muscles in the thighs and arm over the gaze of the smiling head. (In none of these pictures does a performer look directly at the camera.) No other pose conveys more convincingly or dramatically the female body's *penetrability*, enhanced of course by the effort of the smiling face to be seen on the same plane as the vagina.

Plates 16 and 17 show the same pose from different angles. Here, however, the performer juxtaposes the proud display of the genital region with an aggressive display of muscular strength in the arms and legs. In plate 16, the tense linearity of the limbs contrasts delightfully with the curvaceous pliancy of the torso, pelvis, and buttocks. In the frontal view (plate 17), the legs, with the help of high-heel shoes, appear as spearlike projectiles which diminish the performer's aura of vulnerability and give the impression of monstrously beautiful insectoid antennae, simultaneously enticing and threatening. And here again, as usual, the performer discloses a self-absorbed smile of pleasure in contortion rather than a smile of invitation to the spectator.

In plates 18 through 21, the woman works with a male partner who performs gymnastic poses instead of contortions. His function in the pictures is two-fold. First, he demonstrates his own strength, in plate 18, by lifting, with one arm, the contorted body of the woman, who performs an upside-down version of plate 14. This display of the contorted body produces an idealizing effect that is technically quite difficult to achieve. Here contortionism inspires the manifestation of strength in the man, and the awakening of strength in the man is the motivation for contortionism in the woman. When two women accomplish this pose, the effect is invariably breathtaking. But the second function of the male partner is to display the strength of the woman. In plates 18 through 21, he performs handstands on different parts of her contorted



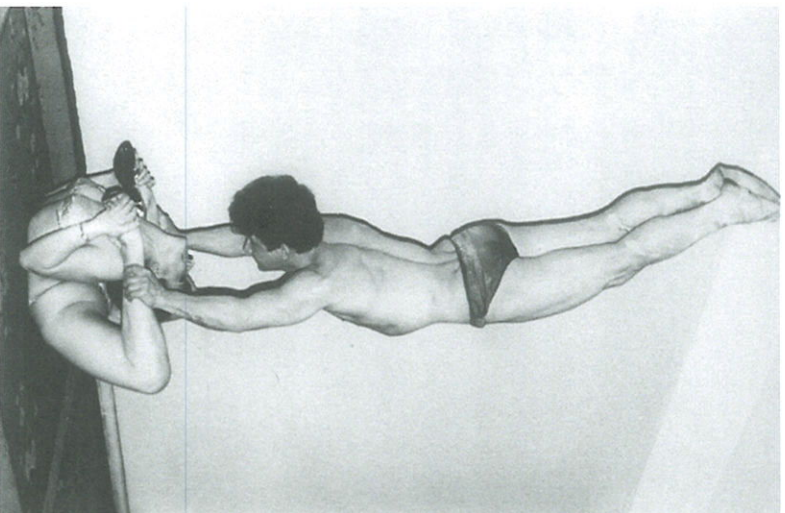
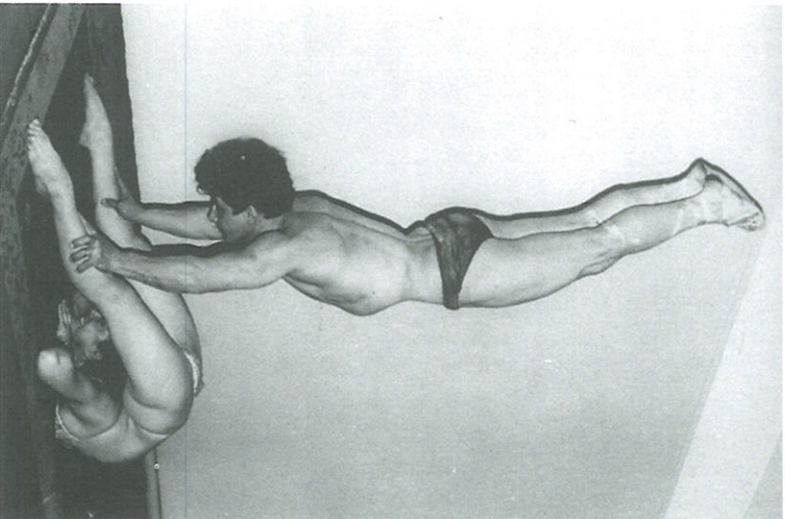
body. No matter what contorted position she assumes on the floor, she displays both the strength and the poise necessary to support his acrobatic assertion of balance. In plate 21, the woman offers perhaps her most intense display of vulnerability, yet in this pose her strength paradoxically achieves maximum expression.

Taken together, then, this set of pictures produces a beautiful little drama depicting the self-sufficiency of the woman in contortionism, the oscillating tension within her body between vulnerability and strength, pliancy and poise, and the authority of these qualities to define her relation to the man. The woman achieves perfect equilibrium of vulnerability and strength when the man can trust her voluptuously contorted body to support his own precarious acrobatic gesture. Contortionism is primarily about the ability of a set of people, the contortionist, the partner, and the spectator, to trust the voluptuousness of the body as a great source of strength rather than a morbid sign of “unnatural” desire.

Voluptuousness always involves degrees of contortionism. But contortionism is always in some sense an image of perversity. Rather melodramatically, Roland Topor perceives female contortionism as a:

bodily rupture, almost a suicide, an offense to the body given by God. [...] Contortionism has therefore long been, and sometimes continues to be, assimilated to diabolical thought, to perversion, to the language of sorcery. [...] Subversive by definition [...] contortionism is not accessible to the masses. (1993:7, 9)

Titus’s obsession with contortionism evolved from a lifelong desire to affirm that the happiest sexual relations between bodies depend on *pervese* ex-



pressions of voluptuousness for which contortionism is the most powerful sign. For this reason, however, contortionism retains a shadowy, marginalized identity within the history of performance cultures, confined in the West especially to “dubious” performance milieu often imbued with a pornographic mood, while the discourse on the subject remains, for the most part, the “secret” of a strange, international cult that documents its great passion in picture exchanges and letters that are essentially clandestine, or at least “private” to a most obvious degree. The correspondence discloses the unique power of contortionism, as a cultic mode of performance, to weaken cultural and class differences. The “unnatural” or “displaced” display of body parts produces, as Koch tried to reveal, in “essential” configurations of desire that are rooted, as Bellmer proposed, in an obsessive level of perception located in a “dark” psychic terrain wherein the borders between syntactic and anatomical order become “fluid” or “twisted.” The obsessive level of perception blurs differences between the corporate executive and the hotel clerk; between the heterosexual and the homosexual connoisseur; between Europeans, North Americans, and South Americans; between performer and spectator; between male and female identification (the bisexual dimension); between the professional and the amateur performer; between the idealized body and its self-transgression; and between bizarre and mundane performance contexts. Obsessive modes of perception invariably get tangled up in “essential” expressions of desire. What is “essential” to both the performer and the spectator of female contortionism is the revelation of optimum thresholds of voluptuousness. These may appear as “disturbing” intimations or even articulations of the pornographic or, as in the Chinese approach, as superior exemplars of the intensely competitive conditions under which maximum voluptuousness can coexist with a constantly “fragile order of things.”

As Koch demonstrated through his dramatic revisions of the “context” for contortionist performance, the act of contortionism possesses uncanny power to draw the spectator closer to the body of the performer: even the revision some spectators feel occurs because of this sense of intensifying closeness. The Yamachani Tantrics believed that contortionism brought them closer to the hidden sources of creation, to the “essential” beauty of the Goddess. Titus required no religious rationale for his obsession. But his obsession was always a matter of bringing himself closer to something “essential”: the body of the contortionist. Not content with assuming the role of a detached spectator in a theatrical context, he had to talk to the performer, correspond with her, correspond with people who know of her, collect more and more pictures of her, study every aspect of her art, travel huge distances to see her, photograph her, divulge to her the power she has to excite him, touch her, and even penetrate her. Voluptuousness, then, becomes the “essential” force in bringing bodies into contact with each other, and contortionism is the “essential” expression of voluptuousness. Yet all this blurring of difference in the obsessive pursuit of an “essential” manifestation of humanness succeeds above all in magnifying the curious individuality, the strangeness, indeed the perversity, of human identity. Female contortionism dramatizes—with disturbing intensity—the perception that it is perverse or narcissistic displacements of anatomy which bring bodies closer together.

Notes

1. Consider the cover illustration for the *New York Illustrated News* on 2 August 1890: this is an engraving which depicts a “high society” woman from Cincinnati who, attempting to “emulate a female contortionist” by wrapping her feet around her neck, was unable to disentangle herself. Two female friends stare at her in a state of alarm. The

- Illustration treats female contortionism as a sensationalistic, somewhat freakish “news” event with comic and possibly dangerous consequences. But more importantly, the illustration indicates the enthusiasm of a female audience for female contortionism; the desire to see female contortionism in the 1890s did not belong entirely to men.
2. Cirque du Soleil presents a different contortionist act in the video *We Reinvent the Circus* (1989).
 3. For further examples of the underground cult network see the letter referring to American Smith Paulson (26 Jan. 1956) and with English actor Stephen Murray (26 Jan. 1952; 4 June 1965). From Emilie Winsette, Titus obtained further views of relations between marriage and contortionism (6 Dec. 1956).
 4. That not all contortionists wished to confide relations between contortionism and sexual desire is stemly evident from a letter in the Dennis Walter file of the Katzenberg collection, in which Walter tells Katzenberg that he will not correspond with him if he continues to ask about erotic aspects of contortionism.

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