



Title

Daido Moriyama: A Retrospective

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Daido Moriyama: A Retrospective

by Yi Ting Lee • 31.01.2024

The work of Daido Moriyama (b.1938) can be understood as a persistent and open-ended investigation into the definition and nature of photography. Although he is perhaps best known for his black-and-white street scenes from the 1960s onwards, Moriyama is a prolific and conceptual artist whose practice has fluctuated in tandem with his relentless enquiry into the entanglement of photography and reality. Curated by Thyago Nogueira and Clare Grafik, the retrospective at the Photographers' Gallery, London, is the product of a three-year research period and includes more than two hundred works.¹ Tracing the trajectory of Moriyama's oeuvre from the mid-1960s to the present day, it is divided into two main sections that reflect crucial developments in the artist's practice. The first, 'In Pursuit of a New Reality', focuses on early works produced for Japanese magazines, and his subsequent questioning of photojournalism, the circulation of images and the language of photography itself. The second, 'The Rebirth of Reality', begins in the 1980s and explores Moriyama's use of the camera to reflect upon the relationship between the external world, history and memory.

The transition between the two sections is signalled by the display of Moriyama's photobook (*Shashin yo sayonara*) (*Farewell Photography*; 1972). Published only eight years after his name first appeared in a photography magazine, it marked a turning point in his career, as well as in his personal life. The book exemplifies Moriyama's unconventional approach to photography, comprising 'mistakes', film ends and rejected or scratched negatives. The photographs do not adhere to a chosen theme or subject-matter, nor are they guided by aesthetic principles or standards: fragments of magazine spreads appear alongside blurred cityscapes and indecipherable, solarised images. *Farewell Photography* epitomises the '*are, bure, boke*' ('grainy, blurry, out of focus') style that Moriyama pioneered in Japan in the late 1960s, along with Takuma Nakahira (1938–2015) and Yutaka Takanashi (b.1935), in the pages of *Provoke* magazine. For Moriyama, *Farewell Photography* was a negation of the stability of the medium and the accepted conventions of documentary and fine art photography; it was, in his own words, a way to say 'farewell to spiritually peaceful photographs, to photographs that show no doubt what photography means' (p.208).² Not only did this reassessment lead to a decline in his photographic output, it was also followed by a period of social isolation, anxiety and a dependency on sleeping pills: 'I tried to dismantle photography but ended up being

dismantled myself' (p.210). It was not until 1981 that, with the encouragement of his colleagues in photography, he felt able to return to the complicated act of taking photographs.

Moriyama was born in the village of Ikeda, but his family frequently relocated due to his father's job in a life insurance company. This itinerant lifestyle contributed to an early sense of instability, and he experienced difficulties during his education, including expulsion. The unease of his childhood was exacerbated by the death of his twin brother at the age of one. More widely, Moriyama grew up as part of a generation that experienced the uncertainty, anxiety and desolation of a country recovering from the Second World War. Japan's dramatic economic growth, rapid urbanisation and industrialisation were accompanied by hypercommercialisation and a Westernisation resulting from complex ties with the United States, which drove political tensions in the country. Indeed, it is not difficult to locate such stimuli in Moriyama's practice, as he rejected the 'objective' modes of photojournalism in favour of ambiguity and fragmentation.

Moriyama's primary outlet was, and remains, the printed page rather than the gallery wall. The curators, therefore, were faced with the challenge of translating his photographs intended for magazines and books – which were often reproduced in various ways – to the exhibition space without undermining the specificity and intellectual rigour of their original contexts. The result is a compact and rewarding, if slightly overwhelming, exhibition, which uses vitrines [FIG.1](#), digital wallpapers, negatives, projection [FIG.2](#), video and vinyl in an attempt to convey the accessibility of the artist's imagery. The inside pages of *Farewell Photography*, for example, are printed in sequential order and adhered to the wall, resembling a mammoth flat plan [FIG.3](#). A video in the dedicated reading room shows the book layout on screen. Indeed, the reading room, which is situated on level 3, is a vital element of the exhibition, allowing visitors to engage directly with Moriyama's work as he conceived it.

In *Farewell Photography* one can identify glimpses of Moriyama's imagery for *Provoke*, which was founded in 1968 by Nakahira, Takanashi, Kōji Taki (1928–2011) and Takahiko Okada (1939–77). Moriyama joined the group before the publication of *Provoke 2* in 1969 and, although only a total of three issues and a book – *Mazu tashikarashisa no sekai o Suteru (First, Abandon the World of Pseudo-Certainty; 1970)* – was produced, *Provoke* had a substantial impact on photography in Japan in the 1970s and 1980s. Opposed to the socially orientated documentary approach that was prevalent at the time, it presented photographs free of narrative and language, serving as an antithesis to the glossy pages of commercial magazines.³ It was in these pages that the *are, bure, boke* style, which emphasised subjective uncertainty, was fully developed. For his debut in the magazine Moriyama

presented a series of images of a naked woman in a room in the Shibuya district of Tokyo **FIG.4** **FIG.5**, her suggestive poses unfolding with the turning of the pages. His photographs in *Provoke 3* – of stacks of Green Giant sweetcorn tins and Coca-Cola bottles – were a direct reference to the screen prints of Andy Warhol.⁴ In contrast to Warhol's unmistakable soup cans, however, Moriyama's images are at points so grainy that the objects become indecipherable – an act of erasure that defies the evidentiary.

During this time, Moriyama began work on the one-year project *Accidents/Premeditated or Not* **FIG.6**, which took the format of a *rensai* (serial publication), published as monthly instalments in *Asahi Camera*. The series responds to the representation of events in the media as they were reported. He focused specifically on reports of deaths and unexpected events, again alluding to the work of Warhol. Exploring his distrust of journalistic images over a prolonged period, Moriyama probed the rhetoric of truth and reality in photography. Tellingly, in an interview with Nakahira in April of that year, he stated, 'I no longer needed the boundaries that separate raw realities from realities created out of printed images. [...] the virtual and the real image [...] to me they are all the same'.⁵

In late 1971 Moriyama visited New York for the first time, where 'the smell of Andy Warhol [was] billowing out of every street' (p.207). He had encountered Warhol's work in the late 1960s in the catalogue for the artist's first major retrospective outside of the United States, at Moderna Museet, Stockholm.⁶ However, William Klein, whom Moriyama discovered in 1960, served as an earlier source of inspiration. The photographs Moriyama took while in New York embody the 'dizzying kind of sensation' (p.199) he felt in Klein's work. For example, an image of a New York theatre, with repeated overlays of the same billboard **FIG.7**, is reminiscent of Klein's *Wings of the Hawk, 42nd Street, New York* (1955). Armed with a half-frame camera, which created pairs of images not unlike magazine spreads, he would return to the same locations and 'casually click' the shutter, often not even looking through the viewfinder of his camera (p.207). Without a care for whether the photograph formed a visually accurate or aesthetic view of the city, he sought to capture a bodily, subjective realism that acknowledged our limited capacity to comprehend reality – whatever that may be.

In a text written to accompany his series *Inu no Kioku (Memories of a Dog; 1982)*, Moriyama wrote of the early death of his twin Kazumichi (一 道):



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Daido Moriyama: A Retrospective* at the Photographers' Gallery, London, 2023-24. (Courtesy the Photographers' Gallery; photograph Kate Elliott).

If we consider my brother a copy of the Moriyama family, then I am a copy of a copy. The ideogram for his name '一' (kazu, 'one') was superimposed with the ideogram for 'person' (人) to form my name (大道), and I ended up surviving [...] When I understood that I was a copy of a copy of my twin brother, the existence of this other I unknown to me and the landscape of a distant fall day, which didn't even become a memory, began to revive in me, as if all of this was the very vision of reality (p.197).

For the series *Inu no Kioku* Moriyama returned to Ikeda and other places associated with his childhood, seeking an external reality that might resonate with his memories. The resulting photobook (1984) also contained previous images, including the now well-known stray dog **FIG.8** from *Kariudo (A Hunter; 1972)*. Some of these photographs take on a new clarity and sharpness, even as they retain their familiar coarse-grained texture. Moriyama's contemplation of memory, reality and place can be understood as a search for *genkei* (original landscapes).⁷ As he believed it was not possible to capture photographic reality, he instead focused on the basic elements of the image – light, shadow, grain – and sought out *genkei*, which by necessity can only exist in memory.⁸

Today, Moriyama remains committed to using photography in an attempt to capture the intersection between external landscape and *genkei*; his approach continues to redefine the medium. One of the largest exhibitions of his work ever mounted, this retrospective successfully positions Moriyama as a conceptual artist as much as – if not more than – a street photographer. In one of the final displays, *Labyrinth* **FIG.9** **FIG.10**, visitors are faced

with now-familiar images. Here, Moriyama reinvents his own archive by publishing his contact sheets, which are presented in a non-chronological and non-thematic way. As with many of Moriyama's series and photobooks, the image is freed from conventional narrative; it is a self-referential system that speaks to the instability of photography and its relationship to meaning. As Moriyama himself noted, 'the past is always new, the future is always nostalgic' (p.217).



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Daido Moriyama: A Retrospective* at the Photographers' Gallery, London, 2023-24. (Courtesy the Photographers' Gallery; photograph Kate Elliott).



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Daido Moriyama: A Retrospective* at the Photographers' Gallery, London, 2023-24. (Courtesy the Photographers' Gallery; photograph Kate Elliott).



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Daido Moriyama: A Retrospective* at the Photographers' Gallery, London, 2023-24. (Courtesy the Photographers' Gallery; photograph Kate Elliott).



Fig. 5 From the series *Provoke 2*, by Daido Moriyama. 1969. Photograph. (© Daido Moriyama Photo Foundation; exh. the Photographers' Gallery, London).



Fig. 6 From the series *Accident/Premeditated or Not*, by Daido Moriyama. 1969. Photograph. (© Daido Moriyama Photo Foundation; exh. the Photographers' Gallery, London).



Fig. 7 From the series *Another Country in New York*, by Daido Moriyama. 1971. Photograph. (© Daido Moriyama Photo Foundation; exh. the Photographers' Gallery, London).



Fig. 8 From the series *A Hunter*, by Daido Moriyama. 1971. Photograph. (© Daido Moriyama Photo Foundation; exh. the Photographers' Gallery, London).



Fig. 9 From the series *Labyrinth*, by Daido Moriyama. 2012. Photograph contact sheets. (© Daido Moriyama Photo Foundation; exh. the Photographers' Gallery, London).



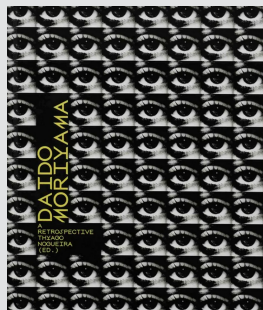
Fig. 10 Installation view of *Daido Moriyama: A Retrospective* at the Photographers' Gallery, London, 2023-24. (Courtesy the Photographers' Gallery; photograph Kate Elliott).

Exhibition details

Daido Moriyama: A Retrospective

The Photographers' Gallery, London
6th October 2023-11th February 2024

About this book



Daido Moriyama: A Retrospective

Edited by Thyago Nogueira, with contributions by Daido Moriyama, Thyago Nogueira, Yuri Mitsuda, Masako Toda, Masashi Kohara, Yutaka Kambayashi, Satoshi Machiguchi and Kazuya Kimura
Prestel, Munich, London and New York, 2023

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Footnotes

- 1** The exhibition was first shown at Instituto Moreira Salles, São Paulo (9th April–14th August 2022), before travelling to C/O Berlin (13th May–6th September 2023). After its presentation at the Photographer’s Gallery, London, it will be shown at the Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki (7th March–2nd June 2024), Photo Elysée, Lausanne (6th September 2024–12th January 2025) and Foto Arsenal, Vienna (2025).
- 2** Catalogue: *Daido Moriyama: A Retrospective*. Edited by Thyago Nogueira, with contributions by Daido Moriyama, Thyago Nogueira, Yuri Mitsuda, Masako Toda, Masashi Kohara, Yutaka Kambayashi, Satoshi Machiguchi and Kazuya Kimura. 288 pp. incl. 30 col. + 150 b. & w. ill. (Prestel, Munich, London and New York, 2023), £45. ISBN 978-3-7913-8925-7.
- 3** This is often seen as a break from the photojournalism of an earlier generation, something hinted at in Shōmei Tōmatsu’s comment that ‘Provoke was a group organized by Nakahira in rebellion against me’, quoted in T. Nogueira: ‘Daido Moriyama: the various realities of image’, in *idem, op. cit.* (note 2), pp.198–220, at p.202.
- 4** *Ibid.*, esp. pp.201 and 207.
- 5** Daido Moriyama, quoted from Takuma Nakahira: ‘Shashin to iwu kotoba wo nakuse! (get rid of the word photography!)’, *Design* 120 (April 1969), pp.62–74, in D. Dufour and M. Witkovsky, eds: exh. cat. *Provoke: Between Protest and Performance*, Vienna (Albertina), Winterthur (Fotomuseum), Paris (Le Bal) and Chicago (Art Institute of Chicago) 2016–17, pp.392–97, at p.396.
- 6** A. Warhol, K. König, P. Hulten and O. Granath, eds: exh. cat. *Andy Warhol*, Stockholm (Moderna Museet) 1968.
- 7** On the discourse of ‘landscape’ and the ‘mutualism between work and observer’ in Japanese cultural production during the 1960s and 1970s, see Y. Lippit: ‘Japan during the Provoke era’, in Dufour and Witkovsky, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp.19–22, at p.22; see also N. Hatakeyama: ‘Artist talk: about fukei’, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (30th January 2013), available at www.sfmoma.org/essay/landscape-situation-about-fukei, accessed 30th January 2024.
- 8** See Nogueira, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.210–11.

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