

Crossing Boundaries: An Interview with Nobuyoshi Araki

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Araki in Conversation

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This interview with Nobuyoshi Araki was conducted on October 28, 2010, in Shinjuku, Tokyo, Japan by Hyewon Yi, as part of her research on participant/observer photography. Yuko Teshima Fujii assisted with interpretation during the interview and translation of the transcript. Kikuko Tanaka also assisted with translation of the transcript. The interviewer thanks Mashiyama Takayuki of Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo, for arranging the interview, reviewing the transcript, expediting permission to publish the accompanying photographs, and countless other courtesies. **Warning:** The interview contains sexually explicit language.

Nobuyoshi Araki(荒木経惟, *Araki Nobuyoshi*) (b. 1940) is one of the most celebrated photographers in Japan and one of the most prolific photographers in the world. He has published over 400 books, beginning in 1970 with *Xerox Photo Albums*, which was produced with the aid of a photocopy machine. With the publication of *Sentimental Journey* (1971), a record of the artist's honeymoon, Araki made his mark on contemporary photography by exposing the private and intimate events of his wedding journey to public view. His candid photographs, often considered pornographic, have provoked conflict with authorities in Japan and controversy in the West. The interview addresses issues concerning Araki's participant/observer method of dealing with his subjects, his blurring of reality with fiction, pornography, authorship, productivity, and the editing process.

HY: I am most interested in how you gained intimate access to your subjects. How did you develop your method?

NA: Don't ask me such a thing! I gained access through sex. Sex is like foreplay. Photography comes afterwards. Or vice versa.

HY: Do you have sex with all your models?

NA: Of course I had sex with all my models. It is a certainty. But now I can't do it any more. I am so sorry.

HY: Your project documenting the red light district of Tokyo in the 1980s, as seen in the book *Tokyo Lucky Hole* (1990), entailed intimate access to the sexual practices of the district's prostitutes and their clients. Your first person participatory approach, with you in the role of customer, often resulted in photographs of you taking part in erotic acts. It is akin to the technique of an anthropologist investigating his own culture through participation and active observation. What was your motivation for this project?

NA: I needed to break down the me-and-you barrier. I can say that I have collapsed the previous tradition of photography that emphasized objectivity. In the past, photographers felt they had to eliminate their subjectivity as much as possible. I consider myself a "subjective" photographer. I try to get as close as possible to the subject by putting myself within the frame. In addition, this action avoids making my photographs mere works of art. Photographs taken by others are better photos than I took [laughs]. Sometimes I give my camera to a subject and my subject takes a picture of me.

When I frequented the club which appeared in *Tokyo Lucky Hole*, there was a guy who came with me. In the course of the activity of having fun, I would pass my camera to a woman or to him. Sometimes he would take pictures of me. He instructed the women in using the camera. By doing so, I got different kinds of shots. Sometimes the photographs caught that I didn't get an erection.

HY: Was it the editor of *Photo Age* who accompanied you? Akira Suei?

NA: An editor came with me, but not him. The editor at *Uwasa no Shinsō* [The Truth of Rumor] came with me. He was an enthusiastic participant. He played multiple roles, from taking pictures of me to being a customer himself. Today's editors don't do that for me any more. It was back in the 1980s. There is no good photo or bad photo. It doesn't matter.

HY: Your passing in and out of the view of your camera's lens, thereby blurring the boundary between photographer and subject, intrigues me. Photographers such as Nan Goldin and Larry Clark also appear in

their works. What is your rationale for revealing such personal activities to the public?

NA: For me, photography is (by definition) to reveal oneself. Both Clark and Goldin focus on particular situations and occasions. However, I came to photography because I like to explore the banality of life, people's ordinary activities. I don't pursue any special subjects.

HY: Several of your books, such as *Sentimental Journey* (1971) and *Yoko My Love* (1978), document your deceased wife's private life with you. *Sentimental Journey* brought you a lot of attention for its honest depiction of everyday life, like pictures in a family album. These pictures, including shots of Yoko having sex with you, are quite revealing. What made you decide to publish such personal images? Did you consider their shock value? Was this a way to gain an attention to your career? How did your wife, Yoko, feel about being physically and emotionally exposed to that degree? Would you say she was your collaborator?

NA: I did not intend to shock anyone. I had more of a "natural impulse." Only artists without talent try to shock people. Because showing naked (genitals) was prohibited (in Japan), it was sensational to show them, but I was not thinking in such a calculated way. As to my honeymoon, I started taking photographs right away, beginning with our train ride, and then having sex. That is what everyone does on a honeymoon, so it is nothing special.

At the time the book was published, people were more concerned about sex. Now people care less.

When *Sentimental Journey* was published, Yoko brought this book to the office where she worked. The great thing about Yoko is, she tried to sell it to her co-workers, even to her boss.

I have luck with women. I am not a great photographer, but I only have great subjects such as Yoko and Kaori.



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'*Sentimental Journey*', 1971,

© Nobuyoshi Araki / Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery

HY: Your next important book, *Pseudo-Diary* (1980), seems to challenge the notion of “honesty,” which was the key factor in *Sentimental Journey* (1971). Did you choose to blur the boundary of truth intentionally, in order to mock or deceive the viewers? Is it true that you added inaccurate dates for each photo in *Pseudo-Diary*?

NA: For me, taking photographs can be just like keeping a diary. During the 1980s, everyone was taking pictures like a diary. In that cultural climate, the first cameras with a date function were introduced to the public. Such a camera allowed you to date all your photographs. It could be manipulated so easily. I took photographs, one after another, with different dates since I could switch the past with the future by manipulating the dates on an automatic camera. Photography is lying, and I am a liar by nature. Anything in front of you, except a real object, is fake. Photographers might consider how to express their love through photography, but those photographs are “fake love.” That is how I make the future and past. That’s why I entitled it “Pseudo-Diary.” I can create 2020 in 2010.

HY: I noticed there were a lot of pictures dated April 1st. **NA:** April 1st is the ultimate metaphor for the photographer as a liar [from the tradition of April Fools’ Day]. Also, there are a lot of August 6th, 9th, and 15th dates relating to bombing of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the surrender of Japan respectively in *Pseudo-Diary* (1980). In the publication *Tokyo hōshasen (Tokyo Radiation)* (2010), I only used dates from August 6th to 15th. This is a sequel to *Tokyo Zenritsusen gan (Tokyo prostatic cancer)* (2009) I am making a connection between the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and my own radiation treatment for cancer. I know it is unethical to relate my personal treatment to such significant dates of Japanese history though.



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'Tokyo Prostate Cancer', 2009

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HY: Why do you think photography is a form of lying?

NA: Photography is a secondary thing, because actual objects are true and photography is a lie and a merely a copy of reality. Existence comes first. So you don't have to make a big deal about photography.

HY: My next question is about the relationship between your work and pornography. Generally in Japanese pornographic photography, models are young and beautiful, usually digitally manipulated to make perfect images. However, in your photographs, many of the women are wrinkled and deviate from the cultural norm of beauty. What do you suppose male contemporary viewers think about your models? Do you consider male viewer's responses? Are you trying to please the male viewer or are you trying to rebel against the male viewer, even as a male yourself?

NA: I don't think about it. I do not care about my male viewers' responses at all. My friends have complained, for a long time, that they cannot masturbate to my photos. That is because they do not have a sense of how to look at photography. When photographers in general make ordinary pornography, they do not touch the models. Male viewers in general seek "beautiful" images in pornography. Meaning, they do not want to look at reality in women's body such as wrinkles and "love handles".. That's why other male viewers can't masturbate to my work. But I think the dirtiness of sex would in fact attract people. Beautiful "normal" pornography does not appeal to the human heart.

Also, with a digital camera, a photographer can only present a virgin because a digital camera is like a virgin. It doesn't have a history. With a film camera, I can present the model and her ex-boyfriends all at once, because a film camera has a long history. A woman's image shot in film reflects the existences of her three prior

boyfriends. It shows the model's history.



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'Tokyo Nouvelle', 1995

© Nobuyoshi Araki / Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery

HY: How different is your work from conventional pornographic photography in Japan?

NA: My photography reveals everything, differently from typical pornography. There is a Japanese proverb, “Hiding makes it flower (秘すれば花).” [If you hide something, it becomes more valuable and beautiful.] But my models and photographs show everything. That can’t make it flower. I am not photographing to show someone else, but photographing for myself. All these soft pornographic photographs in magazines do not last, but my photos will remain. [To add more context, the women in traditional Japanese pornography often seem to be embarrassed, whereas the women in Araki’s photos appear more audacious.]

HY: You are widely regarded as a photographer who knows how to communicate with your subjects. How do you relate to them? What do you say to them? Do you always use the same methods when you work with models?

NA: It depends. I keep talking to them when I photograph. I cheer them up by talking.

HY: How would you describe your relationship to your camera?

NA: My camera is like my pants? It's hard to say. It is certain that I cannot live without a camera.

HY: Did you bring your camera today?

NA: I can take your nude photos later. [Araki laughs while removing a camera from his bag.] This camera takes color photographs and has a date function. Color is Eros. I like color photographs. I call them Kōshoku nikki [好色日記]. [This is translated as “lechery diary”, but 好色 can be literally translated as “likes color.”] Liking this combination of *Eros* /*color* means that you are licentious. Releasing a shutter is like making a wink.

HY: Do you ever use a digital camera?

NA: No, digital cameras are for stupid people. Pictures taken by a digital camera only show the instant moment. A digital camera copies the presence of reality. What you see is what you get. However, there may be something added to the frame during the process of developing or printing when it comes to gelatin silver print. There could be sentimental feelings in those photographs. This kind of “mysterious secret” goes into the process of using a film camera. It is humane, so it is appropriate for photographic expression. I do not feel the body temperature of the subject in digital image. There is no physicality. A digital camera turns a photographer into a robot, with no feeling.

HY: Some of your works are exquisitely composed; others appear to be quite casual, in the style of snapshot aesthetics. Can you tell me about the way you photograph? Were you aware of works by Robert Frank?

NA: I don't think about Robert Frank's photographs at all. Frank would like to show his intelligence and ideas through his photography. His photographs were about social consciousness or social reality. But I don't take pictures about social consciousness. For example, the pictures by Frank taken from the window of a bus have a high vantage point, like a bird's eye view of the city. That's how he became an observer of the society. However, I take photos from a taxi window, a very low vantage point. It can be a close-up view of people. What I see from a taxi window are women's butts. That's why there is no slump for me. Robert Frank told me that what is great about me is I have not experienced any slump.

HY: My next question is about your productivity. Are you always intending to take a lot of pictures? **NA:** It is a way of life. Taking photographs is like heartbeat and breathing. The sound of pressing the shutter is like a heartbeat. I don't think about productivity at all. I just shoot life itself. It is very natural for me.

For a photographer, the moment he shoots is most thrilling. Developing and printing comes later; it is secondary. That's why we are all poor. I enjoy taking pictures very much, but I am not thinking about the rest.

HY: How many books have you published?

NA: Over four hundred. It's like diarrhea. When I take photographs, I publish them immediately so that I don't get constipated.

HY: Who edits your photo books? Do you get involved in the editing process of book publications?

NA: In general, I think photographers should edit as well. Making photography demands a series of choices, like, who to photograph and which photographs to show. I have so many photo books. However, I think I have the responsibility of editing my photo books. For those works that have the word “sentimental” in their titles, I

edit them by myself. All my photos are great, so even if someone else edits them, it still makes a great book. In general, most of the time it is more interesting when editors are involved. Photography is collaboration, because taking a picture requires collaboration with models, and editors are necessary collaborators for me. Collaborations make things better. One gets more excited (sexually) when someone else is looking, right?

HY: Did you edit the book, *Pseudo-Diary*?

NA: Yes, I edited that one. In that book, editing just meant taking random dates and arranging the photos according to the dates; it's conceptually made.

During the editing, the editor specializing in literature said, "You need to put some text along with photographs." I considered my photographs talkative enough, so I didn't want any text, and I said, "No." As an example, an editor said that the book *Sentimental Journey – Spring Journey* – [a book about Araki's beloved cat, Chiro, who died in 2010] needs text along with Chiro dying, but words cannot be of any help in this devastating situation. So I inserted photographs instead of text. I would not have inserted any photographs unless some editors asked me to insert texts. In this way, making photo books can often bring a new idea through the collaboration with people. Sometimes editors can inspire me, but it doesn't make this someone else's book. Collaboration produces better photo books.



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'Winter Journey', 1991

© Nobuyoshi Araki / Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery

YF: Was Chiro your alter-ego?

NA: Well, I am not sure, but her presence was great to that extent.

HY: I find a great sense of humor throughout your work. Where does your comic bent come from? Are you influenced by the traditional Japanese erotic *Ukiyo-e* prints, which often portray light-hearted sex (*Shunga*, 春画)?

NA: I have a sense of humor by nature. I think humor is very important. Within Japanese culture, a sense of humor (comicality, 滑稽さ) is a virtue. If it is not expressed well, it's not interesting. I believe the Japanese sense of humor comes from Edo period. However, I wasn't influenced by *Ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 or *Shunga* 春画).

HY: In earlier interviews, you stated that you were influenced by Japanese culture rather than by well-known photographers in the West. What is your relationship with Japanese culture? More specifically, what is your relationship with the city of Tokyo?

NA: Tokyo is my neighborhood in both a physical and a mental sense. I often take pictures of the sky, but the sky is not the sky if it is not taken from my own balcony. Sky can be interesting only in juxtaposition to the electric poles and wires that are running through Tokyo. Images of the sky alone are not very interesting. 'Sky' is other world; life after death. 'City' (Tokyo) is this world. My photos must contain both of them in the same frame. "Sky is like a film!" Sounds sophisticated, doesn't it?



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'Laments: Skyscapes / From Close-range', 1991

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HY: I have read that you were influenced by the short-lived Japanese avant-garde photography magazine *Provoke* from the late 1960s. What aspects of the magazine work affected you at the time?

NA: I would not say “influenced”, but it was definitely on my mind. I couldn’t fully participate in it, but I shared the rebellious spirit with *Provoke*. Two years later, *Provoke* was pushing me toward the direction of making the book, *Sentimental Journey*. It became an inspiration for *Sentimental Journey*.

YT: How did you learn about *Provoke*?

NA: Everybody knew about it. It was strange for them that I had asked to join them because I was working for *Dentsu* [an advertising company]. Takuma Nakahira of *Provoke* considered me an enemy and attacked me. But when he met me, we became friends with each other. Daido Moriyama defended me. Moriyama said, “He is a nice guy.” Everyone there was very serious. I told them, “Don’t get a fever over an idea. It’s just an idea. Everybody becomes too passionate about photography, but it’s only art and photography. Why would you be so enthusiastic about it?”

Moriyama and his friend went to Zushi, swimming across the ocean to go to the island. They were criticizing other photographers. They were critical of photography. I think it was not necessary to be so critical of each other. If I said something wrong, they would have killed me. They were that passionate in the critical sense.

HY: You blur several boundaries in photography; fact and fiction, formal and informal, your position as a producer and as a subject. This raises the question of authorship.

NA: I do not have any authorship whatsoever. I transgress the boundary as if going back and forth between life and death. Sometimes I was taking photos from the window of a car. Up until now, the inside of the car was this world and the outside of the car was the other world, but lately it has become the opposite. Inside the car is the outer world. Outside the car is this world. I feel as if I am taking photographs from a hearse. Sometimes I am looking at the outer world from inside, or I am looking at the inner world from outside. This position can be very fluid and will change again in the future, for sure.

HY: You often let other people take pictures in which you appear as a subject, but you claim them to be your photographs. Who has authorship of these works?

NA: Photography is not the work. You shouldn’t make photography into an art work.

HY: But in your photo books, the photographs are all credited to you.

NA: Because the camera has the authorship, not the photographer. And I own the camera!

HY: Yesterday I saw *Sentimental Journey – Spring* (2010) your recent book about your cat, Chiro. I found it to be emotionally touching. Your decision to include images of the dead cat, its cremated body, etc., recalls the final book about your wife, *Sentimental Journey – Winter* (1991). You said that Yoko served as a mirror to reflect yourself. I assume the cat also played that role. Are you identifying yourself as a cat?

NA: When I took photographs of Chiro, no one could come between us. We were just looking at each other intensely without saying anything. There is a powerful relationship between me and Chiro.

HY: Are you conscious of your own mortality? What will be your last picture? Who will take a photo of you when you are dead? Have you thought about such things?

NA: I will take my own photo from the coffin by using a digital camera for the first time. I think I am haunted by death. The god of death is approaching me, but I am far away from him because a goddess from New York came to me. The evil spirit ran away because of you.

HY: I hope so. Thank you so much.

NA: You can make it up. You can lie.

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