

Communication within the Corporeal- An Interview with Riichi Yamaguchi

by Dean Poland

The international acclaim enjoyed by Japanese photographers, such as Sugimoto Hiroshi, Hosoe Eikoh, Ninagawa Mika and Araki Nobuyoshi, is a testament to the diverse and rich tradition the photographic arts have in Japan. Riichi Yamaguchi is the latest in a long line of Japanese photographers who attempt to combine a personal vision with an international sensibility.

Born in Tokyo in 1971, Riichi moved to the United States in 1991, and studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Upon graduation in 1997, he worked for six years in the New York studio of world-renowned photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto.

Since returning to Japan in 2004, Riichi has worked at the Tokyo Wonder Site – Institute of Contemporary Art and International Exchange, and has received grants from the Arts Council of England and the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs. In 2005, he was selected by Gustav Metzger to participate in the “EAST International” exhibition in the United Kingdom. In 2007, he exhibited his solo show “A Sense of Detachment” at the Tokyo Gallery.

After joining me to watch a Butoh performance at Dairakudakan’s Kochuten studio in the Tokyo suburb of Kichijoji, I sat down with Riichi and asked him about his life and photographic work.

I began by asking him about his most re-

cent project: ‘Transcending our Limitations’, a work that, on the surface, seems to focus on the naked human body.

Riichi Yamaguchi: The idea for Transcending our Limitations emerged from work I did in a previous project. Inspired by Diane Arbus, I had been working on a portrait



series of people who had experienced existential angst in the past. I met refugees, a suicide survivor, a person from a broken family, a gay man, a person who had trouble fitting into society, and a person who went through a very painful divorce. They told me their personal stories, their difficult experiences and feelings of confusion. In speaking to them, I felt that some of them had gained an understanding of their past that would help them to overcome their circumstances and to move on to the next stage of their life. And I was impressed by how people’s inherent

terested in certain aspects of Japanese art and Eastern ways of thinking, and began to incorporate such ideas into my work. At that time I was strongly drawn to the avant-garde Japanese dance form Butoh, and a choreographic dance technique called Contact Improvisation, which although developed in the 1970s in the US, has in essence, an Eastern way of thinking. Both approaches see the body as the primary source of freedom of expression.

When I heard about these dance forms and techniques from my models, something clicked in me and I really wanted to

include them in my photographic practice. This was the impetus for Transcending our Limitations. I especially made use of Contact Improvisation to choreograph the models and compose the shots.

Contact Improvisation is a partnered or group dance technique of improvised movements beginning from a shared point of contact. Dancers try to maintain a point of contact between their bodies while moving freely. The key is to find balance in the midst of constantly shifting positions. It is said that Contact Improvisation represents one’s attitude, rooted in Eastern philosophy that accepts what-



energy inwardly heals them and liberates them. My original goal for the previous project was to present their portraits along with the texts of their stories. However, because their problems are so personal, and some of them are still struggling, I began to wonder if I should pursue this project. In Transcending Our Limitations, instead of explicitly revealing the models’ past, I wanted to create a series of photographs that focused purely on the energy that allows us to overcome our difficulties. This energy, however elusive it is to define, is something we all have; in the East it is called qi[ki], in the West, libido or will.

Dean Poland: I see. In this series of images you photographed human bodies in various postures; touching each other. Can you tell me more about why you felt this helped you capture the ‘energy’ you just described?

RY: When I returned to Japan from New York, I became in-

ever happens to the individual.

DP: What or who inspires your life and work?

RY: All the models associated with my photography projects have inspired me. A well-known portrait photographer, Diane Arbus, once said that a camera is a kind of license to relate to various people. That is, it is a photographer’s privilege to directly ask “May I take your picture?” to a total stranger. In my case, the process of finding models opened the way to get acquainted with a variety of unique people, for example, a political refugee and a suicide survivor. In my conversations with them I have always been absorbed in listening to their personal stories, beliefs, and ways of thinking. This process of understanding people helps me to create diverse viewpoints and to understand myself better, and it inspires my work.

DP: When and why did you decide to make photography the

focus of your creative work?

RY: Photography was the most appropriate way for me to express myself with its inherent ability to expand my personal and professional network. After going to the US in my twenties, I had difficulty communicating with Americans because of my limited language ability. I felt totally invisible among them. However, when I took a photography class out of mere curiosity, I noticed some people took interest in my work. Their responses interested and inspired me to take more interesting shots so that I could communicate with them. This sense of acknowledgment has motivated me ever since. In this way, deciding on photography was not so much a choice for me, but rather a natural consequence of my situation.

many corporations and organizations in Japan. It took me a long time to understand logically that it was more beneficial to adjust my behavior by trying to understand how others think rather than to be opinionated. If I had continued to live in the US, my work would have taken a totally different path. Maybe, the process of my artistic practice is to constantly find a new balance while expressing and liberating myself.

DP: What motivates you to continue with your photographic work?

RY: My curiosity always motivates me to look for unique ideas. I am fascinated by art forms that demand



DP: Has your approach to life and photography changed since returning to Japan from New York?

RY: Because of the influence of a Western way of thinking and especially the art education I received in New York, I have often faced difficult situations that arise from the different cultural views, and I have struggled to adapt to Japanese society. It is very common for Japanese who once lived abroad, especially Western countries, to struggle to readjust to Japanese society. As is often said, Western society values individualism while collectivism is much more valued in Japanese society. Selflessness is a virtue and expected in

a fundamental change in my way of seeing the world. Actually, seeing Butoh for the first time caused a transformation in my way of perceiving. This experience led me to a new awareness of contrasting concepts (beauty and ugliness, life and death, sacred and profane). Looking for unique forms of artistic expression has been upmost in my work. ♥

For further information about Riichi Yamaguchi's work and current projects you can visit his homepage at: <http://www.riichiyamaguchi.com/>

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