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Nobuyoshi Araki's Archival Corpo-Rapture

Abstract: Nobuyoshi Araki is one of the most famous and controversial Japanese photographers, whose work amounts to several hundred publications. Over the course of nearly five decades, this prolific artist's 'photo-mania' dealing with, among various subject matters, a depiction of human bodies, often eroticized and graphic, has been both celebrated and heavily criticized. Instead of contributing to those discourses of either support or disdain of his artistic vision – especially on the issue of fetishized female nudity – this paper focuses on Araki's insatiable lust for capturing Japan's corporeality. His unrelenting inspiration to encapsulate Japanese bodily images has generated an immense collection of not only personal(ized) memories, but also of various types of archives – intimate and public – of the spontaneous and the staged, reflecting the ephemeral, transitory or epochal. Drawing on Derrida's notion of archive in relation to Freudian death drive, this paper explores Araki's archive fever as a mechanism of subjective power imposed on the collective body. The proliferation of his photo series unveils Araki's tendency to 'destroy' the previous encounters while simultaneously adding to his ultimate repository of somatic images with each new volume.

Keywords: Nobuyoshi Araki; photography; body; archive fever; *eros*; *thanatos*

Corporeal Japan

The human body has been a topic of interest among the Japanese people since ancient times. Affirmation of the Eastern perspective that negates Cartesian dualism is to be found in Shinto purifying rites that cleanse both body and mind, and in Buddhist understanding of the body and the mind not as entirely separate entities, but rather as complex and mutually dependent.

Whether the bodies are naked or concealed under the heavy make-up or layers of clothes, the expressiveness, movement and appearance of the body perpetuate having a distinguished value within Japanese society. A geisha's face remains hidden under the whiteness of her skin, redness of her lips and specific hairstyle, revealing only three triangles of her bare skin on the neck as a seductive invitation to her sensual world. "Although the word kimono means 'thing to be worn', conceptually it has more to do with the realm of emptiness, since the body it contains has no existence of

its own.”¹ Long, wide sleeves, accentuated collar and knotted *obi* obscure the body's shape but wearing kimono is not an effortless task, it commands certain discipline, a body posture beneath weightily layers which enable certain signification – diversity of emotions, suggestive invitations or instigating the imagination of beholder.

On the other hand, another iconic figure of Japanese culture – the samurai warrior, fully committed to the *bushido* code of moral principles – must discipline both physical and psychological aspects of his persona. The body and the mind should be equally trained in order to enable within a warrior the respected values of loyalty, martial arts mastery or honorable death. The command and control of the body, regardless of the severeness of the circumstances, were highly respected; used in a same manner as clothes, to cover the essence as the body was samurai's main instrument for his work. Some samurai clans (Nabeshima) even firmly rejected the saying that “the arts aid the body”, believing that it can only ruin the body and should be left to artists to practice it.²

On the stage, in classical Japanese theatre – *noh*, *bunraku*, *kabuki* – the masks, the puppets or the make-up subvert the “ordinary” body into a presence born in the liminal space of the real and dreamlike state where the body emanates a divine manifestation that reveals to the audience a transgression of time and space. Discipline and control of immensely conventionalized bodily movements is of utmost importance in the traditional imperial dance form, *bugaku*, wherein dancers wear masks, as well as in postmodern dance form, *butoh*, which brings into action often completely naked bodies exploring primal sexuality, nature and shamanistic trance in grotesque, dark ambience.

In densely populated Japan, nurturing a distance between the bodies gives prominence to the culture of bowing and withholds the direct act of touching. However, *kinbaku* (or *shibari*) is a bondage practice dating from the late Edo period (1603–1868) that became widely popular in the 1950s when the aesthetic value of rope masters' work began to be appreciated. Through a set of specific rules and forms, audience is lured into involvement in a communicative act between the bound person and the ropes which are extensions of the *nawashi* (rope master)'s hands.

In spite of the long tradition of sexual images in Japanese art, predominantly *shunga* – woodblock prints depicting various sexual acts, often going beyond standard conceptions and featuring also animals and demons – in the domain of pornography, the Japanese topography of body meets its limitations. Namely, regulated by Japanese law, the genitals of performers appearing in pornographic films must remain concealed and are thus heavily censored. Pixelated and blurred genitals perplex the foreign audience by falsely providing a somewhat arguably romantic suggestion that certain sights must remain invisible, only to be properly enjoyed in “real” life. However, pornography proves to be a significantly powerful factor in Japan's economy, being an

¹ Dominique Buisson, *Japan Unveiled: Understanding Japanese Body Culture* (London: Hachette Illustrated UK, Octopus Publishing Group, 2003), 67.

² Stephen Turnbull, *Samurai: The World of the Warrior* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003), 71.

integral part of a larger sex industry with an estimated annual gross of 24 billion yen (175 million euro). The aforementioned 'romantic' notion gets totally sideswiped by the mere fact that blurred genitals provide an original image within the porn industry that debilitates foreign competition and brings the focus on the domestic product.

From delicate hints of a geisha's body to hierarchical differences in body types of professional *sumo* wrestlers, the human body acquires prominent position in Japanese culture, offering numerous perspectives to decode and revise its notable interpretations.

This brief introduction to Japanese corporeality foregrounds the cultural milieu from which emerged the work of Nobuyoshi Araki (1940–), one of the most famous and controversial Japanese photographers whose *oeuvre* amounts to thousands of photographs and several hundred publications. Over the course of nearly five decades, this prolific artist's 'photo-mania' dealing with, among various subject matters, a depiction of human bodies, often eroticized and graphic, has been both celebrated and heavily criticized. Instead of contributing to those discourses of either support or disdain of his artistic vision – especially on the issue of fetishized female nudity, this paper focuses on Araki's insatiable lust for capturing Japan's corporeality. His unrelenting inspiration to capture Japanese bodily images has generated an immense collection of not only personal(ized) memories but also of various types of archives – intimate and public, of the spontaneous and the staged, reflecting the ephemeral, transitory or epochal.

In the realm of Ararchical

The terms "Ararchical" and "Ararchism" are often used when referring to Nobuyoshi Araki's work which is understood, in both visual style and subject matter, as anarchic – not willing to conform to the norms of moral judgment or rationality.

"Ararchical" is not another name of the person but a sign referring to the style of a body of photographs delivered in various published forms, including books, journals, videos, CD-ROMs, and DVDs. "Ararchical" is a trademark that characterizes his work and helps it circulate on the market. This publicity strategy stimulates the growth of the personal cult.³

Hence, "Ararchical" presumes his artistry – the photographer's rebellion that intersects sentimentalism and vulgarity, private and detached, accidental and posed, but also his compelling need to archive his images in numerous collections.

Araki's first published book *Xerox Photo Albums* (1970) was produced by the artist himself and sent to his friends, art critics and random people. In a traditional

³ Hiroko Hagiwara, "Representation, Distribution, and Formation of Sexuality in the Photography of Araki Nobuyoshi," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 18, 1 (2010): 239.

Japanese binding, Araki made seventy albums by photocopying his photographs at his workplace, Dentsu, a famous advertising agency where he started his career after graduating from Chiba University with a major in photography and filmmaking. Ever since then, his affection for archiving has been apparent due to his preference of photo-monographs over exhibitions,⁴ as he explains that the books last longer and enable the perceiver to explore thoroughly the subject matter.⁵

There are several trajectories of understanding Araki's archival rush. Firstly, we can assume that Araki agrees with Nancy's notion that "a body is a difference". "Since it is a difference from every other body – while minds are identical – it's never done with differing."⁶ It seems that Araki challenges the spectator to perpetually recognize the corporeal variance amid Japanese ostensible homogeneous identity. Possibly this is most evident in his project *Faces of Japan* for which he travelled across various prefectures in Japan, photographing the citizens. It started in Osaka, where he took thousands of portraits, claiming that his photographs are facial X rays, unveiling "a person's interior."⁷ Sharing his fascination with people's expressiveness in documentary *Arakimentari* (2004), the artist professes his wish to capture each and every Japanese face. Araki finds his subjects extraordinary, but self-unaware of their charms and thus, he does not believe in uniqueness of the "artist's expression", but rather presumes that the photographer's task is to discover and capture the aura of his subjects.⁸ With each new face, Araki demonstrates its differing and celebrates the non-identical corporeality that transcends the likeness of our minds. Like no other photographer, with almost a compulsion to preserve everything that could vanish out of sight, Araki creates unending image-glossary acknowledging a *diversity in flesh*.

Further, the archival structure of his artistic production denotes the body as "a figment of the imagination, a fiction."⁹ With each new portrait, Araki constantly invites us to reimagine and reinvent the notion of the body. Hence, his *image-junkie* tendency is a part of a creative act, not exclusively of his own, but the one he transposes onto the audience.

In a certain regard, many of his photographic collections are "nothing less than a historical records of sex and morals"¹⁰ in Japan through different eras. However, his chronicles of contemporary urban morals impose the fictionality of the medium that presumably conveys the reality. "In converting fiction into documentary, and

⁴ His first solo exhibition *Satchin and His Brother Mābō* (1965) featured children in downtown Tokyo, and one of the photographs from the series was awarded the first prize of *Taiyō* magazine the previous year.

⁵ Hans Ulrich Obrist, "In Conversation With Araki," in *Araki: Self, Life, Death*, eds. Akiko Miki, Yoshiko Issihaki and Tomoko Sato (London, New York: Phaidon Press, 2005), 250.

⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 152.

⁷ *Arakimentari*, directed by Travis Klose, Troopers Films, 2004.

⁸ Tomo Kosuga, "Nobuyoshi Araki," *Vice* (July 2008) https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/yvngdx/nobuyoshi-araki-118-v15n7, acc. December 15, 2018.

⁹ Buisson, *Japan Unveiled*, 107.

¹⁰ Akihito Yasumi, "The Photographer between a Man and a Woman," in *Araki: Tokyo Lucky Hole* (Köln: TASCHEN, 2016), 7.

documentary into fiction, he exposes the lies in documentary and extracts the truth in fiction.”¹¹ The photobooks *Pseudo-Reportage* and *Pseudo-Diary* (1980) demonstrate his playfulness of blurring the lines between fact and fiction. Araki creates photo-narratives challenging or even parodying the truth of documentary photography whether by use of words, or manipulating the dates of the images taken by the compact camera. When Araki takes a part in his own photographs, he adds another dimension to an encapsulated fragment in time that conjoins the realms of the real and the phantasmic.

Akihito Yasumi remarks the following:

all photographs are documentaries of relationships between the photographer, the subject, and the person looking at the photograph. Then, when Araki himself appears in the photograph, and we see his familiar sunglasses with the round lenses and his scrupulously trimmed moustache, the relationship between the viewer and the viewed is further confused. The photographer, the voyeur whom we would expect to be hiding behind the camera, materializes in his own photographs, his own work, and is transported to a fictional place as one of the characters in a performance space that he has created. Thus, Araki is always coming and going between fact and fiction, the inside and the outside, is both the viewer and the subject of his photographs.¹²

Araki's own bodily presence in the photographs denotes the breaking of the fourth wall. This type of meta-reference triggers awareness of the medium within the recipient, further accentuating the blend of fictionality and factualness in his photography.



Nobuyoshi Araki, *Marvelous Tales of Black Ink*, 2007.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.*

The third and final point of reading Araki's corporeal archive delineates the liminality of his work, that which emerges from the realms of *eros* and *thanatos*. Born in downtown Tokyo, Araki often spent time in a neighboring cemetery which served as his playground. As it was near Yoshiwara, a famous brothel district of Edo period, the bodies of the prostitutes without families were thrown into a mass grave, piled up without gravestones or names. According to his own words, it was where [he] learned about "the erotic, life and death, and how they're mixed together"¹³ and that reflected in his art. In the subtle, yet provocative search for the shape of female genitalia, Araki's seminal series *Erotos* (1993) (coined to emphasize the interrelatedness of these two principles) discovers it in the close-ups of fruits, woman's eyes and lips, a crack in the land.

Passing of Araki's mother also influenced his artistic vision, as seeing her for the last time provoked attentiveness towards the things, moments or experiences which could not be repeated.

Reminiscing on his mother's funeral, Araki notes:

I broke up the bunch of flowers presented by Norimitsu Yokosuka and looked at and touched my mother's face, buried amidst the flowers placed there by her children. I touched her cold cheeks and regretted not having brought along a camera. It seemed to me the first time I had seen my mother looking so content. I stared at her closely. There was something there that exceeded reality. It was the visage of death. Being the superb second-rate photographer that I am, I was itching to take some photographs. I continued to stare intently. My body became a camera and it seemed as if I were continuously pressing the shutter.¹⁴

In the event of witnessing the death of his mother, Araki equates his body and the camera. Instead of arguing that becoming a *camera in flesh* has a certain relieving effect when in distress, I would rather suggest that this act of corpo-medial performance discloses the need to capture everything that is prone to vanish. The encounter with a lifeless body captivates and compels his own body to become the camera, essentially registering the impermanence and frailty of all the beings.

¹³ *Arakimentari*, 2004.

¹⁴ Nobuyoshi Araki, "My mother's death, or an introduction to home photography," in *Araki: Self, Life, Death*, eds. Akiko Miki, Yoshiko Issihaki and Tomoko Sato (London, New York: Phaidon Press, 2005), 559–60.



Araki Nobuyoshi, *Sentimental Journey*, 1971. Yamaguchi Prefectural Museum of Art

Araki's famous *Sentimental Journey* (1971) documents his wife Yoko on their honeymoon; in addition to ordinary situations in various settings – train, hotel, tourist locations – the photographer depicts her face while making love with her. This exposition of highly intimate events left a significant mark in contemporary Japanese photography.¹⁵ Twenty years later, Araki published *Sentimental Journey/Winter Journey* which is a collection of selected images of their honeymoon and the ones of the last six months in Yoko's life, including her death portraits. Araki produced another collection of life and death images, *Sentimental Journey/Spring Journey* (2010) about his beloved cat Chiro which he adopted with his wife in 1988. Therefore, *erotos* is not just the title of one volume in his vast, continuing opus – Araki recognizes the 'happiness' of each (naked) body under the veil of its mortality: "Someone has said that 'photography is a medium of death.' That as long as you are using photography you are conscious of death, you can't get beyond death. I react to this by deliberately talking about happiness. I'm not Roland Barthes but 'Ero-land' Barthes."¹⁶

In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), Jacques Derrida explores the desire, obsession and compulsion to archive things in relation to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), marking this archival impulse as a defiance to a destructive force of the death drive. Derrida states that "we are *en mal d'archive*: in need of

¹⁵ This personal collection initiated a genre of "I-photography", alluding to I-novel – a form of the early twentieth century Japanese literature, a fiction read as autobiographical, confessional diary.

¹⁶ Jonathan Watkins, "Ice That Doesn't Melt," in *Araki: Self, Life, Death*, eds. Akiko Miki, Yoshiko Issihaki and Tomoko Sato (London, New York: Phaidon Press, 2005), 22.

archives.”¹⁷ He unconventionally understands the attribute *en mal de* as “to burn with a passion”.

It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archiveright where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there's too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. No desire, no passion, no drive, no compulsion, indeed no repetition compulsion, no ‘mal-de’ can arise for a person who is not already, in one way or another, *en mal d'archive*.¹⁸

Derrida's notion of archive has been sublimely foregrounded by Araki's archive fever, as a mechanism of subjective power imposed on the collective body. With each new photographic encounter, Araki demonstrates inexhaustible drive for updating somato-archive, as if to constantly evade the definitive interpretation of his artistry. As it is a case with all photographers, his images defy the consequences of time, but their cumulative effect reveals his archival passion. Araki's restlessness and anarchistic persistence to show new images represent his resistance to amnesia. The proliferation of his photo series unveils Araki's tendency to ‘destroy’ the previous encounters, while simultaneously adding to his ultimate repository of somatic images with each new volume.

Postscriptum of permanent destruction: constantly updating Ararchive

Reflecting on his work in the 1970s, Araki remarks that he was growing far too conservative. “So I rebelled against myself. I had to destroy the past. I'd lost touch with my dirty side, so I had to revisit the erotic world.”¹⁹ Apart from this auto-rebelling, destruction turns out to be a powerful strategy in Araki's battle with censorship laws – “instead of focusing on creating something new”, he realized that “it's better to destroy something that already exists” and then he could “discover or create something new and original”.²⁰ Suggesting that photography “has a kind of a reality which is almost illusion”,²¹ Araki recognizes the destructive force of photography, in sense that it decomposes the real world. It rebels against the essence of time, “as everything gets

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 91

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Arakimentari*, 2004.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

condensed in that forced instant.”²² “Shooting makes you aware of this. But if you keep creating these points, they form a line which reflects your life. That’s what I’m unconsciously thinking, while clicking the shutter, gathering these points.”²³ Araki’s archival corpo-rapture is manifested through a peculiar paradox – his effort to obliterate the real using photography as a medium, actually accumulates the testimonial records of genuine existence of what was inside the body of the image.



Ararchy Photobook Mania

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²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

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