Yuji Ono, facing photography

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Yuji Ono's photographs face their subjects. This so that the photographer faces photography. Why is it that one facing photography faces Western paintings from a particular period? And why is it that they face a mass of light floating in space?

The most fundamental principle of photography is the pinhole phenomenon, in which light passing through a tiny hole creates an inverted image. The phenomenon in which sunshine filtering through the branches of trees creates images of a solar eclipse on the ground is mentioned in writings attributed to Aristotle, and based on the fact that the Lascaux cave paintings include inverted images of horses, there is even a theory that New Stone Age humans were already aware of the pinhole phenomenon. The camera obscura recreated this natural phenomenon by making a darkened room. Photography is none other than a technique for fixing, preserving and replicating inverted images projected onto walls inside these darkened rooms.

Incidentally, because we understand the pinhole phenomenon and pinhole camera in retrospect after the development of photographic equipment with lenses and film, there is a tendency to misunderstand them. An example of this is the belief that "the focus in pinhole cameras is soft." In fact, pinhole cameras do not have anything one could call focus to begin with. In the pinhole phenomenon, light emitted by the subject forms an image after passing through a small hole, but the size of the hole forms an image by becoming a pixel, as it were. If the hole is small, which is to say if the pixel is small, a sharp image arises, but if the hole is large, which is to say if the pixel is large, a blurry image arises. The "focus" of a pinhole camera image depends on the density of the points of light. As well, because the light forms an image on the surface it arrives at, images form not only on the surface directly facing the hole, but also on the walls to the left or right or on the floor or ceiling. And because there are no limits in natural phenomena, regardless of whether the hole is small (sharp image) or large (blurry image), the pinhole phenomenon occurs the same. In other words, even if the hole is the size of window or the size of a doorway, an inverted image of the world outside the house actually appears, it is just that the image is blurred to such an extreme that it cannot be seen by the human eye as an "image." The interiors of spaces with entrances through which light can pass are continually filled with images of the outside world.

Perspective was a concept that involved drawing together these images, which in the sense that they fill space could be called three-dimensional, on a single surface facing the hole through which the light passes. Lenses were inserted into pinholes and screens set up in accordance with the focal distance. The camera obscura, which was coming into wide use in the 16th century, was a device that underpinned what Roland Barthes called the "dioptric arts."

> [T]here will still be representation for so long as a subject (author, reader, spectator, or voyeur) casts his gaze towards a horizon on which he cuts out the base of a triangle, his eye (or his mind) forming the apex. … The scene, the picture the shot, the cut-out rectangle, here we have the very *condition* that allows us to conceive theatre, painting, cinema, literature, all those arts, that is, other than music, and which could be called *dioptric arts*. (1)

Here, upon fixing one's point of view, if this triangle does not necessarily have to be an isosceles triangle, the result is anamorphic (like the skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*), and upon fixing the triangle, if one establishes various points of view, the subjects pluralize accordingly. Paintings produced using perspective were "windows" open to the world within the pictures, but the 17th-century Dutch painters that adopted this technique saw there "window glass," so to speak. In other words, paintings were projected images from any point of view, and there was nothing on the other side. Even though they may have presented realistic painterly worlds, they were nothing but thin, flat surfaces (screens, layers). This is something that trompe-l'oeil artists emphasized time and time again with regard to picture planes, and Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts' famous *Reverse of a Framed Painting* even suggests that these layers are actually nonmaterial and invisible to the human eye.

When photography, the technology for fixing images projected onto these layers, expanded dramatically from the late 19th century onwards, as is widely known, a trend towards creating painterly photographs by pursuing the same level of artistry as paintings known as "Pictorialism" emerged. At the same time, having been robbed by photography of its role of depicting the outside world, painting moved towards things other than images of the outside world, which is to say impressions of the outside world, symbolism and abstraction. Modernism, which then arose suddenly, demanded in all art the pursuit of the essence of art itself and the purification and reduction of the self to this essence. According to Clement Greenberg, the pure essence of modernist painting was "flatness." He was referring to the invisible, nonmaterial surfaces, or layers, that underpin all visible images. In his later years, Monet, who had earlier attempted to capture all of the constantly changing colors of the Rouen Cathedral, moved towards the extraction of the invisible surfaces (layers) on top of which all such infinite changes occur. The "Water Lilies" series was the pure expression of layers (water surfaces).

Modernist photography is said to have come into existence in around 1917, when Alfred Stieglitz, who had broken from so-called Pictorialism – as well as from not only Impressionism and Symbolism but also from Vortographs, which were modeled after Cubism – was interacting with Duchamp and Picabia (2) and was inspired by the collages of Picasso and Braque to found "straight photography" (Paul Strand's *Blind Woman*, which was published in the magazine *Camera Work* the same year, is regarded as a landmark work in this genre).

Incidentally, if photographs are fixed versions of camera obscura screens, and layers, the essence of painting, also derive from these screens, then by their very nature, the essences of photography and painting must surely be the same. It was on the basis of this thinking that Aaron Siskind, for example, produced abstract photographic works as simple compositions of layers in an attempt to prove that photography, too, was the pursuit of "flatness" and an art on a par with Abstract Expressionism. (3) However, both Greenberg and the contemporary photographer he rated most highly, Walker Evans, saw the essence of photography somewhere different from the essence of painting (layers). "[U]nless I feel that the product is the *transcendence* of the thing, of the moment in reality, then I haven't done anything, and I throw it away." (4) *Blind Woman* was a work that shocked Evans. It suggested to him that the essence of photography lay in the subject appearing in the photograph as something that transcended the subject, and that this was only possible with photography. There is nothing the camera wants to look at, and for

this reason it is able to capture things the human eye does not see or want to see. This was the truth of photography.

Such modernist photography fell into decline from around 1970. The truth that Walker Evans and others believed photography alone showed us was losing its authenticity due to the advent of the media society, which was awash with "true" photographic information. A world in which photographs by no means captured the truth had arrived. In the words of the last modernist, Hiroshi Sugimoto:

> For me, the camera is a device for capturing as is the world as it is. But what one must be careful of is that this world as it is is filled with as-it-is-ness. To tell the truth, it is only by way of this "-ness" that the world as it is can be seen by the human eye. The eyes of incorrigible people are selfish, and they tend to see what they want to see in the way they want to see it. [...] To use a figure of speech, the world as it is is like a pure white screen, and your eyes are like a projector manifesting your own world upon this white screen. [...] The camera, this "unsullied eye," sees the world as it is. (5)

These words serve as a commentary on Sugimoto's own "Theaters" series. How to make photographs that no longer capture the truth express the truth, or at least how not to make them lie, is a concept running through all of Sugimoto's work. All of his various series are variations on this concept, (6) but "Theaters" can be seen as his most affirmative, purest work in the sense that when entire movies, which are the ultimate fake photographs, are photographed with long exposure times, the lies self-erase and become white screens, as if reduced to the world as it is. Due to the light of self-erasure, the historic spaces surrounding fake entertainment stand out.

At a time when photography can be neither painterly nor documentation of the outside world as it is, many photographers are choosing as their subject "photography" itself. Yuji Ono can perhaps be counted as one such photographer. Not because he has kept the desire for "the world as it is" as Sugimoto has, but because he faces photography. However, he does this by facing Western paintings of a certain period. (7)

To date, the subjects of Ono's "Tableaux" series have ranged from the works of Holbein (1497–1543) to those of Monet (1840–1926). This is roughly equivalent to the period from the camera obscura to the establishment of modernist photography, or in other words the period of the dioptric arts based on the system of "layers." (8) Apparently there are some unpublished works featuring paintings that predate perspective and the camera obscura, but according to Ono there are none by artists later than Monet. As stated above, if Monet in his later years extracted layers in the form of water surfaces, and if the modernist painting that followed was the reduction of painting to its essence of "layers," then what Ono, who deals with artists up to Monet, is facing cannot be layers. In other words, for Ono, layers are not the essence of photography.

Why then does "Tableaux" face paintings from the "period of layers"? Perhaps this is the reduction of the illusion the human eye wants to see (the depicted world) to the "matter as it is" that is captured by the camera eye (canvases or boards on which paint has been applied). If Sugimoto's "Theaters" consisted of white screens as the result of the self-erasure of lies (movies) and the surrounding historic spaces, then might Ono's "Tableaux" consist of black canvases as the result of the cessation of lies (painterly illusion)

and the surrounding historic frames, and the essence of photography be the materialistic reduction of the world?

The “Luminescence” series is a crucial auxiliary line leading to “Tableaux.” At a glance, these two series appear contrastive. In “Tableaux,” Ono captures the disappearance of the illusion depicted in paintings that occurs for just a brief moment each day due to the angle of the light, when one faces the works in natural light entering through windows after he has extinguished the artificial lighting in the museums. In “Luminescence,” he shines artificial light on chandeliers from behind inside various buildings and photographs the glittering crystal glass from a considerable distance away with a super-telephoto lens. (9) The former is concerned with the reflection of light on the paintings’ surfaces, while the latter is concerned with the light itself.

“Tableaux” can only really be understood when we think of it, like “Luminescence,” as a series of photographs of light itself. At one time, photography and painting seemed like brothers, both originating in the camera obscura. This was because, due to the system of perspective and layers, we misunderstood the camera obscura. However, the principles of photography are much older than this system. The reason Yuji Ono faces paintings is to take back photography from painting. This is an act of taking photography back to a time before this misunderstanding, back to the camera (room) as the scene of a fundamental phenomenon of light. A time-space in which light ceases to serve the human eye (an illusion based on layers) and returns to its natural state appears, and “Tableaux” leads us to images of light filling space. Because on every surface in rooms where there is natural light, even on surfaces from which pictures have disappeared, the outside world forms images regardless of the human eye.

Finally, “facing” is not a metaphor. Yuji Ono literally makes his camera face his subjects. Even without this condition, if one looked for a suitable angle, it would probably be possible to take similar photographs, just as a solar eclipse is always occurring somewhere on earth. But herein lies the essence of photography on which Ono is incapable of yielding. It is not that he wants to photograph black surfaces. He wants to capture on film the moment when the “camera” that has been tamed over the past several hundred years returns to the wild for just a brief moment in the day by simply facing its subject in completely natural light. Anytime, anywhere – these are antonyms of photography.

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Translated by Pamela Miki

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1. Roland Barthes, “Diderot. Brecht, Eisenstein,” in *Image Music Text*, essays selected and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 69–70.
2. The well-known photograph of Duchamp’s *Fountain* (showing the urinal on a pedestal with a painting in the background) was arranged and taken by Stieglitz.
3. Christine Mehring, “Siskind’s Challenge: Action Painting and a Newer Laocoon, Photographically Speaking,” *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (2006).
4. Leslie G. Katz, “An interview with Walker Evans” (1971), in *Photography in Print*, ed. V. Goldberg (New York: Simon and Schuster 1981), 362.

5. Hiroshi Sugimoto, “The world as it is,” memo (unpublished) from June 1995. Emphasis mine.
6. Minoru Shimizu, “*Sugimoto Hiroshi, kukyo no ban'nin*” [Hiroshi Sugimoto, Guardian of the void], in *Shashin to hibi* [Photography and the everyday] (Gendaishichosha, 2006).
7. The “Vice Versa” in the title of the 2018 solo exhibition “Vice Versa – Les Tableaux” (ShugoArts) is probably a reference to the paradox of facing paintings in order to face photography.
8. Or perhaps one could even say to *The Large Glass* (1915–23), the last painting that (supposedly) administered last rites to the “period of layers.”
9. In order to more-or-less face the chandeliers suspended high above the floor from the location of his tripod on each occasion.