

Record of the International Symposium for the 20th Anniversary of the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum:
Why Are Photography Museums Necessary?

Discussion

Panelists

Sandra Phillips

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Filippo Maggia

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Chairperson

Michiko Kasahara

Chief Curator at Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, Japan

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Michiko Kasahara (MK): Alright, let's reopen the symposium. Thank you to so many of you for staying with us all the way to the end. I don't think we can sum up or show the way to any conclusions here, as this wasn't our aim from the start. Hopefully it's given you something to think about. We've heard various things about the state of photography museums and collections all across the world, so now I'd like to ask our panelists some questions, and then we'll open it up to questions from the audience.

Tokyo Photographic Art Museum (TOP) reopened this year on September 3rd, after closing for a little under two years for major renovation work. When you say "renovations" there's a tendency to assume everyone's just been on vacation for the two years but we've been guest speaking at school outreach programs, for example, as well as continuously collecting work. One thing that we put a lot of energy into as an important project was assembling the archive stretching across the 25 years of TOP to make an anniversary publication. We're selling it now but it stretches over 500 pages, so given that it's quite expensive I suggest looking at it at the library. And if you work at a public museum or library, I'll let you have a copy so you can use it as resource.

There were several reasons we worked so hard on this anniversary publication. Of course there's the ordinary sense — although it's only been 25 years, if we don't go on ahead and put this together now various materials will end up vanishing like the mist, a variety of records will end up disappearing. And it would be troubling if these records disappeared because as a specialized museum, TOP is the first institution of its kind in Japan, so the fact remains that TOP's history exists as the single field within a history with respect to which we may speak of "Japanese photography." I'm not saying this is necessarily a good or bad thing, but the fact remains that we only have a single history. So in any event we felt we had to make sure to preserve it properly.

And then being the one and only photography museum presents a difficulty. What should we exhibit, what kind of exhibitions should we hold, and what should we buy? Well, of course we've had fundamental policies in place from the start, so it's only natural to follow them, but within these terms, specifically



what kind of exhibition, whose exhibition will we do, whose exhibition won't we do, what should we collect — this is what all of us associated with TOP have been trying to figure out for these 25 years.

What I thought after listening to the presentations of each panelist was that there really are both similarities and differences between the situation in Asia, including Japan, and that in Europe. For instance, when it comes to Europe there's a photography department in every museum, and in America there are various museums with photography departments, such as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, New York's Museum of Modern Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. I think there's quite a big difference between a situation where an institution can put together an exhibition based on, say, John Szarkowski's perspective toward photography and also an exhibition that counters his views, compared to the situation in Japan where we still must make the fundamental inquiry "what is photography in art museums?" I would venture to say that this challenge we face is something we've all been constantly thinking about.

Filippo's video was really interesting, but then one reason it was so interesting is that we have an historical perspective and a language in common across these fields called history, photographic history, art theory, and so on — "we" meaning all us specialists here who have been furnished with a standard of shared education and shared experiences by so-called photography and contemporary art. If we watch Filippo's video from this perspective, we can really understand the selections he made — for the Japanese artists, Yasumasa Morimura, Daido Moriyama, Hiroshi Sugimoto. Curators use a certain standardized global language, even while doing local work in certain specific local places. On the other hand, however, we then have the problem of how to

win over the average crowd when we're working in these local spaces. And one more problem in this regard is that photography straddles an extraordinarily large number of fields. TOP deals with photographic works of art, but this "art" itself is also extraordinarily broad. We also have a situation where, because we're the "photography museum," people from every single photographic field just come knocking at our doors. At that time, as I said before, there's the question of what we deal with, what we do not deal with; the conflict between global and local languages — perhaps if we used words that were just a little bit easier to understand, we could take a populist bent, or otherwise we could do only specialized work. The conflict here is that there is a difference in standard, which I think is inevitably going to be an issue on some level in any museum or university. This is the basis upon which I've been thinking while listening to the presentations of each panelist.

It's been 20 years since TOP's establishment, but we're really groping around for how we're going to move ahead in the 20 years to follow. We want to be open to various things, but at the same time we don't want to be an embarrassment as a specialized museum, and it would be great if these two courses of action were in agreement with each other, but the problem is that there are cases in which they are not. So I'd like to hear from each of you individually now on this point. We held an exhibition of Hiroshi Sugimoto for TOP's reopening. The *LOST HUMAN GENETIC ARCHIVE* exhibition boasted of 67 thousand visitors, far more than we had imagined. With things in Japan being what they are, where 20 thousand visitors to a contemporary art or contemporary photography exhibition is considered a great turnout, 67 thousand people is an outrageous number. However, besides the extremely favorable reactions there were some questions about whether his work was actually photography or if it was just contemporary art. And it is just these past 30 years or so that contemporary art and photography have come this close together. Even if you don't see the two as being entirely equivalent, there are an extremely large number of overlapping areas. Well, from my point of view, whether something comes directly from photography or contemporary art is of little importance — if it's good, it's good. On the other hand, of course it does irritate me at times to see exhibitions by contemporary art curators who handle photographic works without paying any attention to the history of photography. I do know I'm being extraordinarily selfish by saying so. On that note, I'd like to ask Judy about what aspects of photography she deals with at contemporary art museums, such as the problem of the relationship between contemporary art and photography, photography and so-called commercial photography.

Judy Annear (JA): The boundary between art and photography is ever-moving. I think of the two as being intimately entwined, because I see the historical relationship as continuously evolving, but never really definite. Of course, it's easy for people to dismiss certain aspects of photography as either "amateur" or "commercial," and put "art photography" in a completely

separate bag, but the relationship is always rather slippery. I mean for my part, for the 20 years that I was a photography curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, I tended to avoid people whose work was primarily “commercial” — in the sense that they mainly worked in a particularly commercial photographic arena. It was a very arbitrary decision based on a number of things to do with just sheer volume, really. And I had to make a lot of decisions like that — concerning scale, and also concerning finances as well. So in this context I tended to be quite specific about artists working with photography, but my actual position is much more generous than that. I think policy is important for a curator at any institution, but policy also needs to be continually reassessed in light of the shifts that artists — and in particular theoreticians and historians — may be proposing. And also the shape of the collection that a museum is building. You look at where it has come from, you look at its strengths, and then you have to start making decisions about whether you’re going to play to those strengths and weaknesses — but of course I’m generalizing wildly and not really answering the question, because I don’t think there’s an easy answer to it.

MK: And what do you think, Sandra?

Sandra Phillips (SP): I think it’s really important to remember that before we talk about whether photographs are art or can be art, or whatever they can be, we have to remember that photography is a technology. I think this was what Judy was saying, but I’ll say it again in my own way. It’s a very large field — it’s like a language in a way — so the curator has to make these decisions about what goes in the shows and what gets in the collection. Of course it’s a huge, overwhelming job, but I think it’s really interesting. I think the important thing is to keep these questions open. To be very concise — probably to be irresponsibly open (laughs).

MK: I love the part about irresponsibility. So now I’d like to hear from Filippo — you know I went to Modena last year, and the scope of the collection they’ve constructed at the Fondazione Fotografia is also enormous, but, as he’s shown us today, for research he’s visited not only Japan but the entire world, making exhibitions and collections. They really have an insanely vast collection of contemporary photography. And as for my question — I spoke earlier of the local and the global, and although what you have is amazing as this global contemporary photography collection, what do the Italian audiences and executives think of you spending money on global artists rather than Italian artists, with the funds coming from the bank in this tiny Italian town of Modena? And not just money, but devoting a whole section of the collection to said artists?

Filippo Maggia (FM): When we decided to build a collection in Modena, the first problem was how we were going to be able to communicate our choice to

collect photography, because it was quite strange — there are no photography departments in Italian contemporary museums, not one. There was one at the beginning of the Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea when Antonella Russo was working there over 20 years ago, but they stopped. So it was very challenging for the Modena Foundation to decide to collect photographs — especially as we were focusing on very, very contemporary artists, and not only on photography but also enlarging our research to the broader field of images including video works, installations, drawings, animation, and so on.

Honestly speaking, I never paid attention to the question, in Modena or in Italy, of whether our audience could understand the project or not, because it was something we wanted to do for future generations. Since this is the first step, we thought we just had to do it. As you know, Italy has so many things it needs to preserve, photography is probably the last problem on anyone's minds (laughs).

Anyway, we've been very lucky because our former President and board decided to follow through on this project not just as an investment or because it was something different to do, but first of all because they came from the academic field so they understand that if you want this to become something you need time. You cannot bet on what will be the phenomenon of today or tomorrow. You need time. And you need time also to teach and to grow up with new artists — young artists, not only from Italy, but also from abroad. For us, the Master course is important because it's a way to invite artists from all over the world, so we can have a mix of experiences.

Anyway, I think that the question of the border between contemporary and modern collections is not the issue. For example, when we decided to collect American photography, I immediately understood that it was impossible to buy from the US. It was too difficult and too expensive, so we decided to divide the purchases into two periods — we'd start with the '50s-'80s, and then when we had enough money, we would continue on to buy contemporary works (laughs). It's the same in Germany, for example. If you want to buy Andreas Gursky's work today it's quite impossible.

MK: Even in Japan, we've been talking about the however many hundreds of art museums that have been constructed in China since the beginning of the '00s. However, I've also heard there's been a bit of a conflict, as this museum construction period has overlapped with the extreme rise in market value of Chinese contemporary photography and contemporary art. One often hears that the number of professional curators can't catch up, and in any event this is an issue all over Asia, including Japan. So Gu, what are your thoughts around all of this?

Gu Zheng (GZ): There was previously a governmental cultural policy in

China where public museums had to rent out their exhibition spaces on their own in order to earn the money to run the museum. For some time this cultural policy carried a lot of weight for the management of the art museums. So many exhibitions are opened to try to bring in a lot of funds, because the museum management's side is running to make a profit in order to cover things like the staff's salaries. For instance, there isn't really any budget dedicated to collecting works within the costs for the year. So we put everything into these short-term operations. So for these museums, up until now, we have a situation where there's really no plan at all when it comes to collecting works. Recently this has been improved a little. That is, no longer opening exhibitions in order to better the administrative situation on your own — when it's like this in your country, your museums practically aren't even museums, which is not a great situation in the long term.

So in respect to costs — I'm sure everyone is well aware of this, but China has more money than it used to. So now the costs are largely being subsidized, but previously we had the aforementioned situation. On the other hand, there are also a lot of private art museums, but I really haven't met anyone running private museums really for the sake of pure art. When it comes to their policies, they're generally focused on whether the value of what they're purchasing and collecting will go up in the near future. So for most of those people in China, photography is generally not even coming into their line of sight. As far as the current situation surrounding public and private museums goes, I don't think we'll be seeing an improvement in the near future in regards to photography's collection or research.

MK: We heard from Filippo that his board members and the people from the government are very understanding in regards to a highly international collection, as well as very supportive toward research on and exhibitions of international and young artists. Kim, you're presently heading a museum, and you've had many experiences at institutions like the Daegu Art Museum, and then in China and at the Mori Art Museum, so I'd love if you could touch on this talk concerning globalism and local artists.

Sunhee Kim (SK): What I'd like to talk about as a curator from Asia is the situation in Asian art museums. There are a lot of things happening in Asia right now, so I'd like to push the conversation in that direction. It's already been 25 years since the preparations began for TOP, and now it's had 20 years of amazing operation. It's globally renown as a great art museum amongst photography museums. I personally think it's probably thanks to this that Japanese artists are well-known worldwide. TOP is doing so many versatile things these days, so if we were to make a big photography museum in Korea now, I truly believe TOP would be a great model to base it on.

With that said, however, aren't we a bit weak when it comes to photography, if you compare us to Europe or America? This is how I've been seeing things,

anyway. For example, if you're talking about noted photographers it's Hiroshi Sugimoto, Andreas Gursky, Cindy Sherman, Yang Fudong, Yeondoo Jung — these famous photographers are accepted no matter where you go. You can see their work in photography museums, and they're often shown as well in art museums that handle the broader field of art, it's pretty invariable. But we really aren't capable of discovering new photographers, or young, genius photographers fixated on particular themes or means of expression.

I personally think China's photography is weak compared to other media. Perhaps weak isn't the right word — there aren't as many photographers there, compared to artists in other media. The number is just smaller compared to artists working with painting, sculpture, or things like installation. And it probably used to be the same in Korea. Now anyone can take photos with their cellphones, but say 10, 20, 30, 40 years ago, the photo artists in Korea were really just the people who had the money for it. Though things have changed, even now if you want to take really good photographs the equipment and production costs do add up, it's still quite tough. So I'm holding myself, too, to a certain standard from now on to make sure to put young artists into exhibitions I work on.

And I do have one request for TOP. While you've been doing a great deal of work with Europe and America, shouldn't it be Asia from now on? Something is changing in various Asian countries, including Korea and China, that have started to become involved with art. Since TOP has been leading the way until now, take more responsibility (laughs). It'd be great if you'd help us out by, for instance, showing good work from Asia. I mean, you just haven't really had too much of this kind of cooperative effort with Asia.

MK: While I really don't think we've been leading the way, it is true that in the 1990s, when TOP initially opened — as well as in the '80s, when I came back from studying photography at an American university — it wasn't just TOP, but a considerable number of museums in Japan were all looking exclusively toward America or Europe, that's certainly true. However, since the latter half of the '90s or around when the money ran out and after the new millennium our attention has shifted significantly toward Asia. TOP is opening an exhibition of Thailand's Apichatpong Weerasethakul from December 13th, and we often feature Asian artists in the Yebisu International Festival for Art & Alternative Visions. There are Asian artists in the lineup for exhibitions as of the next year as well, which would have been largely Americans or Europeans if we were still in the '90s.

After the first seven or eight years of the 2000s, I feel that various manifestations of the medium of photography have been put into use as many cultural resources, given the contemporary art or contemporary photography biennales within Asia. There's the Daegu Photo Biennale, the Gwangju Biennale, Pusan, not to mention the Beijing International Art Biennale,

various art fairs — Hong Kong just built a huge art museum, Thailand has also started a photography biennale in Bangkok as of last year, Singapore is also starting one, and India will from January at Kochi, and so on. It's really evident that Asia's fever for photography is now very much on the rise.

SP: I just wanted to add one thing here. TOP is a very important museum internationally, because there is a real culture of photography in Japan, and this museum has responded to it. Japan has been producing amazing photographs since the beginning of photography, really — especially since the war, when the country invested in its photographic industries. So that's why this museum has been a leader here.

MK: Actually, we had no choice but to make an art museum dedicated to photography. Or to put it otherwise, one might say that if many other art museums had had departments dedicated to photography, there would have been no TOP. We wouldn't have needed a photography museum if every museum across Japan had a photography department, a photography collection, a specialized curator, holding these exhibitions for us — so one does also feel it would have been alright if it had turned out that way. There are difficulties that one encounters precisely by dint of being a specialized museum. We're going a little over time, so I'd like to take a few questions here.

Q: Thank you. I'm from Singapore. I'm going to ask about literacy, viewer literacy. It's not the question of whether or not photography museums are necessary — I mean, certainly in my opinion, I think they definitely are necessary, and in regards to your point Sandra, you were saying that they keep us honest and also, in a way, are very democratic.

But when I asked a friend of mine in Singapore on what he would consider museums to be doing — what he would consider to be the purpose of museums, and what good art is — he basically said to me, well, it's the art itself that's made the difference. One can see how photography and the works that you present in museums actually influence opinions and also influence other artists. So, I think my question around literacy concerns the fact that for people like us — and it seems like for many others — it's kind of hard to tell what good photography is and what the different kinds of photography are. So we look to museums to educate us on how to see what photography really consists of. I think all of us understand photographs; we have lots of them at home. But to buy photography, and use it as art, and put it on our walls, and to really have that sense of evaluating the medium — that's something entirely different. So now that all of you have had many years of experience, including experience with contemporary art, and you've seen what is happening with contemporary art in museums — what would you not do? Not what would you do, but what would you not do in a photography museum going forward that might be a problem in contemporary art today?

SK: That's a really hard question. I often work on exhibitions related to photography, but I have a somewhat different perspective from the curators who specialize in it. Photography is a very important medium within contemporary art. Photography is really vast and deep, and there are still new means of expression frequently emerging, so, and it's hard to say this in just a few words, but when you see good work, it's certainly different, spiritually speaking and also in terms of its inspirational factor, compared to those lacking in these aspects. So when it comes down to buying a photograph or not, of course it's really a matter of taste, of likes and dislikes, and with all of that it's difficult to explain anything clearly in relation to this point, but since the world of photography has various means of expression and things to take notice of, maybe you should think about it along those lines?

JA: In terms of what I would not do in a public institution, I would not sever a medium from its history and context. If you do that, then you've just got something floating around — and no wonder it would be difficult for people to understand or find a “way in” to what they're looking at. And to be frank, I see a lot of that happening in the contemporary art world, and I think to some extent it has probably always happened. I mean, fashion intervenes, if you like. But as soon as you sever something from where it's come from, you are lost, quite simply.

SP: I agree totally with Judy. As she said, there is a lot going on in contemporary photography, because it's suddenly become very fashionable, and the prices have accelerated — and no wonder you're confused. Many, many people are. I think the easiest way to start, first of all, is to see a lot, and to see a lot of diverse material, not just in Asia, but all over. And also to try to see what is particular to photography as a medium. I think that's a good guide. If you make pictures that challenge the limits of photography, or approach something we call contemporary painting and sculpture, that's interesting, but it can be deeply fashionable and therefore forgettable in a number of years.

MK: I think my answer will be about the same. While taking history, photographic history, art history into account, each museum has its own collection policy, as well as institutional aims governing why a certain exhibition is being held when it is, as well as why a certain artist's work is purchased. As TOP is a public museum, all of the donations and corporate sponsorship account for about half of our exhibitions, and we run the collection on subsidies from the city of Tokyo. But as it is a public museum we have to be extremely cautious about how we're going to make our purchases or the exhibitions we're going to hold. For that there's the expertise from each of our curators, with their respective fields of specialization, and additionally there was a committee set up for these experts' proposals, which, on top of taking in opinions, holds a roundtable conference for journalists before and after exhibitions, as well as directly after collection purchases. I can't believe I'm really disclosing all of this right now, I'm giving you everything — this is

more information than probably any museum in Japan has ever made public. We only have five minutes left, so I'd like to end this symposium with a word from each of you.

GZ: As Sandra mentioned earlier, TOP's present status and influence have developed from the strong spirit of the photography culture in Japan. So, as Kim also mentioned, I'm hoping to look forward to more introductions of photography from various countries in Asia, as well as your continued work with Europe.

SK: I feel the same way. TOP's activities until now have been amazing, and it's thanks to Michiko Kasahara that it's become this amazing museum. However, I'd be grateful if they continued to push it even farther from now on. It's really tough to make a museum — certainly when looking at it as someone like myself, coming from the museum side of things. There's a lot of stuff to worry about for one, and then there are times when you just get really exhausted and fed up with all these voices and opposing opinions coming at you while you're killing yourself doing all this. So while you need TOP's competence and dynamism in order to make a photography museum that's good for everyone, they also really need backing and support from all of you.

FM: Well, I suppose when I met Michiko Kasahara for the first time — more or less 20 years ago during my first trip to Japan — I immediately recognized a very strong passion for photography. This museum is probably her house. TOP is a fantastic place for Japanese photography — as Sandra said before, Japanese photography has had a very long history, a very long tradition, and very good photographers. And what they've been doing here for years is supporting younger generations, which is fantastic. So please continue.

SP: How can I add to that (laughs)? This museum has been an integral part of the culture of photography, so it's an institution I admire. And I think it is admired very much by the world outside of Japan, so they are doing a lot right.

JA: Yes, I agree, absolutely. I couldn't have done the projects I've done with Japanese photography without the assistance of this museum. Those publications from its early years on the history of Japanese photography were crucial for someone like me to learn about how photography evolved in this country. I relish seeing the exhibitions here. I am so glad that the museum has now reopened, and I hope it continues to excavate and to present the diversity of contemporary photography within its elegant confines.

MK: And with that, thank you to the audience members that stuck around with us for these five hours, as well as to all the panelists. We'll end things here. Thank you very much.