



The Photo Issue 2008

Nobuyoshi Araki

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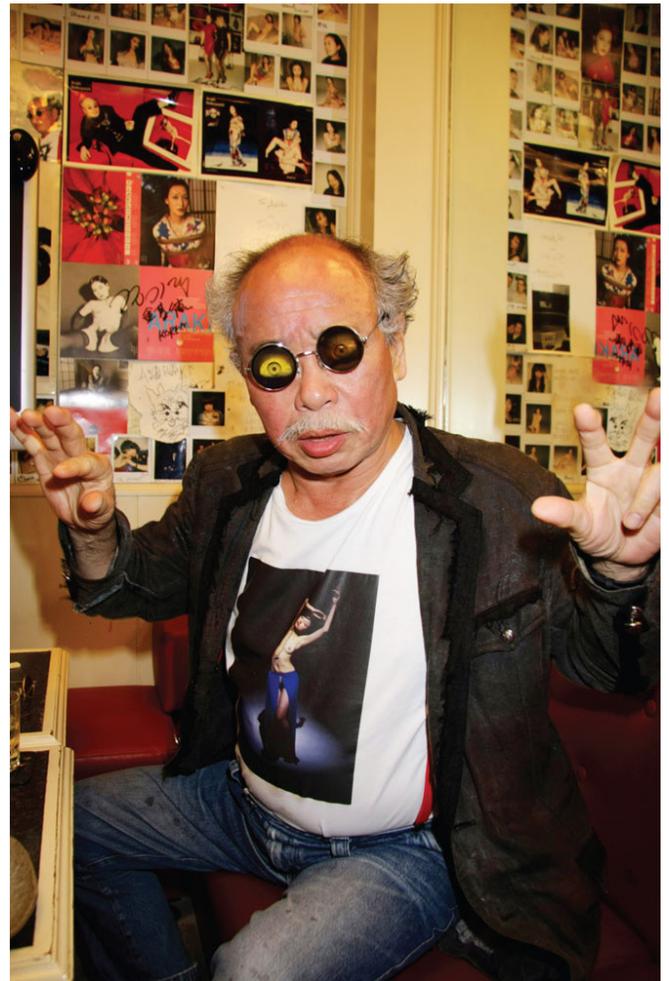
There lives in Japan a relentless monster who has released 450 photo books—and still continues to take photographs every day. His name is Nobuyoshi Araki. Those of you who don't know much about him might, after a cursory glance, see nothing more than a horny old man. And yes, sure, at times his themes are super-erotic, and that's not only when he shoots women. He can make anything look sexy. Who else can make a photo of the ground look so much like a vagina that you start to seriously consider jerking off to it? Nobody but Araki. There are a quintillion photographers in the world, but none have lived and breathed photography like Araki, who is constantly producing work and at times releases as many as 20 books a year—an accomplishment that can be achieved because of his perpetual focus on everyday life. Not only that, he writes books on photography. His magic words render his images all the more potent. Unfortunately, most of his books have only been published in Japanese, and we can't read Japanese. That's why we sent Tomo from Vice Japan to talk to Araki. Sick of being interviewed countless times throughout his career, Araki tried to demolish him from the very beginning. But Tomo hadn't cut classes in university to read the entire collection of Araki's books in the school library for nothing. And so an unprecedented battle of wills over photography began...

Vice: Today I want to ask you about your photographs.

Nobuyoshi Araki: Look, if you want to know about my photos just read a book or something. You writers all end up asking the same damn questions over and over. What exactly is it that you want to know?

OK, well, why don't you start by telling me about the first time you picked up a camera...

No, no, no, forget it! Let's just forget about this whole thing. I'm leaving. Why don't you just go and watch some TV or something—don't bother me. I'm not



fucking doing this anymore. You should know all about this crap. It's so boring. You don't even ask about my current projects. Don't fucking ask me about the first time I took a photograph or whatever—it's pathetic. And I don't need you to go writing this up in an article for other ignorant people who don't know me to read either, OK? I don't give a shit. I'm not interested in money or fame. I'm not looking for that anymore.

Well then, can I ask about all the photo books that you've published?

That's such a stupid question, man. Which one do you want to talk about? I have 450 books, for God's sake.

In *EROTOS*, you made ordinary flowers and cracks in the ground look like male and female genitalia. Why do you think your photos come across as being so erotic?

Why do they come across as erotic? Because I shot

them. That's what my photos are. You're wondering why they look erotic? It is what it is, you know? You're going to keep asking me these dumb questions and write it up in your little article? Oh, come on, you can do better than that. I've been asked the same question a million times, dude

Well, let's talk about your book *Kofuku Shashin* ["Happiness Photographs"]. Compared to your old photographs, these were more reminiscent of keepsake portrait pictures that fathers take of their families. It seemed to me like they are crossing a line that was almost taboo in your former photographs. What made you shift your perception so drastically?

So you noticed that, eh? You're not so clueless after all. *[laughs]* It's probably because right now, I believe that "happiness is the best state." That's all. Rather than shooting something that looks like a professional photograph, I want my work to feel intimate, like someone in the subject's inner circle shot them. Now that I'm older, I can finally say that happiness is truly the best state to be in. It's so cheesy, right? When you're young you try to keep a distance from your subject and be really cool about everything, but eventually this is what you come to feel. I also noticed that both professional and amateur photographers have stopped shooting these kinds of photos. So I tried doing it myself, and guess what? It's way more difficult than shooting stuff like *EROTOS*. With *EROTOS* you just try to be as horny as possible and it works, but with *Kofuku Shashin* it's all about creating a relationship with your subject. It's just not the same.

Right. With this kind of thing there's the danger of the images ending up like professional portraits, but you didn't want that.

Exactly. Everyone thinks that "art" means taking a step back from something familiar or precious to you. But my stance is "Don't make a work of art, don't 'do' photography." That said, with *EROTOS* the initial concept was to create a book of ultimate photographs, where the audience is forced to understand the photos without any text whatsoever. I'm not saying that it was bad or that it was a mistake. It's not about one being better than the other, it's just that in terms of where I'm at now, the notion of *Kofuku Shashin* appeals to me more. I guess I've aged or wised up or something. *[laughs]* Not that I'm ever giving up my eroticism. Once you give that

up, you lose the strength to live. Anyway, when you compare the two books it's hard to believe that it's the same person behind the camera, the same photographer, right? There's, like, five Arakis inside of me.

***Kofuku Shashin* consists mostly of snapshots. Do you ask for permission from each person before taking a photo of them in the street?**

In the past, no one knew me, so I could secretly take snapshots of random people. I can't do that anymore because they spot me first. That means that I have to communicate with them before taking each photo. But in the end, I think it's best for both parties, because we both acknowledge one another's existence. I'd make them laugh and forget about the mundane troubles of yesterday or whatever and try to create our own little time together. And I shoot that moment. That's far more profound. Of course the spatial relationship that we create for ourselves at that moment is also important, but the time that we share together is far more appealing and precious to me. So to be pedantic, it's like I frame "time" rather than "space." That's what differentiates my photos from the rest of them. And that's where happiness lies, you know? In the "time" that we spend together.

I guess that's why the expressions of the people in those photographs are so distinct.

Sure, because the "happiness photography" that I'm shooting now is all about sharing time and happiness with one another, in the moment. There's still a bit of self-consciousness there, but that's all the more reason why I think that capturing an ephemeral smile is far better than shooting a sophisticated portrait.

But you once said that "a camera is a penis," and your stance was all about unleashing that tool onto your subjects.

Sure. But now it's become a cunt, the exact opposite. Now I'm the one that accepts and embraces, just like a vagina.

I see. With your *Nihonjin no kao* ["Faces of Japan"] project, you have been traveling to various prefectures in Japan and shooting the citizens there. I hear that you shoot anyone and everyone who sees the ad and comes along.

That's nothing to be surprised about, though,



because the world around us is so magnificent that you can't help but shoot it all. There's the phrase "artistic expression," but I believe that the people truly expressing themselves are the subjects, you know? It's not about the photographer trying to express stuff. It doesn't work like that.

So you're saying that you need to embrace the subjects?

Yes, because the people in front of you, the subjects, they're far more extraordinary than you. They all have their own charms. But often they themselves aren't even aware of their charms, so you have to discover it and present it to them, like, "This is it!" They're radiating all this aura, so your job is to pump up that aura even more and give it back to them by capturing it on film. That's how I approach my work.

You don't necessarily just want to shoot beautiful people then.

No. I don't discriminate in terms of my subjects. You have to always be able to accept and embrace them. They're all amazing, but each person has that extra-special unique something in them. Usually photographers have their preferences, and some might really want to shoot a particular actress or something, but I don't have that. Anything and anybody who I have the privilege of encountering is significant in themselves. Some people may seem like assholes, but you have to be accepting enough to think that maybe you're projecting a preconceived idea onto them, and they're not really assholes. That way, you might be able to discover something nice about them. Now, it's easy to say that, but I must admit, there sure are a lot of bitches out there! *[laughs]*

Like many of your works, this series also suggests that you are particularly intent on shooting Japan. Why is that?

You have to shoot what's around you, what's familiar. I'm often invited to go overseas, but when I get there I always think, "Shit, I have to take more photographs of Japan." So I focus on my neighborhood and things around me in daily life, like my girlfriend. I mean, we're Japanese, so you shouldn't even have to consciously tell yourself to shoot Japan. It should just come naturally to you. So in my case, I was like, "OK, I should shoot a bunch of Japanese people," which led to, "Well, why don't I shoot the entire country," and that eventually resulted in this "Faces of Japan" series.

You must have so much energy to even conceive of shooting the whole of Japan.

I know! I mean, I shoot about 500 to 1,000 people in each prefecture. I've only been to six prefectures so far and I don't think I'll be able to finish the project. I can't do this forever! I'll die! *[laughs]* I've only got so many years left to live. But usually I tend to run with an idea and just go for it even if it's only very vague. Once I start working and encountering more and more faces, I learn something new from them all the time.

For example, a lot of people come when I call for volunteers, and obviously they're from all walks of life. I've had elderly couples who say, "Please take a picture of us because we've been together for 60 years but don't have a single photo of our wedding," and so on. Or, "We have a new grandchild, please take our family portrait." In the past, my stance was to focus on the sentiments that emerge through the relationship between myself and the subject, but when people come up to me these days or a married couple say, "Please take a photo of us," I find that the sentiments or emotions that they have toward one another are much stronger than mine. I came to realize that I can get much more out of the shoot if I focus on the relationship that my subjects have among themselves, rather than the relationship between them and me. Shooting all those people taught me so much about the essence of human beings. *Kofuku Shashin* was the endpoint of that realization. You can't do that kind of photography when you're young—it's way too embarrassing. But really, it's the best thing. Like you'd go to the park during the cherry blossom season, and you'd see

two children climbing on top of the father who's lying down on a picnic mat, and the mother would be sitting demurely by their side. You just can't beat that, you know? There's nothing like it. I guess I'm at a point now where I have enough room in my heart to finally be able to say, "Wow, that's so awesome." Listen to me, I sound like I'm going to die soon or something!

Funny. So, any interesting things happen to you lately? What else is new?

Everything is always interesting to me. One thing that comes to mind is that I'm currently doing an exhibition in Berlin called *Kinbaku* ["Bondage"], consisting of 101 black-and-white photographs. We held an opening party and everybody went crazy. People overseas are so fascinating—there are so many weirdos. Even TV interviews are different. They'd be like, "I brought a rope, please tie me up," and they'd conduct the rest of the interview tied up in rope. The camera's still going and everything, you know? There was another incident—obviously I can't speak the language so I don't exactly know what was going on—where this huge fan of mine suddenly took all her clothes off in the middle of the venue and began grinding her hips. I was like, "What the fuck?" and then she suddenly pulled out a tampon from her slit and came toward me swinging the damn thing above her head!

Whoa.

She was utterly crazy. It was unreal! [laughs] So yeah, those kinds of things are interesting to me, little incidents like that.

Your portrayal of bondage makes it seem somewhat different from the typical image that we have of it.

A lot of people say that to me, and when they do, I tell them that "I free their souls by tying up their bodies." Sounds like nonsense, huh? Up until recently I used to say, "I don't tie up their souls, only their bodies." But now I say the opposite because I asked this girl which is better and she said that she liked the idea of "freeing the soul" more. So I stuck with it.

You brought *EROTOS* along today, huh? Wow, it's amazing you even have this. When I go overseas, a lot of female critics or researchers or whatever say to me, "Araki, out of all your books, I think that *EROTOS*

is the best." Nice, right? Flowers are all erotic in my eyes. They're all Eros. Once you realize that they're all reproductive organs, they begin to look like dicks and cunts. This book is a classic. I only make about 500 to 1,000 prints of any one book, but if it's good, then I think that's plenty. I like the idea of only 500 to 1,000 people owning the book. In any case, it's amazing that the two books you brought with you today are *EROTOS* and *Kofuku Shashin*. You must have an eye for these things.

Thanks. So maybe you can give me some tips on how to take lustrous photographs of thousands of women?

Why, you should have sex with them! [laughs] I'm serious, it helps a bit if you do that. Like, connecting with them and physically touching them. People nowadays neglect the act of touching. They all try to keep a distance. They don't connect with the city, with women, they don't even feel with their eyes. With me, I immediately get a hard-on if I touch a girl, you know?

I know. Thanks so much for the interview.

Hey, you should stay longer. At first I wanted to go home because you were asking me dumb questions, but you're all right. I mean, you brought *EROTOS* and *Kofuku Shashin*, for God's sake. You pass! Look, I'll take you to another secret haunt of mine. Let's go!

