

NAGASHIMA YURIE: NO ONE ELSE WAS DOING IT, SO I HAD TO DO IT MYSELF (2020)

Interview by Goroku Miwa

*Photographer Nagashima Yurie on
why she continues to speak out*

IN THE 1990S Japan saw the emergence of a movement known as *onna no ko shashin* (girls' photography). The movement was made up of girls who started to capture themselves, their friends, and scenes from their daily lives in pictures with a close-up, intimate feel. Following hot on the heels of the arrival of the easy-to-use compact camera, *onna no ko shashin* was a form of photography that didn't demand skill or expertise; it was intuitive—or, more bluntly, lacking structure. Due to its easily accessible style, it quickly garnered popularity in Japan. Thus ran the typical description of the *onna no ko shashin* movement provided by most media sources. But what was the *onna no ko shashin* movement really about?

When we begin to unravel the threads of the contemporary discourse around *onna no ko shashin*, it becomes clear that it has many contradictions, as well as much prejudice, sexism, and misogyny lurking in the background. “I found it ridiculous even then, so I don't think we should blame it on the times,” says Nagashima Yurie, one of the central figures of the so-called *onna no ko shashin* movement. “I always thought that someone qualified to do so would come along and present a counterargument, but no such person appeared, and therefore the current definition stuck. If that's how things are, I thought, I'll have to fight back against it myself, so I decided to enroll in a university.”

Nagashima's recent book on the topic is entitled “*Bokura*” *no “onna no ko shashin” kara watashitachi no gārī foto e* [From their “onna no ko shashin” to our *girly photo*] (Daifukushorin, 2020). It is a statement of dissent that examines and, in turn, corrects the various elements of warped discourse around *onna no ko shashin*; it was also Nagashima's master's thesis in humanities at Musashi University, where she engaged in feminist studies beginning in 2011. “I didn't write it in order to blame anyone in particular. Rather, I wanted to inspire courage in young women,” Nagashima continues. What comes into view, once the various stereotypes and biases have been swept away, is *girly photo* as a part of girly culture, in resonance with the third-wave feminism that emerged in the United States in the 1990s. I spoke to Nagashima about the process of writing the book, and her thoughts as they stand today.

You returned to your graduate studies in 2011, and earned your second master's degree in 2015, this time in sociology, then published your book in 2019. When did the idea come to you to write the book, which has been eight years in the making?

¹ [Iizawa Kohtarō, “*Onna no ko shashin*” no *jidai* (Tokyo: NTT Shuppan, 2010).]

I think the decisive factor might have been seeing the publication *Onna no ko shashin no jidai* [The Era of Girls' Photography] by photography critic Iizawa Kohtarō, which came out in 2010.¹ The editor reached out to me to ask for permission to reproduce images of my work in there and I agreed, but when my copy arrived, I found its contents pretty problematic. For a start, it espouses an antiquated view of gender that hasn't been updated at all since Iizawa's essay in the 1996 publication *Shutter and Love: Girls are Dancin' on in Tokyo*—a survey of *onna no ko shashin*.² In both books, the concept of gender taken as self-evident is a heterosexual, binary relationship between “the Feminine Principle” (i.e., femininity) and “the Masculine Principle” (i.e., masculinity)—a view of gender that was already outdated by the 1990s. In addition, Iizawa makes his “arguments” based on private information whose veracity can't be checked. Further, he considers photographers who haven't yet been discussed within the framework of *onna no ko shashin*, like Yanagi Miwa, and those from a slightly later generation, like Sawada Tomoko and Shiga Lieko, and assesses their work based on whether their works display “the feminine principle” or “femininity.” Reading it, it struck me that it wasn't actually a statement on *onna no ko shashin* so much as a kind of gossip column cloaked in a veil of critical discourse. I'd always thought that if we could just tolerate the 1990s things would improve, so having to tolerate that kind of insult into the 2010s felt like an outrage. That was when I first started to think that maybe I could argue back.

The *onna no ko shashin* movement was primarily one of the 1990s. What do you think Iizawa's intention was in writing about it again twenty years later?

This is just a guess, but I imagine that the book *Kanojotachi: Female Photographers Now* by the art writer Yamauchi Hiroyasu, published by



fig. 1

Tank Girl, 1994

Pelikansha in 2008, may have been the trigger. Iizawa has been viewed by some as the foremost scholar of nineties women's photography, so I imagine he wanted to put out something that would surpass Yamauchi's contribution.

² [Iizawa Kohtarō, ed., *Shutter and Love: Girls are Dancin' on in Tokyo* (Tokyo: INFAS, 1996).]

³ [Nagashima earned an MFA from California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in 1999.]

In the title of your book, you use the phrases *onna no ko shashin* [girls' photography] and *gāri foto* [girly photo] side by side. Broadly speaking, they are perceived to have the same definition. Was your motivation to correct and overwrite all the mistakes made in the discourse around *onna no ko shashin* in the past?

My argument in the book is that although the categories *onna no ko shashin* and *girly photo* both refer to works made by the same group of photographers from a certain generation, their meanings are totally different. So I wouldn't agree with the interpretation of those terms as synonymous. I didn't write the book in order to blame anybody in particular; in fact, I wrote it for myself, above all. I also wish that we lived in a world where everyone who saw themselves as a girl could express themselves without having their self-esteem dented by others. For a long time, I secretly looked down on the people who wrote all these misguided things about what girl culture is, while somewhere in my head I was waiting for a critic to come along and correct all their mistakes. Nowadays, you don't see princes on white horses coming to the rescue, even in Disney films. So I decided that what I needed to do was to protect the value of myself and the work on my own and reclaim the self-esteem that had been stolen from me. That was what I learned in university in the United States.³ Starting in 2007 I would occasionally participate in study meetings held by the sociologist Ueno Chizuko, and that was where I met the scholar Senda Yuki. Wanting to study with her, I enrolled as a research student in the humanities department of Musashi University.

That was in 2011?

Yes. But a week after I'd been accepted into the program, the Tohoku

earthquake and tsunami happened, and I started worrying that maybe I should be concentrating on things other than feminism. I deliberated really hard about it, but in the end I reached the conclusion that what had built up the certainty that nuclear accidents wouldn't happen in the discourse was the companies, politicians, and the government, which had prioritized financial gain above all else, and reaped its benefits—which is to say, our androcentric society was responsible. So I decided that there was meaning after all in pursuing feminism. It's an indirect approach for sure, but I felt certain that in pursuing feminism I could do something that would influence the functioning of society, whose problematic nature the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami had made so clear, and so I decided to go for it.

You assembled a vast quantity of primary documents, and then went about examining and dissecting each one with great care. I was overwhelmed by the painstaking nature of your discursive analysis. At the same time, as a writer myself, I broke out a bit in a cold sweat. I felt like I was being confronted with the danger inherent in unquestioningly believing or quoting secondhand the discourse of experts or those in authority.

I feel that mass media has a tendency to write and edit copy and choose headlines based on which elements of which themes they think are most likely to provoke a reaction. Reading old articles from back issues of *Studio Voice*, which I quote in my book, there are times when it's unclear what the writers are trying to say. When I read them as a young person, however, I thought it was because of my own lack of knowledge that I didn't understand them. I think that often when a reader is discomfited by something, the cause isn't a misunderstanding on their part, but rather the assumption that the writer must know what they're talking about, so the reader is predisposed to trust the writer and is therefore susceptible to misinformation. Everybody makes mistakes sometimes—that's just inevitable—but I think it's important to think about who takes responsibility for those mistakes.

I observed the popularity of Hiromix at the time it was happening, and I remember the complex feelings that I had, the way I wasn't fully able to get on board with it all. I had mixed feelings. I didn't want to be part of a group called “*onna no ko*”—I even felt that, if possible, I'd have preferred to be born as a man and take photographs as a man, and so on.

I had a similar kind of experience while watching a TV program called *TV takkuru* [TV tackle] in the 1980s, where the talent Tajima Yōko was being taken apart by the show host Ōtake Makoto and the other male guests. I remember thinking to myself that if you became a feminist, then that was what happened to you. Even though I'm sure Tajima was definitely in the right with what she was saying, I remember thinking to myself that I shouldn't become like her—it was as if she was being made an example of as a public warning. I think that's how, for a long time, male-oriented society has exerted group pressure to protect its own vested interests, and to inhibit attempts at female solidarity. Sometimes I think about how things would have been if I had been able to connect with other female photographers of my own generation, like Hiromix and Ninagawa Mika. But I felt at the time that if I got close to them, I ran the risk of people saying, “Aha, so the *onna no ko shashin* photographers are forming a group after all.” Looking at Western art history, you see that artists getting together and exchanging ideas is a perfectly natural way for a movement to be born, as in the case of the Impressionists or Dadaists, but for us, there was this ridiculing interpretation placed on us, like with the *onna no ko shashin* discourse. It's a clever technique for chasing not just women but anyone belonging to any kind of minority into the periphery.

The headline “Snap Feminism,” which appears over the *Shutter & Love* feature in the August 1995 issue of *Studio Voice*, seemed to me to be heading in a good direction toward attempts to acknowledge third-wave feminism.

That must be because the article was written by the art writer Hayashi Nakako. It was Hayashi who first understood the women's photography



fig. 2

The Kiss, 2011

movement in the 1990s as a tributary of third-wave feminism, and renamed it from *onna no ko shashin* to *girly photo*. Iizawa claims that photographers he featured in the photo magazine *déjà-vu*, like Araki Nobuyoshi and Nan Goldin, had an influence on *onna no ko shashin*, but I didn't have the money to buy expensive photography magazines, and I hadn't even heard of *déjà-vu* until I myself was featured in it.⁴ We were more directly influenced by the jacket photos of the CDs we listened to in Tower Records and HMV, or imported magazines like *i-D* and *The Face*, also carried in record stores, which we'd flick through in the store aisles. Of course, I went on to discover Goldin's and Araki's work afterward. I was surprised by how Iizawa's theories about *onna no ko shashin* are exclusively limited to the world of photography, and the influence of subculture is ignored entirely.

⁴ [*déjà-vu* was a photography quarterly founded by Iizawa in 1990.]

⁵ Nagashima quickly made a name for herself after receiving the Parco Award for a series of portraits of her and her family in the nude.

Jumping back somewhat, what was the thing that first made you want to pursue photography?

I never thought that I wanted to be a photographer. Even the work that I submitted to the second Parco *Urbanart* competition in 1993 was something I thought of as visual art that just so happened to use the photographic medium.⁵ At the time I was studying graphic design at Musashino Art University, but I was forever doing something different from the set assignment, and the teacher, who was fond of me, would often say with a smile, "Nagashima-san, you need to become an artist."

When you're making your work, does the concept come first?

I have an idea about the kind of work I want to make, but often the concept changes or gets more complex as I'm making the work. It's no fun just to make the things in exactly the way you've decided to do it, in a way that you already understand, so maybe I'm just ensuring that I don't get bored. On occasion, I venture to do something and then even I myself can't judge whether it's good or bad.

In addition to your photography work, you've continued to write. What are the most integral aspects of your writing practice?

To give an example, when I read the writing of others, I not only pay attention to what I relate to or what makes sense to me, but I'm also attentive to the writers' thoughts that feel incompatible with my own views. I think art is often thought of as a form of expression in which linguistic communication is unnecessary, but that isn't so in the field of contemporary art. That's why I try to get my students to understand it in literal terms first. In his essay, Iizawa compares the photographs made by *onna no ko* to "voice." But in *On Photography*, Susan Sontag writes that photographs "cannot themselves explain anything." Generally speaking, the word "voice" is used to signify assertion or the opportunity to speak, but I think you can offer the interpretation that we *onna no ko shashin* photographers had our true voices stolen from us by the argument that our photographs themselves were our "voice." The "voices" we possessed were really just literally voices and nothing more—voices making sounds like "aah" and "ooh"—while our voices-as-means-of-verbal-assertion were taken away from us by the grown-up critics, who decided to speak in our place. Just like in the story of *The Little Mermaid*, we had our voices stolen from us in return for the legs we needed to enter society.

How do you view feminism at current in our post-#MeToo era?

I think that there a lot of people who, as they grow older and accumulate life experience, come to an urgent understanding of the importance of subjects like feminism, as I have myself. I feel that it would be great if the option to return to studying was open to everyone—that anyone, if they felt like they wanted to learn more, could go back to university, for example, or become involved in local lifelong learning courses, or similar opportunities. We live in an age where there's all kinds of information accessible for free on the internet, so I think the ideal would be for us to form an environment where news about grassroots feminist activities and other information was made available there for anybody to access.



fig. 3

Rice Cake on Fire, 2015

The idea of respecting one's own choices and individuality is definitely gaining traction, isn't it?

6 [A reference to the *Mazinger Z* giant robot manga and anime series.]

Even so, there are pitfalls within girly culture too, I think. For instance, when I was a child, I hated skirts and clothes with ribbons and lace and all that stuff and would only wear pants. I favored the blue-uniformed characters over the pink ones in the *Super Sentai* superhero series on TV and loved the show *Devilman*. I also really wanted my own super-alloy.⁶ At the same time, I don't want that to be interpreted as my being boyish or wanting to be a boy. I don't think that I should feel excluded from girly culture for that reason. In the 1990s, I chose to wear pink and sported miniskirts and red lipstick, but I always mixed those things with elements that were seen to belong to the world of boys, like camouflage prints or a shaved head. I have this sense of wanting to shake up people's ideas of what rightfully belongs to girl culture. The people who influenced me, like Madonna and those in the Riot Grrrl movement, also expressed themselves in fashion and the kinds of behavior seen to belong to girls, but at the same time they worked out, or played in punk bands, and therefore dragged these activities, behaviors, and concepts not seen to belong to girls into girls' territory, taking ownership of them in a way that seemed really cool to me. Both in the past and now, the people that I think of as cool are those who have an awareness about whether their thoughts of "being themselves" comply with the values that society imposes on women.

You're right. There are still not many women who can come out and say that they don't care at all what men say about them.

I mean, when I was younger and I split up with my boyfriend, I cried and said, "I promise I'll fix what's bad about me!" But yes, now if people see me behaving like myself or saying what I really think, and that results in them wanting to distance themselves from me, I don't stop them. There are still lots of times even now when I feel like I'm still bound by ideas of *how a woman should be*—I still concern myself with wondering how men I like see me, or find myself putting various responsibilities on myself for no other reason than my being a woman, or acting with

exaggerated enthusiasm when I'm actually finding something boring, and so on. But I feel that acknowledging and understanding those behaviors is more important than trying to get rid of them entirely. When the part of me that's acquired knowledge about that stuff comes across the other part of me that's suffering because she's absorbed this old way of thinking, the former asks, "Are you sure that's what you want?" I believe that's how you go about dealing with these issues.

You've recently joined Instagram, haven't you?

I started back in 2016, so not that recently. I'm not sure how enjoyable it is for those expecting content from "the photographer Nagashima Yurie." But, as in my work, the photographs I post there are taken from a different angle than the usual ideas about what is pretty or Instagrammable. Instead, I stick with my idea that real beauty lies in the untidied version of life, the one in which you don't move the unphotogenic things out of the frame. I don't wear makeup when I'm at home, and if I'm writing in the early morning then my hair will look like I just got out of bed. If a photograph showing me like that appeals to me in some way, I'll go ahead and post it. If I don't have time to clean or tidy up because I'm taking care of both my job and the house every day, then that's just the way it is. I don't think that's something to be embarrassed about. I feel like my thinking on this has remained more or less unchanged since I was a child. I think of that famous slogan of second-wave feminism, "the personal is political"—if there are people who are shocked by a glimpse of my daily reality, then I'd like that to be a chance for them to think about the way that our society is structured.

So that's related to feminism for you, as well?

From the moment I was born, as soon as the person delivering me said to my mother "It's a girl," I've lived as a woman. I've always been vaguely conscious that being a woman in this world was treated as something unfortunate in some way. So as a result, I read anything I could get my hands on that I thought might help solve the question



fig. 4

©Nozaki Kosei



fig. 5

©Nozaki Kosei

for me of why it was so hard just to be who I am. And the ones that really hit home for me were a broad range of feminist and feminist-leaning texts. Of course, that includes the work of serious feminist authors like Simone de Beauvoir, but also more close-at-hand sources of information, like a copy of *An An* magazine that my mother bought, which once had a feature on DINKs (Double Income No Kids), or a magazine cover featuring a supermodel striding down the runway in a see-through blouse visibly wearing no bra underneath. That broke this sense of discomfort I had over why men were allowed to be topless but women had to feel ashamed about it. So I learned that it didn't have to be that way.

Are you working toward any new exhibitions or other projects at the moment?

I'm releasing a small photograph collection as part of a series of mini-publications produced by Dashwood Books in New York. There's also a plan for an exhibition somewhere in Japan in the summer—the details haven't been announced yet. Although at the moment everything has been cast into uncertainty with the pandemic.

This text was originally published as “Dare mo yaranai kara, jibun de yaru shika nai’ shashinka Nagashima Yurie ga kotoba de katari tsuzukeru riyū” in *The Fashion Post*, April 24, 2020, <https://fashionpost.jp/portraits/180108/>.

Translated by Polly Barton.

© 2021 Nagashima Yurie + Bunka-cho Art Platform Japan

artplatform.go.jp/resources/texts/202104
