

**Shigeru Onishi: Emanating Hatred**  
**Ryuichi Kaneko, photography historian**

Here one experimenter interposed, and a few images of him were mixed together. And they merged with time and space, forming a curiously murky solution. In the faint light I couldn't make out this experimenter, nor even the location of the camera. But his anonymous reality looked pained, as though it had regurgitated some kind of ectoplasm...

Shuzo Takiguchi, "Through the Mechanism of Photography"

I believe forty years have already passed since I picked up a copy of *Marginalia* (1966, Misuzu Shobo). The book was a compilation of short articles written for exhibition catalogues by Shuzo Takiguchi, who was "for ideological reasons hardly writing for periodicals." Takiguchi, who as an art critic had opened up new horizons in the artistic expression of postwar Japan, had edited it himself. The text above, written for an exhibition of Shigeru Onishi's photography at Nabis Gallery (Tokyo, March 1955), is included at the beginning of the book. What was the work of this photographer – this "stranger named Shigeru Onishi," as Takiguchi himself put it? I was personally very curious about his work, but at the time I didn't know how to go about looking into it, so I just filed him away in a mental drawer. Then out of the blue, more than twenty years ago, a vast number of Shigeru Onishi's photographic works came into my care courtesy of Hideyuki Yanagisawa, who was then a curator at the Okayama Prefectural Museum of Art (and is now chief curator at the Ohara Museum of Art).

What particularly appealed to me about the deluge of works handed to me was the way in which different images – nudes, cityscapes, trees, portraits of women, interior shots – had been jumbled together in photomontages, as well as his unorthodox printing methods: using a brush to coat the photographic paper with emulsion, consciously causing irregularities in the development; employing acetic acid for discoloration; even deliberately making it look as though the fixing process was incomplete. This jarring mode of expression completely overturned the respectable photographic techniques that had come before; unable to make out any unified syntax of expression, I wasn't so much enchanted as repulsed. Left all alone with this oeuvre that had been placed before me, I still cannot forget how I flinched at the intense "hatred"-like energy that emanated from it, how I was caught up in its storm and felt nauseous. I have seen countless photos, but it is fair to say that never before or since have I had an experience like that one.

And so I continued my research, digging up those few works of his that had been printed and discussed in the photography and art periodicals of the time, and eventually I was able to fulfill my dream and stage a retrospective in a small gallery in Tokyo: *Shigeru Onishi: Elusive Avant-Garde Photographer* (Galerie Omotesando, Tokyo, May 26th – June 7th 2014).

Shigeru Onishi (1928 – 1994) was born to a long-established family in the city of Takahashi, Okayama Prefecture. According to the art critic Tadao Ogura, who was his friend from middle school, he brimmed with a precocious, uncommon genius: by middle school he was already well into his study of advanced mathematics; he was also trying to pass himself

off as a poet; and he was studying the *I Ching* divination manual.<sup>1</sup> In 1953 he graduated from Hokkaido University's Department of Mathematics and stayed on at the university to research topology. He started to take photos in Hokkaido; apparently, from the beginning his aim was not to record but to express the images within him. He was an active member of an amateur photography club in Sapporo, but it seems that his work was not understood by his fellow amateur photographers.

In March 1955 he held a show at Nabis Gallery, for which Shuzo Takiguchi wrote him his article. Noting that it was the most impressive photography exhibition held that year, the photography critic Tatsuo Fukushima wrote the following about it:

Shigeru Onishi is one of those photographers whose work boldly strikes me with the unease and anguish of an individual living through our times. While his work aggressively takes a stand against all that harms and injures us, I also felt as though it is issuing a warning to our tamed souls, which when confronted with such harmful things tend to try and proceed by forgetting, evading, deceiving. His photographs shock our numbed souls and teach them to hate that which is hateful. The force they display – the opposite of what we see in the more accommodating salons – could not be more important for this society.

– "Will Salon Photography Return?" in *Camera* (June 1956)

Yet regardless of this kind of praise from Fukushima, it is fair to say that Onishi's work went completely unnoticed by the photography world at the time.

The following year, 1956, he exhibited his works at the inaugural *International Subjective Photography Exhibition* (Takashimaya Nihombashi, December 11th – 16th). In 1957 Takemiya Gallery, which was run by Takiguchi, staged a second private show, and three works titled *Works* were published in *Bessatsu Atorie*, no. 34 – "New Photography" (May 1957, Atorie Shuppansha), accompanied by commentary by Onishi himself. He was also the subject of a special feature, "From Shigeru Onishi's Photography Show," in the photography periodical *Photo*, no. 35 (July 1957, New Japan Photographic Society); it contained six works, including *Evening Light* and *Setting Sun in the Corner*. Takiguchi's aforementioned article was reprinted here under the title "Thoughts on Certain Prints," as was Onishi's commentary from *Bessatsu Atorie* – "New Photography."

In his commentary, Onishi describes "the purpose of my photography" as follows:

To know the conditions of the object's formation – this is the purpose of my photography, which is founded on a desire to pursue metamathematic propositions such as "the possibility of existence" and "the possibility of optional choice."

Understanding what is meant by the "metamathematic propositions" of which Onishi speaks is, frankly, something that is best left to him. But the photographic techniques he uses to realize that purpose – montages created at the shooting or printing stage;

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<sup>1</sup> Kokushi Ogura (former name), "Profile of Shigeru Onishi" in *Photo*, no. 35 (July 1957, New Japan Photographic Society).

development using photographic paper, brush and very hot chemical bath (up to 80 degrees); intentional discoloration with acetic acid – break down the spatio-temporal aspect of the photograph, which is bound by physical conditions, and also negate the image's immutability. I believe that this brings into question the scientific absoluteness of photographic technology, and is a means to transcend our understanding of the spatio-temporality of our everyday reality, and give a physical manifestation to topological space.

After these shows, Shigeru Onishi focused on creating "art informel" works of abstract ink painting (avant-garde calligraphy), and seems to have moved away from photography. I am not sure when Onishi began to produce avant-garde calligraphy, but apparently as a postgraduate he was scribbling dozens of abstract sketches in red ink every day.<sup>2</sup>

That year Michel Tapié, who had come to Japan with Toru Haga, Sam Francis, Toshimitsu Imai and Georges Mathieu, began to associate with Jiro Yoshihara and the other artists of the Gutai group. One of the fruits of this collaboration was the *Contemporary World Art* exhibition (Bridgestone Museum of Art, October 11th – November 10th, 1957; Osaka Daimaru Hyakkaten, December 16th – 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1957), which featured his calligraphic works. After this, as a calligrapher Onishi was involved with the *International Sky Festival* (Osaka Takashimaya Namba) hosted by Gutai, and participated alongside the group's artists in exhibitions like *Continuité et avant-garde au Japon* (International Center of Aesthetic Research, Turin, March 1961), but it appears that he never became a member.

Michel Tapié (who founded the International Center of Aesthetic Research) had a deep knowledge of mathematics, and was one of the few people who understood Onishi's topology-based theory of art. He went as far as to contribute a foreword to the anthology *Logic of Continuum (1), a Study of Meta-infinite* (International Center of Aesthetic Research, Turin, 1969), which reproduced the handwritten, bilingual (Jap-Eng) essay of the same name: a magisterial study of Onishi's calligraphic works and topological symbols.

Having blasted onto the photography scene in the late 1950s, Shigeru Onishi never found a place for himself there, despite being noticed by some critics and periodicals. And although he was acclaimed for his contributions to the Gutai group's spectacular global activities, it is fair to say that he is now forgotten. That may well be because he refused to situate his own creations within critical frameworks that fit their visual style or methods, such as "Gutai" or "subjective photography." This probably stems from his pride at having formed a theory of art based on topology. More than half a century on, I am not sure to what extent Onishi's theory is comprehensible. However, as we continue to discover them, his photographs draw us into a spatio-temporal dimension the likes of which we have never witnessed before, never ceasing to express the bare "existence" of one proudly independent artist as he struggles within it. So now is the time for us to establish a new critical framework, and take on the task of assigning this photographic oeuvre its place in history.

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<sup>2</sup> Toru Haga, "The Newcomer Shigeru Onishi" in *Geijutsu Shincho* (July 1960).