

# Daido Moriyama

## How I Take Photographs

*Takeshi Nakamoto*

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Nakamoto

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**The real Daido Moriyama**

## A brief guide to snapshot photography

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‘What’s the key advice you give to any beginner in snapshot photography? This is the first question I ask Daido Moriyama when we meet to discuss the plan for this book.

Frankly, because of mass, he must have been asked this hundreds (if not thousands) of times — but, no doubting the sense of seasoned, Moriyama replies:

***‘Well, the first thing I always tell anyone who asks me for advice is: Get outside.’***

***It’s all about getting out and walking. That’s the first thing. If you do that and photograph everything you’ve learned on the subject of photography for the moment, and just shoot. Take photographs — of anything and everything, whatever catches your eye. Don’t put time to think. That’s the advice I give people.’***

Snapshot photography is all about capturing at the actual moment and expression of whatever you are photographing — the subject — in that particular moment.

Like Moriyama says, as a photographer he has devoted his life to taking snapshots. Snapshot photography works particularly well for him: his outlook of street scenes, or street photography, as it is also known.

When Moriyama was still barely twenty, a friend sold him a cheap Canon 4Sb, and he took it with him into the streets of Osaka, which was where he was born and grew up.

Looking back at that time, Moriyama reflects with a smile:

***'More than once, you see, I was so eager to go out on the streets with a camera and find something really way-out and exciting that I'd never experienced, that I'd end up doing it — essentially lying on the streets — for the next few decades.'***

Before he set out as an independent professional photographer, Moriyama worked with two major figures in the art form: Takeji Iwamiya (1920–1989) and Eikoh Hosoe (1933–). Both men were hugely influential in their fields: Iwamiya had his own photographic studio in Osaka, which Moriyama joined, and he was active in all sorts of spheres, including art at the vanguard of fashion, while Hosoe was a new prophet. He was avant-garde as well as working on his own magazine, but he also energetically straddled new working projects and boundaries. If Moriyama had not worked too, he could as well have followed in Iwamiya's footsteps, and found success as a completely different kind of photographer.

But Moriyama wasn't only interested in the streets. And for him, his inevitable result meant snapshot photography.

***'I call it a personality trait: I was just the kind of person who was fascinated by the idea, and as a kid I was always straying about on the streets. I preferred that. Give a camera to anyone who is that kind of kid, and watch what happens. They are going to want to go out and start taking photographs of the streets. Snapshot photography is a natural progression of me.'***

Fast forward fifty years, and Moriyama is still not interested in diversifying photography: no portraits of big-name actors, no advertising jobs, no still-life photography on behalf of sponsors, not specializing in wildlife photography, or woods, or ...

Instead, Moriyama sets out, camera in hand, walking the streets, taking snapshot photographs. That's what he does, basically. He has always thought that, taking street snapshots, he could become one of the Tokyo photographers — like Nobuyoshi Araki, Shomei Tomatsu, Masahisa Fukase, Kikuji Kawada, Minoru Yamasaki. Locations: Tokyo, Hokkaido, Shinjuku, New York, Paris, Buenos Aires, Hawaii. But he also — a whole variety of places, not only limited to particular cities, but also something different fragmented: a scrap of the city, or the sky; something

on the margin; a singular feature of the road. Pick out and photograph things that look unusual or not as expected. And that has remained his purpose throughout the last half a century.

***'... taking snapshot photographs of the city streets is: You're capturing the alien and unknown.'***

And cities, camera in hand. But nowadays, with the proliferation of cheap, high-spec digital cameras and smartphones (which clearly always double as cameras), everyone out there has a camera, either in their pocket or their bag, and thus the means to take snapshots.

Nevertheless, as Moriyama points out, *'Most people only take snapshots of things immediately around them in their daily life. Fundamentally that means that if you're going to continue to take photographs out on the city streets, everything you encounter is alien and unknown. That's what taking snapshot photographs of the city streets is: You're capturing the alien and unknown.'*

So what kind of abilities are most useful for someone who is intent to try and capture this unknown, alien world? What is it — what abilities can objects quickly catch your attention, and the varying distances? Or perhaps instant response: good hand–eye coordination?

***'Of course, any beginner is a chance to start. No need to worry. A sharp eye, a fascinated mind. Of course you have to be alert, sensitive, responsive, at ease in your own body. But you can rest assured: you can manage it all. If necessary, stop, stop, and take how the movie draws. The interesting photographer must feel in the instant he takes the shot. If you don't have desire, you won't be motivated. But the thing about desire: the desire to encounter what has been unknown, something that compels you to talk about it — it could be a woman, or anything. Desire is all around us: the sky, the land, limitless supply of it. It's important to be true to that desire. To take a photograph: that is all interesting or meaningful you must become one with that desire whenever you press the button.'***

More than half a century has passed since Moriyama first started walking through the streets, camera in hand. The chapters that follow are a record of excursions I made in the company of Moriyama — one of Japan’s most iconic and profound photographers — during his restless, ever-evolving prowling of the streets. And as you read this, I should add one wellspring of his appeal: the *‘desire’* that imbues his attitude to his work, and his views on snapshot photography.

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## Location 1

### **Sunamachi: The shopping street as training ground**

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***‘For our first lesson in snapshot work,’ Moriyama tells me, ‘there’s really no better place to start than an ordinary shopping street — the kind you find in front of railway stations in any town or city in Japan. Shopping streets are places that have everything, all jumbled together. A huge variety of things, and a huge variety of people.’***

The Sunamachi Ginza is one of Japan’s most famous shopping streets, a street of food about 670 metres long, between Meiji Boulevard and Maruhashi Boulevard, in the east of Tokyo’s Koto Ward. It has about one hundred and eighty shops and small businesses, mostly selling an array of fresh produce and locally prepared foods. This part of the city retains quite a bit of the charm of the historical Shitamachi, the traditional working-class districts with low-rise buildings and houses, and narrow back alleys. Moriyama chose this location for our first shoot.

***‘I still have a vivid memory of the special atmosphere that you used to get on the street corners and in the markets of the 1940s and ’50s. When I come to these Shitamachi districts, I immediately feel a nostalgia. It’s all quite cramped, and requires some degree of sophistication — or high-tech, but. The sights, the smells, the noises and smells of the food — it’s all there. There’s just something I love about these places. And Sunamachi Ginza most of all. That’s why I chose it.’***

We set off by car late morning from Moriyama's office, arriving at Sunamachi just before midday. After parking close to a little coin-operated parking lot, and walking down the main thoroughfare, we head for the shopping street. It is the afternoon of a sultry summer warm on our backs, Moriyama clutching his compact camera.

Walking along one side of the shopping street, which is very long and narrow, we set about taking our photographs.

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Over and over again, Moriyama pauses in his tracks and just stands there, pressing the shutter button on his camera, looking round, continually alert. He points his lens towards whatever catches his interest. Occasionally, he holds his camera at chest height, and as soon as something new turns up, clicking it pressed down, taking one shot after another, in quick succession, without bothering to look into the viewfinder. Catching everything that will always reveal itself in a steady flow, as he makes his way forward at a run, as if already certain of what he'll find there. I know that it's not uncommon for him to get through one whole roll of film, 36 shots, in less than five minutes. And today, even before we've gone halfway along the street, he has to stop for a few seconds to change his film several times.

He can also be shooting interesting while we are shooting, gazing into the viewfinder of his camera, he just stands there: such skill, poise, looking like a character in a film with heat pressing down.

***'What am I waiting for? Well... nothing in particular. I'm just seeing to see if something, anything, turns up. I never know if something specific, in order to hit that specific position. It's just what it is. I never make up something I'll pursue.'***

And it's not a matter of the light, either. There's no equation where checking it in conjunction with thought.

***'I'm just concentrating on the moment. Thinking out each and every instant. How should I take the next few shots?'***

There's a crossroads coming up, so where should I head being? Should I slip into a doorway somewhere? This person? This woman, occasionally I think she might be nice if a passer-by walked into the frame. But I don't obsess over it. I'm just considering my options. Is there a better way to take the shot? Maybe there's something in the frame that I haven't spotted yet...

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Moriyama occasionally gives classes at photography schools, so I take my chance to ask him for tips. Does he have any dos or don'ts for taking snapshots in a shopping street like this?

***'First of all, in any shopping street, large or small, rammed with people or deserted, you're basically taking pictures of the interaction between the people and the street. So that's what you should focus on. And make sure you pay attention to all the food and other things displayed in the storefronts, and the wide varieties of posters and adverts stuck on all the corners of buildings. But don't just take wide shots, wide shots of the road and all the people going about their shopping. Make sure you really look at the objects, whether food or other goods, all in their variety.'***

Of course, today, as of all days, Moriyama is shooting relentlessly. He walks along, floating forward like an aeroplane zooming along, stopping and photographing whatever catches his interest. He passes people by, and the vision of the people who pass him, and cross in front of him, becomes his lens too. He can feel everyone, the people in the shop, the vendors, the posters advertising, the signs — the shops and advertising make snapshots to be seen in their triteness. For him, to do descriptive stances on his part, he cannot be blamed. No concept, no theme to discriminate.

***'I'm a little unorthodox in my views. I've always said that photographers should not be assigned "concepts" or "themes" when they go out on a shoot. Of course, I understand young people want to have a conceptual basis to their work — it was the same way, starting out. But even in my earliest photographs, the collection titled Yokosuka, for example, I knew I wanted to take pictures of Yokosuka. But I had no agenda... I never thought to myself, "Right, I'm going to explore the political tensions in Yokosuka," or anything***

***like that. I just thought, "I'll go and shoot some pictures." I feel no different when I later went to Shinjuku, or Buenos Aires, or Hawaii. If you go to places with an agenda related to what's going on socially or politically, and try to take shots that bring out an agenda, you're not going to get anywhere. The photographer should just note whatever he observes, using all his senses, and if possible unreflectively. This is what I always tell my students, or any young person who wants to become a photographer.'***

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I remember once asking Moriyama for a definition of what makes a 'snapshot photograph.' And I remember his reply:

***'It's like a cast net. You direct yourself simply to throw it out. You throw the net out, and you snag whatever happens to come back.'***

It's like an *accidental moment*: it emerges when a photographer points his camera toward something and presses the shutter button, of course he does it with some kind of intention. But the image that is captured in that instant will always contain way more information than the person behind the camera had in mind. Any concept or message that the photographer may try to express will be utterly insignificant.

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The conversation returns to Moriyama's way of working. Making these little, fleeting snapshots of the streets.

***'Whenever I photograph shopping streets, I make it a rule to walk up the street, then back down again. The light will always fall in a particular way when you go up the street, and then the opposite way when you're going in the other direction, so different things will present themselves to you. Something that seemed quite worthless when seen against the light might seem absolutely fascinating when the light falls on it from the front... that kind of thing. Sometimes the streetscape will look like a different place: you'll get a completely new shot or image. That's why I like to cover shopping streets and boulevards from two directions. If time is short and I***

***can't go all the way up and down, I always turn around and point my camera behind me. I walk for a bit, then shoot, then point it back and take some shots. If I don't spot something I want to capture, I'll go back to photograph it specifically.'***

In recent years, I've been shooting both in Japan and abroad. And it's true, no matter where it is, whenever he finds a street that piques his interest he does what he always did — going back and shooting again. And he's not satisfied simply with once: he'll go straight along it — also will duck into little alleyways, finding more, and crossing the road over and over again. Or he'll walk for a good few metres, look back over his shoulder, and then retrace his steps.

***'One thing I would recommend your readers to do is take shots, lots of shots, of any regular journeys they make in their everyday lives.'***

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For taking snapshots, it's a way for them to understand how their own powers of observation are what they see, even with the most ordinary things. Taking shots over and over again of the same shopping street will do more than teach them how to take snapshots — it will help them become better photographers all round.

Many of the students at the schools and colleges at which Moriyama has taught have dreams of becoming high-fashion photographers. Moriyama can tell these students, getting like are just wrong, haphazardly. So any skill you learn on the streets taking snapshot photographs is bound to come back for work in commercial work.

***'In contrast, in instances when students would tend to become documentary photographers who take pictures of meaningful objects, I'd tell them: Don't just select any old thing. Choose the object deliberately and carefully. If they're going to take a picture of a house, for example, I tell them I expect them to find at least one house on top of that can do it as one's best. My reason? You're not going to develop a discerning eye unless you hone your ability to give something your full and undivided attention.'***

Moriyama goes on:

***'The ability to give something your full and undivided attention is essential for any young people – I see so many young people – I guess they're taking photographs, but it means in the end, they're just shooting without inspiration. If you don't think they are taking photographs in a mindful way, if you don't think they have their eyes open, and concentrated, if you're talking about drawing, it's the same thing. If you're talking about music, same. If you're talking about anything. If you just draw a half-assed picture, if you just play a half-assed piece on the piano, it's not going to be enough, without some sort of awareness.'***

***'That's why I always tell my students to choose their subject and observe it closely. Give it your undivided attention first, and only then capture it on camera. And take lots of shots. Because you won't see what it is you're taking unless you take lots of shots – at least, that's true with street shots. Without a good number of shots, you cannot really see what you are taking. If you can't see what is in front of you, and have no idea of what you want, how could you expect to be able to understand anything about photography?'***

Here Moriyama catches himself, and grins:

***'Listen to me talk. I'm still not sure that I really have any idea of what photography is myself...!'***

And with that he brings the session to an end.

***'That'll do for today.'***

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## Location 2

## **Tsukudajima: Snapshots at the water's edge**

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***'Photographs taken near water always come with an element of risk,'***

*Moriyama tells me.*

***'They can often feel quite dreary and poetic, but this can be both good and bad.'***

For our next location after Sunamachi Ginza, Moriyama chooses the Tsukuda district in Chuo Ward, in the heart of Tokyo. Once known as Tsukudajima ('Tsukuda Island'), it is a man-made island originally built up by fishermen from Tsukuda village near Osaka. The warlord Tokugawa Ieyasu invited those fishermen here, as he set out when he was defending Edo (now Tokyo) as his capital in the early seventeenth century. It still has a feel typical in the old pace versus the street layout and the original Edo atmosphere. Nowadays, much survives despite fires, earthquakes and wartime air raids. The remains of old highways can be traced among zones of fashionable new high-rise apartment blocks and towers.

Here is this strip of land, squeezed in between the Sumida River and the Harumi Canal and surrounded by water on three sides, that Moriyama is using as the location for our photo shoot.

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In my work with snapshots, the question of whether an area has water doesn't usually enter into my calculations — I never go anywhere expressly to take shots by water. But today he has the sea. It has rivers, it's got quite a lot of waterfront. If there's something I want to take, and it happens to be near water, well, then I'll take some snapshots. Photographs of scenes near water have a tendency to look more like 'landscapes of the imagination', but I don't want my work to take on this glossiness. I'll take my shot.

Moriyama says it's a good idea to shoot straight into the sun when taking photographs by bodies of water.

***‘It’s pretty simple. If you take pictures into the sun, or partially into the sun, things by the water look very sharp.’***

Reflections on the surface, lines that cut across the water, and distort the shapes, make snapshots all the more vivid and interesting. By the same token, photographs taken at Tsukudajima look even more evocative because of how the site’s skyline of colour pops out, as well as the shimmering surfaces. Urban snapshots taken in such places are a lot more evocative — maybe less naturalistic, but still, there’s a free-floating feel, and you can end up becoming a visionary photographer. You start shooting without thinking, and behind what’s being shot lies behind thinking.

‘So what’s wrong with that? What’s wrong with imaginary landscapes?’ You have a make use of it. Tsukudajima, the location being what it is — a fascinating mix of the traditional and the modern — several photography enthusiasts can be seen there every weekend, cameras slung around their necks, eagerly hunting for their next shot.

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The layout of the streets, for example, is so redolent of the Edo townscape — and then, if you can get the right angle, not very far off the skyscrapers, which appear so ultramodern. It’s very interesting. In view of it, taking pictures of ultramodern cityscapes and rows of dark, wooden, traditional houses.

As a well-travelled photographer, not only in Japan but all over the world, Moriyama has photographed hundreds of locations that have become the subject of the work of any number of other photographers. What does he think of this in artistic subjectivity? When he does a site, his focus is instinctively rooted: trying to capture physical things, he has his particular ways of vision.

***‘Take Asakusa as an example. The first thing most people think when they hear the name Asakusa is shinmachi, right? By shinmachi, we mean Asakusa — traditional, working-class, Edo-period, and all that. But when I go there to shoot, I’m not interested in highlighting anything particularly “Asakusa-ish”, not about Asakusa — that’s not it. I’m after other.’***

On the other hand, that doesn't mean that I won't take shots of the Kaminarimon temple gate, or other famous landmarks.

***'Refusing to take shots of the Kaminarimon temple because it's an Asakusa icon seems a bit self-defeating to me.'***

And it's true, lots of times, such structures don't make good photographs; he tells me, as he said: *'Well. Often they come across as exaggeratedly iconic, as if the point is simply to showcase "the way they're built" — and it'll be difficult for the viewer to take away anything more than that. But I've come to think that not to take photographs of these places just because they have iconic status is pretty stupid. Thinking back on it, I was probably trying to avoid things that might be considered cliché or iconic — and I was basically holding myself back. That's why I say now that any photographer must be resolved as well to question any derogatory label and be prepared to ask: "Well, what about that?" Now, when I take shots of Tokyo I find myself purposely going to places that I would have avoided before from fear of doing anything cliché — and photographing them.'*

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As Moriyama explains, this change of heart came with the publication in 2002 of his photo book titled *Hokkaido* (and in 2008 in New York, titled *Hokkaido*). The collections of photographs originally taken in the 1970s was something I had always been aware of. But it came home to me in a very concrete way when I was getting to grips with a collection of *New York* photos in *Hokkaido*. What I learned from these experiences is that the passage of time has this ability to completely erase things from your memory. And what you are left with is simply what's in the photograph. Whatever it is that you thought you were capturing in the experience that you pressed the shutter button at — it doesn't take long for the photo to stand as something unique, regardless.

***'In the old days, places like that would not have occurred to me as locations. Now I find myself fired up to include shots of them in my collections.'***

By the same token, Moriyama continues, *‘the photographs we’ve taken today, here in Tsukuda, we’ve taken quite casually. From now on, you can never discount once again similarity that some young person will come along in ten years’ time, take a look at them, and think, “Hey, these are astounding!” Photographs are things that can be brought to life over and over again, any number of times, depending on their environment. Put it in another way: The only way you can ensure that a shot will for ever fall meaningful is if you don’t take it. Don’t think too hard about it beforehand, don’t be too self-conscious or intentional – just press the shutter button. There’ll be all the time in the world for other people to come along later and attach whatever implications or “meaning” they like to it.’*

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### Location 3

#### **Ginza: A debut in digital photography**

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Some years ago, I asked Moriyama what he thought of digital cameras. His response was ambivalent.

***‘I haven’t made up my mind,’ he told me, ‘but right now, I get the sense that photography is moving away from things you can feel in the hand – photographic film, chemicals, and so on, and becoming simply an electronic tool...’***

As he sets out to take shots of Ginza for the photographs in this chapter, I notice Moriyama is now using a digital camera. We’re doing this shoot at year’s end, 2008. So why has he now acquired a digital camera, I wonder. Was it specifically for this shoot?

There’s been some talk of me doing a show in Ginza, in a gallery owned by a major camera manufacturer, he explains. *‘So I thought maybe I should try taking a few shots with a digital camera. Simple as that.’*

After the day's shoot, I ask Moriyama to talk about what difference using the digital camera made to him. What were the main differences from when he used a traditional film camera?

***'Well, I take masses more photographs than I did.'***

***'This fits. From a man notorious for taking huge numbers of photographs to begin with – a man who takes at least 360 exposures at a single time. I've always believed that quality can be covered with quantity. So with a digital camera you can keep shooting: you can shoot 200, 300 shots because the memory card stores them.'***

When you take photographs with a digital camera, you see an image of your most recent shot in the LCD panel, for instance, at the lower part of the viewfinder. As you shoot you glance down at it – which inevitably makes you want to take just one more shot, then another, and then another, and so on. You take one shot, see one image, and want to take another one. The more you take, the more you want to take. It's like you're continually stimulating yourself, increasing your desire, just by looking into that little screen. You want to try it this way and then that. The shots you have at your disposal have increased. And you can be that much more sure you've captured the image than you are with a film camera.

On the other hand, Moriyama is not one to spend time reviewing his shots.

***'In fact after a photo shoot, I might look over a few that interest me. Yesterday, for example, I took one and then, enough or not much time, I won't wonder whether a shot is good. I'm deliberating so much. I wonder about it so little. I just want to take another shot. And of course, there are times when I am a little curious, so I just take a peep, but really only when I am a little curious. But when the shutter closes I have very few things to review. What else is there? I've got nothing better to do.'***

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What about with digital? I ask him.

***'I used it simply so I didn't also do the review of my photos. I did — if anyone didn't check the screen. Now I know you should not like at once again in the LCD. You look at it, but anyway, when you look at again it halfway after you take it; but then again, shooting it as simply. My advice is: shoot, shoot, shoot. Quite a few digital photographers don't shoot very much. Since a digital camera gives easy access to view shots so easily after, they shoot too little. Few new photographers are working the way as I say — "People who know photography — there's no exception — simply shoot, shoot, shoot."***

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As is well known, Moriyama has always preferred to work with compact cameras. And of course, even though he makes a joke of it, saying it's because they're *'lightweight, just like him'*, there has always been a rationale behind this preference.

Think about it. If you've got an SLR or a large-format camera in your hand, you inevitably want to take considered shots, you think about the composition, and so on. With a compact camera, you just point and shoot. Plus, for something so small, I really take shots are surprisingly good across. If compact cameras were not so good, of course, I wouldn't. I didn't get a high-quality image. I would never have been content to use one for everything I did — you would have just found it from time to time. Anyway, I've never liked lugging around a heavy camera, or a load of tripods. If a camera is small, light, and takes good shots, well, what more can you ask for? And a digital camera offers all that in spades.

But Moriyama doesn't deny that there's a great deal of uncertainty about how digital photography will develop. How this new relationship with it is going to be — how it is going to develop.

***'I've always said it doesn't matter what kind of camera you're using ... So what makes digital cameras any different?'***

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***'There's still so much I'm not sure that I'm happy with. About whether the black-and-white mode really works as well as if it's image quality as silver halide, there's still so much. On other things that bother me: the impact digital will have on the amounts of work offered to put together photo collections, what I think – knock on, effects will be on the financial side of things, and so on. When it comes down to it, there's still a lot to be said on these.'***

One thing that gives me pause is that the image that shows up in the initial panel just presented in its colour. I take shots with the perception that I'll likely shoot in black and white. And inevitably I start wanting to take my next shot in colour – because there is a side of me that is strongly attracted to colour. Colourful things really stand out in an image. But what happens when you want the shot to be in monochrome? This is one of my preoccupations right now. I worry because I know if I'll start being influenced too much by the colour on that little screen. This is why, at the moment I still watch the viewing screen of the monochrome mode. I would say I'm still in the experimental stages. It's still feeling new.'\*

Experimentally or not, it's fair to say that Moriyama has stepped into digital territory by using a digital camera, here shooting Ginza itself for his new medium – an unknown area, away from visual hunting grounds.

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Of course, when I first arrived in Tokyo, I headed straight for the bright lights of Ginza. I went from Yurakucho to Ginza, then Tsukiji, to Hosen Senso-ji and Tomatsu-san (since Tomatsu's 1990s). Here I went to the restaurant that had been set up in Yurakucho – I was crazy about that film. For someone like me, a young guy from the provinces being in Tokyo in Ginza, it's been a location well worth photographing. And even today, when I hardly care about tourist things so particularly, I just never thought of it as a place worthy of photography. Today I feel this first time in my life I can record Ginza, from the Imperial Palace grounds up until photographs of the Imperial Palace grounds. I don't know why, but suddenly I feel I must shoot here. And I did. And it didn't seem like my territory. Not that anything's changed particularly – I haven't felt myself changing. I just realized that there's a difference to me now what I might be able to do.'\*

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***'Nope. Call me hard-hearted, but I've never, not even once, thought to myself, "Oh god, this would be so much better on a film camera."'***

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Even so, he's been taking his photographs with a film camera for over fifty years now — that's quite a long relationship. Surely there are occasions, when he's out on the streets using his digital camera, when he thinks wistfully, if only briefly, that he should go home and fetch his analogue camera and take some shots with that?

***'Nope. Call me hard-hearted, but I've never, not even once, thought to myself, "Oh god, this would be so much better on a film camera." For me, the ultimate aim is always to put an edited selection of my photographs into a photo book, or a collection — to be able to look at it once it's complete, and feel satisfied I've done a good job. Getting a good image is worth 80% of the hassle of criticism, isn't it? But to look at what care people say — if you've got to have guts. I have my own interpretation. I'm less dainty by listening to the naysayers!'***

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## **Postscript**

It's now a whole decade since Daido Moriyama started working seriously with digital cameras. Much has changed. He is still doing what he does, aiming as before to take street photographs. The only difference is that he now goes around with a compact digital camera in his hand.

***'After saying what I said, I don't know if there was a brief period when I tried to go back to analog (with my Ricoh). But soon after, I got hold of a digital camera. And it was pretty much finished after that. Ever since, I've used a film camera sparingly. Probably, I'll never go back.'***

***'As I've said countless times before, my photography is all snapshots. Ultimately, I take lots of shots. Digital cameras are just so amazingly convenient. There's no film to keep changing, and you just point the camera where you like... Of course, the batteries are a bit of a bother, but relatively speaking...'***

Moriyama recognizes of course that there are differences between film and digital. One element that people have come to automatically associate with his photographs, for example — the graininess of the image — has to be completely dispensed with in his digital work.

***'But you know, some people tell me that the photographs I take still have the look and feel of film photographs. Actually, though, I'm not too worried about that. Ultimately the choice a photographer makes, whether for digital or silver halide, depends on the style and attitude they want to adopt. If people want to stick solely with silver halide, that's fine by me. Speaking for myself, though, I'm more than happy to move on — and I've said this several times too. I think the chances of my going back to film photography are close to zero.'***

The last time Moriyama took photographs using an analogue camera was to prepare for a special exhibition he was invited to put on by a well-known university. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, he thought of cancelling.

***'Yes, it was a pity. But I was okay with it. I never thought to myself, "Well this is my last chance to shoot them. I should have." ... I find I must admit: once, when someone implored me, saying they had to have non-digital photographs, I could imagine taking some. I'd be willing to think about it at least.'***

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**Haneda Airport: Postcard shots and landscape shots**

Having completed a ‘test drive’ in digital photography in Ginza, Moriyama has today chosen Haneda International Airport and its environs for his next location. Haneda is one of the two primary airports that serve the Greater Tokyo Area.

*“Every time I make the journey to this airport by the Tokyo monorail, I get this strange feeling that something is being relayed back at me, as if I can just catch a trace. That does interest me. Firstly, I suppose, it’s just the fact that it feels like such a vast, neutral, indifferent space. Then there are all the advertising hoardings alongside the tracks, which William Klein photographed in the 1960s – though only a section of them remains, in skeletal form. I’ve had this urge to come here for years, which is why I wanted to do a shoot here today.*

*This kind of rather boring photograph expresses the “smell” of Haneda quite effectively, what it feels like to be here, it seems to me.”*

It does feel very empty and sprawling out here in the environs of Haneda – not like Tokyo at all, completely lacking in character.

A cynic might say, “You like subjects and situations like this because you can’t come up with any better ideas.” But Moriyama replies that he likes these sorts of situations precisely because they leave so much room for thought.

When you’re taking postcard-like photographs, Moriyama tells me, you should take in the whole mood, and take equally neutral and judicious shots.

*“First of all,” Moriyama continues, “I would say nothing about them is ever that bad. You know, you don’t have to almost automatically set out to look for things that fit a particular notion of ‘beauty’ about them, about Haneda. If a person does happen to be around, I’ll shoot them – but I really just add contrast. It’s rather hackneyed, I know, but this can be quite effective visually in bringing out the kind of place that Haneda is. The basic idea is to capture scenes of lifeless, deserted commotion.”*

*“It’s sort of an obvious point but, if you think about it, the photographs that are used on postcards are all excellent images. So it’s not a term you should use to slag off a photograph.”*

And I occasionally hear people dismissing another person's work that they didn't like with the same comparison. Clearly, the epithet 'postcard' requires more careful consideration. But I get the feeling that Moriyama's view of it is different.

He continues:

*"It's sort of an obvious point, but if you think about it, the photographs that are used on postcards are all excellent images. Most shots that are so-called 'postcard shots' are simply excellent images. So it's not a term you should use to slag off a photograph."*

He explains that postcard photographs succeed precisely because they give the impression of having captured every aspect of the subject, whereas in a second all they make it seem that someone other than an amateur photographer has taken them. In reality, many amateur photographers aspire to go to famous tourist spots and try taking photographs in precisely this sort of postcard style.

*"Of course it's much harder than you would imagine to take a genuine postcard photograph. It really is a kind of document. From the outset, postcard photographers always have a strong feel of technical skill."*

*I think on days like, for example, when I took shots of something that was quite far away, if there was horizon detail in the distance under a cloudless clear sky – I would aim to take that image purposely to add an element of finality. Not exactly a 'technique', but I guess I thought a straight-on location would be too similar to a postcard shot. Now I don't bother, why make it into an issue? And anyway, picture postcard shots are good."*

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**Highway: When the world rushes at you through the window  
of a car**

Daido Moriyama and I set off together on a trip. As a photographer who takes everything as it comes, Moriyama seemed to make no hierarchical distinction between different kinds of things. Mechanical destinies that he does not discriminate between, odd items and so on—whether he is travelling to Buenos Aires, or photographing the Shinjuku bar district, or flying time, or prowling the streets of Shinjuku at 3 a.m. for fifteen minutes, or even when he is buying dog food.

But this time he and I set off, taking for the purposes of shooting photographs by car. We left Tokyo to go in a car, and I had a general target for writing.

I also was experiencing alone out of the highway, so I said: “*This is like the travelling book America I used to look at.*” This was the title Daido Moriyama first tried on in 1969. Then he was only thirty years old, taking a stance on “Provoke” (Provoke Shisocho, 1968–1970). Inspired by Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), Moriyama travelled for trips just as the American vagabonds had criss-crossed all of North America. And, just like Kerouac and his friend Allen Ginsberg, who both wrote records of their adventures, Moriyama took his own record of the trips he made. Ginsberg and Kerouac used a typewriter, typing non-stop, while Moriyama used a camera. You could compare the tap-tapping of their typewriters with the shutter sound of Moriyama’s camera—two types of “beat”, if you like.

When you brought the image of doing a book, it was natural to think of it as “on the road” as I like to look at things on the road. Of course we shoot places in Tokyo, but I wanted to take some shots of a new spot along the highway, driving for miles and miles. That might be the most crucial factor—when all my thoughts on photography, on how to take the shot, everything that interests me, concentrated down to: *I’m On the Road.*

We leave for Tokyo before midday, driving a rental car, our provisional destination the town of Ashio. (Ashio, in Tochigi Prefecture, is the site of one of Japan’s biggest copper mines, and known for the environmental disaster in the late nineteenth century.) I say provisional because we still aren’t sure of heading there—Moriyama is thinking of shooting as freely as possible. He’s photographed before, but this was the first time with such a specific subject (as I hoped, maybe this trip would be the subject), and his randomness and his no-bias outlook install himself yet in the automated voice of the navigation system into which he inputs its instructions—

driving all around northern Kanto, first to Kiryu in Gunma Prefecture, then to Ashio in Tochigi, and then from Ashio to Manza, a hot-spring resort back in the mountains of Gunma.

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In the passenger seat, Moriyama keeps his lens pointed at the scenes that rush past the car windows, pressing the shutter button so much that he is grinning, almost shaking with glee. Glancing over and at one instant I think: *He looks like an amateur with his fingers on the trigger.* The term “snapshot” is not his word, but it’s just like turning to snap, wildly, with his chosen Moriyama style where all kinds of shots, you get really absorbed, then just shoot physically. Moriyama did get the sensation that he was shooting, but back to something like Plato in the allegory of his cave with his back to the windscreen and camera.

***“When you take these kinds of shots, you really do get the sensation that you are physically ‘shooting’ something.”***

A road running endlessly is like a living creature—it’s like a Tokyo freeway. Once in its lanes, the car rides one long narrow ribbon of road stretching out, there in front of us. There is an incredible variety in the things that come into view. Disordered landscapes, crowded towns, factory belts, and you have fields too.

Possible fields, mountains, bridges, tunnels... Countless, just one after another, all just waiting along a single stretch of road.

Surely considering the skill of the average photographer, shooting those scenes that flash past as you drive by at just a little too hard and ready way of going about things? Moriyama’s favorite word: *nonchalant* (“Nonchalant” is one of his pet phrases).

In this country, Moriyama says, movement and speed really do seem essential.

Passing through all sorts of landscapes at high speed, skimming through highways, your interest in what you see on the window you can’t predict what’s going to come into view through the windscreen. It’s that feeling of coming—or rather, of knowing

not to know.

And also, since we're going along at a speed—that's important. Everything goes by at exactly the same pace, doesn't it? But certain things you only pick up if you're moving along inside a moving car. If not so alert to certain variations, or modulations, in the flood of scenes. Your vision behaves differently when you're moving along as opposed to when you're walking through the city streets. Quite often something presents itself to you in ways it never would have if you were on foot. *It's those moments I wait for. As soon as something presents itself—flashing at me—I immediately take the shot.*

Because in certain places or at certain times, precisely because you're seeing them from a car window, something happens. *I always stop and get out to take my shots.* So maybe the "speed" acts like a filter, singling out what to capture.

Nevertheless, some points in Moriyama's very same vision have a kind of premeditated kind in mind—even though he has been taking his images from travelling along the highways for several decades.

***"I already had started to feel very preoccupied by failing to capture as I sped along. Call it a kind of melancholy—a sense of loss—that I felt about all the images I was conscious had been passed out of my grasp, and that were now behind me on the road. Something essential, something indefinable, that I was foregoing letting escape—like water dripping through a sieve. The feeling started to bother me more and more. So in the end I decided to stop taking shots from cars. I decided it was better to get out and walk."***

Interestingly, Moriyama has made the following statement to me on this essay:

***"There is a part of me that is always rushing ahead, intent only on the next image that might present itself to me tomorrow. But another part feels this deep lack of certainty about all the scenes I've passed through in any given day. What did it all mean? I know I've encountered and seen countless objects, people, scenes. But can I really say definitively what they were? ... Can I really say for sure what I encountered? ... There is this strong doubt I feel about myself, and about photography."***

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### Shaashin to iu taiwa soshite

*Shaashin kara shashinto e*  
(*A Dialogue with Photography*)  
Tokyo: Seikyusha, 2006

The quotation comes from an essay that Moriyama wrote looking back on his career up to that point. The preoccupation was both the past years he came to feel as he took photographs from a car. Sometimes being in focus is clear seems an acknowledgement of what he had done before—which suggests that it is less what is going on around him in his life, and it is, after all, what his life as a photographer is.

This is like his long career, Moriyama's thinking about photography in encapsulated form—suggesting that Moriyama has analyzed himself and understands his methodology.

In fact what it proves is that the highway, and the car Moriyama sees sped along, it is as important a habitat for both the photographer as the city streets. And that these “snapshots” from moving cars sit at the core of his own thought, his methodology.

***“This is great. This is so great, I’m able to relive directly the physical pleasure of it. I rate this higher even for photography, and better for my own feeling overwhelmed by the physicality of the shots. Going along the road, you get directly hit by the speed of the car. Every so often, out of the blue, along these moments when your own rhythm and the car’s rhythm seem to be in perfect sync. It does give you a unique buzz.”***

Plus, when you walk through the streets of Tokyo, you have the power to make a decision—if you're not in the mood for taking photographs in Asakusa, you can decide you don't have to take photographs in Asakusa and you can go somewhere else. On a highway, you can't do that. All sorts of scenes, images, come at you, with no choice. Mountain roads, often rural landscapes, from the forest, then people, then street scenes...

So accept whatever comes. You can't be fussy.

Of course, the whole principle of street photography is that you're walking through the streets. But there are some shots that you can't get when you're moving through at high speed. So what I see on the road is something unique, no less than a metropolis.

***“I focus on what's right in front of me. All I care about is whether or not a thing is compelling.”***

The photo shoot is over. Once the images have been printed, I join Moriyama in laying them out side by side to select the ones to go in the book. Some of them were shot through car windows, and others from when we stopped the car and got outside. Satoru Daimon's fields of barley, rivers, small dilapidated barns, mountains, fields of rice, temples, and the chimney chimneys of the old copper mine, which we can all see as we page back on a familiar order. Moriyama's astonishment at the complexity of the car window shots, which come about their complex look for their randomness, and another time for their look for their order, which seemed to be able to place them in the book, always astonishing. On a highway, a journey is hardly respectable.

***“You should avoid travel, simple travel, the sentimental travel. I'm not a traveller. I'm not making this book to travel. I may say it's true, but words can be hyperbolic. You should avoid travel by proclamations. I am basically an amateur photo person. I focus on what's right in front of me. All I care about is whether or not a thing is compelling... I never bother capturing any of the usual feelings of loneliness you associate with being on a journey. As a young man, visiting little country towns in the northeast of Japan I remember suddenly wondering what on earth I was doing, wandering around all on my own in such out-of-the-way places. But if you'd never able to see that from the photographs I took. There was no feeling of loneliness in them at all.”***

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***“One thing I do occasionally feel is a sort of envy. With some journeys I take, whether by train or car, obviously I sometimes have to go straight through places without stopping. On any trip with you we stopped frequently. Whenever I see a place that might have good subjects, it’s easy to carry through such a problem. But sometimes when I am with someone more specific, and can’t afford to stop, and have to keep pressing on the motion, I can’t. Just glimpsing these streets as I go by, at those moments is good. But at the same time, it is frustrating. Or I get this compulsion to stop, get out, and take photographs. This stress that I don’t know starts to take over. That’s the only kind of ‘sentiment’ that I feel when I travel. It bothers me, a kind of envy.”***

He returns his attention back to the prints that are laid out before us, his composition of the shots we tried to take after our stops along the book, the material for this photo series. *“It’s so simple, so excellent, so excellent.”*

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***“You say ‘freely,’ but I don’t know. That’s a question I’m always asking myself—am I really ‘free,’ in the true sense?”***

And he nearly gave up photography altogether. Looking back on that time, Moriyama describes it in terms of having strained his photography “muscle”. Basically, he hit a slump.

For a time, this man who had wandered the streets taking snapshots like a man possessed simply withdrew from the world because he could—unable to take a single shot. After several long, difficult years of creative block, one day Moriyama managed to take a few very simple photographs of some light and shade that he saw in front of him. Returning to the basic principles of photography like this allowed him to accomplish his own recovery, once he had recovered. From the 1980s onwards Moriyama resumed his photographic activities with even more energy and desire than before—something that continues to this day.

As a bystander, it is as though this photographer, who has spent his whole life asking himself the question: “*What is photography?*” has managed, while sometimes frustrated, to bring himself back again and come to untiringly put this question at himself. Moriyama is endlessly inquisitive both with himself and with photography; it is in this sense he has managed to carry on, able to handle the feeling of his body as hard as that car, now more able to handle that feeling of the need to relive all the images he was feeling previously as he was able to set them to places which rekindled his recollections, as though somehow an answer to that question: “*What is photography?*” itself.

***“You say ‘freely’—but I don’t know. That’s a question I’m always asking myself—am I really ‘free’, in the true sense? I’m always asking myself—am I really photographing ‘freely’? I want to be, but I wonder often whether that is true about photography—but I wonder whether someone who has spent so long at it could ever reach the point of photographing ‘freely.’ Am I really sufficient yet just to take photographs intuitively? Always questioning myself, and this is the doubt continually at the back of my mind. I’m continually in this ambiguity itself, will another shot allow me to dissolve, or at least raise questions about, all the statements I make.”***

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## **The real Daido Moriyama**

***“Oh, come on, get real...”***

In the ten years I’ve known him, I’ve noted Moriyama has a habit of saying this – then giving a dismissive snort. I’ve heard him come out with it on all sorts of occasions, and I realize now that it’s the photographer’s way of demonstrating that he thinks the person he is talking to is being ridiculous: about sport (like myself, for example), or music, or reading about something, or making some crazy request, and rather than putting them down with something stronger (like “*That’s total crap*”), he’ll come out with the expression.

***“I’ve never felt that I should conform to any particular set of rules – and not just in photography. I have no truck with what passes for the normal way of doing things...”***

Moriyama steers clear of any preconceptions in snapshot photography and he has a similar aversion to rules, standards, or normal practices in any area of life. You might say that, for him, the only criterion is that there should be no criteria. And when it comes to photography, it’s clear that the only ‘norms’ that are generally regarded as common sense are ones Moriyama resists.

Perhaps the best example of this would be the idea of the ‘photographer’s rights’ code. An art someone who has taken the photo, even if they have been anything other than mere copying, is a lost cause, he thinks. It’s nothing to be boring taking a photograph. He knows by using a camera and pointing at what he captures, he is in another dimension. When that poster contains an image by another photographer, he has no problem at all in issuing it either – as long as the image that is his happens to be there, that’s fine.

***“I’ve even considered doing away with the copyright symbol from my photos altogether.”***

This clearly illustrates his attitude to ownership. What could be considered a negative view by the public has to be considered as Moriyama’s own strength. That he wasn’t to think of photography as tied to copyright but that what is real is produced in the instant, as though the essential argument for photographs being original, being ‘art,’ and so on. A personal philosophy.

***“Oh, come on, get real...”***

is, in fact, the photographer’s real maxim. In other words, Moriyama is clearly most committed to his own desire. The snapshot epitomizes this desire. A spur-of-the-moment shot that he takes the instant that he feels the urge. Point and shoot, point and shoot. Simply, without thinking.

But, of course, there is another Daido Moriyama: the Moriyama who in *Sunnanachi* stares into the viewfinder lost in thought, the Moriyama who on our highway photo-shoot feels compelled to interrogate what he is doing. This Moriyama is definitely

not so simple, and is more open-ended.

In his scrupulous commitment to his desire, Moriyama never stops questioning the world he is shooting, never stops questioning the photographs he takes, and never stops questioning the self that is trying to take those photographs – even as he relentlessly continues to take them. The questions he asks go well beyond that tiny split second – the 1/250 of a second – in which the shutter opens and closes. In every shot he takes, in that one brief moment, there lies an eternity of questions, and conflicting points of view, and journeys back and forth. Small wonder then that he refuses to waste his time on caving frequently to common sense or convention.

In this book, I wanted to delve into Moriyama's views on snapshot photography through conversations with the man himself. If I've managed to represent Moriyama's thoughts, to represent the man and his views on photography, it is this stance of endless self-questioning. To engage in street photography with Moriyama is never stop questioning spaces, the world and of oneself – through the camera and through photography.

I know how Moriyama would say if I presented him with this conclusion. He would give a dismissive snort and say:

***“Oh, come on. Get real.”***

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### **DAIDO MORIYAMA**

Born in Osaka in 1938, Moriyama began his career as an independent photographer in 1964. In 1968 he published his first photo book *Nippon Gekijo Shashinchou (Japan: A Photo Theater)*, as one of the first people to use the avant-garde rough, blurry, out of focus aesthetic with which he and his associates subsequently became identified. Moriyama has published scores of books, continually expanding the parameters of photography as if to breaking point. He has had major exhibitions all over the world, including a major retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1999 (which travelled to the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York and other venues in the United States), and an exhibition at the Cartier Foundation in Paris in 2003.

## **TAKESHI NAKAMOTO**

Born in Kanagawa Prefecture in 1968, journalist and photo book publishing consultant Nakamoto has accompanied Daido Moriyama on several of his shoots, producing a number of his photo books, including *BUENOS AIRES, Si, Sao Paulo Light & Shadow*, and *NAKAJI* (all published by Kodansha Limited).

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### **Back cover text:**

Take a walk with legendary photographer **Daido Moriyama** while he explains his groundbreaking approach to street photography.