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Sugimoto's Middle Brow and the Collective Horizon

Aaron Francis Ward*

Abstract

Is art for everyone? Although attendance at art galleries has risen rapidly at the start of the 21st century, so too has the price of art, and the perception that art is an object of conspicuous consumption. The current paper presents a discussion of the possibilities that the photography of Hiroshi Sugimoto offers an artistic oeuvre that countenances the current state of the art market and is open to the aesthetic appreciation of a broader audience. As middlebrow mode of cultural production (Bourdieu 1996), photography is an artistic form that most people are familiar with, rendering it a medium that is broadly appreciable as a form of representation of common and cross-cultural experience. At the same time, photography can also satisfy the demands of highbrow cultural interpretation, meaning that it can act as a locus of community that provides access for a range of people to other forms of artistic culture. In particular, it is argued that Sugimoto's *Seascapes* present a particular body of work of a subject matter and style that can be appreciated by people of any sociocultural background. Further, the often-made comparisons between these images and Mark Rothko's multiform, colour-field paintings may offer viewers a bridge between middlebrow and highbrow culture, which has become, since Rothko's death, more conceptually and economically challenging for audiences to engage with and understand.

Keywords: Japanese Photography, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Aesthetics, Mark Rothko, Art

Introduction

Throughout the course of history, cultural production in the form of art has had relationships that have waxed and waned in its relevance to people occupying different strata in the social hierarchy (Shiner 2001). However, interest in the arts, as measured by attendance at art museums and galleries, has increased by an astonishing 59% in the past 30 years (Redmond 2019). This has occurred in tandem with the expansion of the global middle-class, mass-tourism and the market for luxury goods (MacCannell 1999; Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Riello and McNeil 2016). These trends have particular resonance in Japan, which has seen a rise in its international profile as a destination for arts and culture. In 2016 Yayoi Kusama was also the only visual artist listed in Time magazine's most influential people of the year (Embuscado 2016), and in 2017, Kusama's *My Eternal Soul* exhibition was the most successful exhibition by attendance for a living artist with over half a million visitors in just three months (Sharpe and Silva 2018). (See Figure 1 below.) Other Japanese artists have also benefitted from this increased attention towards the local art market, including the teamLab Museum in Tokyo, which last year surpassed Amsterdam's stalwart, audience favourite, van Gogh Museum as the most popular single-artist destination in the world (Rea 2019).

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Figure 1 My Eternal Soul exhibition (2017), Yayoi Kusama (© the author)

Although popular engagement with art has increased in the 21st century, this is part of a process of social change that has been ongoing since at least the European Renaissance. In the Baroque period, when societies began to become more liberalized, there was a concomitant shift towards the production of art that appealed to a wider audience (Shiner 2001). This was perhaps exemplified in the Catholic paintings of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, which were used to broaden the appeal of the Catholic church to the lower tiers of society, by interpolating the suffering of the peasantry into the passion of Christian mythology (Schultze 2009; Langdon 2000). The trend of broadening art's appeal continued, particularly for religious works, until the 19th century when the Kantian ideal of *art-for-arts-sake* became institutionalized as legitimate culture, and people further down the social hierarchy began to be more deliberately excluded from artistic appreciation (Shiner 2001; Hughes 2010). By the turn of the 20th century, art museums and galleries had become more exclusive, particularly when modern art forms, such as Dadaism, began to critique the traditional role of beauty in art through seminal works, such as Duchamp's (1918) production-line urinal, found-object artwork *Fountain* (Scruton 2009). The trend of conceptualizing modern art and intellectualizing the act of artistic appreciation, meant that art more increasingly came to be seen as a central index of social competence well into the twentieth century. Even the 1960s advent of Pop Art, which initially saw the social elevation of a popular aesthetic, quickly became opportunistic and cynical as demand on the market for Pop Art rose.

As late-capitalist societies have developed, they have progressed towards modes of cultural exchange that are geared to more refined liberalized and individuated conceptions cultural production (Deneen 2019). The primacy placed on individual autonomy has, on the one hand, diversified immanent notions aesthetic experience, but has on the other alienated more conservative and less economically empowered sections of society. By the time the twentieth century came to a close, artistic culture had begun to undermine its own aegis by making a pivotal and paradigmatic shift towards art as primarily conceptualized (Greenberg 1992; Goldie and Schellekens 2009). Central to this development was a challenge to beauty's "universal, natural, given or singular" nature that effectively and completely annexed popular aesthetic sensibilities (Beech 2009, 12; Bourdieu 1993, 1984). This was complicated by

the increasing inclination of cultural gatekeepers to view, with suspicion, established social perceptions in art as politically loaded. This has ultimately come to mean that “private, subjective likes and dislikes [have become] inextricably caught up in social codes and social divisions.” (Beech 2009, 15) Consequently, many people have become encouraged to be suspicious of beauty, and this has disallowed people the elevated experience it once was (Beech 2009).

It is not just that perceptions of what constitutes art have changed, but also its prevalence as a surrogate index of social status. In the context of the rapid expansion of the market for luxury goods (Riello and McNeil 2016); increased perceptions of art as a financial, rather than cultural, investment (Kinsella 2018); and the explosion of conspicuous consumption through online influencer culture (Hund and McGuigan 2019), the art market has ultimately turned on its communal roots (Dutton 2009). If we consider the 2017 high-profile sale of da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi*, for a record USD\$450m, as well as the publicity afforded to Banksy's (2018) self-shredding screen print *Girl with Balloon/Love Is in the Bin* (USD\$1.37m) and Maurizio Cattelan's (2019) infinitely fungible, banana-duct-taped-to-wall *Comedian* (USD\$150,000) (Estiler 2020; Shoot 2018), it is easy to see how many people have become alienated from the cultural, communal and spiritual connections that art, for many, once offered (Scruton 2007, 2001).

Photography as a Sociocultural Middle Ground

For all of the ideological advances of modern art, it often seems to lack in its capacity to connect to tradition and broader society (Scruton 2001). The post-Kantian aesthetic of conceptual art places particular interpretive demands on the viewer that can be off-putting to a wide range of people (Bourdieu 1984, 1993; Hodge 2012). These demands mean that a large portion of modern art lacks the compelling immediateness that Arthur Schopenhauer believed was necessary to engage audiences. For Schopenhauer, the paradigmatic aesthetic experience is an immediate one where the viewer is able to lose themselves in the work and become “rivetted to the realities before him” (Vasalou 2017, 30). Further, as Friedrich Schiller implies, “[f]ulfilment does not come through purpose, [...] but only when purpose is set aside [and] the paradigm of fulfilment is the aesthetic experience [of] the disinterested contemplation of *appearances*, the self-conscious alertness to *the presented meaning* of things.” (Scruton 2007, 18) For these aesthetes, art that has a wide social reach, is art which, in modern terms, suspends the of disbelief of the common viewer and in doing so engenders sympathy towards its subject matter (Walton 1980; Vasalou 2017).

If art in the 21st century is to communicate more broadly to people, what is needed is a medium and a subject matter that can facilitate a broad consensus in people's aesthetic preferences. One such medium may be photography. Although photography is intimately connected to many of the negative aspects of modern consumer culture (Hund and McGuigan 2019), it is difficult to imagine any other medium (perhaps even those connected to necessity, such as cookery) rivalling photography in terms of its breadth of participation and production. With the advent of smartphones, most people have two-to-three cameras on them at any given time, and are at least tacitly aware of the constraints and formal qualities of photographic technique. Further, since the early 19th century, the number of images produced has increased exponentially, indicating that photography is a medium that vast numbers of people are capable of and willing to engage with¹. In spite of its technical constraints, photography is nonetheless grounded

¹ The introduction of digital photography in the late 1990s and social media at the start of the 21st century have only magnified this. By 2020, an estimated 1.4 trillion images will be produced, the majority of which come from smartphones (Carrington 2020; Saracco 2016).

in the immediate and concrete, because photographs are built from people's direct experience and the demands of everyday life (Adams 2005).

Yet, photography is not without its problems and, like jazz, as a legitimate art form has had a mixed reception since Louis Daguerre and Nicéphore Niépce exposed the first permanent photographic image in the 1830s (Shiner 2001). Although early photographers, such as Edward Weston and Edward Steichen, dedicated themselves to creating photographs as fine art, it was not until the early 20th century that photography was accepted into art museums (Shiner 2001). Nonetheless, photography is still considered a lesser art and valued considerably less than more traditional artforms, such as painting, as determined by the market values shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Top Five Sales Prices in Millions for Painting and Photography

Painting				Photography		
	Title	Artist	\$US	Title	Artist	\$US
1.	Salvator Mundi (1605)	Leonardo da Vinci	450m	Phantom (2011)	Peter Lik	6.5m
2.	Interchange (1955)	Willem de Kooning	300m	Rhein II (1999)	Andreas Gursky	4.4m
3.	The Card Players (1892)	Paul Cézanne	250m	Untitled #96 (1981)	Cindy Sherman	3.9m
4.	Nafea Fan Ipoipo (1892)	Paul Gauguin	210m	To Her Majesty (1973)	Gilbert & George	3.8m
5.	Number 17A (1948)	Jackson Pollock	200m	Dead Troops Talk (1992)	Jeff Wall	3.7m

Sources: Beale (2017); (Ricketts 2014)

The derogation of the value of photography as an artistic medium stems in no small part from its democratization (Bourdieu 1996). The advent of cheap portable cameras, such as the Kodak Brownie in the post-war era, significantly increased participation in photography, while at the same time eroding its symbolic value. The ease of access to photography, its low cost, the relative lack of time taken to acquire and execute relatively proficient photographic technique and its typical use as a medium of collective identity², mean that as a form of cultural production it is more likely to be taken up by working- and lower- middle-class people. This has led to photography being perceived, on the hierarchy of cultural legitimacy, as a distinctly *middlebrow art* (Bourdieu 1996). Further, thanks to social media platforms, such as Instagram, photography has become an almost invasive mode of participation in late-modern

² Particularly the use of photography for family portraits and to create souvenirs of social occasions, such as weddings, birthdays and holidays.

consumerist society (Larsen, Luna, and Peracchio 2004; Schmitt and Simonson 1997; Berger 2009; Rose 2012).³

Consequently, photography is often not considered *serious art* by conservative critics, such as Roger Scruton (2001). This is argued to be because, even though a photograph may take on the subject matter of fine art, such as the landscape, portrait or still life, the photographic image proper is inevitably perceived by the viewer as being indistinct from its referent (the subject contained within the image). In contrast, the production of, say, painting does not *rely* on the existence of its subject matter – and is thus seen as the realization of the painter's *intention*, and it is that which facilitates the recognition of a given painting's subject matter. From this perspective, embodied in the painted image is not only the subject matter itself, but also the artist's perception of it. Therefore, the value of a well-executed painting lies not in its replication of reality, but rather in the capacity for it to act as a 'conventional or even quasi-linguistic act which stands in a semantic relation – a relation of reference – to its subject [that] presents a visual appearance only as a means of fulfilling a referential function.' (Scruton 2001, 124). As such, the painted artwork is not just seen as an image of a referent, but also an advent of the artist's perceptive and executive skill (Shiner 2001). It is these "properties of the medium [that] influence not only what is seen in the picture but also the way it is seen" and the value it is ascribed in the field of cultural production (Scruton 2001, 123; Bourdieu 1993, 1984). In contrast, the relationship between the subject matter of a photograph and what it represents is perceived to be *causal* – the image relies entirely on its referent's existence in the world. Consequently, the photographic image is devalued as a mechanical execution, rather than the expression of an artistic intention (Bourdieu 1996).

In spite of the many criticisms leveled against photography as legitimate art, as Table 1 indicates, it is nonetheless becoming more valued by the art market. Further, the appeal and availability of photography means that it is one area of the art market that has remained conceptually and practically accessible to a broad audience. This in turn makes photography a potential bridge across an increasingly widening social-aesthetic divide.

Photography in Japan

Japan was an early adopter of photography, and many Japanese photographers have sought to elevate photography's status as an artform through the development of technique and style. Their efforts have also included world-leading excellence in the production of photo books, as well as experimenting with printing techniques, such as Sakiko Nomura's (2016) *Rencontres d'Arles International Photography Festival* awarding-winning *Another Black Darkness*. Other photographers have sought to integrate photography into established Japanese cultural fields, such as literature and the performing arts, as can be seen in Eikoh Hosoe's (1963) seminal *Barakei* works with internationally-celebrated Japanese author Yukio Mishima, or Nomura's (2017) collaboration with renowned Noh actor, Koshiro Matsumoto. Further, photographers including Daido Moriyama have taken to the juxtaposition of photographic

³ A careful examination of Figure 1, shows that a significant aspect of the participation of the audience at the *My Eternal Soul* exhibition is the *photographic opportunity*. Not one of the audience members is actually looking directly at the artwork. Instead, through the inevitable sharing of the photographic image they are all interpolating themselves into Kusama's pumpkin sculpture via the cameras on their mobile phones. In doing so, they are appropriating some of the cultural capital reified in Kusama's work (Bourdieu 1993).

images with short stories by well-known Japanese authors, such as Osamu Dazai (Moriyama 2014). Some Japanese photographers have also taken to fine-art photography including Kenro Izu (2018) and Masao Yamamoto (2019) or less-commercialized records of haute-couture, such as can be seen in Takay's (2020) collaboration with avant-garde designer, Yohji Yamamoto.

However, one Japanese photographer, Hiroshi Sugimoto, has perhaps broadened the appeal of Japanese photography in a manner reminiscent of the works of the European Bauhaus and De Stijl movements, by integrating everyday and collective life experiences into his work. While Sugimoto's work is in the tradition of fine art photography, and is often reified with a sense of Japanese aesthetic, his images are nonetheless enmeshed with Western thought (Zweite 2013). Because Sugimoto's images are taken from all over the world and are of subjects recognizable to a broad audience, they are suffused with a *platonic* sense of beauty that Armin Zweite (2013, 6) suggests have an "...arresting beauty and aura cannot fail to leave a lasting impression on all those who see them."

Sugimoto was born in Tokyo, Japan in 1948, and educated at Rikkyo (St. Paul's) University, before emigrating to the New York in the mid-1970s. His contributions to the establishment of photography as a legitimate artform have been recognized widely. He received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts from Parsons School of Design in 2000 and has been the recipient of numerous other accolades including the 2001 Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography (the highest distinction in the field), as well as being admitted as to the position of *Officier de L'ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 2013. Sugimoto has also held exhibitions at some of the most distinguished art institutions around the world including The Carnegie Museum of Art (1991), the Museum of Contemporary Art (1995 & 2003), Kunsthalle Basel (1995), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2000) and the Palais de Tokyo (2014) (Sugimoto 2020).

Sugimoto broadens the appeal of his photography by drawing on common concerns. In particular, time is the central theme of Sugimoto's photography, which resonates because time is a central feature of engagement with culture that establishes a continuity between tradition and modernity (Scruton 2007, 2001). For Sugimoto, time is perspicacious in its role in the conservation of memory and the facilitation of a sense of connectedness to community (Sugimoto 2012). The notional ebbing and flowing of time as an ocean that connects us to our collective past, present and future, has been observed in a diversity of cultures from Africa to Japan (Mita 2019). Although photographs are often seen as instantaneous snapshots of reality, this is not necessarily so. In his landmark text *Camera Lucida* Barthes (2006) argues that, in a world overloaded with photographs, particular images are reified with significance to the extent that they *advene* (reach out) to the viewer by connecting the past to the present. Barthes argues that it is a *punctum* (a piercing detail within an image) specific to a given viewer that connects them to their own experience and personal understanding with the photographic subject matter. However, for Sugimoto, it is the atemporality of the *studium* (the subject matter) of an image that advenes and animates the beholder to a suffused aesthetic experience.

Sugimoto began his oeuvre at the endpoint of modernist art (Mita 2019), and his works are primarily concerned with long-exposure, landscape and still life photography. As a child, he became fascinated with the scientific method, and his photographic execution exudes an empirical rigor (Sugimoto 2012). This, in turn, is reflected in a body of works that are conservative in their approach—a likely reflection of growing up in a conservative family and undertaking a liberal-arts, Protestant-affiliated *gakuin* (kindergarten to university) education (Sugimoto 2012). Sugimoto's conservatism can also be seen in his preference for using a custom-built, 19th century-style, eight-by-ten inch, large-format box camera.

Working this way gives Sugimoto's resulting works a formal quality akin to historical, representational painting (See 2018; Brougher 2012). Sugimoto's style of photography is generally viewed as a form of photographic minimalism. Mita (2019) describes this approach as a "[r]eductivist passion [and an] aesthetic urge to strip away and eliminate, to reject the superfluous and excessive" (Mita 2019, 7) that stands in marked contrast to contemporary conceptual and popular art. Although Sugimoto often refers to his formative experiences growing up in post-war Japan and discusses the connection between his work and Japanese culture (e.g. Sugimoto 2012), Sugimoto's reductivism and choice of studium do not particularly lend his works a substantive Japanese character.

To illustrate how Sugimoto's works may appeal to a wider audience, and in doing so, avoid much of the divisiveness of contemporary artistic culture, some discussion will be made of Sugimoto's perhaps best-known series of photographic images: *Seascapes* (Sugimoto 2019b). (See Figure 2)

Figure 2 Seascapes 1. Caribbean Sea, Jamaica, 1980, 2. Ligurian Sea, Savio, 1993, 3. Baltic Sea, Rügen, 1996 © Hiroshi Sugimoto (retrieved from Sugimoto 2019a)

Sugimoto's affinity for the ocean came from a childhood experience in which he recalls how his "first view of the ocean came as an awakening... Captivated by this startling yet oddly familiar scene, I felt I was gazing on a primordial landscape." (Sugimoto 2012, 12) The Seascapes series are an ongoing project of images taken from a variety of locations around the world, from Scandinavia, to Japan, North America and New Zealand. When exhibited, Sugimoto's Seascape images are usually printed in large-scale format. (See Figure 3 on page 2.) These seascapes are uniform, large-format photographs of the sea (and occasionally lakes) in which the horizon precisely bisects the sky and sea. Each image differs formally from others only by the length of exposure, time of day and atmospheric conditions. Although concerned with the same studium, and largely devoid of puncta, these changes in circumstantial context affect each image formally leading to at times clearly delineated, tectonic images, and at others more painterly, impressionistic ones (c.f. Wölfflin 2015; Zweite 2013). However, regardless of the presence or absence of salient details, such as clouds or waves, none of the images contain landmarks or any other context-identifying features (Wittmann 2009)—a technique that contrasts with other contemporary, long-exposure, landscape photographers, such as Michael Kenna (c.f. 2015). The absence of puncta in the Seascapes images weakens their representational nature, leaving the viewer with an image that they can recognize, but not one that they can attribute to a specific experience (Wittmann 2009).

Figure 3 Hiroshi Sugimoto, Stars exhibition, Mori Art Museum (2020) © the author

While Sugimoto's technique is at its fundament a form of abstract and conceptual art (Zweite 2013), it in no way relies on the kinds of irony or inside joke typical of contemporary art (Scruton 2001; Goldie and Schellekens 2009). Instead, his particular use of framing and long exposure broadens the Seascapes appeal by creating a "rupture" between the studium and the resulting photograph, wherein "Sugimoto brings the image close to the real but stops just shy of persuasion." (Brougher 2012, 20) The resulting effect is not a representational, related-to-the-world *snapshot* of time, but rather an atemporal image that waxes and wanes in how it can be perceived (Wittmann 2009; Barthes 2006). While the images lend an air of familiarity and verisimilitude, they are not specific to the memories of any given person, and instead appeal to a collective *family of resemblances* (c.f. Wittgenstein 1958). In this respect, through their peculiar sublime character, Sugimoto's Seascapes facilitate the kind of aestheticization advocated by Schopenhauer and Schiller by engaging the viewer without recourse to artistic insight or the demands of Kantian contemplation (c.f. Vasalou 2017; Scruton 2007; Hughes 2010).

Sugimoto's artistic insight does not rely on technique alone. His non-culturally specific choice of subject matter is central to the aesthetic appeal of his work because it is ultimately relatable. The ocean is a source of many cross-cultural traditions, in which water is seen to support and enfold the world, making it foundational to a multiplicity of religious rites and rituals (Mita 2019). As a photographic subject matter, the ocean advenes spiritual significance and "by virtue of its size and apparent emptiness, invites our attention... [It] is too vast to understand and too awesome to avoid [and] offers a final liberation from human scale." (Adams 2005, 92) The temporal and cultural acentricity of the sea's limitless horizon means that Sugimoto's images do not require any preexisting cultural acumen to appreciate them (Mita 2019). Sugimoto also makes a more direct juxtaposition between the atemporal abstraction created by his Seascapes, and our concrete and contextualized experience of the ocean at the recently completed Enoura Observatory in Odawara. As part of his architectural design, a special 100m long gallery of Seascapes photographs is cantilevered out over the Sagami Bay, from which guests can walk outside to the same view represented in Sugimoto's celebrated images. (See Figure 4 on page 12)

Figure 4 Enoura Observatory (2019) (© the author)

The accessibility of Sugimoto's Seascapes series also may act as a bridge for many people to engage with established highbrow art. The Seascapes have often been likened to the multiform, colour-field paintings of the late-modernist painter, Mark Rothko. The most well-known of Rothko's multiforms is *No. 14* (1960) (on page 13), which is part of the permanent collection at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 5 Mark Rothko, *No. 14* (1960), San Francisco MOMA © Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko

A selection of Rothko's paintings and Sugimoto's Seascapes were recently juxtaposed in an exhibition and publication through Pace Gallery in London (Pace Gallery 2012). Rothko and Sugimoto are both considered philosophical artists, who are concerned with universal notions of human emotional existence beyond the immediate moment. In these respects, Rothko's paintings can also help us to better understand our collective response to Sugimoto's Seascapes. Formally speaking, these works have a

great deal in common. Both are comprised of powdery, emulsive, rectangular fields of varying degrees of tonal intensity and contrast. These formal elements roughly approximate the limits of human visual potential, draw the viewer into the image (c.f. Rothko 2017), and metaphorically connote collective perceptive experience (Shiff 2012; Rothko 2015, 2017). While for Rothko, the choice of relative sharpness between the borders of the rectangular fields in each composition defines the acuity of emotional experience, these same formal distinctions in Sugimoto's photographs are a consequence of a priori decisions to shoot under particular atmospheric and lighting conditions. The presence of cloud, fog and wind and time of day affect the resulting images and are commensurate with our lived experiences in nature (Wittmann 2009; Shiff 2012). Although somewhat different in concept and execution, both sets of works express abstract, yet fundamental, human emotional and cross-cultural experience (Shiff 2012; Rothko 2015).

Conclusion

Regardless of the representational nature of Sugimoto's work, to paraphrase Christopher Rothko (2015), the reductivism of both oeuvre offer us an escape from the self-indulgences and excesses of the modern art market, exemplified in the kitsch excesses of the art-market darling, Jeff Koons. By presenting us with stripped-back experiences which we can all relate to, Sugimoto, like Rothko, is asking us to appreciate, reflect upon and share those basic things we all experience. Perhaps one of the greatest achievements of Sugimoto's photographic works in contemporary society is to help us more directly appreciate the world around us and our shared place in it. They also present, as Beech (2009) suggests, an opportunity to reconnect with beauty in a way that does not endorse a particular cultural authority. Further, if we might borrow the ideas of Basil Bernstein (2003), we could say that Sugimoto's photography satisfies the criteria of both a restricted and elaborated artistic code that is able to serve both concrete and abstract, contemplative modes of aesthetic engagement. In the words of Adams (2005, 105 - 106), beauty in photography can lead us away from the distractions of everyday life, and give "us a new understanding of and tolerance for what previously seemed anarchic and threatening." Sugimoto also reminds us that the sublime nature of experience, as presented in art, does not need to be wholly abstracted, overtly political nor cynical in order to represent and connect disparate cultures. Finally, as Christopher Rothko says of his father's work, it is the task of the artist "to fight through the natural human tendency towards complacency, superficiality and hedonism." (Rothko 2015, 149) Hopefully, Sugimoto's Seascapes are a means to Rothko's end through a medium that can be appreciated by everyone.

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