

Fracturing Realities: Staging Buddhist Art in Domon Ken's Photobook *Murōji* (1954)

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Against the backdrop of the immediate postwar, photographer Domon Ken (1909–1990) embarked on a journey to the Murōji Temple in Nara Prefecture to capture its Buddhist treasures. The body of work was published in his photobook *Murōji* (1954), and has often been interpreted as a nostalgic spectacle that romanticizes Japan's Buddhist heritage for mass consumption. Yet, a close examination of the images and their arrangement in the photobook reveals Domon's indifference to reconstructing an accessible past. Contrary to the resurgence of Zen Buddhism in the 1950s, Domon's project absconded from any politicized attempt that sought to authenticate the "tradition" or spiritual "essence" of Japan. While beholders are granted with unprecedented proximity to the icons, Domon's interest in tactility and his manipulation of scale paradoxically render these statues illegible and unfamiliar. Equally significant is his juxtaposition of legible and abstract close-ups, which shatters the past into incongruent fragments. The photobook *Murōji* thereby raises questions that continue to resonate today: what is the role of documentary photography in postwar Japanese culture? In what ways can photography function as a metaphorical ground upon which competing ideas of nation, cultural memory, and subjectivity are mediated?

Keywords: Domon Ken, photobook, documentary, realism, postwar photography, avant-garde, New Objectivity, Buddhism, cultural heritage, pilgrimage

Introduction

Historians of modern art have often been drawn to the narratives of the avant-garde, yet such an approach often leaves little room for a nuanced reading of works that eschew overt radicalism. Consider, for instance, the oeuvre of Japanese photographer Domon Ken 土門拳 (1909–1990). Best known for his "absolutely unstaged" (*zettai hienshutsu* 絶対非演出) style, Domon championed the genre of documentary photography whose sociopolitical

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currency is predicated on its claim to objectivity.¹ However, the reading of Domon's works solely through the lens of documentary realism has adversely affected the reception of his oeuvre, which is often discussed either separately or antithetically in relation to those of his younger contemporaries in current scholarship. Such a narrative of generational clashes, which positions Domon's works in the conservative faction against which postwar avant-garde movements were defined, may appear to be rich in meaning, but it problematically glosses over the productive dialogues among photographers from the 1950s to the 1960s. Through a close reading of the photobook *Murōji* 室生寺 (1954), this article connects Domon's oeuvre with the expanding discourses on realism in postwar Japan. I argue that the staging of anachronism in the photobook and its refusal to offer a totalizing narrative foreground Domon's critical reflection on the notion of pure objectivity in photography. Moreover, I show how Domon recast the photobook as a receptacle of heterogeneous visions by highlighting reality perception as innately fractured rather than coherent. The case of *Murōji* therefore demonstrates a different trajectory of postwar Japanese photography, one that centered on stylistic resonances rather than antagonism.

1) The Crisis of Documentary

Named after an eighth-century Buddhist temple in present-day Nara Prefecture, *Murōji* opens with the natural scenery of Mount Murō 室生山 (figure 1).² Meandering through the Uda River, the viewer proceeds to the long stone pathway leading up to the temple's Golden Hall (figure 2). To heighten the sense of immediacy, the next pages situate the viewer at the corner of the edifice (figure 3). Its low vantage point—roughly at the level of the raised altar for the sculptural ensemble at the back—appears to mimic how one would approach the sacred space from its side entrance in a kneeling position. Perusing further, one encounters two of the twelve guardian figures that are removed from the altar and individually framed like artworks in glass cases (figure 4). With their dramatic poses, exaggerated facial expressions, and billowing draperies, these statues convincingly declare their presence as if they have just manifested themselves before one's eyes. Consider, for example, the kind of gestural dynamism of the guardian on the right when he spirals his legs. Absorbed in contemplation, his sidelong gaze seems to acknowledge the viewer while playfully denying any intent at communication.

However, what appears to be a conventional photographic survey of temple treasures gradually morphs into an exercise of free association. After the aforementioned guardian figures, the viewer is confronted with provocative juxtapositions and incongruous jumps between images. Instead of guiding the viewer from one icon to another, the photobook abruptly transits from the statues in the Golden Hall to the seated Buddha in the adjacent Maitreya Hall (figures 5, 6, and 7). Spatially, the transition is at odds with the actual layout of the temple complex. Temporally, the leap is anachronistic, considering that medieval statues are showcased before those from earlier times. To amplify the sense of disorientation,

1 The term *zettai hienshutsu* appeared frequently in Domon's writings during the 1950s. See Domon 1953. Note that major photographic magazines of this period, such as *Camera* カメラ and *Nippon Camera* 日本カメラ, often mixed romanized and *katakana* titles together, and hence following Julia Adeney Thomas, I retain the romanized title *Camera* rather than *Kamera* (for this reason I have left these as they are in the refs.). See Thomas 2008, p. 371.

2 The English version, with essays translated by Roy Andrew Miller, was published in the same year.



Figure 1. Domon Ken. *Murōji*, 1954, pp. 10–11.
Reproduced with permission of the Domon Ken Museum of Photography.

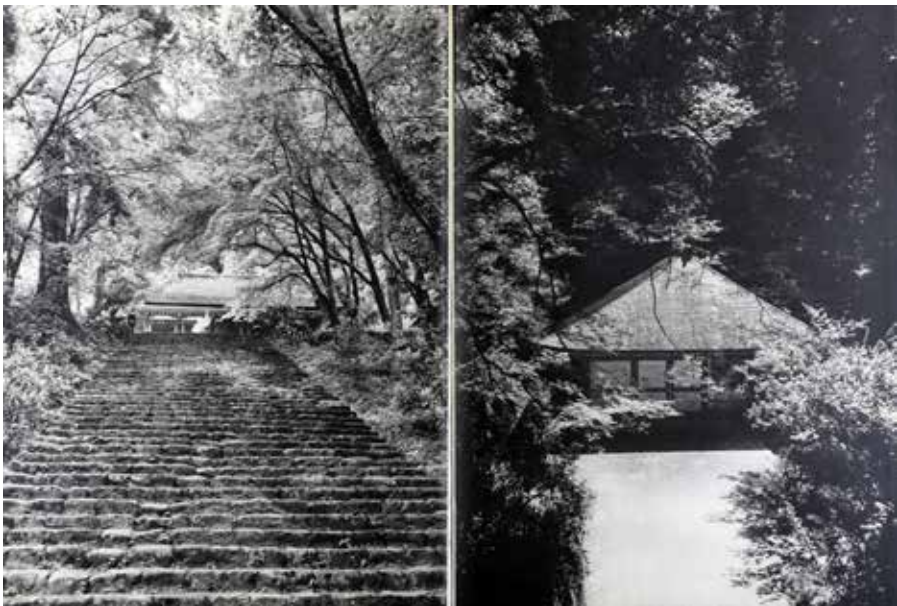


Figure 2. Domon Ken. *Murōji*, 1954, pp. 14–15.
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Figure 3. Domon Ken. *Murōji*, 1954, pp. 18–19. Reproduced with permission of the Domon Ken Museum of Photography.



Figure 4. Domon Ken. *Murōji*, 1954, pp. 30–31. Reproduced with permission of the Domon Ken Museum of Photography.



Figure 5. Domon Ken. *Murōji*, 1954, pp. 36–37. Reproduced with permission of the Domon Ken Museum of Photography.



Figure 6. Domon Ken. *Murōji*, 1954, pp. 38–39. Reproduced with permission of the Domon Ken Museum of Photography.



Figure 7. Domon Ken. *Murōji*, 1954, pp. 40–41. Reproduced with permission of the Domon Ken Museum of Photography.



Figure 8. Domon Ken. *Murōji*, 1954, pp. 48–49. Reproduced with permission of the Domon Ken Museum of Photography.



Figure 9. Domon Ken. *Murōji*, 1954, pp. 52–53. Reproduced with permission of the Domon Ken Museum of Photography.

the trajectory of the viewer's journey becomes increasingly ambiguous thereafter, with more cropped and abstract close-ups of lesser-known statues (figure 8) intersecting with those of natural surroundings and other edifices of the temple complex (figure 9). While the photobook format invites the viewer to interpret the images sequentially, the disjointed journey shatters the past into an array of historical fragments, and thereby renders the temple's heritage as an open-ended narrative that impedes any definitive reading.

What drew Domon to Buddhist art, and why the Murōji temple in particular? To contextualize the photobook *Murōji*, it should be noted that the work was produced against the backdrop of the resurgence of documentary photography (*hōdō shashin* 報道写真) in the 1950s.³ The genre first gained currency in Japan during the interwar period when Domon began his career under the tutelage of Natori Yonosuke 名取洋之助 (1910–1962) in 1935.⁴ Dissatisfied with the contrivance of salon pictorialism that was in vogue during the 1920s, Domon was drawn to documentary photography for its commitment to sociopolitical truth. Yet, the onset of total war soon made it evident that even this supposedly objective genre was prone to manipulation by the authorities in their effort to legitimize colonial expansion.

3 According to Jonathan M. Reynolds, the critic Ina Nobuo 伊奈信男 (1898–1978) and the photographer Natori Yonosuke are to be credited with coining the term *hōdō shashin* (*hōdō* meaning “to report”) as the Japanese equivalent for documentary. However, the usage of the term was never uniform. For instance, the photographer Hamaya Hiroshi 濱谷浩 (1915–1999) preferred *kiroku shashin* 記録写真 (*kiroku* meaning “to document” or “to record”) for photobooks on subjects associated with anthropology and cultural geography. See Reynolds 2015, pp. 8–10; Weisenfeld 2000, pp. 751–54.

4 From 1935 to 1939, Domon worked for Japan Studio (Nippon Kōbō 日本工房, which became Chūō Kōbō 中央工房 in 1936) under the tutelage of Natori Yonosuke. After a personal conflict with Natori, Domon began to work as a commissioned photographer. In the 1950s, he was invited to serve as a judge for the monthly photography contest hosted by the magazine *Camera*. See Domon 1954, p. 14. For a comprehensive account of Domon's life and career, see Kai 2012, pp. 109–12; and Mainichi Shinbunsha 1995, pp. 180–85.

As a matter of fact, the documentary style was widely employed in propaganda magazines and films that promoted the puppet-state of Manchukuo 満州国 (1932–1945). Attempting to mask, if not neutralize, the social-political hierarchies in the colonies, editors saturated these propaganda materials with images of happy farmers, factory workers, and bustling cityscapes.⁵ While it remains unclear whether or not Domon was coerced into contributing to wartime propaganda, his works were featured in photomontages designed for wartime murals and in the multilingual propaganda magazine *NIPPON* (1934–1944) that was edited by none other than Natori.⁶

To redeem the image of documentary photography, Domon turned his lens to pressing social issues in postwar Japan during the 1950s. For instance, in the photobook *Hiroshima* ヒロシマ (1958), he documented the victims of the atomic bombings. Following the convention of photojournalism, Domon's *Hiroshima* paired each image with a descriptive caption to emphasize the author's impartial role in recording unmediated facts.⁷ In another series named *Chikuhō no kodomo tachi* 筑豊の子どもたち (The children of Chikuhō, 1960), Domon investigated a coal-mining town in Fukuoka Prefecture in which war orphans suffered from extreme pollution and poverty. Printed on rough paper and priced at only a hundred yen, the photobook contributed to a mass fundraising campaign for the suffering community, the better to actualize Domon's goal of using art to effect social change.⁸ Subsequently, his effort was replicated by admirers such as Kimura Ihei 木村伊兵衛 (1901–1974) who began to capture beggars, prostitutes, and other socially marginalized groups across Japan. The sudden proliferation of these images in national photographic contests led critics of the time, in a somewhat derogatory manner, to typecast works by Domon and his followers as “beggar photography” (*kojiki shashin* 乞食写真).⁹

The publication of *Murōji* coincided not only with the resurgence of documentary photography, but also with the growing popularity of ethnographic studies in postwar Japan.¹⁰ As Jonathan M. Reynolds has argued, the return to the ethnographic was in part triggered by the large-scale migration of young people from rural areas to Tokyo and other city centers in the early postwar period.¹¹ The gradual dissolution of rural communities thereby operated simultaneously with the representation of them as the token of a pristine, unchanging past threatened by the influx of foreign culture. The phenomenon is best exemplified by the discourse of *furusato* 故郷 (“hometown”), which homogenized Japan's variegated pasts and regional cultures into mass-manufactured, readily consumable

5 Shepherdson-Scott 2012, pp. 92–99. See also Shepherdson-Scott 2018. For earlier use of photography in Japanese expansionist policies, see Odo 2009.

6 Weisenfeld 2000, p. 774. For a summary of Natori's career and the founding of Nippon Kōbō, see Germer, 2011.

7 For a comprehensive analysis of different photographic strategies that engage with the trauma of the atomic bombings, see Merewether 2006. For an analysis of Domon Ken's *Hiroshima*, see Felten 2011.

8 Kai 2012, p. 161.

9 Thomas 2008, p. 373. Tanaka Masao 田中雅夫 (1912–1987), the editor-in-chief of *Nippon Camera*, even lamented about the absurdity of how Japanese photography was “haunted” by tragic images of beggars and prostitutes. See Tanaka 1953. For the full translated text by Ryan Holmberg, see Chong et al. 2013, pp. 50–53.

10 Domon's interest in Buddhist art began as early as 1939 when he first visited Murōji with the art critic Mizusawa Sumio 水沢澄夫 (1905–1975). See Tseng 2009, p. 114.

11 Reynolds 2015, pp. 10–23.

images or products that fulfilled a collective yearning for the cultural commons.¹² The visual culture of *furusato* relied heavily on photography to mask its artificiality and so authenticate the rural hinterlands of Japan as exotic yet familiar.¹³ Here, the architectural discourse of Japanese vernacular houses known as *minka* 民家 warrants specific attention. The subject garnered significant interest among Japanese intellectuals in the immediate postwar, which culminated in the ten-volume photobook series *Nihon no minka* 日本の民家 (Japanese traditional country houses) that was published from 1957 to 1959. In this series, the photographer Futagawa Yukio 二川幸夫 (1932–2013) traversed remote communities in Japan to document the forms, materials, and construction processes of vernacular houses. Futagawa's photobook rendered the rural edifices as though they possessed the modernist architectural concepts of functionalism, sustainability, and the rebuilding of the communal, ideals that countered the negative impact of urbanization. In doing so, Futagawa's lens transformed these rural hinterlands from cultural backwaters to the last frontier of the core communal values of premodern Japan.¹⁴

2) The Photobook as Experimental Site

The relationship between the *furusato* phenomenon and *Murōji*, however, appears tenuous at best. Domon gave no strong indication in his writings that he conceived the photobook as shorthand for traditional Japanese art.¹⁵ Any reading that reduces *Murōji* to a nostalgic spectacle thus fails to account for Domon's participation in the broader debate on photographic realism in the 1950s, which explored the heterogeneity of reality unbound by any one-sided representation. While current scholarship tends to credit Domon's younger contemporaries with reinventing documentary realism, a closer examination of the photographic circles from the 1950s through the 1960s suggests otherwise. It should be noted that both veteran and emerging photographers chose the medium of the photobook to experiment with new techniques and modes of narration.¹⁶ It is thus of paramount importance to recover the ways in which the photobook images communicate *sequentially* rather than as stand-alone works in the museum or gallery context. Put differently, it is the association between images that the viewer generates from perusing the photobook, rather than the meanings of individual images per se, that merits critical analysis.

Apart from the centrality it gives to sequential reading, *Murōji* departs from Domon's earlier works in its frequent insertion of close-ups that incite haptic engagement. Take, for

12 The immediate postwar witnessed intellectuals, architects, and photographers—most of them born and raised in the city—venturing into remote locales to chart the “traditional” ways of living. For instance, the 1955 photobook *Yukiguni* 雪国 (Snow country) by Hamaya Hiroshi staged an immersive journey into the Echigo areas of Niigata Prefecture. It lionized the northern villagers as upholding the endurance, work ethic, and communal spirit in premodern Japan. See Reynolds 2015, pp. 12–16 and Tunney 2015.

13 For the intersection of Japanese popular culture, local tourism, and the *furusato* phenomenon, see Robertson 1988; Greene 2016; and Solomon 2017, pp. 14–28.

14 Zimmerman and Zimmerman 2015.

15 It should be noted that the construction of national museums in Tokyo, Nara, and Kyoto since the 1870s contributed to the formation of the category of “Buddhist art” and its integration into the larger fabrics of Japanese art history and national identity. See Guth 1996; Aso 2013, pp. 20–35.

16 The recent boom in scholarship on Japanese photobooks is too numerous to be listed here. For major monographs and exhibition catalogues, see Kaneko et al. 2009; Keller and Maddox 2013; Nakamori and Pappas 2015; and Kaneko and Heiting 2017. Japanese photobooks are also discussed in Badger and Parr 2004–2014.

instance, the spread pages of the seated Buddha, whose profile is paired with an abstract image of its drapery composed of rhythmic curves in sharp tonal contrast (figure 5). As Stella Kramrisch argued, the vitality of an icon is expressed through the intersection of sight and touch, in which the sensuousness of the icon's body, posture, or drapery conjures one's psychological proximity to the sacred.¹⁷ In subsequent pages of the photobook, Domon dramatically showcases the statue's palms by rescaling them to match those of the viewer (figure 6). What is more, he metaphorically contorted these palms: originally, the left palm hovers above the icon's crossed legs in the wish-granting gesture, while the right palm in the mudra of fearlessness is drawn towards the icon's chest. In other words, Domon captures the palms from two different angles. But by aligning the frontal and the top down shots on the same plane, he uses the two-page spread to generate an unsettling feeling with both palms pressing forward and intruding into the viewer's space.¹⁸ The same play of viewing angles continues through subsequent pages, where Domon displays the icon's upturned feet from above, a vantage point that is hardly attainable on an actual visit (figure 7). Thrusting towards the surface of the page, the image appears to invite an almost forensic scrutiny of the statue's craftsmanship.

Yet, rather than granting the viewer access to the totality of these icons, the close-ups in *Murōji* metaphorically shatter them into incongruous fragments. Here, we return to the aforementioned statue of the Buddha. With its profile headshot juxtaposed with details of its drapery (figure 5), the icon appears to contemplate upon its fragmented self. The uncanny effect is amplified by the absence of any caption in the spread pages. Without textual description, the sequence of the icon's body parts prompts the viewer to wonder whether these images should be read independently or associatively. Domon's removal of descriptive details—and so of narrative clarity—affords him the creative license to juxtapose images in the photobook. In his toying with the tension between the part and the whole, Domon's images recall Mary Ann Doane's theory of the close-up, in which she argues that enlarged details often operate as autonomous entities in their refusal to disclose their referents.¹⁹ In this light, the images in *Murōji* appear to be ontologically suspended between objective reportage and subjective reverie.

3) An Alternative Realism

Domon's withholding of narrative clarity in *Murōji* underscores his critical reflection on the nature of documentary photography and its premise of objectivity. In his 1950 article “Hifu ni kansuru hasshō” 皮膚に関する八章 (Eight chapters about skin), Domon compares two modes of photographic practice with reference to the Japanese scrubbing brush (*tawashi* 束子):

Originally, the term *tawashi* denoted not only a kitchen utensil, but also a psychological entity (*shinriteki sonzaibutsu* 心理的存在物). The latter is evoked by the material property of *tawashi*. Although the camera lens might seem more effective than a pen or a paintbrush to visualize such property, if the photographer focuses on

17 Kramrisch 1946 (vol.1), p. 136. I am grateful to Nachiket Chanchani for introducing me to this source.

18 Alice Y. Tseng has pointed out the stylistic resemblance between images of distorted body parts from Domon's *Hiroshima* and that of the Buddhist statues in *Murōji*. See Tseng 2009, pp. 116–18.

19 Doane 2003, p. 90.

the merely visible, the image would only communicate the former meaning. Consider the historical significance of the New Objectivity Movement (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) that gained momentum in Germany at the end of the 1920s, which reflected upon the mechanical property of the camera itself... Although the movement was introduced to Japan during the early 1930s by photographers such as Kanamaru Shigene 金丸重嶺 (1900–1977), these advocates remained uncritical towards the meaning of their photographic motifs. Unfortunately, their works failed to transcend the kind of decorative formalism (*sōshokuteki keishiki shugi* 裝飾的形式主義) that was symptomatic of the period.²⁰

Invoking the history of the New Objectivity Movement, Domon differentiated two approaches to photography: the former strives to reproduce the physical appearance of things, while the latter penetrates through the visible to foreground their material and conceptual constituents. It should be noted that in the European context, New Objectivity Movement photography was widely deployed as a pedagogical tool in art-historical lessons.²¹ These images, which hovered between documentary and art photography, informed Domon's use of the photobook as a mode of intellectual inquiry. Here, his choice of Buddhist sculpture as subject proved ideal for his experimentation: the ubiquity of Buddhist icons in Japanese visual culture challenged Domon to render the all-too-familiar anew, an undertaking which aligned with the New Objectivity Movement's interrogation of what constitutes a sense of reality. Perhaps most indicative of such resonance are the close-ups of Buddhist statues in *Murōji*, which invite speculation not only on their materiality but also on their assembling processes. As Samuel C. Morse has pointed out, the rise of artisanal workshops in the Kamakura period (1185–1333) registered a major shift in sculptural making process from the single-woodblock method (*ichiboku zukuri* 一木造) to the joint-woodblock method (*yosegi zukuri* 寄木造).²² By crafting the body parts of an icon in separate woodblocks, the new technique allowed sculptors to produce Buddhist statues much faster and in larger scale, allowing additional time for experimentation with dramatic gestures and intricate details.²³ Seen in this light, the spread pages of *Murōji* can be regarded as an exercise in reverse engineering: by dissecting Buddhist statues into discrete body parts, the photobook invites the beholders to trace and mentally reenact the making of these icons.

Domon's interest in probing the hidden mechanism beneath the visible was a corollary of the larger debate surrounding realism during the 1950s, in which the claim to objectivity in literature and the arts came under increasing scrutiny.²⁴ The pivot of the debate is best encapsulated in the 1952 essay "Atarashii riarizumu no tame ni: Ruperūtāju no igi" 新しいリアリズムのために: ルポルターージュの意義 (For a new realism: The meaning of reportage)

20 Domon 1950, pp. 3–4.

21 Stetler 2011, pp. 283–89. For a discussion on how technology conditioned early art-historical education, see Nelson 2000.

22 Morse 2016.

23 Covaci 2016.

24 As Thomas and Kai have observed, there was no consistency in how "realism" was rendered in the Japanese language. It was expressed in photo magazines and contests with loan words such as *riarizumu* リアリズム or *rearizumu* レアリズム (based on the Japanese *katakana* rendition of the English word), or the Japanese *genjitsu shugi* 現実主義 and *shajitsu shugi* 写真主義. See Thomas 2008, p. 370; Kai 2012, pp. 114–18; Jesty 2014.

by the writer Abe Kōbō 安部公房 (1924–1993), who advocated a new mode of artistic expression for the heterogeneity of reality perception. As the author explicated:

The world as it is seen or felt can no longer be the reality today. At the very least, it is inadequate to express a constantly changing reality ... those confined within the framework of the quotidian, empirical, and naturalistic will come to realize for themselves that reportage is difficult—almost an impossible task. Those of you who consider reportage to be something easy or something that depicts experience will ultimately be strangled by it, only to face the choice of either abandoning it or dropping out. You should recognize that, far from being a trend that will serve to vindicate your position, reportage will call for your demise.²⁵

Against the formulaic naturalism in documentary reportage, Abe urged artists to capture facets of a world whose idiosyncrasies repudiate any one-sided representation.²⁶ In other words, since the search for pure objectivity is a futile exercise, it follows that any claim for a disinterested position in artistic expression is self-serving and deceptive. Instead of concealing subjectivity in art, the artist should foreground his or her role in mediating conflicting information from a world in flux. Abe's insight strongly resonated with similar debates in photographic circles. Given his active involvement in juried photography contests, Domon was no doubt aware of Abe's proposition.²⁷ As a matter of fact, in the 1953 roundtable discussion "Kindai shashin no shomondai" 近代写真の諸問題 (The problems of modern photography) organized by the magazine *Camera*, Domon argued that it was misleading to evaluate photography based on the subjective-objective divide, claiming that even though the photographer may have no intention of expressing himself or herself, "there's still always something that belongs to you" in the resultant works.²⁸

Domon's interest in transcending the subjective-objective binary is evident when we examine his photobooks in relation to those of his younger peers. It should be noted that key members of avant-garde groups such as VIVO ヴィヴォ (1959–1961) had worked with Domon and other documentary photographers. For instance, Domon collaborated with Tōmatsu Shōmei 東松照明 (1930–2012) in compiling the photobook *Hiroshima-Nagasaki Document 1961*. The photobook was significant in that Domon allowed a selection of his previous works on Hiroshima atomic-bomb survivors to be placed alongside those of Tōmatsu, rendering the timeframe of the photobook ambivalent.²⁹ Moreover, similar to *Murōji*, captions are absent from the spread pages, thus allowing viewers to formulate their own interpretation. In this 1961 photobook, we find a tacit agreement between the two photographers: instead of offering a coherent narrative, they immerse viewers in a flow of images that conveys the inexplicable trauma. These visual strategies would later reverberate in other photobooks on wartime memory, most notably *Chizu* 地図 (The map,

25 Abe 1952. For the full translation by Yoshida Ken, see Chong et al. 2013, pp. 44–48.

26 For an in-depth study of Abe's engagement with realism, see Key 2011, pp. 7–33.

27 Kai 2012, p. 83.

28 Domon et al. 1953. See the translation by Ryan Holmberg in Chong et al. 2013, pp. 53–58.

29 Merewether 2006, p. 124.

1965) by Kawada Kikuji 川田喜久治 (b. 1933).³⁰ Wandering through a desolate landscape consisting of wartime ruins, the ruffled national flag, and memorial photos of the dead, Kawada presents a puzzling array of unlabeled images that render the viewer both spatially and temporally disoriented. Such a strategy of disorientation appears to mimic the struggle of the postwar baby boomers, who attempted to make sense of the war with fragmented information sieved from censorship.³¹ Similarly, in *Murōji* Domon acts as a desultory wanderer, who deploys the camera as a somatic surrogate to record his impromptu experience of space and time. Instead of offering a chronological survey of the temple's treasures, Domon conjures an immersive environment from his impressions of the visit.³²

The act of wandering also refashions time as a subjective experience. Devoid of a clear narrative structure, *Murōji* abnegates causality and highlights the malleability of temporal perception. Through jump cuts that arbitrarily pan through statues in different periods, Domon confronts viewers with close-ups of stylistic oddities and incoherencies that declare each icon as a unique artifact unbound by any historical category rather than as a “period piece.” In this way, the photobook calls into question the predicament of stylistic progress or evolution so central to art-historical teleology. In fact, Domon's negation of linear temporality resonates with the temple's history. As art historian Sherry Fowler has pointed out, most Buddhist statues in Murōji's Golden Hall were once borrowed, discarded, or even altered to conjure new iconographic programs to reflect the temple's changing patronage and sectarian affiliations.³³ In this light, Domon's denial of teleology befits the anachronism of Murōji's sculptural heritage.³⁴

Domon's renewed understanding of realism is further supported by his last photobook series, *Koji junrei* 古寺巡礼 (Pilgrimages to old temples, 1963–1975). Although this five-volume project was inspired by the 1919 travelogue of the same title by the philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎 (1889–1960), Domon's images do not serve as illustrations to Watsuji's text. Moreover, rather than limiting his study to ancient temples in Nara, Domon's project examines Buddhist structures across Japan built from the seventh to the fifteenth centuries. Despite such an ambitious scope, the series as a whole offers no coherent narrative predicated on historical period or regional style. It focuses instead on provocative juxtapositions of details that amplify the tension between sight and touch, proximity and invisibility. Consider, for instance, Domon's depiction of Hōryūji's Golden Hall in volume one, which juxtaposes a section of its corridor with a statue that is completely enveloped in shadow. While the former expands spatial depth through perspectival view, the latter abruptly refutes visual penetration. A similar play in spatial compression is evident in the concluding shot of volume three, which showcases a section of the door panels at the Phoenix Hall of Byōdōin. While the absence of any discernible Buddhist element appears at odds with the rest of the photobook, Domon was drawn to the defacement on the wooden panels that were once painted with religious scenes. That Domon deploys the door panel

30 Merewether 2006, pp. 127–30.

31 For an analysis of *The Map* in relation to Japanese postwar identity, see Hayashi 2014.

32 On the postwar discussion of *kankyō* 環境 (environment) as an interactive zone that solicits active participation from the audience, see Charrier 2017; Furuhashi 2014; Yoshimoto 2008.

33 As a matter of fact, the current arrangement is dated to the seventeenth century. See Fowler 2001.

34 Apart from anachronism, Japanese photographers of the 1970s also experimented with seriality to complicate the notion of time; see Praepitpatmongkol 2015. For a similar tendency in conceptual art, see Kee 2015.

to conclude his photobook indicates its role as a self-reflexive coda: it recalls not only the flatness of the medium of the photobook, but also its compression of multiple temporalities, here expressed in terms of the centuries-long human trace of marking and tagging. Despite the ten-year interval between *Murōji* and *Kōji junrei*, it is clear that Domon continued to complicate the visual experimentation he had conducted in the 1950s. Questioning the premise of “period style,” both photobooks refuse to serve any teleological narrative of Japanese Buddhist art, and serve as a persistent reminder that any reading of the past is bound to be conditioned by the socio-historical constituents of the present.

Conclusion

By underscoring reality perception as fractured and situational, Domon Ken’s *Murōji* interrogates the claim of objectivity in documentary photography and exposes the arbitrariness of art-historical teleology. While existing scholarship on postwar Japanese art has tended to pit Domon’s career against his younger counterparts, the discourse of intergenerational clashes reveals less about the photographic circles in postwar Japan than the preoccupations of art historians. Perhaps even more detrimental to the recuperation of Domon’s legacy is the afterlives of his images in curatorial practices, which often singularize certain works and display them as representatives of the “essence” of Japanese Buddhist art. Most notable in this regard was the 2000 exhibition at the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, which showcased Domon’s images alongside those of his predecessors under the exhibition title *Utsusareta kokuhō: Nihon ni okeru bunkazai shashin no keifu* 写された国宝: 日本における文化財写真の系譜 (Image and Essence: A Genealogy of Japanese Photographers’ Views of National Treasures). This framework, which renders Domon’s images as textbook illustrations of the history of Japanese Buddhist art, sharply contrasts with the original photobook that questions the viability of any totalizing narrative. A refusal to recognize Domon’s critical reflection of documentary realism in *Murōji* is to impede a fair assessment of his postwar career and artistic legacy.

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