

DESIGNED BY TAKAAKI MATSUMOTO

HIROSHI SUGIMOTO: DIORAMAS

PUBLISHED BY DAMIANI AND MATSUMOTO EDITIONS

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U N N A T U R A L N A T U R E

The Diorama series is my first body of work and the work that launched my career as an artist. It remains a work in progress to this day. Why do dioramas fascinate me? I guess it is the way they present us with something simultaneously dead and alive, shining a light on the interstice between life and death. Many people who look at my Diorama pictures, whether of wolves or polar bears, are convinced that they are looking at photographs of living animals in their natural habitats. The photographs present a counterfeit reality that tricks the mind. Does the deception originate in the photograph or the viewer? My photographs exist in a space between objects that deceive and people who are deceived.

All my life I have made a habit of never believing my eyes—there has never been any guarantee that what I see is actually there. This sense of the insubstantiality of existence has gnawed at me from childhood; I have even come to quite like it. I liken this to the feeling you have when someone interrupts your daydream and you abruptly fall back to earth, wondering where exactly you are. I've spent my life shuttling between dreams and reality like that, forging an accommodation of sorts between the two states. Daydreams are the source of all my art. In transforming those dreams into works of art I do battle with reality, with my camera serving as my boxing gloves in this struggle.

I have taken photographs in natural history museums throughout the United States, and no fewer than five times in New York's American Museum of Natural History, first in 1976, then in 1980, 1994, 1997, and, most recently, 2012. Looking back, I can see how the focus of my interest shifted slightly on each occasion. In 1976 I awakened to the extraordinary visual qualities of dioramas. The first time I saw a diorama I was overwhelmed by the fragility of existence that it captured. Being models of nature, dioramas include many of the world's constituent parts. The only thing absent is life itself. Time comes to a halt and never-ending stillness reigns. The dioramas made me think of ancient Egypt, where the dead were mummified and placed in gaudy sarcophagi decorated with likenesses of their inhabitants before setting off on a journey across the sea of time known as Death Eternal, with Isis and Osiris as their guides.

I realized that I too could bring time to a stop. My camera could stop time in the dioramas—where time had already been halted once—for a second time. Might killing something that was already dead bring it back to life? I thought of myself as an Egyptian grave robber who had forced his way into a tomb. Some of those grave robbers ended up as mummies themselves instead of making off with the treasures sealed inside the tombs. When I am creating a Diorama photograph I am not a mere spectator; I am a part of the unreal world of the diorama. My camera is dead—it has the same point of view as the mummified grave robber. Focusing my camera on the motionless polar bear, I felt like an invisible man. Had I really been standing that close to the bear at the moment when it was poised to swat the seal and sink its teeth into its flesh, I would have been the one to be eaten. In the world of my subjects, time has stopped; I alone have the luxury of time. I felt myself to be looking down on all of history from a great height. At the instant when I pressed the shutter—I say "instant" but it was actually a twenty-minute exposure—I prayed for the bear to come back to life. Then, like an embalmer making

up the face of a corpse to be lovelier than in life, I set about my postmortem cosmeticizing of the bear. To best show the nap of the fur, I set up a black reflector, and I assiduously adjusted the exposure to prevent the white of the ice field in the background merging with the white of the bear. I performed all these tasks during the long exposure. (Considerable craft is required to stage a proper resurrection drama.) From a theatrical perspective, my photography for the Diorama series is existential—questions on the order of “to be or not to be.” Once I have taken a picture, I mix my own developer using a traditional recipe. The film is coated in light-sensitive silver. Those parts that light touches form black shapes, and those that light does not touch simply melt away. In that sense I might be considered an alchemist, working with silver rather than gold. My life as an artist began the moment I saw with my own eyes that I had succeeded in bringing the bear back to life on film.

In 1991 I was invited to take part in the Carnegie International, a quinquennial exhibition of contemporary art held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Carnegie Museums include the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. It contains all sorts of dioramas depicting the dawn of life on earth. They are imaginative reconstructions based on trilobite fossils and other scientific evidence. Around five hundred million years ago, the Cambrian explosion saw the sudden appearance of numerous complex organisms. The origins of all life, including human life, date to that time. In the Carnegie Museum, the actual trilobite fossils are displayed alongside the dioramas. As I contemplated the trilobites, a thought suddenly came to me: *If a photograph is able to stop time, then a fossil can do the same thing. Both photographs and fossils are records of history.* I took to calling fossils “pre-photography time recording devices.” Taking the Diorama photographs inspired me to start collecting fossils from different phases of the evolution of life. Fossils became a part of my everyday existence, providing me with another enjoyable subject for daydreaming, as I speculated about what the petrified creatures had been doing before they turned to stone. Thanks to my fossils, I can ruminate on the whole history of life carried down from prehistoric times, which is also imprinted on my own DNA. Inside those inorganic stones something organic remains, transformed into information.

In 1993 the American Museum of Natural History unveiled the Hall of Human Biology and Evolution. Extrapolating from the fossilized bones of hominids discovered in Ethiopia in 1974, it sought to recreate the appearance of the ancestors of present-day humans. The sight of the diorama of the hominid known as “Lucy” brought my university days—I studied historical materialism and dialectical materialism—rushing back. Friedrich Engels’s unfinished essay *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man* played an outsize part in shaping my view of history. I decided to photograph four dioramas that together provided an overview of the development of the human race. The order was: Lucy from 3.2 million years ago, *Homo ergaster* from 1.7 million years ago, Neanderthals from 50,000 years ago, and then our direct forbears, Cro-Magnons from 30,000 years ago. When hominids became capable of walking upright on two legs, their forelegs were freed up to serve as hands. They used their hands to craft tools, and labor was born. Hominids working in groups brought both language and society into being. Such was the process that awakened human consciousness. Art is intimately bound up with the awakening of consciousness. As my photographs advanced from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic Era, I grew increasingly interested in prehistoric stone tools and began collecting them.

When I first picked one up, it fit snugly in the palm of my hand. I again felt that sense of being directly connected to our distant ancestors through touching an ancient object. The job of photography was to transfer that consciousness to the dioramas. My collection of stone tools now numbers several hundred pieces.

In 2012 I decided to photograph the American Museum of Natural History from a new point of view. The museum is vast and home to a great number of dioramas. Until this point I had mainly photographed dioramas that showed animals in their habitats. These scenes were always built around an incident of some kind: a pack of hyenas devouring the remains of a zebra killed by a lion, a wild pig trying to steal an ostrich's egg. But natural habitats like these are rapidly disappearing from the face of the earth because of the dramatic changes wrought by humankind since the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. My daydreams and my enthusiasm retreated further back—to nature prior to the advent of humanity, to untouched, "natural" nature. The cactus-dotted plateaus of Arizona, the mountain forests of Oregon, the Arctic Ocean in summertime—these were reproductions of nature before humankind began to meddle with it. Even when there are people in the dioramas, they seem to live as part of nature, like Adam and Eve before the Fall. As I took my photographs, I was overcome by the desire to depict natural history as a false image with the illusion of realism. (Although if no one sees through a false image, perhaps it is reality that is the falsehood after all.) Photographing dioramas that recreated landscapes prior to human colonization, I took great comfort from the thought that nature would probably need only a few thousand years to revert to its pre-human state should the human race ever be wiped out.

If humans are just one of many animals living in the natural world, then the island of Manhattan represents the most extreme example of artificial nature that this particular animal has created. In the middle of this island sits the pseudo-natural environment of Central Park, with the American Museum of Natural History snuggled up against its flank. Inveterate daydreamer that I am, in my mind's eye I picture the museum's roof collapsing upon moldering dioramas, everything ensnared by vines and overgrown with wild grass. Civilization has come to an end.

All over the planet, nature is being transformed into un-nature at breakneck speed. My life is a part of natural history. I long to know where that history came from and where it is going.—*Hiroshi Sugimoto*



HOMO ERGASTER, 1997



HIROSHIMA BOMBING, 1999



MOUNTAIN LION, 1980



MOUNTAIN NYALA, 1980

KERRY BROUGHER AND DAVID ELLIOTT

HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

CATALOGUE DESIGNED BY TAKAAKI MATSUMOTO

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Boden Sea, Uttwil, 1993
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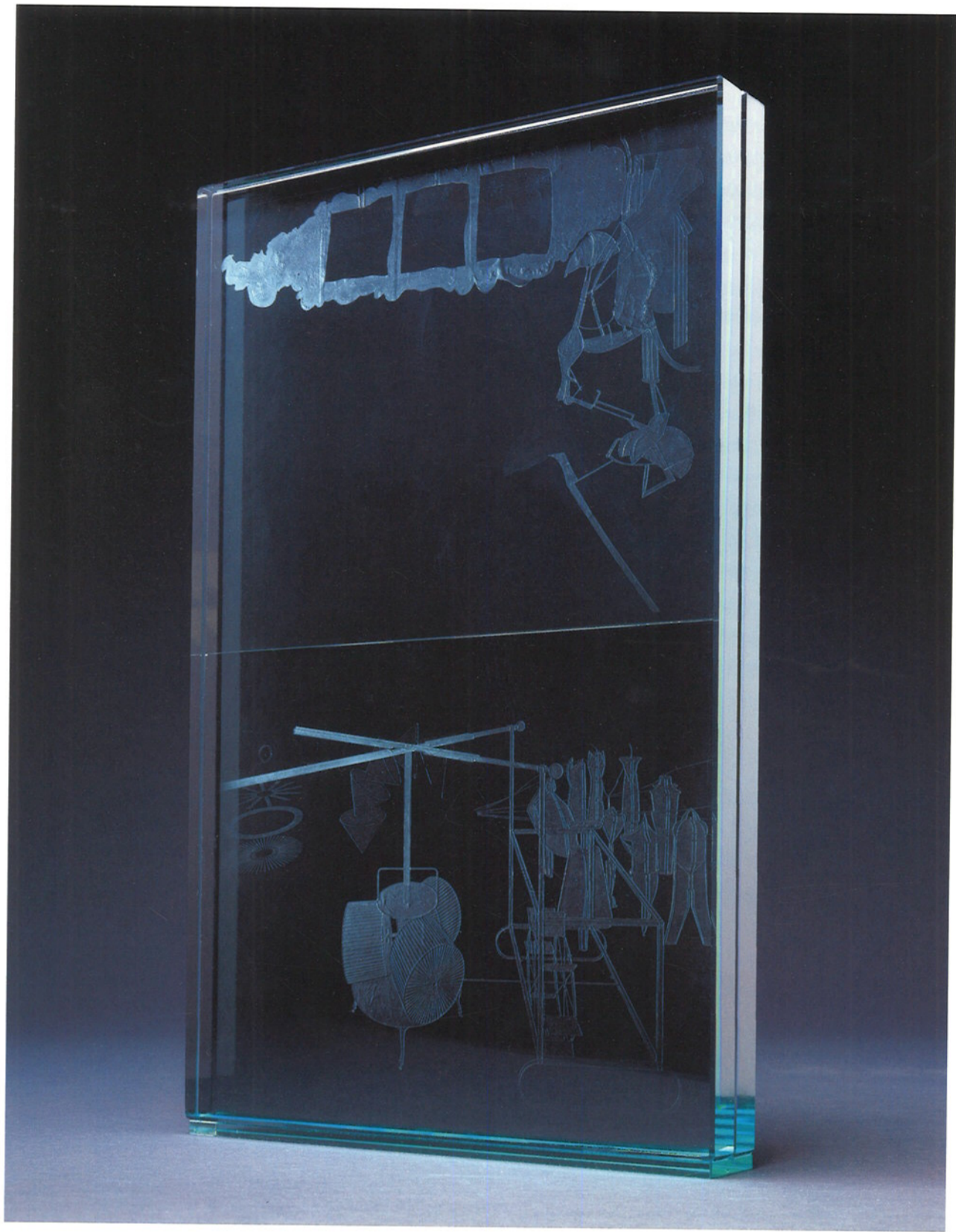
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LA BOÎTE EN BOIS (THE WOODEN BOX), 2004

IMPOSSIBLE PHOTOGRAPHY

KERRY BROUGHER

Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other: tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits . . . mad if this realism is absolute and, so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time. . . .

—Roland Barthes¹

One-Eyed Vision

In a bleak, forbidding landscape, where a pale sky and snow-covered ground meld together to produce a white void, a polar bear hovers over its victim. Caught just after the kill, the photograph shows the beast poised over a freshly dispatched penguin, suspended forever, perhaps in contemplation of its next meal. It is a scene of sharp contrasts—hunter and prey, action and stillness, life and death—black-and-white creatures delineated in a black-and-white world.

There is certainly something disturbing about Hiroshi Sugimoto's 1976 *Polar Bear* (page 70). At first it seems as if this discomfort stems from the subject matter, but upon reflection, the edginess of this image appears to grow not out of the life-and-death struggle so common to nature photography, but from elsewhere, from somewhere deep within the picture itself. A contradiction is at work here. Upon further scrutiny, it becomes clear that our unease arises from the manner in which the photograph was taken, that there is something incorrect, even alarming, about the very process of its making.

Wildlife photographs generally, particularly those involving dangerous animals, have a similar look. Nearly all are in color with blurred backgrounds, a result of the photographer's position at a safe distance and use of telephoto lenses as well as the attempt to capture animals in motion. Sugimoto's photograph is different. His stark black-and-white image is rendered with a wide tonal range and with a crystal, almost super-real clarity—the antithesis of the blurry, grainy, quickly composed documentary photograph. To achieve such an effect, Sugimoto would have had to utilize a large-format camera with a normal or wide-angle lens, forcing him right on top of the animal, essentially an impossible, or at least incredibly risky, feat.

22 The result is a photograph that "feels" inherently wrong to us. A disconnect exists between the content and the presentation, between what we see and our knowledge of photography's vocabulary, which is acquired through processing countless images in our media-saturated culture. We know, through having viewed numerous nature studies, that although this polar bear appears extraordinarily realistic, it cannot be the real thing.

Critic Susan Sontag has written, "Photographs have this authority of being testimony, but almost as if you have some direct contact with the thing, or as if the photograph is a piece of the thing; even though it's an image, it really is the thing."² In much of Sugimoto's work, however, a rupture occurs between the "thing" photographed and the photograph itself. The rupture—the "trick"—is, of course, that the scene is not real at all. It is a photograph of a diorama in New York's American Museum of Natural History. *Polar Bear* was among the first of Sugimoto's diorama images, a series begun in 1975 that includes subject matter ranging from animals and undersea life to daily-life scenes of early humans, as well as, more recently, tableaux photographed in wax museums.

Clearly Sugimoto's purpose in taking these photographs is not merely to fool the spectator. Shooting the dioramas in color with a 35mm camera and blurring the background would probably have resulted in a more convincing "fake." Indeed, we could never confuse the photograph of a Neanderthal for an image of the real thing. By utilizing the slow, time-consuming photographic methods developed in the nineteenth century to photograph a scene normally requiring modern handheld cameras, Sugimoto brings the image close to the real but stops just shy of complete persuasion. It is, as the artist has said, "as good as real."³ The photograph, upon consideration, announces its deception: it is not a picture of animals but a picture of a diorama of animals. Yet because of its initial deceptiveness, because of its lack of telltale museum signs, the image transcends being a mere photograph of a diorama. Striving toward the

real and presented as an example of photographic "truth," yet simultaneously undermining that truth, the image inhabits a space between the thing depicted and the photograph itself, a space for contemplation in which the diorama as a concept moves to the foreground, taking the place of the diorama as mere image. Like photography itself, the diorama is a means of harnessing and analyzing nature, a way of categorizing and classifying the world. Sugimoto's photograph stands out as an image of us attempting to understand the world. It is, ultimately, not a picture of a polar bear, nor an image of an artificial polar bear, but rather it is an impossible photograph—a photograph of an idea.

Throughout his thirty-year career as an artist, Sugimoto has avoided photographing concrete objects, preferring instead to concentrate on things intangible, ephemeral, even nonexistent. His series of movie palaces (begun in 1975), for instance, captures the ornate interiors of these cinematic dinosaurs with the light reflecting off the movie screen. By leaving the shutter open throughout the screening, an entire film is compressed into a single, iconic, white rectangle that speaks of many things: of abstract painting and radiant windows, of Zen voids and minimalism, and ultimately, in light of the film's absence, of the disappearance of the classic cinema and the decline of these grand twentieth-century cathedrals.

Sugimoto's seascapes (begun in 1980) represent various bodies of water in the same deceptively simple composition: the horizon line evenly divides the frame into water and air. Despite such titles as *Caribbean Sea, Jamaica* (page 115), they are not so much depictions of geographic locations as they are attempts at capturing on film the qualities of light, air, water, and atmosphere. In emphasizing these natural elements, Sugimoto drapes like a veil the decidedly intangible over the specific, the concept over the concrete, returning all seas to their fundamental state as water and air. Through the nearly abstract, almost sacred geometric composition and the repetition of this yin-yang relationship from image to image, from ocean to ocean around the world, the sea is returned to a kind of primordial state untouched by humankind. Sugimoto's seascapes are not photographs of the sea; rather, they are images that arise out of the murky depths of the past, time machines that are capable of extending our vision back beyond our own existence, images that focus on the sea with the very substances—water and air—that would ultimately give rise to life itself.

The product of a mechanical apparatus and creative chemistry, photography is viewed as a modern scientific means of capturing truthfully and objectively the appearance of the world. Indeed, throughout photography's history, this dominant line of thought has deflected occasional attacks from such "subversive" groups as the surrealists, who audaciously questioned photography's ability to reproduce truth, arguing instead that it was better at relaying fiction and fantasies. Unlike cinema, which from its origins was as much identified with dreams as it was with reportage, photography has been dominated by a concern with objective truth. Although this relationship with the real can be slanted one way or the other—from Walker Evans's documentary approach to Edward Steichen's painterly views of nature, from Robert Frank's gritty realism to Ansel Adams's crystal clear views of the California wilderness—the sense remains that photography's purpose is to reproduce the world mechanically, to capture in a truthful manner what is in front of the camera's lens. Seen in this way, photography becomes "a mirror" of the world, to use theorist Roland Barthes's phrase; it represents "the familiar, the known."⁴

Shortly before Sugimoto began his career, these assumptions about photography came under attack, not so much from within the photographic community, but instead from the visual arts community. In the early 1960s, Yves Klein's use of an altered photograph as proof of his "leap into the void," Andy Warhol's absorption of photography into the arena of painting, and Ed Ruscha's utilization of mundane

photographic documents in a series of deadpan books relied on photography's status as a purveyor of objective truth in ironic and self-conscious ways. Fused with other media, photography was hoisted by its own "truthful" petard, an act that clearly undermined perceptions of the photograph as objective reality and announced a new kind of photography that would now be unavoidably informed by its own history. Throughout the 1960s, the use of a new, codified photographic vocabulary was further developed by such conceptual artists as John Baldessari, Dan Graham, and Marcel Broodthaers, all of whom rejected the notion of pure photography and the technically refined print in favor of the directness and social value inherent in the amateur snapshot.

These novel but "impure" approaches opened the door to further innovations within the photographic community itself. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the fast-take, shoot-from-the-hip style of street photographers Robert Frank and William Klein, with their gritty, grainy, off-kilter black-and-white reportage, dominated the vanguard. In the 1970s, these street scenes gradually gave way to a broader use of the medium, one that relied less on innate photographic elements, such as black-and-white film, grain, and blur, and more on a clarity of vision associated with painting. First, photographers William Eggleston and William Christenberry challenged the firmly established notion of color as "vulgar" (Walker Evans's verdict) and utilized the rich, saturated hues of the complicated dye-transfer process. A little later, Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld gave up their hand-held Leicas for the old-fashioned, nineteenth-century view camera in an attempt to slow down the photographic process and align it more closely with the act of painting. Taking a step back from the in-your-face approach and chance encounters of street photography, Shore and Sternfeld left the big city and concentrated on suburbs and the American landscape, often photographing these subjects from distant perspectives. Using the large-format camera not only slowed the process of making the picture, but it also created negatives filled with myriad details that demanded slower, more considered scrutiny from the viewer. This change shifted the experience of photography closer to historical, representational painting.

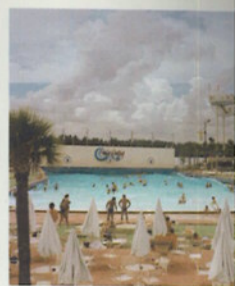
As a young photographer in New York City in the mid-1970s, Sugimoto would have been aware of these developments that simultaneously tainted pure photography and opened up an array of new possibilities. In Sugimoto's case, he found himself questioning the fundamental idea of the separation of the camera from the world.⁵ In the 1950s and 1960s, Lee Friedlander and other photographers had allowed their own shadows or reflections to creep into the photographic frame, thereby reminding the viewer of the artist's presence and collapsing the distance between the maker and the subject, between the camera and the world. For Sugimoto, however, the question was not one of self-reflexivity, of referring to himself, but of reconsidering photography's relationship to our perception of the world. Photography and human perception were not two different things; rather, photography was simply an extension of our way of processing the world—and it always had been, even before the invention of the medium. Linking the photographer and the camera with the world beyond the lens echoed certain investigations by visual artists of the time, in particular minimalists such as Donald Judd (page 26) and Dan Flavin and earthwork artists Robert Smithson and Walter De Maria. For them, art was not separate from the world but was one with it. Indeed, art was literally made out of the stuff of the world, out of light or earth, and was defined by—and in turn defined—the space around it. As early as 1959, for example, Judd had referred to the seventeenth-century Chinese artist Tao Chi, who achieved "the whole or *oneness*." For Judd, "The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting."⁶

In the mid-1970s, Sugimoto found himself drawn more and more to New York's American Museum



AN ARTIST IS NOT MERELY THE SLAVISH ANNOUNCER OF A SERIES OF FACTS, WHICH IN THIS CASE THE CAMERA HAS HAD TO ACCEPT AND MECHANICALLY RECORD.

John Baldessari. *An artist is not merely the slavish announcer of a series of facts...*, 1967. 59 x 45 inches (149.9 x 114.3 cm). Acrylic and photoemulsion on canvas. Private collection, courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York, and John Baldessari.



Joel Sternfeld. *Wet 'n Wild A*
Orlando, Florida, September
(printed 2004). 48 x 60 inches
Digital C-print. Hirshhorn Mu-
Garden, Smithsonian Institut-
D.C., Gift of the Artist, 2004.
artist and Luhring Augustine.



IT IS NOT MERELY THE SLAVISH
RECORDER OF A SERIES OF FACTS.
IN THIS CASE THE CAMERA HAS
ACCEPTED AND MECHANICALLY
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149.9 x 114.3 cm). Acrylic and
on canvas. Private collection,
Sonnabend Gallery, New York, and
ssari.



Joel Sternfeld. *Wet 'n Wild Aquatic Theme Park,
Orlando, Florida, September 1980*, 1980

(printed 2004). 48 x 60 inches (121.9 x 152.4 cm).

Digital C-print. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture
Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington,
D.C., Gift of the Artist, 2004. Courtesy of the
artist and Lühring Augustine, New York.

of Natural History and especially to the dioramas on view there. With their strange position between reality and illusion, these tableaux held a particular fascination for the artist, although he could not at the time pinpoint its source. One day, however, he had the idea of covering one of his eyes as he looked at these tableaux and was immediately struck by the fact that they were already close to being a photograph. Extending this one-eyed vision to the rest of the world, Sugimoto suddenly had a way not so much of recognizing the elements of photography but of understanding the photographer within himself. He began to comprehend that, for him, photography does not exist separately from the world; it is not an invention created to capture truth beyond the lens, but already exists as an innate perceptual tool within our mind. Photography, therefore, was not a technical invention but a byproduct of natural impulses for capturing memories and stopping time.

For Sugimoto, the diorama, as well as a display in a wax museum, is already a kind of photograph. The tableau is a means of arresting a moment and holding it forever, of classifying nature. It is a way of making sense of the world and of writing its history, of reproducing what "has occurred only once"—as Barthes puts it—a way of designating reality without being separate from it, "of being thus, of being so. . . ."⁷ Sugimoto's interest in the diorama, and his subsequent investigations of wax museums in his "Chamber of Horrors" and "Portraits" series, lies less in using photography to capture some external truth existing outside of himself than in finding the photographic essence already in operation within the human mind. He spotlights the ways we have developed to overcome time and space in order to make meaning out of the world as it continually flows around us.

Sugimoto has admitted that he was not particularly interested in Eastern philosophy and religion while in Japan. It was only after he moved to Los Angeles in 1970 to study at the Art Center College of Design that he began to study Zen Buddhism. In the introduction to *Zen in the Art of Archery*, D. T. Suzuki suggests that a Zen artist

does not need, like the painter, a canvas, brushes, and paints; nor does he require, like the archer, the bow and arrow and target, and other paraphernalia. He has his limbs, body, head, and other parts. His Zen-life expresses itself by means of all these "tools" which are important to its manifestation. His hands and feet are the brushes and the whole universe is the canvas on which he depicts his life for seventy, eighty, or even ninety years. This picture is called "history."⁸

This process is echoed in Sugimoto's desire to understand the diorama as a means of creating a "photographic" history of the world. Indeed, he does not need a camera. By covering one eye, he was capable of making an image in his mind and focusing on a subject that readily demonstrated that photography is not a tool separate from the world but is a part of it. The polar bear had already been "photographed" by the makers of the diorama before Sugimoto "rephotographed" it both with his closed-eye vision and then with his camera. Although the forty-eight images that comprise Sugimoto's depiction of the thousand and one sculptures in "Sea of Buddha" (pages 165–79), taken at Kyoto's Sanjusangen-do, Hall of Thirty-three Bays, seem at first quite different from his other works, in effect, the project is quite similar. They do not represent the real world; they are manifestations of an ideal world, one that has been replicated repeatedly in the mind. Like the seascapes, they are defined by their similarities and subtle differences, and like the dioramas and wax museum images, they are tableaux, shadow presences of our

spiritual thoughts, "pictures" that help us to understand and deal with life and death.

Sugimoto's "Architecture" series offers another example of a kind of impossible photography, one that runs counter to his own predilection for crisp, clear images. Rather than photographing buildings in the conventional style that accentuates clean lines and volume, the artist chose instead to leave the image quite blurred, thereby eliminating these elements altogether. Essentially, Sugimoto reverses the normal artistic process, taking the final three-dimensional art object and sending it reeling back in time to its origins, to the architect's initial dream. He captures not the building itself but a mind-image. This process becomes particularly poignant in his photograph of the World Trade Center (page 205). Although the buildings no longer exist, the architect's original vision—his mind-photograph—remains.

In his introduction, Suzuki quotes Huyen of Gosozen (died 1140), who claimed that a true artist turns "the emptiness of space into a sheet of paper, the waves of the ocean into an inkwell, and Mount Sumeru into a brush. . . ."⁹ Sugimoto's simple gesture of covering his eye reveals the primal photographic essence of the human mind.

Dark Chambers

In 1999 Sugimoto photographed *The Music Lesson* (page 32), a re-presentation of a tableau, on view in Madame Tussauds in Amsterdam, of Johannes Vermeer's painting *A Lady at the Virginal with a Gentleman (The Music Lesson)* (circa 1662–64). This was one of the first color photographs Sugimoto had taken since his days as a student in Los Angeles. Numerous art historians, artists, and photographers have suggested that Vermeer used an optical device, probably a camera obscura, to assist him in creating his work. As architectural scholar Philip Steadman has pointed out in his study of the Dutch artist, the term *camera obscura* means "dark chamber," deriving from the fact that the apparatus required the use of a room sealed to keep out daylight, with only a small hole cut in the door or window blind. A glass lens affixed to this aperture let in a narrow shaft of light that projected an upside-down image of the outer world.¹⁰ The camera obscura was, on the one hand, a scientific tool used to reproduce perspective accurately, and as such, it was a precursor to photography. It was also a machine that created a kind of magical luminosity, a forerunner of cinema's illuminated dreamscapes.

Since the Madame Tussauds tableau existed in real space and accurately reconstructed the painting, Sugimoto decided to photograph it from the exact location of Vermeer's camera obscura in order to reproduce the painting photographically. Working backward, the photograph re-creates the wax tableau, which re-creates the painting, which re-creates the camera obscura image. The use of color blurs the division among painting, photograph, and tableau, and seems to suggest that the final product circles around to life itself, to a moment long ago that has been mirrored through successive impressions and then compressed into this final image, in much the same way that Sugimoto condenses the countless frames of film running through the projector in his movie palace photographs. By setting his camera in the same location as Vermeer's camera obscura, Sugimoto in a sense displaces the painter, much as recent photography itself has supplanted painting and undermined the division between reality and illusion. In *The Music Lesson*, reality, tableau, painting, and photograph are dissolved into one continuous photographic hall of mirrors, each becoming as real—and as illusory—as the other.

The camera obscura also resides at the heart of Sugimoto's "Theaters" series. Cinema is, of course, nothing more than twenty-four photographs projected per second that create a world of dream narratives out of the phenomenon of persistence of vision, in which each individual frame of film optically



Donald Judd. *Untitled*, 1976. 15 variations on a box. Douglas-fir plywood, $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (1.6 cm) thick, each box: 5 x 5 x 3 feet (1.5 x 1.5 x .9 m). Installation view at Dia:Beacon, Dia Art Foundation; gift of the Brown Foundation. Photo: Bill Jacobson. Art © Judd Foundation. Licensed by VAGA, New York, New York.



Image of camera obscura from *Lucis Et Umbrae*, published in Athanasius Kircher, *Oxford Science Library*. HIP / Art Resource, New York.



1976. 15 variations on a
d, 1/2 inches (1.6 cm) thick,
t (1.5 x 1.5 x .9 m).
Beacon. Dia Art
Brown Foundation. Photo:
dd Foundation. Licensed
ew York.

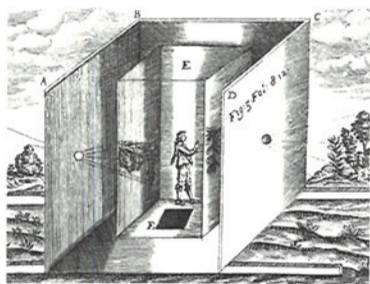


Image of camera obscura from *Ars Magna
Lucis Et Umbrae*, published in 1646 by
Athanasius Kircher. Oxford Science Archive.
HIP / Art Resource, New York.

blends together to produce continuous motion. In Sugimoto's works, all the elements of cinema are present, yet they are compressed and returned to their more fundamental state as still photography. The light reflected from the silver screen acts as the only illumination, casting the world of dreams and shadows onto the real world of the movie theater and blurring the differences between fiction and reality. The screen holds within its stark whiteness an entire film, an entire narrative, with characters and sets, all absorbed into a luminous rectangle frozen for all time. The cinema, Sugimoto seems to suggest, is not an extension of photography, but it is bound up with a photographic vision; it is a way of perceiving a world already at work before the development of cinema, even before the invention of photography. This vision reaches back through the cinema and photography to the *tableaux vivants* of the nineteenth century, back to the theatrical paintings of Paul Delaroche and James-Jacques-Joseph Tissot and the photographic realism of Gustave Caillebotte and Edgar Degas, back through the spectacles of Joseph Turner and Hubert Robert, and on to the sixteenth-century "widescreen" paintings of Veronese and Tintoretto. By photographing the screen at some distance and including the ornate interiors, Sugimoto makes clear that these palaces are large camera obscuras, with the white rectangle serving as the aperture that lets dream-world light into the real world.

For Sugimoto, the gallery space itself also becomes an extension of the camera obscura. The hanging of his photographs creates a link between the interior and the exterior world. His seascapes, despite their radically different appearance, are closely tied to the dark spaces of the movie palaces. Each sea is distinct, and subtle details vary depending on the time of day and weather conditions, yet by repeating the image in the gallery over and over, Sugimoto uses the cinematic device of multiple frames to overcome time and space. Aligned on a gallery wall, these seascapes act in a manner akin to persistence of vision. Images fuse with one another to become, photographically, one abstract sea existing out of time and space, with only the most fundamental elements remaining. As when the light from the fictive world of cinema penetrates the real interior of the movie palace, so here the distinction between the actual and the photographic sea become blurred—the exterior world enters the gallery space; the outside, as in the camera obscura, is brought into an interior space. Indeed, Sugimoto has even reversed the process by hanging his seascapes outdoors on a wall near the actual ocean, thereby blurring the real and the artificial in the opposite manner.

Throughout his career, Sugimoto has inverted our notions of photography, giving us photographs of people that are not people at all, films that have disappeared inside themselves, soft memories of hard buildings, and seas photographed in the sunless night. In these works, he suggests, we do not exist outside photography but rather photography resides within us. From the shadows flickering on the walls of Plato's cave, to the rays of light streaming through stained glass windows into the gloomy interiors of Gothic cathedrals, to Athanasius Kircher's use of light bounced off painted mirrors into dark chambers to create elusive specters, and on to the screen's silver light glowing in the darkness of movie theaters, we have long made sense of the world through a kind of camera obscura vision.

Oculist Witness

Sugimoto's desire to photograph the idea of photography is reflected in a recent work in which the artist chose to "re-create" Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23), better known as *The Large Glass*. Duchamp's "Kind of Sub-Title" to his *Green Box* (1934) of documents relating to *The Large Glass* asks us to regard the piece as a "'delay' instead of 'picture' or 'painting'."

As artist Richard Hamilton points out, *The Large Glass* is "near to a still in the cinematographic sense,"¹² and thus Duchamp uses the term "delay" to suggest that we are confronted not by a painting or even a picture, but by a machine caught at one state that has, in fact, many states of existence. Indeed, by creating the work on glass, the piece visually fuses with the world itself, creating a kind of fourth dimension. Duchamp authority Robert Lebel observes, "This effect of transparency plays an important part in Duchamp's conception for he has turned the background into a ready-made continually in motion."¹³ On the simplest level, *The Large Glass* is an elaborate metaphor for the impossibility of male-female relationships, but the work also stands as Duchamp's solution to finding an alternative to painting. It becomes a way around representation and gives physical evidence to an idea; Duchamp wanted to take an idea and give it a kind of "cinematic blossoming." This desire for new ways of seeing has a certain "photographic" overtone that is apparent in other works by Duchamp, such as his study for a section of *The Large Glass* titled *To be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour* (1918) or his final voyeuristic masterwork, *Etant donnés* (1946–66), with its peephole view into a kind of camera obscura complete with a pastoral landscape and nude.

The connection to Sugimoto's own method is clear, and he pays homage to Duchamp's way of perceiving the world by photographing a replica of *The Large Glass* in the collection of the University of Tokyo and sandwiching the negative and print between two sheets of glass in a manner similar to Duchamp's masterwork. Titled *La Boîte En Bois* (The Wooden Box) (page 20) after Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* (1941), this multiple links *The Large Glass* with photography. By placing the negative (which seems more closely associated with the camera than the positive print) between the glass planes, Sugimoto puts the camera, and thus himself, "inside" the work, staring out in both directions simultaneously at the spectator. In a sense, he takes the place of Duchamp's "Oculist Witnesses" that inhabit the lower portion of *The Large Glass*. Whereas a painting or diorama requires an eye to be located outside the scene in order to complete the illusion, *La Boîte En Bois* suggests the photographic eye is embedded within the object itself, with the artist's gaze, and the gaze of the subject, becoming one and the same.

If, ultimately, Duchamp was creating a reversed through-the-looking-glass version of *The Large Glass* in his dioramalike final work, *Etant donnés*, with its peephole view of the bride now stripped bare by her bachelors, then Sugimoto holds up a similar voyeuristic mirror to his own diorama works in recent installations. In 2004 at the Yoshii Gallery in New York, Sugimoto placed the dioramas in a darkened room. Each individual photograph was installed within a black box containing its own light source; the viewer moved from scene to scene, peering in through a cut out in the wall. In this installation, as well as in his recent placement of the dioramas within specially designed wooden boxes based on historical Japanese reliquary containers, Sugimoto returns the two-dimensional world of the photograph back into the three-dimensional but related realm of the diorama.

Sugimoto's interest in Duchamp has also recently led to two new bodies of work. We might distill Duchamp's thinking to two notions: that art as object needs to give way to art as idea or concept; and that machine aesthetics can play a role in this process, if only ironically. Referring to his *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 3* (1916), Duchamp asked the viewer to "remember, when we consider the motion of form through space in a given time, we enter the realm of geometry and mathematics, just as we do when we build a machine for that purpose. Now if I show the ascent of an airplane, I try to show what it does. I do not make a still-life picture of it."¹⁴ Sugimoto's recent series of "Conceptual Forms" (begun in 2004) once again undercuts the usual role of photography, putting it to use instead to create images of conceptual



Marcel Duchamp. *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*. 1915–23. 109 1/4 x 69 1/4 inches (277.5 x 175.9 cm). Oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Bequest of Katherine S. Dreier, 1952, 1952-98-1. Photo by Graydon Wood. © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/Succession Marcel Duchamp.



Marcel Duchamp. *Etant donnés: 1. The Illuminating Gas*. 1946–66. 242.6 x 177.8 cm. Mixed-media: wooden door, bricks, velvet, wood stretched over an armature of aluminum, iron, glass, Plexiglas, electric lights, gas lamp (Bec Au), etc. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Cassandra Foundation, 1969, 1969-1969-1. Photo by Graydon Wood. © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/Succession Marcel Duchamp.



Marcel Duchamp. *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*. 1915–23. 177.5 x 175.9 cm. Oil, varnish, wire, and dust on two glass panels. Museum of Art: Bequest of Katherine S. Dreier, 1952, 1962-98-1. Photo by Graydon B. White. © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Paris/Succession Marcel Duchamp.



Marcel Duchamp. *Etant donnés: 1 la chute d'eau, 2 le gaz d'éclairage (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas)*. 1946–66. 95 1/2 x 70 inches (242.6 x 177.8 cm). Mixed-media assemblage: wooden door, bricks, velvet, wood, leather stretched over an armature of metal, twigs, aluminum, iron, glass, Plexiglas, linoleum, cotton, electric lights, gas lamp (Bec Auer type), motor, etc. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of the Cassandra Foundation, 1969, 1969-41-1. © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/Succession Marcel Duchamp.

ideas. Employing plaster models of mathematical formulae in the collection of the University of Tokyo, Sugimoto dramatically lights these forms against dark backgrounds, creating rather monumental “stereometric renderings” of concepts, as in *Mathematical Form: Surface 0002* (page 276). His series of mechanical devices, such as *Mechanical Form: 0026* (page 303), from the same collection, is shot in a similar manner. Sugimoto monumentalizes these machines and anthropomorphizes them into images similar to his own series of wax portraits. If Duchamp gave in the *The Large Glass* a version of the historical nude as a machine, then reversed the process in *Etant donnés*, Sugimoto reverses the process of spectatorship yet again by turning his wax portraits into machines, with historical figures becoming oculist witnesses.

In Praise of Shadows

In 1998, Sugimoto created a series of photographs of burning candles. “In Praise of Shadows,” so called after an essay of the same title by Japanese novelist Jun’ichiro Tanizaki, comprises images, like the movie palace photographs, that were produced by leaving the shutter open, in this case as the candle burned down through the night. The result is an image not so much of a candle but of a kind of ghost light amidst darkness. In his essay Tanizaki analyzes the way that light works on darkness.

And while I am talking of this whiteness I want to talk of the color of the darkness that enfolds it. I think of an unforgettable vision of darkness I once had when I took a friend from Tokyo to the old Sumiya teahouse in Kyoto. I was in a large room . . . and the darkness, broken only by a few candles, was of a richness quite different from the darkness of a small room. . . . On the far side of the screen, at the edge of the little circle of light, the darkness seemed to fall from the ceiling, lofty, intense, monolithic, the fragile light of the candle unable to pierce its thickness, turned back as from a black wall. I wonder if my readers know the color of that “darkness seen by candlelight.” . . . This was the darkness in which ghosts and monsters were active. . . .¹⁵

Using the negative, Sugimoto installs these works with a real candle, thereby casting “positive” photographic ghosts onto the gallery walls. The photographs become spectral candles undulating to the rhythm of the real burning candle and blurring the distinction between the photographic image and reality.

Sugimoto continues this interest in his most recent series, which captures nothing more than light and shadow falling on the walls of a space he renovated in Tokyo. “Colors of Shadow” is the first series he photographed completely in color, ironically to capture what is essentially a monochromatic subject. Like his earlier architecture series, which eliminated the hard lines of conventional building photography, the “Colors of Shadow” photographs undermine the belief that photography is merely an extension of Renaissance systems of artificial perspective. As art historian Hubert Damisch suggests, it is the fact that the camera is a “technical extension” that is “wholly consistent with so-called one-point perspective” that, more than anything else, has led to our acceptance of photography as a ghost of the real, a passive trace of truth.¹⁶ Consisting of images of shadows cutting across white walls and shafts of light reflecting off corners and doorframes, the “Colors of Shadow” series focuses on the elements that create photography: light emanating into a dark or, in this case, dim chamber. Ultimately, these photographs are representations of a kind of camera obscura, but one without a focused image. In a manner similar to the seascapes, the

subject here has been reduced to little more than the quality of light, here flowing in from the adjacent windows. If Vermeer used a camera obscura to re-create the images in a room, Sugimoto turns the room into a camera obscura, removing the tableau elements and leaving nothing but light and space.

Sugimoto's insistence on photographic vision being part of the history of the world and his attempt to position the photographer in a fourth dimension outside time and space find their ultimate expression in his recent renovation of a Shinto shrine. Located on the Japanese island of Naoshima, a site overseen by the Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum, Sugimoto's shrine is situated near projects by artists James Turrell, Tatsuo Miyajima, Rei Naito, among others. Asked to renovate the Go-Oh shrine, Sugimoto took seriously the notion that a shrine is a sacred space where the gods dwell. Such a "space must be simple and flawless. In order to make a flawless space, one must construct it with flawless proportions."¹⁷ Using a number of highly skilled traditional artisans, Sugimoto completely renovated the shrine using proportions found in other well-known sacred structures, paying close attention to the play of light and shadow. His goal was to "reproduce the style of ancient times from the viewpoint of the present. . . ."¹⁸ To make the shrine "contemporary," Sugimoto formed steps from the same glass used to grind camera lenses. This unusual staircase leads from the shrine but does not stop at ground level; rather, it continues on, descending into a dark underground chamber. Following a passage in the stone cavity, the visitor then comes to an opening in the side of a cliff, where a "window" or "aperture" reveals a stunning view of the sea not unlike those found in Sugimoto's photographs.

As author and photographer Wright Morris so accurately points out, "There is a history of darkness in the making of images. At Peche Merle and Altamira, in the recesses of caves, the torch lit chapels of worship and magic, images of matchless power were painted on the walls and ceilings. These caves were archival museums."¹⁹ Are these paintings, made in a natural fissure, that different from, say, Christiaan Huygens's formative magic lantern projections, or Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's creation of the world's first photograph by placing a chemically treated plate into a black box, or Auguste and Louis Lumière's cinematograph machine, an optical device that both photographed motion pictures and represented them in the dark theater space? In these cases, the result is the linking of the magical and the scientific through the introduction of light into darkness.

Sugimoto's Shinto shrine extends and comments on this history of connecting the sacred with the photographic impulse. Like his movie palace images, which provide meditative views of dark, cavernous spaces devoted to worshiping glowing modern icons on a silver screen, the shrine suggests that mystical notions and the photographic impulse are already associated in our subliminal, "subterranean" mind. Indeed, as Barthes suggests, photography is essentially about death: "Ultimately, what I am seeking in the photograph taken of me . . . is Death: Death is the *eidos* of the Photograph."²⁰ Photography acts as a mechanical means of linking the world of the living with that of the dead, even offering glimpses of our own future deaths when we become "embalmed" in the magical chemicals of a photograph. Sugimoto's underground camera is in part a response to Saigyō, a Japanese poet of the Heian period (794–1185), who wrote, after a visit to the Grand Shrine of Ise, "I do not know what is here, but my tears flow in gratitude."²¹ Sugimoto has said that the poet "felt something although he did not know what it was. What he felt was a connection with the ancestors of the people who were living there at the time, a connection going all the way back to the age of the gods."²²

Photography then is not separate from this world or our concept of the hereafter. The parade of optical devices invented through the ages is an extension of our internal photographic sensibility, a desire to

bring light into darkness in an attempt to overcome the restrictions of time, space, memory, and death. The camera may be a modern device, but it is the manifestation of an old one-eyed way of seeing and understanding the world. Like Sugimoto's shrine, the camera is within the earth itself, part of nature, part of us.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 119.
2. Susan Sontag, "Photography within the Humanities," in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), 64.
3. Hiroshi Sugimoto, introduction to the "Dioramas" series in this volume, 45.
4. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 91.
5. Conversation with Hiroshi Sugimoto, December 6, 2004.
6. Donald Judd, quoted in Thomas Kellein, *Donald Judd: Early Work 1955-1968* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2002), 26.
7. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 5.
8. D. T. Suzuki, introduction to Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), ix.
9. Hoyen of Gosozen, quoted in Suzuki, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, ix.
10. Philip Steadman, *Vermeer's Camera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.
11. Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, trans. George Heard Hamilton, a typographic version by Richard Hamilton (Stuttgart: Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 1976). Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) established his reputation as a painter in France before World War I and moved to live in the United States in 1915. He pioneered two of the most important innovations in twentieth-century art: kinetic art and the ready-made.
12. Richard Hamilton, "Towards a typographical rendering of the Green Box," in *Collected Words: 1953-1982* (London: Thames and Hudson, n.d.), 189.
13. Robert Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp*, trans. George Heard Hamilton (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 68.
14. Marcel Duchamp, quoted in K. G. Pontus Hultén, *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 75.
15. Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1977), 34-35.
16. Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), xiv.
17. Hiroshi Sugimoto, quoted in a January 2003 interview posted on the website <http://www.naoshima-is.co.jp/english/archive/newsletter/no16/content.html>.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Wright Morris, "In Our Image," in *The Photography Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 67-68.
20. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 15.
21. Saigyō, quoted on the website www.naoshima-is.co.jp, op.cit.
22. *Ibid.*