

In an Indoor Age, the Streets Remain His Studio

By RICHARD B. WOODWARD

DAIDO MORIYAMA was everywhere in New York this fall. The subject of exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Japan Society and the Laurence Miller Gallery; of a handsome catalog on his life and work (from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), and of essays in prominent art magazines, he has enjoyed a scholarly star treatment unprecedented for a Japanese photographer in this country. The reviews were mainly raves.

Given the 61-year-old Mr. Moriyama's acknowledged debts to American artists, especially to William Klein's confrontational camera and Andy Warhol's acrid, Pop sensibility, this belated recognition is as instructive as it is overdue.

Against the background of photography seen in New York galleries and museums these days, his work can look simultaneously at home and estranged. His indifference to certain technical niceties places him squarely in the sector of the art world that has always distrusted perfect prints. His are often over- or underexposed, blurred or scratched, as if stored in piles under a bed.

His means of making pictures, however, as well as his prowling, scavenger eye put him at odds with the controlled, intimate mood that has dominated photographic practice for the last decade. He shoots black and white, mainly with a hand-held camera, and until recently made small-scale prints.

An impersonal artist who finds his gritty matter in

With art photography turning introspective in the studios, Daido Moriyama represents a vanishing breed of observers.

the world at large, he has stalked the Japanese for more than three decades and photographed this most homogeneous of nations as if it were populated entirely by outcasts and freaks. He is at heart a street photographer, and as an active proponent of this once-vital style — one that is now all but invisible in New York galleries — he can appear to be an alien twice over.

Popping up now from the other side of the globe, he looks like something of a relic, and his career is cause to reflect on the strange fate of the street-documentary style over the last 25 years.

In 1974, when Mr. Moriyama was first featured in New York, in a group show on "New Japanese Photography" at the Museum of Modern Art, he did not seem so out of place. His links to older Japanese figures like Shomei Tomatsu, and his breaks from them, were made clear, and his jaundiced vision of the city as a 24-hour comic nightmare, akin to Weegee's and Mr. Klein's, locked him into the American zeitgeist.

These were the years when Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander and their allies were remaking the photographic image into a more fractured and tenuous but still coherent thing. Robert Frank's "The Americans" was the Bible — proof, said Mr. Winogrand, "you could photograph anywhere." There was a hunger to devour the world and a faith that this could best be done with a hand-held Leica and a wide-angle lens.

The anarchic joy that pulsed from Mr. Winogrand's raucous images of New York in the 60's and 70's persuaded a generation to stand at Fifty-Seventh Street and Fifth Avenue, where it seemed everything worth photographing was passing by or soon would be.

Today it's not only faith in this quixotic illusion that

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San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

"Shibuya, 1967," by Daido Moriyama: a scavenger eye whose often blurred, scratched and underexposed work reflects a mistrust of controlled, perfect prints.

now seems dead. New York's street life ceased to hold the attention of young photographers well over 10 years ago; indeed, the appetite to hunt for pictures on the streets anywhere — or in the wider world beyond the studio or the home — has sharply declined.

The inward-looking tendency of art photography in the late 80's, summed up well by the Museum of Modern Art's 1991 group exhibition "The Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort," is even more pronounced today. Artists have portrayed their friends, families and themselves with abandon throughout the 90's. Just as the memoir has challenged the novel as the narrative of choice for young writers, so have the hermetic documentary and self-dramatics supplanted more expansive forms of address in photography.

The latest photography that emerges from art schools and that finds a place in galleries and museums is predominantly studio-based, theatrical in orientation and shot in color with large-format cameras. If Mr. Frank, Mr. Winogrand and Mr. Friedlander were guiding lights for their peers a quarter-century ago, their counterparts today would be Cindy Sherman, Nan Gold-

in and Sally Mann.

"The street is almost totally absent in the new work that comes in here and that I see in galleries," said Jeff Rosenheim, assistant curator in the department of photographs at the Metropolitan Museum. "The studio is all-powerful. It's all about the self."

The many reasons for this change of voice, from public to private, range from the ubiquity of television, which has assumed the former role of photography as eyewitness, to the economic imperative of making big prints for cavernous gallery rooms.

"People bring me documentary street work all the time," said the Los Angeles photography dealer Paul Kopeikin. "I don't think it has completely died out. But no one is buying it, so I can't really show it."

The triumph of postmodern ideology, which undercuts the neutral ground of the observer, is also responsible. "Political correctness has killed off documentary in general," said Sandra Phillips, senior curator at San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art. "There's an inhibition now about photographing strangers anywhere." Passersby are also far less willing than they once were

to be passive vehicles for a someone else's vision of them: photographers who work in the street face suspicion or hostility.

Many artists, including Tina Barney, Jeff Wall and Philip-Lorca diCorcia, have fuzzed the fine between a documentary photograph and a tableau as one way to drive a stake through the heart of idealist categories.

"Documentary itself is an empty notion for a lot of artists," said Anne Tucker, curator of photography at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts. "Photographing a guy being mugged, or photographing a guy being mugged on television or staging a guy being mugged are now the same. Distinctions between what is reality and what is media have become so blurred they're meaningless for the purposes of many photographers. Everything is open to question, including what's 'out there.'"

The in-your-face style practiced by Mr. Moriyama and his American and European counterparts during the 60's and 70's also tended to exclude women.

Lisette Model and Diane Arbus worked for long periods as flaneurs, but Helen Levitt is perhaps the

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Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

Streetwise: Garry Winogrand's photograph "New York, 1970."

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American woman to have spent a lifetime photographing in the streets. "It's an aggressive act pointing a camera in someone's face," said Ms. Phillips, who noted that Mr. Winogrand and his crew of male friends called themselves "the pack"

The one arena where the macho street aesthetic seems to have survived, and perhaps thrived, is in war photography. "Gilles Peress is a prime example of someone who has taken the techniques of street photography and applied them to world events," says Colin Westerbeck, co-author of "Bystander: A History of Street Photography" and associate curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago. "War and everyday life have merged in countries like Iran, Nicaragua, Bosnia and Kosovo." Everywhere he looks Mr. Peress seems to come upon the kind of sad, loony, surreal juxtapositions that Mr. Cartier-Bresson found in Mexico and Mr. Winogrand in New York.

There are other defenders of the faith as well. Mr. Friedlander, Tod Papageorge and Leo Rubenfiel are still clicking away on city streets around the globe. Thomas Roma and Sylvia Plachy still patrol Brooklyn and Manhattan. Mitch Epstein's snow of huge color prints this fall at Brent Sikkema in Chelsea even featured one of a woman lighting a cigarette for a stranger along Fifth Avenue. "It was my way of making a Winogrand picture," says Mr. Epstein. But the death early this year of the Indian photographer Ragubhir Singh further diminished the ranks of first-rate artists who find material simply by walking or driving around.

The large-format camera, the tool of choice for many young, ambitious photographers, thwarts spontaneity and offhand observations. The German artist Thomas Struth, who often blurs the action in his pictures, is nonetheless in the business of producing monumental prints with the richness of old-master paintings. The streets in his book called "Streets" were eerily empty. The excitement of discovering things on the fly is missing.

Even Mr. diCorcia's celebrated photographs of people on sidewalks are composed with stage-set lighting. The pictures seem to illustrate the point that Tokyo and New York and Berlin are now one place; they're less about detecting some hidden vitality that would be unknown without

his photographs. It's as if he knew what he wanted to say before he made the picture.

In the decade of globalization and cyberspace, when people interact more with their computer screens than with each other on street corners, it makes sense that photographers find private musings and fantasies more relevant than a crowd of shoppers at Home Depot. As the photographer Joel Sternfeld complains, "It's also much harder to make interesting pictures in a mall culture, in a McDonald's or a Starbuck's."

The absence of street life, along with the more widespread dismissal of documentary practice from art school curriculums, however, feels like an impoverishment of our visual history.

"Students don't realize that in 5 to 10 years the world is going to change again," Mr. Sternfeld said. "What is omnipresent now may be rare in the future, and a clear, sharp picture of the present is going to be intrinsically interesting."

The simple and, in some ways, unglamorous act of photographing people and events, unarmed by art theory, has lost its value in the art market and in schools. The photographer Justin Kimball, who has taught at the Rhode Island School of Design, said: "It's hard to convince students to go out into the world anymore. They all want to just stay in their rooms and photograph their stuff."

Mr. Moriyama's pictures, however occult or halting in articulation, point outward at the world, as if he were groping to explain his native country to himself after postwar assaults by the West. In a shrewd essay on Mr. Moriyama in the October issue of *Art in America*, Mr. Rubenfiel observed: "His Japan has fully absorbed the American virus into its own chemistry, and while a Japanese might hate this condition, there is no possibility of reversing it."

Feeling doomed, even disgusted, by what he sees happening around him — in stores and backyards, on highways and in karaoke bars — he has tried not to withdraw and to remain engaged with his culture, fashioning his own code of distress signals about his permanent alienation. His career and life demonstrate a rare kind of bravery. One might say that Mr. Moriyama is a documentary photographer in spite of himself. □