

DOWN
IN
THE
PARK
YOSHIYUKI KOHEI'S
NOCTURNES

**INTERVIEW BY
ARAKI NOBUYOSHI**

Michelangelo Antonioni's film Blow-Up (1966) places the photograph at the center of a gripping drama and in the process offers compelling commentary on the ambiguity of photographic veracity, the photographer as voyeur, and the fact that you never know what kind of scene you might capture in a public park with a camera. In 1971, while strolling across Tokyo to take night shots of skyscrapers, Japanese photographer Yoshiyuki Kohei was surprised to stumble upon a couple having sex on the veranda of a model home. This run-in inspired him to investigate a world of lustful adventurism in the city's parks after dark—couples having sex, sometimes in view of a rapt audience of voyeurs. Intrigued by this clandestine give-and-take of performance and spectatorship, Yoshiyuki became in effect the ultimate "peeper"

and photographed these secretive tableaux, staged in the shadowy corners of public parks. A small automatic camera and infrared film provided a stealthy cover—no sunburst of paparazzi-flash would startle those in flagrante delicto. The resulting scenes of unhinged desire, desperation, and palpable loneliness rendered in haunting chiaroscuro are a jarring combination of surrealist dreamscape and social document.

The following is a conversation between Yoshiyuki and the photographer-provocateur Araki Nobuyoshi, who for decades has playfully pushed the limits of kinkiness and sex in serious photography. Originally published in the Japanese porn magazine Weekend Super in 1979, this conversation appears here for the first time in English.





ARAKI NOBUYOSHI: I don't know you that well. I know who you are, but readers don't know much about you. Why don't you tell them about yourself? I'm sure they would like to know when you were born, for instance. How old are you? What interests you? What kind of work are you doing? I'll bet you're not in your twenties.

YOSHIYUKI KOHEI: I was born in 1946.

AN: As the genius of photography, I'd like to introduce Yoshiyuki Kohei to our readers. You were first featured seven or eight years ago, then?

YK: Something like that.

AN: You were featured first in *Shukan Shincho* in 1972, and then in *Camera Mainichi*. You created a huge sensation by taking voyeuristic photographs of people having sex, and of voyeurs—peepers—watching people having sex, with infrared film. A lot of people made a lot of noise about them, but my critique consisted of exactly one line: "These are what I call photographs!" [LAUGHS]. After that we met and chatted now and then, but I haven't seen you for quite a while. Recently, I received an invitation to your solo show. I couldn't go because I was busy, but I mentioned it to the editor of *Weekend Super*, and heard later that he went to see it. When I asked him about it, he said he liked the way the photographs were exhibited.

YK: I turned out all the lights in the space, and gave each visitor a flashlight. That way I was reconstructing the original settings. I also blew the photographs up to life-size.

AN: You recreated the original settings.

YK: Yes.

AN: I'm sure that you have a concept about exhibiting them. Can you tell us about it?

YK: This is how I would have done it if I had exhibited the photographs back when I shot them. But there was a lot going on then, and the magazine feature came out first. The concept remained in the back of my mind, though. Last year, I lost my job, and I thought, why not?

AN: Viewers went into a dark room with a flashlight and looked at the photographs? But that way, you can only see part of them.

YK: Yes, that's how I wanted them to be viewed. I wanted people to look at the bodies in the photographs an inch at a time. But this is an uneasy situation. When it's completely dark, the whole photograph is illuminated, but the viewer looks at it section by section. My original concept involved a corridor where points of light would be focused on the photographs. Viewers would look at them slowly . . . carefully. They might even touch the photos. That's how I wanted to exhibit them. But then I realized that viewers would suffer if I forced them to look at the photographs in that way. So, that time I just used a board as a partition in the middle of the space.

AN: That sounds interesting. And I think people could see what you were aiming for. But you're focusing too much on *how* you show them. Five years ago, you wanted to exhibit them in a certain way, and the idea implanted itself in your brain until it became sort of an obsession. It's like coming into some money and deciding to buy a nice gift for a girl you had a crush on long ago. And it's how you'd feel if the girl said: "Oh no, nobody does that anymore," isn't it?

YK: In a way.

AN: We're talking about how to display them today. The photographs are defi-

nately good, so maybe you should have exhibited them more straightforwardly. They are powerful enough to thrill anyone who comes to see them. The type of exhibition you're talking about reminds me of a woman trapped in a bad relationship.

YK: I really enjoyed watching people looking at the photographs. Since the points of light were also their lines of sight, I saw things that were totally unexpected.

AN: That kind of thing was the mainstream in contemporary art not too long ago. If you asked me, I'd say go back to simple ways of exhibiting photographs. I'd tell fine artists to return to oil paintings and photographers to return to photographs.

YK: But your activities have a conceptual aspect to them.

AN: Yes, but when you exhibit photographs, you have to do it with conviction. And I heard you didn't issue many invitations. That was a bad idea. It's a shame you didn't make a really spectacular gesture.

YK: I'm a coward.

AN: Cowards don't go around spying on people and photographing them having sex. What was your motivation?

YK: It had never occurred to me to take that kind of photograph. I knew about peeping, though, and then one day I stumbled onto a scene—an incredible scene [LAUGHS]. That was when I was still an amateur. At that time, there weren't many skyscrapers in front of Chuo Park in Shinjuku. There was a model apartment in one of them. I was walking behind it with a friend (we had just finished a shoot), when we saw something amazing!



AN: "Something." I like your choice of words.

YK: Yes! I was shocked. They were actually screwing.

AN: They were?

YK: Yes. And when I saw them, I knew this was something I had to photograph.

AN: You didn't photograph them at the time?

YK: I had my camera, but it was too dark. After that I did some research. I found out that Toshiba made flashbulbs—infrared flashbulbs. But before I had a chance to use more than a few of them, they were discontinued. Then I looked around for filters, and ended up using two tricolor separation filters. After a while I heard that Kodak had some flashbulbs, so I used those. At that time, infrared flash units didn't exist. Sunpak came out with them after I took these photographs.

AN: So they're making them now?

YK: Yes. Now, anybody can take photographs like these.

AN: Wow! Guess I won't be able to have sex in dark places anymore. Are the people you photograph totally unaware of what's going on? I've never used equipment like that, so I have no idea.

YK: The light flashes—a red light. I'd better not say anymore!

AN: Like the lights on a passing car, from the subjects' point of view?

YK: That's right. Anyway, they're so engrossed in what they're doing that even a lot of light shouldn't faze them.

AN: Let's have a look at the photographs. They are amazing—because they're really screwing. Look at him giving it to her! You need a lot of nerve to take

photographs like these. Mine are just pseudo-documentaries, so everything is staged [LAUGHS]. These days it's the women who are aggressive. At Shinjuku Gyoen park, for instance, the women are always on top.

YK: I saw that sometimes, too. But I can't photograph that. If the guy's on the bottom, he'll notice the camera.

AN: Look at this one!

YK: This guy was hopeless. He couldn't get it up. The ambience made him self-conscious, I guess. I was right near them, listening and thinking he'd get it together. But then he said: "It's no good."

AN: The wonderful thing about this photograph is that it shows the peeper. It's a self-portrait. It shows your shadow. I really like that. It's probably strange to talk about photography theory in a context like this, but this is what a photograph is supposed to be. Oh, look: that peeper is touching her. He's assisting.

YK: Yes, maybe. But peepers shouldn't touch, because they'll definitely be discovered. Things gradually get out of hand. The peepers, too!

AN: Yeah? Here he's touching her ass. Oh, I've done that. What's this . . . the peeper's fly is open. But you know, this scene is actually more festive than pathetic. Look where the peeper's hand is!

YK: Look at his face, too. The peeper's face.

AN: They say all peepers have buck teeth, and it's true, they really do. What's this . . . one, two, three . . . there are *eight* people watching! When, say, four or five peepers get that close, the guy is going to be too scared to say a word, even if he knows they're there.

YK: Definitely. Things are different now, but when I shot these photographs, even if the subjects had heard rumors that peepers were around, they wouldn't have thought they'd come so close. And if they did see the peepers, they'd just stand up. Remember, the couple is lying on the ground. In their place, I'd be scared.

AN: Wasn't it hard to shoot these photographs?

YK: Well, it's harder to photograph the peepers. But at that time, nobody ever dreamed they'd be photographed. I had a tiny camera with a flash attachment. I think it would be almost impossible to do that now.

AN: But you could do it openly, couldn't you? Just grab one shot with your flash, and then run?

YK: I guess so. Maybe that's the way to do it.

AN: Then you get different reactions. Maybe the peepers would be more upset at you than the couples would be for spoiling their fun, and start chasing you. Then you'd photograph their reaction.

YK: Maybe if I took sequential photographs. Wonder what would happen if I yelled out to them while they were doing it, then took a flash photograph.

AN: That's an excellent idea! What I've been doing is taking photographs at night with a small flash, yelling: "These light-scapes are obscene!" It's fun when you have only seconds to get a shot, and the reaction is very clear.

YK: Yes, it is fun.

AN: Maybe everybody will be doing it by this summer, once word about the Sunpak flash unit spreads.

YK: I heard the company had a lot of inquiries after my show.

AN: Uh-oh!

YK: Yeah. I won't be able to do my work anymore [LAUGHS].

AN: You mean nobody has ever come after you when you took photographs like this?

YK: Never.

AN: Wow! Maybe you're a ninja.

YK: The guy who developed the Sunpak infrared strobe is a real lecher and a lot of fun.

AN: Really? He must have done a lot of fieldwork.

YK: Yes. I guess that's where the idea came from.

AN: Lechers are the only hope for the twenty-first century. Only lechers come up with good ideas. Only lechers take good photographs. So are you one, too?

YK: I think I'm completely ordinary, but maybe there's a little lecher in everyone.

AN: I guess it's a matter of degree. I am fascinated by this topic. . . . I like the way the legs are open in this shot.

YK: I think she was a student—really cute. Others are much more outrageous. They get carried away.

AN: What do you mean?

YK: Once a couple walked over and laid a piece of cloth on the ground. I thought: "They're going to do it," and then they started screwing. The guy pulled his pants down to his knees.

AN: That's good! In this one, he just unzipped his fly. You really need to see

the guy's ass. Men are shy about that part of the body, though.

YK: I don't know about that. . . .

AN: They should get completely naked. He could sit her on his lap.

YK: But most of them do it in the missionary position. Or standing up. They do it in the rain, after everyone else has left the park.

AN: That's their chance!

YK: Right. There's nobody around then.

AN: Why do they go to the park to screw? Have they done it everywhere else already?

YK: I don't think that's why. Even if the girl isn't thrilled about having sex there, the guy might say: "Let's do it here." Maybe they've been drinking nearby or something. But only couples who've had sex before screw in a park. You can always spot them, because they walk fast.

AN: Really? So you stand at the park entrance watching. Then you see a couple walking fast, so you know you'll get some shots?

YK: That's definitely what I look for.

AN: I'm not a peeper, but I once tried to spot couples headed for "love hotels" at Shinjuku Station. My hunches were usually right. You can tell.

YK: I've never seen a couple who haven't already had sex together screw in a park. Foreplay takes too long, and the peepers will gather around, and the opportunity is gone. They have to have had sex at least once. Even if the girl doesn't feel like it, guys want to do it in the park. I've overheard their conversations.

AN: I'd like to observe sometime. We could organize a tour. Let's do a grand

tour, with you as the guide. Can you imagine a bunch of photographers filing into a park [LAUGHS]?

YK: A photo-session!

AN: Right. Once our tour leader raises his flag, the flashes will go off all at once. The surprised subjects will stare at us, and we'll photograph that, too. A colleague and I once shot a couple having sex in a car, from a microbus. When the first flash goes off, they're stunned. Then you take another shot. So this time we'll each use two flash units, not infrared, grab our shots and run. Or we could bring our own bodyguards to scare them.

YK: You can't threaten people. You can photograph them, but the law. . . .

AN: So photographing them isn't illegal?

YK: No, as long as you don't say anything. If you keep quiet, take your photographs and run, it's okay.

AN: Really? It sounds almost criminal. You know, you could blackmail people with these photographs.

YK: That's true.

AN: So, let's do it, all right? This summer, and make a big event of it. It'd be a shame to waste the opportunity.

YK: This summer, then!

AN: Yes, yes. Watch out, everybody. Yoshiyuki is coming! ♡

Translator's note: Japanese personal names have been rendered surname first, in accordance with Japanese custom.









Page 77 (bottom) and page 81 are both *Untitled, 1979*; all other photographs *Untitled, 1971*, from the series *The Park*.

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