

Kunié Sugiura

Ubiquitous Conjunction

Curated by Ryo Sawayama

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1.

In 1963, at the age of twenty, Kunié Sugiura moved from Japan to the United States and enrolled at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago—an institution which descends from the New Bauhaus lineage. It was in Chicago that Sugiura first encountered photography as a medium and began her career as an artist. From that point on, Sugiura has consistently worked with photography as her primary medium.

At the time, photography was still regarded within the art world as a secondary field, subordinate to painting and sculpture. It was only later that a number of women artists—such as Cindy Sherman, Francesca Woodman, Ana Mendieta, Laurie Simmons, Barbara Kruger, among others—would take up photography as an important medium. Sugiura's work anticipated this shift (a contemporary parallel can be found in Betty Hahn).

Photography came to be actively taken up by women artists precisely because it had long been dismissed as a secondary mode of expression. Unlike painting and sculpture, traditional fields largely occupied by male artists, photography was seen as a democratic field open to those on the margins. Therefore, Sugiura—a foreigner and a woman—turning to photography as her medium was a conscious and theoretical choice bound up in these very issues.

Although Sugiura embraced photography as her primary medium, she has distanced herself from presenting so-called "photographic works" associated with straight photography, and likewise from being regarded as a "photographer." Instead, Sugiura has continued to pursue and expand the latent plasticity inherent in photography, experimenting with how photography might become a means of expression equal to painting and sculpture. Sugiura's work does not treat photography as a privileged medium in itself; it engages photography through hybridization and its conjunction with other media.

The use of hybridization can be seen in Sugiura's *Photocanvas Island 2* (1971), where photography conjoins with painting. Here, acrylic paint is layered over a photograph of the surface of the Coney Island breakwater, where the rough "ground" of the photographed breakwater is superimposed onto the "ground" of the painting, and the brushstrokes are combined with the pre-existing pattern of the rock surface. The three-dimensional object of the breakwater and the two-dimensional picture plane, the figurative and the abstract, are brought into conjunction. Here, rather than placing the brushstrokes freely, Sugiura arranges them along the textures and patterns already formed by the rocks.

For Sugiura, the conjunction of photography and painting meant collaborating with an already-existing nature: creating a superposition of nature and artifice.

2.

This kind of conjunction can be found throughout Sugiura's work: the conjunction of photography and painting in *Island 2* (1971), *Christmas Lights* (1979) and *Hossawa* (2022); the conjunction of multiple frames in *Arita* and *Miyazaki* (both 2023); the connection of different sequences in *Story of Catfish* (1993); the linking of skeletal structure and joints through X-ray photography in *Vertebra* (2021) and *Racks* (1994), in which a photo rack holding postcard-sized X-ray photographs recalls the connective structure of bones, or the structure of DNA. This conjunction can also be seen where Sugiura binds flowers together with thread, or in the large photocanvas of a couple having sex. In Sugiura's work, photography is a plastic material that carries out endless operations of severance and conjunction with everything it touches. Through these conjunctions, new forms are produced. By staging these encounters, conjunctions, and hybridizations, Sugiura turned photography into a site of experimentation, revealing its open, transversal, and mediating nature.

Sugiura was also known in Japan as a writer, with a regular column in *Bijutsu Techō*. Before the widespread use of the internet, the information she sent from New York, from the 1980s onward, was extremely valuable. Sugiura introduced the New York art scene to Japan, welcomed and looked after many Japanese visitors in her studio, and connected them with people on the ground in the local art community—she was herself a mediator in every sense. Sugiura understood, better than anyone, that the encounter between two things generates a new form, and that chance encounters give rise to new events. In a sense, Sugiura's stance as a mediator resembles the very attitude she takes toward photography as a medium.

Sugiura's work carries forward a New Bauhaus mode of thinking that crosses and conjoins photography with a variety of other media, in parallel with her treatment of photography as a site of formal experimentation. What characterizes her practice is its continuity with early experimental and avant-garde photography—through the use of photograms, X-ray photographs and the material and fluid use of photographic emulsion. Sugiura treats photography not simply as a means of reproducing an existing scene, but as an experimental field for formal invention.

Experimental and avant-garde photography explored precisely this plastic potential inherent in photography, and such experiments were themselves preceded by occult photography, including early spirit photography. Notably, the birth of photography and the rise of spiritualism were historically contemporaneous. Multiple exposures on wet and dry plates, stains, chemical unevenness, and irregular reduction reactions during development often produced unexpected double images or hazy forms. This made it

possible for different moments in time to coexist within the same pictorial space, as in Futurist painting (although, more precisely, Futurist painting was influenced by experimental photography, rather than the reverse). These photographic processes and their unpredictable effects all served to expand photography's plastic potential.

3.

At the time, photography was believed to reveal the presence of spirits automatically and objectively, without human intervention. Avant-garde and experimental photography consciously and aesthetically repurposed techniques first seen in early spirit photography: multiple exposure, solarization and the photogram. Therefore, it could be said that spirit photography had already realized photography's chemical plasticity, preceding experimental photography and the avant-garde.

One could say that photography announces the existence of another "nature"—a parallel world. Photography reveals that the perceivable world runs parallel to a supernatural world, and to a world beyond human perception, that includes electromagnetic waves such as ultraviolet light and X-rays. X-ray photography visualizes precisely that behind the visible lies a reality beyond human perception. By chemically combining multiple substances, photography demonstrates that the world is a superimposition and conjunction of multiple universes, exceeding what human beings can coherently grasp. Through developments in contemporary science and early photography, it became clear that the way human beings had grasped the world was no more than a contingently generated pattern—a subjective convenience.

Early photography served as evidence in police records and as a form of historical documentation. At the same time, however, its chemical process of mixing volatile substances and its capacity to reveal what would otherwise be invisible gave early photography a magical, even suspect quality. Photography and spirit photography were bound together by this same unpredictable process of development. The word "occult" carries the meaning of "hidden knowledge." In this sense, occult photography sought to make visible an invisible, hidden world—the latent plasticity of the world and its hidden creativity.

It was this expectation—that photography possessed an automatism capable of revealing a hidden, surreal world, an automatic productive force independent of human agency—that drew the Surrealists, who placed automatism at the center of their methodology, so intensely to photography. The emergence of an image through chemical reactions in photography shares the same structure as a spirit medium, who similarly makes the invisible visible. Photography is thus the perfect medium, in both senses of the word. Through its chemical plasticity, photography binds together different worlds and reveals another, invisible nature.

4.

In this way, photography transmits a hidden world into the here and now. For example, Sugiura's *The Kitten Papers* (1992) was made by leaving two kittens alone in a darkroom for a week and turning the traces they left—their footprints and movements—into the work itself. The traces are made not by the artist but by cats moving of their own will; they record the cats' unpredictable movements, which are beyond human intention. This device—a cat in a darkroom—recalls the thought experiment in quantum mechanics known as "Schrödinger's cat", in which a cat sealed inside a box is described as simultaneously alive and dead—an object in quantum superposition. Here the contents of the box constitute a literal "black box", and whether the cat is alive or dead cannot be known until the box is opened.

Although Schrödinger's cat is a thought experiment modeling the indeterminacy of measurement in quantum mechanics, Sugiura's *The Kitten Papers* is an experiment actually carried out in a darkroom. Among the works exhibited in the same exhibition, *Story of Catfish*, made by Sugiura during the same period, belongs to the same artistic trajectory. In both *The Kitten Papers* and *Story of Catfish*, the accumulation of uncontrollable, probabilistic deviations produced by the behavior of animals in the darkroom appears as material traces fixed onto photographic paper.

An important point to note is that the word "Papers" in *The Kitten Papers* evokes the documentary practice of reconstructing an event after the fact from its material traces—a movement of nature that no one observed. Here, Sugiura functions simultaneously as the maker and observer.

Sugiura's photograms, in dealing with the physical movement of living creatures in the darkroom, reveal the countless deviations possible within nature—the superposition of multiple worlds. The unrestrained movement and energy of these creatures arise not because the world is fixed and static, but because countless possibilities remain latent and open within it. It is because these innumerable worlds are superimposed simultaneously, that the world possesses creativity. Here, the living creature is not merely an object being photographed, but it is itself the subject that produces the image.

5.

The fact that Sugiura has repeatedly chosen living things—such as humans, animals, and flowers—as her subjects is congruous with her interest in the formation of natural forms. A living creature, which produces its own form through its own agency, is structurally similar to photography, which also produces an image automatically (for example, a flower grows by its own power and forms its own shape as a flower, entirely by its own power). As Sugiura herself has said, a flower is a reproductive organ: the stamen produces pollen, and the pistil receives that pollen to create a new life that ultimately becomes the seed.

Sugiura's works that bind flowers together with thread appear to show, quite literally, the conjunction of male and female—pollination and fertilization—within a process of biological reproduction. Here, photography's automatism responds to nature's process of self-formation.

The photographic emulsion itself is, materially, a forced homogeneous dispersion and suspension of substances that do not naturally dissolve into one another—a mixture of water-based gelatin and fine particles of silver salts. The very support of a photograph embodies, at the material level, the conjunction between heterogeneous elements, as photography arises through an operation—emulsification—that binds together things that are chemically unmixable by nature. This operation recalls the Hindu creation myth of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, in which every manner of plant and seed is placed into the ocean of milk and churned, and from that churning, the sun, the moon, the gods, and all animals are born.

This conjunction in reproduction and photography can also be linked to the alchemical term *coniunctio*. In the alchemical process, the chymical wedding—the chemical marriage of opposites, sulfur (the male principle) and mercury (the female principle)—was said to produce a new substance: the philosopher's stone. *Coniunctio* meant a chemical conjunction, while at the same time serving as a metaphor for the conjunction of the sexes.

The mixing and blending of heterogeneous elements—emulsification—could be thought of as the emergence of life itself. The human body, living creatures, flowers, and the earth itself—subjects that Sugiura has persistently captured—belong precisely to this realm of nature and living things, onto which she superimposes the chemical process of photography's own formation, together with her own acts of painting and image-making. Photography, rather than serving as a means of reproduction, can be understood as a self-generating movement that, through acts of conjunction, generates new forms—releasing a creative productive force inherent in the world itself. Sugiura's work reveals the ubiquity of an automatic creative power that permeates the world.

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