

## Sakiko Nomura and Ango Sakaguchi. *Ango*. Bookshop M, 2017.

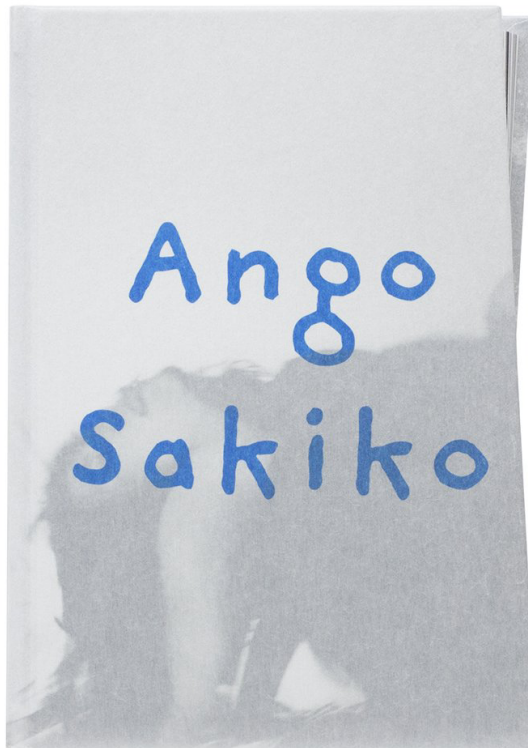
**José Bértolo**

Instituto de Estudos de Literatura e Tradição, FCSH-UNL

Escola Superior de Artes e Design — Caldas da Rainha

[jlbertolo@gmail.com](mailto:jlbertolo@gmail.com)

ORCID: 0000-0003-0445-0909



*Ango* is part of a collection planned and developed by Satoshi Machiguchi, the Japanese graphic designer behind both the creative design studio based in Tokyo MATCH & Company and the publishing house Bookshop M. The main feature of this collection is that all the books included combine a literary work by a classic Japanese author with photographs by a contemporary photographer.

Before the title in review, three other volumes were published in this collection: in 2016, *Dazai* combined Osamu Dazai's short story "Villon's Wife" (1947) with photographs by Daido Moriyama; still in 2016, *Odasaku* joined Oda Sakunosuke's tale "At the Horse Races" (1946) with photographs, again, by Moriyama; in 2017, *Ango* matched Ango Sakaguchi's "In the Forest, Beneath Cherries in Full Bloom" (1947) with photographs by — for the third time — Moriyama.

Also published in 2017, *Ango* includes text by Sakaguchi as well — this is the reason why it shares the same title with the other book of the same year — but it also marks the first collaboration between Machiguchi and a photographer other than Moriyama in the context of the collection. This time, the editor's choice fell on Sakiko Nomura, a photographer who was already part of the catalogue of MATCH & Company with the photobooks *Tsukuyomi* (2005), *Kondo Ryohei* (2006), and also one of her most celebrated works, *Nude / A Room / Flowers* (2012).

The entire set of books — *Dazai*, *Odasaku*, *Ango* and *Ango* — clearly responds to a poetics of the collection on the part of Machiguchi. This emerges firstly from the combination of classic texts with contemporary artworks; secondly, from the material and graphic construction of the books; and thirdly, from the specific authors and stories selected to be part of the collection. In this regard, it is certainly not accidental that all the Japanese authors represented lived throughout the World War II, and that the specific stories selected by Machiguchi were published between 1946 and 1947, that is, in the immediate post-war period.

The stories have various points in common, but two of them are prominent and must be highlighted. To begin with, all the narratives are primarily humanistic, albeit with pessimistic undertones, tackling human relations, and especially the relations between men and women. In addition, a traumatic memory of war is (more or less explicitly) inscribed in all the stories, being especially apparent in the authors' depiction of physical and psychological violence.

War occupies a central place in Sakaguchi's "The War and a Woman". The tale revolves around a man and a woman, a former prostitute, throughout and after the World War II. As stated in a prefatory note, the text was first published in 1946, but was highly censored by the Civil Censorship Detachment of the GHQ (the offices of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers during the occupation of Japan) due to alleged "Militaristic/Love of War Propaganda". The original, uncensored version of the story would only be published in Japan in 2000.

An important aspect of this edition of Sakaguchi's story is that the censored passages are included in grey, contrasting with the rest of the text in black. This allows the reader to read the original story or the censored version (should s/he choose to not read the words in grey). Interestingly, some of the most striking passages are among those that were censored and deal with the abovementioned question of "Love of War":

“The woman came to enjoy the war.”

“She was not aware of it herself, but what she had been in love with was not to be found in Nomura; it was within the air raids. If she could always stay like this, he thought, maybe I could find some happiness. If only the war could go on forever.”

“The war had become mixed up in their love. Please, he begged. Let the war go on forever.”

“I should have enjoyed the war more. I should have thrown myself into every second of it, enjoyed it until completely exhausted. Until I spat blood, until I dropped dead. I should have sucked all the joy from it that I could get. I should have absorbed it, become one with it — and there before him, the war had turned into a beautiful, petite body.” (Nomura and Sakaguchi, 2017)<sup>1</sup>

These censored passages are some of the most important from a literary standpoint, because, on one hand, they materialize the psychosexual dimension of the story, and, on the other hand, they reveal Sakaguchi’s critical stance against the war and how it affected the daily lives (and loves) of the Japanese. In fact, it is ironic that the censorship committee described these passages as “love of war propaganda”, when in fact Sakaguchi seems to be criticizing the war and questioning the ways it affects people, turning them into psychologically and emotionally ill human beings, unable to untie their personal lives to the collective war. There is thus a metaphorical dimension in “The War and a Woman” that had been lost for decades in the censored version. Sakaguchi’s criticism of the war — and the exploitation of the war by everyone involved (and *all* were involved, since this was a *world* war) — becomes clear in this passage (censored, as one might guess): “War, he thought, is just a way to live out fantasies; a plaything. It is not just me. Everyone, he thought, everybody has used it as their toy”.

In Sakaguchi’s tale, we are a far cry from the honest and simple humanism of works such as Erich Maria Remarque’s *A Time to Love and a Time to Die...* Sakaguchi denounces the horrors of the war, but not in a pamphlet-like way; rather as a satire.

The choice of this tale for the fourth book in the collection is explained by Machiguchi in an afterword. In this brief but instigating text, the editor recounts the impact of the war on the lives of his father and Sakiko Nomura’s grandmother. He also explains that with war being absent from his and Nomura’s lives (he was born in 1971, she in 1967), what remained in the Japan of recent decades was an “attitude towards war”. Well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (and over 70 years since the end of the last world war), the choice of this story by Sakaguchi also seems to aim at raising awareness for what one can perceive as an impending doom. Machiguchi writes: “Let us continue to think ever more clearly, ever more coolly. After all, an attitude toward the war is still within our reach”.

As shown, this book can be seen as part literature and part literary history, but it is also a photobook. It will find most of its readers among those interested in photography, particularly in an international context, where Sakiko Nomura’s name is better known and has more currency than Ango Sakaguchi’s.

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<sup>1</sup> Pages are not numbered in this edition.

Sakiko Nomura reportedly said about this book: “There’s the writer Ango Sakaguchi, and there’s me. I hope that, through the selection of photographs that seek to add another dimension to the work, the readers will be able to experience a brand-new universe” (Nomura *apud* Robert, 2021). And this is exactly what is intended with the book (and the collection it belongs to): to not be entirely about literature, nor about photography, but about something in between. The text is contaminated by the photographs, and vice-versa, or, borrowing from Nomura’s words, one adds another dimension to the other, in a mutual relationship.

While looking into Nomura’s photographs, we are faced with most of the attributes that made her work known to the public: the images are in black and white, grainy and generally dark. The way Nomura photographs bodies, and their visual relationship to the environment, is remarkable, and harks back, perhaps, to some of the work of Nobuyoshi Araki, to whom she was an assistant before starting her career as a photographer. In what concerns the human figure, the most unique aspect of this photobook is that we only see naked female bodies, which may be surprising, given that Nomura is known as one of the few female photographers who depicts male nudity (and certainly one of the best doing it). In fact, men are almost absent from this visual narrative, appearing only in the final images. This creates a noticeable — and particularly productive — dissonance with Sakaguchi’s text, in which the male protagonist is always present. We are also reminded that *Ango* can be perceived as the product of Nomura’s (and Machiguchi’s, let us not forget) interpretation of Sakaguchi’s text. The fact that she chose to leave the male protagonist out of the visual and narrative flow created by the photographs may say something about the way she read the story and chose to work from it.

Although the dominant subjects of the photographs are women, interior spaces and flora — familiar to those acquainted with Sakiko Nomura’s work —, there is a great diversity of subjects and photographic genres in the book. Uniting everything is her characteristically melancholic mood and a noirish expressionism that takes us back to some cinema of the 1940s — coincidentally or not, the decade in which Sakaguchi story was written.

The interplay between Sakaguchi’s text and Nomura’s photographs is sometimes direct and easy to decipher, but most of the times the relations between them are not that clearcut. This apparent divergence between text and image produces some interpretive resistance on the part of the reader but also incites him/her to create his/her own reading of the connections, thus becoming an active agent in the meaning-making of the book. This attests not only to the symbolic and expressive richness of Sakaguchi’s tale and Nomura’s art, but also to the mastery of Satoshi Machiguchi (assisted by Minori Asada) as a book designer with a special talent for sequencing images.

I conclude with a note on the material quality of the book, which is — as always is the case with books designed by Machiguchi — striking. The book comes in a cardboard box, and the hardcover has a pleasing texture to it. In it, we read the title, *Ango*, and the name of the photographer, Sakiko, below. The book has different versions in different languages — English, French, German, and Japanese —, and in each of them the words in the cover are in different colours. Inside the book, the visual interplay between the text and the images is creative and diverse: sometimes

a spread contains text and image; at other times, it contains only text (a single phrase or whole blocks); and in other occasions only images are displayed. The paper is thick, slightly glossy, and the quality of print is as commendable as ever in Machiguchi's editions, with deep, rich blacks.

An interesting and quirky characteristic is the fact that on the right side of the cover, the paper cut side, the book is cut on an angle. At first glance, this may seem like a design choice with a decorative function. However, in a book built around ambience, fluidity and imbalance, this decision may convey, from the outset, important qualities regarding the identity of this book at conceptual and visual levels.

## Works Cited

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