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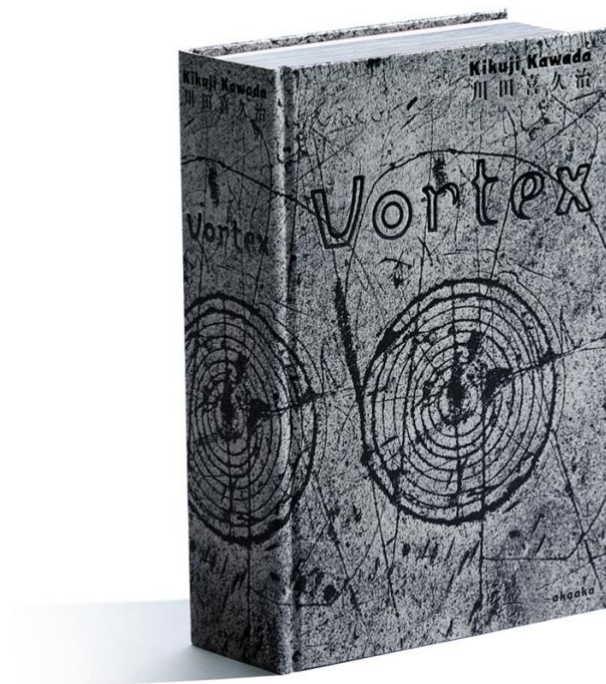
Kikuji Kawada. *Vortex*. Akaaka, 2022.

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It would not be entirely fair to say that Kikuji Kawada has lived his entire life under the shadow of his first, groundbreaking work, *Chizu* (*The Map*, 1965). In fact, Kawada continued presenting new work, as well as publishing photobooks, regularly up to these days. We must recognize, however, that Kawada's work after the 60s was invariably haunted by *Chizu*. This is understandable insofar as the 1965 book is celebrated as one of the most important photography works of the twentieth century. But when a photographer presents us with a new work such as *Vortex*, we should try to see it for what it is, instead of looking at it solely through the lens of the artist's historical path and evolution.

Vortex is the latest photobook by acclaimed Japanese photographer Kikuji Kawada. It was published in July 2022 by Akaaka, one of the most important publishers currently coming from Japan. Kawada is a longstanding member of the pantheon of Japanese photography, along with Daido Moriyama, Masahisa Fukase, Nobuyoshi Araki, Shomei Tomatsu, Takuma Nakahira, among others, but his name and his work have not been as familiar to Western audiences as those of the others for decades. It was only in the last few years that he became well-known in the West, namely, after the publication of the beautifully delicate *The Last Cosmology* in 2015, and the maquette edition of *Chizu* in 2021, both by MACK.

Vortex reached the West in limited numbers, as commonly happens with photobooks published by Asian publishing houses, but that didn't stop it from becoming a minor sales success, quickly being sold out in many specialized bookstores. This may be due to a certain cult status that Kawada achieved in the last few years, which can be explained, on the one hand, by his name being associated with MACK, and, on the other hand, by the photographer's presence on the Internet. Having been born in 1933 and being 89 years old at the time of this writing (he is turning 90 in January 1st, 2023), Kawada must be one of the oldest, if not the oldest, renowned photographers with a very active presence on Instagram. Commenting on Kawada's relentless activity on the Internet, Yoshiaki Kay notes that "Kawada's photographs on Instagram are far from serene. They are unsettling not just in their imagery, but also in Kawada's frequent act of posting them — one cannot help but sense some uncontrollable impulse of the photographer" (Kai, 2002: 527). *Vortex* is born from this persistent activity online, gathering — albeit not exclusively — photographs that were first posted on the photographer's Instagram account.

Kawada uses Instagram like this photo sharing social network was first meant to be used: a way of sharing slices of life in the characteristic stillness of photographs. In a way, one can say that Instagram still works more as a book than as a gallery. As a "reader", you leaf through the images as you leaf through the pages of a book. But Instagram also offers the photographer an immediacy that s/he would not find in a book or in a gallery. That is why the temporality of the photographs posted on Instagram is more directly related to the flow of life than in any other medium. From the few photographers that took advantage of this, Kawada has certainly been one of the most interestingly prolific.

Kawada's Japanese origin may not be totally unimportant to this discussion. Japanese photography is historically intertwined with life and experience, as the works of the abovementioned artists testify. In the documentary film *Traces of a Diary* (2010), directors André Príncipe and Marco Martins travelled to Japan to

interview a group of photographers, in order to ascertain the strong relation between Japanese photography and the diaristic mode. In the last segment of the film, Araki claims enthusiastically: “Photo is diary; diary is life!”. In “Remote Past a Memoir: 1951-1966”, a text of 2016, Kawada also writes *apropos* of a set of photos he had shot long ago, in the 50s and 60s. Meditating on the interplay between life, time, memory, and photography as a mediating technology, he states:

...The lens itself is indeed a machine for glimpsing into the past and future. Both the telescope and the microscope serve to imaginatively compound our vision. From negative to positive, it induces the beginnings of memory to shift from the glooms of chemistry towards a new illusion. It had also attempted to transform that which was lost in pressing the shutter, into radiant life. The images that remain as profound memories are alluring bodies that move faintly and ever so slightly. All of the past becomes a needle that penetrates the future, engraving its body, bringing a flower to blossom vividly like that of a tattoo. (Kawada, 2016)

Despite the current tendency to consider Kawada a quasi-formalist, or at least a conceptual artist, I prefer to look at *Vortex* as the work of a diarist, the same way I look at his Instagram account as a photo-diary. In a short piece entitled “The Map and The Chronicle”, Rei Masuda also discussed these same propositions within the work of Kawada, albeit through the concepts of the “map” — which was obviously fundamental in *Chizu*, but is also crucial in *Vortex* — and the “chronicle”:

A chronicle is in effect a continuous record of events written in order of their occurrence, and serves to explain the process by which one arrived at the present. If a map’s intention is to confirm one’s current position in the midst of the flow of time that extends from the past. (Masuda, 2016)

I would argue that *Vortex* responds to a particular kind of photo-diary, a mix between “map” and “chronicle” where both space and time are disorganized, non-referential. This disorganization takes place because the change of medium from Instagram to book also changes the sequencing of the images and, consequently, the reader’s experience. For instance, contrary to posts on the Internet, there are no dates on the book. Also, the book does not include the compelling hashtags that accompany the photos on Instagram and sometimes help the reader place themselves geographically. Nevertheless, leafing through the pages of *Vortex* throws us into that same “vortex” we are thrown into when sliding through the images on the photographer’s Instagram account. Strong lines and colours, abstract shapes, strange perspectives, weird textures, and so on, morph into each other while *reading* the book, finally producing what Alex Prior aptly described as a “visual cacophony” (Prior, 2022), but also an oneiric and alternative — purely photographic — reality.

The work Kawada has produced in the last few years is as diaristic as Moriyama’s (who is also in his 80s, and famous for having embraced quite early digital photography), in the way that it communicates an existence in the world that cannot be entirely disconnected from a photo camera. As Gerry Badger states in *Traces of a Diary*, diaristic Japanese Photography become about “not so much recording the world, but recording one’s experience of the world”. Publications such as *Vortex* or Moriyama’s ongoing *Record* series are truly the works of “camera-men”,

such as the modernist avant-gardes of the last century (think of Dziga Vertov or Jonas Mekas) conceptualised when thinking about how to close the gap between the artist and the camera while recording his/her own life.

In *The Last Cosmology*, Kawada states: “I want to spy the depths of a multihued heart that is like a Karman vortex” (qt. in Vermare, 2022: 532). And in one of the three essays that accompany *Vortex*, Pauline Vermare clarifies that: “The phenomenon of a Karman vortex is defined by American meteorologist Tom Niziol as ‘a linear chain of spiralling whirlwinds, that are spectacular is satellite imagery’” (Vermare, 2022: 533). This chain of spiraling whirlwinds, both “stunningly beautiful and deeply haunting” (ibidem) is the perfect metaphor for the snapshot-like, expressive images that constitute this fairly “subjective” work (again, Badger’s words).

This is a fairly thick book, with a textured hardcover in black and gray (with an abstract pattern reminiscent of *Chizu*), 216 × 154 mm in size, 533 pages, displaying around 250 photographs and containing three short essays in Japanese and English. However, what strikes us when picking up the book is its relative lightness. This is due to the type of paper used in the publication, a textured matte that, in the best Japanese fashion, seems to be simultaneously sturdy and delicate. Most photographs are in horizontal format, with only a few quite imaginative spreads showing two vertical images. And the images always fill the pages in their entirety, leaving no white margins. One would say it provides a truly immersive experience.

The sense of lightness that I referred to comes from the materiality of the book but also from the images themselves. This happens because the images here shown are heavily digital — not high-definition, but mostly of old digital technology. There is visible noise in almost all the photographs, especially since they are clearly manipulated by Kawada in post processing. Colours are frequently non-natural, heavily saturated, and in the best-case scenario just a little bit off, the contrast is clearly overdone, and you will not be looking at the “details” in the photos, because there is almost no detail to be analysed and marveled at. You would not expect to find some of these images in a serious photobook by a serious photographer. These photographs may make you think that, possibly, the photographer has gone a bit too far in the editing process. However, that is also part of the freshness and the bravery of *Vortex*. Kawada is sure of himself as a photographer. He has nothing to lose. And he is — whether deliberately or not — freely exploring and extending the possibilities of photography within the contemporary image-filled world.

The photographs that constitute *Vortex* are ostensibly flat and two-dimensional, almost transparent — images which were, up to a certain point, created on a screen with some image editing software, and that are, in a way, also meant to be seen on a screen. But the interesting aspect of all this is that they work even better on the book than on the screen of our phones or laptops. To me, this paradox lies at the heart of *Vortex* and elevates it to the status of a great photobook — certainly one of the best published in 2022. Almost all the images inside it point to the virtual, to the diaphanous, to the elusive; yet, in the end, we hold this object in our hands, touching it with the tips of our fingers, feeling its weight in our hands.

And a great part of the fascination it exerts on us comes from these intrinsic aesthetic and material characteristics.

As Akiyoshi Taniguchi mentions in his short final piece, “[a] discussion of Kawada’s work naturally becomes part of a discussion of the essential theory of photography. To see Kawada’s works is to touch something more real than reality, something truly genuine” (Taniguchi, 2022: 540-41). Flirting with bad taste, kitsch, and the limits of what is considered “serious photography”, and putting it into such a well-crafted book, Kawada invites to think both on what contemporary photography is and is not — and why it is not what it could also be. Finally, he makes us reflect on what a photobook can do for photography in a world where making images and sharing them with others is increasingly ridden with virtuality.

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