



yasumasa morimura
THEATER OF THE SELF

A PUBLICATION OF THE ANDY WARHOL MUSEUM

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Cover image: Yasumasa Morimura, *Doublonnage (Marcel)*, 1988



Yasumasa Morimura
A Requiem: Red Dream/Mao, 2007
C-print mounted on alpollic
59 x 47 ¼ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

Andy Warhol's transition from fey commercial illustrator to cool Pop artist at the beginning of the 1960s was emblematic of a shift happening across the culture at large, wherein the photographic image was rising to a position of extraordinary prominence that would influence the way we think about the world and our place in it. Warhol, like others of his generation, recognized that one of the central questions facing him as an artist was how to meaningfully go about the practice of producing fine art in a culture so completely saturated by and fascinated with the visual. While the means through which images (moving and still alike) are consumed have been thoroughly transformed in recent years, we can nonetheless regard the present moment as a close relative to the world in which Warhol found himself. The manner in which we relate to images, as individuals and societies, remains a central question for visual art and is an underlying theme in the oeuvre of Yasumasa Morimura.

Published on the occasion of a retrospective exhibition at The Andy Warhol Museum, *Yasumasa Morimura: Theater of the Self* examines Morimura's far-reaching artistic project, which reimagines the visual culture of the West, as well as that of his native Japan. The project also resonates with performative conceptions of identity seen in contemporary media culture. The exhibition surveys over twenty-five years of the artist's practice and focuses on his treatment of three genres of



Yasumasa Morimura
Me Holding a Gun: for Andy Warhol, 1998
Digital video, color, silent, 3:00 minutes
Collection of the artist

images: those pertaining to celebrity culture, art history and photojournalism. Developed with the close collaboration of the artist, it includes over fifty images, several of which have never before been exhibited in the United States.

We are grateful for the contributions of Akira Lippit, Robert Morgan and Charles Exley—three writers who have each brought new insights to Morimura’s art practice. Lippit considers the nature and function of “homage” in the artist’s work through an analysis of Morimura’s reprisal of Velazquez’s masterpiece *Las Meninas*. Exley’s essay explores themes of “dressing up,”

“imitation,” and “play” while tracing connections between Morimura’s work and specific aspects of Japanese cultural history. Finally, Morgan brings an art historical perspective—with particular emphasis on Warhol—to bear on what he describes as “Morimura’s Kingdom of Art.”

This publication, The Andy Warhol Museum’s first foray into the world of digital publishing, would not have been possible without the enthusiasm and ingenuity of our Director of Publications, Abigail Franzen-Sheehan and Director of Digital Engagement, Joshua Jeffery. Similarly indispensable have been Roland Augustine, Lawrence Luhring and Geneva Viralam of Luhring Augustine, who provided sage advice and crucial research support to the curatorial team and writers alike.

The exhibition and publication have been developed with the close collaboration of Yasumasa Morimura, Natsuko Odate and Yoshiko Isshiki. It has been a privilege and a pleasure to collaborate with them and an honor for the Museum to present Morimura’s most in-depth exhibition in the US to date.

Morimura’s fascination with the self-portrait, sexuality, celebrity and the nature of identity align him closely with the work of Andy Warhol. However, where Warhol strategically focuses his attention on the surface of images, Morimura seeks to make sense of them from the inside out, bringing their aesthetic and political predilections to the fore and presenting a view of the self as something constructed through our relationship to the images that we create and celebrate.

Eric Shiner, Director

Nicholas Chambers, The Milton Fine Curator of Art



Yasumasa Morimura, *A Requiem: Mishima*, 1970 (video still), 2006
Digital video, color, sound 7:42 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

CHAPTER 3

YASUMASA MORIMURA'S KINGDOM OF ART

Robert C. Morgan

When Salvador Dali appeared on Groucho Marx's television show, *You Bet Your Life* in the mid-1950s, his signature upright mustache became an immediate sensation. This unusual accent of facial hair was transformed into an irrevocable sign of art in America. It displaced the public's earlier obsession with Van Gogh's ear, or at least temporarily. While Surrealist painting may have been beyond the reach of most viewers (including Groucho Marx), Dali's mustache won them over. He became an instant culture hero, an idol for men in grey flannel suits, an eccentric playboy liberated from holding down a nine-to-five job. Yet in spite of its fame and allure, this defiant mustache would not last forever. Like all ubiquitous signs of power, it had its ups and downs. One day a fetish, the next a fashion, soon to be replaced by nostalgia. Yet nostalgia longs for fetishes to linger, mingling with Eros as it leans toward the absurd, which only further enhances the metaphor. This trend becomes clear more than a half-century later in Yasumasa Morimura's *A Requiem: Theater of Creativity / Salvador Dali in Motion*, 2010. Here our relentlessly deft, multivalent artist dares to raise the height of Dali's unyielding waxed mustache yet another two inches, thus impeding the latter's perception. Suddenly the familiar fetish becomes an annoyance, an impediment to normal vision, a diminished sign of virile composure. Once again, power goes on the wane as Morimura invites us to recontextualize the phallocratic role of this dandyish artist.

A Requiem was shown during the 52nd Biennale di Venezia, in an exhibition of Morimura's photographs and films titled *Requiem for the XX Century: Twilight of the Turbulent Gods* at the Piazza San Marco in 2007. I had begun reflecting on the profoundly ambiguous nature of Morimura's work maybe five years earlier.^{M01} Seeing a museum filled with contradictory self-portraits that suggested deep-seated political ambiguity offered a wide spectrum of emotional and intellectual response. The show was filled with humor, empathy, provocation and a stimulating level of chaotic interface. While his assault on the reasoning behind these images simulated the kind of equivalence found in commercial media, the repetition and exposure had the capacity to affect our way of thinking over time. This provided a strange aura of contradiction, in fact, a paradox, in terms of how identity equivocates in relation to the moment. One might conclude this feeling of ambiguity cannot easily be salvaged by way of ideology, as the twentieth century has made clear.

In becoming cognizant of American propaganda in Japan during the years following World War II, Morimura clearly grasped the hidden meanings in publicized images and eventually learned to reverse them on his own terms. As his work evolved, he learned how to remove these images from their intended significance and to put them in another more poetically ambivalent context. In a word (maybe a bad word), he deconstructed the signs and symbols offered by the West and employed them to tell another story, his story (history). Entering blithely into a phenomenal series of simulated reenactments, he thus revealed the hysteria associated with images that once decorated the glossy magazines and airwaves of America. Morimura's intimate portrayals of media figures in the twentieth century represent an absurd, sublimated revenge on the lingering fatality of a heinous and schizophrenic epoch that ended twenty years before a new century was declared. Despite the rise and proliferation of advanced information technologies in the late twentieth century, the global environment is still in limbo, still searching for more humane and creative applications in both science and art. Reasonable efforts are being generated by many working today who envision a future without resorting to a denial of the past. As an



Yasumasa Morimura
A Requiem: Where is the Dictator? 1, 2007
Gelatin silver print mounted on alpollic
59 x 47 ¼ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

artist concerned with the nature of the human condition, Morimura has taken a leading role.

Morimura has visually summarized and reinterpreted speeches by Lenin and Mishima, rehearsed the icy stare of Chairman Mao, celebrated the tomfoolery of Einstein's tongue, observed Duchamp and his Bride play chess, witnessed Pollock paint a masterpiece, and doubled the performance of Chaplin as Hitler in *The Great Dictator*. One might think of these portraits as studies within an urban network that evoke a faux intimacy, an exchange of diverse temperaments. Within the masquerade, a latent process of *interpersonation* reveals itself. This extended interior dialogue between artist and subject, between presence and absence, functions in contrast to *impersonation* where a change of surface appearance induces obvious behavioral affects. **M02** Through *interpersonation* one may realize the cautious allure of the ghostly other. One may sense the irony of these larger-than-life operatic figures, each operating under a split awareness as to who is perceiver and who is being perceived. These heroic denizens engage in a breadth of atavistic longing and cultural interface according to the terms set forth under the cunning, inexorable (dis)guise of Morimura.

The urban context of Osaka, Morimura's birthplace and continuing residence, breeds not only cultural interface, but anonymity as well. In his case, anonymity and ambiguity seem to coincide. Curiously, he has never traveled or lived for a very long time away from Osaka. Given his attraction to art history through reproductions, there is relatively little reason to travel outside his domain, especially to foreign museums. **M03** The virtual simulacra provide what he needs.

Osaka is not particularly known as an art city; rather, it is a sprawling environment without uniformity. It is filled with meandering byways, repetitive buildings, industrial plants, funky no-tell hotels and endless traffic lights. It might be said that Osaka is an illimitable spectacle in progress, the kind of urban spectacle less driven

by scale than ambition for ambition's sake, empty ambition, an obtuse Zen “camp” phenomenon. Nevertheless, Osaka retains a certain accessible charm less present in Tokyo. Yet, its charm is contained by an omniscient aura of uncertainty. Its identity is never clear. It feels more axiomatic than cybernetic. Machinery still operates the way it might have functioned decades earlier in the same place at the same time. Each area of the city seems to negate any holistic concept as to what Osaka might be. In this context, Osaka functions as a place of shifting identities, a city bent on exhuming some kind of cultural trace. As such, it provides a backdrop that mirrors the artist's practice of self-effacement wherein the desire to self-efface becomes instinctive, yet consciously determined, neither too obvious nor too obscure.

Whereas the Western point of view has a tendency to categorize art and life more directly into separate domains, the traditional Japanese vantage point is more open about the confluence or overlay of signs, that is, how specific forms of representation merge together or spontaneously converge upon one another. **M04** This merging together should not be confused with Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which places greater emphasis on the sensory impact of the staging in contrast to the depth of a signifying process. **M05** While we may think of Morimura in terms of photographic performance on a grand scale, he seems more interested in the problems of art in general as he enters and to some extent resides within what he chooses to call the “Kingdom of Art.” **M06** Although we recognize his highly evocative art historical and media-oriented imagery—largely, though not entirely, emanating from Western sources—through photography, Morimura insists, “True art [for me] is oil painting.” **M07** Yet, we also know the artist's strongly willed propensity for performance and exhibitionism, which are not always the same. In addition, Morimura has retained a keen interest in set design, music, writing and film. The latter medium used not merely as a source for his appropriated subject matter, but also for making a series of short films, ranging from his engaging panoramic *Inori*, 2002, to *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Dialogue with Myself)*, 2001, in which the artist performs on a digital keyboard while his other

“Frida” sits beside him alternating costumes, occasionally holding a small bright red flag. **M08**

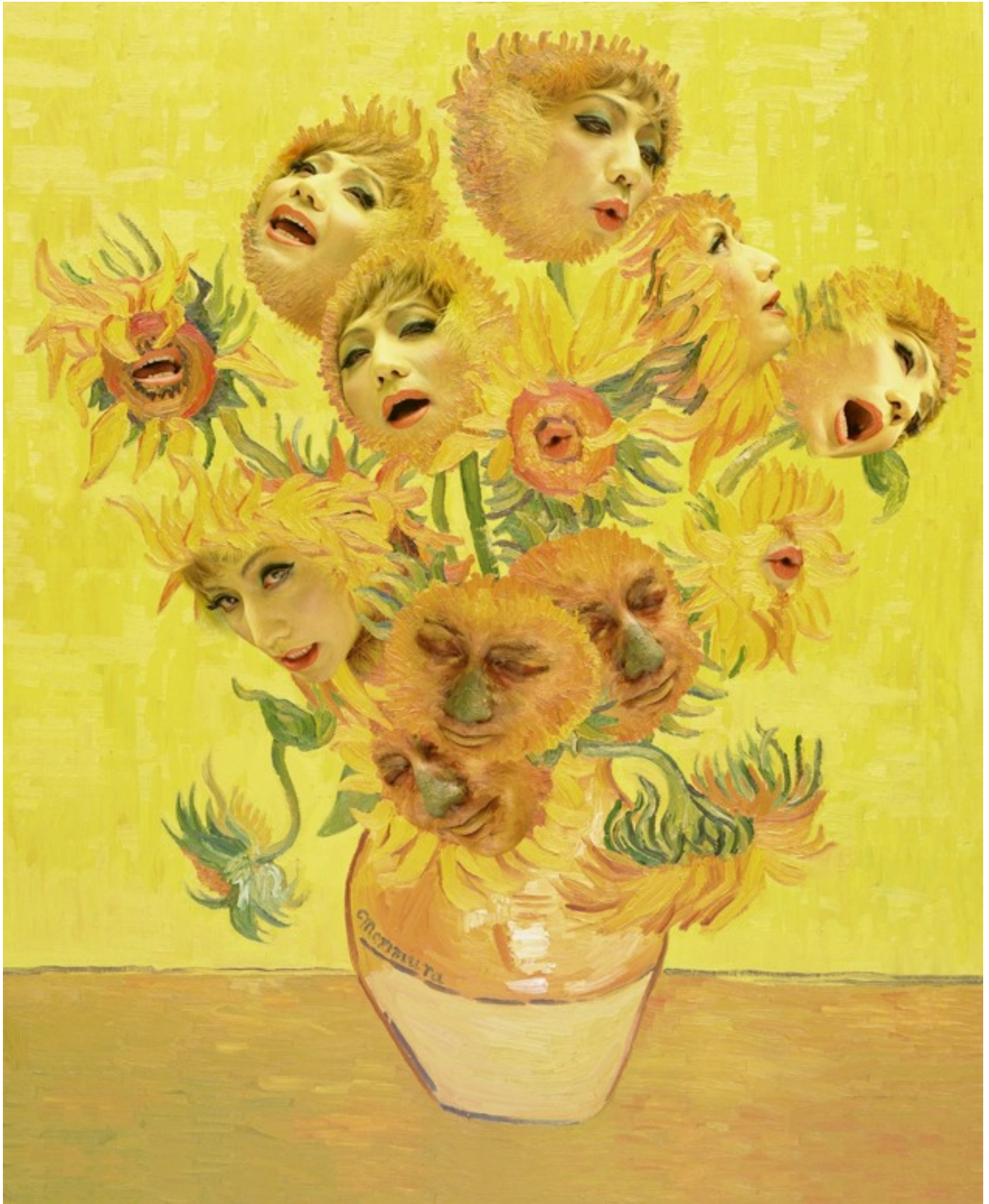
Some years prior to Morimura’s exhibition at Piazza San Marco, I came to understand that ambiguity in art has the potential to function in a positive way, which is decidedly different from being vague. While ambiguity suggests a conflict of interpretation or hermeneutic disjuncture—known today as misinformation—vagueness implies a meandering or misguidedness, a faulty reconciliation of the premises by which art is understood (as art). After years of struggle with Conceptual art, I finally concluded that art does not exist as a predetermined fact, but is in a continual process of evolution. The closest artist I have found in this American genre would be Robert Morris, particularly the ambiguous dress-up photograph of the artist donned with chains over a bare torso and wearing a metal helmet for the exhibition *Robert Morris: Labyrinths-Voice-Blind Time*. **M09** While a striking poster image, Morris’ militant delivery transmits differently from that of Morimura whose ironic manner employs flagrant expressive gestures but never in the aggressive manner more common in the West. Rather Morimura’s openness and precision includes the inconspicuous clarity of his carefully choreographed flamboyance, as his magnificently discordant Frida Kahlo self-portraits show. The photograph *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Standing Firm)*, 2001, helped usher my thinking in this direction. Despite this discordance, there is something contiguous about these images, something that involves an overlay of thought, material, history, desire and social/sexual transformation.

In past centuries, painting has led the way, sometimes for better, occasionally for worse. While photography can function on the same level as the best painting in the transformative sense, it cannot be painting, not in the plastic or even the philosophical sense. Morimura’s photographs are less the result of what technology has wrought (since the late 1970s) than what can be found in the paradoxical and absurd nature of his images. Nevertheless, while his inventive and phantasmagorical

visionary affects appear brilliant for some, they are offsetting and contentious for others. In either case, such fiercely ironic portraits have opened a new visual, conceptual and emotional threshold for photography. His radical layering of subject matter, density of content and carefully choreographed images deliberately overstate themselves in order to project the absurd realities to which we are exposed: the ultimate semiosis of media play. One need only compare the extreme gestural machinations in the artist's *Self-portrait / after Liza Minnelli, 1 - 5, 1996*, with those used in Morimura's impersonation of Yukio Mishima in the "Bonsai" speech at the conclusion of *Seasons of Passion / A Requiem: Mishima, 2006*. One gets the message: identity is fluid, ambiguity is real and absurdity continues to ride in the saddle.

In each of his imposing works, the artist's transgender/transcultural strategies suggest a veritable celebration of masquerade that outweighs the mute effects of traditional composition given to earlier forms of portraiture. Even as they manage to stay within the realm of portrait photography, they do not appear static. Rather they engage in a type of illusion experienced in theater, such as Kabuki or the more traditional Noh. In each genre, a type of narrative kinesis is implied. **M10** Even as the mythic origins in most of Morimura's images are pulled from Western media (as the paintings were taken primarily from print reproductions), the sense of a highly charged erotic transit shuttles back and forth between the emerging frontiers of East and West. A sublimated intervention occurs in these composite photographs. Take, for example, his singing anthropomorphic *Singing Sunflowers, 1998*, in which a delicate subversion occurs throughout the optical picture plane. The hidden apertures incite synaptic, erotic charges between eye and brain and the image veers close to a hallucinogenic experience: a rush of neurons, a sudden corpuscular energy, as if moving through Hokusai's gust of wind across a barren field, feeling the heat of immanence dissipate into an aura of cool transcendence.

The more specific point is the artist's heightened sensory and cognitive ability to ventilate a fresh wave of interest where performance and set design interact with



Yasumasa Morimura
Singing Sunflowers, 1998
Color photograph mounted on canvas
36 ⁵/₈ x 28 ³/₄ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring
Augustine, New York

fashion and photography. In each case, a painting continues to linger in the background. This is pervasive in his work, overtly so in *An Internal Dialogue with Frida Kahlo*, 2001, or in his earlier Manet-inspired *Portrait (Futago)*, 1990. Whatever his intentions, the work exonerates seamlessness, charisma and fetishism, all of which are inextricably bound modes of ironic subversion. His photographic images represent undaunted moments in which formality and ambiguity merge unabashedly together. Whether the orator Lenin, the clandestine Greta Garbo, the penitent Frida Kahlo, the eternal pin-up Marilyn, the school-girl temptress Jodie Foster, or the pensive Rembrandt—together, or on their own, they transform into similar stillborn images, capable of engendering quixotic deceit and sexual allure, reduced and refined until finally given their reincarnation through the mirror of Morimura's performance surrogates. Each of these images rejuvenate exorcism and vitality as they float majestically through art and media history, as each persona secures its own place in Morimura's panoramic spectacle, entering into a photographic dream. Each identity slips in and out of one another. The sexuality becomes arbitrary, as in the *Actresses* series, which are surreptitious vestiges that illuminate irony and the ambiguity of the image, if only for a moment. In Morimura's "soluble photography," the focus on the artist's still pose is observed from the perspective of video time, which is different from the stillness of photographic time. For example, Einstein's tongue goes in and out in slow time. Here I found the performance ineluctable, but accurate. Only later did I discover Morimura's penchant for the absurd as a spur for intellectual engagement and a means to escape the predictable routines and paltry chatter that serve to enhance mind control in post-1984 reality.

In some ways the myriad of paradoxical and sexualized subjects offered in Morimura's work intersects with aspects of Andy Warhol's practice, most directly with the latter's cross-dressing photographs. Yet Morimura does not conform to a Warhol style any more than he does to the images of Cindy Sherman. Morimura may share affinities with each of these artists more than he embraces certifiable influences. These affinities or coincidental intersections of Warhol, Sherman and Morimura

form a kind of virtual triumvirate that results in exciting, spontaneous encounters. Morimura believes this is part of a general mood he refers to as “contemporaneity,” given that each artist is pursuing, or has pursued, his or her own direction. **M11** His is an inclusive point of view rather than an exclusive or competitive one. Morimura does not discount his close connection to Warhol even as the former’s self-portraits are more personal, theatrical and direct in comparison with the distant approach of media used by the American Pop idol. Equally generous, the Japanese artist holds Cindy Sherman in great esteem. By addressing her as “my little sister,” he offers an affectionate exchange of aesthetic solidarity. **M12**

In retrospect, one might credit Warhol as enacting the vital crossover between late Modernist dramaturgy and postmodern denouement. When Warhol’s work was introduced in Los Angeles and then New York in 1962, he based his silkscreened paintings on consumer products and mass-media imagery. Cited by the media as a Pop artist, his work was quite different from his Pop art colleagues at the Leo Castelli Gallery. Warhol worked with quiet intensity in a studio called “The Factory” at Union Square, where in addition to hired assistants there were many spectators, often spectacles in their own right, who were simply hanging out. **M13** This kind of environment may have contributed to a more consciously banal narrative, less concerned with objects per se than with images. Warhol’s glib and impish iconoclasm worked exponentially for the popular press, even as he became the mirror of everything on the surface of media culture.

Despite historical, cultural and social differences, Morimura appears in step with Warhol, not as a conformist, but as a battering and insouciant, if not demagogical, creator of kindred images, surrogate anomalies. Each portrait emulates an insistence in its coyness and desire to captivate and astound viewers, regardless of past repressions, backgrounds, or preferences. Clearly, the Japanese post-World War II trauma and related conundrums expressed by Morimura in many of his talks and interviews could not have been shared with Warhol, other than through extreme

empathy. On the surface, there are clear differences between the two cultures, so elegantly discussed by the semiologist Roland Barthes, that may have been obscured for Warhol. Even so, the contiguity and attraction between two (in their lifetime) sexually ambiguous men—both highly intelligent artists—would have deferred any extant cultural barriers. The most critical difference, however, would have been within the realm of the social. Again, based on interviews with Morimura, it would appear that his point of reference is much less socially involved than that of Warhol. The American critic Barbara Rose once characterized Warhol as follows:

His chalky puckish mask has been plastered over so many newspapers, scandal sheets, art reviews and fashion magazines, beamed through so many TV sets, projected on so many movie screens, reproduced on so many posters and announcements, that he can afford to change his name to John Doe and still be recognized as Andy Warhol on any street corner in the Western world. **M14**

In this sense Morimura is quite different from Warhol. He is much less involved with publicity and more prone to a solitary life. When he performs for his photographs, he is fully engaged; when he's not performing, he lives a routine life in Osaka. The artist admits that his *Actresses* series and other early female impersonations emerged from his desire to become a drag queen. **M15** In recent years, this no longer seems important. At one time, the life of a transvestite may have seemed more appealing: to become outwardly social, and ultimately to discover a way towards fulfilling his expressive desire. In such a mindset, identity becomes a fleeting and floating sensation, an ironic plaything always up for grabs, always ready to change, ready to transform one's unknown self and to become the other. Becoming someone else, acting out the grey zone, is a place of both risk and haven that Morimura feels is essential to art. In contrast to Warhol, Morimura sublimates his need for outward sociality in order to transform himself inwardly and thus achieve sociality through masquerade, which eventually leads to art.

For instance, in Warhol's *Blow Job* 1964, we find the youthful face of a curly blond-haired male framed by a 16-mm film camera. Throughout the 41-minute duration of



Andy Warhol
Blow Job, 1963
16mm film, black and white,
silent, 41 minutes at 16
frames per second
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Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, a
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Film still courtesy of The
Andy Warhol Museum

Yasumasa Morimura
M's Self-portrait No.26, 1995
Gelatin silver print
18 ½ x 21 ¼ inches (framed)
Collection of the artist, on long-term loan
to the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art

this black-and-white scenario the lad appears caught in the throes of angst-ridden pleasure (*Leidenschaft*), the recipient of fellatio, seemingly induced by a second performer whose presence is hidden off-camera. **M16** More than three decades later, Morimura takes a black-and-white photograph, titled *M's Self-portrait No. 26/A*, 1996, revealing the artist as his/her blond transvestite self. He/she is photographed on the aftermath of some unidentified, though pleasurable, encounter, quite possibly portraying the unseen figure in Warhol's film: the absent performer. Most likely shot as a prototype for Morimura's enactment of Brigitte Bardot, this coy self-portrait happily reveals a mouth and chin enhanced by what could be read either as the remains of a coconut gelato or a healthy dose of sperm.

Allegorically speaking, the difference between the modern and the postmodern positioning of art, or the sudden shift from art into image or image into art, might be summarized in relation to these two works. Whereas, Warhol's film functions as a kind of distant reportage that gives an ironic, albeit aesthetic credibility to a highly charged sexual act, Morimura's interest (desire) in portraying actresses from the golden years of cinema would seem the more liberated strategy for arousing Eros. In the cinematic imagery of Warhol one is given an indirect representation of fellatio, while in the dramaturgy of Morimura we discover the full closure, in essence, the finale of an affect, sanctified with all its Neo-Rococo trimmings.

Ambiguously, Morimura may function simultaneously as "Warhol's conceptual son" and as the extended *Daughter of Art History*. **M17** This idea was inaugurated in 1990 with Morimura's groundbreaking celestial self-portrait as the precariously sublime *Infanta Margarita (Princess A)*, 1990, after Velazquez's painting from 1656. While Velasquez offers Morimura a way to see Western painting, Warhol was less the academic mentor than a spirited Diogenes, willing to guide the nascent Japanese artist through the many harrowing turns of the underground, and thus bring him safely out of the burning coals up to the rim of the crater.



Yasumasa Morimura
M's Self-portrait Nos. 15, 16, 17, 93
(starting at top, left to right), 1995
Gelatin silver print
18 ½ x 21 ¼ inches (framed)
Collection of the artist, on long-term loan
to the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art

Velasquez's *Infanta Margarita* was a necessary subject for Morimura to work through in order to pursue his own goals. Given that he chose the Kingdom of Art as his rightful dominion, Morimura had no intention of relinquishing its bejeweled crown. This would include the code required to break the seal of exclusivity imposed by the Western art world. Or did he willfully reject the code to the art world altogether and gleefully accept the mantle of art from the ironically urbane Warhol? Finally, we might pose the question: was it not Warhol who exposed the secret archives of Madison Avenue minds, not only by reviving the aura of downbeat images, but also by expanding their use in terms of high fashion and other varieties of standard media exposure?

While Morimura may have recognized Warhol as an omnipresent figure at the helm of contemporaneity, he still needed to know more about Western art to make it a prerequisite in *his* direction as an artist. Morimura's career might be understood as a self-fulfilling prophecy in that the son and the daughter now exist side by side in a rightful state of mind. Androgyny is central to his creative process; a concept also accepted by Duchamp—art as a mental act—to which Morimura brings the body. In his video, *Inori*, 2002, the artist makes his point overwhelmingly clear. The video begins with a profile of the artist standing in a darkened space. He is observing a brightly lit, curved-shaped diorama that includes the costumes and accessories of various headless mannequins (all formerly used by Morimura in his *Self-portraits*). A piano recording is heard as the artist begins to remove his glasses, trousers and shorts, whereupon he stands nude confronting the center of the stage. As he climbs to the stage, the camera pans from right to left, filming each of the mannequins who come “alive” with his face. Initially the movements are almost undetectable, but on the second pan to the right, they become animated through repetitive motions as if they were marionettes. This suggests the artist's affinity with Gordon Craig's early concept of the *Ubermarionette*, 1908, eventually adapted by Oskar Schemmer for his performances at the Bauhaus, 1926. Craig introduced the “Ubermarionette” as an actor transformed into a life-size mechanized puppet on stage. This appears

consistent with Morimura's repetitive actions in *Inori* as he re-evokes the presence of various *Self-portraits* until 2002. **M18**

In addition to his Western influences, other figures that relate more directly to Japan's recent history have loomed large for Morimura. He has spent considerable time clarifying his psychological, intellectual and cultural views on Japanese positions and Japanese people during the ambiguous period of Westernization from the mid-1940s throughout the 1960s. In spite of the business and technological advances achieved, the retrospective impact of this history upon Morimura's self-appointed image as the *Daughter of Art History* became significant. For example, the much publicized press photograph of General MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito taken in 1948 had a vital impact on the artist. Morimura would eventually recreate the photograph, removing the faces of each subject and substituting his own. In recontextualizing such noteworthy images, the artist intentionally drew closer to the rupture that had occurred in his homeland. Japan was forced to change according to the rules and mores of the American way of life. For many Japanese people, such changes were difficult and had drastic consequences on many levels.

In reflecting on Morimura's sense of indigenous culture, there exist some obvious influences that are less surprising to a Japanese viewer than to Westerners. These affinities reveal similarities without necessarily proving a cause and effect relationship. Morimura sees two radically separate but equal facets in today's art world: the outwardly visible aspect, which functions through marketing and promotion, and the less visible element, which is a state of being—residing in the Elysian Kingdom of Art. Like Duchamp, Morimura is less concerned with conflicts between the two than in finding a suitable complementary state. With this in mind, the artist's reference to Mishima's final speech in 1970, which became the subject of his *Seasons of Passion / A Requiem: Mishima* from 2006, offers both an ambiguous critique of the art world, specifically in Japan, while at the same time paying homage to his mentor Mishima. Given Morimura's youthful obsession with the author of the

groundbreaking novel *Confessions of a Mask*, Mishima was unquestionably a mythical cultural figure for the artist in post-World War II Japan. **M19**

Years later, his recreation of *Requiem* in memory of the writer, both exalts and deflates Mishima's power in oration. Although Morimura's speech is clearly not in the words of Mishima, he orates with a similar intonation: a high-pitched rhetoric that subverts the message as it demonstrates how the passage of time (more than four decades) offers a reevaluation of the writer's intensely felt political views. From another viewpoint, one might compare Morimura's later and more sober views on Mishima with those of the American writer Henry Miller, whose essay *Reflections on the Death of Mishima* appeared in Japanese translation in *The Weekly Post* in Tokyo in 1971, the year following Mishima's speech. "Who better than he, in Japan, could sense the dangers that menace Japan in following our Western ideas? By now it should be apparent to all the world, whether Fascist, Communist or Democrat, what poison is contained in our half-baked notion of progress, efficiency, security and so on." **M20**

During his lifetime, Miller was regarded as an important, though controversial, figure in American letters. At the time he wrote on Mishima, Miller was married to a Japanese woman and living in Pacific Palisades near Los Angeles. Miller's support of Mishima as a symbolic figure is consistent with his criticism of America, which was decidedly evident in his successful writing career. This would also have been consistent with the youthful and gay Morimura. In spite of the apparent reappraisal of Mishima in Morimura's *Requiem*, there is little doubt that the Japanese author had an important political and emotional impact on the artist.

By the time Morimura recognized his capacity to become an artist, he was less interested in Japanese art history than in taking the implicit political turn of seeking out images of artists from the West as his subject matter. He began a complex construction of a large-scale scenario that imitated a painting by Van Gogh, and then



Yasumasa Morimura, *M's Self-portrait*
Nos. 31,32,33,34,
(from top, left to right), 1993
Gelatin silver print
18 ½ x 21 ¼ inches (framed)
Collection of the artist, on long-term loan
the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art

placed himself inside of it. This direction began with the Van Gogh self-portrait, which he reconstructed and photographed in 1985 using his face as an Asian signifier. Even as he was primarily focused on the poetic and political intervention of seeing Western portraits with Asian faces, there remained interest in paying attention to indigenous influences. This shift becomes clear in the *Self-portrait as Actress* series in 1996, when the artist turns from Hollywood to actresses in Japan. These would include such famous indigenous actresses/personalities as Shima Iwashita, Junko Fuji, Setsuko Hara and Momoe Yamaguchi.

As for Japanese art history, Morimura has denied any interest in Ukiyo-e woodblock prints from the mid-Edo period. As a younger emerging artist, he believed the prints were generally too stereotypical of Japan, particularly among Western collectors, and therefore, rejected their importance. Of the artists associated with Ukiyo-e, the one who may be closest to Morimura would be Sharaku Toshusai (active 1794-95). This affinity is important from the perspective of anonymity. Just as Morimura has pursued anonymity with regards to identity, this quality can also be found in the career of Sharaku. As far as we know, Sharaku was solely a portrait artist who worked in woodblock prints for a brief duration of nine months. There is no biographical date to confirm the artist's existence. Nothing is known about his identity prior to or after this nine-month period. **M21** Some claim that the portraits named for Sharaku—related to the origins of Kabuki theater—were done not by a single artist, but by a devoted group of followers. (It is interesting that a similar argument has been used to account for the obscurity of Lao-tzu during the Zhou Dynasty in China more than 2,500 years ago.) The most credible argument is that Sharaku was a Noh actor, whose real name was Saito Jurobei, who lived from 1763–1820, and took a hiatus from acting during the approximate period in which the Kabuki portraits were made. The larger point is that Sharaku was an artist who worked without any proven identity, yet who is recognized by connoisseurs, along with Rembrandt and Velazquez, as one of the best portrait artists of all time.

There is a poignant aspect to this story, particularly if one is familiar with the artist's extraordinary work. We know the images are associated with someone named "Sharaku" but we don't know who he is or anything about his origins. We know the name but the life of this artist is heretofore completely anonymous. One wonders if Morimura would like his biography, even as he lives, thrives and continues to work, to sustain a protective fog of obscurity and thereby foreground the personae of his *Self-portraits*. Taro Amano's comment that Morimura is "exploring possibilities of turning 'I' in to an elastic being" seems to refer to the artist's work or the viewer's aesthetic receivership of the work, but not necessarily to the artist's identity. [M22](#) It would appear from another perspective that by maintaining anonymity through obscurity, Morimura further augments the authority, irony and ambivalence that his work continues to deliver. In a similar manner, the mystery surrounding the identity of Sharaku does not limit our interest even as we marvel over his Kabuki portraits more than two hundred years later.

In many ways his *Requiem* series remains equally ambiguous. His portrayals not only celebrate artists, ideologues and scientists, among others, but also create a distance relative to how the subjects performed in life and who they actually were. This distance implies a disjuncture between these personages and the identity by which they are captured in everyday media. Media identity for Morimura is fluid; a surreptitious quality, a perpetual performance. But media is also unrelenting and refuses to let go of its grip. In contrast, Morimura might be understood as an artist reduced to a singularity; a Nietzschean *ubermensch*, a superman, capable of capturing likenesses of the same subjects held ransom by global media. The differences, however, between Morimura and the current state of conventional media are considerable as Morimura continues to play within the grey zone, a nebulous space somewhere between compassion and the absurd, but not in the terms of everyday reality. The Kingdom of Art enhances his surrogate identity, his chain of fantasies, his protective lure and ultimate safekeeping. This was clarified in a statement on his work that "...everyone surely possesses elements in mind and body

that far overstep the bounds of name, function and position granted by society. That is what I mean by grey areas. And that which gives shape to these ambiguous realms that do not usually surface in everyday life is art.” [M23](#)

One might say that Morimura operates between the popularized notion of art (that has emerged over the years on a global scale) and the kind of art produced on a more private level (that is closer to what he believes art should be). Art may function as a refuge and then suddenly become coerced into publicity, open to the network of pundits who judge, often erroneously, whether a work is important or neglectful of the trends that make art investment worthy today. For Morimura, the balance between the more private, spiritual concerns of the artist and the overt commercial requirements necessary for art to continue is, in fact, essential.

There is no easy path in coming to terms with the work of Yasumasa Morimura. Complex identities arise with deeply layered nuances. These are accompanied by meticulous masquerades that sweep across the foreground. Once acquainted with Morimura’s work, we come to expect these identity slippages as they move from one personage to another, often in a gingerly recondite manner. The artist takes us from one gender to another, from one culture to the next. The more slippages between identities, the more we catch the fleeting signifiers, the historical metaphors, the traces of androgyny and the desire to retain ambiguity. Because of this, the task of locating a single point of reference inevitably falls short. We might better choose to go with the flow and allow the illusion of a stable center to disappear. Even so, there is an irresistible tendency to compartmentalize Morimura’s work on a relativist scale in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, economics, politics, or queer studies. In isolation, none of these can fully embody or transmit his achievement. Morimura stands outside all that appears predictable. The issues intrinsic to his work are not easily delimited in terms of institutional categories, topical issues, or stylistic determinants. His *Self-portraits*, while distinctly beautiful, may also appear as signs of the time. Paradoxically, their rigorously disjunctive quality admits the presence of



Yasumasa Morimura
A Requiem: Vietnam War, 1968, 1991/2007
Gelatin silver print mounted on alpollic
47 ¼ x 59 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring
Augustine, New York

living cultures through an interface with globalization. The *Self-portraits* further imply a termination of the somewhat empty resolutions that characterized Modernist culture in previous decades. They recognize an acceptance of the suspension of opposites that inhabit our globe today, longing to endure without the necessity of coercive tactics. Indeed, now is the time to laugh at the dictator. The current terms of negotiation have changed

since the era of Marlene, Frida and Marilyn. Meanwhile, Morimura works diligently in the Kingdom of Art, regenerating the power of myth and tracing it delicately, fastidiously back into the realm of art.

Endnotes

1. Maggia, F. & Venanzi, M. (Eds.). (2007) *Yasumasa Morimura: Requiem for the XX Century Twilight of the Turbulent Gods*. Venice: Skira and Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa.
2. The word “interpersonation,” is a neologism I find more accurate than “impersonation” in suggesting the internal dialogical relationship between Morimura and his various subjects.
3. Morimura, Y. (2001). *Frida de Mi Corazon: An Imaginary Dialogue. Morimura Self-Portraits: An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo*. [Exhibition Catalogue] Tokyo: Japan Fondation Arc-en-Ciel. Also, Warbelow, A. (2011, October 22) Interview Questions for Yasumasa Morimura, [unpublished transcript] St. Louis: Washington University.
4. This point has been retrieved from many sources, including:
Barthes, R. (1983). *Empire of Signs*. New York: Hill & Wang.
Cage, J. (1961). *Silence*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.
Watts, A. (1961). *Psychoanalysis East and West*. New York: Pantheon.
5. Kuspit, D. (2003). *Art’s Identity Crisis: Yasumasa Morimura’s Photographs. Daughter of Art History*. Photographs by Yasumasa Morimura. New York: Aperture.
9.
6. Morimura, Y. (2008). Introduction. *On Self-Portrait: Through the Looking Glass*. Amsterdam: Reflex Editions. 5.
7. Morimura quoted in, Maggia, F. (2007). op. cit. 45.

8. Thanks to Natsuko Odate for her translation of the ideogram for *Ikiru* that appears on the banner Morimura's Frida occasionally holds in her left hand for the DVD of *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Dialogue with Myself 3)*, produced in 2001. There are two possible meanings: one is "life/live" and the other is "cut the life." Basically, the combined translation suggests that Frida's body is in pain, but this makes her spirit strong.
9. The exhibition poster with the photograph of Morris, produced for the artist's two-gallery exhibition in 1974 received much attention for what some perceived as a sexually charged, though ambivalent, signifier. See *Robert Morris, 1961 – 1994*, (1995) [Exhibition Catalogue]. Paris: Musee National d'art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou. 257.
10. Waley, A. (1957). Introduction. *The No Plays of Japan*. New York: Grove Press. 15 – 55.
11. Warbelow, A (2011). op. cit. n.p.
12. Morimura photographed himself in a pose originally photographed by Cindy Sherman in 1980. Morimura's work, *To My Little Sister*, 1998, offers a mutual respect to the American artist, which was later reciprocated by Sherman. Still, Sherman has never photographed a "self-portrait" or acknowledged the photographs she has taken as being about herself. Morimura calls his photographs self-portraits, but always seen through the looking glass or the *interpersonation* of the other.
13. Koch, S. (1991). Blow Job and Pornography. *Stargazer: The Life, World & Films of Andy Warhol*. (Revised and Updated). New York and London: Marion Boyars. 47 – 51.
14. Rose, B. (1988). Andy Warhol's Aluminum Foil: The Mirror of Our Time. *Autocritique: Essays on Art and Anti-Art, 1963 – 1987*. New York: Weinfeld & Nicolson. 37 – 40.
15. Morimura, Y. (2010). *Past, Present, and Future of the Actress Series—An Afterword*. Tokyo: Nigensha. 173.
16. *Leidenschaft* is a German word translated as "the pain in passion."

17. The statement that Morimura is Warhol's "conceptual son" appears in the initial press release for the current exhibition at The Andy Warhol Museum. Morimura is credited with the remark, but the origin of the remark is unknown to date. The subtitle given to his painting of *Infanta Margarita, Princess A was Daughter of Art History*, which is consistent with his analysis of Western art history being the father of the Japanese daughter. (2007) [Lecture] New York: Columbia University.
18. Craig, E. G. (1908). The Actor and the Ubermarionette. In E. T. Kirby (Ed.) *Total Theatre: A Critical Anthology*. New York: Dutton. 33 – 57.
19. Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask* was published in 1949 in Japan when the author was 24 years old. It created a sensation as being the first book to deal openly with homosexuality in Japan.
20. Miller, H. (1972). *Reflections on the Death of Mishima*. Santa Barbara: Capra Press. 12.
21. Henderson, H. and Ledoux, L. (1984). *Sharaku's Japanese Theatre Prints*. New York: Dover.
22. Amano, T. (1996). Can Yasumasa Morimura Save Humanity. *The Sickness unto Beauty: Self-Portrait As Actress*. [Exhibition Catalogue]. Japan: Yokohama Museum of Art. 151.
23. Morimura, Y. (2008) *About My Work*. op. cit. 119.

GALLERY 4.1 ACTRESS



Yasumasa Morimura, *Self-portrait (Actress) / Elizabeth Taylor 1*, 1996
Ilfochrome print mounted to plexiglass
47 ¼ x 37 ¼ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

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IMAGE GALLERIES

GALLERY 4.2 ART HISTORY



Yasumasa Morimura, *Doublonnage (Marcel)*, 1988
Color photograph
59 X 47 ¼ inches
Private Collection, New York

GALLERY 4.3 REQUIEM



Yasumasa Morimura, *A Requiem: Asanuma 1*, 1960, 2006
Gelatin silver print mounted on alpollic
47 ¼ x 59 inches Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York



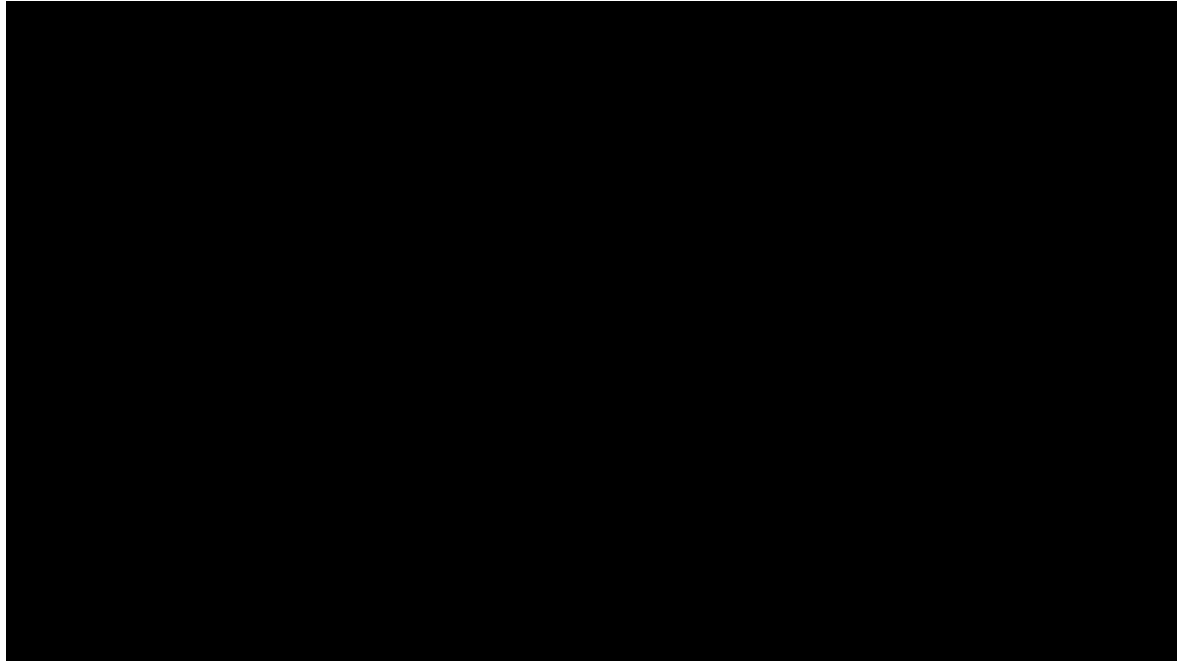
MOVIE 5.1 EXCERPT FROM, A REQUIEM: MISHIMA, 1970, 2006



Yasumasa Morimura, *A Requiem: Mishima, 1970* (excerpt), 2006
Digital video, color, sound 7:42 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

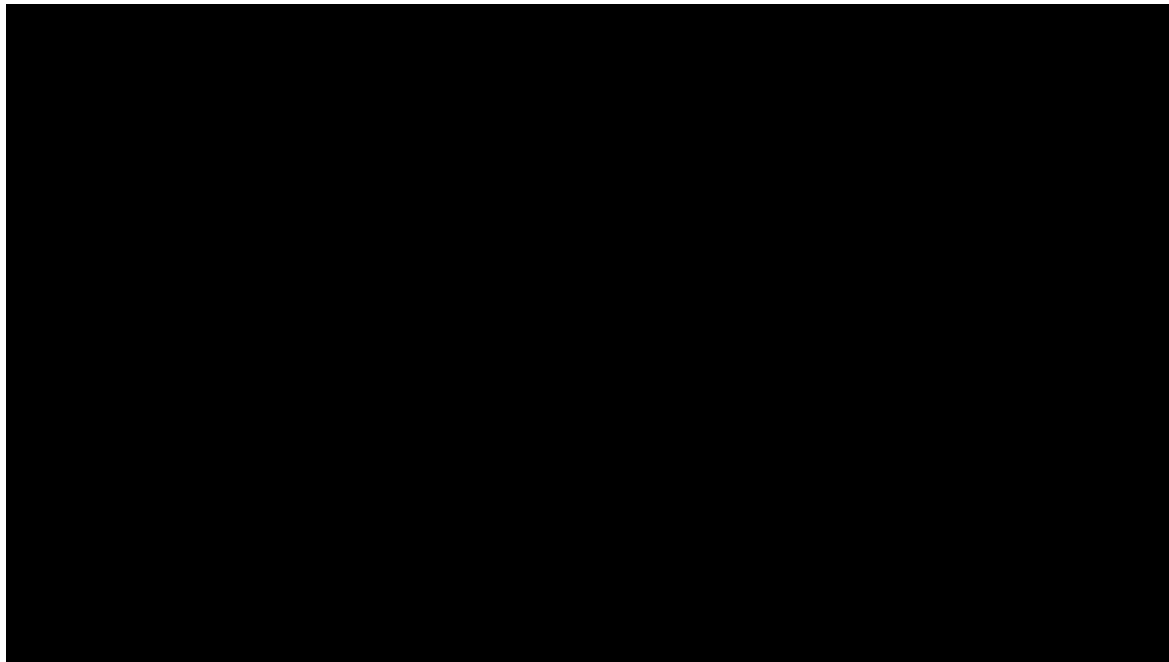
VIDEO

MOVIE 5.2 EXCERPT FROM A REQUIEM: THEATER OF
CREATIVITY / SALVADOR DALI IN MOTION, 2010



Yasumasa Morimura
A Requiem: Theater of Creativity/Salvador Dali in Motion (excerpt), 2010
Digital video, color, sound 7:42 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

MOVIE 5.3 EXCERPT FROM ME HOLDING A GUN FOR ANDY
WARHOL, 1998



Yasumasa Morimura
Me Holding a Gun: for Andy Warhol (excerpt), 1998
Digital video, color, silent, 3:00 minutes
Collection of the artist



Yasumasa Morimura, *To My Little Sister: for Cindy Sherman*, 1998
Ilfochrome mounted on aluminum
55 x 31 inches
Private Collection, New York

Charles Exley

Charles Exley is an Assistant Professor of Modern Japanese Literature and Film at the University of Pittsburgh. He received his Ph.D. in Japanese Literature from Yale University. His work is motivated by a desire to add more visual and cultural history to traditional literary history. He enjoys exploring large theoretical questions about the nature of modernity and postmodernity, experimental poetry and poetics, mass culture from rakugo to advertising and visual arts and film. His forthcoming book draws on a variety of discourses of interwar Japan (medical, colonial, historical and popular) in order to examine the role of mental states in Satō Haruo's fiction.

Akira Mizuta Lippit

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Robert C. Morgan

Robert C. Morgan is an international critic, painter, curator and lecturer living in New York City. Professor Morgan holds both an MFA in Sculpture from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (1975), and a Ph.D. in Contemporary Art History and Aesthetics from New York University (1978). As a highly prolific writer and critic, his concerns are focused on the breach between aesthetics and marketing relative to artists in an era of global transition. In 1999, Morgan received the first Arcale award in Art Criticism from the Municipality in Salamanca (Spain), and in 2011, was inducted into the European Academy of Sciences and the Arts (Salzburg). In 2013, his book, *Reflections on the Condition of Recent Chinese Art*, was published in Mandarin translation in Beijing. Since 2002, he has been Professor Emeritus in Art History at the Rochester Institute of Technology.



Yasumasa Morimura
A Requiem: Theater of Creativity/Andy Warhol in Motion (video still), 2010
HDTV digital video (monochrome)
silent, 3:58 minutes.
Collection of the artist

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Yasumasa Morimura: Theater of the Self, exhibition installation view
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