INTERVIEW
Hiroshi Sugimoto and Deborah Martin Kao*
at the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, May 12, 2006

Deborah Martin Kao:
What was the evolution of your "Photographs of Joe*" project for the Pulitzer Foundation?*
Hiroshi Sugimoto:
I had a one man show at the Kunsthaus Bregenz in Austria, which was designed by the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor. Eckhard Schneider, the director there, has a strong interest in architectural issues and he wanted to make a book about my architectural series. He asked me if I would be interested in publishing a book together with the Pulitzer Foundation, because its building was designed by [Tadao] Ando. In that connection I came to St. Louis to photograph Ando's building.

DMK: *What are the qualities that you respond to most in Ando's buildings?*
HS: The simplicity of the Japanese aesthetic, you can not be free from your national identity. I have the same problem or advantage; I don't know which (laughs). Simplicity has been part of Japanese aesthetics since ancient times. Ando used concrete in an extremely sophisticated way. Concrete is a rough material but he used it as a surface and finish material. He invented the means to quality control a smooth surface for the concrete, and it fits the Japanese sensibility.

DMK: *Did you have expectations for what the architectural experience of this building would be in advance of your first visit?*
HS: Usually when I decide to photograph a building I buy books to familiarize myself with it first. Then I determine the most expected view to photograph based on the already published images. So I knew this building beforehand.

DMK: *Did you photograph the most expected view of the Pulitzer Foundation?*
HS: I made the one beautiful shot; and then I also knew this museum had Richard Serra's *Joe* outside in the courtyard. When I saw it I found I could consider this sculpture as architecture. Why not approach this sculpture as an architectural structure? I had brought my equipment to shoot architectural photography; I got started and really involved.

DMK: *You've commented elsewhere that you always begin a body of work with a fully formed concept.*
HS: There is also always a coincidence involved. In this case I did not expect to approach the Richard Serra sculpture as architecture. However, I quickly shifted to see this sculpture not as a sculpture but as architecture.

DMK: *What do you mean when you say that you approached Serra's* Joe *as architecture rather than as sculpture?*
HS: That's a categorization—architecture is something used for functional purposes and sculpture is nonfunctional. But to me this sculpture is functional for my photo series, so it can be called architecture (laughs).

DMK: *Your work interacts with the architecture to change the nature of the viewers' perception of the museum space.*
HS: The architect competes with the quality of the space outside and inside. When I make photographs I create two-dimensional space from three-dimensional space; but when I hang my shows I create a three-dimensional sculptural space within the museum. In that sense I am working with an architect's or a sculptor's mentality.

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DMK: *What is the relation between your "Photographs of* Joe*" and Richard Serra's sculpture?*
HS: When Richard saw my photographs he was shocked and said "this is not about me," which was a very good sign because I want to present my own identity and concept. The Serra sculpture is just a source in my case. I had seen *Joe*-like spiral pieces by Serra at the Gagosian Gallery show some years ago and also at the Dia Foundation, but I had never seen one outside. It caused me to revaluate Serra's quality of space. I photographed *Joe* employing the same approach as my architectural series. A finished building is a product of negotiation; I used an out-of-focus technique in an effort to regain a sense of the architect's core idealist vision for the building. But as a sculptor Serra does not have to compromise like an architect; *Joe* is his idealized vision. Thus the sculpture is a representation of pure form for both of us.

DMK: *An element of time is important to the experience of the Serra sculpture as you walk through.*
HS: Serra spent some time in Japan during the 1970s; that's the time when I moved to this country, so we missed each other. He was influenced by Japanese gardens. The design of traditional Japanese gardens involves time concepts quite different from Western gardening. I never asked Richard about this, but I feel the same roots for how to deal with the concept of time in his sculpture, especially *Joe*. They echo each other. His sculpture is continuous; it is a very mysterious, almost trap-like structure. That's why I became deeply involved with it and kept finding in it so many different compositions.

DMK: *The work suggests notions of a sundial.*
HS: When I make the seascapes I spend quite some time with my camera sitting in one spot to feel the weather conditions. I want a clear sky and a calm day with less wind so that I can get a pure clean composition. The cloud quality is very important, but not Gustave LeGray-type seascapes, which I want to avoid because they are too painterly. I applied to the *Joe* series the same principle as if I were at the seashore watching the weather. Fortunately, most of the five days that I spent here were clear with some clouds. I used the cloud formation as part of the design. In the upstairs gallery are two identical compositions that record the passage of clouds. I need about thirty seconds between exposures. I use an 8 x 10 camera with a large holder that contains two sheets of film. I have to place my holder and then shoot and then close the sliding door and then take out the holder and flip it and put it back, that takes thirty seconds, so that is the time span being shown.

DMK: *Was there a certain time of day that you preferred to photograph during the week you made the negatives for the* Joe *series?*
HS: For the *Joe* series I worked mostly in the morning and at sunset—from about 5:30 to 8:30 a.m. and again from about 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. At mid-day the shadow quality wasn't as interesting. That was about three years ago at this time of the year.

DMK: *I am intrigued by the shifting kinetic pictorial effects and distinct representation of space in the* Joe *photographs.*
HS: Vision through the camera is different from what you see through your eyes. Humans create three-dimensional vision in their brains. I can mentally translate how a scene will look through the two-dimensional vision of the camera lens and in black and white values. I trained myself very well on the Zone System, Ansel Adams' technique of how to control the shadow detail and yet maintain the highlights. My pictures contain neither dead black nor one hundred percent white; there are continuous gray tones from the darkest spot to the brightest spot. The negative is made through a mixture of my composition, the character of the lens I choose, and the controlled technique that I apply so that I do not lose quality in any part of the shadow detail.

DMK: *What is it about photography that has engaged your interest for this body of work and over the past number of decades?*
HS: Photography is rather a young medium compared to painting and sculpture. It's been only about 165 years since its invention. I first came to New York in 1974 with the basic idea to be an artist, but in which medium? I was free to choose. The art scene at the time—conceptualism and minimal art, especially the work of Donald Judd and Dan Flavin—fascinated me. I decided to engage contemporary art through photography. I thought I had an advantage because the medium was so young. Since its invention people have been amazed by how accurately photography can record reality. I tried something new—to use photography as a tool to

represent my ideas in the field of contemporary art. Painting had become a dead end. That's how conceptual art and minimalism came to be; it was almost as if we were giving up, we didn't know what to do from now on (laughs). In the 1980s and 1990s there was a return to expressionist-type painting—a sad movement with nothing to do but look back to original traditions. In my case I wanted to investigate a new way to use photography as an expression of human emotion and ideas.

DMK: *One feature that distinguishes your work in those early years from other conceptual artists who engaged photography is the quality of your craftsmanship.*
HS: There are many different types of photographers. For instance, [Nobuyoshi] Araki or [Daido] Moriyama are Japanese photographers who make grainy images and are less conscious of [technical] quality. For me the nineteenth-century technique of large-format photography creates the best quality picture, because the negative stores a huge amount of information. Although it's difficult to control, I'd rather continue to practice this traditional method and craft. Technically I'm influenced by Ansel Adams' books, even if aesthetically I'm quite different. Digital images may contain a large amount of information, but why should I shift to a digital camera and print less interesting pictures in which I can not control the shadow detail?

DMK: *How did you create the soft-focus effect in the "Photographs of* Joe*"?*
HS: I use what I call my twice-as-infinity technique to produce the out-of-focus effect in the *Joe* photographs and in my larger architectural series. I set my focal length on the twice-as-infinity spot, which actually does not exist. Today most small cameras auto focus, but they used to be hand focused. There was a clearly marked spot to set the lens to focus on infinity to photograph far vistas, mountains, and seascapes. However, on the old traditional view camera there is no mark indicating infinity, which means I can pass beyond the infinity point. If I use a 300 mm lens and the distance between lens and film is set to 300 mm then that is the focal point for infinity. If I shorten it to half of the length of the lens capacity (150 mm) technically then that is twice-as-infinity.

DMK: *In addition to the desired aesthetic effects that technical decision renders, does the concept of double infinity itself appeal to you?*
HS: Yes, I like this concept. I just don't want to say 'well I made it out of focus because I like it' – that's not sharp enough (laughs). I had to come up with some reason why I am doing this.

DMK: *You have written about the challenges that contemporary museum architecture can pose to exhibiting artists. What challenges did you meet in designing the installation for the "Photographs of* Joe*" in Ando's Pulitzer Foundation building?*
HS: In every museum show I try to adapt my art to the three dimensional quality of the architecture. It is fun to deal with museum quality space, but in most cases they are also very difficult. In Ando's building, however, it was a simple and straight forward hanging, even though I carefully designed the space. I didn't even have to deal with artificial light. In this building light comes through the courtyard with its water pool; the light reflects up from the surface of the water into the building giving the viewer a constantly changing view of my art that's perfect.

DMK: *What was your design concept and process for the installation of the "Photographs of* Joe*" at the Pulitzer?*
HS: I made a 1:20 scale model of the space and photographs and then I started shifting and switching pieces. The main gallery has the strongest impact in which a musical or rhythmical quality is important for the sequence so that you always encounter something different but related as you move from one piece to another. In the two smaller galleries are works that show cloud formations and the movement of the clouds. I carefully designed the entrance space that people see first. I wanted viewers to be puzzled so they wouldn't realize that these are photographs of the Serra sculpture. Some people may encounter the sculpture first and then step into the entrance. A few minutes elapse between the time they see the sculpture and the photographs. Their memory is still fresh and then they encounter a different kind of photographic memory. I think this is a new way of seeing the sculpture and the photographs.

DMK: *You wanted to activate the space by the sequence and the placement of the photographs and also by their relation to the Kelly wall sculpture and the two Serra sculptures that remained in the gallery.*
HS: I have to respect them of course. I want to co-exist peacefully with other art including Ando's strong presence. The last photograph that you see in this sequence has the most Ellsworth Kelly-like composition, so it naturally continues to the Kelly. The picture I hung between the two Serras in the gallery is particularly interesting. It shows the last edge of the inner core approaching the center of the *Joe* sculpture. The shadow is falling onto the outer core. I created a Richard Serra sculpture-shadow here.

DMK: *Where do you set up your camera to create this perspective?*
HS: My camera with its wide angle lens was placed just a few feet above the ground and facing upwards. Viewers lose a sense of the scale through this photographic vision, which makes the sculpture appear huge, like a 200 meter high building. It gives the impression they are looking up at a high-rise.

DMK: *How would the spectator's experience of the* Joe *photographs change if they were installed in a different location?*
HS: This is a once in a lifetime experience to have the sculpture seen next to my pictures. People come and are amazed at how different the photograph can be from the sculpture. This is a secret message from me: don't trust photography (laughs).

DMK: *How did you choose the presentation form—large mounted photographs that are un-framed, un-glazed and un-laminated?*
HS: Look at the Ellsworth Kelly [wall sculpture]; its surface is so sensitive and it's unprotected. I too have to be brave enough to show my work this way. The photograph mounted on an aluminum panel and lifted slightly off the wall has its own sculptural quality. There is a transformation from the three-dimensional heavy steel source sculpture to the thin layers of what I would call my silver sculpture. Fiber-based black-and-white photographs contain silver. I always see the color and feel the presence of the silver, which is a precious metal. I mount the photographs on four-ply mat board to cushion them from direct contact with the aluminum surface. Then I sand off the edge of the photographic emulsion to create a thin white line that delineates the border of the image. It's not just the surface of the photograph that is my art; the way I present and install it in space is my art.

DMK: *You've said that you want your photographs to fade and acquire a patina.*
HS: At Ando's [Contemporary Art Museum] building in Naoshima, Japan, I intentionally placed my seascape series outside in the courtyard of the building. For more than ten years they've been exposed outside in sealed waterproof Plexiglas boxes. My intention was to let them fade so that people could see how quickly the image disappears; but against my wish the image remained with almost no change even after ten years of exposure. I see many early photographs that are faded; this is part of their beauty and a trace of the passage of time. Color prints and digitally printed images are only surface to me; when they fade nothing remains. But with silver prints some solid materials remain; fading adds some kind of aging beauty on top of the surface.

DMK: *There is an analogy with the rusting of Serra's* Joe*.*
HS: I came back here three years after I photographed his piece and it looks quite different. It's rusted and there is some graffiti on the surface. Nothing is permanent, everything keeps changing. I'm a collector of Japanese traditional antiques and artifacts and I've learned a lot from my collection about how objects look more beautiful after they have survived for eight or nine hundred years. They show how they have survived and that is in itself a value.

DMK: *There is conscious reference to the essential vocabulary of traditional photography in much of your work including the "Photographs of* Joe*"—the dark chamber, the light oculus.*
HS: I want to expand the vocabulary of photography but at the same time remain within the original character of the photographic experience. I have an 1839 [William Henry] Fox Talbot negative. If you really concentrate on the shadow area all of a sudden you start seeing a window shape. In that recognition there is the impact of how photography was invented to see actual scenes in the chemicals. I want to retain that original fascination

with photography. How many photographers today make large-format, black-and-white, fiber-based photographs? I feel like I'm the dinosaur of this tradition; someday I want to be nominated as a National Living Treasure (laughs).

DMK: *You have written about the development of the human consciousness of memory leading to the making of memorials as the beginning of sculpture. This idea seems particularly relevant for your "Photographs of* Joe*" series.*
HS: It could be that the Serra sculpture is named after the late husband of Emily Pulitzer; it could be the stone of the tomb or a memorial tower. But I don't personally associate it with Mr. Pulitzer; I see it related to my seascape series as a metaphor of human memory. The seascape is perhaps the least changed vista from prehistoric times. If we look at a seascape we may flash back to our ancestors' memories many thousands of generations ago, to the first humans who became aware of themselves and the presence of the seascape. The *Joe* series also functions as a metaphor and a system of remembrance. The beginning of human culture is the beginning of how we treat people who have passed away. The monkey mother holds the dead baby for two or three days and then she abandons it and her memory is gone. Instead of forgetting, humans make a clear mark of the death using a system of tombs and gravestones, which are the beginning of sculpture and of art.

DMK: *What do you see as photography's role within these ideas?*
HS: In the nineteenth century photography replaced the tradition of painting portraits to keep the memory of the dead. Photography is a time recording device; it is the best medium to record the past. I have been collecting fossils lately. I call them a pre-photography time-recording device; they functions in exactly the same way. Under the sea perhaps after an eruption four hundred million years ago, a small sea creature became pressed; when we find the stone and separate it one side is negative and one side is positive. Photography has been the time-recording medium for only 165 years; but digital photography can be manipulated in any way such that now the credibility of photography is lost. I am glad I was living in the last decades of the real photography (laughs).

DMK: *Could you speak about the book presentation of the "Photographs of* Joe*"?*
HS: I've known Jonathan Safran Foer for a long time and we had wanted to work together. When the *Joe* project came about I asked him if he would be willing to contribute. He wrote a beautiful short story titled *Joe*, which has nothing to do with the Serra sculpture or with the actual Joe Pulitzer. Richard Serra, Jonathan, and I are three artists working on the same theme of *Joe*, but each of us are doing totally different things and then putting them together in a book as a new experience.

DMK: *Who determined the sequencing of images and the relation between the text pages and the image pages?*
HS: I sequenced the images and then Jonathan wrote the story. As the book was being edited and designed by Takaaki Matsumoto we realized there were five or six blank pages at the end. Jonathan expanded his story to fit the size of the book.

DMK: *There are many more photographs in the book than in the Pulitzer Foundation installation.*
HS: If I were given a bigger space I could show every single one of them (laughs). I did not choose because one particular piece is better than the other, they all have similar qualities. This was a grouping and a sequencing that worked in combination. I could design a second show using other pictures from the series that would be equally interesting as this original show.

DMK: *There are not many institutions where the qualities of the display you have achieved at the Pulitzer could be realized. Is there another space in your mind or in your dreams that would be the most ideal?*
HS: I am tired of dealing with spaces designed by famous architects, so probably in the future I will design my own (laughs). I want to be challenged to do something new; and traditional photography is now a thing of the past so I have to start something different. I already practice architecture; I have an architectural commission

in Tokyo and I want to do earthworks. All my memories have come back together. I want to do something on a bigger scale dealing directly with nature.

DMK: *Was the Go'o Shinto Shrine in Naoshima your first built architectural commission?*
HS: Yes that was my first serious architectural commission. I created optical quality glass steps leading down into a dark underground chamber; it looks like an 18th or 19th century camera obscura. So it's all related; I can apply the experience of being a photographer to an earthwork scale. I am not abandoning my previous career; I am just trying to adapt it to a different type of art form.

DMK: *The "Photographs of* Joe*" also evoke being inside of a subterranean space.*
HS: Yes, this picture feels as if you are at the bottom of the well with a very small opening for the sky. Light comes into the chamber from the sky and creates interesting shadow formations.

DMK: *In your recent retrospective catalogue you wrote about your memory of your childhood back yard as being like a well; and about how memories are often revealed in blurred layers that fold over on themselves. Is there a conscious or subconscious autobiographical aspect to your "Photographs of* Joe*" series?*
HS: Yes, maybe subconsciously (laughs). Many factors are condensed here—out-of-focus, underground space, light coming from the top, and even the seascape-like quality of half sky and half something different. Then there is the relation to my childhood memories, the strong impression of looking at my first seascape. I share this dreamy child-like mentality with my first well-like visions.