

## Ryuichi Kaneko, Historian of Japanese Photography, Dies at 73



Ryuichi Kaneko  
Portrait by Kazuhiko Washio

Ryuichi Kaneko, a historian, curator, and photobook collector, was a leading figure in establishing the history of Japanese photography. He died on Wednesday, June 30th, 2021. He passed away as a result of complications from a brain hemorrhage suffered in the autumn of 2020. He was 73.

Kaneko was a revered historian, serving a critical role in facilitating the work of researchers, curators, as well as nurturing a younger generation of those studying the history of photography in Japan. Spanning four decades of activity, his commitment to the subject fostered an enthusiasm and excitement among the photography community both in Japan and abroad, leaving a prodigious legacy.

From an early age, Kaneko inherited an interest in photography from his father and was an active member of his high school's photography

club. While he was a student at the seminary school Rissho University, he joined the *Zen Nihon Gakusei Shashin Renmei* (All-Japan Students' Photo Association), which was led by photography critic Tatsuo Fukushima. The association was a collective of students whose activities in photography developed in parallel to the student protest movement of the 1960s and '70s. Kaneko was also involved in the independent gallery movement of the 1970s and '80s, wherein photographers independently operated galleries for showing work and exchanging ideas. This proved to be a pivotal time for Kaneko. Through this involvement, he met many of the photographers who would become major figures in the history of Japanese photography; it was at this point that he made the choice to work as a photography historian, rather than pursue a practice of his own photography.

Soon after, he began his decades-long practice of collecting photography books and became a prominent proponent of establishing a discourse of the Japanese photobook alongside photography itself. As a historian of photography, his areas of speciality included Japan's era of Pictorialism as well as Modern Photography, for which he helped foster research and interest both domestically as well as abroad. He played a large role in reestablishing the international awareness and critical reception of the photography-based experimental work of Toshiko Okanoue, the photography of Shigeru Onishi and that of Masao Horino. Kaneko served as a lecturer at Musashino Art University and University of Tsukuba for several years. He was also involved in the administration of the Tokyo College of Photography and The Japan Society for Arts and History, serving as a director of both.

Kaneko was a specialist advising researcher and key figure in the establishment of Japan's first public collection of photography, the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, which opened to the public in 1995 and where he worked as a guest curator until March 2015. The museum's inaugural

exhibition was a fundamental reexamination of Japan's modern photography, *The Founding and Development of Modern Photography in Japan*. Over the years, he curated many important exhibitions devoted to the work of individual photographers, such as Shomei Tomatsu, Shoji Ueda, Eikoh Hosoe, Iwata Nakayama, and Masao Horino, among others. The final exhibition that he curated while at the museum was *1968—Japanese Photography* (2013), which is highly regarded as a benchmark contribution to the history of photography in Japan, casting a new light on an important period as well as introducing the significance of student photographers.

Kaneko contributed to and wrote for numerous international exhibitions and catalogs, including *The History of Japanese Photography* (2003), *Japan's Modern Divide: The Photographs of Hiroshi Hamaya and Kansuke Yamamoto* (2013), and *For a New World to Come: Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography from 1968–1979* (2015–16). Apart from these productions, Kaneko was an author involved in many important books on the history of photography in Japan, including *Nihon kindai shashin no seiritsu* (The dawn of Japanese modern photography, 1987), *Independent Photographers in Japan: 1976–83* (1989), *Kansuke Yamamoto: Fukano no dentatsusha* (Conveyor of the Impossible, 2001), *NIPPON* (facsimile edition, 2002–2005), *Nihon shashinshi no shiho* (The treasures of Japanese photography, 2005–2007), *Shoji Ueda: Watashi no shashin saho* (2000), *Japanese Photobooks of the 1960s & '70s* (2009), and *The Japanese Photobook, 1912–1990* (2017). He is the author of *Osamu Shiihara* (2016), *Shigeru Onishi: Mathematical Structures* (2021) as well as *Nihon wa shashinshu no kuni de aru* (Japan is a country of photobooks, 2021), which is a collection of Kaneko's writings between 2014 and 2019. Kaneko's last major book publication, for which he served as the lead author, is devoted to the subject that first sparked his interest in this field, *Japanese Photography Magazines: 1880s to 1980s* (forthcoming).

While Kaneko worked as a curator and author, his primary work was that of a Buddhist monk. He was the 32nd in the lineage of monks in charge of the Buddhist temple Shogyoin in Tokyo's Taito district. He served in this position for approximately seventeen years, having inherited the role from his father. Kaneko was also a proficient player of the Japanese Hichiriki (a double-reed wind instrument, similar to the oboe) and performed traditional Japanese court music *gagaku*, contributing to its succession and development.

He is survived by his wife, Setsuko; his son, Masahiro; and daughter, Risa.

Due to COVID-19, a closed funeral service was held in Tokyo on 9th July. Condolences may be sent to the family through MEM gallery. <[art@mem-inc.jp](mailto:art@mem-inc.jp)>