

The Photograph “Tomoko and Mother in the Bath”

Aileen Mioko Smith

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The following is Aileen Mioko Smith’s statement explaining her decision to no longer release the photograph “Tomoko and Mother in the Bath” by W. Eugene Smith.

This statement was released at the Arles/Perpignan, France Photo Fetes press conference.



THE DECISION to no longer release the photograph “Tomoko and Mother in the Bath” was made after a great deal of deliberation, with love and care. I am grateful to be given this opportunity by the organizers of this press conference to explain this decision.

“Tomoko and Mother in the Bath” was taken by W. Eugene Smith during our project of photographing Minamata between the years 1971 and 1974. Taken on a chilly December afternoon in 1971, in the little bathing room, the air was intense as we all four in bated breath made this statement. It would never have happened if merely the will of the photographer had been asserted upon his subjects.

I believe it is the viewer that creates the power in this photograph, completing its image. And so this photograph has been in a constant process of being re-created over the 30 years since its making, and I wish to add, will continue being created anew for the years to come, now in a different and in some sense more powerful way.

In spite of working with Gene and fighting with him as though a colleague, he was finally, a mentor, and the decision I made as holder of copyright to this photograph was very much because I believe in what he said, and because I wish to honor his tradition. I do not intend to have this decision be a setter of precedents, but I do believe that this decision contributes to the work of photography as art and journalism. I have never felt so sure and good about making any decision in my life, and that is for me personally quite a miracle.

Gene said that as photographer he had two responsibilities. One was to his subjects and the other was to his viewers. He said if both responsibilities were met, this automatically would meet his responsibility to his editors. “Integrity” and “stubbornness” were what Gene held most high.

I would like to tell you a little about Tomoko's family. Photography is neither medicine nor god and the photograph "Tomoko and Mother in the Bath", in spite of its release worldwide, could not cure Tomoko's illness, the result of being contaminated with deadly organic mercury from a Japanese sea polluted with industrial waste. Her mother had unknowingly eaten contaminated fish while pregnant with Tomoko and the poison had gone through the placenta to the child. Tomoko's parents called their eldest a "treasure child" because she had absorbed the poison that would have remained otherwise in her mother. Because of Tomoko having taken away the poison from her mother, all of Tomoko's siblings, five girls and a boy, were not afflicted with Minamata Disease like Tomoko.

Prejudice remained, and still does to this day against those who have members of the family afflicted with Minamata Disease. This makes marriage difficult if not impossible in some cases. In 1976, shortly after her rights of passage into adulthood and shortly before her siblings reached marriageable age, Tomoko died. Tomoko's death was an indication that Tomoko, so loved by her family, was making a statement as she left their lives. This was only a decision that could be made by Tomoko, and so it was.

Tomoko's parents to this very day remain firm in their desire to rid the world of pollution. "Extermination" is the word Tomoko's father uses. And so they care that this photograph be not erased from this earth. And so be it. (The work in publications that already exist, in museums and with collectors will do that.)

Needless to say, after Tomoko's death, this photograph meant something different. It wasn't about Tomoko anymore, a life being lived, but about continuing to reach out to the entire world, seeking the extermination of pollution, expressing the love of mother and child.

In living life, we learn that the gift of love is given to us willingly, we cannot take it for granted, nor can we assume it will be offered forever.

To be honest, over the years it became a greater and greater burden for me to continue to answer to the publication of this photograph. Tomoko's parents remained silent, but I knew how they felt because I know how I feel. I kept telling myself, "I know people have been moved, even their lives changed by this image. I must continue to release it to the world. It is my duty." But gradually, this was turning to profanity. I knew that Tomoko's parents, now nearly a quarter century since her death, wanted Tomoko to rest. "Yasumasete agetai" (we want to let her rest) were their words. And I felt the same. I literally felt Tomoko's efforts over these two and a half decades, each time going out to the world, naked, showing everything of her polluted body.

This photograph would mean nothing if it did not honor Tomoko. This photograph would be a profanity if it continued to be issued against the will of Tomoko and her

family. Because this was a statement about Tomoko's life, it must honor that life and by it her death.

The viewer, what about the viewer? To really honor the viewer, I must not lie to her or him. How could I publish this photograph, keeping secret the fact that in reality we needed Tomoko to rest?

What about the world of photography? Will this decision to terminate future publication abet a "dangerous trend" of subjects asserting themselves, preventing the release of images? I do not believe so. This particular decision made on the Tomoko photograph was an act of *exercising* copyright, not relinquishing it.

There is a fight to be fought, and it must be the right fight that we fight. Each case is different. And I believe this decision will add strength to photography, not weaken it.

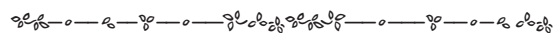
I believe this particular decision does honor to this particular photograph as a work of art and as a work of journalism, and by it honors the art and journalism of photography itself. Because — if I may be so brash to add — if all subjects and viewers in the world knew that each photograph that is seen in the world is a result of careful deliberation, not an accident of mass production, the power of photography would soar.

Finally, to me it is as though Tomoko is sending us out into a world — this time without her — saying, "Now it is *your* turn. Now you must express with your art and your journalism the statement this image made, and even more!"

The challenges are great before us whether we are photographer, working in the world of photography, or, like me, simply carrying on from the tradition of W. Eugene Smith in other ways. There is so much to do, and what might be called the "loss" of this photograph can give us courage to know that we have a task before us that is great.

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