

THE PROVOKE ERA

Japanese Photography from the Collection of SFMOMA



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California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock

3824 Main Street, Riverside, CA 92501



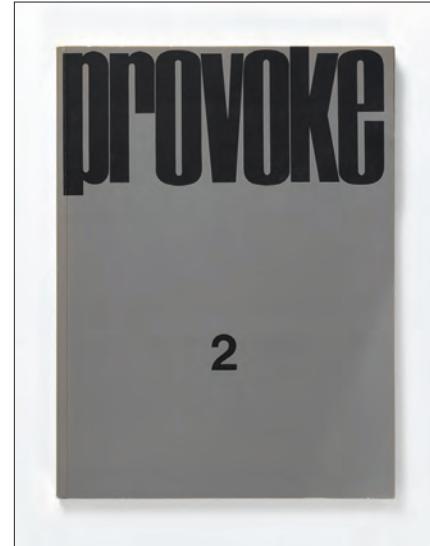
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The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has been actively acquiring the work of internationally recognized artists including Masahisa Fukase, Eikoh Hosoe, Daido Moriyama, and Shomei Tomatsu since the 1970s, assembling one of the world's preeminent collections of Japanese photography. Featuring approximately 50 photographs, this exhibition represents the avant-garde tradition that emerged in Tokyo in the 1960s and 70s. The tumultuous period following World War II proved fertile ground for a generation of Japanese photographers who responded to societal upheaval by creating a new visual language dubbed “*Are, Bure, Boke*”—rough, blurred, and out of focus. Named for the magazine *Provoke*, which sought to break the rules of traditional photography, this exhibition traces how Japanese photographers responded to their country's shifting social and political atmosphere.

In the wake of its defeat in World War II, Japan sought both to forget the past and to transcend it. Aligning with the American victors in an unexpected embrace, the country catapulted itself almost overnight from an historic empire to a democratic nation with a competitive economy. Although the country had experienced extreme poverty immediately following the war, soon it not only accepted the presence of its Western occupiers but widely appropriated the American influences of capitalism and democracy, and even elements of popular culture, such as jazz. The complicated and at times ambiguous atmosphere created by the transformation from a traditionally restrictive social structure into a new egalitarian society provided fertile material for the burgeoning artistic community. Photography was ideally suited to record this rapidly changing environment, and the medium experienced an important avant-garde development.

The small-press photography magazine *Provoke: shiso no tame no chohatsuteki shiryō* (*Provoke: Provocative Materials for Thought*) was founded in 1968 by a group of photographers and writers united in their pursuit of a new and more



expressive visual language. The works on view in *The Provoke Era* provide a context for this incendiary time, and include work from the postwar period, from the *Provoke* movement itself, and from later generations of artists who have felt its impact. Among the earliest works in the exhibition are those by photographers Shomei Tomatsu, Kikuji Kawada, Eikoh Hosoe, and Ikko Narahara, who united in 1959 to form VIVO, a collaborative group modeled on the Magnum Photos agency. The cooperative shared a common philosophy that sought to forge a new critical practice in opposition to established photographic conventions. Rejecting straightforward realism, this new generation of Japanese photographers projected a more personal and ambiguous vision of Japan, such as that in Hosoe's *Kamaitachi #31* (1968), which exemplifies the violent upheaval and passionate artistic response that followed the war.

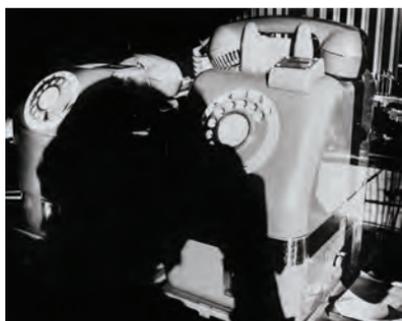
International political turmoil and increased consumerism were the catalysts for the *Provoke* movement, formed in 1968 by photographers and writers including Takuma Nakahira and, later, Daido Moriyama. Reacting against the narrative and descriptive properties of photojournalism, the *Provoke* artists embraced a style of extreme graininess and high contrast with which they sought to deconstruct traditional photographic conventions, as can be seen in Moriyama's frightening signature image, *Stray Dog, Misawa, Aomori* (1971). *Provoke*, their self-published magazine, was conceived as both photographic and political manifesto. Rather than depicting their subjects with clarity, the photographers often chose fragments of life that described a sense of excitement and anguish that resonated with existentialism, so important in postwar Europe.

Cover: Daido Moriyama, *Stray Dog, Misawa, Aomori*, 1971
Collection SFMOMA, gift of Van Deren Coke, © Daido Moriyama

Above, left to right: Eikoh Hosoe, *Kamaitachi #31*, 1968
Collection of the Sack Photographic Trust, © Eikoh Hosoe

Daido Moriyama, *Provoke 2*, 1969
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Research Library, © Daido Moriyama

Daido Moriyama, *Hiratsuka*, 1966
Collection SFMOMA, gift of Carla Emil and Rich Silverstein, © Daido Moriyama



Left to right: Shomei Tomatsu, *Elko Ôshima, Actress in the Film "Shiiku" ("Prize Stock")*, 1961
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, promised gift of the Kurenboh Collection
© Shomei Tomatsu - INTERFACE

Daido Moriyama, *Shibuya*, from the series *Light and Shadow*, c. 1981
Collection SFMOMA, Accessions Committee Fund purchase, © Daido Moriyama

By the 1970s, Japan's economic bubble had burst. *Provoke* magazine ceased to exist and some members of the movement turned away from photography, although younger photographers, many of them friends of the original group, continued to pursue their own work in much the same style. Photographers became interested in investigating underlying social and economic structures; Hiroshi Watanabe surveyed the underworld society of Shinjuku, and Masahisa Fukase turned inward, examining his solitude after the dissolution of his marriage in *Seikan Ferry Boat*, from the series "The Solitude of Ravens" (1976). Since that time, Japan has continued to support a diverse and flourishing photographic culture, which has transformed and grown as the country has evolved.

—Sandra Phillips

The Provoke Era is organized by SFMOMA and curated by Sandra Phillips, SFMOMA senior curator of photography. UCR ARTSblock's presentation is organized by Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP curator of exhibitions. Graphic design is by Wendy Brown. This presentation is part of an unprecedented statewide tour of works from SFMOMA's renowned photography collection to communities throughout California while its building is closed for expansion through early 2016. During this time, SFMOMA is on the go, presenting an extensive array of off-site exhibitions and programs throughout the Bay Area and beyond. For more information, visit sfmoma.org.

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