

## LANDMARKS IN JAPANESE POSTWAR AVANT-GARDE PHOTOGRAPHY

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### **Abstract**

*The article presents key landmarks of the postwar Japanese avant-garde in photography, revealing the ideological and artistic positioning of the main local photographic movements. Focusing on the three postwar decades, particularly the 1960s and 1970s, a period of intense creative expansion shaped by reconstruction, rapid modernization, and Western influence—the study situates photographic practices within a broader cultural context that reinterpreted both traditional and foreign elements. During this time, photographers acted and reacted through journalistic protest, ideological provocation, and artistic performance, articulating diverse visions—both radical and realist—of photography as an art form and medium. Evolving in close dialogue with other artistic disciplines, photography became central to the Japanese postwar avant-garde, engaging in multicultural exchanges and intermedial transgressions that challenged established aesthetic boundaries. Through iconoclastic ruptures, experimental practices, and sustained theoretical reflection on the nature of the medium, Japanese photographers contributed decisively to the emergence of new aesthetics and to broader artistic transformations within the dynamic crucible of postwar avant-garde arts.*

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**Keywords:** Japanese photography, postwar photography, photographic movements, avant-garde photography, radical photographic languages.

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DOI: 10.24818/SYN/2026/22/1.10

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### **1. Introduction - Photography within the postwar Japanese artistic avant-garde**

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In the aftermath of war and the American occupation, postwar Japan became the stage for one of the most concentrated avant-garde movements of the 20th century. Over roughly three decades, artists broke decisively away from traditional canons, inventing radically new forms of expression (Brown-Ewens, 2025). During this period, Japanese cultural traditions, intertwined with Western influences, were reimagined within a powerful and original artistic avant-garde—a singular phenomenon in the history of the arts. Across a wide range of disciplines—including photography, theater, dance, illustration, graphic design, music, architecture, and cinema—an impressive generation of pioneering artists profoundly transformed the visual arts landscape. Fueled by extraordinary creative vitality and a profound

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humanist response to wartime devastation and atomic destruction, this movement generated a continuous flow of ideas and works that have had a fundamental impact on contemporary art, despite remaining relatively underrecognized in the West. “That feeling, of having witnessed the worst of humanity at close range and needing to invent something entirely new from the wreckage, runs through all the work of that era” reflects A. Ravalec (Ravalec, 2025).

The postwar development of Japanese avant-garde photography must be understood within the broader context of Japan’s profound transformation following World War II. Emerging from a period of national reconstruction marked by rapid social, economic, and political change, Japan entered what would become the most dynamic phase of creative expansion in its modern history. As industrialization accelerated and the nation reasserted itself on the global stage, the arts evolved in parallel, generating new forms of expression that both reflected and challenged contemporary realities. This environment laid the groundwork for a fertile artistic landscape in which experimentation and innovation thrived, ultimately positioning Japan as a major center of contemporary art by the twenty-first century (Nishimura-Poupée, 2021).

Within this shifting cultural framework, Japanese photography assumed a central role in articulating the concerns and aspirations of the postwar avant-garde. Far from operating in isolation, photographers engaged closely with other artistic disciplines, participating actively in the transformative artistic tumult that defined the period. Significantly, the avant-garde was a collaborative phenomenon and, in Ravalec’s opinion, also inevitable: “These artists were confronting the void together, using the body, language, image, and gesture to do it.” (Brown-Ewens, 2025). Big names in Japanese photography, notorious in the West, such as Araki Nobuyoshi, Moriyama Daidō, Hosoe Eikoh, created alongside many other remarkable photographers, such as Ishiuchi Miyako, Kawada Kikuji, Hanaga Mitsutoshi, Nakahira Takuma, or the multi-artist filmmaker, poet and photographer Terayama Shūji, to name a few. In the same time, photographers were dynamically interconnected with other influential visual artists of the period, such as designers and painters (Tanaami Keiichi, Yokoo Tadanori, Awazu Kiyoshi, Tanabe Santaro, Akira Uno), writers (Mishima Yukio), choreographers and butoh dancers (Hijikata Tatsumi, Ohno Kazuo, Mizohata Toshio), experimental theater troupes and actors (*Tenjō Sajiki*, Sasame Hiroyuki, Terayama Shuji), film directors (Enomoto Ryoichi, Morishita Takashi), performance artist groups (*Neo-Dada*, *Hi-Red Center*, with founder Genpei Akasegawa), and others (Ravalec, 2024).

Within the postwar Japanese avant-garde, revolutionary artists adopted diverse positions and articulated distinct artistic and photographic visions, shaped by the prevailing artistic and ideological frameworks. Accordingly, artists took divergent stances toward modernism and the international arts community, as well as toward Japan’s ties with the United States and the corporate and bureaucratic interests that

defined the socio-economic and political context in Japan during this period, as noted by T. R. H. Havens in his work *Radicals and Realists in the Japanese Nonverbal Arts: The Avant-Garde Rejection of Modernism* (2006). If, during the American occupation (1945–1952), a certain degree of censorship of the arts led to a period of artistic stasis and isolation, changes in context followed rapidly in the subsequent decades. Thus, in the 1950s and 1960s, the emergence of an artistic subculture in Shinjuku, energized by Japanese artists who had studied abroad and characterized by experimentation across the nonverbal arts, is notable. In the 1960s and 1970s, under the influence of numerous cultural exchanges, radical artists attacked formalism through the creation of so-called *anti-art*, going beyond modernism in their work (Havens, 2006; Volk, 2010).

Characteristic of the avant-garde, the various movements, expressions, and experiments were influenced more by generational and ideological divergences than by artistic genres, Havens believes. Therefore, across the visual arts as a whole, two major artistic attitudes emerged: radical stances of rebellion against existing aesthetic canons and established authority, favoring inspiration from Western art; and more realistic approaches oriented toward local materials, themes from everyday life, and inspiration drawn from traditional pre-modern Japanese art. However, the tactics of artistic protest or resistance were shaped more by adaptation to the historical context than by direct confrontation (Havens, 2006; Volk, 2010). On the whole, avant-garde art was born of artists' need to free themselves from conventions, traditions, and received ideas. Over three decades, their approach to artistic resistance evolved from direct protest guided by political ideologies to a broader, existential form of opposition, encompassing social, moral, and philosophical dimensions (Ravalec, 2024).

Significantly, postwar Japanese photography emerged as a pivotal force within the avant-garde, shaping and reflecting the profound changes of the period. Through radical innovations, courageous experiments, and extended conceptual reflection on photography as both medium and art, Japanese photographers challenged established aesthetic norms and expanded the possibilities of visual representation. At the same time, photography functioned as both a participant in and a documenter of the avant-garde movement, capturing its evolving forms while simultaneously shaping its direction. Through this dynamic interaction, the medium itself underwent groundbreaking developments, generating movements from which emerged works now considered fundamental to contemporary photography.

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## ***2. Main movements in the postwar Japanese photographic avant-garde***

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In Japan, the three postwar decades witnessed the emergence of several avant-garde photographic movements and currents, which put forward competing artistic and ideological visions of photography as both an art form and a medium. In the following, the movements in avant-garde Japanese photography are presented

roughly chronologically, although they often overlapped, starting with their defining characteristics and the representative photographers who initiated them or adhered to their ideas, with the caveat that this exposition is not exhaustive (Iizawa et al., 2003).

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### 2.1 Photo-Realism movement

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In the first postwar decade, photographers began to document the aftermath of the war in the cities, but due to censorship imposed on the arts during the American occupation, some of their works were not published until after 1952. Also during this period, several photographers turned to rural, idealized Japan, perceived as a place of unspoiled life and untouched traditional culture, in contrast to the destruction in the cities. In the 1950s, the first peak of postwar Japanese photography was reached with the *Photo-Realism* movement, which involved a wide range of amateur photographers inspired by Ken Domon and Ihei Kimura. In opposition to propaganda photography, the photorealists of this decade chose to document social realities accurately and straightforwardly. Through their approach to the image, they opposed both the previous photojournalism, which documented mainly public events, and the reminiscent prewar pictorial photography, which they saw as intended exclusively for art exhibitions. Instead, they promoted humanistic social reportage photography, with direct and clear snapshots of everyday life, published in large prints in newspapers and photography magazines, because, in their opinion, this kind of photography needed to reach the broader, general public (Bunian, 2012).

Ken Domon documented the aftermath of the war by focusing on common people and their everyday lives, emphasizing the value of the ordinary over the major, destabilizing events of the world. Domon also turned to Japan's secular religious traditions, capturing the beauty of ancient temples, as well as the traditional aesthetics of Japanese theater. Domon's most renowned photographs are *Hiroshima* (1958) and *The Children of Chikukō* (1960) photo series. *A Pilgrimage through Old Temples* (1963) and *Muroji Temple* (1954) photo series document the Buddhist temples, while *Bunraku* (1972) celebrates Japan theatre traditions in beautiful black and white images (iBasho Gallery, 2025a).

Ihei Kimura is known for his portrayal of the informal aspects of everyday life, both in urban Tokyo and rural Akita Prefecture. In the 1950s, Kimura traveled to Europe and China, providing photographs for Japanese camera magazines. Due to his snapshot documentary style, he was often compared to H. Cartier-Bresson. His photographs were published in photography books such as: *Impressions of Europe* (1954), with images from his travels, *Paris* (1973), that holds his pioneering color series, and *Akita* (1978), with images from the Japanese villages (iBasho Gallery, 2025b).

Hiroshi Hamaya became interested in documenting the traditional customs of people in the villages even before the war. In the early 1950s, he recorded life in remote prefectures of Japan, developing a more humanist, ethnographic approach to reportage photography. Hamaya later returned to Tokyo to document the massive street demonstrations against the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1960. His political reportage photography was collected in the photobook *Record of Anger and Grief* (1960), an iconic book of Japan's postwar visual culture of protest. Hamaya was the first Japanese photographer to join Magnum Photos, and his work was included in Edward Steichen's major world photography exhibition, *The Family of Man* (MoMA, 1955, touring for eight years around the world), a pinnacle of Photo-Realism (Hoppen, 2025a).

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## 2.2 *VIVO* movement

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In the late 1950s, the *VIVO* collective, a short-lived postwar photography agency in Tokyo (1957–1961), re-examined photography as a medium, leaving a lasting imprint on the field for decades to come. The *VIVO* group was founded by six independent photographers who would become among Japan's most renowned: Eikoh Hosoe, Kikuji Kawada, Ikkō Narahara, Akira Satō, Akira Tanno, and Shōmei Tōmatsu; creative and experienced, all six had participated in the famous 1957 exhibition *Jūnin no me (Eyes of the Ten)*. The *VIVO* movement represented the culmination of postwar Japanese photography's Image School, which defined the 1950s. Drawing on photojournalism and prewar Japanese surrealist photography, and inspired by contemporary Western photography, *VIVO* was the photographers' response to the existentialist and radical ideas of the era. Young artists who had come of age amid war, defeat, and American occupation, the members of *VIVO* engaged with the currents of protest through their art, resisting state politics and postwar Americanization (iBasho Gallery, 2017).

Modeled largely on the prestigious European collective Magnum Photos, founded a decade earlier, the *VIVO* group focused more on practical, exhibition-oriented goals than on a shared artistic vision. The members explored various forms of photography, from documentary (Ikkō Narahara, Kikuji Kawada, Shōmei Tōmatsu) to fine art (Eikoh Hosoe, Akira Tanno) and commercial work (Akira Satō). Their personal projects also intersected with the work of numerous artists, writers, sculptors, performers, and models of the time (Krischer, 2007). Ikkō Narahara's photographs depict spaces shaped by striking angles and bold contrasts. Akira Tanno's images capture circuses, ballerinas, and music stars of the time, often in very tight frames. Eikoh Hosoe's work presents creative representations of the human body, as seen in his series with the writer Yukio Mishima or in his abstract nudes. Akira Satō's photographs reflect the agency's commercial and professional intentions. In documentary photography, the works of Kikuji Kawada and Shōmei Tōmatsu signaled a shift in both aesthetic and perspective, from merely recording facts to conveying the affective memory of events. Although both photographers address the

consequences of the atomic bomb, depicting ruins, victims, artifacts, memories, and evidence, their images pursue an emotionally charged narrative; some photographs were even composed, it seems, with a deliberate emotional imperative (Krischer, 2007).

Beyond producing visually impactful photographs, *VIVO* artists established themselves on the photographic scene by creating a discourse on the fundamental questions of photography as a practice—interrogating its relationship with political protest movements, its ambiguous documentary function, and the dynamic interplay between subjective and objective representations of reality. “What sets them apart from the older generation of documentary photographers is their obsession with how to describe immediate experience: their images are not commentaries on experience, but experience itself. *VIVO* artists wanted to express, rather than document, the visual and existential discord that permeated everyday life.” (iBasho Gallery, 2017). Their works bear witness to how, as in Western photography, the photographer’s subjectivity came to prevail over the depiction of social realism.

Shōmei Tōmatsu, the most famous member of *VIVO*, produced a rich body of photographic work characterized by his intimate view of postwar daily life in small Japanese towns, the critical spirit evident in the *Occupation* series (1960), in which he captured images of American military bases and the surrounding cities, the innovation of the *Nagasaki* project (1961), dedicated to the consequences of the atomic bomb, and the modernist sensibility of the series *Oh! Shinjuku* (1969) and *I Am a King* (1972), in which he chased the rapid transformations of the city (iBasho Gallery, 2017).

Ikkō Narahara initially distinguished himself in Japan with the *Human Land* project (1956), and as a member of *VIVO* he expressed his intention to create a “personal document,” as opposed to realist documentary work. Narahara also produced photography outside Japan: three years in Europe, where he created *Where Time Has Stopped* (1962–1965), and four years in the United States, where he created *Where Time Has Vanished* (1970–1974). His photographic work often seeks a mythical space located elsewhere, contrasting with Japan, and demonstrates an appreciation for artificially constructed spaces as opposed to natural ones (iBasho Gallery, 2017).

Eikoh Hosoe, one of the best-known Japanese photographers, drew attention for his direct exploration of sexuality in his *Man and Woman* series (1960), followed by the *Embrace* series (1969–1970), in which he presented abstract, almost transparent nudes of men and women. His fascination with the body’s forms, movements, and eroticism continued in his seminal series *Ordeal by Roses* (1963), featuring the famous writer Yukio Mishima as his model. The *Man and Woman* (1960) and *Kamaitachi* (1969) series were created with Tatsumi Hijikata, the founder of experimental Butoh dance, while for the *Simmon: A Private Landscape* series (1971), he collaborated with Simon Yotsuya, an artist and actor from the *Situation Theater*

led by Shuji Terayama. Hosoe's photographs are highly subjective, presenting elegant, beautifully composed scenes that are surreal and mystical (iBasho Gallery, 2017).

Kikuji Kawada created documentary photographs defined by an aesthetic of the grotesque, often depicting places imbued with the memory of wartime violence, such as the dome of Hiroshima. His series *Sacre Atavism* (1971) and *Cosmos of the Dream King* (1979) convey a dark tone, while his major work, *The Last Cosmology* (1980–2000), uses photographs of elegant abstractions to connect astral dramas with the closing of two historical eras: the end of the Shōwa era, marked by the emperor's death, and the end of the 20th century (iBasho Gallery, 2017).

Akira Satō experimented with fashion photography and was appreciated for his graphic and experimental representations of the feminine, as seen in the refined series *Cyclopean Eye* (1962). His beautiful book *Women* (1971) is an enigmatic collection of portraits subtly intertwined with fashion (iBasho Gallery, 2017).

Akira Tanno recorded the dynamic performances of the stage in his *Circus* series (1956–1957), creating photographs that combine documentary observation with lyrical expression. Throughout his long career, the poetic quality of his documentary images remained significant, setting him apart in the landscape of postwar photography (iBasho Gallery, 2017).

After the agency's dissolution, the *VIVO* photographers continued to work independently in the following decades, asserting their creative visions alongside other movements in contemporary Japanese photography. For young photographers of the period, *VIVO* represented both a working model and a platform against which to define their own ideas (Krischer, 2007). The *VIVO* movement generated a set of innovative ideas and experimental photography that strongly resonated with the era, laying the foundations for the further development of the photographic scene. The work of *VIVO* photographers has inspired many artists of their generation and subsequent ones, including Nobuyoshi Araki and Masahisa Fukase, whose works embody the inseparable connection between personal life and the photographic act (Maison Européenne de la Photographie Paris, 2017).

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### 2.3 Provoke movement

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The *Provoke* movement is perhaps the most famous Japanese photographic movement, both in Japan and the West, due to the radicalism of its ideas, which had a profound impact on the era and transformed the landscape of postwar Japanese photography. The style and concepts it advanced created a cult following that persists to this day. Emerging in the late 1960s, the *Provoke* movement conveyed bold and striking new ideas in photography, developing as a continuation of those introduced by the *VIVO* movement but with more radical nuances. The movement coalesced

around *Provoke* magazine, an experimental, independent Japanese photography publication self-published in 1968–1969, comprising only three issues. The founders of the magazine were the critics and photographers Kōji Taki and Takuma Nakahira, the photographer Yutaka Takanashi, and the writer Takahiko Okada. Photographer Daidō Moriyama joined starting with the second issue, bringing with him early influences from the photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson and American photographers. (Tate Museum, 2012). *Provoke* photographers were inspired by the work and ideas of the *VIVO* agency, particularly by the vision of Shōmei Tōmatsu, one of Japan's leading photographers, who supported *Provoke* members as an exhibition organizer and editor (Seymour, 2016).

The three issues of *Provoke* magazine, published in 1968 and 1969, presented series of photographs alongside poetry, criticism, and photographic theory. *Provoke* served as a robust platform for theorizing photography, advocating a photographic language radically opposed to pre-existing aesthetic canons—closer to “non-photography” than to the artistic or reportage photography produced at the time. In extensive theoretical essays, *Provoke* critics and photographers debated issues such as the nature of the medium, objectivity and subjectivity in social reportage photography, photographic styles and their role in documentary work, the relationship between photographic images and language, the importance of personal expression, and the position of photography as an art form within the broader artistic landscape.

Through the *Provoke Manifesto*, the participants articulated their stance on photography, arguing that visual images cannot fully convey ideas as words do, but that photographs can capture what cannot be expressed in words, thereby challenging language and ideas and becoming genuine documents subject to interpretation. Photography was seen as a new language, capable of generating new meanings (Witkovsky et al., 2016).

The *Provoke* movement emerged as a continuation of the ideas of the *VIVO* movement, incorporating the latest Western concepts and reaching a peak in postwar Japanese photography through both advanced theoretical discourse and radical visual experimentation. In response to Japanese *Photorealism* and the descriptive visual journalism of *Magnum Photos* photographers, the members of *Provoke* proposed a personal and affective visual narrative, aiming to present the surrounding reality as they experienced it, even if fragmentary and subjective. Convinced that photography could capture fragments of reality beyond the reach of language, they experimented with spontaneously taken snapshots, recording reality in an almost visceral way, and regarded the resulting images as legitimately valid documents alongside language and ideology. Furthermore, against the backdrop of the era's social unrest, critic Kōji Taki viewed official political and cultural ideologies as a threat to the neutrality of photographic art. He proposed instead new forms of visual documentary that would affirm photography's freedom of expression, convey ideological messages distinct from official narratives, and thereby initiate cultural change (Witkovsky et al., 2016).

The subjects chosen by the *Provoke* photographers included everyday urban life, inhabited spaces, marginalized citizens, and abandoned places, following the same line of thought as the rejection of traditional photographic subjects - an act of social opposition through the artistic act against the utopia of the modern, clean, and functional city. *Provoke* contradicted the Western vision of modern Japan, promoted by state cultural policy during the period of economic expansion, which depicted the country as a place of technological advancement and social harmony. In contrast, the photographs published by *Provoke* documented national suffering through representations of peripheral neighborhoods, side streets, and city dwellers in their daily lives, creating a dense visual narrative about the difficulties faced by ordinary people exposed to Americanization, rapid modernization, and accelerated economic growth, and shaken by frequent social and political turmoil (Seymour, 2016).

*Provoke* photographs are characterized by a distinctive artistic style, often blurry and dark, with a peculiar melancholy. The term *are-bure-boke*, literally “grainy-blurry-unfocused”, has become synonymous with the aesthetic of the *Provoke* movement. This visual style was not entirely new, but photographic effects such as distortions, prominent grain, and strong contrast - achieved during the exposure or development of film - were adopted by the group and used systematically in accordance with their declared artistic vision. They also employed juxtapositions, collage, tight cut-outs, and repetition. Additionally, they introduced innovations such as the square format chosen for their publications, which differed from the formats used in established camera magazines, and a borderless layout between photos on the page, creating the impression that the images merged with one another, becoming something new (Moriyama, 2010).

After the dissolution of the group, the photographers continued their work independently and in different directions. Takuma Nakahira distanced himself from the original vision and returned to more clearly defined images, while the works of Daidō Moriyama and Kōji Taki remained aligned with the original style and purpose of *Provoke*, reflecting the ideologies they sought to convey, and were followed by other contemporaries. Representative works of these current include *Kitarubeki kotoba no tame ni* (*For a Language to Come*, 1970) by Takuma Nakahira, *Shashin yo sayōnara* (*Farewell Photography*, 1972) by Daidō Moriyama, and *Toshi-e* (*Towards the City*, 1974) by Yutaka Takanashi.

Takuma Nakahira was a radical photographer who made major contributions to modern photography.

As a member of *Provoke* (1968–69), he theorized the group’s ideas about a new photographic language and pushed photography in a radically experimental direction, adopting the movement’s iconic style *are-bure-boke*, through which he challenged conventional aesthetics. His first anthology, *For a Language to Come* (1970), reflected both his poetic sensibility and his radical critique of photography. At the 1971 *Paris Biennale*, Nakahira presented his experimental project *Circulation: Date*,

*Place, Events* (1971), for which he randomly took snapshots in Paris and added new prints to the exhibition space daily, creating a form of photographic performance art. Later, Nakahira abandoned the *are-bure-boke* style, which had become commercialized and, as a consequence, was no longer considered radical, advocating instead for sharp, color photographs that presented the world as if in an illustrated dictionary - ideas materialized in his work *Why an Illustrated Botanical Dictionary* (1973). He also destroyed many of his earlier prints and negatives because they no longer aligned with his recent vision, namely that the only radical capacity of photography is to direct the eye toward the world. From his travels to the Okinawa Islands emerged the series *Amami: Waves, Graves, Flowers and Sun* (1976) and *On the Border: The Tokara Islands, Depopulated* (1977), published in *Asahi Camera* magazine. After a health problem, he spent most of his time taking photographs, which were published in photobooks such as *A New Gaze* (1983) and *Adieu à X* (1989). His color works were later published in books including *Hysteric Six: Nakahira Takuma* (2002), *Documentary* (2011), and *Okinawa* (2017) (Kohara, n.d.).

Yutaka Takanashi, another notable Japanese photographer, primarily addressed the transformations of the city, his preferred subjects being the city of Tokyo and its inhabitants, overlapping generations, urban lifestyles, as well as the landscapes, shapes, and geometries of the city. Simultaneously, Takanashi also worked in commercial photography, for which he gained recognition; his series of portraits *Otsukaresama* (1964) was published in *Camera Mainichi* magazine. Within the *Provoke* movement (1968–69), Takanashi's works contrasted with those of Nakahira and Moriyama. Even the style he adopted differed from the *are-bure-boke* style, being more anchored in clear and realistic images, although it largely remained poetic and subversive. Among his representative works are *Tokyoites* (1966), which brought him public recognition, *Toshi-e (Towards the City)* (1974), *Machi* (1977), *Tokyoites 1978–1983* (1983), *Hatsukuni* (1993), *Chimeiron: genius loci Tokyo* (2000), *Nostalgia* (2007), *Kakoi-machi* (2007), and *IN* (2011) (Brueggemann, 2013a, 2013b, 2016).

Daidō Moriyama, the world-renowned Japanese photographer, is best known for his portrayal of urban life on the streets of post-war Japanese cities, especially Tokyo. In the 1960s, he worked as an assistant to Eikoh Hosoe on the *Barakei* series and also photographed Shuji Terayama's experimental theater, a series published in the photobook *Japan: A Photo Theater* (1968). He cited American photographers such as William Klein and Andy Warhol as sources of inspiration, as well as Jack Kerouac, whose book *On the Road* inspired him to hitchhike across Japan, stopping at deserted cafés and taking photographs through car windows. He also experimented with cutouts and grain, photographing images and reframing them, as in the Warholian series *Accident* (1969). His photographs from this period were published mainly in the magazine *Camera Mainichi*.

Moriyama participated in the experimental magazine *Provoke* (1968–69), embracing the iconic *are-bure-boke* photographic style while maintaining his apolitical stance within the group. His two major books are *Hunter* (1972), which contains some of his best-known photographs, and *Farewell Photography* (1972), an experimental production inspired by Warhol. Another book, *Another Country in New York* (1974), inspired by another favorite author, James Baldwin, contains Xeroxed photographs of New York. In *The Tales of Tono* (1976), he published photographs of the pre-industrial Japanese countryside. He began to receive attention outside Japan in 1974, with works exhibited in America, followed by other exhibitions that established his reputation in the West. More recent photographs, such as those in *Light and Shadow* (1982), are clearer and more direct, include color, while Moriyama continues to photograph the city (Phillip, 2022).

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#### 2.4 *Kompōra* movement

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In the West, there is a tendency to associate postwar Japanese photography solely with the *VIVO* or *Provoke* groups, but other groups and independent photographers also made significant contributions to the development of Japanese photographic art. One such lesser-known group is *Kompōra*, which existed in the late 1960s, as noted by Brueggemann. The term *Kompōra* is a contraction of the English words contemporary and photography, coined in 1966. Although all these movements - *VIVO*, *Provoke*, and *Kompōra* - were formed with the aim of opposing journalistic photography that presents reality through the prism of ideological preconceptions, the vision of the *Kompōra* movement was distinct. Unlike the emotionally nuanced photography produced by *VIVO* or the radical, fragmentary style proposed by *Provoke* - with subjective recordings of reality in an exaggerated visual style such as *are-bure-boke* - *Kompōra* photographers sought to capture reality detached from emotionality and ideology, producing clear portraits of everyday life and its simple events in a clean, neutral, clinical visual style through direct snapshots (Angst, 2011). Although this style was adopted by several photographers, notable artists associated with the *Kompōra* movement include Yutaka Takanashi, in his creative period after *Provoke*, Shin Yanagisawa, Shigeo Gocho, Seiichi Furuya, Masato Seto, and especially Issei Suda, who, however, remained independent from both *Kompōra* and *Provoke*.

Issei Suda was a freelance photographer influenced by the *Kompōra* movement and its followers' discourse on photography in the 1960s and 1970s. Early in his career, Suda worked as a theater photographer with Shūji Terayama's avant-garde troupe *Tenjō Sajiki*, an experience that left its mark on how he later conceived of street photography as a stage. Suda created modern photography inspired by ancestral Japanese traditions. Notable in this regard is the series *Fūshi Kaden* (1978), in which he portrays people from rural areas of Japan, photographed mainly at traditional festivals, celebrating together and sometimes posing in unusual ways, like actors in

a play. Another frequent subject of Suda's work is young girls, often photographed in their traditional festival clothing.

In the 1980s, Suda returned to the city and modern Japan, choosing to depict life on side streets or in small neighborhoods, imbued with a sense of isolation within an urban context, in monochrome prints published in his photobook *Human Memory* (1996). Although Suda was inspired by the ideas of the *Kompōra* movement, developing photographs that stem from a precise observation of reality, his works are far from detached or cold. Often revealing a certain tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary in everyday life, or between the traditional and the modern superimposed, his images contain an aura of beauty and emanate a subtle sense of mystery (Angst, 2011).

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### 2.5 *I-Photo* movement

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The *I-Photo* movement is particularly associated with *I-photographers*, especially Nobuyoshi Araki and Masahisa Fukase. Other photographers, including Takashi Hanabusa, Akihide Tamura, Bishin Jumonji, Yoshihiro Tatsuki, Shin Yanagisawa, Shunji Ōkura, Masaaki Nakagawa, and even Issei Suda, are more or less associated with this movement. The concept of *I-Photo* is a photographic adaptation of the literary convention of the first-person narrative, which Araki sees as a new form of life reportage. In this approach, the photographer is an active participant and often the subject of the work, while the photographic image is conceived as a tool to convey a personal experience of reality. Combining documentary and fictional elements, truth and falsification, stark black-and-white contrasts, and evocative abstractions, *I-photographers* explore themes of self and reality, seeking to elicit an emotional response. Their photographs are subjective, intimate, emotionally charged, and often provocative.

Nobuyoshi Araki, Japan's most famous - but also controversial - photographer, is best known for his work combining eroticism and bondage in an artistic context. In the 1970s, Araki shifted from commercial to artistic photography in response to the *Provoke* movement and began self-publishing his first photobooks. He developed a confessional, autobiographical style of photography that he called *I-Photography* (*shi-shashin*), inspired by the *I-Novel* (*shi-shōsetsu*) literary movement of the early 20th century. Revealing intimate aspects of his own life and his wife's, as well as fragments of the lives of others, Araki's photography unreservedly presents taboo themes such as eroticism, illness, and death.

With a proven mastery of erotic tension in images, Araki created his famous bondage photographs, juxtaposing ikebana flower arrangements and performance art with kinbaku bondage in a modern reinterpretation of traditional Japanese aesthetic conventions, producing a sensational effect. His prolific and often provocative work has been published in over 500 photobooks. Among the best-known are *Sentimental*

*Journey* (1971) and *Tokyo Lucky Hole* (1990). *Sentimental Journey 1972–1992* is a visual diary of life with his wife Yōko (Hoppen, 2025c).

Masahisa Fukase, a pioneer of post-war experimental photography, created series that resonate with the *I-Photo* movement of the late 1960s, combining documentary and fictional elements. His photography focused primarily on his own life and that of his wife, Yoko, whom he photographed in a variety of private and public situations. After separating from his wife, he photographed ravens as symbols of loneliness and loss, a series published in the renowned photobook *Karasu (Ravens)*, an atmospheric black-and-white photographic masterpiece. Fukase's photographs are intensely personal and intimate, revealing his interest in the passage of time and aging. He worked almost exclusively in series, which together form a true visual biography, with his subjects including his wife Yoko, his dying father, and his cat Sasuke. He also experimented with giant Polaroids, colorful abstractions, and numerous performance-art self-portraits, some of which he subsequently painted (Hoppen, 2025b). Among his published books are *Yūgi (Homo Ludence)*, 1971), *Yohko* (1978), *Karasu* (1985), *Family* (1991), and *Memories of Father* (1991); however, most of his work was published posthumously from the available archives (Masahisa Fukase Archives, n.d.).

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### 2.6 Performance Art, Non-Art, Ani-Art movements

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Other artist collectives with a major impact on contemporary Japanese visual arts, including photography, were *Neo Dada Organizers* and *Hi-Red Center*, which innovated through street performance and involved many visionary and experimental artists, including photographers. Their work was considered *anti-art*. Later, the artists of the *Mono-ha* group continued to theorize the *non-art*, experimenting with objects, textures, and materials, including photography. Within the context of the postwar avant-garde, an important site for meetings and interdisciplinary events, including numerous happenings, was the *Sōgetsu Art Center (Center for the Composite Arts)*.

Genpei Akasegawa, a participant in the *Neo-Dada Organizers* and founder of the *Hi-Red Center* group, was a radical avant-garde artist known primarily for his provocative visual and performance-based events. He also practiced photography, guided by the same artistic beliefs, and was a novelist as well. Through a series of events and happenings that manifested social discontent in the 1960s, he advocated creative destruction and iconoclasm toward conventions and rules, aiming to open up possibilities for new forms of art that came to be labeled as *anti-art*. In his photomontage works, Akasegawa addressed similar themes, depicting the rise of Japan as a modern capitalist society and its consequences through images of modern objects or discarded materials, presented as unconventional forms of art. He also coined the term *Thomassons* to describe photographs that transform strange urban elements into gestures of conceptual art. In his numerous photographs, most of which

were unpublished during his lifetime, Akasegawa continued to explore the possibility of art in the everyday, capturing “particles of art scattered in daily life.” (Toyoda, 2023).

Shūji Terayama, a fascinating multidisciplinary artist and participant in the *Hi-Red Center* group, created radically experimental works as a filmmaker, performer, poet, playwright, actor, and photographer. His singular and impressive photobook, *Phototeque Imaginaire de la Famille Chien Dieu – Fantasy Museum: People of the Inugami Family* (1975), is a remarkable photographic work presenting black-and-white alongside color photographs, portraits framed as paintings, images coupled with text, a family tree, and records of a bizarre family, including erotic and strange scenes of a fantastical traveling circus. In fact, the book is a collection of surrealist and performative works, forming a symbolic imagery that explores themes of identity and societal constraints - motifs also present in Terayama’s work with his renowned avant-garde theater troupe *Tenjō Sajiki*, as well as in his experimental films and *angura* theater plays (... , 2018; Flint, 2016; Tasker, 2014).

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### *2.7 Key women photographers in the postwar Japanese avant-garde*

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The photography scene of the 1960s and 1970s was largely dominated by male photographers, who exhibited and published a great deal of work. However, female photographers also produced significant work during this period and in subsequent years. Notable among them are Miyako Ishiuchi, known for her subjective work on memory and identity, and Tamiko Nishimura, who produced poetic photographs of alternative spaces.

Miyako Ishiuchi is recognized for her powerful and deeply personal work, which explores themes of memory, history, and identity in the context of postwar Japan. Her gritty depictions of Yokosuka, capturing the American naval base and its influence on her hometown, reflect her complex relationship with the place, as seen in *Yokosuka Stories* (1976–1977). Her intimate examination of objects as traces of time is materialized in photographs of her late mother’s personal belongings in *Mother’s* (2000–2005), the clothing of atomic bomb victims in *Hiroshima* (2008), and objects associated with Frida Kahlo in *Frida: Love and Pain* (2008) (Mitsuda, 2021).

Tamiko Nishimura distinguished herself through her travel photography, shot in a delicate, poetic, and personal style associated with the *I-Photo* movement. Nishimura began with photographs of the underground theater run by Jūrō Kara in 1968–69, later published in the photobook *Existence* (2011). She also worked with photographers from *Provoke* in 1972. The photographs taken during her travels in Japan were included in the photobook *Shikishima* (1973). Her more recent works include *Eternal Chase* (2012), *Kittenish...* (2015), *My Journey* (2018), and *Voyage* (2019).(...., 2025; Vermare, 2024).

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### 3. Conclusions

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In postwar Japan, over three successive decades, important photographic movements and currents developed, stemming from competing artistic and ideological views on photography as an art form and as a medium. These movements were formed around new ideas, evolving at a dynamic pace, overlapping over time, competing with one another, and at times complementing each other or developing in new directions. Some photographers initiated and actively participated in specific groups, while others adhered only to circulating ideas while remaining independent. Certain aesthetic styles were adopted by photographers across several currents, but their ideas about what photography is differed; moreover, the creative visions of the same photographers evolved over time.

Postwar photographers witnessed the changes brought about by rapid modernization in Japan and recorded them, some embracing the latest Western styles, while others drew on centuries-old traditional aesthetics. They generally addressed themes that responded to the historical, political, economic, social, and cultural contexts in which they worked, including documenting the collective memory of wartime traumas, presenting the effects of Americanization, and revealing the social consequences of massive industrialization and economic growth on rural and urban communities (Angst, 2011).

The subjects chosen by the photographers reveal the tense relationship between tradition and modernity. While some focused on the modern metropolis - especially Tokyo - or on hometowns near American military bases, others turned to rural areas, searching for the old Japan, idealized yet endangered by migration to the cities. "It was mainly Japanese photographers who captured this contrast - the radical tension between the flourishing hypermodernity of the big cities and the often still very traditional life in rural areas," says Brueggemann. In particular, the development of the metropolis of Tokyo with its rapid changes in the city's appearance, the transformation of its social structure, and the daily lives of its inhabitants occupies a central role in the photographic discourse of the period (Angst, 2011).

The evolution of these radical or more realist anti-establishment and anti-system movements reached a turning point around 1970, marked by the *Osaka World Expo* - the first world exposition to be hosted in Japan and in Asia - a moment from which Japanese art increasingly moved toward commercialization and institutionalization. In this regard, it is important to recognize the extent to which the intense creative energy of the first three postwar decades of the avant-garde laid the foundation for contemporary Japanese photography, continuing to inspire photographers worldwide to this day.

Ultimately, the postwar Japanese photographic avant-garde, evolving in close and continuous dialogue with other arts, served as a forge of artistic reinvention where boldly radical and more realist visions intersected. This dynamic interplay, reflecting Japan's complex tension between tradition and modernization, shaped distinctive photographic practices and decisively influenced the emergence of new global

photographic aesthetics, leaving a lasting impact on the trajectory of contemporary art.

### ***Disclaimer on the Use of Generative AI Tools and AI-assisted Technologies***

In accordance with publication requirements, the author discloses that she has used ChatGPT (an AI-assisted language tool) in a limited and supportive capacity during the preparation of this article. Specifically, the tool was used to assist in reformulating certain phrases and to review the English translation of content originally written in Romanian. All AI-assisted outputs were carefully reviewed and edited, or further rewritten by the author to ensure accuracy, clarity, and appropriateness. The final content reflects human judgment and oversight at all stages. The author takes full responsibility for the integrity, originality, and correctness of the article.

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