

PROVOKE AS A COLLECTIVE PRACTICE OF PHOTOGRAPHIC REALISM

by

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Abstract

Comprised of the critic Taki Kōji, poet Okada Takahiko, and photographers Nakahira Takuma, Takanashi Yutaka, and Moriyama Daido (who joined with the publication of the second issue), the photographic journal *Provoke* ran for three issues between 1968 and 1969. My thesis considers *Provoke* in terms of its status as a physical and commercial object within the socio-economic context of late 1960s Japan so as to offer a perspective into the collaborative endeavour represented by the journal as a whole. I argue that *Provoke* attempted to mobilize photography's documentary potential in the face of the abstract conditions of Japan's modern capitalist society. This was operationalized as a mode of photographic realism whose access to reality was a function of the journal's collective form. The necessity for a specifically *collective* engagement with reality was articulated via the group's engagement with Marxist theory: in the writings its members contributed to the journal they argued that the subjective alienation characterizing Japan's capitalist modernity had rendered invisible the individual's relation to the social whole.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished work by the author, Tristan Ignas-Menzies.

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Introduction

Comprised of the critic Taki Kōji, poet Okada Takahiko, and photographers Nakahira Takuma, Takanashi Yutaka, and Moriyama Daido (who joined with the publication of the second issue), the *dōjinshi* (coterie magazine) *Provoke* ran for three issues between 1968 and 1969.¹ Founded on the rhetoric of a rejection of pre-established styles and conventions, *Provoke* asserted that at their current moment antecedents from the tradition of Japanese postwar photography were inoperative as forms of truthful expression. Their practice was as such an interrogation of the medium's physical and conceptual properties in search of alternatives to what they perceived as a defunct photographic realism. At the same time as *Provoke* attempted to redefine the political and aesthetic possibilities of photographic representation, they departed from standard notions of photography and photography publications with a new look that was seen in their eponymous journal's pages. Printed alongside their distinctively blurred and out of focus images were poems and theoretical essays from the group's various contributors—together, the heightened contrast of the images and the revolutionary thrust of their ideas produced the experience of avant-garde activity that the journal physically embodies. It is indeed in the object-form of the publication itself that the extreme attitude underlying *Provoke's* visual qualities and technical approaches are most directly felt.² As the art historian Yuko Fujii writes, reading

¹ The group also published a retrospective volume *First, abandon the world of pseudo-certainty* about their activities in 1970.

² At the same time as the journal sustained the formal structure of *Provoke's* collective intervention into the practice of photography, it provided both the symbolic space in

Provoke is a “dramatic and raw experience... of the vibration of innovative, rebellious minds.”³

This fact is attested to by *Provoke*'s popularity with collectors and its robust representation in recent exhibitions and photobook reprints. Following their relative obscurity through the 1970s and early 1980s, the group's revival occurred in concert with the crystallization of the formal narrative of postwar Japanese photography being assembled in the writings of Nishī Kazuo, Īzawa Kōtaro, and Itō Shunji in the early 1990s. This development was simultaneous with the critical and curatorial efforts of figures like *Aperture*'s Mark Holborn and Yokoe Fuminori of the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art, who ratified the canonical lineage and *Provoke*'s place therein with

which this move was accomplished as well as the practical possibilities required for carrying it out. As Reiko Tomii has written, much twentieth-century Japanese art was produced in the context of collective engagements. These are understood as “strategic alliances” that functioned “as a means to mediate the relationship between the intrinsic (aesthetic/expressive) and the extrinsic (social) forces” involved in artistic creation. *Provoke*'s collective endeavour occurred in the historical context of art groups like *Kurohata Gurūpu*, *Kyūshū-ha*, and *Zero Jigen*. The popularity of such collaborative efforts in the 1960s was in part indicative of an ideological and economic shift, as Fabienne Adler has noted: “Grassroots collaborations around independent enterprises thrive on limited budgets and artisanal means; they also signal a definite repudiation of the Existentialist notion of *engagement* grounded in self-assertion and in the value of individual action...” *Provoke*'s use of a quarterly publication to fulfill their stated mandate was thus significant in at least two ways. Firstly, it was a pragmatic means of organizing and funding the group's activities. Secondly, it symbolically linked their practice to the historically privileged forms of the photo-publication as a way of disseminating experimental photography since the postwar period, and the artistic group as a strategy for developing and realizing “alternatives to the existing options.” Reiko Tomii, “Collectivism in Twentieth-Century Japanese Art with a Focus on Operational Aspects of *Dantai*,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 21.2 (Spring 2013): 232, and Fabienne Adler, “First, Abandon the World of Seeming Certainty: Theory and Practice of the ‘Camera Generated Image’ in Nineteen-Sixties Japan” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2009), 223.

³ In her PhD Dissertation, Fujii aims to “investigate each [*Provoke*] photographer's photographs to demonstrate that they were imbued with a rebellious and independent spirit.” Yuko Fujii, “Photography as Process: A Study of the Japanese Photography Journal *Provoke*” (PhD Diss., The City University of New York, 2012), 3; 33.

books and exhibitions of their own.⁴ The growing salience of 1960s-70s art in Japanese galleries and art schools was reflected internationally in solo shows for *Provoke's* most famous member Moriyama Daido, as well as an increasing interest in the group itself on the part of photobook aficionados.⁵ Since 2010 *Provoke* has received major attention in exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.⁶ As of this introduction's writing, a massive monographic show on *Provoke* is currently underway with venues in Europe and the United States.⁷

With this contemporary abundance of visibility, the relative fixity of *Provoke's* historical meaning and formal significance would seem assuredly to have been secured. Yet amidst the plethora of curatorial representations, *Provoke's* only concrete constant is its commercial value—as much as \$20,000 USD for a set of the originals, with the facsimile commanding a \$2,000 price tag of its own. Although the presence of *Provoke's* images in reprints and exhibition catalogues rightly emphasizes the journal's status as an object with an undeniable aesthetic impact, this compelling materiality is nevertheless not registered at a historical or critical level in the accompanying

⁴ Mark Holborn, *Black Sun: The Eyes of Four, Roots and Innovations in Japanese Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1986), and Yokoe Fuminori, "Japanese Photography in the 1970s: Memories Frozen in Time," in *Japanese Photography in the 1970s: Memories Frozen in Time [Nihon no shashin, 1970 nendai: tōketsusareta "toki" no kioku]* (Tokyo: Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, 1991).

⁵ In the 2000s the journal was reprinted as a limited edition facsimile by Steidl/Edition 7L (2001), while also appearing in anthologies such as Martin Parr's 2004 *The Photobook: A History* and *Japanese Photobooks of the 1960s and '70s* by Ivan Vartanian and Ryuichi Kaneko (curator at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography).

⁶ See Anne Wilkes Tucker et al., *The History of Japanese Photography* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2003), and Nakamori Yasufumi et al., *For a New World to Come: Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography, 1968-1979* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2015).

⁷ The 2016 exhibition *PROVOKE: Between PROTEST and PERFORMANCE – Photography in Japan 1960/1975* will appear at the Albertina (Vienna), Fotomuseum Winterthur, LE BAL (Paris), and The Art Institute of Chicago.

discourse. In the contemporary “expanded field” of photography where *Provoke* now appears—a space defined by generalized difference and the dissolution of genre- and medium-specific boundaries—making any subsequent, specific determinations about its content seems impossible. For what provides *Provoke’s* place in the (dominant) narrative of Japanese photography, hence its curatorial relevance to the present, is the periodization and conceptual shift it represents in the practice of photography itself: from “postwar” to “contemporary.” Understood as an irruption of difference within the field of artistic-cultural production, impelled in large part by the new representational possibilities of visual media like photography, this change’s articulation depends precisely on maintaining *Provoke’s* open-ended indeterminacy in its capacity as (one of) this change’s particular results. The publication’s visual heterogeneity is thus seen to exceed the grasp of the preceding forms of photography to which it is conceptually (in the historical narrative) and physically (in the curatorial arrangement) compared. But as such the meaning and rationale behind the magazine’s appearance is divorced from its immediate, aesthetic value to viewers and the popularity this produces. What this means is that the specifically institutional dimension of recent attempts at recognizing *Provoke* within a renewed critical apparatus has proven incapable of discursively generating any meaning from the rich and vital materiality of these objects apart from the initial premises on whose merit they were displayed in the first place.

These premises are not new themselves, devolving specifically upon formal claims about the development of photographic expression in Japan and the innovative role played by photographers in this process. More broadly they trace the changing nature of “photographic realism,” a concept with significant sociopolitical implications

as what has historically facilitated photography's social role as a "truth-telling" medium.⁸ Since the 1990s they have thus contributed to a periodization from *Provoke* up to the "present" on the basis of the collective's simultaneous conceptual homology with the future and formal break with the past.

In historical narratives that retroactively project *Provoke* towards a horizon of artistic individuality and heterogeneous contemporaneity, the group's ongoing reception resolves methodologically around three related approaches. These are: a modernist formalism based on the development of photography's institutional representation (the morphological changes seen therein); a biographical contextualization that posits continuity both within individual artists (the unified identity expressed by their bodies of work) and between them (in terms of relations of influence or collaboration); and a socio-political retrospection that sees *Provoke* as a reflection of the broader moment of Leftist protest and "radical politics" in 1960s Japan. The overdetermining tendency of these models appears in their common conflation of *Provoke* with the generalized artistic-political avant-garde of the late 1960s and its attendant modernity critique. This ultimately shows the group to have shared in the broader movement's fate: following the collapse of the opposition between modernization and the romantic opposition to its forces in the early 1970s, a loss of faith in the autonomy of the image entails the collective's dissolution.

⁸ By embodying the particular form of the photograph's relationship to the world it represented, it symbolized the function the image performed. As Julia Thomas argues, the meaning of the concept of "realism" underwent constant debate and renegotiation during the postwar period. Julia Thomas, "Power Made Visible: Photography and Postwar Japan's Elusive Reality," *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 67, No. 2 (May 2008).

Provoke is thus positioned at—indeed *as*—the inception of a multiplication of photography’s historical vectors that occurred in its wake. In the 1991 catalogue for an exhibition at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, for instance, the curator Yokoe Fuminori writes that *Provoke* had an “immeasurable impact on the world of photography at the time and influence on subsequent events.”⁹ This refers to a sense of diversification corresponding to the independent emphasis Yokoe’s show placed on the individual photographers’ respective work. Similarly, in 1993 Īzawa Kōtarō situated *Provoke* in a lineage of postwar photographers extending from Domon Ken to the paternal personage of Tōmatsu Shōmei.¹⁰ Īzawa’s definition of *Provoke* indeed sees the group itself as something essentially incomplete: the document of a photographic realism whose aspiration to an all-encompassing perspective was shattered by an irreconcilably fragmented world and the irreducible differences between the subjectivities of its observers.¹¹

⁹ By abandoning the typical approach of thematically organizing photographs, *Provoke* turned “from objectivity to towards a more inner-directed mode of expression.” Yokoe, “Japanese Photography in the 1970s,” 12.

¹⁰ In 1993 Īzawa Kōtarō, a photo-critic and editor in chief of *Déjà-vu*, released a special issue of the magazine entitled: “The “Provoke” Era: Turning Point in Post-War Japanese Photography.” Īzawa Kōtarō, “Preface,” *Déjà-vu* No. 14 (1993): 8.

¹¹ Īzawa argued that “*Provoke*’s gesture of smashing photography’s conventions so as to create a language and images of a totally new kind” prefigured the effects of the pervasive “media/image environment” in 1990s Japan. For him, *Provoke*’s “radical” quality referred to the fundamental disjuncture between reality and its representation that their photographs revealed. Tracing the formal trajectories of Moriyama, Nakahira, and Takanashi, he thus concludes: “‘Provoke’ is not limited to a small period of a few years’ activities at the end of the 1960s, but forms a movement spanning up to the 1990s... In the years following the brief “Provoke era,” Japanese photography underwent a number of critical changes that were centered around... the roles of language, the body, and the image. Photography could never now “remain the same,” but necessarily had to become “something else.” Īzawa Kōtarō, “Provoke Photographers After Provoke,” *Déjà-vu* No. 14 (1993): 100.

The mainstream status of this view was confirmed on an international level by the 2003 exhibition “The History of Japanese Photography” at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.¹² In the essay Īzawa contributed to its catalogue he describes the 1960s as a period of “diversifying photographic expression.”¹³ In this account the practice of *Provoke’s* photographers is an attempt to bridge the gap between the obscure conditions of modern reality and the individual’s subjective experience thereof. By emphasizing the medium-specific qualities of photography, they could obtain a quantum of sense-certainty in the relationship of the image to the experience they had of taking it. Yet while for Īzawa it was these properties (of unique particularity and non-exchangeability) that guaranteed the autonomy of the image, they simultaneously defined its contents as a purely personal vision of the world.¹⁴ The sense of avant-garde pathos this evokes was substantiated by Īzawa’s popularization of a heroizing narrative of the careers of Moriyama and Nakahira. His 1993 account contrasts their fiery radicalism in the 1960s with their struggle with substance abuse and bodily ailments during the 1970s, finally announcing their gradual but triumphant return to photography at the end of the 1980s.¹⁵

¹² Tucker et al., *The History of Japanese Photography*.

¹³ Īzawa Kōtarō, “The Evolution of Postwar Photography,” *The History of Japanese Photography* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2003).

¹⁴ Closed off to the rest of the world in this moment of its minimal signification, the photos produced by *Provoke* seem in this way to be sentenced to an indefinite repetition of the formal negation underlying their indexical access to the photographer’s private experience of reality. From here, the group’s practice could only ever be an intensification of this difference, which is to say of the reductive impulse embodied by the aesthetic properties of their images.

¹⁵ The modernist imperative of aesthetic autonomy is moreover enforced by his identification of their guiding question as being: “*What is photography?*” *Ibid.*

While the next major international exhibition to treat on *Provoke* would break the mainstream mold by redirecting the aesthetic thrust of their inquiry from the introspective space of interiority to that of mass media and society, this still referred to the received notion of their practice as a negative form of critique. Yasufumi Nakamori, who curated the 2015 show, writes that “*Provoke* deconstructed photography, both in theory and practice, thus also deconstructing the modern... They thereby hoped to open up, with the camera, new possibilities for their contemporary era.”¹⁶ His gloss similarly preserves the romantic identity of the avant-garde artist in the generative quality of *Provoke’s* contribution at the inception of a “period of experimentation” spanning the 1970s. This view simultaneously sustains a sense of their work’s essential unknowability by suspending it within this category of “experimentation,” whose connotations are those of incompleteness and open-ended possibility.

As Yuko Fujii has noted, the global magnitude of their commercial and exhibition-based reception is disproportionate to the existing scholarship on *Provoke*. Indeed, the effort made by the MFAH’s 2015 exhibition to link *Provoke* and photography to contemporaneously developing modes of conceptual and performance-based art in Japan is a distinct echo of her landmark contribution to the discourse on *Provoke* three years earlier. In Fujii’s PhD dissertation “Photography as Process: A Study of the Japanese Photography Journal *Provoke*,” she provides the most comprehensive examination of the group to date with the goal of “fill[ing] the gap between scholarship and a collector-driven market that pays great attention to

¹⁶ Nakamori Yasufumi, “Preface,” in *For a New World to Come: Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography, 1968-1979*, 18.

Provoke.¹⁷ Although it is by no means ignored in art historical and other academic literature, the necessarily narrow perspectives with which the existing writing approaches *Provoke* (e.g. discussing its images within a biographical treatment of one of its members, or engaging one of its specific theoretical or historical themes) is rightly seen to have left unexamined the overall entity represented by the journal's physical form and the group's collective structure.¹⁸

As a correction to this trend she proposes to consider *Provoke*'s output "as independent objects."¹⁹ Fujii's findings as such are indeed a significant addition to our knowledge on *Provoke*, while methodologically they represent a turn to a more curatorial ethic that prizes the direct presentation of the object as well as the cataloguing of its formal possibilities. It is in this sense that she takes as her starting point the model of "Japanese photography" articulated by the catalogue to the 2003

¹⁷ Fujii, "Photography as process," 34.

¹⁸ Furthermore, in such scholarly precedents as Charles Merewether's "A Language to Come: Japanese Photography After the Event," which draws a formal analogy between *Provoke*'s "bure-boke" style and a post-structural paradigm of writing and the (Derridean) archive, or Miryam Sas' book chapter on *Provoke* wherein she philosophically grounds their practice as a dialectical investigation of language via its (Hegelian) negativity, Fujii's intuition of a tendency to obscure the objects themselves within a theoretical framework proves to be a valid concern. Other precedents include Nishī Kazuo's 1996 anthology of essays *Why Does Provoke Matter, Even Now?* [*Naze Imada, "Puruboku" ka?*], Īzawa Kōtarō's aforementioned writings in *Déjà-vu* and elsewhere, Charles Merewether's 2006 essay "A Language to Come: Japanese Photography After the Event," Shimizu Minoru's 2008 essay "Reconsidering *are-bure-boke*: The Reprint of Moriyama Daido's *Shashin yo Sayōnara*" ["Are-bure-boke saikō: Moriyama Daidou no Shashin yo Sayounara fukkan"], Fabienne Adler's 2009 PhD Dissertation "First, Abandon the World of Seeming Certainty: Theory and Practice of the "Camera Generated Image" in Nineteen-Sixties Japan," and Miryam Sas' 2011 book *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan: Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return*.

¹⁹ Fujii writes: "these four publications constitute a multi-functional medium, serving as a journal of photography, an artist's book, a photobook, and an artwork. All the while, the publications demonstrate their unique qualities as photographic media..." Fujii, "Photography as process," 15.

exhibition at the Museum of Fine Art, Houston.²⁰ This natural extension of the curatorial apparatus is tempered by Fujii's use of both the *Provoke* members' own writings as well as a social and historical analysis to inform her reading of the journal.²¹

The tension this introduces into Fujii's argument refers to the same split ("between scholarship and a collector-driven market") she describes as the initial impetus for her intervention. For the conclusion of Fujii's attempt to unify *Provoke's* critical legacy with its posthumous existence as a commodity art-object—which is also her dissertation's main thesis—is the concept of "photography as a process rather than a final product."²² Irreducible to any one result or representation, this sense of vital, avant-garde activity ultimately betrays the priority of the objects in Fujii's analysis, retroactively specifying their "independence" to be that of an artwork mediating the intentions of its creator.²³ Fujii thus describes the various ontologically-based projects of photographers like Taki and Nakahira without exploring the necessarily political implications that these ontological claims would have had.²⁴ Instead, this philosophical facet provides the critical edge with which their work is shown to have made its mark on the historical development of artistic and cultural production in Japan. As Fujii writes: "My goal in relating the *Provoke* publications' metaphysical and physical

²⁰ *Ibid*, 26.

²¹ These two methodological axes refer to Fujii's simultaneous intervention into what she deems to be the formal rigidity of its terms as well as the schematic linearity of the exhibitionary model's (Izawa-influenced) historical narrative. *Ibid*, 15.

²² As she writes: "*Provoke* members' photographs prove that the very act of taking photographs can be a critical way of being in the world... It is crucial to investigate this powerful concept at their core." *Ibid*, 2.

²³ "I describe the nature of the publications as incomplete manifestations of what the members sought, not as the end product or the visual pinnacle of the photographers' received ideas." *Ibid*, 275.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 14.

investigations of photography to local history is to proclaim the publications' achievement without subsuming it under what Jean-Francois Lyotard refers to as the "grand narrative."²⁵ Given her extensive argument for *Provoke's* interdependent relationship with (and ultimately rightful status as) contemporary art, this statement seems designed to preserve the integrity of another—less explicitly metaphysical—"grand narrative" to which her text subscribes. That is, the institutional narrative of avant-garde modern and contemporary art, a history whose artistic categories underwent the dissolution of their medium-specific boundaries in the 1960s and 70s.²⁶ Despite attempting to bridge the aforementioned split in *Provoke's* reception, Fujii's thesis therefore does not directly challenge the established exhibitionary model so much as supplement its theoretical citations and fill its factual gaps. The determining role played by the paradigm of auteurship and individual creativity in the historical narrative on *Provoke* is firmly maintained.²⁷

²⁵ *Ibid*, 17.

²⁶ The dynamic and volatile quality of *Provoke's* photography "as process" thus corresponds precisely to these changing forms of expression as they marked the emergence of "contemporaneity"—a phenomenon Rosalind Krauss termed the "expanded field" and which has been recently conceptualized by scholars like Geoffrey Batchen (Fujii's PhD advisor) as a condition of aporetic instability between competing epistemological claims. In his 1999 book *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, Batchen distinguishes the physical practice of photography from an antecedent desire for such a "photographic" way of seeing. He defines the discourse on photography as divided between a mutually interdependent "postmodern view that all identity is determined by context" and a formal attempt at medium-specific definitions. For Fujii's understanding of *Provoke*, said situation ultimately entails the double-jointed relegation first of photographic reality to the procedural conditions of its creation, and accordingly this reality's meaning to the author-subjectivity of the photographer, whose imagined continuity in performing these conditions is the point of exclusion that defuses the negativity underlying the mediating relationship that they thereby (photographically) sustain.

²⁷ As such the inherent opposition that Fujii leaves unresolved (resulting from the capitalist contradiction in the situation she describes) occasionally manifests itself

Fujii's scholarship is an invaluable and long overdue contribution to the field, not only for its wealth of detail and contextualizing overall perspective onto *Provoke*, but also for its astute appraisal of the journal's reception and its identification of the problems therein. However, as I hope to have shown, her text falls short of resolving the key issues it diagnoses. Although Fujii's study attempts to comprehensively cover

when one its terms overpowers the other. Such a moment occurs in Fujii's discussion of Steidl's facsimile reprint of *Provoke* in *The Japanese Box*. Criticizing its commodified nature and lack of important texts (none of Okada's poems or essays were included for legal reasons), she sees the facsimile as an appropriation of *Provoke* by capital that diminishes the group's meaning and significance. In support of this point she contrasts the fetishizing impetus of the commodity as a vessel for desire—the “sleek and clean reproductions” packaged in an “eye-catching box”—with the “rough,” “raw” experience of the originals as provocative avant-garde objects. (“The experience of reading these replicas is quite different from the dramatic and raw experience of looking at their originals... They have lost the raw feel of the original publications.”) This has the effect of recreating the division between copy and original that *Provoke* itself tried to negate through the journal's serial form and material ephemerality. And while it is precisely the journal's mass-produced ephemerality and transience that historically resulted in the scarcity necessary for *Provoke's* existence as the elusive referent of the Steidl facsimile, the facsimile's veneer of originality (in what Fujii describes as the distinctiveness and high quality of its packaging as well as its release in a limited edition of 1500) is what reveals it to be the ultimate copy in that it is thereby separated irreversibly from the original not only quantitatively in terms of price (she cites an auction listing of \$20,000 for the original *Provoke* compared to \$2,000 for the facsimile), but qualitatively in terms of the phenomenal experience obtained by encountering it as an object: “The collectors of *The Japanese Box*... would not so much experience the vibrations of innovative, rebellious minds, as find a commodified result of archival efforts.” However, implicitly aligning these different regimes of experience with different commodified representations (for *Provoke* itself is a commodity, as the auction listing cited by Fujii demonstrates) serves to reinscribe the function of *value* within the art historical discourse on *Provoke*. In this light the very act of pointing to and/or denigrating the decisions that resulted in the appreciable disparity between the original and facsimile seems complicit in, indeed crucial to, contemporary representations of *Provoke* as such a commodity. This is because it is only by symbolizing these differences that the metonymy of desire mediating the relationship between consumer and commodity is established. Here, Fujii's concept of “photography as process” conceals a contradiction between aesthetic (use) and economic (exchange) value by conflating them within the mystical figure of the photographer-as-artist. In other words, in her text identity functions to generate the artistic commodity's valorizing rarity/particularity.

Provoke so as to escape the particularizing inertia of established narratives about the group, the Lyotardian sign of “postmodern” difference under which this is done defeats the purpose by placing *Provoke* as a whole out of conceptual reach.²⁸ Within the logical framework of her argument Fujii proceeds by privileging the individual photographer as the determining basis for judgments that are applied to the meaning of the group as a whole, the group serving simply as a category to accommodate these divergent claims. In this sense, the inherently indeterminate concept of “photography as process” that she locates at their “core” is indicative of an approach that misses the forest for the trees.

In light of current scholarship, my thesis will consider the three issues of *Provoke* in terms of the socio-economic context of late 1960s Japan and their status as material (indeed, commercialized) objects. In doing so I hope to offer a perspective onto the collaborative endeavour represented by the journal as a whole, while simultaneously resisting the historical overdetermination of *Provoke*'s contents by biographical narratives of artistic identity and modernist narratives of formal innovation. I argue for an understanding of *Provoke*'s practice as it was immanently embodied by the publication's discrete physical form. I contend that *Provoke* attempted to mobilize photography's documentary potential in the face of the abstract conditions of Japan's modern capitalist society. This was operationalized as a mode of

²⁸ This is to say that it renders any “radical” potential therein ineffective by serving as an excuse for a depoliticizing formal investigation that fragments their practice into individual parts. In my use of the term I define “radicality” to be the quality of an extreme, indeed revolutionary, change at a fundamental level. “Radicality” as such refers to a change with universal implications for the society in which it occurs.

photographic realism whose access to reality was a function of the journal's collective form. The necessity of a specifically *collective* engagement with reality was articulated via the group's engagement with Marxist theory: in the writings its members contributed to the journal they argued that the subjective alienation characterizing Japan's capitalist modernity had rendered invisible the individual's relation to the social whole.

In three sections, my thesis engages *Provoke's* three issues while discussing the way they respectively functioned as representations of their current reality. In Chapter One, I consider *Provoke 1's* engagement with the contemporary context of photographic production in Japan, specifically its investigation into the relationship between received notions of photographic realism and the symbolic identities ("professional" and "amateur") corresponding to these concepts. In Chapter Two, I consider the way *Provoke 2* continued this investigation with a methodological move to emphasize photography's phenomenal and sensory qualities over its symbolic properties. I argue that this move revealed *Provoke's* reflexive consideration of photography's fetishized status in capitalist society as well as a consideration of the entanglement of its members (as individual photographers) therein. In Chapter Three, I consider *Provoke 3's* distinctive formal properties in relation to its status as the journal's final issue, arguing that it exhibits a formal elaboration of the isomorphism between photography and the commodity form as well as a dialectical recapitulation of *Provoke's* position as an essentially collective practice of photographic realism.

Chapter One: Provoke 1, Summer 1968

Provoke 1 was published on November 1, 1968. Appearing on the shelves of local bookstores in Tokyo, Kyoto, and Hokkaidō, and in advertisements on the bulletin boards of university campuses, it would have been encountered by prospective readers within a rising tide of printed matter produced and circulated in the 1960s and 1970's.²⁹ (Fig. 1.1) As a photographic publication it announced its difference with its square-cut shape, left-to-right orientation, and cover starkly emblazoned with the untranslated word: "PROVOKE." Anyone picking it up and leafing through it would be met by the group's manifesto on the first page. It declared:

Today, language has lost its material base, in other words, its reality, and is floating in midair. What we photographers can do is to capture with our own eyes fragments of reality that cannot be grasped by any existing language and actively offer materials to thought and language.³⁰

²⁹ Yuko Fujii, "Photography as Process: A Study of the Japanese Photography Journal *Provoke*," PhD Dissertation, The City University of New York, 2012, 11.

³⁰ The manifesto continued: "Visual images [*eizō*] are not in and of themselves thought. Visual images cannot have a totality like ideas, nor are they an interchangeable code like language. Nevertheless, visual images' irreversible materiality—reality cut out by the camera—resides on the reverse side of language, and it thus sometimes inspires the world of language and ideas. At that moment, language overcomes itself as a fixed concept and transforms itself into a new language, which is thus new thought. Today, language has lost its material base, in other words, its reality, and is floating in the air. What we photographers can do is to capture with our own eyes fragments of reality that cannot be grasped by any existing language and to actively offer materials to thought and language. This is why we assign 'material to provoke thought' as a subtitle to *Provoke*, although we are somewhat embarrassed by it." Taki, Kōji (多木浩二) and Nakahira, Takuma (中平卓馬). *Provoke 1* (November 1968).

In the texts and images that followed, the raw “material” of such a photographic reality was made immanent to the language whose radical actualization the authors wished to provoke.

This sense of immediacy was most conspicuously effected by the breakdown of conventions that otherwise served to frame the reality under representation within a symbolic space created between the photographic image and its referent. Unlike contemporary photo-books and magazines which often placed white borders around the image, printed larger spreads with a “gutter” to mitigate the disruption caused by the central fold where the pages joined the binding, and maintained a standard formatting, *Provoke 1* employed a dense and varied layout. The square format creates a 2:1 spread when open, less cinematic (as the aspect ratio might suggest) than it is *photographic*, evoking the horizontality, cut ends, and—in that *Provoke 1* contains precisely 24 photographs—arbitrarily limited capacity of the 35mm film strip with which its pictures were taken.³¹ The absence of captions, interviews, or other writing directly related to the photographs resituated the interpretive locus of their contents’ meaning within the space of the encounter with this photographic surface—a surface moreover rendered symbolically opaque by *Provoke’s* characteristic *are-bure-boke*.³²

³¹ Such a comparison to a cinematic frame is made by both Miryam Sas and Yuko Fujii. See Miryam Sas, *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan: Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011, 181, and Fujii, “Photography as Process,” 51.

³² *Are-bure-boke*, or “rough, blurred, out-of-focus,” were the terms used to describe the characteristic appearance of *Provoke’s* images. While it is ostensibly a formal or visual description, in use it was (and is) more of designating or grouping label used within *Provoke’s* critical reception to simultaneously signify their collective activity and the style evoked by their images. In my use of this term I take *are-bure-boke* or *bure-boke* to refer to the methodological and aesthetic qualities of *Provoke’s* images as these formed the basis for the subsequent articulation of their discursive avant-garde position.

Although the extremes of over- and under-exposure, rejection of implicitly “natural” perspectives (resulting from the positioning of the camera at eye-level), and the cultivation of a dense, granular tonality would only come to be fully developed in later issues, already the introduction of these effects obscured many of the places, dates, and things being photographed.

The experience of late 1960s Japan provided in the pages of *Provoke 1* is indeed rough and disjointed. The formal variances of its photographic contributions uneasily offset each other as the images thereby resist any sense of stylistic unification. This is only exacerbated by the different contents they depict. The differences between the scenes being shown and the methods used to show them called into question the place occupied by the photographer (whose authorial determinations the images ostensibly reveal). In *Provoke 1*, this place is revealed to be the politically fraught and internally inconsistent conditions of subjectivity within the nation’s intensifying modernity.³³

³³ Japan’s modernization project had officially begun in 1955 with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party’s aggressive program of economic expansion, urban densification and infrastructural development. Rika Fujioka writes that Japan’s economy “grew rapidly at approximately 10 per cent per annum between 1955 and 1964. By 1968, Japan had the second largest gross national product in the world.” By centralizing government funds (municipal budgets relied on as much as 70% federal funding) and “lending” party employees out to municipal governments, the LDP ensured the penetration of their state capitalist policy at the local level. Communities were beholden to a “pipeline to the center” (a network of contacts between local politicians and the LDP government) that massively subsidized the developments required for the creation of local industries. New roads, train-lines, apartments, and factories rapidly spread across a landscape that was being socially and economically transformed by large-scale capital investments. This ultimately facilitated industrial centralization around major cities and the creation of a corresponding urban workforce.

Japan’s modern landscape not only presented itself in accordance with a specific image of modernity desired by the government, but actively remodeled the behaviour of its inhabitants in order to attain it. With such projects as the construction of the bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the \$100 million Tokyo-Nagoya expressway in 1966, the way people moved through and

Indeed, while the act of launching *Provoke* comprised a rejection of conventional conceptualizations of photography's access to reality, such a rejection entailed less a reorganization of the relationship between the photograph or photographer and the site of exposure than it did of the relationships structuring the presentation of the photographic object (the picture or print) after the fact. As I argue in this chapter, in so far as this presentation—in magazines and photobooks—corresponded to the symbolic place occupied by the name of the photographer to whom the image was attributed, *Provoke's* reorganization of photography was simultaneously the reorganization of the identity of the photographer. Thus the “photographic realism” practiced by *Provoke* was necessarily collective in form. This was symbolically expressed in terms of the journal's intervention into the categories of “amateur” and “professional” as they functioned as photography's social identifiers in the 1960s. Formally, *Provoke* attempted to activate photography's objective component, its physical existence as something necessarily

experienced the landscape became increasingly structured and efficient. Such institutions as the *Danchi* (row apartment complexes) exemplified new forms of urban life corresponding to the spatial organization of subjectivity around the reproductive process of the worker's labour. Sponsored by the Japanese Housing Corporation as a way of housing an increasing number of urban workers, corporations often built and rented *Danchi* at reduced rates to their workers in order to foster an atmosphere of “corporate community.” *Danchi* were thus designed to support the typical family unit of a worker, his wife and children, while prescribing a predetermined pattern of work, commute, and leisure for their inhabitants. Rika Fujioka, “The Pressures of Globalization in Retail: The Path of Japanese Department Stores, 1930s-1980s,” in *Comparative Responses to Globalization* (Palgrave Macmillan: 2013); Rikki Kersten, “The Intellectual Culture of Postwar Japan and the 1968-1969 University of Tokyo Struggles: Repositioning the Self in Postwar Thought,” *Social Science Japan* 12.2 (2009): 227-245; André Sorensen, *The Making of Urban Japan: Cities and Planning from Edo to the Twenty-first Century* (London: Routledge, 2002). See also: Gary Allison, *Japan's Postwar History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), and Thomas Havens, *Fire across the Sea—the Vietnam War and Japan 1965-1975* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

exceeding the photographer's individual agency and subjective point of view—its existence, quite literally, as the journal itself.

By presenting both texts and photographs, *Provoke 1* combined theoretical issues with the formal problems of photography—a synthetic quality that was echoed by the issue's unifying theme of “summer 1968.” As it referred to the lives of the contributing photographers—what they were doing that summer—the theme spoke in turn to Nakahira's intuition of the absence of any meta-perspective or position from which to approach the situation of the late 1960s. In the afterword he described an inevitable antinomy “between politics and creative activity” that was for him the most immediate form of the challenge faced by photography. It was the historical space of this tension itself that had first to be inhabited—“[from] a personal standpoint,” he writes, “there is no other way.”³⁴ Similarly, all the photographs in *Provoke 1* reveal the diverse trajectories of their takers' activities at the time. Taki Kōji's photos show employees involved in a labour dispute at the San-Ichi publishing company as well as coal miners from Hokkaidō (where he had travelled on assignment); Takanashi Yutaka's, his visits to places like Asama mountain and the Izu peninsula in the course of his work as a fashion photographer; while Nakahira Takuma's reveal his nighttime wanderings through the dark streets of Shinjuku and Gotanda. The overall banality of their contents served less to exclude or obscure the intensifying disquiet of 1968 than to demonstrate the impossibility of doing so in the first place—thereby revealing the basic fact of inhabiting a moment whose presence was felt like a “thick, heavy curtain”

³⁴ Nakahira Takuma, “Afterword,” *Provoke 1* (November 1968).

draped over the world.³⁵ As Moriyama Daido (who joined with the second issue) would say: “This era is marbled with innumerable political veins... when taking photographs, it is not that I turn my camera towards culture itself, and hence by pressing the shutter obtain it. To the contrary, no matter what I photograph, it is already political in itself.”³⁶

The texts by Okada and Taki in *Provoke 1* further evoke a sense of the inexorable refraction of politics into all aspects of life. Though their concerns were ontological at root, they were articulated in terms of a corrective to the present’s “symptomatic” political malaise. Both authors saw in the current moment an imperative to critical self-reflection so as ultimately to rehabilitate the individual’s creative possibilities. In his essay at the start of the journal (“I cannot see, I feel heartbroken, I want to leap” [*Mienai, setsunai, tobitai*]), Okada describes an existential freedom whose subjective embodiment in the act of art making was frustrated by one’s inability to grasp an orientating sense of “human totality.”³⁷

Taki also took up the notion of an essential “totality” circumscribed by human actions. As that “towards which I bring myself into existence in the theorization of the invisible,” this “intelligence” (知) was understood as the dialectical contents of one’s sense-making encounter with the world.³⁸ Despite its utopian emancipatory potential, intelligence in its “degenerated” state performed the ideological separation of

³⁵ Taki Kōji, *Provoke 1* (November 1968), 47.

³⁶ Moriyama Daido and Nakahira Takuma, “Moriyama Daido and Nakahira Takuma – Dialogue at Yamanoue Hotel,” in *Farewell Photography [Shashin yo sayōnara]* (Tokyo: Shashin Hyoronsha 1972), 291.

³⁷ Fujii writes that “Okada lamented that his heart was broken (*setsunai*) because he could not see (*mienai*) the momentum of releasing his creative energy (*tobitai*)” in this way. Fujii, “Photography as process,” 81.

³⁸ Taki, *Provoke 1* (November 1968), 65.

consciousness from corporeal existence in a society that would “ultimately erase the human being.”³⁹ Taki saw Tokyo University as a bastion of such degeneration.⁴⁰ The collapse of the university’s symbolic authority, brought about by its then-ongoing occupation by student activists, was as such a necessary prerequisite for the future “liberation of the human being” within Taki’s ideal “totality of intelligence.”⁴¹

³⁹ “The system [of intelligence’s organization of society] is the only object of concern, this system being convinced of its ‘subsistence to human needs.’ Yet, the system is that which will ultimately erase the human being. At the very least, at the moment of awareness of its organization, its ‘anti-humanism’ will play the role of the trenchant blade that reveals the antinomy between organization and existence, that is, of making the seizing of the chance of totalization possible.” *Ibid*, 66.

⁴⁰ At the time of Taki’s writing, student activists were occupying Tokyo University’s Yasuda Auditorium. While ostensibly protesting the university’s authoritarian policies, their actions took place against a backdrop of Leftist antiwar and anti-government protest that occurred throughout the 1960s. On October 8 of 1967, for instance, more than 2,500 student activists from the Marxist Student League, the Socialist Student League, and the Socialist Youth League joined blockades and attempted to forcibly prevent Prime Minister Satō Eisaku’s departure from Haneda airport to attend a summit in Saigon. Again on January 17, 1968, hundreds of activists confronted police in protest of the aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise*’s visit to the port of Sasebo. As such the political student groups that constituted a major driving force behind these protests also pursued their activities in Japan’s universities—occupying many of the nation’s campuses were between 1968 and 1969. Armed with helmets and wooden staves, they often battled police in a form of direct action termed *Gewalt*. This action did not aim for immediate political change, but served as a means of self-transformation in the face of an authoritarian society: influenced by Sartre’s notion of engagement, their only recourse was to take responsibility for their lives at an individual level. The police thus became symbolic enemies in a battle against the mold of subjectivity for which university was to prepare them—against the production of a workforce designed to fit Japan’s homogenous landscape. As one participant in the 1968 uprising at Nihon University said: “We entered Nihon University in order to study and learn truth as human beings, but the university deals with us not as humans but as commodities, makes use of us as tools, and sends us off into bourgeois society.” Takemasa Ando, *Japan’s New Left Movements: Legacies for Civil Society* (London: Routledge, 2013), 56; William Marotti, “AHR Forum Japan 1968: The Performance of Violence and the Theater of Protest,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 114, No. 1 (2009): 102; Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴¹ This notion referred to the collective consciousness by means of which the individual conceptualized their relation to reality. In the context of intelligence’s degeneration,

Nakahira's rough, blurred, and grainy images in *Provoke 1* precipitated a similar collapse as they divulged the differences between conscious perception and the world seen by the camera. His photographic contribution cast him in the role of an urban wayfarer whose perspective was provided by the street, his lens pointed down an empty thoroughfare or through a windshield at the sun, into the faces of solicitors in Shinjuku or the electrified grottoes of a loading bay at night. (Figs. 1.2-1.6) Punctuated by shots of unidentifiable interiors as well as his wife and sister at the beach, the images appear disjointed, haphazard—seemingly unequal to a single regime of sight. But their provocation is precisely that they *do* present such a “single regime” as a series of scenes glimpsed by the camera accompanying Nakahira's life—their “violent,” fragmented appearance not the subjective distortion of the world according to a viewing intentionality, but the subjectifying “distortion” of the viewer according to the world preceding intention.⁴² In other words, the appearance of the world as *undistorted* in so far as Nakahira attempted to separate the photographer's interpretive exigency from the vision this role monopolized by de-identifying himself (as the photographer) from any familiar visual language. The role of the camera, he wrote, was “the apprehension of scattered phenomena before our eyes, an enumerative reality... and indeed the only

individuals were correspondingly deprived of a view of their actual historical conditions and hence of the means necessary for effective political action. As such, Taki wrote: “The degeneration of intelligence has currently engulfed the university. As long as it persists in maintaining the contemporary organization, the symbolically functioning Tokyo Daigaku ought to collapse... At the very least because of Tokyo University's collapse the repudiation of degeneration itself will become our foothold.” *Ibid*, 67.

⁴² “We see the world from a single viewpoint, moreover from a viewpoint that must already first pass through the meaning of the world.” Nakahira Takuma, “Reality restoration,” [“Riariti fukken”] *Design [dezain]* (January 1969).

capacity in which the record can operate.”⁴³ The phenomenological significance of this record was not the acceding to some ground of ontological anteriority, but rather the awareness that this ground was already prepared for perception as the material facticity of the social relations that perception—the camera—enforced.

Nakahira later argued that photography portrayed social circumstances (including the relationship between the photographer and the photographed) as being “actual” or “preexisting” reality.⁴⁴ He had participated in the media coverage of the assault on Tokyo University’s occupied Yasuda Hall, where he was struck by the hypocrisy of news cameramen whose intention of providing the students’ cause with the “social justice” of media coverage was belied by their dependence on the exertion of state power, in the form of over eight thousand riot police deployed against the protestors, for their presence at the scene—in other words, by the structurally coinciding perspective taken by photography and the state.⁴⁵ For this reason Nakahira never took photographs of (or as) his political activism, seeing in such an act the danger of involuntarily reproducing the representational hegemony being protested by the New Left to begin with.⁴⁶ The images in *Provoke 1* are thus left unresolved, undescribed:

⁴³ Nakahira, *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ “...the meanings and values that eizō engenders are always the products of an association, notably at the moment [the image] is linked to language. When this point is forgotten, we get the illusion that all the image reflects is actual reality, so that eizo is easily co-opted by authorities as a powerful means of control. If there is such a thing today as a desire for authors to be involved subjectively in eizō, it can only be on the level of a ‘meta-eizō.’ Nakahira Takuma, “Eizō language,” [“eizō gengo”] *Kikan film [kikan firumu]* (December 1972).

⁴⁵ Nakahira, Takuma, “What is contemporaneity?” [“Dōjidaiteki de aru to wa nani ka?”] Originally serialized in *Design* (May-August 1969), cited in *Fire at the limits of my perpetual gazing*, 81.

⁴⁶ This could be seen in the way the government actively attempted to incorporate the perspective of the press within its own operational standpoint of “neutrality,”

the photographic side of the split lived by Nakahira and awaiting its reconciliation with language within the fundamentally altered conditions of intelligibility he hoped would someday arrive.

Photography's inextricable and simultaneous entanglement within commercial, private, and political registers and its consequently fraught status as an avant-garde medium was perhaps most plainly asserted in *Provoke 1* by Takanashi Yutaka's photos of the places he visited on commercial assignments. (Figs. 1.7-1.9) Although they exhibited a more even and granular tonality, his photos were stylistically and methodologically similar to Taki and Nakahira's in their abandonment of "straight" conventions for a rough and blurry dynamism. Mobilized in this sense as records of Takanashi's personal experience, they reproduced the context of his work for the Nippon Design Center (an advertising agency) and various fashion magazines as the site of the avant-garde production actualized in their presence in and as *Provoke 1*. By suggesting an underlying determination of style by the value placed on creative novelty—as in the picture of a fashion show where the clothes' newness and originality

augmenting and embedding the means for media coverage into its own events. Less a declension of power than its adaptation to what Yuriko Furuhashi has described as the visual acceleration of violence in modernity's "politics of the image," this representational strategy thus attempted to align public perception with government goals. When Tokyo's undercurrent of anti-establishment sentiment exploded into protests on International Antiwar Day in 1968, for instance, the conflict was controlled by a well-organized response. Police both confined and neutralized outbreaks of violence while dramatizing their own restraint "so as to yield negative press publicity for the protestors." The concertedly "defensive" police presence put into practice here successfully focused public attention on the student movement's violent extremes, producing a desired backlash against the student protestors. Yuriko Furuhashi, *Cinema of Actuality: Japanese Avant-Garde Filmmaking in the Season of Image Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), and William Marotti, "AHR Forum Japan 1968: The Performance of Violence and the Theater of Protest," *The American Historical Review*, 114.1 (2009).

is superimposed with the innovative use of *bure-boke* to photograph them—this repetition elided the boundary between capital and the alternately artistic, amateurish, and/or avant-garde creativity of the individual.

Or rather, it exposed this boundary's already infinite permeability: to Takanashi's "wandering consciousness... fixed in the working hours of laying electrical cables, of an empty Coca-Cola bottle's frame-out," the continuity between advertising studio and the world "outside" did not result from the reproduction or simulation of one by the other, but from their mutual basis in photographic seeing.⁴⁷ A photo of a model fixing her makeup shows her on location at an outdoor fashion shoot, evoking a comparison with the "professional" photograph Takanashi presumably took soon after. (Fig. 1.8) Another photo shows a transient landscape of houses and billboards alongside a Hokkaidō expressway. (Fig. 1.9) Canted by Takanashi's loose, haphazard operation of the camera, the marginal attention paid thereto while simultaneously driving a car, and moreover blurred by this moving vantage point, the indistinct blending of its contents sustains its verisimilitude to the traveller's vehicular vision. The roadside scenery of Suntory whisky and colour TV advertisements slips past in the corner of one's eye, a seamless succession of appearances piling up on the highway's scopic moraine and captured in Takanashi's glimpse of a Toshiba billboard—his photograph suggesting in turn the viewer's own *glimpsing by* a Toshiba billboard in so far as the phenomenal space it provided was structured around the inverted return of the look in the form of the commodity-image.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Takanashi Yutaka, *Provoke 1* (November 1968), 31.

⁴⁸ An image whose very allure was its own interpellation of a viewer who desired it. In *Provoke 2*, Okada would write: "By means of mass communication (*masukomi*) or

Though figured here by the landscape's literal possession of a pair of eyes, the function of creating this viewer was not limited to iconic content: what was revealed by photography's reflexive visibility in the *bure-boke* of Takanashi's images was the possibility of an identification with the photographic surface itself. That is, of reading the photographic medium's visual effects as the indexical markers of the photographer's creative self-expression. Indeed, since at least the 1950s a thriving practice of amateur photography in Japan had popularized photography as a means of personal self-representation. In what Yoshiaki Kai defines as the genre of snapshot or *snappu* photography, this was premised on presenting, through personal photographs, one's own *perspective* as a sign of individuality.⁴⁹ This latent possibility was realized in 1973 with *Provoke's* entry into the mainstream lexicon of style and Takanashi's use of a similarly slanted, roadbound shot to advertise Neopan SS film. (Fig. 1.10) For sale: more so than the chemical creativity of silver grains, the crystallized consciousness of "the photographer" fixed therein.

Like Takanashi, Taki situated his photographs for *Provoke 1* within his own professional context, presenting photos from press assignments to the San-Ichi publishing company and the Mikasa coalmine in Hokkaidō. (Figs. 1.11-1.13) His deliberate use of layout is seen in the conspicuous margins that disrupt the visual flow,

alternately the large-scale networks of commerce, the mass-disseminated and reiterated image [*imiji* (sic)], despite being a mere moment's projection rather than the physical object, plants strange obsessions in people's hearts, organizing there a reverential structure of feeling. Without even knowing it, these people begin to treat the image as a fetish..." Okada Takahiko, "Going back to Fetico," ["Fetico ni gyaku modori"], *Provoke 2* (March 1969).

⁴⁹ In other words, the self was represented via photographs taken *by* the self (as an amateur photographer) rather than simply via photographs taken *of* this self (as in portraits or family photos). Yoshiaki Kai, "*Sunappu: A Genre of Japanese Photography, 1930-1980*" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2012).

the images' varying degrees of contrast and clarity preventing any singular worldview from coalescing around a sense of stylistic unity. The variably limited disclosure of content within the dark and overlit extremes of exposure suggested uneven levels of access on the part of these subjects to the means of reproduction and visibility exemplified by *Provoke* itself as a photographic journal. Juxtaposing different work environments within this photographic matrix thus invited a comparison between the different modes of production, the materiality of their productive bases. As a miner looks at the camera, the technical process facilitating his visibility to the viewer is denoted by the blank space on the left—a simple side-effect of the difference between the photo's original dimensions and those of the journal's horizontal spread. (Fig. 1.11) This self-referential trace of the underlying operation of printing and editing thus marked the blank place of a photographic transparency whose representational function (transparency *to* something) required *its own* mediation by a determinate content. At the same time this blankness was also the opacity of the miner's actual *work* to the photo's veristic lucidity: an intuition, in this left-over negative space, of the inadmissibility of the physical base to the photograph's figurative vision. Grappling with photography's failure as a way of seeing the totality, Taki writes in his foreword of the unique sensory deprivation of the coalmine: starved of light, bereft of seasons, time—a stygian presence whose evocation on preceding pages had here receded beneath the sterile brightness of sunlight.⁵⁰ Both on the page and at the mine the vital capacity that made use-value present was excluded from the final product (the coal, the image). The difference is that this surplus remained in Taki's spreads. Its existence as

⁵⁰ Taki Kōji, *Provoke 1* (November 1968), 15.

such was confirmed by his choice to leave the margin white or print it black depending on the photo next to which it appeared. In this sense it is an index of the construction of layout, pointing to the partial nature of the pictures by serving as a reminder of their own context (the journal). (Fig. 1.12)

Of course, by 1968 the era in which labour movements were capable of representing the class interests of a self-conscious majority had ended.⁵¹ As Nishii Kazuo writes, “the historical situation [of the 1960s] was ultimately moving towards the end of the collective ‘us’.”⁵² In the 1950s the militant unions guarding work-floor bargaining power had been successively undermined and eliminated by Japan’s industrial conglomerates in a series of targeted attacks culminating in 1959, when the firing of 300 union leaders the Mitsui-Miike coalmine sparked a 313 day strike.⁵³ While the mediatized figure of “the miner” thus became a symbol for organized labour, the terms of militant violence with which his struggle was articulated ended by obscuring its actual stakes. This could already be seen in the way the miner’s paradigmatic image—in its implicit model of photographic realism—formalized the possibilities for political engagement. Aspiring to the objectivity of a direct, transparent representation of its subject (the miner), the photojournalistic style of “realism” reproduced by Taki’s image naturalized Japan’s political context of participatory democracy by positing the individual as its basic representational unit. In other words, just as the individual vote was the smallest and most particular element of meaning in democratic politics, the

⁵¹ Nishii Kazuo, *Why Provoke, even now? [Naze Imada PROVOKE Ka?]* (Tokyo: Seikyūsha, 1996), 13.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Takemasa Ando, *Japan’s New Left Movements: Legacies for Civil Society*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 36.

individual figure appeared as minimal element of meaning in photographic reality—but like the vote, this individual was understood as the determinate *referent* of the image, rather than its signifying contents. It is as such that in postwar debates on photographic realism in Japan, the creative vision of the photographer was commonly privileged over what the photograph figuratively depicted. A fundamental disjunction was thus introduced between the political possibilities of organized labour and the image of the miner by which they were symbolized.

This masked what Muto Ichiyo describes as the structural changes to the workplace effected by Japan's rationalization process (*Gōrika*) in the 1950s and early 1960s.⁵⁴ "Undertaken not merely by individual enterprises for their own competitive advantage but by the capitalist class as a whole through coordinated planning," *Gōrika* exemplified Japan's state-directed monopoly capitalism. In order to weaken the existing organization of labour, Muto argues that it focused on transforming the behaviours and attitudes of workers as individuals, going so far as to call *Gōrika* the "replacing [of] worker identity with capital's identity."⁵⁵ Totsuka Hideo has similarly described this period as "the rise of Japan's corporate society," referring to the predominance of labour management strategies that were premised on "assimilating and mobilizing employees for the enterprise's goals."⁵⁶ Thus, even as the clear, lucid image of the miner that is reiterated by Taki refers to a faith in the empowering potential of political representation, in practice it made the miner inoperative as a protagonist for labour's

⁵⁴ Muto Ichiyo and Inoue Reiko, "Beyond the New Left (Part 2): In Search of a Radical Base in Japan," *AMPO Japan-Asia Quarterly Review* 17.3 (1985): 54-73.

⁵⁵ *Ibid* 47.

⁵⁶ Totsuka Hideo, "Building Japan's Corporate Society," *AMPO Japan-Asia Quarterly Review* Vol. 25, No. 1 (1994): 13.

larger class interests—if anything, casting him as an antagonist opposed to the rational discourse of democracy. In 1970 the economist Taira Koji would write: “the sad truth is that given the indomitable business-government coalition, the labor movement relies on protest as practically the sole effective method of workers’ participation in public policy.”⁵⁷

As though appearing in the aftermath on *Gōrika*’s other side, Taki’s photo of strikers at San-Ichi hauntingly invokes the conditions and iconography of the mine.⁵⁸ (Fig. 1.13) Three figures appear on a black background whose only suggestion of a setting is what seems like a screen door on the left. The light of a flash reflected in one of their eyes is otherwise soaked up by the claustrophobic, subterranean darkness—a placeless stage for the anonymous bodily presence produced by the violence plaguing protests in 1968 and connoted here by the helmets and bandannas, which, mirroring the miner’s equipment, protected union members and student activists from a hostile urban environment rife with riot police, rival factions, and reactionary thugs.⁵⁹ Unlike in the coalmine, the impetus for action was not only the workers’ control of the relations of production, but—as they were literally performed at the publishing company Taki visited—those of reproduction. In the urban context of the late 1960s

⁵⁷ Koji Taira, *Economic Development and the Labor Market in Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 227.

⁵⁸ This necessarily referred to the mine’s status as the postwar period’s locus classicus of engaged photography (exemplified by such photobooks as Ken Domon’s *Children of Chikugo*, 1960). Its revisiting by Taki’s images as such would have constituted its reappraisal in light of the new conditions of protest and political engagement represented by the city—something indeed directly seen in the eerie appearance of the photographs.

⁵⁹ Peter Katzenstein and Tsujinaka Yutaka, *Defending the Japanese State: Structures, Norms and the Political Responses to Terrorism and Violent Social Protest in the 1970s and 1980s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 30.

this was increasingly a practice of creating and circulating representations, a process whose social workings extended outside the self to vanish into a darkness that lurked not only belowground, but everywhere in the city as well.

As they perform these observations, Taki's photographs—and those of Nakahira and Takanashi as well—flicker at the interface between representation's "working" and "not-working." Put simply, their contents are at times clear and at others inscrutable. This difficulty (even impossibility) of identification was not, however, the loss, but the *appearance* of photography's link to objective reality in the form of the photograph's irreducible contingency, its insistent presence in and as the world; in other words, its ability to create continuity between the site of exposure and the site of vision—an ability otherwise appearing metaphorically as *something else's* contingent quality of "being there." But which, presented in *Provoke 1* in terms that made visible the structure of technological mediations spanning between the journal, the photographs, the camera and the world, revealed the need for a reconceptualization of the image and its social function in late 1960s Japan. Reiterated by the journal's physical ephemerality, its scattering across the city, the "irreversible materiality" of *Provoke's* images began to occupy the constitutive emptiness of the camera's scopic field as imagined by such contemporary designations as "*Hōdō shashin*" or "reportage," foregrounding instead photography's status as a self-disclosing operation.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ The critique of the concept of "realism" as it was shared by Nakahira and Moriyama was articulated by the latter in a dialogue they had: "Up until now 'realism' has been applied to the 'objective' *Hōdō Shashin*—the supremacy of the presence of the site of photographing—or to the simulation of a particular state of affairs by the camera, the most symbolically schematic photography, 'reportage' ... And aside from these, 'art

It was the journal's intervention in the material practice of presenting photography (rather than the photographic practice of presenting the world) that formed the basis for *Provoke's* difference from the visually similar work of contemporaries like Tōmatsu Shōmei. Founded on a rhetoric of the rejection of pre-established styles, *Provoke* raised the question of photography's relation to reality in the form of an antagonism between its presence as a quantum of sense-certainty—a “non-exchangeable... [fragment of] reality cut out by the camera”—and the subversion of the discourse making it intelligible in social-historical terms. This was a historical and critical discourse in which all of *Provoke's* members were heavily implicated. Nakahira and Taki, for instance, had worked under Tōmatsu in the curation for the 1968 exhibition “One Hundred Years of Photography: The History of Japanese Photographic Expression.”⁶¹ The two also took frequent freelance work as photojournalists for magazines like *Asahi Graph* and *Asahi Camera* while contributing criticism to publications like *Design*. Okada was active as a poet and art critic. Takanashi was the most established, with a career as a fashion and advertising photographer. All of them regularly appeared in the round table discussions that were a mainstay of art and photography publications at the time. The negative thrust of their participation in *Provoke*—unconventional both in its presentation and visually striking images—was in this sense directed at themselves, that is, at the creative identities that had been

photography' (*Geijutsu-shashin*) and 'subjective photography' (*Shukan-shashin*) have also had this label applied to them..." These "antecedent realisms" (as Moriyama called them) proved, for Nakahira, "that the concept of realism itself has already broken down." "Moriyama Daido and Nakahira Takuma – Dialogue at Yamanoue Hotel," *Farewell Photography [Shashin yo sayōnara]* (Tokyo: Shashin Hyoronsha 1972), 301.

⁶¹ This exhibition presented a progressive narrative of Japan's modernization through a series of historical photographs.

constructed by the appearance of their output in preexisting discursive venues. Between the bare names, minimally attached to (near) incomprehensible photos in *Provoke*, and these names' pre-established views and associations in the photography magazines where they regularly appeared, the relationship between the images and the individual that the name signified was brought into sharp relief. The photographer Oshima Hiroshi describes such a shock upon first seeing *Provoke* (whose members he did not know personally at the time): "The fact that, even though they already possessed a place for their expression [they] so resolutely launched into making their own *dōjinshi*, was extremely meaningful."⁶² As his reaction suggests, *Provoke's* ability to present a new model of photography owed much to their status as a collective. As a collaborative and economically self-sufficient project, the *Provoke* publication pragmatically distinguished itself from the overdetermined identities of its members. In this way it provided an alternative space in which the meaning of their photography could be realized.

In preexisting publications like the aforementioned *Asahi Camera* and *Camera Mainichi*, the "place for expression" referenced by Oshima was the site of discussions on photography that had emerged from postwar debates on photographic realism (*riarizumu*). Julia Thomas argues that the concept's salience referred to the "epistemological and existential turmoil, as well as economic, political, and social distress" of Japanese society following the war.⁶³ The lack of stabilizing norms, institutions, or social values at this moment initiated a number of competing claims in

⁶² Oshima Hiroshi, cited in "Symposium: 'Provoke' and After," Īzawa Kōtarō (ed.) *Déjà-vu* 14 (1993): 33.

⁶³ Julia Thomas, "Power Made Visible: Photography and Postwar Japan's Elusive Reality," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67.2 (May 2008): 390.

the 1940s and 1950s as to the nature of *riarizumu* by photographers and critics such as Domon Ken, Tanaka Masao, and Watanabe Kosho.⁶⁴ These claims saw access to reality as a function of the creative capacities and subjective judgments that determined the photographer's encounter with an otherwise unstable world. Reality as such had to be made intelligible, first discerned amidst life's confusing chaos before being presented in a graspable way. This subordination of the camera's perspective to that of the photographer was in distinction to the notion of realism implied by *Hōdō Shashin*, the mainstream model of Japanese reportage developed by Natori Yōnosuke in the 1930s and continuing after the war as a method of visually presenting news stories with series' of photographs organized according to a predetermined idea or theme. The lucid, legible narratives produced in this mode thus elided the individual subjectivity of the photographer by mandating a straightforward shooting style and having editors select and arrange the final images. Despite these differences, *Hōdō Shashin* and the documentary realism of photographers like Domon Ken shared a stylistic similarity in the verisimilitude with which their photographs depicted their contents, their access to reality thus formally predicated on a mimetic relationship. The 1960s saw the advancement of new practices of photographic realism that rejected the necessity of such "straight," naturalistic rendering. Preserving the sense of the photographer's individual identity and creative choice, the images of photographers like Tōmatsu Shōmei responded stylistically to the actions of the taker in order to express their unique, penetrating perspective.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Writing in 1960, the critic Shigemori Kōen described a number of young photographers "whose work puts forth idiosyncratic versions of reality shaped by their

Although they would adopt many of the formal rejections seen in the images produced in this vein (such as dynamic compositions, heavy dodging and burning, and blurring the image) *Provoke's* members refused the strong sense of authorship with which these maneuvers were identified. This refusal extended to their departure from the discursive milieu of these antecedent realisms by creating their own *dōjinshi* to present their work. The critique formulated in this way referred less to a breakdown of photography's inherent access to reality than it did to the breakdown of the photographer as an agent whose own reality was autonomous from that of the photograph. Nishii Kazuo argues that *Provoke's* innovation was precisely to call the "photographer's" identity into question at a time when this designation referred solely to professional status (whether or not one was paid to take photos). By "taking photos hobby-ishly," "as a way of living," they attempted to define the photographer in social and personal terms inimical to those of wage labour.⁶⁶ But this is not to say, as Nishii implies, that such a socially imagined photographic identity did not exist prior to its investigation by *Provoke*. Its seeming absence before that point was, rather, its seamless operation as an inherent presupposition of the act of taking photos itself. That it was made visible by what Nishii describes as *Provoke's* mobilization of deskilled amateur techniques and tropes—to ultimately perform a professional-commercial, albeit critical, function (something demonstrated by *Provoke's* members' established status within

own bold unilateral judgments, reversing the self-negating tendencies of photographers who record reality from a so-called objective standpoint." Shigemori Kōen, "The new problem of visual language: The visual image," ["Shikaku gengo no atarashii mondai: eizō"] originally published in *Photo Art* 12.6 (May 1960): 162-65 and *Photo Art* 12.7 (June 1960): 142-45, cited in Doryun Chong et al. *From Postwar To Postmodern: Art in Japan 1945-1989* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 147.

⁶⁶ Nishii Kazuo, *Why Provoke, even now?*, 13.

“photography world” yet which Nishii does not acknowledge)—indicates the extent to which photography as an abstracting process was seen to have already entered the everyday.

This awareness paralleled a concern with subjectivity that had emerged in the decade’s political debates. Progressive understandings of self and autonomy founded in the postwar discourse on liberal democracy had proven powerless against the *realpolitik* exemplified by the revision of the Japan-US Security Treaty amidst mass protest in 1960. For the New Left movements gaining in momentum in the build-up to the renewal of the treaty in 1970, what was clear from the abortive political legacies of Leftist antiwar protestors of the early 1960s—who presupposed as their starting point the existential freedom of subjective action—was the need to reevaluate the received notion of the self as the basis for political agency. This could be seen in the critical resources mobilized by radical movements like Zenkyōtō, who drew on existentialist theory and rhetoric to articulate their strategy of direct action and its corresponding slogan of “self-negation.” Another approach was found in Marxist theory, which as Eiji Oguma writes, “was read anew despite the decline in support for traditional Marxist political parties.”⁶⁷ Marxism provided an effective way of understanding the individual’s position in society and the contradictions therein. In 1970, for instance, the historian Hirata Kiyooki advanced a Marxist analysis of Japanese society that identified its conditions with that of capitalism’s ontological inversion of the relationship between market and people—such that “the market comes to create people rather than vice

⁶⁷ Eiji Oguma, “Japan’s 1968: A collective reaction to rapid economic growth in an age of turmoil,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 13.1 (March 2015).

versa.”⁶⁸ Within this view the mediation of human relationships by commodities had produced a social imaginary in Japan that was incapable of articulating a viable counter-politics to the operations of capital producing it as such.⁶⁹ For the student radicals, the ideological contents of this imaginary could be keenly felt in the contradiction between words and actions embodied by the university in its ambivalent role as both propagator of humanistic discourse and preparatory site of the Japanese workforce.

While less precisely politicized than those of the student movements, *Provoke's* critical apparatus often employed a Marxist approach to the forms of cultural representation they engaged. In the second issue of *Provoke*, Okada synthesized Marx's theory of commodity fetishism with the Freudian concepts of sublimation and sexual fetishism in order to argue that the modern subject was separated from reality by the simultaneous abstractions imposed on them by culture and the market economy.⁷⁰

Nakahira would describe his own project in terms of a counter to the abstraction performed by the circulation of images in the mass media. According to him, the media was a structure “that protects its class benefits, where the bourgeoisie instills an illusion of equality in deprived citizens, who are controlled by the nation, and heightens bourgeois morals to a universal plane, depriving us of our consciousness...”⁷¹

Furthermore, in an essay published in *Provoke 1* (“Memorandum 1: Degeneration of

⁶⁸ Hirata Kiyooki, cited in Yumiko Iida, *Rethinking Identity in Modern Japan: Nationalism as Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2002), 156.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 155.

⁷⁰ For a discussion of Okada's essay see Chapter Two.

⁷¹ Nakahira Takuma, “Illusion named as record: from document to monument,” [“Kiroku to iu genei: dokyumento kara monument e”] *Bijutsu Techō* [Art Notebook] (July 1972), 75.

intelligence” [*Oboegaki 1: chi no taihai*]) Taki commented on the student occupation of Tokyo University, describing its aforementioned contradiction as something “sewn into reality beforehand by means of false knowledge.”⁷² Taki saw such an ideological motive at work in the organization of Expo ’70 as well, describing its underlying purpose as the “strengthening of the culture of bourgeois ideology.” According to Taki, in so far as holding it in 1970 would provide a foil to anti-ANPO sentiment, the expo itself was “created as an offensive by the totalizing force of capital.”⁷³ This idea was elaborated by Taki’s definition of his photography as an attempt at exposing “the deception” of “objects in their alleged natural state, disguising themselves as merchandise and structuring individuals.”⁷⁴

Of course, as was surely not lost on Taki, *Provoke* would have been just such an object itself. According to Yanagimoto Naomi, a member of the student movement at Nihon University and Taki’s assistant at his design office in Aoyama, by *Provoke 2*’s release the first issue’s entire print run of 1,000 had already sold out and was on back order.⁷⁵ As it sat on bookstore shelves, how might *Provoke 1* have “structured” the individuals who perceived it?

⁷² Taki Kōji, “Memorandum 1: Degeneration of intelligence,” *Provoke 1* (November 1968).

⁷³ *Ibid.* As Reiko Tomii writes, “In his [Taki’s] view, *Expo ’70* was a means for “power,” in a presciently Foucaultian sense, to co-opt art and culture into the “network” of power that operated invisibly.” Reiko Tomii, “Tokyo: 1967-1973,” *Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis* (London: Tate Modern, 2001), 203.

⁷⁴ Taki Kōji, cited in Matthew Witkovsky et al. *Provoke: Between PROTEST and PERFORMANCE – Photography in Japan 1960/1975* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2016), 350.

⁷⁵ Yanagimoto, who was tasked with most of *Provoke*’s (albeit limited) business activities, produced three silkscreen posters to advertise the first issue (featuring photos from Taki, Nakahira, and Takanashi) and distributed around 300 issues to bookstores in the Tokyo area. He recalls also filling his bag with copies of the journal and traveling to Osaka and Kyoto to place them in bookstores there. Although at a cost

Provoke 1 presented photos and text in a way that disrupted the seemingly self-evident associations between its contents and the world they signified. As such, its critical maneuver was to assert that in 1960s Japan the difference motivating the (photographic) signification of reality as “elsewhere” no longer lay between the photograph and its object, but between the photograph and its *representation as photography*. This was achieved by resituating the figurative function of photography within the journal itself—by presenting its photos as being transparent not (only) to the world at the moment of exposure, but to their own physical existence as photos as well. By removing itself from the mediating milieu of current discourses on photography, *Provoke 1* not only critiqued but reversed the constitutive relationship between the identity of the photographer and the reality of their images: instead of emphasizing a creative subject or authorial identity *anterior* to the images, the journal presented the images in themselves as a material existence whose collective reality preceded the interpretive signification of this identity.

of 500 yen *Provoke 1* was almost double the cost of a normal magazine, sales from the journal were never enough to cover the initial production costs. Yanagimoto Naomi, cited in Īzawa Kōtarō (ed.) *Déjà-vu* No. 14 (1993): 66.

Chapter Two: Provoke 2, Eros

Provoke 2 was published on March 10, 1969. (Fig. 2.1) Containing writing by Okada and photos by Nakahira, Takanashi, Taki, and Moriyama (who joined the group with this issue), its rectangular dimensions of 242 x 180 mm departed from *Provoke 1*'s square form. Its overall impression was also more jarring, as the stylistic features characterizing *bure-boke* were intensified in images whose retention of the visible side-effects of the shooting and printing processes, their harsh texture and excessive exposure, belied the glossy paper and professional finish of the journal itself. Organized around the theme of "Eros," the photographs differed in terms of a greater prevalence of backlit scenes and depictions of the female body. Indeed *Provoke 2*'s visual and textual contents shifted the explicit terms of the debate on subjectivity and photography begun in *Provoke 1*—from the ambiguous antagonism between the categories of amateur and professional to that between the erotic and the commercial. This was simultaneously a methodological move by its contributors to emphasize the sensory space of experience over the symbolic realm of language. While Okada described the subject of Japan's modern capitalist society as caught between the interdependent forms of the sexual- and commodity-fetish, Nakahira photographed the city's beguiling atmosphere on rainy nights; Moriyama took pictures during sexual encounters with his ex-girlfriend; Takanashi made portraits of the fashion model Oka Hiromi; and Taki photographed female sex industry workers in Shinjuku.

To the extent that *Provoke 2* departed from *Provoke 1*, this was less of an avant-garde search for originality than it was a reframing of the previous issue's guiding

concern. This took the form of the publication's renewed self-awareness as the material context of creative production—the production, as demonstrated by *Provoke 1*, not simply of *photography* but of that which emerged in addition to it, the *photographer*. While the photographer's presence in *Provoke 1* was a function of the journal's reversal of the signifying relationship between the sensations borne out by its images and the language used to describe them, *Provoke 2* returned to this presence as what physically delimited the space of the group's ongoing investigation into the subjectivity produced by the act of photography.

As I argue in this chapter, *Provoke 2* engaged the issue of photographic realism in terms of the immediate, bodily experience of photography's material conditions. The impetus for this transformation owed to the fact that with *Provoke 1*'s release and circulation as a commodity (a quarterly journal) the photographic practice it embodied would have been submitted to the same commercial-symbolic discourse to which it was initially posited as an alternative.⁷⁶ In so far as *Provoke 1* recorded the subjectivity of the photographer by making the photographic signifiers of identity physically present in its pages, *Provoke 2* recorded the subjectivity of the photographer by re-presenting *Provoke 1*'s objective results—the discrete form of photography's existence in the world

⁷⁶ As such *Provoke's* practice—in *Provoke 1* the bodily activity continuous between the individual's private act of looking, on the one hand, and the labour on which the photographer's professional status was premised, on the other—was from its inception at risk of being petrified by the contradiction between the categories of “amateurish” avant-garde artist and commercial photographer as these categories simultaneously applied to the identities of its members. This sense of impasse reveals anew the necessity and significance of *Provoke's* formulation of the reality revealed by photography as being something exceeding the perspective of individual consciousness—that is, something collective and anonymous.

as a commodity—as an aesthetic experience.⁷⁷ This was to reveal the role played by photography in Japan’s capitalist society as what mediated between the individual’s desire and this desire’s unseen determining conditions.

As if attempting to capture an elusive reality that was at best poorly approximated by the term—“Eros”—posited in the issue’s preface, a sense of bracketing or enframing characterizes *Provoke 2*’s physical layout.⁷⁸ Split in two parts and printed on grey matte paper, Okada’s essay (“Returning to Fetico” [Fetico *ni gyaku modori*]) is situated nearest the front and back covers on the outside. Then, the first and last of the four photo sections are those of Nakahira and Taki respectively. Both of them printed their images to the edge of the page and photographed depopulated urban scenes. The two sections in the middle (#2 and #3) are by Moriyama and Takashi, who printed their images at the center of the page with white margins. Their images exclusively show female bodies. The journal’s overall sequencing of form and content thereby marks the site of a crucial *something*, collectively circumscribing a reality that could not be described but only (photographically) shown.

⁷⁷ In other words, this experience referred to *photography*’s phenomenal properties (as a process involving various objects and behaviours) rather than to the phenomenal properties of the world that the photograph mediated.

⁷⁸ Situated at the limits of intelligibility, Eros was described as what stimulated the urges and emotions that appeared to consciousness: “It [Eros] is the unknown part that remains within the heart of any technological civilization, that is, what, flowing through the dark bottom of the world, constitutes it from a place far deeper than what we are conscious of.” The text took as its problem the ambivalent nature of the Eros’ social function. Even as *eros* constituted the subject’s creative drive, modernity had seen its appropriation by forms of technological mediation like photography. These had externalized Eros’ representational function in an automatic and hence predetermined way. *Provoke 2* (March 1969).

Provoke 2 begins with images taken by Nakahira. In one, the bed of a truck looms against a distant background of buildings. (Fig. 2.2) The vehicle extends past the frame and into the darkness, freighting a hidden cargo whose shrouded surface is only seen where it catches light from the streetlamps behind. Overexposed, they flood the street with brilliance, the pavement's white surface a stark contrast with the sky (pitch black) above. Between these two extremes are the visible effects of the stress they place on the medium, their filmic support—exposed to different levels of illumination whose varied intensities it cannot capture all at once, the photographic surface appears noticeably in the picture as a haze of grain. What also appears in these traces, whose rough gradation represents the attenuated sensory interval between the absence and superabundance of light, are the details of the urban setting the image depicts. The seeming attack on photographic appearances continues beyond these contents' raw and evocative rendering to the image's canted composition and haphazard framing. While the matter-of-factness with which it is presented suggests the conceit of straight or documentary photography, this scene's overall banality and the lack of a clearly identifiable subject drains it of any narrative or evidentiary import it might otherwise have: in the symbolically impoverished space of the photo, its figurative contents can be at best generally described.

Yet the photo nonetheless functions indexically to specificity—not the contingent particularity of the scene, but the visual abstraction by which it is shown. As Shimizu Minoru writes, “rather than a world illuminated by light, Nakahira wanted to shoot the

'light' itself..."⁷⁹ In its bright and dark areas the photograph materially reproduced the structure of a world whose spatial organization was otherwise a function of luminous intensity: the given magnitude of light corresponding, in the presence and absence of silver crystals in the film's emulsion, to the minimal possibility of being registered by sight.⁸⁰

Nakahira's *Provoke 2* pictures stare into this razor-thin horizon. The photos follow the passage of light through a labyrinth of manmade surfaces: over wet pavement and the scaffolding of construction sites, into the scattered reflections of raindrops and glass windows. (Figs. 2.3-2.5) In doing so they record the roving gaze of a photographer who moves on the periphery of an overblown blaze of light. Describing the urban sensorium, Nakahira wrote that "at night the city wipes clean all impurities, acquiring a nearly flawless kind of beauty."⁸¹ Despite the glittering allure of its appearance—in the bright beads of raindrops on a phone-booth's glass panels or the rippling beam running across a poster-covered wall—directly approaching the "Eros" of this nocturnal world was impossible, even dangerous. A photo that looks up at a vast, well-lit building has had its details obliterated by overexposure, its very surface seared by an excessive proximity to what it shows. (Fig. 2.5) As the photograph's tonality degrades into a meaningless blur and its surface is imprinted with the aperture's octagonal shape, the vision it sustains is blinded by the reality of the material limits (mechanical and chemical) to its own perception.

⁷⁹ Shimizu Minoru, "Rethinking *are-bure-boke*: The Reprinting of Moriyama Daido's *Shashin yo Sayōnara*" ["are bure boke' saikō—moriyama daido no 'shashin yo sayōnara' fukkan"], *Inter Communication* 58 (Autumn 2008): 102.

⁸⁰ The unexposed silver halide was separated from the photograph, drained off into the sink or chemical waste tank in the fixing process.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 10.

It was precisely at this limit that Nakahira found the salience that justified his act of taking photos in spite—or rather *because* of his critical consciousness of the formal and political contradiction therein. Even as the photograph's fragmented, contingent quality seemingly rendered it inoperative as a record of reality for anyone other than its taker, he nonetheless sought to mobilize it as something that could be objectively experienced by others. By taking photographs while walking aimlessly through the streets and refusing to rationalize his urge to press the shutter, Nakahira framed the sensory milieu of the encounter with the city as the determinate reality of his photos. This was to treat the image as something *found* and not *created*. He approached printing similarly as a process of trial and error rather than a demonstration of technical skill. Yanagimoto Naomi recalls that Nakahira would go through dozens of prints before being satisfied with the look of an image. "Despite being terrible at orthodox printmaking, Nakahira was completely obsessive about printing. It... showed particularly in the great lengths he went to in order to produce the bewitching aura of light [in his *Provoke 2* photos]." His photographs thus witnessed a paradoxical attempt to methodologically eliminate the photographer's intentionality from the picture.

As they thereby intervened in the form of subjectivity corresponding to the photographer whose existence the photograph presupposed, his images also served as a political gesture. "As certain as I am of photography's powerlessness," Nakahira wrote, "I am also nonetheless certain that today, and tomorrow, I will head into the city with my camera in hand."⁸² This referred to his awareness of photography's inevitable appropriation by the media discourse of the state and market. For Nakahira,

⁸² Nakahira, "What is contemporaneity?," 81.

photography was the site of an arduous contradiction between the sense of self-actualization achieved by its use and the alienating awareness of the fantasy in which this perceived agency was founded. Nakahira elaborated this intuition in a 1971 essay that critiqued the perspectival rationality embodied by the camera: “The image, as the form taken by an individual’s reaction to the world, was in this case based on the a priori assumption of a mechanistic schema established between a completed world and the corresponding reactions to it of a completed self...”⁸³ He described the vocation of art as an assault on this illusion, an attempt to shatter the mirror of “the creative individual” as an autonomous reflection of reality. In *Provoke 2* Nakahira carried out this attack by taking photos while (most likely) under the dissociative effects of a popular derivative of the sedative-hypnotic drug Methaqualone.⁸⁴ With no judicious eye in the finder or regulating hand on the focus ring, the camera disgorged a filmic vision congruent with the perceptual experience of the city dweller whose unreflective consciousness Okada described elsewhere in the journal.

Expanding on the concept of Eros posited in the preface, Okada’s essay begins with an account of Japan’s modern urban environment, “where there is nowhere that human excitation is not actively aroused.” In turn he warns the reader of the danger

⁸³ Nakahira Takuma, “The Exhaustion of Contemporary Art” [“Gendai geijutsu no hihei: Dai 7 kai pari seinen biennāre ni sankā shite”]. Originally printed in *Asahi Journal* (December 1971), reprinted in *Takuma Nakahira – Circulation: Date, Place, Events* (Tokyo: Osiris, 2012), 296.

⁸⁴ In a 1993 interview with Īzawa Kōtarō, Okada mentioned Nakahira’s use of drugs and alcohol, in particular describing his frequent use of *haiminaaru* [ハイミナール], a non-barbituate tranquilizer contained in the drug Methaqualone. According to Okada, the effects of this drug could be clearly seen in both Nakahira’s writing and photography from the time of *Provoke’s* second issue onwards. Īzawa Kōtarō (ed.) *Déjà-vu* No. 14 (1993): 68.

this reveals the current moment to be facing—a historical crisis seen in the “signs [that we are] dozing off, within a fantasy, into yet another fantasy.”⁸⁵ This sense of inwards involution away from reality referred to his overall argument, which critically engaged Freud’s theory of sublimation, von Gebattel’s theory of sexual fetishism, and Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism so as to investigate the structure of subjectivity in modern Japanese society. “By means of mass communication [*masukomi*] or the large-scale networks of commerce,” Okada writes, “the mass-disseminated and reiterated image [*imiji* (sic)], despite being a mere moment’s projection rather than the physical object, plants strange obsessions in people’s hearts, organizing there a reverential structure of feeling. Without even knowing it, these people begin to treat the image as a fetish...”⁸⁶ Ultimately, the loss of reality that this entailed was seen to derive from a concatenation of social and material abstractions that occurred in the context of modern capitalism. Identifying these processes as various forms of fetishism (defined as a fundamental reflex and therefore constitutive of subjectivity), Okada suggested that this isomorphism was indicative of their interdependence.

Fetishism being as such “not only an inversion born of the neurosis that comes from sexual repression, but also one which is imposed by the market economy, it is from the coalescence of these two inversions that the fundamental effects of fetishism... begin to exhibit themselves.”⁸⁷ Okada thus described the city as a space of institutionalized sexuality within the economic framework of capitalism. Citing the discotheque as an example, he argues that the immaterial experience on offer there—

⁸⁵ Okada Takahiko, “Going back to Fetico” [*Fetico ni gyaku modori*], *Provoke* 2 (March 1969).

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 7.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 108.

the dazzling visual impression of flashing lights and designs in fluorescent paint—revealed the target of fetishistic identification now to be predominantly a mood or feeling.

As their contents speak to the taker's incessant seeking of such a sensation—appearing in brief burst of city lights—Nakahira's photos record the perceptual operation underlying this fetishistic experience. Like the discotheque sensorium in which dancers forgot themselves, the “perfect beauty” which pervaded the city at night rendered irrelevant the specific place where it appeared. Even as a sense of Eros was thematically imputed to these scenes, nowhere could it be seen to refer to the human body. For the alienated consciousness of Nakahira's photos, it was a quality of (inanimate) things.

While nevertheless not absent from its pages, the human being in *Provoke 2* invariably takes the form of the female nude. When it does directly appear, as in Moriyama and Takanashi's photographs, its appearance is limited to the private realm of fantasy. This is signaled by the decontextualizing settings wherein the photographers depict the female body, capturing its eroticism in the lucidity and verisimilitude of their images. Gone is the gritty atmosphere of Nakahira's rain-drenched, depopulated streets. Moriyama's photos are set in anonymous hotel rooms, revealing his lover—her naked body—in various poses, before and after, as well as during, sex. Their undeniably considered compositions belie any claim to spontaneity that could be located in the candor of their contents. (Figs. 2.6-2.9) Takanashi took portraits of his girlfriend (the fashion model Oka Hiromi) giving the images a soft, high-key look. Even as she is shown wandering through a deserted industrial landscape or posing inside a derelict train-car,

this environment's bleakness and desolation recedes into the sensuous quality of the prints. (Figs. 2.10-2.12)

The juxtaposition of these series' with those by Nakahira and Taki in *Provoke 2's* layout reveals the mutual exclusivity of their contents. At the same time, it suggests a structural continuity between figurative form of the female body as an expression of desire and the phenomenological space of urban reality where this desire's underlying sensations were actually encountered. The woman's mediating role between the topological specificity of bodily experience and its symbolic articulation as subjective presence here recalls the visual trope of the woman in earlier modernist imaginations of the city.⁸⁸

This relation is taken up in Taki's series at the end of the issue. Exhibiting a heightened *bure-boke* with far more pitch blacks and pure whites, the photographs show a city whose inhabitants are neither totally absent as in Nakahira's photos, nor fixated on as in Moriyama and Takanashi's. (Figs. 2.13-2.17) Bodies punctuate the

⁸⁸ In André Breton's *Nadja* (1928) and Yasunari Kawabata's *Scarlet Gang of Akasuka* [*Akasuka kurenaidan*] (1930), for instance, distinctive urban settings were personified as (erotic) females. Miriam Silverberg argues that the colourful streets of Akasuka (historically paralleled by the Shinjuku pleasure district where *Provoke* photographed) were metaphorized by Kawabata's mysteriously multivalent character "Yumiko." Yumiko's polymorphic appearance—encountered by the narrator in a sequence of different disguises and masquerades—reiterates nothing in its own instability other than her gendered form (according to Silverberg, even then only faintly). In this sense Yumiko seems to perform the transformation of this form as it is invested with the significance of a universalized function of mediation, ultimately revealing an essential lack or instability as the constitutive core of the subjectivity with which Akasuka's urban experience is represented. This moreover seems indicative of the virtual form in which capitalism's modern reality exists as a series of *possibilities* for exchange simultaneously sustained from a subjective standpoint—the woman's essential eroticism conjuring into existence the (gendered male) subject from whose perspective it is sensed. Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

streets and storefront, severed by the edges of the frame and stripped of identifying features. Taki's photos thus witness a strange relationship with their subject matter, the people—female workers in the sex industry—who occupy the pleasure district they depict. The closer the camera gets, the less there is to see: as a woman's face fills the frame, the quality that from a distance held her figure together seems suddenly to recede, scattering details in its wake. Simultaneously, any sense of wholeness or technical proficiency dissolves into the intractably unappealing landscape. From amongst his peers Taki was the most resolutely anti-aesthetic in his images—presenting, from a technical standpoint, unsatisfying photos.⁸⁹ Under this deliberately maladroit eye, even the lyricism that was imputed by critics to *Provoke* as a style cannot be applied to blunt the city's inhospitable appearance, the rendering of its experience as one of loss and estrangement. Taki's approach resonated rather with his phenomenological understanding of photography: "I would rather choose images that are blurry over accurately focused images and choose those images that feel somewhat insufficient or compositionally lacking... Such photographs would acquire meaning once we understand that our own existence is defective, and realize that we should not be passionate about the things that constitute the world, but rather recognize the world's imperfections..."⁹⁰ In terms of his *Provoke 2* series this suggested Eros to be a

⁸⁹ His images invited similar criticism from his peers. Takanashi, for instance, has said: "He [Taki] may not have been a true photographer. He would take these ugly pictures of naked women. He didn't really understand photography. His photos are those that Moriyama *might* have taken. Taki thought "ugly" to be more real." Takanashi Yutaka, interviewed by Diane Dufour and Walter Moser, with Sawada Yoko. Matthew Witkovsky et al. *Provoke: Between PROTEST and PERFORMANCE – Photography in Japan 1960/1975* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2016), 489.

⁹⁰ Taki Kōji, "Eyes and things that are not eyes" ["me to me narazaru mono"], first published in *First, Abandon the World of Pseudo-Certainty: Thought on photography and*

sense or feeling that called attention to these overlooked yet deeply significant flaws in being. It was less a property of erotic appeal than it was a strangely salient feature, something more ambivalently and fetishistically focused upon.

In Taki's perverse urban vision, it is in fact the mannequins posed in a clothing store display who impart the greatest sense of human presence, as though they are somehow realer than the actual women whose indistinct figures (as seen in the accompanying images) seem paltry reflections in comparison. (Figs. 2.15-2.16) Their sharp contours like incisions into the image's own surface, the mannequins' crispness and clarity is excessive—their unnatural poses less alluring than threatening as vision itself is lacerated by the lucidity of their human semblance. This danger is most unsettlingly seen in the gaping holes from which the main figure seems to watch the viewer, its inhuman gaze emanating from dark eye-sockets in a face that thereby repeats the display window's main visual motif. The photographic depiction of these mannequins within the infinitely receding space of the storefront's visual matrix—an illusory play of reflections organized by a mirrored, grid-like structure inside which commodities are placed—evokes both Nakahira's sense of the anathema of imperfection to the city as well as Okada's diagnosis of its nested fantasies.

Taki's photo of mannequins indeed depends on the accompanying images for its legibility—in that the blurred appearance of “actual” human beings in the series' other photos served to specify the meaning of verisimilitude (for Taki) in relation to the world the photos collectively represent. In these pictures only inanimate things can be

language [*Mazu tashikarashisa no sekai o sutero: Shashin to gengo no shisō*] (Tokyo: Tabata Shoten, 1970), cited in Matthew Witkovsky et al. *Provoke: Between PROTEST and PERFORMANCE – Photography in Japan 1960/1975* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2016), 350.

seen clearly, free of the blur and shakiness that accompanies the photographer's bodily movement through the streets. As an index of vitality—Taki writes: “photography will embody traces of the body, or in other words, the very sweat of our labour...”—the things that lack this blurriness are exposed as the products of abstraction (objectified by preexisting concepts).⁹¹ There is thus almost no stylistic distinction between Taki's photo of mannequins and the photo he took of a nude woman in one of Shinjuku's “nude studios.” (Fig. 2.17) What one detects instead is a similar logic of display: in these venues models were paid to undress in front of customers who could then take photographs. In this image the naked, eroticized body viewed by Taki seems to acutely express the structural coincidence of sex and labour that Okada observed in capitalist society. More precisely, in the fetishization of labour as the value of a commodity—the consequence of which is revealed here in the shady scene from a nude studio where sex and money have become equal terms in a single, simple equation: labour = selling one's body.

For unlike the shot of the mannequins there is a real person participating in this scene. As such their fetishizing treatment by Taki exemplified the aforementioned structural elision wherein such relations of exploitation were rendered—not so much *invisible* as *unseen* or *unrecognized*—in capitalist society. In the context of his attack on aesthetic and technical perfection, the photo of a nude model (Taki affectionately termed it “the white whale”) is incongruously accomplished.⁹² There is no indication here of the critical cunning with which he outmaneuvers the commodity form

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² According to Yuko Fujii, Taki liked the photo in question so much that he nicknamed it his “white whale.” Yuko Fujii, “Photography as Process: A Study of the Japanese Photography Journal *Provoke*” (PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2012), 203.

elsewhere in *Provoke 2*, not to mention the altogether more sympathetic attitude with which he depicted male workers (the miners and publishing company employees) in *Provoke 1*. Instead, the “amateurishness” with which Taki’s attack is carried out has lapsed into the unreflective gaze of a private individual whose seeming autonomy from the professional-commercial sphere serves in the end to support it.

But if this image cannot critically register what it sees, it at least indicates the perspectival limits to (Taki’s) individual subjectivity. The “nude studio” where he took it was one form of the venues that newly populated the sex industry in 1960s Japan, as prostitution and prostitution-like services were made increasingly available in spaces like hostess bars, cabaret clubs, *sunakku*, and pink salons.⁹³ These commercial practices made explicit what Okada described when he wrote: “For us whose lives have attended the advance of the capitalist system, sex has been commercially circulated from the outset...”⁹⁴ In Okada’s analysis, the relationship between the labour congealed in the commodity, on the one hand, and the phenomenon that is fetishized, on the other, was sustained by the human being as the site of two concurrent impulses (as specified by his reference to von Gebattel): the erotic or libidinal urge and its social expression as sexual desire. This mediation was the result of the a priori conditioning of subjectivity by a phenomenal environment—the modern city—that was in turn physically predetermined by its *economic reality*. This alienating urban setting produced a consciousness incapable of differentiating between the way it saw sexuality and the way it saw value, because the formal operation that dissimulates human labour within

⁹³ Caroline Norma, “Prostitution and the 1960s’ origins of corporate entertaining in Japan,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 34.6 (2011): 515.

⁹⁴ Okada, “Going back to Fetico,” 106.

the object (the commodity fetish) had been collapsed into the formal operation that dissimulates erotic pleasure within the body (the sexual fetish). The single function into which these two operations were collapsed was that of representation as primarily performed by the image.⁹⁵

This collapse pointed to the ongoing ontological shift Okada that identified as a return or regression of the consciousness corresponding to visual perception—from *animism* to *animatism*. The transcendent quality of the latter term referred to the universalizing impetus of general equivalence as it was articulated in the passage from *Capital* Okada's essay cited.⁹⁶ This is indeed what was seen in photography's facilitation of the voyeuristic relationship between Taki and the model: in the nude studio's prescription of their predefined roles, the internal logic of the image replaces that of the actual place (the actual bodies) where it physically circulates. With the completed transaction, reality becomes isomorphic with its (photographic) representation.

The appearance of a similar scene in Moriyama's photos—taken in hotel rooms rather than a nude studio—is thus a function of the permeation of even the most seemingly intimate personal experiences by a universal logic of exchange. As the photos depict his partner's naked body, the resulting anonymity of its owner (her face never actually shown) points to the dehumanizing indifference of desire as something that

⁹⁵ This was necessarily a *visual* function, hence a property of the image (and by extension the photograph), in so far as visibility was the subjective expression the essentially *potential* form of exchange value's concrete existence—the immateriality of the image maintaining the perpetually unrealized quality of what it represented (the social meaning and value of its contents).

⁹⁶ Okada treats the terms according to their generalized definitions. As such, "animism" refers to a belief in the existence of a particular life-force within a multiplicity of different objects, while "animatism" refers to a belief in the existence of a transcendent or universal life-force common to various different objects that manifest it.

exceeds individual subjectivity. Moriyama writes: “When someone looks at pornographic photos, it doesn’t matter at all who took the photograph. The person looking is only interested in what is being shown, how they are doing it. For once, I want to abase photography to that level, and then try to grasp what it is that remains nonetheless.”⁹⁷ Even so, the photos in *Provoke 2* do point to the name of their taker—Moriyama—whose identity (as a photographer) is thereby secured by means of this fetishistic appropriation of another’s bodily presence.

Only in what the photos make non-figuratively present can Moriyama’s work (the activity of taking and developing them) be seen. That is, in the aesthetic properties of *bure-boke* as they manifested the unsettling form of a nearly pure equivalence (at least at the moment of *Provoke 2*’s publication) between the body of the photographer and the resulting image. It is in this way that his photos (and moreover the photos of all of *Provoke 2*’s contributors) served as a record of reality. If they seemed paradoxical as a result, this was due to the paradox they witnessed in reality itself. In so far as the photographer’s conscious intentions corresponded to the mystifying structure of fantasy in capitalist society, it was *in spite* of the photographer that the photographs performed their function as records. Yet the photographer was nonetheless *necessary* as what gave the camera access to the reality of this structure in the first place.

In this sense the journal can be understood as a way in which the *Provoke* photographers confronted this impasse by invoking an agency outside of themselves. The group’s collective form generated a productive critical distance between its

⁹⁷ Moriyama Daido, cited in *First, Abandon the World of Pseudo-Certainty: Thought on Photography and language* [*Mazu, Tashikarashisa no Sekai wo Sutero: Shashin to gengo no shisō*], (Tokyo: Tabata Shoten, 1970), 146.

members as they encountered each other's work. This is perhaps why it was Okada, a poet with no special interest in photography, who made the most perspicacious assessment of the fetishism seen in *Provoke 2*'s images. In fetishism's function as a form of abstraction, Okada simultaneously saw a glimmer of revolutionary potential. In so far as fetishism's animistic quality produced an irrepressible affect of presence, the sense-certainty of *something's* existence, it could be redirected towards a reality that was otherwise ignored. As Okada wrote:

Paraphilia in the form of fetishism, as Gebattel said, is partly 'a destructive reaction formation,' 'a characteristic inclination to oppose erotic reality's natural order, organizational rules, as well as meaning' and finally a 'spirit of rebellion and defiance.' If this is the case, surely there are possibilities in freeing fetishism from magic, taking the naked form of the substance in one's hands, and rearranging this substance into its totally opposite state.⁹⁸

In the context of *Provoke 2* this substance was not the world whose semblance the camera reproduced, but rather the world's representation as such—the physical medium of photography as what facilitated the fetishization of this semblance (hence obscuring the processes preceding vision, the organization of matter into this worldly shape).

In the absence of any reliable determinations about the truth of the current moment—the “totalizing world picture...” as Okada wrote, “being ungraspable”—

⁹⁸ Okada, “Going back to Fetico,” 108.

Provoke's photographers operationalized their intuition and feeling as a way of relating to the world, the reality of which could then be captured photographically. As a relation to a totality foreclosed from individual perception, this therefore appeared subjectively in the form of a self-negation—the irreducibly fragmented quality of the *Provoke* photographers' images referring to their negative intuition, as individuals, of the presence of a reality that could only be mediated objectively by the camera.

Chapter Three: Provoke 3

The third and final issue of *Provoke* was published five months after *Provoke 2* on August 10, 1969. While *Provoke 3* contained no indication of being the group's last installment (to the contrary, in its afterword a forthcoming, fourth issue was announced), it was markedly different than its predecessors. Although *Provoke 3*'s dimensions were almost the same as *Provoke 2*'s, the deep red colour of its cover and the added thickness of its coarse paper, dust jacket style flaps and inner foldouts departed from *Provoke 1 & 2*, whose glossy finish and high quality printing evoked the calculated crispness of museum catalogues and professional magazines. (Fig. 3.1) *Provoke 3* was moreover nearly bereft of writing. With no overarching theme, its textual component comprised Taki's afterword and poetry by Okada and Yoshimasu Gōzō.⁹⁹ The accompanying photos by Takanashi, Taki, Moriyama, and Nakahira seem similarly scattered in the absence of any overt rationale for what they depict.¹⁰⁰ While Takanashi shot his standby of runway shows from the world of high fashion, Taki took portraits of the people who visited his office, Moriyama photographed canned food and other goods at an Aoyama supermarket, and Nakahira revisited the scenes of his urban wandering.

⁹⁹ Yoshimasu's poem "Provocative morsels for photography" ["shashin no tame no chouhatsu teki danshō"] was a series of short, disconnected verses about photography. Okada's poem "Do not draw the present moment with dots and lines" ["ten to sen de ima o egakuna"] employed a more standard structure in what Yuko Fujii calls "a surrealistic word-play." Yuko Fujii, "Photography as Process: A Study of the Japanese Photography Journal *Provoke*" (PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2012), 56.

¹⁰⁰ Compared to *Provoke 1*, with essays by Taki and Okada, as well as a poem by Okada, and *Provoke 2*, with an essay and poem by Okada.

Yuko Fujii has indeed argued that “*Provoke 3* is more fragmented than the two previous issues, with the third issue’s photographs and texts exhibiting little associative character.”¹⁰¹ Together with this conceptual change she cites the conspicuous shift in *Provoke 3*’s appearance as the basis for its distance from the journal’s previous iterations. Due to economic constraints *Provoke 3* was produced using less expensive and more matted paper, as well as a zinc-plate printing method that created flatter, medium contrast images. According to Fujii this formal difference prefigured *Provoke*’s impending disintegration in that it reflected the growing conceptual friction between its members’ individual practices.¹⁰² The fact that this breakdown finally precipitated in the form of an economic crisis—the journal’s impending failure as a commercial operation—implies, in her reading, a correspondence between *Provoke*’s vitality as a conceptual apparatus and its viability as a commercial enterprise.

However, one should be wary of seeing such a mechanistic causality at work in *Provoke*, not least because the historical facts (which Fujii faithfully records) show its group dynamics to have been economically overdetermined by the form it assumed—a quarterly journal. While *Provoke* was created and circulated as a journal, the orienting goal of its collective organization was clearly not profitability. As such the “fragmentation” that Fujii finds in *Provoke 3* may refer less to *Provoke*’s functionality as a conceptual and photographic apparatus than to the conditions of Japan’s modernity in 1969.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 127.

¹⁰² In historical narrative Fujii inherits from Īzawa, these are individual practices that only truly became free to move off in their respective directions following the disbanding of *Provoke*.

It would therefore be amiss to read *Provoke 3*'s differences—both from the journal's other issues and amongst its constitutive parts—as the signs of either discontinuity or waning vitality. Although *Provoke 3* was indeed theme-less, this was in many ways a return to the totalizing scope with which *Provoke 1* had engaged the categories of art and politics. And while its photographs were methodologically and conceptually varied, they formally cohered around their similarly blurred and out-of-focus appearance—a visual aesthetic of *bure-boke* whose specific mobilization as such in *Provoke 2* was intensified here by *Provoke 3*'s new printing method.

As a practice of photographic realism, *Provoke*'s first two issues had shown the reality accessed by photography to be inseparably linked to the political and economic conditions of Japan's modern capitalist society. *Provoke 3* continued this investigation by elaborating the isomorphism between photography and the commodity form in the context of its contributors' experiences of consumerism and mass culture. In this chapter I argue that *Provoke 3* thus revealed the group's *success* (not failure) as a collaborative attempt at representing reality. By reproducing the fragmentation and difference that was present in the world itself, *Provoke 3* collectively approximated its overall form. "In other words," Taki explained in the afterword: "collectivity is in itself the force of a single function which draws [us] together even as it tears [us] apart."¹⁰³ In this sense *Provoke 3*'s diverse, indeed divergent, contents seem less indicative of a breakdown of the group than of their medium, the institutional form of the journal—as it was stretched, transformed, to accommodate the former.

¹⁰³ Taki, "Editorial postscript," *Provoke 3* (August 1969): 109.

In its densely populated pages *Provoke 3* contains a world of visual hyperactivity. The first photos a reader sees depict the bizarre scenery of fashion shows by Courrèges and Paco Rabanne (in fact the first ever Japanese shows held by their brands). Full of grain and light, they rehearse the runway show's theatricality. In one shot a glittering garment (studded with bright stars of reflective material) is animated by the movements of an unseen person inside it. (Fig. 3.2) In another a small procession traipses through the gloom. Wearing what looks like fully-body protective gear, they anticipate an unknown disaster. (Fig. 3.3) Meanwhile a model displays a bright white dress, her gestures compiled into a blur of light by the photo's elongated exposure. Faintly captured by the camera's flash, the spectators' frozen figures appear as afterimages, the enrapt minds of an audience whose bodies had long since gotten up and wandered away. (Fig. 3.4)

With a picture taken while pointing the camera at the ground, the photographer—Takanashi—gestures to the impossibility of looking away from these sights: even as he averts his gaze, the mirrored floor reflects it back. (Fig. 3.5) Between the two constitutive elements of the spectacle being staged—light and mirrors—the onlooker's vision is endlessly redirected and trapped. Here accuracy is less important than entrancement: the photo in figure 3.2 was inverted in printing to “create [a] visual rhythm” (the non-inverted original was printed on a later page), while figure 3.3 was repeated in an accidental double-exposure.¹⁰⁴ (Figs. 3.6-3.7) The heavy processing in almost all the images—their dodging, burning and pulled development—forcibly drags the eye across their surface to rest on designated points of interest.

¹⁰⁴ Fujii, “Photography as Process,” 222.

As they thereby led the viewer towards a rarefied realm of fantasy in the commodified displays of fashion and advertising industries, the photos nonetheless renounced the professional conventions that would have made them indistinguishable from Takanashi's commercial work. Instead, their uncompromisingly dark and hazy surface witnesses the basic level of awareness with which he confronted Paco Rabanne and Courrèges' staged scenes—if only refusing the totalizing impetus of the fantasy they displayed in an attempt to replace it with his own. In their reflexive materiality Takanashi's photos thus reveal his inescapably isolated position and irrevocably fragmented perspective at this moment of encounter.

This sense of refusal was made possible by the immediacy and ephemerality of *Provoke 3's* physical form. Because of its zinc plate printing method, *Provoke 3's* visual effect was undoubtedly different than before. Unlike the deep and inky blacks of its antecedents (resulting from a high-quality, light-absorbent finish), the dark areas in *Provoke 3's* pages had a greyish sheen produced by the light that reflected off their rough and matted surface. Similarly, the highlights were dull and muted even in zones where the overexposure of the image had erased all detail. While its shape still resembled a magazine, the aesthetic of *Provoke 3's* photographs was thus comparable to that of the newspaper or printed pamphlet.

Yet as such the indexicality of the photographs here failed to function as proof of Takanashi's authorial intention or technical skill in the same way it would have in the context of a magazine with more overtly "artistic" connotations. In his series in *Provoke 2*, for instance, Takanashi had printed the first and last photo with the black edge of the film holder intact. Usually absent in the final image, this frame's appearance had acted

as a barrier between the figurative space of the photograph and the physical surface of the page. According to Takanashi, he used these frames to show the audience that the photo was uncropped—thereby assigning his creative gesture of taking the photo to the same essential space of “reality” its contents depicted.¹⁰⁵

On the other hand, the particularizing appearance of Takanashi’s photos in *Provoke 3* appears less like a substantiation of authorial identity than shocking evidence of its hidden alterity, the vanished agency and impotent inner vision of the self faced with the overwhelming artifice of a staged representation’s nonetheless real conditions. Despite shattering the fashion show’s theatrical presentation, what remains in Takanashi’s representation of it is far from a compelling escape into a world of private fantasy. The photographs’ depictive capacity has been severely compromised as a result: both by the adverse technical conditions encountered in photographing the fashion show outside of the restricted range of visual possibilities it deliberately presented, and by the degradation of their printed appearance in *Provoke 3*. Rather, the photos record the last dregs of Takanashi’s subjective vision as the scenes he strains to see are starved of light before decaying into obscurity. Their resuscitation with heavy-handed darkroom techniques necessarily yielded something that was nothing like he’d originally envisioned.

The intentionality underlying Takanashi’s subjective identification with the photographs (as the photographer who took them) was thus contravened by *Provoke 3*’s ephemeral and mechanically reproduced aesthetic. In this way Takanashi’s position appeared antagonistically alongside Nakahira’s contribution to the issue, which

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 214.

appealed directly to *Provoke 3*'s rough appearance in formally invoking the cheap and low-quality printed matter the journal resembled. While they were taken in the city streets he wandered daily, Nakahira's photos were both less lucid than those in *Provoke 1* and less thematically consistent than those in *Provoke 2*. Attenuated human figures appear haphazardly in the urban spaces they show. (Figs. 3.8-3.10) As these scraps and shreds of grayed out scenery appear at random like brief snatches of a newspaper's uncredited imagery, they recall Nakahira's ardent assertion that "photos are not works of art (*sakuhin*)." More appropriately, in his words, they were the "dregs (*kasu*) of [my] life."¹⁰⁶ Like the litter left behind by the consumption of commodities, the photos represented a living existence in the vital need they satisfied.¹⁰⁷ But beyond this presence they consistently signified nothing. Like a flyer found fluttering in the street the photos seem unattached to any self-identical subjectivity, exposing a vacuum in the place otherwise occupied by an author.

Instead they resonated with a serialized essay by Nakahira in *Design* (whose final installment came out the same month as *Provoke 3*). Nakahira had made much of a moment from Henri Colpi's "The Long Absence," describing the daily ritual of a character (who suffered from amnesia) as it consisted of gathering old magazines and cutting pictures out of them.¹⁰⁸ When asked why he chose one photo over another, the man replied "for many reasons that even I don't understand." "The single photo [he

¹⁰⁶ Nakahira Takuma, cited in "Moriyama Daido and Nakahira Takuma – Dialogue at Yamanoue Hotel," *Farewell Photography [Shashin yo sayōnara]* (Tokyo: Shashin Hyoronsha 1972), 287.

¹⁰⁷ Nakahira said that taking photos was something he "could not live without doing." *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Nakahira Takuma, "What is contemporaneity?" ["Dōjidaiteki de aru to wa nanika?"] *Design* (May-August 1969).

selected],” Nakahira wrote, “is tied somewhere at a single point within the man to the past he had currently lost.”¹⁰⁹ Nakahira’s *Provoke 3* images are a similar form of found reality encountered by the photographer—suddenly snagging, in their inexplicable significance, on something somewhere in his psyche. As the involuntary visions accrued in the course of an otherwise unremembered walk through the city, his photos attacked the authorial subjectivity of Takanashi’s images, formally rupturing the rational causality on which it was premised.¹¹⁰

Takanashi would indeed later say that his work in *Provoke* led him “to accept whatever foreign matter appears in the image... [in other words] things I have no conscious control over within my photos.”¹¹¹ Takanashi’s *Provoke 3* series thus reveals his highest level of commitment to the revolutionary intentions of the group’s images. In so far as they contained the closest thing to a questioning of his own identity as a photographer situated at the interface between various categories of commercialized expression—art, fashion, advertising—the photos hinted at an answer to the problem Takanashi raised when he stated: “I also saw “fashion” as a symptom of civilization.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Nakahira Takuma, cited in Īzawa Kōtarō (ed.) *Déjà-vu* No. 14 (1993): 100.

¹¹⁰ Nakahira’s *Provoke 3* series can be seen to prefigure his more conceptually well-elaborated project for the 1971 Paris Biennale, which involved a continual process of taking photos during the day before displaying them at the venue. As he subsequently described it: “under the conditions of contemporary society... humankind has been fragmented into isolated individuals... What has been designated as art according to society, by the bourgeois in particular, and confirmed as well by the artists themselves, strongly demands the steady adherence to this identity... [However] by actively discarding this form of individual subject-hood (rather than demand its maintenance), we can perhaps begin to undermine the foundations of contemporary society.” Nakahira Takuma, “Photography, a Single Day’s Actuality,” first published in *Asahi Camera* (February 1972), reprinted in *Nakahira Takuma—Circulation: Date, Place, Events* (Tokyo: Osiris, 2012), 292.

¹¹¹ Takanashi Yutaka, cited in *Déjà-vu* No. 14 (1993): 39.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

But, equally owing to this position, any recognition on his part remained latent.

Takanashi's resolute refusal of any political identification meant that he conceptualized the split before his eyes in terms of "art" and "commercial" photography.

Takanashi's *Provoke 3* pictures nonetheless "symptomized" the ongoing colonization of day-to-day life by the categories he had identified in relation to his identity within the fashion industry. Like all good fashion, the photos set a trend—the "lesson" learned in *Provoke* ("that photos are nothing but fragments") revealing in turn the commercial implications of the recuperative possibilities that existed for photography in even the smallest scraps of value.¹¹³ In 1993 Takanashi explained that before *Provoke* "something like the photo of a fashion party from the first issue... would have been discarded." (Fig. 3.11) But now—*Provoke's* influence—"I think that would be a waste, and gather it up [with my other images]."¹¹⁴ Looking back, the disposability and transience connoted by *Provoke 3's* coarse materiality seems suggestive of a brief moment before the market became saturated with the images of its "epigones."¹¹⁵ It is therefore more tempting to compare the shrewd sense of prescience exhibited by Takanashi's career to the phenomenon Eric Cadzyn describes of "the *Zengakuren* members who attribute their success as corporate managers to the lessons they learned while reading Marx's *Capital*"—if only as a reminder that any "radicality" that can be attributed to a methodology is not an intrinsic property but a quality of its use.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Takanashi Yutaka, interviewed by Diane Dufour and Walter Moser, with Sawada Yoko. Matthew Witkovsky et al. *Provoke: Between PROTEST and PERFORMANCE – Photography in Japan 1960/1975* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2016), 489.

¹¹⁶ Eric Cadzyn, *The Flash of Capital: Film and Geopolitics in Japan*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 169.

The historical context of *Provoke's* stylistic and commercial appropriation thus underscores the importance of the group itself (its collective form) as the embodiment of such a “use” of *bure-boke* (as a method of photographically representing reality). This was demonstrated by Tōmatsu Shōmei’s criticism of *bure-boke* in 1972. His article “Wake up! Sufferers of *are, bure, and Konpora*” in the January issue of *Camera Mainichi* sarcastically treated the “styles” in its title as the symptoms of a sensory disorder suffered by the photographers.¹¹⁷ Comparing the *bure-boke* of *Provoke* to autism, he argued that its “sufferers” had immersed themselves in mindlessness introspection—becoming incapable of relating to other people and the social reality this represented. With this sense of pathological isolation from the world and from others, Tōmatsu perceptively described the subjective experience of modern reality which *Provoke* itself had identified. His main criticism of *bure-boke* as being a stylistic fad indeed referred less to *Provoke's* own project than to the danger of *bure-boke's* popularization as a form of perception.¹¹⁸ “Doesn’t a fashion accomplish its errand by continuing to flow outwards and onwards? The old state of affairs cannot be left unchanged... Go! Towards a hell of infinite fashion...”¹¹⁹ Diagnosing *bure-boke* as an endless proliferation of superficial differences, Tōmatsu saw its underlying logic as being no different than fashion or advertising imagery. His final condemnation of *bure-boke* was thus not due to its detachment or isolation from reality, but because of its perceived *lack* of any critical distance from this reality whatsoever.

¹¹⁷ Tōmatsu Shōmei, “Wake Up! Sufferers of Are, Bure, and Konpora,” [“Okotte! Are bure boke no kanja yo”] *Camera Mainichi* (January 1972): 60-61.

¹¹⁸ Tōmatsu’s article was written specifically in regards to the context of *bure-boke's* existence in 1972, as something now independent of the *Provoke* publication

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 61.

If this revealed the professional identities of *Provoke's* members to have caught up to their activities in the magazine, it once again pointed to the problem they had engaged (subjectivity) as well as the means of its overcoming (collectivity). In *Provoke 3* this can be seen in the totalizing impetus with which the journal's physical form mediated its members' individual contributions. Throughout the images there is a prevalence of thicker grain and other self-disclosing medium-specific effects. The issue's printed appearance competes with that of the photographs as it insists on the more abstract motifs and repetitive sensations derived from the mechanical artifacts resulting from the printing and publishing processes.

Taki's photos of people who visited his design office in Aoyama (which doubled as the office for *Provoke*) made extensive use of this mechanized, serial aesthetic. (Figs. 3.12-3.15) These portraits, nominally identified as such by the thin white borders isolating them on the page, were not photographs themselves but rather photocopies of photographs. More precisely, they were printed reproductions of these photocopies—of photographs, which were themselves first printed from a negative. Each stage of this process produced an attenuating effect, such that in the final image the pattern of grain has coalesced into solid areas and the gradation of light is heavily simplified. The visual field of the photograph's (ostensibly empty) perspectival space has thus inexorably filled with strange and non-human traces. Taki would write of such "...horrors and agony that haunt photography's "visuality," which originate in the fact that photography is both human and trans-human."¹²⁰ Using foldout pages to create multi-

¹²⁰ Taki Kōji, *Eyes and things that are not eyes,* ["me to me narazaru mono"], first published in *First, Abandon the World of Pseudo-Certainty* (1970), cited in Matthew

image spreads, he repeated the photos several times in an attempt to concretely represent the final step of this process (printing). This was done by making the printing method's inconsistencies and random errors conspicuously visible in the differences that arose between the supposedly "identical" series of images it created. While these otherwise unnoticed flecks and scratches seemed negligible, their presence pointed to an important question: what other artificial distortions might be going unrecognized at the level of human sight?

In its treatment of human faces by means of photocopying, Taki's series moreover addressed its contemporary context by referencing Andy Warhol's use of seriality and copies in his silkscreen paintings of celebrities and commodity objects.¹²¹ Given that pop art contained not just faces, but (Warhol par excellence) Coca-Cola, Campbell's soup, and hamburgers as well, Taki's appropriation of pop-art tropes via Warhol positioned his series in relation to the phenomena of commercialization and mass culture. Specifically, it seems poised to critique the notion of serial reproduction represented by the mobilization of commodity within the pop art aesthetic. In the

Witkovsky et al. *Provoke: Between PROTEST and PERFORMANCE – Photography in Japan 1960/1975* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2016), 350.

¹²¹ Yet this relation was by no means that of a reductive "influence," as Taki's later dismissal of his work in *Provoke 3* as mere "mimicry" (*manegoto*) might imply. It should rather be seen as situating Taki's work within the perspective generated by his local milieu onto what Reiko Tomii has described as the conceptual space of "international contemporaneity" that has, historically, been accessed from multiple locales. As both Yuko Fujii and Nakamori Yasufumi have moreover noted, an international context more appropriate to *Provoke 3*'s use of photocopies can be seen in such commercial-experimental practices as that of the New York dealer Seth Sieglaub (who invited his artists to create work with a Xerox machine) and the Tokyo-based Fuji Xerox company (whose corporate monthly *Graphication* presented photocopy art as early as January 1969). Nakamori Yasufumi, "Experiments with the Camera: Art and Photography in 1970s Japan," *For a New World To Come: Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography, 1968-1979* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2015), and Yuko Fujii, "Photography as Process."

coincidence between Taki's use of the human face and his aforementioned technique of making visible the differences between images that would otherwise be considered as identical copies, his *Provoke 3* images revealed the abstraction inherent in this sense of equivalence. No sooner are the details in the photos degraded by their reproduction, crumbling into useless information, than the faces of their subjects crystallize therein, standing out with a paradoxical intensity. In this sense Taki's choice to take portraits was likely informed by the phenomenological significance of the face as one of the most basic forms sought out by human vision. The symbolic function thereby revealed at the level of individual contents was compared in turn to a symbolic function that appeared in the series' overall operation. That is, in the supposed equivalence of these recopied images—even as their repetition suggests similarity, this sameness is ruptured by the profusion of qualitative differences resulting from the appearance of the medium's materiality. The viewer is thus once again redirected to the images' subjectifying logic: while the copies are not *actually* (exactly) the same, in treating them as copies one acts *as though* they are.

If Taki's photos expose its inhuman strangeness, Moriyama's series reveals the other side to this critical view of the commodity by taking a position that unreservedly identifies with it. His photos show the inside of an all-night supermarket, reveling in the consumeristic perspective that the store provides. The camera scans the shelves with the sensibilities of a savvy shopper, picking out the best bargains and gravitating towards his favorite brands. (Figs. 3.16-3.20) The pictures linger appreciatively on pleasingly arranged displays of goods before surging away in search of new sensations. They show an obvious, basic pleasure in repetition.

If there is alienation here it is stocked somewhere out of sight, a low shelf or some less-trafficked aisle. While they called to mind works like Warhol's *200 Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) and *Green Coca-Cola Bottles* (1962), the mass-produced overabundance in Moriyama's photos did not necessarily connote coolness and estrangement. (Fig. 3.21) As Fujii writes, "Campbell's soup and V8 would have been fancy products for trend-savvy Japanese consumers around the time of *Provoke...*"¹²² The *Yours* supermarket that Moriyama photographed was itself located in the newly fashionable neighbourhood of Aoyama.¹²³ He recalls in an interview how "even in front of *Yours* on Aoyama's main street you could see the flashing lights of paddy wagons every night."¹²⁴ Only upon entering the store, its glass doors and brightly lit interior keeping the din outside, could the era's political atmosphere be ignored.

Yet Moriyama inverts the terms of this implicit escape into a consumeristic fantasy. Speaking of his "non-political" (*nonpori*) identification in a dialogue with Nakahira, he described his unease at contemporary politics: "...culture and politics do not necessarily have to be dualistically placed in antagonism to each other... I would rather say that it is a matter of an antimony within culture itself..."¹²⁵ Thus: "Why must

¹²² Fujii, "Photography as Process," 231.

¹²³ As Taki explained in his 1993 interview with Īzawa, the connotations of the supermarket at that time were more "highbrow" than those of recent forms of mass retail such as the convenience store (*konbini*). *Déjà-vu* 14 (1993), 39.

¹²⁴ Moriyama, cited in *Déjà-vu* 14 (1994), 59.

¹²⁵ "...culture and politics do not necessarily have to be dualistically placed in antagonism to each other... More clearly speaking, if culture is vast enough to encompass in itself our immediate history, politics is only visible as its mechanism, that is, its functional operation... Therefore rather than being a matter of an antinomy of politics and culture, I would rather say that it is a matter of an antimony within culture itself..." Moriyama Daido and Nakahira Takuma, "Moriyama Daido and Nakahira Takuma – Dialogue at Yamanoue Hotel," *Farewell Photography [Shashin yo sayōnara]* (Tokyo: Shashin Hyoronsha 1972), 291.

we label this as culture, without calling it political, all the while taking photographs? Ultimately because politics was not vast to the extent of culture... and I feel as if “politics” itself were a grand hallucination.”¹²⁶ As though anticipating the sclerosis of the New-left’s genuinely political possibilities in the 1970s—a declining dynamism that culminated in the infamous Asama-Sansō siege and Rengō Sekigun purge of 1972—Moriyama pointed to the dangerously reductive effects of designations like “politics.” In this sense his blasé preference of canned corn and soft drinks to student protest announced not so much a retreat from reality into a dazzling dream of commodities than it did a refusal to “wake up” within a nightmare.¹²⁷ If the violence and horror of political action made it seem more real, Moriyama’s point was that they thereby made it less detectable for what it was: another dream. In a written account from the 1980s he would assert that the salience of the energetic and cheerful scenes inside the supermarket referred to the same political stakes that could be urgently felt—*but not seen*—on the streets outside.¹²⁸

Conversely, this sense of artifice pointed to the real significance of the conditions that evoked it. Like Taki, Moriyama photocopied his prints before publishing these photocopies in *Provoke 3*. What the obliterated details in the final images revealed was

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Moriyama likened the latter to the imperialist violence and air raid blackouts of the war. Moriyama Daido, *Memories of a Dog* (Nazraeli Press LLC: 2004), 63.

¹²⁸ “Meanwhile the Tokyo night was deceptively flooded with light, and people were drunk with full immersion in a sea of alcohol and goods... Without exaggeration, the sights I witnessed [during the Shinjuku riots in 1968 and 1969] shook my consciousness at its very roots, bringing a major change in my thinking and activities... That night, the streets of Shinjuku were wrapped in a strange darkness. The station plaza and the main avenues were thronged deep black with crowds of the antiwar alliance, radical student sects, citizens, the press, and the riot police... Squalls of shouted slogans, the battle cries of colliding forces, and the angry roar of loudspeakers echoed against each other in a crucible of extraordinary passion and excitement...” *Ibid*, 63-64.

that the consumer whose vision the photos show did not actually have to *see* so much as *read* in order to navigate the supermarket's ambient space. (Fig. 3.22) The logotypes on cans and boxes jump out, familiar landmarks in a topology of social status and taste. The identity perceived to be on sale here indeed referred to Japan's mass consumer culture: an emergent demographic defined by corporate iconography and conditioned by new forms of retail like the supermarket. The 1960s had witnessed the rapid growth of companies like Daiei, whose transformation into full-fledged supermarket chains occurred in the context of their competition with existing department stores to satisfy the new demand generated by the nation's increasing urban workforce.¹²⁹ Mariko Tatsuki writes that the establishment of Japanese supermarkets coincided with a nation-wide "distributive revolution" based on American merchandising theory.¹³⁰ The resulting rationalization of retail practices had a homogenizing effect on the markets that were thereby flooded with mass-produced goods. Against this backdrop, public debates on class and culture came increasingly to revolve around a terminology of "middle class" identity.¹³¹ Exemplified by such phrases as "the mass mainstream of 100

¹²⁹ By purchasing in large quantities, rationalizing distribution and sales systems by creating new supply networks, and aggressively discounting their wide variety of household goods, supermarkets secured a dominant place in Japan's economy. For instance Daiei, with its special buying routes and exclusive agreements with manufacturers, became the nation's largest retailer in 1972. Mariko Tatsuki, "The rise of the mass market and modern retailers in Japan," *Business History* 37.2 (1995): 79.

¹³⁰ "Shuji Hayashi, a business economist, studied the American mass market and published a book entitled *Ryutsu Kakumei* in 1962. He... advocated the construction of a modern mass distributive system which linked mass production and mass consumption." *Ibid* 81.

¹³¹ As William Kelly argues, this was bolstered by establishment rhetoric such as the "Survey on the People's Life-Style" (*kokumin seikatsu chōsa*), carried out by the Prime Minister's office beginning in 1967. William Kelley, "Finding a Place in Metropolitan Japan: Ideologies, Institutions, and Everyday Life," in *Postwar Japan as History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 196.

million people” (*ichiokunin sōchūryū*), this sense of collective consciousness constituted an emergent phenomenon which the anthropologist Marilyn Ivy has described as “mass cultural formations.” Ivy writes: “With the high growth of the 1960s and explosive expansion of the media the Japanese population came to be incorporated into a series of strikingly uniform and standardized taste grouping.”¹³² As a wealth of new commodities were represented in advertisements and other media, the markets in which they were exchanged generated a corresponding form of collectively prescribed pattern recognition. These were social groupings that, as Ivy writes, “were appropriately differentiated in terms of gender and generation but much less so in terms of class or regional affiliation.”¹³³ That is to say that despite the real differences in the population, the symbolic identities that were articulated by the consumption of commodities corresponded to a consciousness that only recognized the same: “Company president, company janitor, and farmer alike came to read the same magazines, watch the same television shows... The dissemination of this standardly differentiated culture... led most people (90 percent or more) to think of themselves as in the “middle.”¹³⁴ If these commodities therefore failed to reflect reality (its social relations and class composition), they at least advertised something better—in their image of material plentitude and cohesive identity.

The ideological subject of this “new middle-class society” (*shin chūkan taishū shakai*) thus appears in Moriyama’s photographs, self-consciously seen in the products on supermarket shelves. Their shopping experience is alternately defined by a sense of

¹³² Marilyn Ivy, “Formations of Mass Culture,” in *Postwar Japan as History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 241.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

satisfying regularity and enticing difference. The store overflows with variety but—as the viewer sees—when this difference is isolated, exposed as a choice between random signs, all options become the same. When a truly different perspective *does* appear—as the shopper hurries to the next aisle—it is an unrecognizable blur. (Fig. 3.23)

As they reproduce the aesthetic allure of a consumeristic fantasy, the photographs record the perceptual operation underlying it as well. This revelatory function was not something didactic and intelligible. In this sense Moriyama was in agreement Taki's statement in *Provoke 3's* afterword:

We are aware that there are layers of raw meaning of the world which only photography can show. These layers of raw meaning are not available to methods of science, research, or aesthetics, as they include the taste of the world surrounding us and all that we cannot perceive with our senses.¹³⁵

In so far as its presence was described as a function of recognition, this otherwise imperceptible photographic meaning was not something metaphysical, but social. Its appearance in the journal so far had indeed only been possible within the photographically-sustained space of non-correspondence between concepts and the things these concepts described. Imperceptibility as such was precisely the negation presupposed by the subject of knowledge. As the manifesto in *Provoke 1* had stated:

¹³⁵ Taki, "Editorial postscript," 109.

Visual images' irreversible materiality—reality cut out by the camera—resides on the reverse side of language, and it thus sometimes inspires the world of language and ideas. At that moment, language overcomes itself as a fixed concept and transforms into a new language, which is thus new thought... What we photographers can do is to capture with our own eyes fragments of reality that cannot be grasped by any existing language and to actively offer materials to thought and language.¹³⁶

It was as such that the “raw meaning” *Provoke 3* photographically showed arose from the mutual exclusivity of its individual contributions, the inadequacy of any single subject position to the whole they collectively implied. Similarly, the totalizing aspiration of Taki's claim to representational purity was by no means teleological. While it affirmed the possibility for completion in the images, this was in terms of the finite totality of their discrete existence, their status as “provocative materials for thought and language” that the manifesto described.

The specificity of this task seems in turn like a defensive gesture against the very conditions—at a moment when “language has lost its material base, in other words, its reality, and is floating in the air”—that *Provoke* sought to represent. In restricting the photographer's role to the facilitation of sight—the minimal acts of “capturing” and “offering” photographic fragments—the manifesto identified their agency in the image's self-referential function of *pointing* to a reality mediated by the photographer's bodily presence. *Provoke's* program (to the extent that they could be said to have one) thus

¹³⁶ *Provoke 1* (November 1968).

retreated within an irreducible point of spatial and temporal immediacy corresponding to the group's existence, the pure "now" of their collective activities. This present was otherwise indescribable and unquantifiable in terms of objective results, only metaphorically approximated by the manifesto's language of formal intentions. Rather, the text refers the reader to the "thought and language" whose provocation by the materials offered in *Provoke* would retroactively prove the latter's effectiveness. Of course in so far as this would be a "new thought and language," it was foreclosed from the same present occupied by *Provoke* and represented by the historical moment in which the manifesto was written. Inarticulable in terms of the manifesto's own conditions of intelligibility (the "fixed concept" of "existing language"), it could only be alluded to therein. In this way the group's avant-garde rhetoric served (or at least attempted) to exempt *Provoke's* work from the overdetermined historical judgments of a present where this provocation was not yet complete. It served, in other words, to protect their practice from its linguistic petrification and detachment from its material base by projecting its symbolic results into an inscrutable future.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Given that the moment the manifesto represents was precisely that present encountered by *Provoke's* practice, this description of their creative strategy suggests the necessity of a historical distance or temporal interval—in that it posits *Provoke's* immediate goal (the bare act of "showing" or "offering" photographic reality) as something whose symbolic possibilities (a "new thought and language") can only be realized apart from or outside of it as its own self-overcoming. In this way the manifesto anticipated the reality of what *Provoke* showed in terms of its representational value for a fundamentally altered future. Taki would indeed write in *Provoke 3* that "the direction that lies ahead is [shrouded] in the impossibility of its previsibility or prediction... We therefore do not speak of the future, although, at the same time... we turn our backs on the officially recognized [moment of] contemporaneity... While feeling incapable of justifying ourselves, we must take actions which will further intensify our own contradictions. The awareness that history resides within each of us is forcing us to the streets. Moreover there are deep connections

This is to say that any “incompleteness” that can be ascribed to *Provoke’s* project is not a formal or material property of the journal itself. It is the *symbolic* deficiency of the journal’s incomplete meaning, a lack or impossibility of recognition on the part of the consciousness with which it is viewed. Any corresponding sense of *Provoke’s* “failure” must be considered in light of this perception’s own present as a moment in which the “new thought” resulting from their eponymous provocation has simply *not yet come*. It evokes the question: could it be that the historical reality of *Provoke’s* present, the material conditions their manifesto reacted to, is still ongoing—still present?

This sense of symbolic absence refers rather to the journal’s concrete presence. It was precisely the physical wholeness of the journal and the irreducible materiality of its images, as something impossible to totally grasp with existing language, that precipitated this symbolic fragmentation. In so far as it could only be *shown* it exceeded thought (and the individual subjectivity thought implied).¹³⁸ Taki described the journal’s paradoxical unity in such terms: “It is this instability, or as one might put it this consciousness that has no choice but to attempt to reach as far as it can go on its own, that ties us together while moreover driving us apart.”¹³⁹ Or as Moriyama, advocating for the nullification of photography’s conceptual context, would say: “This done, it possessing the faculty of the present’s true reproduction, what is called by the

amongst us between these preoccupations and what we are attempting to verify through *Provoke*.” Taki, “Editorial postscript,” 110.

¹³⁸ The material reality felt in this presence was thus the same thing as the “raw meaning” Taki referred to in *Provoke 3*: meaning or knowledge without a corresponding subject.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 109.

name of photography... will experience a new beginning as something truly anonymous.”¹⁴⁰

The thought to which *Provoke* provided “provocative materials” appeared in the form of the journal itself (the preexisting concept of the *dōjinshi* employed by the group). In this way the encounter between this thought and the reality of the photographs that *Provoke*’s constitutive act of “offering” induced occurred in the formal changes the publication underwent.¹⁴¹ Seen most explicitly in *Provoke 3*, they indeed seem to refer to the growing proximity between the journal and the world it sought to represent. While *Provoke*’s termination at this point can thus be considered indicative of a closing window of representational and political possibilities, it should simultaneously be seen as the group’s timely assertion of their project’s necessary finitude, and hence its paradoxical completion.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Moriyama Daido and Nakahira Takuma, “Moriyama Daido and Nakahira Takuma – Dialogue at Yamanoue Hotel,” *Farewell Photography [Shashin yo sayōnara]* (Tokyo: Shashin Hyoronsha 1972), 305.

¹⁴¹ In so far as the inadequacy of thought to the reality presented in the journal would thus refer to a symbolic continuity between the journal and its historical context (a correspondence of the forms of thought appearing, respectively, therein), to its physical coexistence with the world it depicted—then this thought’s symbolic lack represented the interval before its repetition in the “self-overcoming” *Provoke* (implicitly) aimed at.

¹⁴² In the sense that *Provoke*’s self-presentation marked it as being apart from the individual careers of its contributors (which have nonetheless exerted a considerable influence on the retroactive interpretation of *Provoke* in the course of its historical reception).

Conclusion

Provoke's historical reception is characterized by narratives that privilege its individual members, situating the group's avant-garde significance in the personal practices of its contributors. Fujii points out that the critic Kuronuma Kōichi first made the argument for the process- or performance-based nature of their photography in 1972.¹⁴³ In the June 1972 edition of *Art Notebook [Bijutsu techou]* Kuronuma proposed that *Provoke's* photography was "an act of perception, performed through the combined bodies of man and machine," and thus, "a behavioral art."¹⁴⁴ The evolution of this thesis in Fujii's work reveals her interpretive position, as the agitational political value Kuronuma saw therein is minimized in favour of its formal innovativeness.¹⁴⁵ This becomes apparent in the alternative assessment of Kuronuma's argument offered by the curator Matthew Witkovsky, who takes it as the basis for the 2016 exhibition *Provoke: Between PROTEST and PERFORMANCE*. Paraphrasing Kuronuma's definition of *Provoke* as an agitational practice "yielding images as "excreta" of what he dared to call,

¹⁴³ Yuko Fujii, "Photography as Process: A Study of the Japanese Photography Journal *Provoke*" (PhD diss. The City University of New York, 2012), 274.

¹⁴⁴ Kuronuma Kōichi, cited in Matthew Witkovsky et al. *Provoke: Between PROTEST and PERFORMANCE – Photography in Japan 1960/1975* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2016), 469.

¹⁴⁵ Fujii cites Kuronuma to argue that "By embracing the act of taking photographs and embodying this act in photographic works, *Provoke* members expanded people's understandings of Japanese photography... These photographers' spontaneous shooting styles and abrasive manner in developing their negatives and prints expanded *Provoke* photography from a static and transparent medium to a kinetic and opaque one." Fujii, "Photography as Process," 274.

in quotation marks, a “performance,”” Witkovsky writes that: “One might say that Kuronuma placed *Provoke* photography between “protest and performance.””¹⁴⁶

Witkovsky thus advances a curatorial vision of *Provoke* premised on photography’s ability to participate in reality as a form of political dialogue. The photographically-facilitated terms of this debate “turned on a radical questioning of community.”¹⁴⁷ For Witkovsky and his fellow curator Walter Moser, the community *Provoke* belonged to in this way was that of participatory democracy. However, the decision to define the era’s political possibilities in terms of a constituent politics precipitates a formal problem within the exhibition’s presentation of *Provoke*. Between activists and the citizens whom the former hoped to politically galvanize by mediating their protests as vital acts of performance with which the latter could identify, *Provoke* becomes stylistically indistinguishable from what Moser describes as the “protest books” of their peers—the only difference between the two being precisely one of contents (whereas “protest books,” as the name implies, portrayed demonstrations and other political activity, *Provoke* almost exclusively contained scenes of an ostensibly “apolitical” daily life). As such, *Provoke*’s contribution to the discussion is only seen to be possible in the negative form of “radical critique.”¹⁴⁸ Rather than *Provoke*’s inherent political limits, this seems to reveal the constraints of a collective space provided by a democratic politics whose basic representational unit is the single citizen. Despite its valuable and insightful return to group politics, the 2016 exhibition demonstrates its

¹⁴⁶ Witkovsky, *Between PROTEST and PERFORMANCE*, 469.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 470.

¹⁴⁸ In that its photographs, devoid of protest, thereby disrupted the established conventions of political representation. As Witkovsky writes, “Provoke “brought up for discussion” both the state and its dissenting subjects... it also subjected the group dynamics of protest movements... to a radical critique...” *Ibid*.

fidelity to a traditional model of artistic identity with this notion of “radicalism” that situates creative and political agency within the individual.

This is typical of the trend in *Provoke's* reception that I have attempted to address. Even as recent interventions by Fujii and Witkovsky point to *Provoke's* continued relevance as a collaborative attempt at photographically mediating between the aesthetic and political, the individual and collective, the group's meaning and significance as such has not been fully explored outside of established institutional models. By specifically engaging *Provoke's* collective form and socio-economic context, I hope to have begun such an exploration here. Among other things, this has involved a reconsideration of the relationship between the writings printed in *Provoke* and its accompanying images, a discussion of the significance of each issue's theme (or lack thereof), and an examination of the basic Marxist premises underlying much of the group's criticism—all historically under-studied aspects of the journal.

I have argued that *Provoke* collectively mobilized photography in order to record its current reality. This reality referred to a capitalist modernity whose abstract conditions necessitated new forms of reflexivity on the part of attempts at representationally engaging it. In terms of *Provoke's* stated aim of “provoking thought and language” this was something only collectivity could provide. In the context of the journal, *Provoke's* photography mediated between the individual and the collective by appropriating the commodity-form's function as a physical embodiment of the social relations otherwise invisible to subjective consciousness. The journal collapsed the commodity-form's “sensuous non-sensuousness” as the photographs approximated it; material reality was made immanent to the symbolic abstraction by which it was shown.

In other words, the viewing intentionality to which these figurative contents appeared was simultaneously confronted by the physical presence they mediated. This was ultimately to complicate the already uneasy relationship the images' witnessed between the photographer's creative agency and the camera's objective capacity—such that no authorial identity or individual subjectivity could be seen to account for them.

Figures

(Note: Due to copyright issues the figures listed do not appear in the final thesis)

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