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RAW PHOTOGRAPHS AND COOKED HISTORY: PHOTOGRAPHY'S AMBIGUOUS PLACE IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, TOKYO

史 Julia Adeney Thomas

When the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, finally inaugurated a photography department in 1995, Museum Director Ueki Hiroshi 植木浩 was less than enthusiastic. In fact, instead of celebrating the event, the Director used the occasion to highlight what he called photography's "inherent limitations."¹ Not since 1974 had the museum mounted a photography exhibition, but those years of neglect were, he remarked, entirely justified. Ueki's colleague, curator Ichikawa Masanori 市川正憲, expressed even greater exasperation with photography's apotheosis as a museum medium. In an essay entitled "1974 nen igo—hyōgen no fujiyū ● fumaete" (Since 1974—the Restraint on Expression), Ichikawa overtly discredits photography and speaks frankly of his impatience with the premises of the new department and the new Film Center which houses it.²

This open resistance to photography at Tokyo's National Museum of Modern Art is startling. In a society which long ago embraced photography as quotidian practice,³ where superb photographic equipment is manufactured,⁴ and where some of the most internationally-acclaimed photographers live, why is this medium so begrudged in the capital's premier modern art museum? Why does photography inspire suspicion and even antipathy in an institution dedicated to holding the most exalted mirror of modern culture before the Japanese public?

The level at which we address this problem is crucial to the kind of understanding we may hope for. In my view, focusing on the nature of photography *per se* is an ontological exercise of considerable if not insurmountable difficulty.⁵ A study of institutional turf-wars deflects our attention away from photography to bureaucratic practices. My argument here, following Abigail Solomon-Godeau, will rest not on claims about photography's inherent

¹ Ueki Hiroshi, "Aisatsu" [Foreword], *Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan to shashin 1953–1995* [Photography and the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 1953–1995] (Tokyo: Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan, 1995), p.5. I quote from the English translation presented in this catalogue where it is intelligible. Where necessary, I have used my own translations of the Japanese. These are indicated by the use of Japanese titles in the footnotes.

² Ichikawa Masanori, "1974 nen igo—hyōgen no fujiyū o fumaete," *Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan to shashin 1953–1995*, p.14.

³ Photographic techniques arrived in Japan very soon after their invention in France and England and quickly became an instrument of social exchange and group ritual. The exact date given for their introduction varies: for instance, 1848 by Ozawa Takeshi, *Bakumatsu: shashin no jidai* [The final years of the Bakufu regime: the age of photography] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1994), p.7, and 1840 by Michel F. Braive, *The photograph: a social history* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), p.22.

⁴ See, for instance, Gordon Lewis, ed., *The history of the Japanese camera* from a translation by William and Amy Fujimura of *Nihon kamera no rekishi* (Rochester, N.Y.: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1991).

⁵ There are many interesting attempts to explore this difficulty including Kendall L. Walton, "Transparent picture: on the nature of photographic realism," *Critical Inquiry* 11.2 (Dec. 1984).

⁶ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the dock: essays in photographic history, institutions, and practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.xxiv.

⁷ Amino Yoshihiko, "Deconstructing 'Japan'," *East Asian History* 3 (June 1992): 122–3.

⁸ The literature that discusses this phenomenon is vast. See, for instance, Sydney Crawford, "Alternative models of Japanese society: an overview," in *Japanese society: reappraisals and new directions*, ed. Ross Mouer and Sugimoto Yoshio, a special issue of *Social Analysis* 5/6 (1980); or Kosaku Yoshino, *Cultural nationalism in contemporary Japan* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

characteristics nor on institutional sociology. Instead, I want to treat photography as a distinctive set of discourses and practices which need to be understood in the context of other discourses and practices, particularly those of 'culture' and 'politics'. The medium of photography may have certain capacities and Tokyo's National Museum of Modern Art certain jealousies, but these become manifest and meaningful only within the broader framework of contemporary Japan's understanding of culture and politics.

As in Solomon-Godeau's *Photography at the Dock*, the result of this methodology is not a "history of photography" as much as a "history of photographic uses,"⁶ albeit, in this case, a limited one. It is not a question of what museum photography *is* but a concern for what it does and is allowed to do within the context of contemporary Japan that interests me here. In the particular case I take up here, this discursive strategy clarifies the distress felt in this important quarter of Tokyo's art world at the way 'photography' scrapes against accepted understandings of 'culture' and 'politics'. While modes of consumption in Japan may be relatively democratic, production of many cultural and political forms remains within the purview of elite control. Suspicion of photography arises in part because the apparatuses of elite control surrounding it—degree programs, systems of public recognition and awards, critical and curatorial training, and, of course, museums and museum departments—are only beginning to emerge.

More importantly, most orthodox forms of culture and politics in Japan today claim their privileged status by virtue of their removal from the vagaries and contingencies of time, affecting in essence a guise of ahistorical, atemporal truth. From the supposedly immemorial form of the Shōwa Emperor's entombment ceremonies⁷ to the system of anointing outstanding artists as "National Living Treasures," practices marked as particularly Japanese frequently justify their status by denying change and, in many cases, claiming to be ancient, modern, and even postmodern simultaneously.⁸ Photography as an upstart medium with the potential to mark time threatens both the institutional assurance of elite control and the ideological presumption of timeless cultural and political forms. The contours of this tension are revealed in the inaugural photography exhibition at the Film Center of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, and in the postwar history of that institution's relation to photography.

* * * * *

At the new Film Center of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, skepticism of photography is evident everywhere—in the main museum's thin record of previous photography exhibitions, in the new branch's physical distance from the main museum, in the essays written for the catalogue of the first photography exhibition itself, called "Photography and the National Museum of Modern Art, 1953–1995," which opened in May 1995. Although the new building in Kyōbashi dedicated to film, design, and photography is bright and well-appointed, its polished exterior belies institutional diffidence about the building's contents. As mentioned above,

the leading skeptics with regard to photography include the Museum's Director himself, Ueki Hiroshi, and one of its senior curators, Ichikawa Masanori, both of whom contributed essays to the first exhibition's catalogue.

In the catalogue's brief "Foreword," Ueki explains the basis of institutional skepticism. He admits that the past two decades were "an era that might be regarded as the epoch of photography" but claims that in refusing to mount any shows during this time the museum was simply "confronting the subtle and yet essential differences between fine art and photography."⁹ This difference rests, as he describes it, on a concept of creativity where mastery and controlled expression are the mark of the artist:

In order to manifest human creativity, it is essential that representations and records of desire also be intentional expressions. Despite photography's inherent limitations in this regard, there have in fact been works by photographers who aim to realize the expressiveness peculiar to photography.¹⁰

This distinctly underwhelming recommendation employs a precise vocabulary. Ueki's insistence on "intentionality" as the dividing line between art and non-art deserves particular attention. Ueki's professional provenance is not Japan's traditional media—pottery, calligraphy, or Japanese-style painting—with their centuries of emphasis on prescribed skills and techniques passed down with precision through families of craftspeople. His world, the international world of modern art, has revisited and undercut the very paradigms of "mastery," "control," "art," and "non-art" that he employs. Indeed, it could be argued that all modern art media, not just photography, have undermined the idea of "intentionality" as they obsessively expose the relationship between creativity and contingency. At least since Marcel Duchamp adorned a urinal with the signature "R. Mutt," the way expressive desire combines with accident and "found objects" has been a defining theme of modern art.

This being the case, Ueki's concern appears less to be intentionality itself than the problem of whose intentions photography serves. Photography's democratic accessibility and widespread casual use, to which he refers, endangers control by established cultural organizations. Photographic images can and do arise from amateur practitioners, from those not sanctioned to participate in national culture by schools and museums. The decades when no photography was to be seen in Tokyo's National Museum of Modern Art suggest a fear that placing such unlicensed work on display in a prominent public institution could validate greater popular participation in contemporary national culture.

In the third essay of the same catalogue, Ichikawa Masanori takes an even more doubtful view of photography's claim to a place in the Museum.¹¹ Focusing on the processes of making a print, Ichikawa describes the medium as providing too much latitude (variable print size, cropping, tonal values) for any photograph to be art. At the same time, he also faults photography for what he calls an unrelenting realism which restricts free expression. Photography suffers the contradiction of being, in Ichikawa's view, simultane-

⁹ Ueki, "Aisatsu," p.5.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ichikawa, "1974 nen igo."

¹² *Ibid.*, p.14.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, translated by Harry Zohn, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955)

¹⁴ Charles Baudelaire, "The modern public and photography" (originally published 1862), in *Classic essays on photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1980) p.88.

ously too freely manipulable to be art and not free enough to escape reality.

These contradictory bases for claiming that photography lacks the "completeness" and "whole personality" of true art reveal consternation at the very notion of photography, a consternation expressed in nearly hysterical tones as the essay proceeds. Ichikawa warns:

Today, the flood of photographic images contributes to such a growing indifference to photography that we sometimes experience the same dread and surprise as primitive people. It even seems as if these photographs are thrust at us as poorly digested reality which has not been turned into history.¹²

This passage turns on a series of oppositions—the primitive versus the cultured, realism versus artifice, and photography versus art and history. Through these oppositions, Ichikawa suggests that an excess of photographic images reduces "us" to the level of superstitious "primitive people" filled with dread. This pitiable state is brought on because photography presents us with

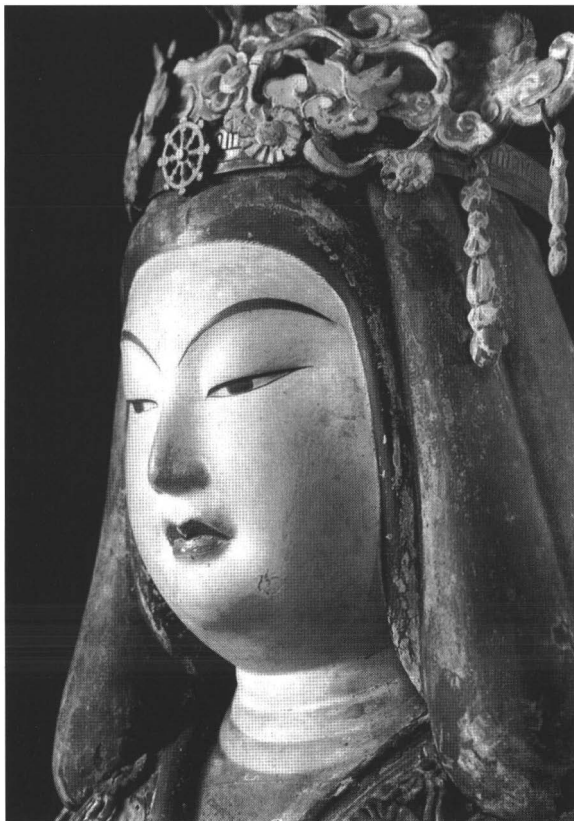
"poorly digested reality," to be eschewed as slightly repulsive. Opposing this horror stands "history" properly understood. This proper history of both the arts and society is "digested," Ichikawa suggests, in ways that photography (and the emotions of primitives) are not. If Ichikawa were to adopt Levi-Strauss's terms, he might tell us that proper history is cooked, eaten, and absorbed into the national body while photography with its realism remains raw, or perhaps half-chewed. In this account, the Raw (photography) clashes with the Cooked (history) when it enters the museum.

For those familiar with Western debates over photography, it may be tempting at first to regard the diffidence of Ueki and Ichikawa as an Eastern echo of European quarrels. The fear of High Art's collapse in the age of photographic reproduction was voiced in the nineteenth century by the likes of Charles Baudelaire and Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, and analyzed most famously in the twentieth by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."¹³ Photography's popular accessibility, its commercial uses, its reproducibility cast doubt on its potential as art from the medium's inception. Certainly Ueki and Ichikawa partake of similar doubts, and yet the Japanese curators' distaste for photography is much more complicated than a mere belated replay of Western anxieties. For Japanese curators to dismiss photography from art history on the basis of its supposed "realism" may recall familiar Western quarrels; to dismiss it from social and political history on the same basis illuminates quite different tensions.

In early European commentary, photography's purported realism often disqualified it as art but justified it as docu-

Figure 1

Domon Ken, "Goddess Kichijōten owned by Jōruri Temple," 1944 (source: Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan ni okeru shashinten 1953–1974, reproduced with the permission of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo)



mentary resource. Baudelaire allowed that photography gave precision to memory;¹⁴ Lady Eastlake averred that photography's "business is to give evidence of facts, as minutely and as impartially as, to our shame, only an unreasoning machine can give."¹⁵ Within this context, the photograph was constrained from joining art history but could augment social and political histories. The Western tradition of documentary photography is testimony to this belief. Within Tokyo's National Museum of Modern Art, on the other hand, this capacity to "give evidence of facts" is itself a suspect, almost perverse practice, one, as we have seen, that Ichikawa accuses of thrusting the world in "our" faces. Ueki and Ichikawa are not rejecting photography as art in order to exploit its capacity for social and political commentary. Instead, they seek to dismiss it from any position where its capacities might be used to challenge accepted Japanese forms of the aesthetic, the social, and the political that carefully efface their own artificiality. Their efforts to protect a cultivated collective from unconstrained reality are not *sui generis*. Other leaders in the museum world, bureaucrats (particularly from the Ministry of Education), and politicians have also sought to contain public feeling by making certain topics such as the war and the emperor taboo¹⁶ while manufacturing a cheerful "past." Images raw and "dark"—as the Ministry of Education once called the illustrations in the history textbook proposed by Ienaga Saburō 家永三郎¹⁷—must be eliminated from collective memory; history must remain the province of élite artificers.

This pattern of repressing photography's potential raw historicity is hardly new at Tokyo's National Museum of Modern Art, as the criteria of its previous exhibitions demonstrate. The first postwar photography show, the 1953 "Contemporary Photography—Japan and America," was jointly organized by the Tokyo museum and guest curator Edward Steichen, who at that time was director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Steichen sought to introduce mildly retrospective elements into the exhibition by presenting American works from the previous two and a half decades, but the Japanese curators narrowed their range to works post-dating 1945. The curator of the 1995 exhibition, Masuda Rei 増田玲, calls this preference for postwar (in fact, occupation-period) pictures "only natural."¹⁸ Certainly, "starting out again" from 1945 was convenient for Japanese photographers with a record of wartime propaganda work such as Domon Ken 土門拳, who needed to secure their peacetime reputations.¹⁹ Due to these temporal disparities, the resulting exhibition counterposed a contemporary history of American photography with glimpses of the Japanese present.

In subsequent exhibitions, the insistence that Japanese photography deal only with the here and now became more pronounced. As Masuda Rei points out:

In 1953, among the postwar photographs, there were still a few works ... which retained elements from prewar art photography. However, in subsequent exhibitions, the term 'contemporary photography' was further restricted so that *all traces of history were eliminated*.²⁰

¹⁵ Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, "Photography" (originally published 1857), in Trachtenberg, *Classic essays on photography*, p.66.

¹⁶ The art world and politicians have bowed repeatedly to rightwing efforts to maintain taboos governing representation of these subjects. See Nancy Shalala, "Censorship silences Japanese artists," *Asian Art News* (Sept./Oct. 1994): 62–7; Nancy Shalala, "Hidden terrors put gag on art world," *Japan Times*, July 10, 1994, p.10; E. Patricia Tsurumi, "Censored in Japan: taboo art," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 26.3 (1994): 66–70.

¹⁷ The Ministry of Education banned a textbook series written by the historian Ienaga Saburō in part because of the photographic illustrations he had chosen. These photographs, captioned "Air-raid on the mainland," "Wartime manners and customs," "Damages of the war" (showing a one-armed veteran begging), and "The atomic bomb and Hiroshima," were rejected, said the Ministry, because "only dark pictures are included and on the whole the impression is too dark." Ienaga Saburō, "The historical significance of the Japanese textbook suit," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 2.4 (Fall 1970): 9.

¹⁸ Masuda Rei, "Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan ni okeru shashinten 1953–1974: kako no tenrankai ga shisasuru koto" [Exhibition at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 1953–1974: a review of exhibitions of the past], *Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan to shashin 1953–1974* [Photography and the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 1953–1974] (Tokyo, 1995), p.10.

¹⁹ Retrospective exhibitions continue to ignore wartime propaganda work. For instance, during the summer of the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end, the Meguro District Museum of Art chose to represent Domon Ken through his views of Buddhist temples and statues instead of his wartime images of pristine, white-capped nurses. "Domon Ken: koji junrei" [Domon Ken: pilgrimages to old temples], June 21–July 23, 1995.

²⁰ Masuda, "Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan ni okeru shashinten 1953–1974: kako no tenrankai ga shisasuru koto" (emphasis mine).

²¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 12.

²² John Berger, "Understanding a photograph" (originally published in 1974), in Trachtenberg, *Classic essays on photography*, p. 293.

²³ Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," translated by Thomas Y. Levin, *Critical Inquiry* 19.3 (Spring 1993): 421–36, at 424. See also Siegfried Kracauer, *The mass ornament: Weimar essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

²⁴ Kracauer, "Photography," p. 429.

²⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, *History: the last things before the last* (1969; reprint ed., Princeton: Marcus Wiener Publishers, 1995). See especially Chapter 8, "The Anteroom," for this comparison between photography and history.

In 1960, 1961, and 1963, the Museum mounted three shows. Each one was called "Contemporary Japanese Photography" and each limited its purview to photographs published in magazines during the previous year alone. The next exhibition, in 1966, "Ten Artists in Contemporary Japanese Photography," retained a tight temporal focus, but slightly broadened the bounds of unrelenting contemporaneity by showing several years of work rather than just one. The same criteria marked the next and final show before the current revival of photography at the museum; in 1974, "Fifteen Photographers Today" exhibited work from the past several years and a single generation.

For all their narrowness and caution, even these shows elicited official unease with photography. One of the 1974 exhibition's organizers, Watanabe Tsutomu 渡辺勉, wrote in the exhibition catalogue's introduction that:

Exhibitions ... are not really very appropriate venues for photography Stylistically, photography presented in an exhibition tends to be too art-like. In turn, its true significance of focusing on reality is in danger of ceasing to function.²¹

Here again, though in milder form, it is the purported realism of photography that is seen as making its position in the museum awkward. After this 1974 exhibition, the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, evidently decided to close its doors to the dangers of reality—which then remained shut for two decades.

At this point, it may be helpful to elaborate on the premises of my analysis. I am not claiming that photographs reveal reality transparently, as Baudelaire or Eastlake suggested. Nor do I wish to claim that a photograph *is*, in its very essence, a moment in time, as does John Berger when he argues that "the true content of a photograph is invisible, for it derives from a play, not of form, but of time."²² Rather, I argue that photography's *potential* documentary relation to reality and *potential* temporality have caused antipathy within the Japanese art establishment. This potential to construct versions of reality and to mold time into storylines can be used to challenge the prerogatives of those whose official purview is the creation of collective culture. However, transparency and temporality are only possible uses to which photography may be put rather than its essential truths.

The German historian and film critic Siegfried Kracauer suggests a similar understanding of photography's potential when he argues that a photograph may *seem* to be "a representation of time" even though "time is not part of the photograph."²³ Tracing what he describes as an unstable relationship between image and time, he argues, "If photography is a *function of the flow of time*, then its substantive meaning will change depending upon whether it belongs to the domain of the present or to some phase of the past."²⁴ When a picture is within the domain of the present, it mediates living flesh; but as it falls into the domain of the past, it is gradually "emptied of life" unless we work to resuscitate it, reestablishing a provisional relationship between image and present. This effort, as he says in his last book, is analogous to the activity of writing history.²⁵

This argument is less about what a photograph really is (its inherent relationship with time) than it is about history (our relationship with time). Kracauer is not saying that photographs are necessarily and automatically “emptied of life,” becoming “ghosts,” but that it requires our effort to keep them alive. For Kracauer, the photograph’s significance arises from the conscious value we give it as interested viewers: descendants of a person in the image, art museum visitors, curators, historians, or citizens. Only when we no longer direct our energies to connecting the image with memory does it die. A photographic image, he argues, is not the natural bearer of meaning, and a photographic archive does not in itself produce history since meaning and history are activities of the living not of inanimate objects. To rely on an archive of images as history is what Kracauer dismisses as “historicism.” As he puts it, “The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of a nature alienated from meaning.”²⁶ What photography’s warehouse of effigies forces is a confrontation between “nature”—the archival images from which meaning drains until they are nothing but dried fragments—and “consciousness,” which drives the creation of historical meaning, resuscitating images by thinking through them. It is *our* relationship to history that photography can reveal, not its own.

At Tokyo’s National Museum of Modern Art, an extraordinary fifty-year-long effort has been expended to avoid both “historicism” as well as “history,” entirely evading the possibility of a confrontation, in Kracauer’s terms, between “nature” and “consciousness.” As its institutional record demonstrates, this effort involves the refusal of both “nature”—the historicism of collecting a photographic archive, and “consciousness”—the history of curatorial effort creating significance by connecting images and memory. At the museum, photography has been allowed no relation with past time. The only time photography has been permitted to portray is “now”; the only reality it has been permitted to represent is that of its immediate present. Since current reality has not been allowed to mutate freely into history, as soon as tomorrow arrives, the photograph must die so as not to become a memento of loss and a reminder of the incompleteness of the present. This attitude is evident not only in the avoidance of retrospective exhibitions at the museum but also in the lack of interest in collecting photographs, which, according to Ueki, the museum did not actively pursue until 1990.²⁷ For nearly the entire postwar period, then, the attitude at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, has been that the preservation of prints is pointless. The present should not be preserved because to do so, I would suggest, indicates and indeed constitutes a past that might thereby be explored.

* * * * *

The rejection of photography on the grounds that it belongs neither to art history nor to social and political history places Masuda Rei, the first curator of photography at Tokyo’s National Museum of Modern Art, in an awkward position. As the curator, Masuda must negotiate a place for the popular framework of cultural and political discourses already heavily invested in denying its validity. Fortunately, his training in the history of photography

²⁶ Kracauer, “Photography,” p.435.

²⁷ Ueki Hiroshi appears to mean that the museum began a concerted effort to collect photographs in 1990. Before 1990 the museum had acquired some photographs as gifts (for instance, works of Alfred Stieglitz were donated by Georgia O’Keeffe), as exhibition pieces, and occasionally as purchases (for instance, Ei-Kyū’s 瑛九 work was bought in 1970.)

²⁸ Ichikawa, "1974 nen igo," p.14.

²⁹ Masuda's initiative has historical resonance in that mid-nineteenth-century Japan used the word "*shashin*" to refer both to photography and to Western-style realistic painting. Early Japanese practitioners of photography were often painters as well. Yokoyama Matsusaburō 横山松三郎 (1838–84) perfected a technique he called "photographic oil painting." For information on early Japanese photography, see Kinoshita Naoyuki, *Nihon bijutsu no 19 seiki* [Japanese art in the nineteenth century], exhibition catalogue (Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990).

³⁰ In Japan, both public museums and private galleries seem to observe a greater divide between photography and other media, even as their convergence is now largely taken for granted in the United States and Europe. This observation was confirmed in private conversations with both fine art and photography gallery owners, in particular Ōta Hidenori 大田秀則 of the Ōta Fine Arts Gallery in Shibuya (July 7, 1995).

and his graduate thesis on the American photographer Walker Evans make him well-suited for the task. The first challenge that Masuda offers to the detractors of photography is the hint of retrospective suggested by the title of the exhibition, "Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan to shashin 1953–1995" (Photography and the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 1953–1995). The second challenge comes in the title of his catalogue essay, "Kako no tenrankai ga shisasuru koto" (A Review of Exhibitions of the Past), sandwiched between the skeptical pieces by Ueki and Ichikawa discussed above. For all its seeming innocuousness, Masuda's assertion that photography has a past and that as a museum curator he might review it is a bold one given the context. Indeed, the raw nerve hit by Masuda's insistence on historical review is revealed by Ichikawa's declaration a few pages further on that in planning for the new museum, "we became impatient at the requests for a history of photography or, rather, the historicism inherent in the idea of a museum of photography."²⁸ There can be little doubt that during the preparations for the new photography department all parties at the museum recognised the vexing centrality of the issue of "history."

Masuda begins his catalogue essay by arguing for photography's inclusion within a general history of the arts.²⁹ His essay, like the exhibition itself, starts with Alfred Stieglitz (1864–946). Stieglitz is treated as an exemplar in part because in 1923 Boston's Museum of Fine Art chose to hang Stieglitz beside Goya and Dürer to underscore the similar aesthetic values of these images. In reference to this dramatic embrace of photography by an American art museum and, it would seem, in defiance of the institutional constraints under

Figure 2

Kimura Ihei, "A Wooden Wall (in Akita)," 1953 (source: Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan ni okeru shashinten 1953–1974, p.82, reproduced with the permission of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo)



which he labors, Masuda places at the very entrance to the Film Center's first exhibition seven works by Stieglitz including a photogravure of the famous 1907 "The Steerage" and a 1920 portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe.

Surprisingly, after this bold move, Masuda's initiative wanes both in terms of his writing and on the gallery walls. A thorough demonstration of the embeddedness of photography in the broader history of the visual arts would have required an exhibition in several media, as in Boston's 1923 show, as well as works combining photography with other techniques such as collage or installation pieces. Masuda does not choose this option. The physical and intellectual distance separating the Film Center and its parent institution housing other media does not appear to have been breached.³⁰

Unable to reenact the Boston Museum's stunning transgression, Masuda argues for

the acceptance of photography on more limited grounds. On the walls of the gallery, after the seven Stieglitz prints, he proceeds with ninety-four works by twenty-five Japanese photographers. In answer to those who are skeptical about the value of the photographic print, we are presented with the achievements of Kimura Ihei 木村伊兵, Domon Ken, Ei-Kyū, Ueda Shōji 植田正治, Ishimoto Yasuhiro 石元康広, Tōmatsu Shōmei 東松照明, Moriyama Daidō 森山大道, Ishiuchi Miyako 石内都, Sugimoto Hiroshi 杉本博司, Shibata Toshio 柴田敏雄, and others. Many of these works are beautiful, some playful; most are famous.³¹ Their neat chronological order asserts a continuum of productivity, of genius, without creating a relationship among the prints or between the prints and other events. The wall labels, catalogue copy and images do not attempt a narrative of the medium's technological progress or of changing visual styles; there is no suggestion that the photographs reflect broader cultural debates about art or changes in society and politics. The images held up for our admiration appear without context or connection to each other. Masuda attempts neither a formal aesthetic history nor a social and political history. One way of describing this approach is to say that he has chosen instead to canonize Great Japanese Photography.³²

To suggest that Masuda's approach canonizes the medium by focusing on exemplary images is not to say that he retreats from history altogether. Canonization is certainly a form of history since it connects past and present by insisting that particular works transcend time and contain an eternal Beauty or Truth always relevant to the present. In creating a continuum of genius, Masuda rescues photography from an ephemeral existence. He argues that images from the past can have a brilliance worth preserving. In one sense, then, he has returned photography to history. Given the circumstances in which Masuda works, this step is almost radical.

On the other hand, the history Masuda suggests is rarefied indeed. Since genius, axiomatically, soars above passing idioms of aesthetics and philosophy as well as social and political conditions, the canonization of genius is the historical form which most denies historicity. Masuda presents these images as having attained such perfection within their frames that they neither

³¹ Some of the artists in this group, Hosoe Eikoh 細江英公, Tōmatsu Shōmei, and Moriyama Daidō, can be seen in *Black sun: the eyes of four*, ed. Mark Holborn, a special issue of *Aperture*, no.102 (Spring 1986).

³² The idea of the 'canon' has been widely discussed by literary theorists. An excellent introduction to this issue is John Guillory, "Canon," in *Critical terms for literary study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Figure 3

Tōmatsu Shōmei, "From Asphalt," 1960 (source: Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan ni okeru shashinten 1953–1974, p.53, reproduced with the permission of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo)



³³ Masuda, "Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan ni okeru shashinten 1953–1974: kako no tenrankai ga shisasuru koto," p.13.

require nor offer dialogue with the outside world. Existing in a realm beyond loss or incompleteness, like *Sleeping Beauty* before the Prince's kiss, they dream on in a preternatural death-like slumber. They hang embalmed in their own perfected glory, withheld from sparking connections which might suggest alternative narratives connecting Japan's past, present, and future.

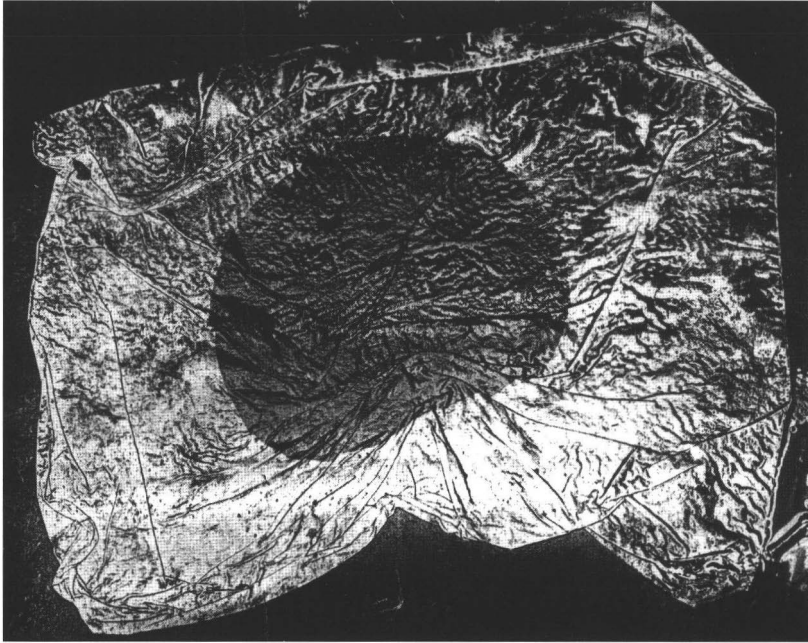
By the end of his essay, Masuda forgoes suggesting any particular context for photography at all. He tells us instead that "what we need to do now is to begin to recognize that there is no inherently correct site for a photograph and that a photograph can be nothing other than a photograph whatever the circumstances."³³ A canonized genius represents only him or herself. A collection of canonized photographs resists entanglement in quotidian histories or quotidian futures. In short, Masuda has negotiated a place for photography by making photography homologous with the most orthodox forms of culture and politics. He has rejected narrative in favor of compendium, eventfulness in favor of achieved perfection, contingency in favor of control. Photography in Masuda's hands becomes a transcendent, largely ahistorical practice which exemplifies excellence and deserves its place within elite institutions.

* * * * *

If I am right that the strain revealed within the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, reflects larger tensions in contemporary Japan, it would stand to reason that the potential of photography to mark time and reveal contingency creates difficulties in other art museums and in other realms as well. Although a systematic survey of the uses of photography is beyond the scope of this article, a comparative glance at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography supports my claim that museum photography has become a site of ideological struggle. The Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography also opened its new facility in 1995, the same year as Tokyo's National Museum of Modern Art opened its Film Center. Some of its exhibitions reveal efforts to contain photography within the atemporal modes of culture and politics pervasive in Japanese society, while others daringly challenge those orthodoxies.

The largest and longest-lasting exhibition during the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography's inaugural year was entitled "Mono, kao, hanmonogatari—modanizumu saikō" (Objects, Faces, and Anti-Narratives—Rethinking Modernism), presented in three parts from April 1, 1995 to January 24, 1996 in the museum's central galleries. Here, an anti-narrative effect was achieved not through a compendium of genius, but through accumulating vast numbers of photographs and juxtaposing them so as to remove any developmental sequence the viewer might be inclined to construct. This strategy has the interesting effect of dissociating any image from the events it might represent and from the artistic development it might embody. Connections among the prints are created strictly by the shape within the frame.

For instance, the sequence of "objects" on display from April 1 to August 27, 1995, invited the eye to move from the oval form of an egg, to the oval form of a spoon, to the round form of an electric fan, and on to pears and

**Figure 4**

Kawada Kikuji, "Hi no Maru," 1960–65 (source: Mono, kao, hanmonogatari—modanizumu saikō, *exhibition catalogue* [Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, April 1995])

apples with the rounded shadows that they cast. Vision is lulled by repetition of the circular form. How easily and lightly the eye then glides over Kawada Kikuji's 川田規矩次 photograph of a soiled Japanese flag, "Hi no Maru," with its round center suggesting the sun. Another Kawada image called "A-Bomb Dome—Ceiling and Sky" draws the eye up through the oval remains of the tower at Hiroshima that partially withstood the atomic blast. Curated in this way, these images lose any potential reference to political or cultural developments outside the frame. Instead, the eye focuses on the circularity of the content within. Even more deftly than Masuda Rei, the curator of this exhibition, Kasahara Michiko 笠原美知子, has created a modality for viewing photography apart from historical developments in aesthetics or politics.

Despite the show's premise of "rethinking modernism," curator Kasahara offers few revisionary guideposts towards this goal. Instead, by opening the show with works ranging widely from Noel-Marie-Paymal Lerebour's 1841 engravings of ancient Syrian sites to NASA moonscapes, from William Henry Jackson's late nineteenth-century albumen panoramas of the American West to Sandy Skoglund's installation photos, from early Japanese experiments in pictorialism to Morimura Yasumasa's 森村安正 gender-bending self-portraits, Kasahara turns the entire opus of the camera into a single epoch. She argues, in fact, that "it does not mean very much whether a particular work is in the modernist or postmodernist style."³⁴ Judging from her choices on the walls, this lack of distinction also applies to the premodern, the pictorialist, and all other categories except for those dealing with sheer content (the "objects" and "faces") as opposed to formal elements. Kasahara effaces documentary

³⁴ Kasahara Michiko, *Mono, kao, hanmonogatari—modanizumu saikō* (Tokyo: Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, 1995), p. 117.

history, technical improvements, and formal aesthetic developments. The resulting show leaves us in a continual, undifferentiated present from the moment that photographic processes were invented—a century and a half of “now.”³⁵

The Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography is, however, far from monolithic in its presentation of photography. While orthodoxy certainly exists, heterodox efforts to use the medium’s capacity to suggest temporality and alternative histories are being made. One of the museum’s opening shows, “Nihon kindai shashin no seiritsu to tenkai” (The Founding and Development of Modern Photography in Japan) (January 21–March 26, 1995), embraced history overtly. The catalogue’s foreword tells us point blank that “this exhibition takes the view that the history of modern photography is part of the history of modern Japan.”³⁶ Curator Okatsuka Akiko’s 岡塚章子 sophisticated and deliberate commitment to historicizing photography combines a narrative of technical advances with aesthetic, social, and political change. The story she orchestrates moves from early-twentieth-century pictorialism and an emphasis on self-expression to the 1930s and ’40s when advertising, mass culture, and

Figure 5

Ueda Shōji, “Papa and Mama and the Children,” 1948 (source: Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan ni okeru shashinten 1953–1974, p.43, reproduced with the permission of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo)



photo-journalism pushed photographers into a new awareness of their social roles. These changing modes of apprehending the world with the camera are placed within the larger history of Japan's engagement with modernity and modern forms of subjectivity.

To anchor photography in a history beyond aesthetic styles alone, Okatsuka must date modernity in social and political terms. The modern (*kindai* 近代), she argues, consists of those years from “the rise of Taishō Democracy, with its respect for the individual as a human being” to the beginning of the contemporary (*gendai* 現代) period—in other words, from 1922 to 1945. She has not only positioned photography within a general history of Japan but has placed it in relation to the traumatic darkness of Japanese history—the war. The expressive richness of modern Japanese photography is seen both in contrast to and in continuum with the war, which she calls “a tragedy arising from the strains of modernization” leading to “the collapse of everything that had been built up over the previous decades.”³⁷ Her narrative has the elements of classic tragedy, which through recounting becomes redeemable.

As Okatsuka's use of the medium suggests, photography in major public cultural institutions has the capacity to reclaim specific memories that many government bureaucrats and political leaders wish to suppress: memories of Japan's militarism at home and of laying waste to continental Asia. Secondly, photography also has the capacity to shade established definitions of Japanese culture and politics by suggesting multiple points of view produced for a variety of purposes. Advertising images, commercial studio work, and magazine covers are included along with the productions of traditional artists' ateliers and the work of amateurs such as the Kobe photography club which took pictures of European Jewish refugees as they passed through in 1941. While these images are not necessarily in direct competition with established discourses of culture and politics, they suggest the variety and plenitude of a past uncontainable within one point of view. In so doing, they challenge forms of national culture and national politics which would deny mutability, excess, and loss by evoking an unchanging single essence identifiable as Japan. Thirdly, and even more significantly, when curated to suggest incomplete and contingent narratives of nationhood, photography in national museums can highlight the ravages and opportunities that follow in the wake of the passage of time. Photography in this form can open up possible alternatives for Japan's future by exploring alternative images of Japan's past.

* * * * *

Using the same strategy that Abigail Solomon-Godeau deploys in *Photography at the Dock* has not led me to discover the same discursive configurations in Japan as she uncovers in the West. In Solomon-Godeau's transatlantic world, photography was riven from the very outset, she tells us, between “one axis supposed to consist of subjectivity, art and beauty (the axis of the icon)—and another axis composed of science, truth, objectivity, and

³⁵ In the same catalogue, Iizawa Kohtarō 飯沢耕太郎, a prominent photographic historian and critic, concurs with Kasahara, arguing that any discussion of modernism is “doomed to end in complication and confusion.” Iizawa Kohtarō, “Cropping and repetition—modernism in photography,” in Kasahara, “Objects, faces and anti-narratives—rethinking modernism,” p.113. In English-language catalogues as well as in the magazine *déjà vu*, Iizawa's given name is romanized as Kohtarō rather than the more standard Kōtarō.

³⁶ “Foreword,” *Nihon kindai shashin no seiritsu to tenkai* (Tokyo: Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, 1995), p.9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the dock*, p.xxii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.xxiii.

technology (the axis of the index).”³⁸ She argues that the processes of the twentieth century have “ultimately consolidated photographic history and criticism together under the sign of the aesthetic,” allowing photography to emerge as a discrete object of aesthetic study with all the apparatus of programs within art schools, degrees, museum specializations, and critical vocabularies.³⁹ In *Photography at the Dock*, Solomon-Godeau rebels against this aestheticization of photography, providing a politicized “history of photographic uses.”

While my purpose has also been to provide a brief “history of photographic uses,” Japan’s particular story does not echo the twists and turns of the transatlantic narrative outlined by Solomon-Godeau. In fact, I would very much argue against the evolutionary trope of modernization theory which would explain, for instance, the lag between the establishment of a photography department at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1940 and at Tokyo’s National Museum of Modern Art in 1995 as the natural consequence of Japan’s supposedly tardy but predictably similar development. In the first place, photography in Japan does not seem to have been poised excruciatingly between the realm of documentary (“the index” with its evidentiary claim to reveal social and political conditions) and the realm of high art (“the icon” with its values of originality and formal attainment). Nor does photography’s recent emergence in these major public art venues in Tokyo reveal that this dilemma of divided loyalties has been resolved in favor of photography’s placement within aesthetic histories. Indeed, I would argue that it is not by claiming one sort of narrative over another that photography provokes tension in Japan but through its capacity to suggest narratives of any kind.

In the transatlantic world where the linear arrow of modern time structured most discourse until the advent of postmodernism, faultlines developed over the question of whether photography belonged to the history of art or the history of society; in Japan, faultlines have developed between photography with its raw images of undigested history on the one hand and, on the other, established discourses on society, culture, and politics which eschew contingent historical narratives in the name of Japanese national identity. The current negotiation between the discourse of photography and those of culture and politics assumes its distinctive shape in Japan because the aesthetic and the political do not oppose each other as separable manifestations of the human spirit as in the West. Instead, they often join as collegial, artificial practices controlled by political, educational, and cultural élites. The result is that photography’s capacity to make time visible and its democratic provenance prevent it from being easily incorporated under the rubric of both aesthetics (“the icon”) and politics (“the index”) in Japan. This being the case, the fact that photography has now elbowed its way into the world of high art, even where it has met with resistance as at Tokyo’s National Museum of Modern Art, is a cause for optimism. If photography’s potential to illumine time’s messy, eroding, and fecund processes is exploited, photographic exhibitions can offer new venues for interrogating the past and for imagining alternative futures beyond the postwar period.

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