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Photographer Daido Moriyama And "Provoke" Exhibition Curators Discuss The Magazine's Lasting Influence On Japanese Photography

By Jianne Soriano, Tatler Hong Kong | May 18, 2021



Shomei Tomatsu's "Oh! Shinjuku" (1969) (Photo: Courtesy of Each Modern)

In this exclusive interview, Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama and exhibition curatorial team, Wang Rui-Xu and Lan ChungHusan talks to Tatler about the unyielding influence of the magazine, "Provoke" on photography

Despite running for only three short years, *Provoke* left a lasting influence and impact on photography and avant-grade movement in Japan. Founded in Tokyo in 1968 by prominent Japanese photographers and critics, Takuma Nakahira and Koji Taki, *Provoke* was a small experimental photo magazine that advocated for a radical change to traditional photography. The group comprised of other notable Japanese photographers including Daido Moriyama, the Godfather of Japanese street photography, who joined in the second issue.

The magazine and group examined Japan's socio-political situation with a radically inventive style and despite only three issues, its impact revolutionised photography in Japan and Japanese art history. This exhibition in Taiwan, *Provoke – Opposing Centrism* is the first research-based exhibition to re-evaluate *Provoke's* influence on photography. *Tatler* speaks with Moriyama himself and the

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exhibition's curatorial team, Wang Rui-Xu, the curator of Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts and Lan ChungHusan of Each Modern to talk about *Provoke's* unyielding influence and impact over the years.



Japanese photographer, Daido Moriyama (Photo: Alfredo Jaar)



Photo: Courtesy of Each Modern and Akio Nagasawa Gallery

Tatler: Moriyama-san, can you tell us how you became a part of the second issue of *Provoke*?

Moriyama: I was invited by [Japanese photographer] Takuma Nakahira. At that time, [Japanese director, writer and photographer] Terayama Shuji was also planning to publish a magazine similar

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to *Provoke*. Takuma Nakahira knew that I was involved so I wasn't invited to *Provoke's* first issue. However, Terayama Shuji's magazine faced a hard time and then shut down so Takuma Nakahira eventually invited me and I joined the second issue of *Provoke*.

Tatler: How were the three issues of *Provoke* different from each other?

Wang: The three issues have always been consistent and continuous in their context. Daido Moriyama joined in the second issue so for the second and third issues, we could find more participation from him. Also, Daido Moriyama and Takuma Nakahira became the key artists and the influence of their work still can be seen in the new generation and in the development of photography.

Lan: I regard these three issues as one because it has only been published for three years and the content aren't considered big [compared to other photo magazines]. The main difference is that Daido Moriyama joined in the second issue and began to publish many works that later became classics. *Provoke's* editing style was quite unique compared with other magazines in the market at that time, including a large number of pictures instead of words and many others. I do believe that it also indirectly influenced the vigorous development of Japanese photobooks later.



Takuma Nakahira's "La nuit" (1969) (Photo: Courtesy of Each Modern)

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Daido Moriyama's "Farewell Photography" (1972/2021) (Photo: Courtesy of Each Modern)

Tatler: To you, in what ways has *Provoke* contributed to the developments of photography and avant-garde art?

Moriyama: I believe that the impact of *Provoke* is not on the style or shape but more on the ideological stimulation of photography and avant-garde art.

Wang: *Provoke* examined Japan's socio-political situation with a radical inventive style, broke the aesthetics of traditional photography at the time and opposed the single perspective and cultural hegemony from Western interpretation. It became the new trend of thought related to the avant-garde movement which made many photographers imitate and became one of the reasons that Takuma Nakahira decided to cease the publication.

Lan: The most obvious influence is their unique style of photography. Before the group *Provoke* was established, we were able to find that some photographers have already begun to take shaky and blurry photos with grainy, high-contrast and fast-paced shooting style. This was because the turmoil and the social movement they captured were bound to lead their point of view to that. For the *Provoke* members, this shooting style is deliberate and gives the audience the idea that something isn't right. *Provoke* became a guerrilla resistance from the side. Later, we saw that this non-traditional photography style became mainstream, driving the photography boom in Asia. *Provoke* changed

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the medium of photography as avant-garde artists who tried to resist the traditional way [of taking photo] wasn't regarded as a mainstream artist at that time.



Daido Moriyama's "Provoke 2" (1968/2018) (Photo: Courtesy of Each Modern)



Takuma Nakahira's "Circulation_ Date, Place, Events" (1971) (Photo: Courtesy of Eachn Modern)

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Tatler: *Provoke* was so much ahead of its time. Were the members ever concerned about their work being *meiwaku* (annoyance, distraction from thinking) as the works are so critical and opened discussions on political and social aspects of Japan?

Moriyama: I don't have any political thoughts at all. What I cared about at that time was only how to push the medium of photography toward the limit. Even today, it's the same approach for me.

Wang: At that time, a large part of photography was used for commercial purposes and was regarded as a kind of technological advancement. It resulted in the photography becoming propaganda of American public culture and the overload of mass media images also brought the hegemony of Western culture. It was why *Provoke* wanted to resist the public images, indirectly opposed the United States and Western culture and also built a bridge with the left movement.

Lan: Members of the *Provoke* group, especially Takuma Nakahira, have been concerned about the post-war social situation in Japan before the group *Provoke* was even established. Of course, their photography and magazine-style were also very avant-garde at the time. Whether it's a focus on the left movement or breaking the normal photography rules, they took the lead of the mainstream at the time.

However, they were known as the so-called "mainstream" because they're extremely powerful. Among those who created a large number of creations in *Provoke*, Daido Moriyama later became the mainstream, while Nakahira Takuma continued his debate and reflection. Even, now, I think they're relatively still ahead of their peers.

Tatler: Moriyama-san, you're known for shooting black and white images, do you have a specific reason why you prefer this style?

Moriyama: Black and white is abstract and the colour is concrete. To me, this is my way of knowing images. If you ask me to say something about it, black and white is like the world of appearance. In this sense, I like black and white photography very much.

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Photo: Courtesy of Each Modern

Tatler: In this exhibition in Taiwan, what can audiences expect? How different is it from your previous ones?

Moriyama: Regardless of the past, present or future, I never have any expectations for the audience's reactions. The work before the show is my job. Once the work is displayed, it should be left to the audience to make their own interpretations.

Wang: *Provoke – Opposing Centrism* is not only related to the art history of the *Provoke* movement but also a link between the spirit of *Provoke* and the world. The *Provoke* group may have ended just after three years (1968–1970) but the spirit is not dead and still continues. We hope after visiting the exhibition, the audience are able to bring the spirit of *Provoke* to the world, like when Takuma Nakahira published *First Abandon the World of Pseudo-Certainty* and began to question the centrism around ourselves and criticize "what is right?" through independent thinking. This is the "Provoke attitude".

Lan: History. Exploring the answers to questions like, "What Japan is like and how do we perceive Japan?", "How do Daido Moriyama's works become classic and everyone regards his works as masterpieces?", "How Takuma Nakahira becomes the so-called legend?". Through this, perhaps we will know a little bit about them. This exhibition provides the reason why they became "them" after all.

Some people may wonder, what will this exhibition provoke in you? The exhibition doesn't punch you directly but uses a more restrained and low-profile approach, like *Provoke's* own declaration of

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"provocative materials for thought". After we learn about the development of Japan and the world, the *Provoke* spirit, the actions of other artists and how they have created or impacted the world—no matter the scale is big or small—is in a way making history too.