

The Japan Times

CULTURE

ART

Things that changed photography

JUL 28, 2015

BY JOHN L. TRAN

SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

In the late 1960s, the *mono-ha* (school of things) movement arose from the Japanese art-school scene, with the Korean-born artist [Lee Ufan](#) — who went from the philosophy department at Nihon University to teaching at Tama Art University — as its most renowned proponent. Using raw materials and with a minimal level of manipulation, *mono-ha* styled itself as anti-representational, with an implied opposition to mimesis as a “Western” art tradition. Rather than focusing on the form and value of the art object, the emphasis was on understanding existence and the relation between matter, its environment and human consciousness.

A few *mono-ha* works, such as a Jiro Takamatsu’s “Oneness of Wood,” which challenges us to comprehend whether a wooden block filled with wood chips taken from itself has fundamentally changed as a substance, are included in “Things: Rethinking Japanese Photography and Art in 1970s.” Another piece, “Push Up” by [Lee Ufan](#) — a sheet of paper marked by a grid of rough holes tinged with *sumi* ink — exemplifies the artist’s interest in abstract expressionism, minimalism and the physical properties of different materials. The main premise of the exhibition, however, is to connect the practice of *mono-ha*, which is going through something of a revival, to the contemporaneous photographic experimentation of Takuma Nakahira, Yutaka Takanishi, Kiyoji Otsuji and Issei Suda and their investigation into whether the reality of things could be perceived without the interference of the photographer’s subjectivity.

To cut to the chase, the experimentation, not the solution, is the point of the exhibition. Inspired by the surreal lack of comment in Eugene Atget’s encyclopedic treatment of Paris and the cool formality of Walker Evans in the early ’70s, Nakahira pursued the idea of photography without ego and came close to the visual equivalent of automatic writing. Takanishi traded the grainy, blurred 35 mm street photography that he promoted in the short-lived *Provoke* magazine — which he cofounded with Nakahira and writers Koji Taki and Takahiko Okada — for the more stately practice of a tripod-mounted large format

camera. Otsuji, after a pre- and postwar career that embraced the surreal, made a foray into trying to capture the objective essence of things before concluding that photography without meaning was impossible. And Suda's technical precision makes his photographs both a window on reality and objects.

These photographers rightly have a growing fan base outside of Japan, where they are considered elder statesmen of the postwar avant-garde. Unfortunately the dynamic and unstable trial and error of the work in this show is not exhibited in such a way that transmits the fervor of the times, or the conviction with which the artists thought they were breaking new ground.

No doubt the museum is working under financial and bureaucratic restraints, but then, as now, ordinary problems can sometimes require radical solutions.

"Things: Rethinking Japanese Photography and Art in 1970s" at The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, runs until Sept. 13; 10 a.m.- 5 p.m. ¥430. Closed Mon.
www.momat.go.jp/english/am/exhibition/things2015

URL: <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2015/07/28/arts/things-changed-photography/#.VbhPCrPtHy>