

As a Mirror: a problem of intimacy in contemporary Japanese photography from Masahisa Fukase's *Yoko*

Abstract

This study explores the evolving trend of post-war Japanese artistic photography, observing its evolution from a realism-focused beginning to a more personal and intimate mode of expression. Within the interconnected realms of the photo-maker industry, consumer society, photo media, and photographic education, the concurrent acceleration of these elements forms the backdrop for the emergence of artistic photographic expression, capturing the essence of a transformative era. Photographers started integrating their life photographs and expressing the societal zeitgeist from their personal perspectives as they escaped from the lens of realism. Within this evolution, the act of husbands photographing their wives became an important and conspicuous representation of this personal photography. Renowned photographers in Japan such as Masahisa Fukase, Nobuyoshi Araki, and Seiichi Furuya symbolized this sort of work. Of particular significance is Fukase's work "*Yoko*" (1978), which takes center stage in this study, exploring the nuances of "intimate photography" and unpacking key themes such as "daily life," "intimacy," and "subjectivity" in the context of Japanese personal expression during the 1970s. As we delve into the intricacies of Fukase's collection *Yoko* (1978), an examination casts a spotlight on the dual identities embodied by *Yoko* as both 'female' and 'family.' Fukase, in this exploration, infuses vibrancy into historical depictions of 'women' and 'family,' offering a nuanced perspective rooted in intimacy, thereby deviating from traditional photographic norms. This shift marks a departure from the confines of realism, as photographers began integrating their life photographs and projecting the societal zeitgeist through their personal perspectives. The study further navigates potential complexities arising from this intimate photographic expression, dissecting dynamics across three dimensions: the action of photography, the photographer, and the subject. The act of photography is portrayed as a somewhat plundering action, laying bare inherent power dynamics. Fukase, wielding the authority to capture images, and *Yoko*, possessing the right to refuse but situated in a position of relative vulnerability, create a palpable tension. Set against the societal backdrop of 1970s Japan, where women's status was notably lower than today, this form of intimate photography serves as a lens through which the unequal power dynamics are exposed, ultimately contributing to the dissolution of Fukase and *Yoko's* marriage.

Central to this exploration is *Yoko's* poignant text: "He, day after day, thinks only about photography, harboring emotions in this world, living, and struggling with thoughts—all of this is unique to him alone. For a decade, he has lived with me, yet while living together, he gazes at me only through the lens, and the me he captures seems unmistakably to be none other than himself." (*Yoko* 1973) This quote offers a glimpse into her dissatisfaction with Fukase's prolonged dedication to photography. *Yoko's* discontent during Fukase's collaborative photo sessions with her stemmed from two significant factors. Firstly, entrenched historical norms dictated men as photographers and women as subjects, with these gender roles intricately linked to the social dynamics of the shooting situation. Secondly, Fukase, in his role as the photographer, wielded the power to photograph *Yoko*. While the desire for self-expression

intensified, the entanglement with power dynamics also exacerbated Yoko's dissatisfaction. Prompted by these reflections, the study pivots to a fundamental question: Why does Fukase's photographing of Yoko lead to her dissatisfaction? This inquiry offers a novel perspective on contemporary Japanese photography. The unraveling of Fukase and Yoko's relationship, leading to their eventual divorce, is attributed to these underlying issues, creating a logical thread that connects historical narratives with interpersonal consequences.

The focus on Fukase's work "Yoko" becomes imperative, encapsulating the heightened prominence of these issues. While previous studies of him have centered on keywords like 'Self-expression,' 'raven,' and 'play,' the dissatisfaction expressed by Yoko has been a relatively overlooked facet. The author underscores the significance of delving into this aspect, contending that the relationship between the photographer and the photographed, particularly within the context of a husband photographing his wife, demands exploration from a feminist standpoint. This approach not only illuminates the historical and contemporary dimensions of Japanese photography but also promises to unveil fresh insights, providing a logical progression from historical context to personal dynamics.

In essence, this research represents a concerted effort to expand our understanding of intimate photography within the post-war artistic expression in Japan. By examining Fukase's Yoko (1978) through a multifaceted lens, the study seeks to unravel the intricate relationships between the photographer, the subject, and the societal constructs that have historically shaped their interactions. Beyond the meticulous analysis of a singular work, the research adopts a holistic approach, contextualizing intimate photography within the socio-cultural landscape of its time. As it delves into the historical context, gender norms, and artistic trends prevalent during the post-war period, the study aims to construct an inclusive narrative, enriching our understanding of the transformative shifts and thematic developments characterizing Japanese photographic art during this pivotal era.