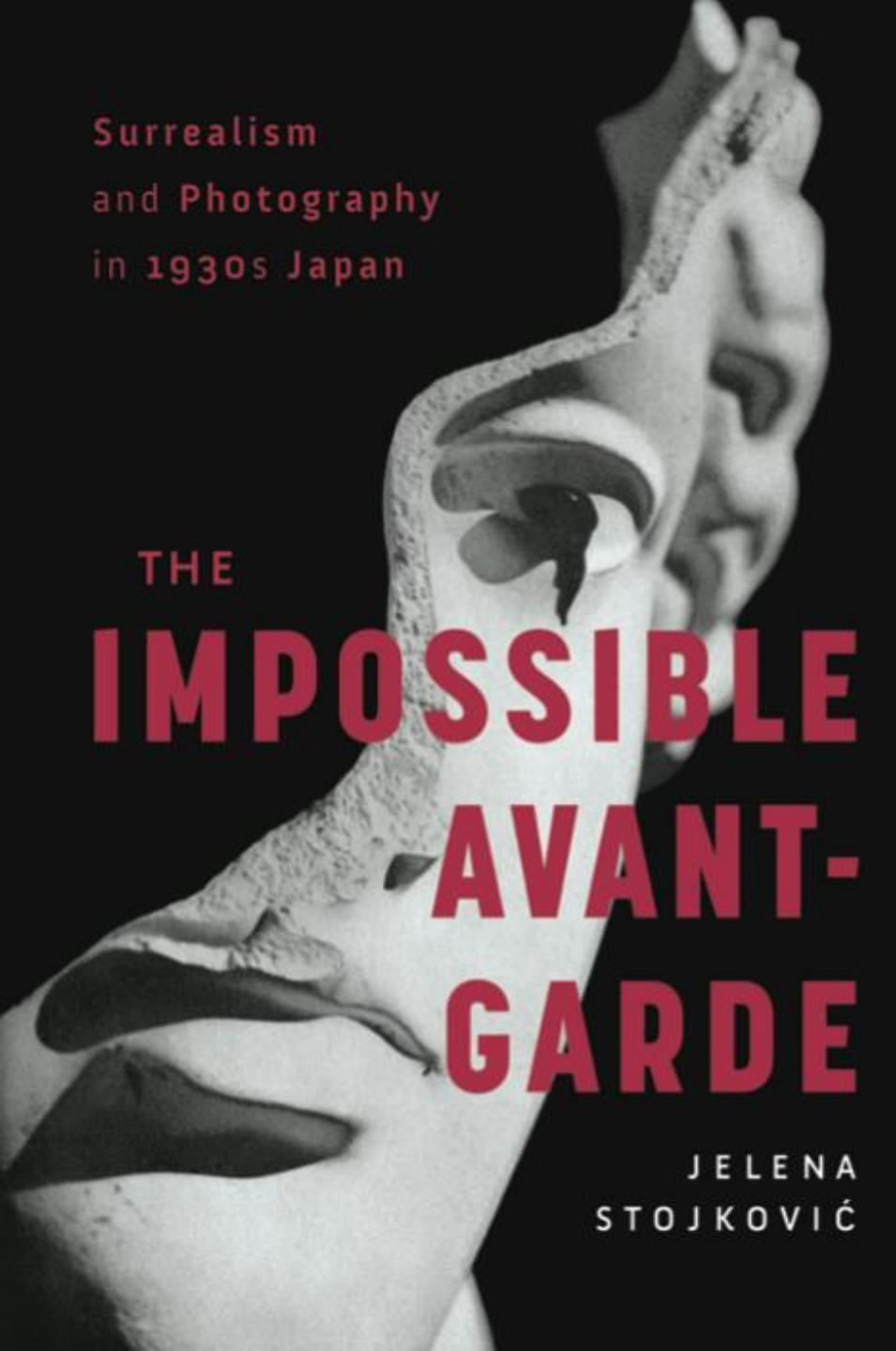




Surrealism
and Photography
in 1930s Japan

THE
**IMPOSSIBLE
AVANT-
GARDE**

JELENA
STOJKOVIĆ

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seeming possibility of recording a passing moment.²² The text, in its 1928 book version, also includes two photograms by Man Ray, which are reproduced in Takiguchi's translation to Japanese.²³ Takiguchi wrote a separate article on Man Ray for the August 1931 issue of *Photo Times* where he tells the famous story of the artist's allegedly accidental discovery of the photogram technique after he turned the lights on while having several random objects left on a wetted sheet of undeveloped photo paper in his hotel room in 1921.²⁴ Man Ray published these 'accidents' the following August under a title *Les Champs délicieux* (1922), evoking Breton's and Soupault's book *Les Champs magnétiques* (1920). In the same manner as theirs was the first publication of automatic writing, Man Ray's was intended to be the first volume of automatic photographs.²⁵

In his article, Takiguchi identifies Man Ray as a prominent Surrealist artist and includes in Japanese translation the part of *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* that concerns his work. However, although such work was thereby known in Japan as explicitly Surrealist, the precise terms under which Nakayama was interested in or practised photography in relation to Surrealism are difficult to establish. In other words, whereas Man Ray's approach to photography developed in direct communication with Dada and Surrealism in its exploration of automatism, Nakayama termed the same approach as 'pure' art. According to Mitsuda Yuri, this difficulty registers the late development of Surrealist photography in Japan at the turn of the 1930s.²⁶ This factual situation, which was also recognized at the time of its taking place, was entangled with the generally problematic status of Japanese avant-garde art during the 1930s. In addition, it was also intertwined with the specific status of *shinkō shashin*, engulfed in this avant-garde under the umbrella of 'newness' when practised with an artistic ambition but detached from it when put in the service of journalism.

We can observe this difficulty in an exhibition of avant-garde painting, titled in French as *Exposition de la confédération des artistes d'avant-garde, Paris-Tokio*, which was initially mounted at the Tokyo Prefectural Art Museum (today's Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, est. 1926) for two weeks in December 1932. With Breton and André Salmon on the board of organizers, it included 116 works by fifty-six artists coming from different backgrounds but as thirty-one of those were made by fifteen Surrealist artists – such as Arp, de Chirico, Ernst, Masson, Miró, Man Ray and Yves Tanguy – it was the first opportunity to view Surrealist painting in the country.²⁷ In Japanese, the exhibition was titled *Parī Tōkyō Shinkō Bijutsu ten* (*Exhibition of New Art in Paris and Tokyo*) and after Tokyo it toured the country with minor differences, travelling to Fukuoka, Kanazawa, Kumamoto, Kyoto, Nagoya and Osaka. On the Japanese side, twenty-four artists exhibited thirty-six works of art, including two photographs by Nakayama, listed as *Composition 1* (*Kompozishon 1*) and *Composition 2* (*Kompozishon 2*).²⁸ Nakayama produced a number of photomontages under the same title at around the same time, complementing his early experiments in photogram technique with references to



Figure 1.1 Nakayama Iwata, *Untitled*, *Asahi Camera*, May 1932, cover page, courtesy of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum.

the bohemian experience of modern life – revue dancers, theatre productions, nightclubs and cafes – as in the case of a cover page for *Asahi Camera* in March 1932 (Figure 1.1). The particular composition also alludes to Nakayama's life in Paris, as it includes an ashtray of the Galeries Lafayette department store and a pipe, a motif that paid tribute to the renowned Japanese modernist painter Fujita Tsuguharu, who acted as mentor to Nakayama during his time in Paris and formed various relations with Surrealist circles during the 1930s.²⁹

The exhibition was conceived and mounted by the Association of Avant-Garde Artists, Paris-Tokyo (Association de artistes d'avant-garde, Paris-Tokio), set up between the Japanese painter Minegishi Gilchi, Salmon and Pablo Picasso in

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● フォトグラムの 自由な制作のために

杉 田 秀 夫



圖 1 第

Figure 1.3 Ei-Kyū, 'For a Free Production of Photograms', *Photo Times*, Vol. 8, August 1930, page 93, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (30008-068).



Figure 1.6 Matusbara Jūzō, *Untitled*, *Japan Photographic Annual*, 1936, page 93, courtesy of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum.

elements that contrast the old and the new in the inclusion of both the modern cityscape and the antique pillar as well as in the positioning of the two female figures, seen from the back and the front and wearing traditional Japanese as well as Western clothing. The male figure, branded with a letter 'O' on his chest and seen in the foreground, is possibly sourced from the advertisements for Charles Atlas's body building course that was popular at the time, and like the female figure above it, has the head substituted by another magazine cut-out. Matsubara's contribution to the same magazine in 1936 is an equally ambitious and complex composition in which symbols of modernist science and urbanity are juxtaposed with those of eroticism and tradition in a similar contrast between the old and the new, this time laid out in the lower and upper parts of the image (Figure 1.6). Urban high-rises tower over the traditional rooftops whereas an



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image we see Nagata on the left with a towel on his head, whereas in its lower part we see another photograph showing Takiguchi wearing the towel.⁹⁷ The image uses the motif of a mirror to defamiliarize both photographs and suggests a simultaneous existence of binary oppositions: between high and low or conscious and unconscious states of the mind. On this occasion, it is important to note, Nagata and Takiguchi also subscribe to staging, in a similar way to Hanawa. They verify collaboration as an important mode of work and explore alternative forms of practice that attest to the versatility of Surrealist photography in 1930s Japan.

Whereas photography was increasingly accepted in Surrealist circles in Japan in the later part of the 1930s through the experiments with Surrealist photo-collage among different artists, photographers themselves were still not fully integrated with those circles despite their advanced use of the medium. This situation continued even in such Surrealist groups as the Room Nine Society (Kyūshitsukai), which was established in 1939 with the support of Fujita and Tōgō, two prominent Japanese Surrealist painters. Regardless of the group's extensive production of photo-collages – by such artists as Hashimoto Tetsurō, Katsura Yuki and Yoshihara Jirō – no member of the group identified as a photographer. It was only in the Art and Culture Association (Bijutsu Bunka Kyōkai), the last primarily Surrealist collective to form in the decade in May 1939 on Fukuzawa's initiative, that photographers such as Nagata were also enlisted as members alongside Surrealist artists and critics.⁹⁸ The forty founding members came



Figure 2.9 Nagata Isshū, *Fire Mountain*, 1939, Tokyo Photographic Art Museum © Asazuma Shoichi.



Figure 2.10 Abe Yoshifumi, *A Shot of Mount Yake*, *Photo Times*, Vol. 17, July 1940, unpaginated, courtesy of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum © Abe Yoshimori.

from almost all the previous Surrealist groups – New Plasticity, Independent Art, School of Tokyo, various art students' groups, as well as Room Nine – and the group launched a magazine of the same title, *Bijutsu bunka*, in August of the same year. The first exhibition of the group included photographic submissions, among them Nagata's *Fire Mountain* (*Hi no yama*) from 1939 (Figure 2.9). The image shows a constellation of heavy rocks seemingly floating in the air, seen



Figure 4.3 Shimozato Yoshio, *Two Dormant Volcanoes, Kameraman*, February 1939, page 28, courtesy of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum © Shimozato Masao.

the act of recording is the means of such interaction, and the fusion is presented in the final shot. In other words, both Shimozato and Sakata use the straight shot to deliver imprints of their subjective desire onto objects, and also mobilize the transgressive character of sexuality as a means of rendering the process recognizable and potentially affective, while applying Dalí's concept of 'edible' beauty in order to suggest the animate character of the objects photographed.



Figure 5.6 Takahashi Wataru, '___', *Camera Art*, June 1939, page 7, courtesy of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum.



Figure 5.8 Sakata Minoru, *Parage*, 1939, Private Collection, on deposit at Nagoya City Art Museum © Sakata Takashi.

severing the ties between the image and the object it represents and thus, in Dalinian terms, 'corroding' reality.

This advanced use of photography's technology coincided with the medium's acceptance as an established art form, announced by the inclusion of such photographers as Nakayama and Matsubara in the *Kokuten* in 1939. In the same year, Sakata and Shimozato submitted their works to the annual exhibition of the Free Artists' Association and were among the rare Japanese photographers to be featured in *Mizue* in August. Their participation in an exhibition of a group mostly consisting of Surrealist artists should be seen as an attempt to establish their positions in the art world of the time, making alliances among Surrealist painters of the group (also including those with a specific interest in photography such as Hasegawa and Ei-Kyū). Shimozato highlights the importance of such integration in 'Thoughts of a Photo Amateur', published in June 1939.⁶⁶ In this text, he describes his frustration with the fact that those photographers who are interested in photography as an arts practice are considered 'dilettantes' within the photography 'world' and are looked down on as amateurs by the so-called professionals, primarily interested in photojournalism.⁶⁷



Figure 5.9 Sakata Minoru, *Sphere*, 1939, Private Collection, on deposit at Nagoya City Art Museum © Sakata Takashi.

However, whereas Shimozato seems to be advocating the same reversal of the positions of relevance as Takahashi, the methodology assumed is significantly different and its final result does not make apparent the primary Surrealist origin of the intended effect or the reversal of scales that it achieves in a focus on a small object. In Sakata's case, the image is from the *Sphere* series, another result of his experiments produced that year and reproduced across different publications, in which his manipulated prints are sometimes merged with images of actual objects, a bean or a stone (Figure 5.9). The main interest in the reversal of scales using Dalí's paranoiac-critical method is maintained, as he is continuing to show close-up views of small and insignificant things. Given the impressive size of the series (approximately 50 cm × 60 cm) this reversal also operates through the experience of viewing the print.⁶⁸ Unlike Shimozato's 'camera's automatism', however, this body of work did not achieve a focused public presentation and its elaboration is scattered across different articles. All the elements of the project remain recognizable at least in terms of figuration, as a clear thread of his interest in abstraction can be followed from the purely technical *Flowing Eyeball*, through

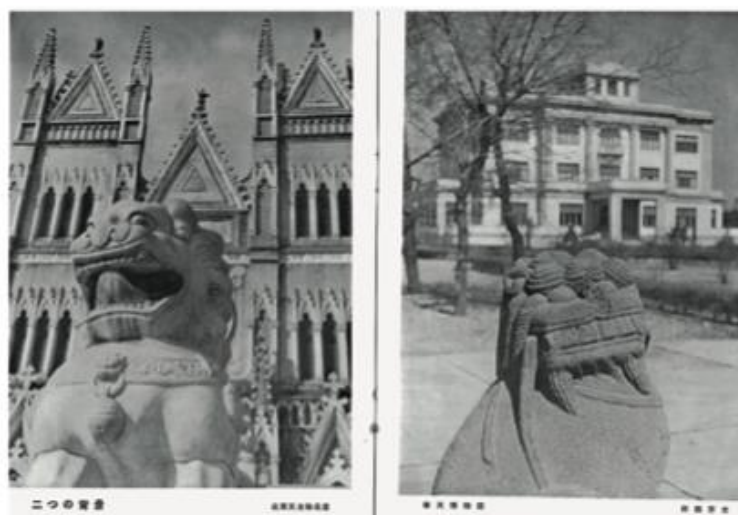


Figure 6.2 Abe Yoshifumi, *Two Landscapes*, *Photo Times*, Vol. 16, February 1940, pages 38–39, courtesy of Tokyo Photographic Art Museum © Abe Yoshimori.

Landscapes (*Futatsu no fûkei*) shows the Chinese guardian lions (*shishi*) in a similar manner, placed in front of the cultural sites in East Asia: the Church of the Saviour in Beijing (1890) on the left and the State Museum (a national museum of Manchukuo) in Mukden on the right (Figure 6.2).¹⁸ Most of Abe's photographs taken during his assignment on the 'continent' focus on everyday objects and scenes and are published consecutively in January, February and May 1940. His submission to the first exhibition of Art and Culture is seen in a direct continuation, in the June issue, and suggests a singular body of work. Rendered in solarization and titled as *White Portrait* (*Shiroi pōtorêto*) and *Black Portrait* (*Kuroi pōtorêto*), they show two bust portraits reminiscent of *Two Poses*: the focus on oppositions is still maintained, not only by the black-and-white renditions of the prints but also by the open and closed eyes of the sitters in two respective images.

Avant-garde photographers such as Abe were not the first artists to travel to Manchukuo and the occupied territories in East Asia. Even the notion of the avant-garde was not unknown to artists working there, as *Pari Tōkyō* also travelled to Dalian in April 1933.¹⁹ The exhibition was similarly effective as in Japan and had such a strong impact on some of the local artists that they started practising Surrealism from then onwards, setting up different groups and seeking the means of exchange with Surrealist artists in Japan.²⁰ Fukuzawa's visit to Manchukuo in 1935, lasting four months, was among the most prominent

