

Ryūichi, Kaneko, Toda Masako and Ivan Vartanian. 2022. Japanese Photography Magazines: 1880s–1980s. Tokyo: Goliga.

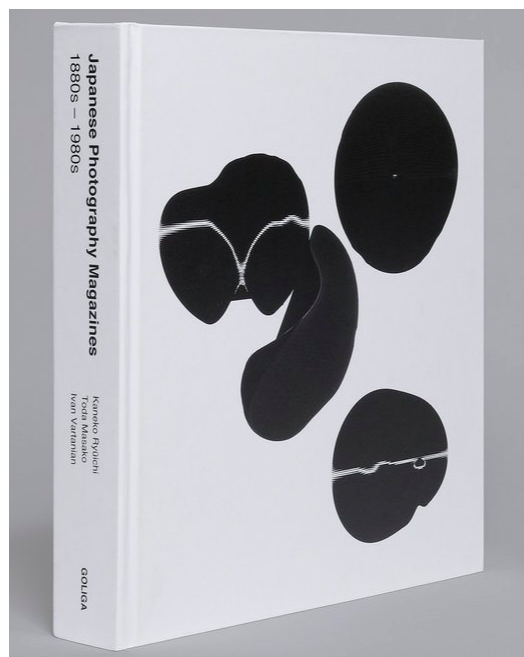
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JAPANESE PHOTOGRAPHY occupies a prominent and sustained position within Western photographic culture. From postwar figures who have entered the canon — such as Moriyama Daidō and Araki Nobuyoshi — to more recent artists like Shiga Lieko and Kawauchi Rinko, Japanese photographers are widely recognised as central protagonists in broader histories of the medium. Their work circulates extensively through exhibitions, publications, and academic discourse, shaping key debates around formal, poetic, and conceptual possibilities of photography.

This visibility has been structured largely through publishing. Western engagement with Japanese photography has foregrounded printed matter, particularly through the republication of historically significant photobooks originally issued in Japan, alongside new books by Japanese photographers produced by European and North American publishers. At the same time, a substantial body of publications has established historical and theoretical frameworks for readers with no knowledge of the Japanese language. Titles such as *I'm So Happy You Are Here: Japanese Women Photographers from the 1950s to Now* (Aperture, 2024) have expanded historiographical perspectives, while *At the Limits of the Gaze: Selected Writings by Takuma Nakahira* (Aperture, 2025), edited and translated by Franz Prichard, positioned critical writing as a foundational element of postwar Japanese photographic culture for an international readership.

The material status of photography constitutes a central dimension of this history. For much of the twentieth century, Japanese photography developed through a markedly unencumbered relationship with reproducibility, circulation, and paper. Books and, above all, magazines functioned as primary sites of photographic practice, where images unfolded through sequences, essays, layouts, and editorial positions, embedded within ongoing critical and social debates. Only in recent decades has Japanese photography been increasingly reframed through the structures of the contemporary art system, with greater emphasis placed on wall-based display, limited editions, and notions of objecthood and aura. This shift has significantly altered the terms through which Japanese photography is received, collected, and historicised, particularly in Western contexts.

Ivan Vartanian played a decisive role in shaping the frameworks through which Japanese photography has been historicised and disseminated outside Japan. Working from Japan as a curator, editor, and historian with an international outlook, he has contributed to the formation of key historiographical infrastructures. His editorial projects for Aperture, including *Setting Sun: Writings by Japanese Photographers* (edited with Akihiro Hatanaka and Yutaka Kanbayashi) and *Japanese Photobooks of the 1960s & '70s* (with Ryuichi Kaneko), consolidated the centrality of publishing, writing, and editorial culture within the study of Japanese photography.

The founding of Goliga extends this trajectory. Vartanian's earlier examination of the photobook as a defining format established a crucial point of departure, and *Japanese Photography Magazines, 1880s to 1980s* advances this by turning to periodicals as a foundational infrastructure of photographic culture. Authored with Toda Masako and Kaneko Ryūichi — an extremely important Japanese photography critic who passed away in 2021, before the book's publication — and featuring individual essays by Fujii Yūko, Inokuchi Yoshio, Nariai Hajime, and Soeno Tsutomu, the book approaches magazines as spaces of production, circulation, and debate, situating

them at the core of how photography in Japan developed, was contested, and continually redefined over more than a century.

Ivan Vartanian's introductory essay, "The Culture of Japan's Photography Magazines," functions as a lucid and compelling point of entry into the book. It outlines the scope of the project, identifies its central questions, and advances interpretative conclusions that frame the material that follows. While also offering a descriptive overview, the introduction positions magazines as a structural condition of possibility for the development of Japanese photography across the twentieth century.

At a moment when photobooks have come to occupy a position of heightened visibility and cultural value, *Japanese Photography Magazines, 1880s to 1980s* invites a return to magazines as an earlier and structurally different form of photography in print. Whereas photobooks typically centre on a strong authorial claim — a singular voice, sequence, and conceptual coherence — magazines operate through heterogeneity. They are characterised by multiplicity: of authors, genres, visual languages, critical positions, and sensibilities. Images coexist with other images, alongside texts, advertisements, technical information, and polemics, producing a discursive field that resists closure and linear interpretation. Magazines foreground photography as a contested and continuously negotiated practice rather than a stabilised oeuvre.

In Japan, photography magazines expressed a dense and engaged photographic community. This community extended far beyond image-making to encompass cameras, technologies, materials, techniques, and — crucially — discourse. Vartanian emphasises this discursive dimension: photography was actively thought in and through magazines. Ideas, modes of seeing, and aesthetic positions were debated, challenged, and refined in public. Conflicts and discussions were inherent to the practice, and magazines functioned as forums in which photography was collectively defined and not merely showcased.

According to Vartanian, this discursive richness is evident in the extraordinary range of textual forms reproduced in periodicals: interviews, criticism, artists' statements, features on recent exhibitions and publications, roundtable discussions, historical chronologies, personal memoirs, editors' notes, and open letters. The accumulation of voices created an environment in which photographic practice was constantly contextualised, historicised, and re-evaluated. Text and image worked together, reinforcing photography as a thinking practice embedded in dialogue.

Equally significant is the role magazines played as laboratories for photographers. Many series that were to become well-renowned first appeared in fragmentary form in magazines. Masahisa Fukase's raven photographs, which culminated in the famous *The Solitude of Ravens*, exemplify this process. Magazines allowed work to evolve, remain open to critique, and develop through engagement with editors, critics, and also readers. In turn, photo contests and prizes promoted by magazines also shaped what photographers submitted and, in turn, how they conceived their work and understood what was worthy of publication. Editorial frameworks were thus not neutral selection mechanisms: they actively participated in defining value, visibility, and relevance within the photographic field.

Still in the introductory text, Vartanian introduces a set of "frames of reading": recurring thematic and conceptual questions that appear throughout the book,

guiding the reader through historical continuities, shifts, and tensions. These frames allow readers to track both aesthetic developments and the social, cultural, and discursive dynamics that shaped Japanese photography over more than a century. Among the central frames is the “Tokyo-ization of Japan”, which traces the progressive consolidation of Tokyo as the political, cultural, and symbolic centre of the whole nation, shaping editorial decisions, photographic networks, and aesthetic trends, while simultaneously provoking attention to peripheral regions. The motif of the “young girl” reflects the prevalence of the female figure in Japanese iconography, particularly in the latter decades of the twentieth century, situated within a broader visual culture that includes cinema and art, and symptomatic of a society marked by entrenched patriarchal structures. The “shift from the real to realness” addresses the transformation in the understanding of photography from a medium that objectively captures reality to one that expresses subjective perception and human experience. Closely related are the attention to “the quotidian”, or “eventlessness”, which underscores photography’s engagement with everyday life, and the emergence of “the snapshot aesthetic”, whose immediacy, informality, and responsiveness to lived experience became defining characteristics of Japanese photography. Finally, the persistence of “ancient identity” highlights the role of photography in maintaining connections to tradition, local customs, rural landscapes, and peripheral communities, revealing the continuous negotiation between past and present, modernity and historical continuity. Together, these frames provide a conceptual lens through which the reader can perceive the complex interplay of practice, discourse, and culture running through the pages of the book.

The book is divided into three sections in chronological order: “Art Photography in an Era of Modernization”, tracing photographic culture up to the Second World War; “Photography in a New Nation”, addressing postwar reconstruction of society and visual language; and “Photography in the Age of Broadcasting”, opening in the 1960s amid television and mass communication. Through this lens, the book offers a rich overview of Japanese photographic history, moving from pictorialism and early artistic debates, through engagement with Western modernisms, wartime propaganda, postwar realism and subjectivist experimentation, to the landmark generations of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, including Narahara Ikko, Hosoe Eikoh, Kawada Kikuji, Nakahira Takuma, Araki Nobuyoshi, and Moriyama Daidō.

Beyond its historiographical and conceptual achievements, *Japanese Photography Magazines 1880s – 1980s* is also a remarkable editorial object. Its large format, nearly 500 pages, and meticulous layout place it close to a table book, making it both visually engaging and immediately accessible. At the same time, it embodies rigorous scholarship, with extensive research, detailed reproductions, and numerous translations of original magazine texts, allowing readers with no knowledge of Japanese language to access material that would otherwise be unavailable. The authors’ careful explanations of terminology, magazine types, and discursive conventions demonstrate a sustained pedagogical commitment, and a selected bibliography and comprehensive index further enhance its value for researchers and scholars. In sum, the book succeeds in combining visual enjoyment with in-depth analysis, functioning equally well for casual browsing and for sustained academic study.

As an editorial project, *Japanese Photography Magazines, 1880s to 1980s* represents a genuinely new and invaluable contribution. The ambition and care invested in its production — from structure and textual clarity to design, printing quality, and physical construction — are exemplary. It is an essential resource for scholars of Japanese photography in Western contexts, and it will undoubtedly appeal to a wider readership interested in the history of photography. This is a book that deepens understanding, reshapes perspectives, and sets a new standard for research on the printed history of photography.

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