



Shigeo Fukuda: The Solitary Prankster He is an intellectual schemer, a psychological trickster. A seat that doesn't stand up, a coffee cup with a handle on the inside, a two-headed screw, three-bladed scissors—all these are his idea of fun. Not content to let people rest with their mistaken visual assumptions, Fukuda has made a place for himself in the design scene on which no one seems especially inclined to infringe. Especially other designers. "I suppose he's just too unique to copy," concedes Ikko Tanaka. Kazumasa Nagai, who is a half-generation older than Fukuda, watched the young Fukuda rise quickly to prominence shortly after his graduation from the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music in 1956. "It is true that he rose more easily than, say, designers with less defined styles. But, because he created his style quickly and stuck to it, he has prospered."

Fukuda's first great international success was a whimsical exhibition of 120 playthings constructed of natural materials. It was held in Tokyo in 1965, and then in New York in 1967 at the IBM Gallery, thanks to Paul Rand. Titled "Toys and Things Japanese: The Works of Shigeo Fukuda," the toys foreshadowed the elements that would grow to define Fukuda and his work in the decades to come. One of the pieces Nagai particularly remembers is the "birdtree," a wooden toy that could be assembled as either a tree or a bird. Nagai says, "Fukuda has always worked strictly with ideas, humor, and visual tricks."

Fukuda himself says that if a client comes to him, the result is going to be within certain guidelines. It will not use photography, and it will have a curious twist. "Take a bread advertisement, for example," he says. "Somebody else might use a beautiful photo of a person eating bread. I won't. I'm always thinking of how I can solve the client's problem, while remaining true to myself."

Unlike most designers, who find their style as they find themselves, Fukuda seems to have deliberately constructed both, with the ultimate goal being distinction from the crowd.

As a kid, Fukuda always like to draw and to make things. Like most of his friends, he wanted to be a cartoonist. But unlike most of his friends, he distinguished himself at it while still a high school student, winning first prize in a manga contest with a hundred pages of a four-paneled strip he created, called *Genshi no Gen-chan*, or *Atomic Gen*. "Unfortunately," he says, "there was no manga department in the art school, so I went into design instead." He was always curious about the fallibility of the human eye, which tells us that straight lines curve and that parallel lines converge, but his decision to enter the world of illusion was as much a career choice as a natural bend. It was also a means once again of distinguishing himself, this time from all the "excellent rivals" he encountered: Tadanori Yokoo, Ikko Tanaka, Kazumasa Nagai, Kiyoshi Awazu. "When I graduated from the university, all these designers were coming from Kansai to Tokyo. And I thought about what I could do so as not to lose to them."

Now there is no mistaking a Shigeo Fukuda piece. "The person and the work seem to meld into one, and are indistinguishable," says Nagai. "I suppose you could say that he isn't capable of doing anything that is out of character."

Fukuda's works are all about human nature, human misconception, and human eyesight. Judging from the popularity of his work worldwide, it seems that people love to be reminded that they are human. Accessible to "anyone with human eyes," Fukuda says in the most successful pieces the artifice of his work leads to a greater comprehension of human beings. He insists that his monuments and posters are people-friendly. "The things that I make can be confirmed by the senses," he says. "Children see it, and grandmas see it. It's not a matter of knowledge, but of eyesight." Fukuda's point is that eyesight is not the same as understanding. The fact that a cone, viewed from the top, appears as a

circle gives Fukuda the upper hand in the visual game, in which the winner is the first one to disregard his last preconception. "I thought it would be interesting to utilize that mistaken intelligence man possesses." A welded pile of forks and spoons, seen as a shadow, for instance, is revealed as a motorcycle. A framed mirror tipped at just the right angle toward a horizontally placed sculpture contains an illusion of van Gogh's *Sunflower*.

By tricking the eyes, and therefore challenging understanding, Fukuda could be said to be carrying on the traditions of Dali and Matisse, but his work has a simplicity that he says is Japanese. He says, "As with the Japanese family crests,"—used on kimonos, gates, and other family possessions—"the effort is toward abridging as far as possible. With abridgement, it becomes stronger."

However, the visual simplicity to which Fukuda is faithful does not necessarily reveal a simplicity in the idea: "Old pond/frog jumping/the sound of water." Fukuda likens his "Victory" poster to haiku like this. Given the choice, he says, he prefers a heavy subject. "I don't know if there's such a thing as a deep laugh and a shallow one, but if there is, I'm after the deep laugh. I think that's why I like haiku. It may be just a frog and a pond, and yet, depending on how you think about it, it could be about the universe, or life."

Like haiku, Fukuda's pieces leave the viewer alone to, as he says, "finish the work" himself. The poster's function is to get the viewer's attention quickly, but the thinking that goes on afterward is a secondary function of his illusions. Once the audience has figured out Fukuda's trick, says Kazumasa Nagai, the experience eventually gives them a great sense of security.

The Fukuda residence and studio is like a great Fukuda monument, but with real-life effects, which illicit an unsettling reaction: "What is this? Am I seeing things right? Oh, I get it. Okay. Let's go on... That was odd." In a typically narrow Tokyo street, just steps away from the subway exit, is a great white facade, seven meters high and 15 meters wide. On the bottom right corner is a doorbell and an intercom; on the bottom left corner is a door, flush, unmarked, and nearly invisible. Once the visitor has made it past the first obstacle, he sees, to his right, at the end of a hallway that seems to narrow down and inward, a tiny red door and a full-length mirror, which reflects his own confusion. Fukuda, meanwhile, appears abruptly, and ushers the now-reeling visitor into the true entrance, which was right in front of him all along. Once the guest has made it up a flight of steel stairs, he's greeted by a paradise for anyone who loves greenery, natural light, and open, private space. Design books line the wall of the gray-carpeted landing, and the studio is glassed in on both sides. From his seat, the visitor is treated to a collection of Fukuda's 3-D works—for example, a lowercase 'a' that from ninety degrees in either direction appears as a lowercase 'z.' From the other side of a great, long barrier of a table, Fukuda looks out into space. Below is a Japanese garden, ancient as the giant trees in whose

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branches the visitor may now and again rest his exhausted psyche. Fukuda's house is famous among shelter magazine editors and design lovers. "Even people who don't have any direct business with me will tag along, just to see the house," he says. "I figure it's my house, so I can do what I like." For Fukuda, it is a small jest. For the visitor, it may bring on vertigo. Simply a trick for the eyes, it puts the viewer on unsure footing, then gradually restores his understanding of the world, albeit a little jumbled after the trip.

Here, in the lofty trees, distant from the wailing sirens, Fukuda thinks up his tricks and pranks. Alone. Like a comic working out his routine, Fukuda stays to himself until showtime. The ultimate reward, he says, is the reaction. "Now my rivals are designers abroad. When I make something, I think about what Seymour Chwast would think of it. Or maybe London's Alan Fletcher—he's probably out somewhere playing golf like a maniac. I'll make something interesting and see what he thinks of it." Tricksters of all sorts do this, anticipating the audience's reaction as they create, alternating between viewer and creator, so as to get the effect just right. While slaving away at a Mona Lisa collage he was assembling out of the national flags of 50 countries, Fukuda was thinking about the last laugh. "It took me a week," he says. "It's tiring, but what's fun is thinking about how surprised everyone will be by the finished piece. I can tell people I used 50 flags to make the Mona Lisa, but they need to see it to believe it."

It takes a certain amount of practice to be able to stand in the viewer's place. And in Japan, where design is more abstract and tends toward fine art rather than logical solutions to specific problems, not all designers have had this practice. The discipline of creating illusions has given Fukuda an advantage. "For communication, which has a distinct purpose, you have to be able to read your audience's lifestyle and its thinking."

What happens when that thinking is alien to the designer is one of the problems Fukuda is struggling with now in his role as international envoy for the Japanese design world. Asia is looking to Japan to lead it into the international design world, and Europe is looking to Japan to introduce it to the Japanese market. "Emotions are the same all over the world, but customs aren't," sighs Fukuda, who is in charge of JAGDA's international relations.

Even in the past few months, Fukuda had directly experienced some distressing effects of this fact. He spoke in India at a design school. "The design they're studying is all aimed at making commercials to sell the products of industry, but in a country with no industry to speak of, and homeless in the streets. How much sense does that make? That's what design is all about: how to make advertisements. But depending on the country, there may be people who can't even read."

In Indonesia, Fukuda says the message "Let's protect nature" cannot be represented by a tree held in the hands, because nature is a menacing force. He adds: "In places where architectural

ruins are the people's bread-and-butter business, they're out there every morning sweeping out the crevices between the stones. With tiny brushes. One seed, and in a week the ruins will be overrun with greenery."

For the African audience, designers need to express complicated processes with images, because many of the viewers cannot read. "To teach illiterate mothers to give their children two doses of medicine every two hours, they're going to have to use drawings. Design conferences in Africa have to address problems like this." Tadanori Yokoo, who is a generation younger than Fukuda and Tanaka, yet was included in a whole slew of group shows with them in the 1960s and '70s, admires Fukuda for his ardent concern that design be popularized and properly understood. "Other designers are in their own worlds," says Yokoo, "and if their work has an effect, fine. Fukuda is driven." Kazumasa Nagai attributes Fukuda's influence on international design to his personality: "Because of the kind of person he is, he creates an atmosphere of intimacy, and without any great command of English, but with just gestures, he has been able to make close friends with people around the world."

It's because he is on the front lines of international design that Fukuda can speak with such conviction about the problems. He himself blundered recently, and on a choice assignment. Asked to design the pictograms for the Lisbon Expo, he came up with something new, exciting, and totally wrong. "I did 84 different varieties, and I thought these pictograms would go down in history." Comprised of just triangles and circles, the pictograms apparently were indecipherable to the local audience. "For a taxi stand, for example, I did a car made up of two triangles on the top, three on the bottom, and two circles for wheels. More than 90 percent of the visitors will be Portuguese, and they couldn't understand the pictogram. I was asked to make the car look like a car."

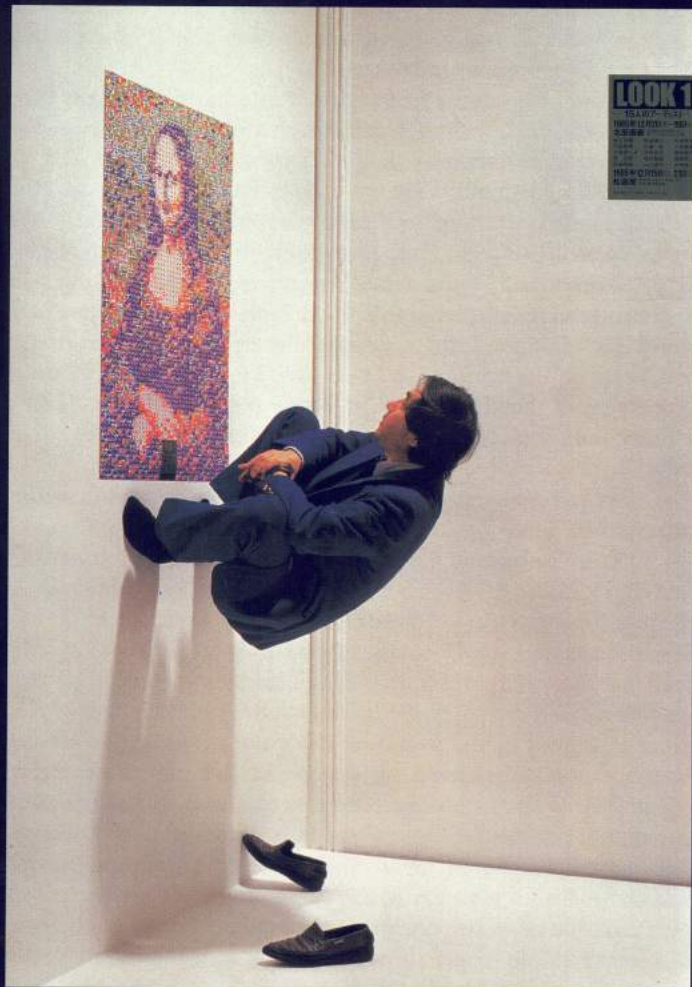
The next five years in Asian international design will bear the stamp of Shigeo Fukuda's concern that designers get global. He is a judge in the Internet Design Competitions, is busying guiding JAGDA's international activities, and is in pivotal positions in the organizations of two major design conferences.

It's fitting that a master prankster like Fukuda be asked to help guide design into a suitable place in the next century. He has trained himself for the past 40 years to look for the universal element of humor in the situation, the point at which the viewer breaks down and changes his viewpoint, and maybe his mind. Meanwhile, back in his sanctuary, as he stares out at the trees twisting in the wind, Shigeo Fukuda is thinking of an airplane. On domestic flights in Japan, the moments before landing are transmitted onto a screen in the cabin, and the passengers feel much like the pilot, responsible for bringing everyone back down to earth. Fukuda would show a building, growing closer by the minute. Every man for himself. ■



Shigeo Fukuda poster exhibition, 1997, at the GGG Gallery, Tokyo.

LOOK 1
15A07-15A1
15A10-15A11-15A12
15A13-15A14
15A15-15A16
15A17-15A18
15A19-15A20
15A21-15A22
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15A97-15A98
15A99-15A100

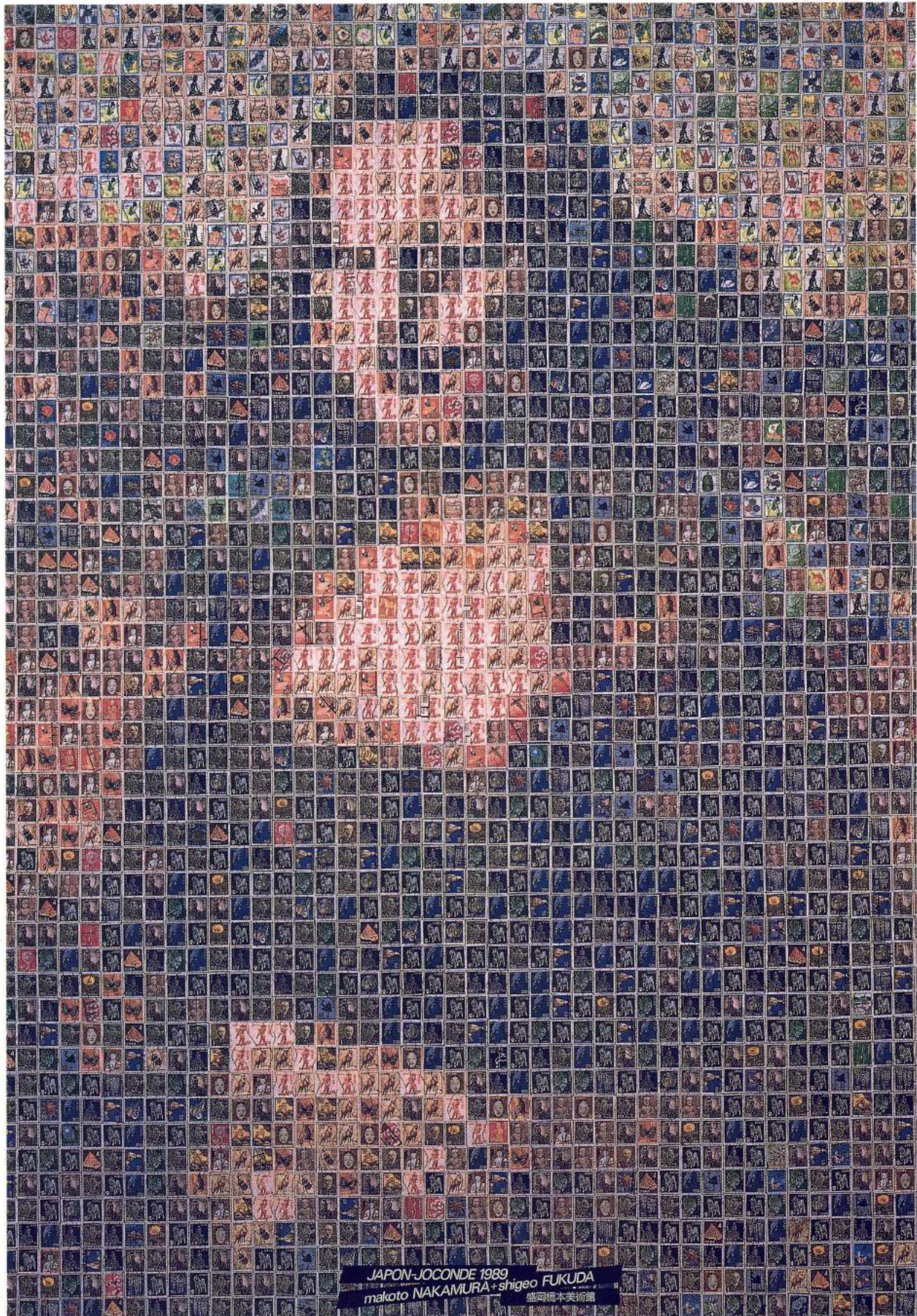


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15A99-15A100

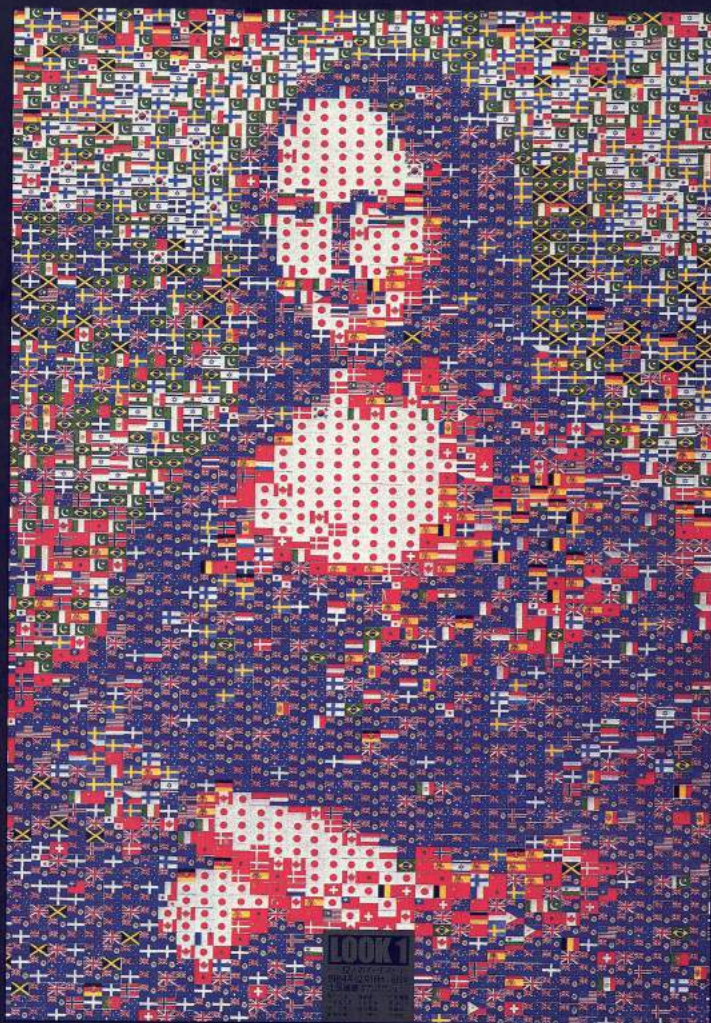


LOOK
15人のアーティスト
1985年12月2日(月) - 10
北辰画廊
麻生 尚博 塚本 隆二 大友 洋
大友 隆孝 佐藤 一郎 下田 正
手塚 豊次夫 中林 忠良 野田 浩
原 正樹 福田 敏雄 坂田 幸
高田 昭彦 山川 隆夫 米津 和
1985年12月15日(日) - 21
松坂屋
DESIGNED BY SHIGEO FUJIKAWA

(Opposite)
"Look 1" silkscreen exhibition
poster, 1985.



"Japon-Jaconde"
silkscreen poster, 1989.



1992年9月10日(日) - 21日(月)

横浜高島屋ギャラリー(8階)

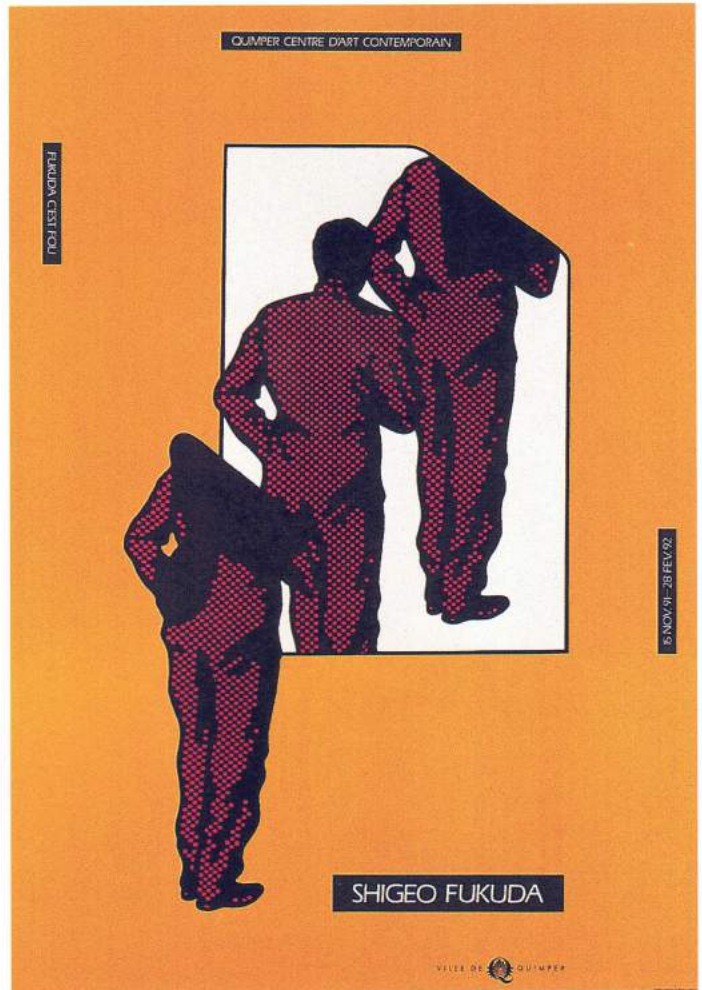
主催：横浜高島屋ギャラリー、美術的芸術文化センター
協賛：神奈川県立美術館、横浜国立大学、横浜国立大学芸術文化センター

総心の軌跡
SHIGEO FUKUDA
福田繁雄展

入場料：一般100円(小学生50円、中学生100円、高校生100円)
1階：www.takashimaya.com

 Takashimaya YOKOHAMA
横浜高島屋 0-TCL 042 211-1111 (本館受付)

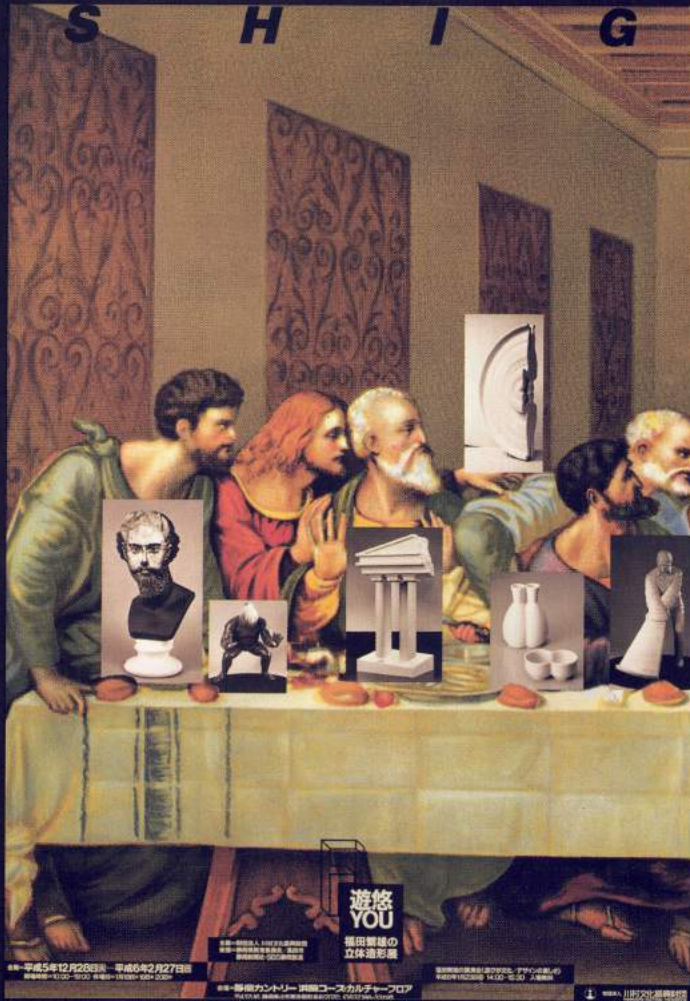
"Fukuda c'est Fou"
silkscreen posters, 1991.
Client: Quimper Centre d'Art
Contemporain, France.



(Opposite, top)
"Look 1"
exhibition poster, 1985.

(Opposite, bottom)
"Shigeo Fukuda-Ecology"
exhibition poster, 1992.
Client: Takashimaya Offset.

(This spread)
"Shigeo Fukuda 3-D Design"
exhibition posters.



(Opposite)
Silkscreen posters for a Shigeo Fukuda
poster exhibition, 1997,
at the GGG Gallery, Tokyo.



(This page, left)
"Victory" poster, 1976.

(Right)
"UCC Coffee"
poster for the Science Expo
Coffee Pavillion, 1984.