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Troubled times: A violent demonstration staged on the campus of Tokyo Medical Dental College in 1969 is captured in this photo by Takeyoshi Tanuma and provided by Exit Art in New York. KYODO PHOTO

NEW YORK — People chaining themselves to trees, students rallying against the Vietnam War and protesters against globalization are among the many images of activists in the United States. An exhibit held in New York, however, pointed out such ideas have equally firm roots in Japan, a country more commonly known for its harmony and national unity than domestic strife.

"Both the civil rights movement in the U.S. and the Japanese movements in the 1960s take advantage of the fact that they can see people in other parts of the world," said Josh MacPhee, standing next to a photo of Japanese protesters taken more than 30 years ago. "I think that their tactics actually influenced each other."

MacPhee, 35, and Dara Greenwald, 37, displayed about a dozen different pieces from social movements in Japan from the past 40 years in a New York cultural center called Exit Art. The two independent activists and artists were the curators of "Signs of Change: Social Movement Cultures 1960s To Now."

The exhibit was on display from Sept. 20 to Dec. 6, comprising hundreds of items of print art, photography and media installations from more than 50 countries. All the pieces were aimed at showing the global overlap and fluidity of political protests and social campaigns during the past 40 years.

On the last day of the exhibit, Greenwald and MacPhee spoke about their individual hopes for the exhibit's influence on the public, and the reason they felt it was important to show "signs of change" from Japan.

"This exhibition has allowed us to really get much deeper into the specificities of the times that we were not familiar with. I know much more about Japanese political culture now than I did 18 months ago," MacPhee said.

The Japan pieces focused on three affairs — the 1960s student movement, protests over the building of Narita International Airport and those targeting the Group of Eight summit in Japan last summer. The 1960s student movement in Japan was most notably a reflection of resistance among students at more than 300 universities to the U.S.-Japan security treaty. The treaty, signed in 1960, established much of the political mood for Japan-U.S. diplomacy after the Cold War. Many Japanese radicals believed the treaty placed unjust emphasis on Japan's support of U.S. military interests and actions, including the Vietnam War.

Students in self-organized groups such as Zenkyoto (The All-Campus Joint Struggle Committee) staged street protests and strikes at several campuses.

Plans for Narita airport were announced in 1966 after it was deemed Haneda airport could no longer fulfill demand for transport in and out of Japan. Believed by many students to be yet another stage for unchallenged U.S. access to Japan, protests began again. This time, local farmers whose land was seized for airport infrastructure also joined the fold of taking on the establishment.

Greenwald and MacPhee arranged for a film screening last Oct. 11 of "Narita," a documentary about the farmers' revolt, as part of the "Signs of Change" exhibit. Greenwald, with a background in film, explained the success of the screening and the importance of its message to a non-Japanese audience.

"It's amazing in terms of stereotypes," Greenwald said of the protesters in the film.

"The amount of Japanese women in the struggle doing intense direct action, and having really strong views . . . it's very counter to the mainstream stereotypes about most Japanese women, like geisha, etc. You realize that if we had grown up seeing this side of Japan, our relations (with the people of Japan) might be different," she said.

MacPhee said a number of Japanese political films like "Narita" were made, but it was the only one accessible and available with English subtitles. Other pieces from movements in Japan included posters with German phrases and excerpts of songs from North American icons like the Beastie Boys and Celine Dion.

Other Asian countries featured at the exhibit included South Korea, Indonesia and China. "Whether it's Japan, South Africa, or Portugal, (the show illustrates) that we are a part of each other's lives in a real way," MacPhee said. Greenwald said the exhibit will reopen in Pittsburgh on Jan. 23 and expressed hope to take the show to Japan at some point.