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Takuma Nakahira

A mythical figure in the story of Japanese photography, Takuma Nakahira is a founder of *Provoke* (*Purovoku*), the short-lived experimental magazine that featured photographers like Daido Moriyama working in the *are, bure, boke* (grainy, blurry, out-of-focus) style of the late 1960s. His extensive writings explore photography's capacity to probe the shape-shifting contours of postwar Japanese society. Nakahira destroyed his own negatives in 1973, and he suffered a traumatic loss of memory in 1977, events that have contributed to his relative obscurity outside of Japan. In the following pages, we offer two perspectives on this vital figure: scholar Franz Prichard introduces Nakahira as a photographer and writer; and curator Matthew S. Witkovksy, who is currently planning a major exhibition on *Provoke*-era photography, unpacks Nakahira's landmark photo-installation *Circulation*, staged at the 1971 Paris Biennale.



At the Limits of the Gaze

Franz Prichard

Takuma Nakahira may be the most important Japanese photographer you have never heard of. In Japan, Nakahira is legendary for establishing, along with Daido Moriyama, an iconic *are, bure, boke* (grainy, blurry, out-of-focus) photographic style and as cofounder of *Provoke*, the influential, experimental photography magazine synonymous with this style. Nakahira is also a prolific thinker on the medium. He deftly traversed the boundaries between theory and practice during the 1960s and '70s in his critical writings on photography, art, film, journalism, radical politics, television, and tourism. The 2003 retrospective *Takuma Nakahira: Degree Zero—Yokohama*, curated by Shino

Photograph from
For a Language to Come
(Tokyo: Fudoshu, 1970)

Kuraisni at the Yokonama Museum of Art, was the first attempt to reveal the full scope of his work after decades of obscurity. Even more striking than Nakahira's relative anonymity both in Japan and abroad is the story of how he has interrogated the equally radical transformation of Japan's urban spaces. For in Nakahira's work, we discover a relentless questioning of the contours of urbanization. It is fitting, then, that the streets run wildly throughout his writings and photography. As we traverse these places of encounter, where gazes, bodies, and material things collide, Nakahira helps us begin to unravel the urban entanglements of circulation, vision, and power.

Nakahira started out as an editor for *Gendai no Me* (Contemporary eye), a leftist monthly cultural affairs magazine in the mid-1960s. In 1965 photographer Shomei Tomatsu invited Nakahira to help organize *One Hundred Years of Photography: The History of Photographic Expression by the Japanese*, the first major historical survey of photography in Japan. He became a full-time photographer while collaborating with Daido Moriyama on a series of gritty photographs that illustrated poet-playwright Shuji Terayama's celebration of Tokyo as a utopia of horse-racing tracks, boxing rings, pachinko parlors, strip shows, crowded trains, and pop singers. This picture essay, "*Machi ni Senjo Ari*" (The streets are a battleground), was first serialized in the illustrated magazine *Asahi Graph* in 1966. These experiences prompted Nakahira to test photography's capacity for inciting radical thought from fragmented material realities, rather than merely illustrating preexisting images or ideologies.

Nakahira's unprecedentedly rapid rise to prominence as both photographer and critic was solidified with *Provoke* and a subsequent collection of material that initially appeared in the magazine, *First Abandon the World of Pseudo-Certainty: Thoughts on Photography and Language* of 1970. The majority of his most iconic *Provoke* photographs record disquieting scenes of everyday city life. We discover grainy nocturnal views

Nakahira helps us begin to unravel the urban entanglements of circulation, vision, and power.



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植物園
中平卓馬



of illuminated streets, sidewalks, passageways, and modes of transportation including subways, trains, ferries, and automobiles. Within these fleeting glimpses of city life are the undulating outlines of uncanny material objects and forms: soporific human figures, plants sealed within glass windows, and fish enclosed in aquariums. That Nakahira's work was at times grainy, blurry and out of focus was not simply an assertion of an authorial intent to forge a new photographic style. Desperate to capture a radically transforming world, the photographs were merely the by-product of his provocations between the camera and the fluid contours of his urban subject.

This subject was, in fact, the intensive urbanization of Japan during the 1960s and '70s that would effectively redraw the nation's social and political contours. Japan's integration into the U.S. geopolitical order, undertaken in fits and stages since Japan's surrender in 1945, was completed with the reversal of Okinawa to Japan in 1972 (which made it possible for U.S. and Japanese military bases to occupy Okinawa in perpetuity). At the same time, the state undertook regional planning and infrastructural projects, such as airports, freeways, and nuclear reactors (including the Fukushima Daiichi plant), envisioning the entire archipelago as an integrated network of communication, transportation, and exchange. A robust consumer society quickly expanded from the urbanized centers to the remote limits of the wholly remade nation-state.

Impelled by the forces unleashed as this landscape experienced the simultaneous construction and destruction of Cold War-fueled growth, Nakahira's quest for a critical vocabulary to contend with the shifting terrain of power underwent a decisiv



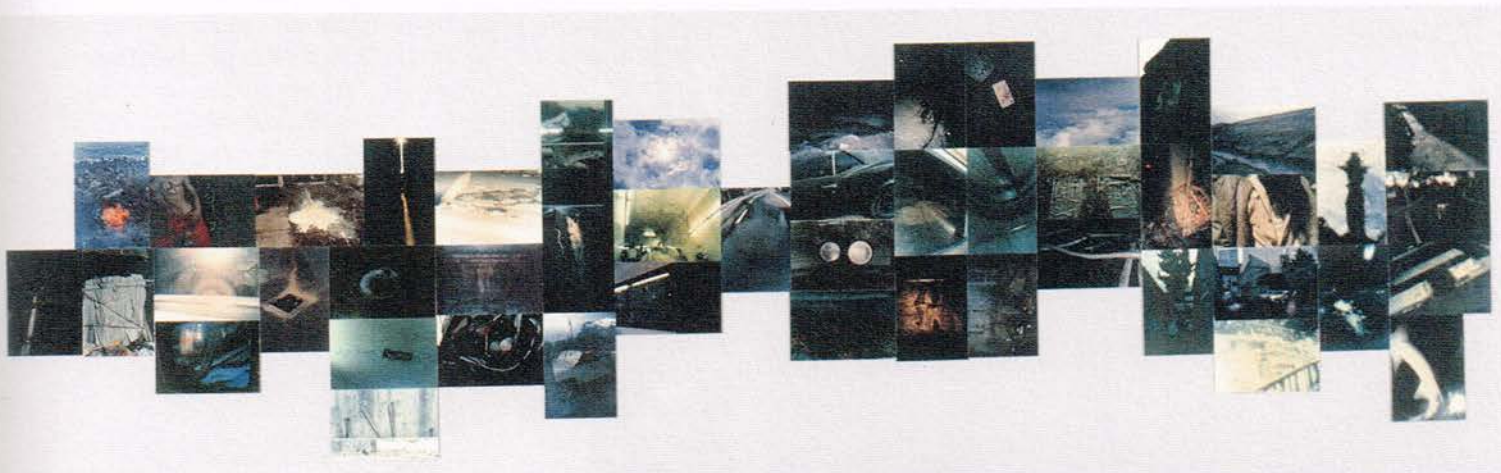
Opposite, top:
"Shokubutsu Zukan,"
Design, July 1973

Opposite, bottom:
"Toshi" (City),
Asahi Journal,
December 17, 1971

This page:
Installation view
of *Overflow*, 1974
Courtesy Museum of Fine
Arts, Houston

arresting photobook *For a Language to Come* (1970), the iconic *are, bure, boke* look of Nakahira's photography was abandoned as he turned to focus on urban experience in the wake of the worldwide upheavals of 1968. In his process-based installation *Circulation: Date, Place, Events* at the 1971 Paris Biennale, Nakahira photographed, printed, and displayed a vast number of photographs that documented his daily experiences in Paris, adding more each day and overflowing the allotted exhibition space in a disruptive cascade of excessive visual feedback (the project is outlined in this issue by Matthew S. Witkovsky). This was followed by an outpouring of color photography and trenchant media criticism that traversed the sprawling Tokyo metropolitan area to reveal an all-encompassing urban reality. These were the basis of both Nakahira's first essay collection, *Why an Illustrated Botanical Dictionary? Nakahira Takuma's Collected Writings on Visual Media*, published in 1973, and his large-scale installation *Overflow*, from 1974.

Nakahira's color photography was mainly produced for the popular weekly news magazine *Asahi Journal*. Each installment included a short text and a different set of visual fragments wrought from the reflective surfaces of an expansive urban reality that had overturned all boundaries between city and countryside, human and nature, history and fiction. We find the scattered remnants of an urban world that pervades and yet escapes each photograph: a looming tire photographed through a windshield, the pale belly of a shark floating in transparent darkness behind glass, an uncanny growth of vines spreading out over an unnoticed corner of the city. The photographs were reassembled in the



“The urban is something that encompasses me, something synonymous with a history that continuously violates me.”

installation *Overflow*, for the exhibition *Fifteen Photographers Today*, held at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, in 1974. A pivotal exhibition of contemporary Japanese photographers, it allowed participants to exhibit a variety of work, among which Nakahira's series presented an exceptional contrast. Consisting of forty-eight adjoining color prints arranged in horizontal and vertical patterns, *Overflow* confronted viewers with the task of making sense of an unwieldy sprawl of surfaces, objects, and divergent vantage points. The layout offered no obvious entry points or coherent organizational logic. Instead, contingency, uncertainty, and indeterminacy threatened any attempt to forge links among photographs.

Around the same time he was putting together *Overflow*, Nakahira wrote, “The urban is something that encompasses me, something synonymous with a history that continuously violates me. The urban is something that always exceeds my grasp, something opaque, yet something certainly existing, a totality of invisible relations,” in an essay titled “Can an Anarchist Become an Architect?” From *Overflow's* interplay

of seemingly random associations, a discernible process can be detected: the undifferentiated enumeration of sky, sea, street, wall, body, vehicle, passage, shadowy surface, animal, reflective surface, portal, crevice, fire, spill, and so on. From these heterogeneous elements, *Overflow* sought to penetrate and render an urban totality that had expanded beyond the limits of perception. More than the sum of architectural objects and infrastructural networks, the urban nebula for Nakahira was the basis for the articulation of a vocabulary suitable to Japan's transformed landscape. *Overflow* was thus the photographic materialization of a radically urban form of thought.

It was the dynamic inquiry into a transforming urban experience that formed the connective tissue between Nakahira's thought and photography. There were of course significant photographic precedents for such an endeavor. For Nakahira, it was the photography of Eugène Atget. Atget developed his vision from examining the radical urban transformations of fin-de-siècle Paris, just as Nakahira perpetually trained his gaze on Tokyo's profound remaking. "These are not images of the city," he wrote of Atget's work, "images of the world grasped by means of a gaze concentrating on the city from a firmly established ego, but rather photographs that have succeeded in a curious inscription of the world and the city that leap at us from that side, with what might be called a vacuum or concave eye." Nakahira used *concave* in the sense that Atget's "eye" did not see the world through the a priori images of an "author," but drew in traces of the world to unsettle the viewer. Nakahira thus celebrated Atget's concave eye for its capacity to disclose an intimate grasp of urban reality. This essay was included in the collection *Duel on Photography* of 1977, published just after Nakahira was stricken with partial amnesia and aphasia. While he ceased his critical writings as a result, the traces of his own concave eye can be found throughout his subsequent photobooks *A New Gaze* (1983), *Adieu à X* (1989), and most recently *Documentary* (2011).

Persisting in his photographic questioning of urban change, Nakahira's thought and practice demonstrate how an emptied gaze paradoxically brings us closer to our lived realities. Perhaps our rediscovery of Nakahira's work can elicit a new perspective on a world in flux, not only in Japan, which is currently undergoing a new phase of urban remaking haunted by the specters of remilitarization, but worldwide, where manifold visible and invisible forms of violence increasingly inform our urban experience.



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植物図鑑

撮影・中平 卓馬

"Shokubutsu Zukan,"

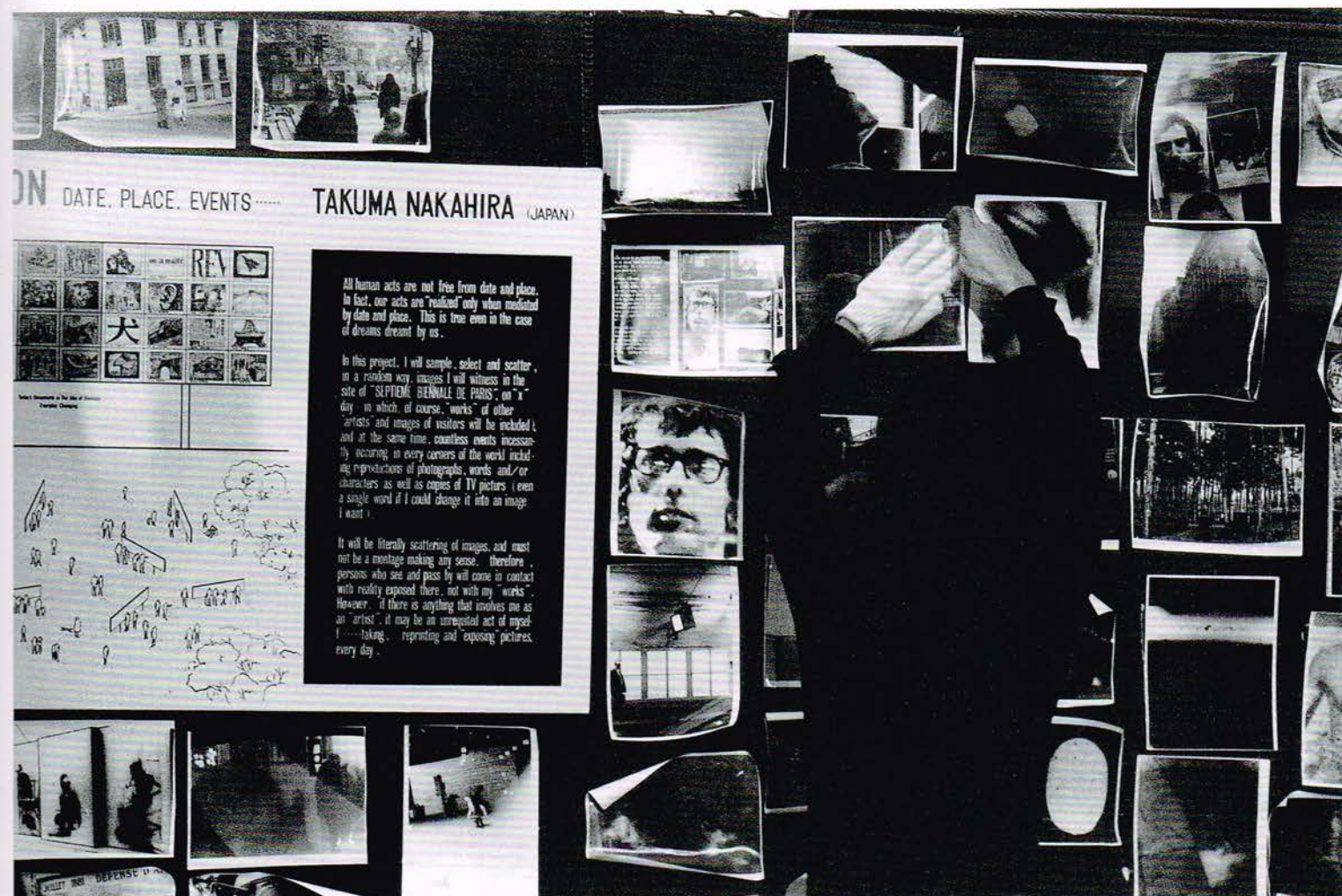
Asahi Journal,
August 20, 1972

© Takuma Nakahira and
courtesy Getsuyosha.

All pages from original
magazine issues have
been scanned and
collected in *Toshi Fukey
Zukan (Magazine Work
1964-1982)* (Tokyo:
Getsuyosha, 2011)

Franz Prichard is assistant professor in the Department of East Asian Studies at Princeton University. He studies the literature, visual media, and critical thought of contemporary Japan, and is currently at work on a book about urbanization and radical media, as well as a translated collection of Takuma Nakahira's essays.

all photographs
Takuma Nakahira,
Untitled, 1971, from
the series *Circulation*:
Date, Place, Events
© 1971 Takuma Nakahira
and courtesy Osiris, Tokyo,
and Yossi Milo Gallery,
New York



Nakahira's Circulation

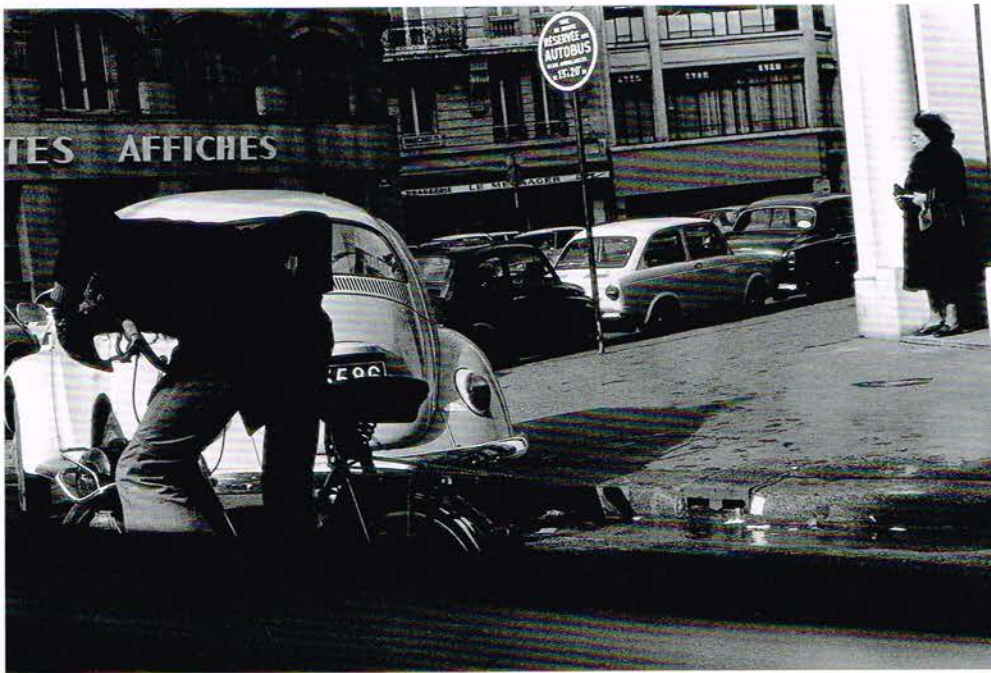
Matthew S. Witkovsky

"Now, as a result of this project, I can feel that the things that I say and the things that I do are beginning to agree with one another for the first time."

—Takuma Nakahira, *Asahi Camera*, February 1972



On the afternoon of September 28, 1971, when Japanese critic and photographer Takuma Nakahira set foot (several days late) in the seventh Paris Biennale, he felt nothing so much as “hollowness” and “despair.” Reporting these sensations for the Japanese weekly *Asahi Journal* that December, Nakahira explained his dissatisfaction with the state of contemporary art and, indeed, with his own activities as a creator and commentator on art. The laudable artworks on view mostly attacked a social system from which their makers pretended to keep some distance; Nakahira observed that, in fact, this art could only be the very face of such a system, which created a sort of play area for artists to vent futile opposition to the forces of capital flow and authoritarian control. Those forces had a vested interest in shoring up authorial ego when, in fact, it was the art goods and their exchange value that really mattered: individuality was a commodity construct. Yet his own contribution to the Paris Biennale, which he described at length for *Asahi Journal* and again for the photography magazine *Asahi Camera* the following February, allowed him guarded hope that art and art criticism could still have a purpose in the world. What was it about *Circulation: Date, Place, Events*, Nakahira’s piece for the 1971 Biennale, that gave grounds for optimism?



As Franz Prichard recounts elsewhere in this issue, Takuma Nakahira, who got his start in photography and criticism only around 1965, had by the end of that decade already become one of the most influential figures in contemporary culture in Japan. Nakahira’s incisive writing cut apart standing views in literature, film, politics, and especially photography, and he published both articles and photographs at a feverish rate. He wanted a relation between these two activities that could come closer than complementarity—a joint force of action, perhaps. The intended effect of that joint action might be “illumination,” to quote a word favored by prewar German critic and theorist Walter Benjamin, whose essays were first anthologized in English as well as in Japanese in the late 1960s: searing, flashbulb-like insights afforded by a photograph or fragmentary phrases. *Provoke: Provocative Materials for Thought*—the short-lived photography journal that Nakahira helped to found, which blazed its trail across the Tokyo cultural scene in those years—took its name from such intertwined desires. Writing and photography should illuminate the world, explosively, and they should set each other ablaze as well. Nakahira’s





Photograph from
For a Language to Come
(Tokyo: Fudoshia, 1970)

epochal photobook, *For a Language to Come* (1970), pushed even more insistently at an overhaul of word-image relations. Yet Nakahira remained dissatisfied and, worse, fatigued by his efforts to develop a productive analysis of contemporary culture.

“Has Photography Been Able to Provoke Language?” Nakahira asked in March 1970, around eight months before his book appeared. “Only through human use can a language be given life,” he asserted, for without a subjective viewpoint, language exists as mere symbols and generalities. But to shake a language awake, to deploy it, is also to risk damaging one’s psyche: “This kind of ‘exploding language’ is a language that has been fiercely lived here and now by a single person.” Just such “fiercely lived” insights were what Nakahira sought to produce and circulate, operating calculatedly on the verge of madness. (Prichard has translated that essay and others in the recent reprint of *For a Language to Come*, as well as in *Circulation: Date, Place, Events*; issued by the Tokyo house Osiris, both books also have keenly written afterwords by cultural critic Akihito Yasumi.)

In the view of many who have encountered it then or since, *For a Language to Come* eminently fulfilled Nakahira’s hope for pictures that would give concrete meaning to words while threatening language overall as a system of convention and control. The word *tree* is general, but a photograph of any tree will be specific, Nakahira argued, with catlike stealth, before pouncing on the surprise conclusion: that close comparison of a single tree in image and word “causes the concept and meaning of *tree* to disintegrate.” How? Through sentences that leap and dart, and pictures that careen between heavy grays and blinding whites; through sequences of haunting images that overtake the reader, as if the setting for Nakahira’s photographs—the city of Tokyo—were a mental space in which one staggered from desire to trauma, a solitary ego shattered by passion and rage.

The effort of making *For a Language to Come* left Nakahira spent and temporarily uninterested in further photographic projects. One year later, the commissioner for Japanese entries in the Paris Biennale, fellow *Provoke* veteran Takahiko Okada, convinced him to travel

Circulation was, in essence, a performance piece in which photographs were the engine of the performance rather than a record of it.

there only after much debate, “at least to do some sightseeing,” as Nakahira disarmingly recalled upon his return. Yet the very fact of Nakahira’s repeated and extensive commentary on his Paris piece suggests the sense of renewal it brought him. *Circulation* was not only the title of this piece but also its ambition and modus operandi. More literally than did *For a Language to Come*, the fleeting work raced with an illuminating flash of brilliance through the early 1970s art scene.

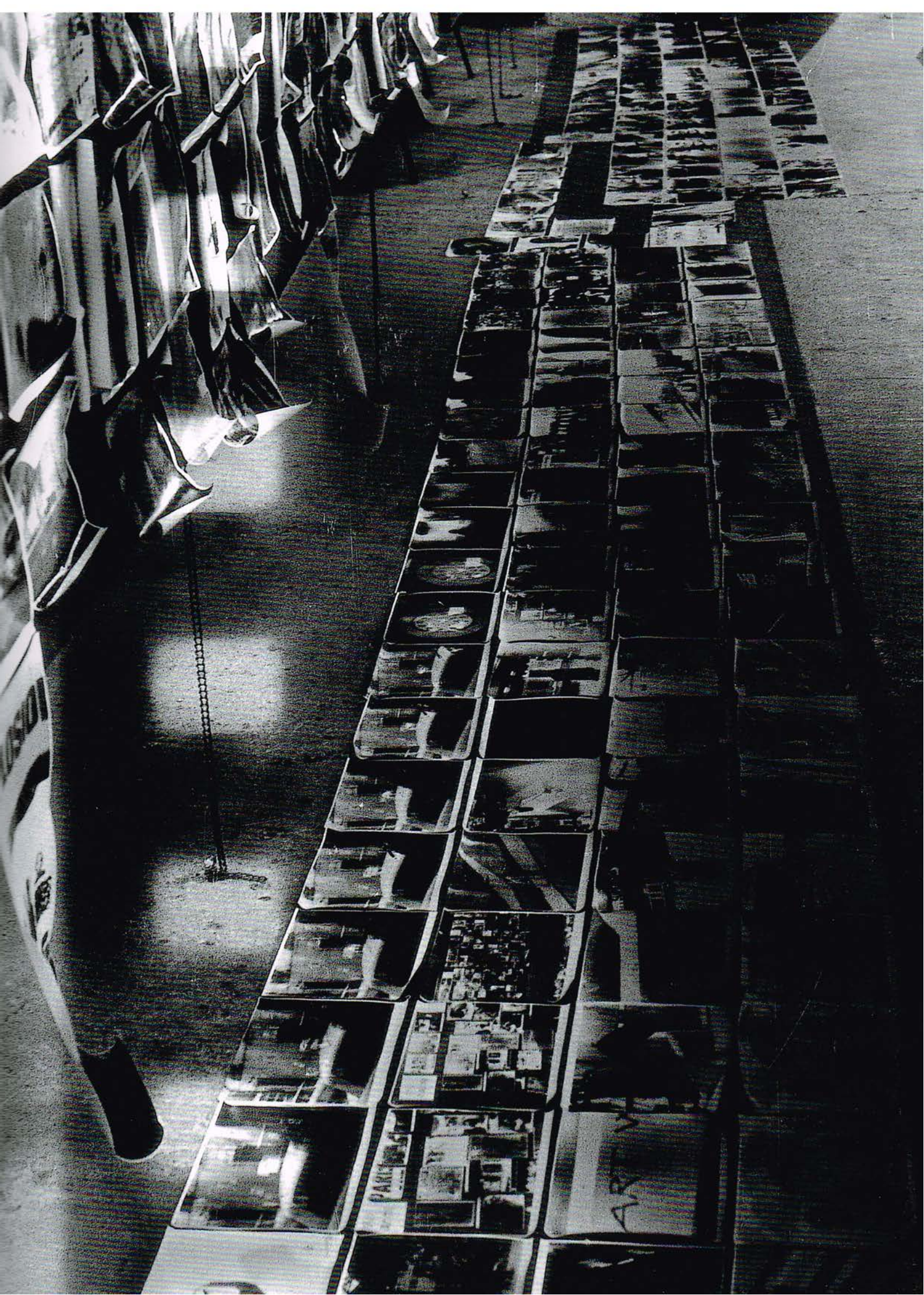
Circulation was, in essence, a performance piece in which photographs were the engine of the performance rather than a record of it. This quality is the greatest guarantor of the work’s uniqueness in photographic terms, but there are other reasons to reassess its meanings today. (New prints from the

original negatives were shown in New York in 2012 and feature currently in an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.) Rather than send existing pictures to Paris, Nakahira wished to create something “live” during the run of the exhibition. He would hang only pictures taken and printed that very day, making a photo-diary of his Parisian experiences that would cover his Biennale wall in stages. By *circulation* Nakahira meant his own movements around Paris, the movement of his pictures from darkroom to display, and the perambulation past his evolving piece by visitors to the Biennale, whom Nakahira photographed for this installation as well.

The prints themselves would be “mere remnants” of these circulatory patterns. Nakahira’s description of his procedure, from the February 1972 article in *Asahi Camera*, suggests a determined resistance to fixity: “To put it concretely, I set myself to photograph, develop, and exhibit nothing but the Paris that I was living and experiencing. My project ... was born from this motivation. Every day I would go out into the streets of Paris from my hotel. I would watch television, read newspapers and magazines, watch the people passing by, look at other artists’ works at the Biennale venue, and watch the people there looking at these works. I would capture all of these things on film, develop them the same day, make enlargements, and put them up for display that evening, often with the photographic prints still wet from the washing process.”

Curator Yuri Mitsuda points out, in an essay for the Houston exhibition catalog, that Nakahira was evidently attracted to the wet Parisian streets, for he included many images of them in *Circulation*, both at the Biennale and in a special section in the January 1972 issue of the Tokyo magazine *Design*, which stands as the one visual record of the Paris work made at the time. Mitsuda nicely analogizes the washing of city streets with Nakahira’s marathon darkroom sessions to make *Circulation*, for which he printed, by his own account, some two hundred images each day for a week: the photographer must have spent hours with his hands in chemical baths or running water over his prints to clean them. To focus on wetness is also a way to suggest flow—the process rather than the product. As another hint at Nakahira’s preferences, the few surviving prints are yellow, faded, or blotchy, and one can see that, paradoxically, not enough liquid was on hand to make them; the developer







was probably heavily reused, losing its strength, and other sources report that the darkroom apparatus consisted of a bathroom sink and an ordinary wash bucket.

Of course, the Biennale display space became a bigger, brighter, and populated extension of the artist's cramped and makeshift quarters. This was one of the radical moves Nakahira made with *Circulation*: evoking at exhibition not an artist's studio but a photographer's normally closed and lightproof darkroom, turning that monastic space into a carnival atmosphere. The rows of drying prints that ordinarily hang on a darkroom clothesline, or lie in trays, were here spread out as if at a yard sale, covering the wall and spilling onto other surfaces as Nakahira outgrew his allotted area. This method could also be likened to making public the draft of an essay, showing sheets of jottings for all to read. A quick glance over the shoulder of a Biennale visitor confirms that Nakahira had an eye for written and printed words: "Viva La Muerte!" (Long live death!), "Explosion," and excerpts from a street poster punctuate the whirl of faces, friends, and street scenes. The first entries for October 12, 1971, meanwhile, include a photograph of the word *Paris* glued directly after the artist's handwritten spelling of the city name, inviting a comparison between manual and photographic representations of language; a photograph of a cartoon page below it continues this theme. Here was the visual equivalent for the harmony of critical thought between taking photographs and writing essays that Nakahira would emphasize in explaining the work.

Other stretches of the installation show series of closely related views, like contact sheets turned into exhibition displays. The first step in printing, especially in the news-photographer paradigm that dominated the twentieth century, was contact-printing a roll of film negatives on a sheet of proofing paper to determine which "shots" had the most promise, before enlarging them into final prints. Nakahira did not make contact sheets but instead put that procedure on view, printing up runs of negatives just as they appeared on the film roll. Among these sequential groupings are a street scene with a car and more spilt liquid, and another with a VeloSolex moped rider maneuvering through traffic, both of which look a bit like stop-action cinema. Another sequence shows screenshots from television, intercut with a single photograph of the word *hyperreal*. There was something hyperreal in this steady

accumulation of repetitive and overlapping images, each flowing into the next, doubling back, overlapping, then gushing onward as if from a faucet left running.

There was one precedent for Nakahira's work in the realm of photography—William Klein—but that precedent gains full meaning only in Nakahira's highly perceptive and unusual reading of Klein's work. The "look" of Klein's photographs—grainy, up close, heated yet acerbic—has been taken by critics since the 1960s as a touchstone for the photographs in *Provoke*. In a terrifically cogent review from 1967, however, Nakahira argued that it was not really the look but the *method* that mattered. Graininess and wide-angle lenses did not automatically signify urban anomie; there was no one-to-one correspondence in photographs between appearance and meaning, no key to decoding, indeed no code. What mattered was that Klein had brought forth a particular *process* of taking photographs in the contemporary city. Viewing it as a dreamscape, even a nightmare, Klein had placed himself in the middle of that mental geography, exposing himself to multiple and colliding vantages with no set idea of his expressive voice. In short, he let his creative identity drift while keeping his critical faculties intact. Nakahira took that approach for a model, as Yasumi points out, and he put into practice his reading of Klein as an authorial cipher passing lucidly yet violently through an unfixed landscape: "The world [for Klein] is not a static, completed universe but rather something which flows and changes its appearance, transforming like a nebula with a movement in viewpoint."

The trouble was what to do with the photographs, which for all the talk of ceaseless motion would end up having a static form. Photography is hard to think of as a performance medium. Also in the late 1960s, Truman Capote recalled in a breathless sentence seeing Henri Cartier-Bresson at work two decades earlier, "dancing along the pavement like an agitated dragonfly, three Leicas swinging from straps around his neck, a fourth one hugged to his eye: click-click-click (the camera seems a part of his own body) clicking away with joyous intensity." This comparison, though beautiful in itself, encapsulates all that Nakahira opposed. In the Vietnam era, dead or dying bodies were shown daily in the news media to no apparent effect, and nothing could seem more suspect than a photojournalist sashaying his way through carnage with cameras as breastplates.

extended space of performance, forsaking the projection of a stable authorial ego for the representation of collective and mercurial states of mind: hilarity, terror, alienation, ooze, hyperreality. These changing and changeable pictures came from the city and went back into it, albeit via a public exhibition space. The camera that took them was run through the streets as on a great *dérive*, a "drifting," as French philosopher Guy Debord phrased it in his classic book of the era, *Society of the Spectacle* (another one of his terms, *psychogeography*, is equally relevant). The perishability of the prints in *Circulation* marks a singular attempt to analyze reality through its traces without memorializing it. Apparently aimless, this daily circulation in fact summed up the city and the moment in a way that no fixing of photographs in a book or in frames could possibly have done.

Matthew S. Witkovsky is Sandor Chair of Photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he has recently held shows with John Gossage, Sarah Charlesworth, Josef Koudelka, and Christopher Williams. His exhibition *Provoke: Photography in Japan Between Protest and Performance, 1960-1975*, co-organized with LE BAL, Paris; Albertina, Vienna; and Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland, begins its tour in January 2016.